The World’s Worst Forgotten Crisis? Uganda To-day.

Introduction

Today Uganda is a republic and has been defined by many member states of the African Union, the media and international community as democratic. It is true that since the National Resistance Movement party (N.R.M) took over power in 1986, Uganda has had two “free and fair” elections, but the state of Uganda’s democracy still stands to be questioned. The nation currently faces two different internal wars facilitated by the Allied Democratic Front (A.D.F) in western Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army (L.R.A) in the northern part of the country.

Origins and Trends of the War in Northern Uganda

The war in northern Uganda began as a simple move by the army deserters of the previous government headed by Tito Okello Lutuwa to regain power in Kampala where they had been defeated.

“The army deserters formed themselves into the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA) and launched a series of attacks on positions held by the government forces; by the late 1986 the UPDA suffered a series of military defeats and was an increasingly demoralized force. In the wake of the moment the unlikely figure of Alice Lakwena a 28-year old spirit medium took over power and formed the Holy Spirit movement with the same objective of regaining power in the capital Kampala. In September 1987 she was thoroughly defeated by government troops and the war took on an aggressive and ruthless turn as it was taken over by her cousin Joseph Kony who formed the Lord’s Resistance Army.”

Joseph Kony took up a very cannibalistic approach with the mutilating of people’s bodies, combined with his bloodthirsty nature that led to the use of children as mine detectors and active combatants in war.
Currently, the war in northern Uganda is greatly affecting the three districts of Kitgum, Pader and Gulu where the Acholi people live. The war is also being fought by the L.R.A who hail from these districts and mainly abduct children and youth to form a large part of their recruits. Neighboring districts have also felt the effects of the war; they are from time to time bombarded for recruits and supplies. They have also hosted a number of internally displaced persons (IDP) and financed their basic needs.

As is with the war in Northern Uganda, the complexity of internal war has “multiple dimensions.” The so-called life style of war, once thought to be predictable, has proved contingent and unpredictable. The war in northern Uganda started out with a clear objective namely to regain power from the N.R.M government, but since 1987 has totally lost focus. The L.R.A has continuously targeted civilian populations, abducted children to form recruits, killed, looted and forced the entire population to be internally displaced.

Just like many other internal conflicts around the world, the internal war in northern Uganda has had its surges of slight peace, promise of cease-fire and a resurfacing of violence on civilians; the trend of the war had been highly unpredictable. For example 1999-2001 were relatively peaceful, but the conflict resurfaced in June 2002 with the government’s military policy called “Operation Iron Fist” which aimed at completely destroying the rebels from their military base in the Sudan.

**Central issue**

“In the past decade there have been numerous attempts to resolve interstate conflict in Africa through mediation. Most of these efforts have failed, with one or more of the parties spurning negotiations, being unwilling or unable to reach a settlement in the course of mediation, or subsequently violating agreements that have been concluded.”
It is of great concern that the war in northern Uganda has lasted for 18 years, despite the numerous atrocities committed against civilian population, including; the use of children as mine detectors, sex slaves, armed combatants, the displacement of 1.3 million people and the deaths of tens of thousands, peace has nonetheless failed to reach our doorsteps. One would think that the Acholi people have had enough and that both parties would be willing to negotiate peace, but the reality is quite different.

Factors contributing to the perpetuation of the war in northern Uganda

Luc Reychler and Thania Paffenholz (2001) attest to the fact that two-thirds of the countries in the world today suffer from violence and escalating conflict. Needless to say in almost every corner of the earth people are killing each other for political, economic and endless reasons in the name of the protection of national security. Although conflicts facilitate hatred and untold suffering to thousands of populations, drain many countries resources and deprive millions of basic human needs; they still persist.

The international community, governmental and non-governmental organizations have invested considerable sums of money in training peace builders, negotiating with rebels and implementing laws and policies to foster reintegration of former combatants but often the outcome is “a mere piling of peace building stones rather than sustainable peace”. Peace building is not a matter of talking; it necessitates a change in attitude and perception of the two or more warring parties.

Why have efforts to build peace in northern Uganda so far failed? Let us take a closer look.
Economic viability

“Economic viability appears to be the predominant systematic explanation of rebellion”viii. Rebellions occur in such a way that rebel groups loot from civilian populations in small groups and subsequently disguise their actions to look like burglary or petty theft. Rebellions reportedly are motivated by “greed”ix that is why they take ages since profitable opportunities for rebellion will not be passed up.

In the case of northern Uganda efforts to attain peace have been hampered by the war economy that is being overseen by the L.R.A. Lootings by the L.R.A has been witnessed in the internally displaced camps after distribution of food by the World Food Programme. Civilians living in the camp attest to the fact that rebels threaten them for cooking oil, foodstuff and harvest produce from their gardens. The rebels have infact, been given a new name “boo Ketch” literally translated as “vegetables are sour”, due to their constant demand for goats and chicken.

Many newspapers including Uganda’s leading daily the New Vision have reported rebel ambushes on buses, commercial vehicles as well as hospitals and shops, all in the search for money. In September 2003 the New vision paperx reported “Joseph Kony’s LRA yesterday ambushed an Arua-bound Nile Coach bus”.

This bus that was ambushed normally carried business people, who were returning from the capital and would have bought a lot of merchandise for their businesses, therefore the L.R.A, must have benefited a lot.

Would it really be tenable only to say that peace efforts have been hampered on the ground of money or greed for it? This argument can stand based on facts.

The L.R.A has for the past 18 years changed its target from the military to the civilian population, although they encounter stiff opposition from government troops in most of their skirmishes. They have a clear policy of continuous restocking and this therefore makes them attack civilian camps, shops and gardens all in the name of obtaining supplies for their use. They are in constant
need of food, clothing and drugs for their wounded and with no funding at their disposal; they resort to threatening the local population since their base in Sudan is pretty dry.

We should also take into consideration the fact that the economic gains made by the L.R.A have a trickle down effect. Due to the ethnic cohesion of the war, the recruits usually take some of the loot to their families. This is what I would refer to as a vicious cycle of gains; the rebels loot from the civilian population, who in turn are given the loot by their families in rebel ranks and the loot is again recaptured by another rebel group. Therefore peace builders are divided into two camps those who are sincerely suffering and want the war to end and those who are experiencing the trickle down effects of the loot.

**Economic Interest of many Humanitarian Organizations**

The war economy is also sustained by the fact many humanitarian organizations seek to provide aid to governments whose populations are greatly affected by conflict. As is the case in northern Uganda, many humanitarian organizations have flooded the region to provide water and sanitation facilities, drugs, rehabilitation for trauma-related cases and infrastructural development.

Humanitarian organizations give aid to these communities, but also reserve a chunk of the resources for their own usage thereby becoming rich out of other people’s suffering. Many workers in these humanitarian agencies in northern Uganda for example have misappropriated lots of money that was aimed at helping war torn communities for their own benefit. Would such people be looking forward to the end of the war? Of course not since their flow of income would be cut short.

“Aid escalates conflict since aid resources represent economic and political power therefore warring parties always try to control them as part of their control victory”\(^{xi}\). In northern Uganda for example the government army always insists
on escorting aid to the internally displaced people’s camps, they want to be seen as having control over this aid. While, on the other hand L.R.A troops waylay the vehicles carrying these goods and always clash with government troops or loot goods from the camp population. Both parties do this for economic reasons; the LRA needs supplies and sells off some of the goods in Sudan for small arms, while the UPDF obtains sizeable allowances from humanitarian agencies for escorting their goods. In essence both sides win economically.

**Use of Child Soldiers**

“The use of children in combat is probably the world’s most unrecognized form of child abuse. The best available estimate is that there are 300,000-child soldiers worldwide\textsuperscript{xii}. Child soldiers are deprived of their childhood, which ought to be typified, by play, learning to love and be loved, education and proper health care. Instead are indoctrinated to be murderers, thieves, rapists and callous. “In contrast to rebel groups who draw from a united population sector, nearly all the LRA’s foot soldiers are abducted children, primarily captured from schools\textsuperscript{xiii}.

The children who are taken from their homes and schools are socialized into a life of brutality and perpetual danger. They are used in heavy combat with Ugandan government soldiers and are forced to commit atrocities against their own people\textsuperscript{xiv}. Girls as young as 9 years old are given to rebel commanders as “wives” and many children have been born and bred in this hostile environment with a strong urge for bloodshed.

“To complicate matter, parties to conflict can make use of inflammatory rhetoric, often painting negative portraits of the opponent as a tool for political mobilization within their own ranks”.\textsuperscript{xv} Children in rebel groups are always indoctrinated to think that the government is the enemy and responsible for all their suffering and are always threatened about what would happen to them if they surrender to government or emerge from the bush willingly.
As children watch their parents being killed, their homes being burnt, their future fade away, a strong feeling of revenge permeates their minds. Many of the rebel leaders were captured as children and have practically grown up in the rebel ranks. Would it then be feasible to talk peace with a generation full of vengeance who realize their power through bloodshed?

One of the tactics the L.R.A use to curb the level of escape of child soldiers is to have them raid, abduct and kill people from their own villages. Bearing this in mind; would it be fruitful to negotiate peace with a person who is scared of going back home because of the guilt, finger pointing, and possibilities of revenge, name calling and other attendant reactions? Wouldn’t it be logical for that child or adult to remain in the bush and fight rather than go and be tormented by the community, and struggle to begin life afresh?

There also exists an economic gain both for the LRA and the family of the children that sustains the war. These children are taken from school and therefore lose years of education, which makes them easily indoctrinated to steal, loot, and murder all of which provide economic gains for the LRA. Some families also prefer their children to remain in rebel ranks so that they can continue reaping tangible economic benefits.

Support from Diasporas

"Diasporas are endogenous to the intensity of conflict; when civil wars occur, people emigrate."
xvi It is true that with the case of the conflict in northern Uganda, many daughters and sons of the soil have fled to neighboring districts, the capital and abroad. With respect to this paper, I will refer to diasporas as any place outside the conflict area, whether within or outside the country.

There is certainly no evidence that the L.R.A over the years has received support from sons and daughters from the home land; however it is worth noting that
when people flee from conflicts they preserve their own hatreds, some support the rebels and others the government, therefore external support could be in the offing.

A question worth considering is where the L.R.A get its monetary proceeds. One could argue that they emanate from loot obtained within Uganda; others could claim that they come from the Sudanese government. Nevertheless these two factors are not enough to account for the financial resources of the LRA. The LRA has a lot of connections with the Ugandan refugees residing in both the UK and USA.

Northern Uganda, in comparison to other parts of the country, is underdeveloped; the government also imposes structural violence on the region. Instead of focusing on ending the war in the north, it instead sends more troops to the neighboring Congo for peacekeeping purposes; yet it is in essence targeting the natural resources in that region. All this attests to the fact that the N.R.M (National Resistance Movement) government is not committed to bringing peace. This in turn therefore would give impetus to those in the diasporas to support the rebels.

It is logical to argue that if the LRA receives constant funding from frustrated Ugandans in the diasporas, it will continue to thrive economically and purchase all that it needs for its daily operations. In essence why would they want to cease their violent activities. What would then be the point in talking peace to a group that is well financed and organized, it would seem like an utter waste of time.

Support by the Sudanese Government

“Among Acholi at all levels, it was accepted as an article of faith that Sudanese support of the LRA has been provided in direct retaliation for Ugandan support to the SPLA.” The northern war has manifested itself in two ways, with the Sudanese government supporting the LRA and the Ugandan government supporting the Sudanese People’s Liberation Front (SPLA). With such a situation
at hand, one would only be adventurous to discuss issues pertaining to peace with a government that is equally supporting another rebel group.

“The Sudanese government has been involved in training LRA soldiers, have joined the LRA in attacks on villages in northern Uganda, including an attack in early 1995 that left 250 people dead”.xx The Sudanese government’s support for the LRA is far reaching, since the latter aids them in rebuffing the SPLA, thereby enabling the government to take control of the oil rich areas, while Uganda’s support for the SPLA as well seems to be connected to the oil in that country.

From the numerous peace agreements that have been signed, it is clear that both the Ugandan and Sudanese governments are not willing to negotiate peace. Many peace negotiations by both governments such as the January 2002 Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) summit held in Khartoum,xx have been patently violated by all parties concerned. It is obvious that these governments will continue to breach peace agreements under the guise of not losing control over the natural resources that both countries seem to be benefiting from.

Weak military capacity
Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argue that another dimension of opportunity for rebel groups is an atypically weak government military capacity. Definitely if a government has a weak military force, rebels will take advantage of the forests and mountains as their hiding places, as is the case with northern Uganda. Uganda does not necessarily have a weak military; the problem lies with the fact that there are few government troops deployed to restore peace in northern Uganda. As attested to by the local population,xxi when rebels attack they have no support from the military, they basically have to fend for themselves. For example when internally displaced people’s camps are attacked, the government troops are too few to rebuff the rebel, which gives the rebels an upper hand.
The Ugandan troops have so far failed to control the Sudanese-Ugandan border. A vast majority of forests and mountains, including an entire district; rebels benefit economically from this uncertain situation and porous the uncontrollable border. They are able to buy and sell small arms easily, loot from civilians without much effort and to hide in the mountains and forests where they cannot be easily found.

**Media**

“Recognizing the potential power of the media, many international organizations and media groups are now advancing new ideas on the media’s role in conflict prevention and resolution” xxii In many parts of the world the media is active in conflict resolution as mediators between the warring parties, trying to take a neutral stand and informing local, national and international communities concerning the nature and extent of the war.

Although, the media has been very effective in informing the general public about issues pertaining to conflict, it is important to note that “the job of reporting on any conflict can influence the situation in many ways” xxiii. Strong market forces usually drive Media houses since that they have to sustain themselves and in addition impress their donors to secure more funding. Therefore, it is very crucial to weigh the “interest” of the media in conflicts since they have a crucial role to play in disseminating propaganda on warring parties, behalf.

Ellen Gardner (2001) attests to the fact that in many countries, the governments controls the media, therefore journalists have to “toe the government line” xxiv. The government controls for instance in Uganda the leading newspaper the New Vision. Although this paper does not present a holistic view of the war in northern Uganda, it has the highest level of circulation, and is bought by all government offices, on-governmental organizations and widely read on-line. The government is eager to maintain the high level of circulation for this paper; it is always the first
to report the news and the first on the streets. State control of the media in Uganda is greatly related to money making.

A good example is the New Vision issue with the title “Govt appeals to Italy over Kony” where the government is appealing to Italy to use its long established contacts in northern Uganda to help negotiate peace with the Lord’s Resistance Army commander, Joseph Kony.xxv

In this particular issue the government is trying to illustrate to the international community that it is trying to do something to end the war in northern Uganda so that it can be able to attract foreign donors to the cause of bringing peace to northern Uganda. The government publishes such articles in its media as a means of obtaining funding for peace efforts in northern Uganda and then extorting most of the money into a few people’s pockets.

Privately owned newspapers in Uganda, like The Monitor newspaper, that bring out the controversies and the real issues taking place in the northern war are censored from time to time simple because it is considered a threat to government. It has become evident that the government’s closure of the monitor newspaper is linked to both political and economic reasons but economics seems to play the bigger. The government seemed to be threatened by the growing popularity of the Monitor newspaper that would soon take over the market considering that, it reports controversial news that the public loves to hear.

“With commercial pressures and stretching of budgets dominating much of the media, if the conflict is at a low point in public interest or in a distant country, the agency may take only a passing interest”xxvi This then brings out two important issues about media houses, one of them being that they only report what sells in order to sustain their businesses and also calculate the cost of going to a distant country to report news. If they are losing financially, they had rather not report on the conflict, if they are gaining the conflict gets reported on.
The war in northern Uganda is at a low point in public interest, as Relief Web calls it “the world’s worst forgotten crisis”. In its inception stages it used to attract a lot of attention because of the inhuman deeds of cutting off people’s noses, lips and cannibalism that were shocking to the public at the time. To date these atrocities mentioned have taken on a general trend as witnessed by the events in Mozambique, therefore the market power of the story is not there. People are more eager to read about “hotter conflict spots”, of which Uganda is not inclusive therefore the media houses would be losing out.

The issues of cannibalism use of child soldiers, and others have become prevalent in many parts of the world, they are like an “old story” and are not given the required attention by the relevant actors.

There also exists hate media that worsens the northern Ugandan crisis. For example the Internet is camouflaged with several pieces of disgusting literature about the LRA that worsen their relations with civilians and government.

“Radio is still the most powerful mediums in countries where much of the population is illiterate or televisions are rare, and it is the key means to reach the public with news and information that can influence people negatively or positively”. This has been true in the case of northern Uganda where some radio stations have send out hate messages to the LRA and this in turn incites them to attack the local population basing on the fact that they do not have support from the public. All these different sources write these articles or have these programs for purposes of making more money considering that many people will get attracted to their programs or articles.

Too many actors
As the saying goes too many cooks spoil the broth, the same issue pertains to the war in northern Uganda; there are too many actors in the peace building process. Civil society entities like non-governmental organizations, churches and
church-based institutions, international organizations, the media, name it, have all been involved in the peace process.

Ron Kraybill brings out the fact that a good peace process, calls for joint information gathering, joint education and joint problem definition. This is exactly the opposite in the case of northern Uganda, where there exists competition between the different agencies and with each agency wanting to be perceived as the one responsible for the success of the peace building process. This competition in mediating the peace process occurs because these different humanitarian, church-based and community organizations want to safeguard the funding of their projects and also seek an extension of their missions to influence donors.

“A spoiler is a leader who will almost never negotiate a peaceful settlement to conflict”; such is the case with Joseph Kony. He is a very unpredictable character whose mind changes like the ticking of a clock, he makes a statement today and tomorrow will make an equally controversial one. As the name of the group suggests, Lord’s Resistance Army, this rebel leader usually goes to consult with the “spirits” and his illiteracy, coupled with the many financial benefits that the LRA is enjoying, makes negotiation impossible.

All the inhibiting factors to ending the civil strife in northern Uganda are in one way or the other connected to finances or tangible benefits. It is clear that the LRA is becoming financially stronger as a result of wide spread looting, support from the diasporas and a weak military that gives them access to borders for trade and landscapes for food, including child soldiers who are at their disposal to aid them in swift looting.

The media, on the one hand, has to calculate how much it will gain or lose from reporting about a particular conflict especially if it is at a low point in public interest. The military, on the other hand, benefit from a well-financed budget
because of the predominant excuse of exterminating the rebels immediately. While humanitarian and other civil society organizations need their projects and budgets to be continuously renewed & financed by donors, there personnel would become unemployed. In essence, every side has something to gain from the war economy, thereby what can be done to restore peace in the region?

As brought out clearly by Nicole Ball \(^{xxxii}\), "the length of each stage and phase of conflict vary and there are many false starts towards peace". Therefore it is worthwhile examining what phase the conflict is at in order to develop appropriate and relevant strategies. So far many false signals have been sent out by the LRA that frustrate peace builders.

Ron Kraybill \(^{xxxiii}\) brings out the fact that a good process, calls for joint information gathering, joint education and joint problem definition. All the different stake holders in this conflict that comprise of the government, media, civil society, international community, sons and daughters of the motherland should join hands and work together in negotiating peace with the rebels rather than being overly concerned with their reputation and economics. It is crucial that the rebel faction gets to hear one voice from all the actors; otherwise uncoordinated and controversial messages will never create room for negotiation but continue to foster animosity.

“What is still vigorously debated, however, is whether and to what extent humanitarian agencies should concede to being a self-conscious part of an overall conflict management process”. \(^{xxxiv}\) Since humanitarian organizations have tended to be, more concerned about money than peace and also present interests of donor governments, they should play more of an observer than active role.

“Good process is conducted under auspices acceptable to all”. \(^{xxxv}\) This has never succeeded in the case of northern Uganda, the rebels feel threatened and feel
that their lives are at stake when government calls them for peace negotiations in specific areas. Therefore, if the two groups are not able to organize a forum this will continue to halt the peace process. It is therefore crucial for both parties to involve an independent mediator to set a forum for both to talk. A lot of peace meetings and seminars have been held without the LRA being represented or even aware of the meetings, this one-sided talk ends up producing only sour grapes.

The U.P.D.F should increase their strong hold on the Sudanese border and other neglected landscapes to prevent the small arms trade and the importation of arms. Free access enables the LRA to come and loot the civilian population, commit grave atrocities and sneak back to the Sudan where they regroup and reorganize. Therefore control of the borders is very critical in weakening the war economy.

It is also important to foster good reintegration programs for returning combatants. Winrich Kuhne\textsuperscript{xxxvi}(2000) notes the urgency of understanding the economics of violence and war. He says that unemployment, particularly among the young, provides further ground for recruitment based on the prevalence of small arms and light weapons in most conflict zones that are sold cheaply and are used for rearmament. Therefore, it is crucial to set up reintegration programs for former combatants that are economically sustaining in order to curb the problem of idleness and banditry.

The major reason why efforts to build peace have so far been hampered in northern Uganda lies in the previously described phenomenon of a war economy. All the various actors have their own hidden interests mainly economic in the war and therefore have to make sure that their economic plate is full before actually negotiating peace. Another critical factor worth considering is the small arms trade, coupled with the government's weak military that fosters ground for this
trade. There also exist too many peace actors without any coordination that send out various conflicting messages to the LRA. Hence, unless there is concerted effort in the part of all stakeholders in the conflict, and a clear agenda set out without hidden interests it will become extremely difficult to negotiate peace since peace builders are currently divided into many “interest-based” camps.

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