

BEHIND THE VIOLENCE:  
CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS  
TO THE WAR IN NORTHERN UGANDA



FEBRUARY 2004

The Refugee Law Project (RLP) was established in November 1999 with the aim of protecting and promoting the rights of forced migrants in Uganda. The RLP operates as an autonomous project within the Faculty of Law of Makerere University, and focuses on three main areas: legal assistance, training, and research and advocacy. The Refugee Law Project works towards ensuring that asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons are, as specified under national and international law, treated with the fairness and consideration due fellow human beings.

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This publication was made possible through support provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the terms of award number 617-A-00-02-00010-00. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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## REPORT SUMMARY

The war in northern Uganda is now entering its eighteenth year. Initially rooted in a popular rebellion against President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, the conflict has since been transformed by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) into a brutally violent war in which civilians are the main victims. Over 1.4 million people have been displaced, and tens of thousands more have been killed, raped or abducted. At first glance, the persistence of the LRA over such a long period is incomprehensible: the majority of the force is made up of kidnapped children held against their will, the LRA is extremely unpopular among civilians because of its brutality and apparent lack of an overarching political agenda, and it operates in an environment without significant natural resources to sell for arms. Indeed, the conflict has not only continued for nearly 18 years, but in 2003 spread significantly east into the Teso and Lango regions.

Based on extensive interviews in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Soroti, with additional consultations in Kampala, Luwero, London and Washington, this report examines the structural causes that underpin the war, its current dynamics, the implications of the conflict spreading further east, and ideas for resolution. The report asserts that while people living in the north have deep-rooted grievances against the current government, Kony's LRA is a poor expression of these and enjoys no popular support amongst the civilian population. The war is thus two conflicts in one: a multi-faceted northern rebellion against the NRM government whose root causes have never been fully resolved, and a war with an LRA that does not fit conventional models of political insurgency and is motivated by an Old Testament-style apocalyptic spiritualism.

In addition, the protracted nature of the war has created new conflict dynamics, with many of the war's horrific consequences – such as mass displacement, a perceived war economy, and a military response that often fails to protect communities – having turned into reasons for its continuation. With the population blaming the conflicting parties for such suffering, the ensuing lack of trust has led to intense three-way tensions between the LRA, the civilian population and the government that has both compromised intelligence gathering, and turned the rebels against civilians. The recent spread of the war has also raised several new issues. The government-sponsored Arrow and Rhino militias in Soroti and Lira, while appearing successful in protecting the populations in their regions in the short-term, is of long-term concern: the arming of over 20,000 civilians may potentially threaten the security of the country. The report concludes with general recommendations for the way forward, addressing the three main strands of the conflict: root causes that continue to feed grievances in northern Uganda, the LRA conflict itself, and the consequences of the war that are interpreted as ongoing causes of the war.

The principal researchers, Zachary Lomo and Lucy Hovil, were assisted by Winifred Agabo, Emmanuel Bagenda, Prisca Kamungi and Sasha Lezhnev, all of the Refugee Law Project (RLP). Additional assistance came from Gemma Houldey of Justice Resources. The authors would like to thank the National Council of Science and Technology for permission to conduct the study, and the USAID-funded Community Resilience and Dialogue (CRD) activity for funding.

## ACRONYMS

Amuka – Government-sponsored Rhino militia in Lira and Apac Districts  
ADF – Allied Democratic Forces  
ARLPI – Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative  
CRD – Community Resilience and Dialogue activity  
CSOPNU – Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda  
DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo  
EDF – Equatorial Defence Force (Sudan)  
FEDEMU – Federal Democratic Movement of Uganda  
GoU – Government of Uganda  
HSM – Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Auma “Lakwena”  
HURIPEC – Human Rights and Peace Centre, Makerere University  
IDP – Internally Displaced Person  
LC – Local Council  
LRA – Lord’s Resistance Army  
NGO – Non-governmental organisation  
NIF – National Islamic Front (Sudan)  
NRM/A – National Resistance Movement/Army  
OIF – Operation Iron Fist  
RDC – Resident District Commissioner  
RLP – Refugee Law Project  
SPLA – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army  
UN – United Nations  
UNLA – Uganda National Liberation Army  
UNOCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs  
UPA – Uganda People’s Army  
UPC – Uganda People’s Congress  
UPDM/A – Uganda People’s Democratic Movement/Army  
UPDF – Uganda People’s Defence Forces  
USAID – United States Agency for International Development  
WFP – World Food Programme

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## 1 BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

Conflict and violence have plagued much of Uganda since independence, from Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 to the 14 insurgencies since Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) took power in 1986.<sup>1</sup> The most protracted of these conflicts has been the ongoing war in northern Uganda, which has lasted nearly 18 years,<sup>2</sup> encompassed five different rebellions and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths in districts from Adjumani to Soroti (see map). Furthermore, the war has displaced over 1.4 million people and all but completely destroyed northern Uganda's economic base, agriculture.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1986 when Museveni captured power from General Tito Okello Lutwa,<sup>4</sup> the northern war was initially a popular revolt by Okello's ousted army troops and their numerous civilian supporters who formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Both these rebels and their successors, who came together to form the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Auma "Lakwena", received massive popular support in the north and thus seemed to act on behalf of an Acholi population that was both alarmed by and angry at the new Museveni regime. Fear of national marginalisation by a government they perceived to be dominated by western Ugandans, as well as resentment against what they believed were NRM-sponsored atrocities and devastating cattle raids, were at the heart of the early insurgencies.<sup>5</sup>

While these rebellions ended, Joseph Kony started in 1987 what later become known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and the northern conflict entered an entirely new chapter. This phase is unique in that the grievances of the original war remain unaddressed, and yet Kony's LRA does virtually nothing to try to represent them. His worldview is steeped in apocalyptic spiritualism and he uses fear and violence to both maintain control within the LRA and sustain the conflict. The current war is thus actually two conflicts in one: the original root causes that still need attending to in many people's minds and may in fact cause future conflict, and the LRA which is a poor manifestation of these grievances. Both of these key components of the war – the long-term underlying grievances in the north and the persistent, destructive LRA – are relevant today, and each requires focused attention by policymakers in order to fully resolve the conflict.

### 1.1 An Overview of the Conflict

The war in northern Uganda has gone through a series of transformations, from a revolt by former Ugandan army soldiers angry at the rupture of the Nairobi power-sharing agreement<sup>6</sup> to unconventional rebel activity that combines traditional African spiritualism with Christian fanaticism and the killing of civilians. Each of the earlier rebellions is described thoroughly in other studies, such as Behrend, Gersony, and Doom and Vlassenroot,<sup>7</sup> and therefore only a brief

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<sup>1</sup> These are the Uganda People's Democratic Army, Uganda People's Army, Holy Spirit Movement, Uganda National Rescue Fronts I and II, Allied Democratic Forces, Lord's Resistance Army, People's Redemption Army, Ugandan National Democratic Alliance, Uganda National Liberation Army, Severino Lukoya's Lord's Army, Uganda Christian Democratic Army, West Nile Bank Front and the rebellion of Dan Opiro in Apac.

<sup>2</sup> The northern Uganda conflict began with the UNLA and UPDA in 1986, but Kony founded what later became known as the LRA in November 1987. Thus, the northern conflict is in its 18<sup>th</sup> year, but the LRA is 17 years old.

<sup>3</sup> World Food Programme Emergency Report No. 4 of 2004. Available at [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)

<sup>4</sup> Museveni is an ethnic Munyankole (from the Banyankole group) from western Uganda and Okello was an ethnic Acholi from the north.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with numerous people in Gulu, Kitgum and Soroti.

<sup>6</sup> The agreement was a power-sharing deal reached in Nairobi in December 1985 between Tito Okello and Yoweri Museveni.

<sup>7</sup> See Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala (1999); Robert Gersony, *The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a Field-based Assessment of the Civil Conflicts in Northern Uganda*, Submitted to the US Embassy, Kampala and USAID mission, Kampala, August 1997. Available at [http://www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/conflictweb/reports/gersony/gersony\\_uganda.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/conflictweb/reports/gersony/gersony_uganda.pdf); Ruddy Doom and Koen

outline of their histories is given here. The northern conflict, which encompasses all of these different insurgencies, began in January 1986 when soldiers from the former national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) of Milton Obote and later Tito Okello, fled to the north after being ousted from Kampala by Yoweri Museveni's NRA/M. UNLA anger was sparked by Museveni's breaking of a power-sharing agreement that had been brokered with Okello in Nairobi in December 1985, and RLP interviews reveal that many northerners still resent the "backstabbing" annulment of this accord (see below). The UNLA forces were defeated in March 1986, but many remnants of the former army joined with Acholi politicians, former Idi Amin troops and others in Juba, southern Sudan to form the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) that same month. These ex-soldiers at first posed a threat to the new regime, but the NRM's carrot-and-stick approach resulted in a peace deal in June 1988 that brought most of the fighters out of the bush. Brokered by Museveni's brother Caleb Akandwanaho a.k.a. Salim Saleh, the Gulu Peace Accord gave amnesty to the combatants (2,000 of whom subsequently joined the NRA) and attempted to address political and economic issues by calling for the discussion of a new constitution and a northern reconstruction programme.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, another rebellion began to captivate the anti-government sentiments of many northerners: the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Auma "Lakwena". According to one study, Lakwena "offered hope for worldly as well as spiritual redemption in a dark hour of despair", since the Acholi had been ousted from power and were facing what many of them at the time believed to be persecution and possible extinction.<sup>9</sup> Lakwena energised and disciplined her soldiers with cleansing rituals and strict moral rules of behaviour, and received numerous civilian donations as a result of her popularity.<sup>10</sup> She led the movement all the way south to Jinja, allegedly because NRA soldiers feared her spiritual powers and thus allowed her to pass through much of the country,<sup>11</sup> but was eventually defeated by a revitalised NRA military force in November 1987.<sup>12</sup>

In retrospect, both the UPDA and HSM were similar in that they tried to mobilise popular grievances in a struggle against the new government. Although the former was more about capturing political power and the latter more about rejuvenating Acholi society, they both articulated reasons for rebellion that most Acholi sympathised with at the time. These popular causes can be summarised as follows: they feared reprisals for what many perceived to be Acholi-led massacres in the Luwero Triangle during the early 1980s; they were upset at their loss of political and economic power as a result of Museveni's breaking of a 1985 power-sharing agreement and destructive cattle raids that they believed were sponsored by the NRM; they were afraid the new government – believed to be controlled exclusively by western Ugandans – would marginalise them after their dominance in the national army; they were defending themselves against atrocities committed by certain battalions of NRA troops in 1986-7; and they saw violence as the only means to address these grievances after witnessing Uganda's successive violent power struggles since independence.<sup>13</sup> Since they were trying to gain popular support, neither the UPDA nor the HSM committed significant atrocities against its own civilians, although such a trend began

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Vlassenroot, "Kony's Message: A New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda". *African Affairs*, 98 (1999), pp. 5-36.

<sup>8</sup> See C.C.M. Lamwaka, "Civil War and the Peace Process in Uganda, 1986-1997", *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999: 16-7.

<sup>10</sup> See Behrend, 1999; HURIPEC, 2003: 36-41; Doom and Vlassenroot, 16-8.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 5 October 2003; interview with opinion leader, Soroti, 5 November 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Gersony, 1997: 25; HURIPEC, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See also, Gersony, 1997, who outlines ten main root causes; HURIPEC, 2003, which focuses on ethnic violence; Hon. Ronald Reagan Okumu, *Analytical Proposal for Peace in Northern Uganda*, unpublished paper, January 2003, which emphasises "prejudice and discrimination against the Acholi".

during Severino Lukoya's brief rebellion in 1987. Severino, the father of Lakwena, tried to take over the movement following her defeat, but was unable to motivate the population and therefore turned to terror tactics, particularly against children, to sustain operations.<sup>14</sup> Poor leadership and organisation, however, meant the group quickly dissolved.

The UPDA peace deal, Lakwena's defeat and Severino's dissolution left a significant power vacuum in the north – a vacuum that was quickly filled by Joseph Kony. Kony, an independent UPDA commander who had also tried to take over Lakwena's HSM, had already been amassing a small contingent of fighters. He took over a UPDA division in February 1987, persuading a few soldiers to join and kidnapping the rest, and later incorporated a small number of UPDA fighters who refused to give up arms following the 1988 Gulu peace accord.<sup>15</sup> While he initially targeted mostly government fighters, Kony soon turned against civilians, particularly after government-sponsored "Bow and Arrow" civil defence militias in Gulu and Kitgum were formed against him in 1991-2. At the same time, the government launched the brutal "Operation North", which reportedly damaged LRA capacity considerably but also generated significant resentment after the arrest of several popular northern politicians.<sup>16</sup> The most successful peace initiative to date was launched in 1994, led by then-Minister for the Pacification of the North, Betty Bigombe.<sup>17</sup> Despite achieving ceasefires and extensive face-to-face talks with Kony himself, the mission failed as a result of communication difficulties, alleged vested interests of certain high-ranking officers and politicians, Museveni's strict deadline of seven days for negotiations and the LRA's turn to Sudan for weapons re-armament.<sup>18</sup>

The war has dragged on in the ten years since the Bigombe negotiations without significant hope for resolution. Brief talks were held in Rome in 1997 with exile businessmen claiming to be the LRA's political wing, but failure ensued after the lead negotiator was almost killed by Kony during their first meeting in the bush (see below). After considerable lobbying by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), the government introduced the Amnesty Act in 2000, which gave a blanket amnesty to all LRA fighters who returned from the bush. However, two years later Operation Iron Fist was launched in early 2002, in which UPDF troops attempted to drive the LRA out of southern Sudan but ended up worsening the humanitarian situation and dramatically increasing the number of IDPs across the north. The war spread east to the Teso and Lango regions in 2003, and new government-sponsored militias called the Arrow and Rhino groups began to counter the LRA in these areas. Today, there is renewed hope for an end to the conflict, with the rapidly moving Sudan peace process and the government's Presidential Peace Team acting as potential important steps in the right direction. Whether this hope eventually bears fruit rests on the government, Ugandan civil society and the international community prioritising the resolution of the conflict and co-ordinating their actions.

## 1.2 Methodology

This report is based on the work of five field researchers who interviewed over 900 people, including 257 individual interviews and 31 group discussions from September to December 2003.

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<sup>14</sup> See Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999: 19.

<sup>15</sup> Behrend, 1999: 179-80.

<sup>16</sup> These 18 politicians were accused of being rebel collaborators after raising concerns about the nature of the operation. All were acquitted after two years in prison, however, as the government did not have any hard evidence against them. See Gersony, 1997: 31-2.

<sup>17</sup> Bigombe is an Acholi from the north.

<sup>18</sup> For more information, see Barney Afako, "Lessons from Past Peace Initiatives", Monograph commissioned by the Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), November 2002.



The majority of fieldwork was carried out in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Soroti districts, with additional interviews in Luwero, Kampala, London and Washington D.C. The views and experiences of 66 local government officials, 14 central government officials, 54 religious and traditional leaders, 53 ex-combatants and abductees, 17 representatives from the UPDF and security services, 114 men and 123 women IDPs, 272 schoolchildren and child IDPs, as well as teachers, journalists and representatives from the business community were collected. In addition, an extensive review of the literature on the war to date was undertaken, and is used throughout the report (see appendix).

The report begins, in Section 2, with an analysis of the root causes of the war, in particular highlighting crucial causes that must still be addressed today. Section 3 presents an in-depth analysis of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army, and Section 4 highlights how the devastating consequences of the war have transformed into ongoing causes of conflict. The fifth section considers the recent developments that have taken place since the LRA spread its attacks further east and the implications for the resolution of the conflict. The final section, 6, analyses attempts that have been made to date to resolve the conflict, before making recommendations for the way forward.

## **2 ROOT CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT**

The wider northern Ugandan conflict traces its core to deeper issues that do not immediately surface in the day-to-day fighting of the LRA. These root causes, which underlay the initial UPDA and other rebellions, are critical since they have never been resolved and may again re-surface and cause renewed conflict if left unaddressed. The absence of a consensus on the core causes of the war partly explains why there is no consensus on how to end the war. Whereas Gersony emphasises the "ghosts of the Luwero Triangle" that haunt an Acholi people who lost economic and political influence following Museveni's rise to power,<sup>19</sup> a recent report by HURIPEC argues that it is the NRM that initiated an ethnic war against northerners even before the Luwero Triangle.<sup>20</sup> These and other competing analyses paralyse conflict resolution efforts, as key actors lack a firm consensus on which issues to address in resolving the conflict. A more thorough investigation into these root causes is thus needed, particularly at a time when there is renewed hope that the conflict may soon be resolved and the root causes dealt with more comprehensively.

Based on both the field interviews and an analytical literature review, RLP has identified two main root causes of the war. First, Uganda's post-independence history of numerous violent power struggles has left a legacy of domination, violent politics and militarism that is difficult to overcome, particularly in the north. Second, deep-rooted divisions between the north and south of the country were accentuated by various leaders over the past 40 years and remain important issues in the minds of many Ugandan citizens. Each is considered in turn.

### **2.1 A History of Violence and Impunity**

Uganda's post-colonial history of violent coups, numerous armed rebellions and lack of accountability for such violence provides the critical backdrop for understanding why the war broke out the way it did in northern Uganda. Indeed, given this history of accessing power through violent means, the armed rebellion in the north against the NRM regime was seen as the normal course of political business. The political system in Uganda has, since the first post-independence government, had a strong military character. Previous regimes, such as those of Idi Amin and

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<sup>19</sup> Gersony, 1997: 9-16.

<sup>20</sup> HURIPEC, 2003: 24-31.

Milton Obote I and II, have been characterised by civil unrest and gross human rights violations, manifested in torture, rape, extra-judicial execution and mass murders, disappearances and displacement.<sup>21</sup> The perpetrators of these crimes got away with impunity,<sup>22</sup> and eventually created a trend for successive governments to hunt down and exact extra-judicial revenge on soldiers and civilian populations associated with the ousted regimes. This practice culminated in a cycle of fear, hate, anger, mistrust, and more violent vengeance, and served to entrench prejudices that had, since the colonial period, labelled and dichotomised Ugandans along regional and ethnic lines. Such a culture of impunity also made recourse to violence the 'easy' and normal method of retaining or gaining access and control of state power. As one religious leader in Gulu noted of Tito Okello's forces after the defeat by the NRA, "They believed they could get power back because it is the norm: Amin did the same, Obote did the same, and Museveni did the same. So they also could use force and topple the government."<sup>23</sup> 'Political mistakes' carried out by undisciplined soldiers became only symptoms of a culture of revenge and exclusion entrenched by historical incidents under various regimes. For example, FEDEMU, a mainly Baganda battalion with the NRA during its guerrilla struggle, "did not enjoy the reputation for discipline" and reportedly committed many atrocities in the north during 1985-6.<sup>24</sup>

Periods of uncertainty following Uganda's numerous military coups highlight the cycles of violence that are still relevant today, including the aftermath of Obote's oustings in 1971 and again in 1985, Idi Amin's overthrow in 1979, and Tito Okello's removal in 1986. At the same time, new governments pursued vendettas against the remnants of previous regimes, following them to their home areas and committing gross human rights violations against the local population. After Idi Amin overthrew Obote in 1971, for example, he ordered soldiers who had served in Obote's government into the barracks and killed many of them before going on to exact revenge against unarmed civilians in Acholi and Lango.<sup>25</sup> One interviewee related this background of violent politics to the current war:

[The northern Uganda conflict] is similar to the overthrows of government in our past. Once a team of people have been overthrown by violence, there is always resistance in the hearts of people. Museveni took over power militarily. This system of coming to power is grounded in this country, leaving a trail of bitterness. The government interpreted that Kony is fighting to regain power.<sup>26</sup>

The absence of viable political structures allowing for the free entry and exit from the political process, as well as inadequate channels to express grievances or disaffection, further fuelled violent political change. The purging of previous army officers forced many into exile, while others were persuaded by their leaders to go into hiding or join other disgruntled groups, to fight either to restore their control of political power and related socio-economic advantages, or to push for popular support to overthrow the government. According to many people interviewed for this report, 'If you don't like the government, you go to the bush!'<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence then, that for numerous people in Gulu and Kitgum, the sense of betrayal by the NRM on the power-sharing

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<sup>21</sup> For a chronological catalogue of human rights violations by each regime since 1962, see *Pamphlet Summary of Report of Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights*, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Gersony, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 15/9/03.

<sup>24</sup> Gersony, 1997: 21-3. The most recent report on the conflict reported that the violations were in fact carried out by the NRA itself, though it was impossible for RLP to verify the accuracy of these historical events. FEDEMU was absorbed into the NRA after the overthrow of Tito Okello. HURIPEC, 2003: 34.

<sup>25</sup> See Gersony, 1997: 7.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 1/10/03.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 5/10/03.

provisions of the 1986 Nairobi Peace Accord was the immediate cause of the conflict. As an elder in Kitgum recounted, “In 1986, I led a goodwill mission to the rebels in the bush and told them to give us their grievances so that we would convey them to Museveni... The rebels generally wanted Museveni to apologise for breaching the Nairobi peace talks. The Nairobi Peace Talks have given the rebels ‘Lapii’ or justification for fighting.”<sup>28</sup>

Other insurgencies related to the northern conflict have arisen because trends in official government policy were seen as deliberately designed to exclude, discriminate, neglect and/or exploit certain groups with regard to political participation and access to the ‘national cake.’<sup>29</sup> As a teacher in Gulu said, “The conflict originated because of the distance between the Acholi and Museveni groups. The government gave us nothing, and it made us so frustrated.”<sup>30</sup> For instance, the National Resistance Movement went to the bush in the early 1980s to protest against purportedly rigged elections. In 1987, the Uganda People’s Army (UPA) emerged to protest the depletion of the economic base in Teso due to cattle rustling by the Karamojong with the alleged participation by NRA soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Many local people interviewed in Soroti held strong views about this, noting that the indifference displayed by the government with regard to this matter could be construed to indicate tacit knowledge or collaboration with the cattle rustlers.<sup>32</sup>

Rebel groups have also perpetuated a political culture of violence by committing their own atrocities against the local population for non-support, while at the same time attracting reprisals from the government for alleged collaboration. The most notorious example was the massacres in the ‘Luwero Triangle’ between 1980 and 1985, where the then-insurgent NRM killed many for “informing the government of the whereabouts of the *Bayekera* [rebels].”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the UNLA government exacted reprisals against the civilians for alleged support of or collaboration with the rebels through mass killings, looting and destruction of property. As one informant in Luwero said, “If the rebels were told you were informing the government, they would come and warn you not to do it again. If you said what they had told you, they would come and take you, and give you a hoe to dig your grave, then hit you with the hoe and you fell into the hole. Or they just killed you and left you.”<sup>34</sup> Other interviewees disputed common allegations that the crimes committed in Luwero were exclusively perpetrated by army officers from the North, Acholi or otherwise: “Some people from here who were in government would come and ask for your identity card, and ask where you came from, especially if you had something they wanted to take from you. Even if they knew you, they would call you a *muyekera* [rebel] and kill you. We know them.”<sup>35</sup>

Fear of revenge thus emerges as a significant motivation for former soldiers to go to the bush. After the defeat of the UNLA, most soldiers withdrew to Sudan fearing execution for crimes committed in Luwero by the previous government, repeating the murder of former soldiers that happened when Amin took over.<sup>36</sup> As one religious leader commented,

When Museveni first came back, all was fine until the FEDEMU battalion of the NRA came with the spirit of revenge, that Acholis were the ones who killed in Luwero. So they started

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with elder in Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>29</sup> HURIPEC, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with teacher, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with former UPA commander, Soroti, 07/11/03.

<sup>32</sup> Group discussion with 20 women IDPs from Soroti and Katakwi districts, Soroti, 7/11/03.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with opinion leader and two local councillors in Luwero, 29/10/03.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with a driver, Luwero, 29/10/03.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with local council politician, Luwero, 29/10/03.

<sup>36</sup> Gersony, 1997.

persecuting... Behind the whole war I see fear. The Acholi people were too fearful and suspicious of the army coming to power since the Nairobi Peace accord failed.<sup>37</sup>

These cycles of violent politics and revenge perpetuated by previous regimes have created a political environment in which armed mobilisation was seen as a legitimate means to address the grievances of one's group and the only means to access political power. Given that Tito Okello's Acholi-dominated government immediately preceded the NRM, it is hardly surprising that armed conflict broke out in northern Uganda.

## 2.2 A Deep-rooted Regional Divide

A second major factor behind the northern conflict is the deep-seated division between northern and southern Uganda, a divide that has engendered a fear of being dominated by either regions or ethnic groups, and has served as a barrier to national unity. This north-south divide is symptomatic of other regional divisions that exist throughout Uganda. As one former senior government official revealed, "How many people view the country as one? If you ask people, what is Uganda, it is difficult to say. The conflict is an issue of nationalism, because it is not viewed as a national issue really."<sup>38</sup> This lingering attitude among many Ugandan citizens and even some policymakers has its roots in the policies and actions of previous governments that concentrated power and resources in the hands of specific groups in certain regions – to the exclusion of other regions. In particular, political and economic patrimonialism occurred along a north-south dividing line, with leaders such as Obote and Idi Amin enflaming anti-northern sentiments in the south through many of their policies. Such political decisions have engendered fear among those regions not in power, and have been one of the chief catalysts of conflict, with leaders using ethnic sentiments to mobilise political support.

The policy-driven regional splits began during the colonial era. The British colonial regime was interested in securing political control of the territory of Uganda against other imperial contenders, as well as establishing an economically profitable enterprise for Britain. To achieve this, it adopted a "divide and rule" policy that split Uganda into functional regions for maximum administrative efficiency, and maximum economic profit. The south was used as an agricultural base for sugarcane and tea, while the north was seen as "a disturbed, hostile territory, in which there were some tribes powerful enough to offer stiff and prolonged resistance".<sup>39</sup> The Baganda in the south were rewarded generously for their cooperation with the British, with the capital, parliament, university, main hospital and best infrastructure all built in Buganda territory. British authorities also characterised and reinforced images relative to the 'usefulness', productivity, 'suitability' and competence of the people in each region, leading to ethnic-based labels and stereotypes that have persisted to date. People from the north were described as having certain inherent traits and flaws that made them a brutal and martial 'tribe' unsuitable for rational political administration and economic governance, as opposed to the peaceful communities in the south.<sup>40</sup> It is important to point out that the British may have exacerbated these prejudices and rivalries, but they did not initiate them – many were present before the colonists' arrival. This is critical because we need to understand not only why the British adopted a policy of 'divide and rule' but also why it was successful: by exploiting existing ethnic tensions, the British were able to undermine any possible co-ordinated resistance of Ugandans.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with former senior government official, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>39</sup> James Barber, *Imperial Frontier*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi (1968), Chs 10-11, cited in HURUPEC, 19.

<sup>40</sup> See HURUPEC, 2003: 19-20; Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999: 7-8.

Regional divisions were accentuated by post-independence regimes. At the root of such divisions lay each government's failure either to identify and prioritise the issue of nation-building, or their use of approaches that only partially solved the problems or inadvertently reinforced them. Narrow individual political interests including exclusion and intolerance to alternative ideas and groups were the root issues in these regimes. In order to help minimise disloyalty and the chances of revolt, successive governments in Uganda have promoted and surrounded themselves with relatives, friends and people particularly from their own ethno-regional-religious group. Tito Okello's wide-scale looting of Teso and Lango, for example, is still remembered distinctly by many in these regions, with serious implications for the current conflict. As one local politician from Soroti (Teso) said: "Historically, the Acholi were not very nice. They brutalized Ugandans when Obote left power. They put human dung in the Lira Hotel, the Okellos. This is rekindled today often in debate. We need to introduce a serious course of peace studies in Acholi."<sup>41</sup> The domination by a single regional group, following the rule of Milton Obote from Lango and Idi Amin from West Nile, is one approach that the NRA purportedly came to power to reverse:

The problem in Uganda is that the leadership has mainly been from the north. The southerners who are mainly Bantu have played a peripheral role all these years since independence in 1962... We are not against the northerners as such, and if a popular man from Acholi or Lango or even Madi wins, he will have our mandate.<sup>42</sup>

Whether the system has been transformed into a fully representative national entity is another matter, but continued perceptions about a north-south divide uncovered in many RLP interviews from Kitgum to Kampala suggest that this is still an important area of concern. As one ex-senior government official recalled, "Someone came into my office once while I was away. When I came back, I asked my colleagues whether the person was a Ugandan or a foreigner. They said, 'oh, he was not a Ugandan. He was an Acholi.' This is characteristic of wider things in the country".<sup>43</sup> As a religious leader from the north said, "This issue of marginalisation of the Acholi people keeps coming back."<sup>44</sup> Or, as a business entrepreneur in Gulu noted, "When you are this side of Karuma Falls, you feel as if you are in another country."<sup>45</sup>

The perception of political domination by a particular ethnic group has fuelled several regional conflicts in Uganda. Numerous Ugandans interviewed by RLP still nurture the perception that if one's ethnic group is not in power, one's security is not guaranteed. A male IDP articulated such a view:

When we overthrew the [Obote II] government in 1985, Museveni said he would put the Acholi in a bottle like *senene* [grasshoppers] so that they can eat themselves. Now we are dying just like he said. We think he is the one who started this Kony spirit. He has said many things that mean he hates the Acholi.<sup>46</sup>

As is apparent in numerous interviews, many northerners perceive that the recruiting ground for the government and military has appeared to shift from the north to the west. As one local NGO worker in Kitgum alleged, "Museveni has turned the government into a family affair."<sup>47</sup> Many

<sup>41</sup> Interview with local politician, Soroti, 7/11/03.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Yoweri Museveni, *Drum Magazine* (East), October 1985: 9.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with former senior government official, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with business woman, Gulu, 18/12/03.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with IDP man, Kitgum, 13/10/03.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

interviewees, particularly IDPs, also believe that it is the NRM's fear of challenge and domination by the Acholi that makes the NRM allow the LRA to weaken them as a people:

This war is a ploy by the current government to impoverish the Acholi. When you are poor, you become a beggar and accept anything that is offered to you. If you are thinking of what you will eat or where you will sleep, you have no time to think about politics or your rights. You are not a challenge.<sup>48</sup>

This does not mean that all northerners hate the government – there are many who disagree with the assertion above. However, the historical/ethnic dimension clearly continues to play a role in the current conflict, and the government needs to work harder to reach out to the people of the north.

The aftermath of these policy choices is a divided Uganda with a fragile sense of nationhood such that political upheavals become geographically localised or 'regionalised', and are perceived by other Ugandans as distant and unimportant, "as long as it doesn't come here!"<sup>49</sup> While this in itself does not cause conflict, lack of concern by the general public not directly affected, and official blindness to a group's problem because 'they are like that!' creates fertile grounds for security-threatening elements to fester and destabilise whole communities, which in effect creates the motive and incentive for conflict. As one interviewee in Luwero said, "Those Acholi are killing each other up there, and they always will. Why should we be concerned? We have our own worries here at home."<sup>50</sup> Some of this attitude may be beginning to change, however. According to interviews in Soroti, for example, most people said they knew very little about the LRA because for 17 years it was not affecting them. "When they came here, we knew what the Acholi have been going through, and we now feel we need to look at this as a national problem."<sup>51</sup>

Thus the failure of successive governments to analyse and correctly diagnose the problems facing different areas of Uganda led them to adopt policies that failed to address these problems, or to adopt strategies riddled with inconsistencies that inadvertently permitted contentious issues to degenerate into violence. In particular, lack of clear leadership that could stand above prejudices both at a national and grassroots level is a recurring issue. Such absence of leadership has led to failure to address these root causes and allowed conflict to continue. In the context of the northern Uganda conflict, much of the current government's official policy response to the physical and human security challenges has been to de-legitimise the conflict by focusing on the LRA as criminal elements or terrorists that can be quickly squashed. However, extensive on-the-ground interviews show that the war in fact encompasses two much broader root issues that must also be considered when dealing with the conflict today: a lingering north-south division in many people's minds and a legacy of political violence that is difficult, but not impossible, to overcome.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with businessman, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with displaced teacher, Soroti, 8/11/03.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with teacher, Luwero, 29/10/03.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with displaced teacher, Soroti, 8/11/03.

### 3 ANATOMY OF THE LRA

#### 3.1 Background

It is against this background that Joseph Kony's LRA has waged a relentless war across northern Uganda for the past 17 years. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 children,<sup>52</sup> including girls used as both commanders' wives and fighters, have been kidnapped since the LRA began operations. Indeed, the group is one of the most brutal across the globe, forcing young children to kill and torture soon after capture, making them massacre their own communities to create a "clean break" with the past, and coercing abductees to walk for miles with their hands tied together with rope. The LRA, which originally consisted of 200 core fighters, is currently comprised of approximately 3,000 child combatants most of whom are not allowed to carry a gun, and 150-200 armed commanders.<sup>53</sup> Although a peace deal was close to being reached between the Government of Uganda and the LRA in 1994, the LRA turned to Sudan for arms and military training that same year and has been substantially better equipped since that time – at times better equipped than the UPDF. There are few resources that can be sold for arms in northern Uganda, and thus the Sudanese strategic assistance has been a critical supply line. Indeed, the LRA's entire resource base rests on raiding farms, abducting children and getting a relatively small supply of small arms from Sudan.<sup>54</sup>

Kony himself is shrouded in a veil of secrecy: on the one hand he is presented as a disorganised criminal who can be quickly and easily crushed, and on the other he is portrayed as an invincible messenger of God which no bullets can penetrate. A BBC reporter confirmed what RLP found in the field: "Little is known about the rebel leader... and it is clear that this is exactly how he likes it. He has created an aura of fear and mysticism around himself which is an image difficult to dispel."<sup>55</sup> Given this confusion, numerous labels have been used to describe Kony and the LRA: 'lunatic', 'irrational', 'inexplicable', 'terrorist bandits', and 'thugs'. These caricatures have had important practical implications, making it hard to know what strategies would be most effective in ending the war.

In addition, there is an important spiritual dimension to the LRA, although the group is not a cult. Kony uses his spiritual and biblical revelations to manipulate people much like a cult leader, but does not appear to brainwash them heavily: most LRA members end up believing in his spiritual power, but they are not mesmerised by his presence. Kony has a multi-layered spiritual vision, but he also uses this spiritualism to maintain control, starting with his overall vision of liberation and destruction and continuing with individual spirits that 'guide' specific military tactics. Thus the following section seeks to give a fuller explanation of why and how Kony's LRA is fighting. Based on interviews with ex-combatants and others who have had direct or indirect contact with Kony, it is important to note that the RLP was unable to interview Kony himself.

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<sup>52</sup> IRIN Web Special on the War in Northern Uganda, available at [www.irinnews.org/webspecials/uga\\_crisis/](http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/uga_crisis/). This is based on UN estimates.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with local government official, Gulu, 7/10/03; interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>54</sup> It does not possess tanks, helicopters, artillery or other heavy weaponry that insurgencies such as UNITA in Angola used to receive.

<sup>55</sup> BBC News online, 2 November 2000. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

### 3.2 What drives the LRA?

#### *The Spiritual Dimension*

Born into a family of peasant farmers with “a reputation for mysticism”,<sup>56</sup> Kony has an important spiritual dimension that motivates him. The evidence suggests that Kony, at least some of the time, believes he is fulfilling a spiritual, not a political, vision as a messenger of God. As one intermediary who has made contact with top LRA commanders commented, “Kony believes he is the true man of God sent by God to save the Acholi”.<sup>57</sup> Seemingly strange at first, the vision appears to have a more coherent logic upon closer examination. According to sources familiar with him during his early days as a commander with the UPDA, Kony believed he was

...sent by God to liberate humanity from disease and suffering. But, he added, he had discovered that healing was senseless as long as those who were healed were killed. He had resolved to fight to destroy all those who wanted to fight. The struggle would last until no one had the wish to fight any longer. He said he had not come to topple the government, but to destroy the evil forces in the world... He wanted justice and righteousness to reign throughout the country.<sup>58</sup>

His early actions confirm such a belief. For example, Kony initially wanted to gain the support of the northern population and broke away from the UPDA in November 1987 allegedly to punish them for their unjust plundering and terrorising of the population.<sup>59</sup> According to one researcher, “He wanted to build up a trans-ethnic movement, but failed” and tried to unite different northern rebellions into one group.<sup>60</sup>

The origins of Kony’s vision must be understood in the context of the Acholi socio-political crisis, as discussed above. Like Alice Lakwena before him, Kony believed he had spiritual powers and could lead the Acholi out of this difficult time. However, other Acholi leaders rejected his prophecy, a rejection that Kony took badly. After he asked Alice for support, for example, she mocked him and told him he should use his limited spiritual powers to become a doctor or a healer, but not to lead a rebellion. Kony reportedly left in silence following Lakwena’s monologue and later allegedly told his followers that he was deeply insulted by her rebuff.<sup>61</sup>

The LRA’s spiritual dimension is in part explained by traditional cultural beliefs. In many African communities, as well as elsewhere in the world, social and cultural problems are interpreted through spiritual media. In particular, calamities afflicting communities are seen as punishment for wrongs that the people themselves committed, and therefore there is need for atonement and cleansing, or to repulse the evil spirit tormenting them. Kony believes that there is something wrong in ‘Acholiland’ and thinks he can engage in spiritual cleansing to address that wrong. However, while he interprets the problem within this traditional spiritual worldview, he then perverts it to fit his own views rather than the accepted Acholi standard. His justification of violence comes because the people have refused to back him. This is where he departs from the Acholi tradition where life is held sacred, to his personal interpretation of the Bible where he can select certain verses to justify the use of violence on those who have refused to support him. Importantly, all the Acholi

<sup>56</sup> GUSCO, 2003: 7. See also Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999: 20.

<sup>57</sup> Confidential interview, Gulu, 17/12/03.

<sup>58</sup> Behrend, 1999: 179. See also Ayebare, 1998; A. Lukermoi, “The Effects of the Holy Spirit Movement on the Christian Church”, MA Thesis, Department of Theology, Makerere University, Uganda (May 1990): 49.

<sup>59</sup> Behrend, 1999: 180.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 181, 187.

<sup>61</sup> She also later sent him a letter to stop fighting in mid-1987. Behrend, 1999: 86.



traditional leaders interviewed by RLP clearly reject Kony's spiritual vision and denounce him as a false prophet. As an Acholi elder in Kitgum said, "Kony says he has spirits, but this should be traditionally investigated. We do not see it that way. The origin of this conflict is based on genuine grievances, but any misguided person can try and abuse it."<sup>62</sup>

Despite Kony's early dismissal by his potential allies, he continued to claim to have biblical revelations into the 1990s, visions that have allegedly become increasingly apocalyptic and destructive over time. During the late 1980s, the LRA concentrated its attacks mainly on government troops<sup>63</sup> but from 1992 began focusing on civilian targets. As several authors correctly point out, the change in strategy is explained by Kony's desire to take revenge on a civilian population that, in 1991-2, fought against the LRA in government-sponsored "Bow and Arrow" civil defence units instead of lending their support to the LRA.<sup>64</sup> RLP interviews confirm this hypothesis. Kony reportedly told one abductee, "if the Acholi don't support us, they must be finished"<sup>65</sup> and then justified his new approach by a different spiritual revelation. He is also alleged to have told LRA members in the bush, "God said in the Bible, 'I will unleash my wrath upon you and you will suffer pain. And in the end you will be killed by the sword. Your children will be taken into captivity and will be burnt to death'."<sup>66</sup>

This quote is disturbingly similar to what has taken place on the ground during LRA raids since 1992: they have burnt villages, abducted children and used pangas (machetes) to kill civilians. As one formerly abducted girl elaborated, "[Kony] said even in the Bible people died and if it is time for you to die, you must die. It's not Kony who has killed you but God, because your time has come".<sup>67</sup> As another ex-combatant added, "The rebels were indoctrinating us saying government wants to kill us and finish Acholis, Teso and Langis."<sup>68</sup>

### *A Political Agenda?*

In addition to the spiritual dimension outlined above, there is considerable debate within the discourse on the war as to whether or not the LRA has a political agenda. Having a political agenda is seen by many of those commenting on the war as a precondition for conducting negotiations with Kony, and his apparent lack of a clear political programme has generated considerable confusion. This lack of clarity was reflected on the ground: some respondents in the conflict zone expressed the belief that he has no political agenda, while others said that Kony may have an agenda but that it was not yet articulated.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, many interviewees were profoundly confused about the fact that Kony claimed to be fighting for them, yet was killing and abducting them at the same time.<sup>70</sup> As one northern politician said, "Now the LRA say that their agenda is democracy, multipartyism, land, etc. They even claim they are upset by rigged elections! Ha! They are just jumping on the bandwagon – any bandwagon that comes."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Acholi elder, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>63</sup> There are notable exceptions to this, however, including the 1988 raid on Lacore Hospital and Sacred Heart School near Gulu. See Behrend, 1999: 180.

<sup>64</sup> Gersony, 1997: 44; GUSCO, 2003: 8; Weeks, 2002: 9.

<sup>65</sup> Focus group discussion with ten boys, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>66</sup> See Elizabeth Rubin, "Our Children are Killing Us", *The New Yorker*, 23 March 1998: 61.

<sup>67</sup> BBC, 2 November 2000.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with ex-rebel boy combatant, Kitgum, 1/10/03.

<sup>69</sup> For example, interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>70</sup> For example, group discussion with 18 school teachers, Gulu, 5 October 2003; group discussion with 12 secondary school children, Gulu, 6 October 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with northern politician, 3/12/03.

Ex-combatants expressed a similar level of confusion. On the one hand, when asked what they were taught in the bush, some ex-LRA combatants talked of being brutally instructed not to escape and taught how to use a gun, not systematically indoctrinated in anti-government propaganda. One former abductee said, “First they tell you that if you escape, you will be killed. They tied up my friend and beat her in public. I don’t know why Kony is fighting, we didn’t see him.”<sup>72</sup> Or, as an ex-rebel said, “I think Kony is just deceiving the children. He doesn’t have the guns to defeat the government.”<sup>73</sup> However, other ex-combatants reported that Kony told them that he is fighting to overthrow the government and mentioned issues such as land and the “overstayed rule of the Banyankole.”<sup>74</sup> In particular, many interviews revealed the extent to which Kony showed clear distrust of the President. As one ex-combatant said, “What the rebels say is ‘until we overthrow the government, we will keep on fighting.’ He is not pleased with a foreigner ruling us. He says the president is punishing the people here in the north, by forcing people into camps, so much dying, no food.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise as a senior official elaborated, “Kony is emotionally charged, since Museveni was the one who overthrew them from power.”<sup>76</sup> In an LRA press release obtained by RLP, the group articulates its grievances against the president:

[The] oppressive rule and mismanagement of the country by Kaguta Museveni... LRM/A believes that there [sic] grievance against Museveni can only be solved through dialogue if Museveni could be serious about [sic] ending the war... the lack of seriousness and ill intention [illegible] agenda by Museveni and his loyalists...<sup>77</sup>

More recently, the LRA reportedly stopped its attacks and told the population to vote for the opposition during the 1996 presidential elections,<sup>78</sup> although the cease-fire was reportedly orchestrated by exiles in London claiming to be leaders of the Lord’s Resistance *Movement*.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Kony fell out with these individuals in the diaspora soon afterwards, as he saw them as trying to hijack the LRA for their own ends. Few other politicians have tried to collaborate with Kony, since “his methods embarrass those who support him or those who would like to support him because they don’t like Museveni”.<sup>80</sup> Reform Agenda politician James Opoka, for example, was reportedly killed by the LRA in 2002 for apparently trying to transform the group by giving it a more coherent and legitimate political programme.

The apparent confusion over the LRA’s political agenda is partly due to the fact that the LRA does not fit conventional definitions of a political insurgency: it does not engage civilians in political mobilisation or indoctrination, and has rejected several attempts by people outside the LRA command structure to take on a political agenda.<sup>81</sup> However, because it does not appear to fit easily within accepted paradigms, it does not necessarily mean that it is devoid of political content, or that political issues relating to northern Uganda should not be part of his grievances. Indeed, two possibilities emerge from what is known of the LRA.

<sup>72</sup> Focus group discussion with eleven ex-combatants, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>74</sup> For example, focus group discussion with five ex-combatants in KICWA, Kitgum, 14/10/03; focus group discussion in Palenga IDP camp, Gulu, 8/10/03.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with escaped abductee, Gulu town, 6/10/03

<sup>76</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>77</sup> LRA press release from 2003 obtained by RLP.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* See also, ACCORD, 2002.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with local government official, Lira, 11/11/03.

<sup>81</sup> See Mackinlay, 2003.

First, that Kony has a political agenda but is very poor at articulating it. Having dropped out of school at P-7 level, it is possible that he does not have a clear understanding of political processes and state power, and is therefore unable to translate his dissatisfaction with the government into a recognisable political insurgency or even an opposition political party. His rejection of previous political agendas from UPDM mobiliser Otunu Lukonyomoi,<sup>82</sup> Ugandan exile leaders, and northern politicians does not necessarily mean that Kony does not have political goals, but that he was either turning away ambitious leaders who want to put their own agenda onto the LRA for their own purposes, or their agenda did not fit with his worldview. Second, it is possible that Kony is motivated by both power and fear – the power he and his commanders derive from controlling an armed insurgency, spreading fear among the population in northern and eastern Uganda, and having numerous wives in the bush, and fear that if he is brought out of the bush, he will be killed or tried for war crimes.

Despite extensive interviews with ex-combatants and people in contact with the rebel leader, RLP cannot say definitively which version, if either, is correct. Whether the LRA does or does not have a political agenda should not, however, become the pivotal point for understanding Kony or for resolving the conflict. Instead, a more flexible approach to understanding what motivates the LRA is needed: trying to force rigid definitions onto this protracted conflict only generates confusion and prevents more complex understandings of Kony's worldview from emerging.

### 3.3 Recent Dynamics within the LRA

In addition to the spiritual and political dynamics explored above, three additional factors have played a significant role in further fuelling the LRA conflict. First, Kony's inner-core of fighters currently fears for their physical survival if they surrender – an anxiety that is fed by three possible factors. Historically, Acholi military leaders were rounded up and killed by government forces after being recalled to the barracks to disarm in 1971 under Idi Amin. The memories of this occasion are reported to still haunt LRA commanders and make them sceptical of the government's Amnesty Act. As one ex-LRA fighter reported, "there is a man called [former UPDA commander Kenneth] Kilama. After peace talks, he changed and joined Museveni and gave Museveni his soldiers. Then they turned against him and killed him. So Kony fears that if he surrenders, the same will happen to him".<sup>83</sup> In addition, the LRA's vicious atrocities, such as Vincent Otti's massacre of between 170 and 220 civilians in his own village of Atiak, mean that the commanders "are haunted by their own curses."<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the government's persistent vitriolic rhetoric about "annihilating" and "hunting down" the LRA add fuel to this fear, making it difficult to believe that they will be safe if a peace deal is reached. As one ex-rebel said, "the rebels in the bush wondered, saying 'this amnesty law must be effective. Do you think the government will not kill us?'"<sup>85</sup> Another junior commander asked, "My query is the amnesty really true? Many people who try to come back are killed. What about me who grew up in the bush and fought for fifteen years. Will I be pardoned?"<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> For instance during the early days of the rebellion in 1988, Kony recruited ex-UPDM political organiser Otunu Lukonyomoi into the group. According to a former HSM member, Lukonyomoi "gained many followers because he tirelessly criticised his own people's failings and combated every form of hypocrisy. He also spoke repeatedly against killing civilians." Lukonyomoi's popularity led to a rivalry between him and Kony, and he died under mysterious circumstances later that year. Behrend, 1999: 181-2.

<sup>83</sup> Kilama allegedly died in mysterious circumstances in the early 1990s. Focus group discussion in Palenga IDP camp, Gulu, 8/10/03.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>85</sup> Focus group discussion with ex-combatants at Concerned Parents Association Reception Centre, Kitgum, 11/10/03.

<sup>86</sup> Testimony of a junior LRA commander in documented conversation with religious leaders in 2002.

Second, after 17 years of conflict, many informants speculated that Kony continues fighting because it has become a way of life that both allows him easy access to resources, and gives him influence and authority he could never have achieved as a peasant labourer in northern Uganda. As one UPDF commander argued, “Peasants in the LRA have attained a life which they can’t sustain if they come out. They are used to freely getting what they want.”<sup>87</sup> An ex-combatant confirmed this: “All the good food such as chicken, meat, goats, cows and groundnuts are given to rebel commanders. The recruit eats... half-boiled cassava and potatoes.”<sup>88</sup> Top-level privileges are not only limited to food: “The commanders chose their wives first, and later gave us the ones they had had.”<sup>89</sup> Photographs of the LRA viewed by RLP reveal commanders relaxing with many wives and children in new-looking army uniforms and sitting alongside highly sophisticated weaponry.<sup>90</sup> As one high-level source put it, “the LRA is better armed than most African armies. They have “Anzas” [shoulder-fired missile launchers], 32 wives, and more. What can you offer them here that they don’t have in the bush?”<sup>91</sup>

Third, Sudan’s re-supply of the LRA has been another factor allowing for the group’s continuation since 1994. The LRA has been receiving weapons, ammunition, fuel, communications equipment and training from the Khartoum government since 1994, when the Bigombe peace talks failed. Such assistance, provided from Khartoum mainly through its southern militia, the Equatorial Defence Force (EDF), is a source of weapons that Kony would find difficult to replace. As one senior Ugandan analyst put it, “Kony hasn’t been shopping for arms. When his supply is cut off from Sudan, how can he sustain himself?”<sup>92</sup> Sudan began supplying the LRA in response to the Government of Uganda’s assistance to the SPLA. It aided the LRA in order both to destabilise Uganda on its northern border and hinder a free-flow of arms to the SPLA. Uganda’s support to the latter has now officially halted, although civilian rumours of the continued presence of the SPLA in northern Uganda persist. As a UPDF commander commented, “This conflict [with the LRA] is not new, but it continues because of its proximity to Sudan.”<sup>93</sup>

However, although Sudan has previously assisted the LRA out of national interest, its interests may be changing with the ongoing Sudanese peace process in Naivasha, Kenya. Khartoum has been under pressure from the US and UK to stop supporting Kony and his ‘terrorist group’. The NIF regime is seeking to restore diplomatic relations with the international community, in particular so it can begin exporting its newly found oil reserves. Furthermore, following the “Agreement on Security Arrangements” signed between Khartoum and the SPLA in September 2003, some EDF militia commanders have begun making deals with the more powerful SPLA (who will take over security for all of southern Sudan under the agreement) and have even been allegedly fighting the LRA near Juba.<sup>94</sup> Permission by the Sudan government to allow the UPDF to cross into its territory during Operation Iron Fist, as well as recent reports that the Government of Sudan is reducing support to the LRA, both forecast a future reduction in the LRA’s access to ready weaponry. As a high-ranking former combatant observed, “By 2001, the relationship between Kony and Sudan was so bad... Kony got so annoyed that he was shooting at Government of Sudan vehicles. He got really mad. They started fighting civilians in Sudan and collected all the property.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with UPDF commander, 2/10/03.

<sup>88</sup> Focus group discussion with ex-combatants at Concerned Parents Association Reception Centre, Kitgum, 11/10/03.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with ex-junior commander, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>90</sup> Confidential interview, 17 September 2003; confidential interview, Kampala, 4/10/03.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with senior government official, 5/12/03. Kony is reported to have between 30-100 wives. IRIN Web Special on the Crisis in Northern Uganda, 2003, available at [www.irinnews.org/webspecials/uga\\_crisis/](http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/uga_crisis/)

<sup>92</sup> Interview with senior independent analyst, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with UPDF commander, 2/10/03.

<sup>94</sup> Interviews with senior government officials, Kampala, 3-6/12/03.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with high-ranking ex-combatant, Gulu, 7/10/03.

It is not clear whether Khartoum will give up entirely on its long-time strategic partner. After all, the LRA not only causes insecurity in Uganda, but has also worked together with the Sudanese army in attacking strategic locations such as Torit in 2002.<sup>96</sup> One Ugandan official noted that, “The LRA is still getting arms from Sudan, having moved their supply lines beyond the Operation Iron Fist line [where the UPDF is allowed to operate]. They also have arms buried. But the key for me is if Kony doesn’t get re-supplied.”<sup>97</sup> However, these combined developments make the LRA’s future look less promising than before, and it appears to be feeling pressure that its most critical supply line may be cut off.

At the same time, two factors indicate that the LRA can sustain itself for some time without Sudanese support. First, the group uses few high-tech weapons – most attacks are against soft-target civilians and are carried out using axes and pangas (machetes). The fact that it operated for eight years before Khartoum started assistance in 1994 is testimony to this. Second, Kony has buried what seem to be sizeable arms caches from previous weapons transfers. As one analyst put it, “The LRA is very good at stockpiling. They were putting arms in the Imatong Hills well before Operation Iron Fist. They know how to plan for a rainy day. Besides, their supply needs are very low. They only fire something like a hundred bullets a day.”<sup>98</sup> One ex-junior commander appeared to confirm this suspicion: “We had weapons which we did not know how to use. These came from outside countries. The ones we don’t know how to use, Kony says he will wait for the angel to tell him when and how to use them.”<sup>99</sup> Some were more sceptical of the critical nature of the caches: “They have many arms buried... but if their supplies are cut off [from Sudan], they can survive only for a couple of months.”<sup>100</sup> While their precise impact is as yet unclear, the contingency supply factor will certainly have to be taken into account during the peace process, as discussed below.

### 3.4 LRA Tactics

Regardless of the motivation and capacity for Kony and the top LRA commanders to stay in the bush, the strategies that the LRA uses to maintain discipline and total control are both effective and horrific. First, Kony’s spiritual dimension is a key tool of manipulation, and many in the LRA appear to believe that he possesses spiritual powers. As an NGO official who works with ex-combatant children observed, “Some think he is God... They never question what he has said. They fear him very much.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, a typical response among returned fighters interviewed by the RLP is, “I heard that the evil spirit is in [Kony]. The spirit moves with him. In fact, I believe in this, because whenever he becomes weak, he has to make sacrifices on the mountain in Odek.”<sup>102</sup> Some former LRA members, however, were more sceptical: “I cannot believe in the spirit. I think Kony is just deceiving the children. I had fear, because I didn’t know the purpose [of the violence].”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, it is little coincidence that the spirits “guide” Kony to employ certain military strategies when they would be most effective. As one former LRA member said,

Kony only does things using the command of the spirits. At one time, Kony brought down an army helicopter near Adilang. He was using a certain gun. Also, when you are crossing a road, the commander goes first and sprinkles water and says prayers. That way, you can cross without getting

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with international official, Kampala, 4/10/03; interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 6/12/03.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with international NGO representative, Kampala, 6/12/03.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with ex-junior commander, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 6/10/03.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Lira, 13/11/03.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with two ex-combatants, Soroti, 5/11/03.

caught. When you are abducted, you are spread with shea butter – they believe that if you escape, it will just bring you back to them.<sup>104</sup>

Other spiritual practices serve a similar purpose. For example, Kony allegedly has a spirit called “Sengsu”, who “is the spirit for the commanders. He says when you begin firing your gun, run and don’t be afraid.”<sup>105</sup> Lack of fear is a well-known military factor that improves battlefield success against the enemy, and Kony clearly uses this spirit to increase his military effectiveness. One researcher further observed, “psychological pressure is maintained through the enforcement of arbitrary behavioural strictures imposed by Kony.”<sup>106</sup> Rituals such as not eating for three days, brushing your teeth to be “clean” before fighting, and smearing shea-butter in the sign of the cross on your body all create an aura of mysticism that increases their faith in Kony’s power.

Kony’s mysticism also appears to aid the LRA’s military campaign against the UPDF by instilling fear into many of the people fighting the group. As one observer in the north noted,

People fear Kony a lot because he’s being possessed by spirits. So even the government and the military believe that Kony has spirits. But what is the truth? They believe in witchcraft, and people fear. In the Mayi-Mayi rebellion in the Congo, the soldiers ran away from fear; children would wave twigs and the soldiers would scamper. But then the rebellion ended.<sup>107</sup>

As one senior government official admitted, “It is true that some UPDF troops believe that Kony may have spiritual powers. Some of their lack of vigour in pursuing the rebels can be ascribed to this, though this is far from the only reason why the war has not ended.”<sup>108</sup>

### *An Army of Children*

Reliance on abducted children has further enabled Kony to maintain his internal grip on the LRA for a number of reasons. First, as has been shown in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Iran and elsewhere,<sup>109</sup> they are easily malleable to whatever purpose Kony wants and are very quick to obey his orders. As one former junior commander noted, “Children copy exactly what is taught during training. They don’t pretend.”<sup>110</sup> An NGO worker added that “[Kony] targets children because he can model them and they’ll like you.”<sup>111</sup> Former rebels from other insurgencies understand the power that children can bring to such a group: “Kony commands thousands of... children whose allegiance is unquestioned. His power is very strong.”<sup>112</sup> Although this is slightly exaggerated given that hundreds of children escape from the LRA every year, the fact remains that Kony uses children as a vital resource.

Second, children, who are used as disposable porters by the LRA, walk quickly and tire slowly. This both increases LRA mobility and enhances its capacity to carry loads of looted goods over long distances – a critical source of the group’s re-supply line for food, gumboots and cash. As a

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with escaped abductee, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>106</sup> Willet Weeks, “Pushing the Envelope: Moving Beyond Protected Villages in Northern Uganda”, Submitted to UN-OCHA, New York, March 2002: 11.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>109</sup> See Para. 27 of “Machel Report”, otherwise known as “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children”, A/51/306, UN Department of Information, New York, (1996); Bennett, 1998.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with ex-junior commander, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Gulu, 16/9/03.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with ex-UPA rebel commander, Soroti, 4/11/03.

youth who escaped after one month admitted, “I carried the injured and didn’t use the gun. On raids, we would loot food, go into people’s homes and ask where the food was.”<sup>113</sup> Another recalled how the slower children are killed: “They looted our home and neighbours, abducting ten boys and four girls. We carried the loot up to Ogili hills. On the way, a small boy of twelve years threw the luggage down because he was tired. He was shot dead immediately.”<sup>114</sup> One abducted girl remembered that, “They beat my uncle, then made us carry bombs, grenades, bullets. We walked long distances, and our feet swelled.”<sup>115</sup>

Third, forcing children to kill their friends or family members in front of other abductees instils fear into them and discourages them from escaping. As one ex-rebel who spent eight years in the bush said, “Sometimes they get the new people to kill. You never refuse to kill, otherwise they will kill you.”<sup>116</sup> It also forces a clean break with the past, as they are less likely to return to a community where they have murdered and tortured. Finally, atrocities against soft-target civilians spread fear and chaos through the population, a guerrilla warfare tactic that denies intelligence to the government and leaves the rebels free to loot. A single vicious killing can force hundreds of people to flee from their homes in a particular sub-county, leaving behind their planted crops and numerous possessions for easy looting. Again, numerous testimonies bear this three-pronged logic out: “We killed people so that people would fear us,”<sup>117</sup> recollected one ex-combatant. A formerly abducted girl added, “They teach you ‘don’t fear’, otherwise you will be killed. They test your fear; they tell the children to kill an escapee otherwise you are killed. This is not done to everyone, but they see you are weak, and then they test you. They know these things.”<sup>118</sup> Thus Kony’s manipulative control is comprehensive.

### *Military Operations*

Although the LRA is often portrayed as a band of criminals, such a characterisation is clearly inaccurate for a group that has wreaked havoc in northern Uganda for the past 17 years. Not only are its tactics appallingly effective, but the LRA also has significant military ability. As one of the group’s former fighters commented, “Kony has no plan, but he has lots of weapons and soldiers.”<sup>119</sup> Unlike the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone or Angola, northern Uganda does not have rebellion-inducing resources such as diamonds, oil or coltan, making the LRA’s almost two decade-long existence remarkable. As a regional analyst noted, “The LRA have marvellous internal organisation and management. They keep records when they abduct children – who their parents are, etc. They have survived for 17 years on next to nothing.”<sup>120</sup> In the absence of natural resources, the LRA uses guerrilla ambush attacks with extreme effectiveness, skills that were probably acquired from UPDA splinter commander Odong Latek in mid-1988.<sup>121</sup> Fear of the LRA runs across all corners of the north, largely as a result of persistent surprise attacks on villages and roads undertaken by numerous highly mobile groups of 15 that then break up into smaller groups of 3-6.<sup>122</sup> Such attacks are usually undertaken deliberately with machetes and axes to spread maximum panic. Thus while the number of casualties may be relatively low compared with other conflicts, the level of displacement is extremely high in northern and eastern Uganda – over 1.4

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with ex-abductee, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>114</sup> Focus group discussion with six ex-combatants, Kitgum, 11/10/03.

<sup>115</sup> Focus group discussion with eleven ex-combatant girls, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with ex-rebel, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with ex-abductee, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with regional analyst, Kampala, 6/12/03.

<sup>121</sup> See Behrend, 1999: 182.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with senior government official, 4 December 2003; interview with senior government official, 5/12/03.

million people, which includes 82% of the population of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader.<sup>123</sup> One official described the LRA military strategy in more detail:

They go for soft targets and traumatise people. The ferocity of the attacks spreads fear into the population. When this happens, they deny the government intelligence, they drive people from their homes and loot, and then they take the goats, cassava, etc. from their land. The tools they use are terror, concealment and high mobility, tying the children together with ropes and moving very fast.<sup>124</sup>

Such tactics act as a form of psychological warfare. As one analyst summarised: “The rebels attack civilians because they want publicity and when they strike civilian targets, it will show that the rebels are active. It will be turned around that the government is not protecting people”.<sup>125</sup> However, this strategy has not worked as the civilian population clearly does not support the LRA. It has been tried for years in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader without success, and the recent popular government-sponsored militias against the LRA in Teso and Lango testify further to its failure in these areas. While it is true that almost all of these areas are majority multi-party regions, the LRA has failed to translate this opposition to the Government’s one-party Movement system into political support. As Gersony noted, “Given the anti-Museveni sentiment of most Acholis, the LRA’s inability to mobilize support – or at least avoid repudiation by its own ethnic base – is remarkable”.<sup>126</sup> Thus, while Kony is unable to convince people of his ideas, his effective use of military tactics creates fear and maintains instability throughout the region.

Other LRA tactics also indicate well co-ordinated military planning. For example, LRA commanders avoid government Mi-24 helicopter gunship attacks by passing uniforms over to child abductees and immediately dispersing into groups of 2-3.<sup>127</sup> While children are disposable porters in the LRA’s overall strategy, and the LRA loses nothing militarily when they are gunned down by UPDF troops, the government risks political backlash for killing children. As one ex-combatant claimed, “The UPDF cannot defeat them, because it is even possible to evade the gunship. And the place where the weapons are hidden is so tricky – it is difficult to remember. So even if people are captured and told to take the soldiers there, they can’t find it”.<sup>128</sup>

In summary, this section has sought to show that simply dismissing Kony as a ‘criminal’ or ‘terrorist’ is not only inaccurate but dangerous, as it underestimates the level of military planning and effectiveness of the LRA. Although limited by not being able to meet with Kony himself, this section has sought to analyse a group that has held northern Uganda ransom for the past 17 years, and to explore ways in which its motives can be better grasped as reaching such levels of understanding is vital in bringing resolution to the situation. However, factors other than the LRA’s internal mechanisms have also played a key role in continuing the war, in particular the effect the war has had on the civilian population.

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<sup>123</sup> WFP Emergency Report No. 4 of 2004; UN CAP report, 2004. Approximately 879,000 people out of a total population of 1,076,000 in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have been displaced, with 1.4 million in total. The government’s ‘protected villages’ policy is the other chief reason for the displacement, of course. This policy response to the war is discussed in more detail in section 3.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Gulu, 16/9/03.

<sup>126</sup> Gersony, 1997: 88.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, focus group discussion with five ex-combatants, Kitgum, 14/10/03; focus group discussion with 10 schoolteachers, Lira, 12/11/03.

<sup>128</sup> Focus group discussion with five ex-combatants, Kitgum, 14/10/03.



#### 4 CONSEQUENCES AS CAUSES: THE IMPACT OF THE LRA

It is hard to exaggerate the impact the LRA conflict has had on the people living in northern Uganda. Indeed, there is substantial documentation describing the situation of those who have experienced the effects of the war most acutely: catalogues of human rights abuses or stories of atrocities are a prominent part of the public discourse on the war. What has been less well articulated, however, are the numerous complex dynamics that surround and sustain the conflict, in particular the different ways in which the conflict is understood and articulated both by those living in the midst of it, and those commenting on the war. These understandings form the focus for the following section, which highlights different understandings and perceptions of the war. Reaching a clearer understanding of these dynamics is crucial, as it not only sheds light on the environment in which the war continues, but gives clear indicators of how people on the ground believe the war can be resolved. Indeed, if such dynamics are not taken into account it is unlikely that resolution will lead to sustainable peace.

The devastating impact of the war is not only an effect: it also feeds the different understandings of the situation – something crucial in a protracted conflict situation. As a women’s peace activist in Gulu said, “It is very difficult to point out one cause or another. Now the consequences have become the causes.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, many on the ground, who blame either the LRA or the government for these negative effects, have come to see the consequences of the war as its causes. These ‘causes’ then further sustain the cycles of violence, as the parties blame the population and become less willing to end the war. In particular, notions of political and economic marginalisation, which were strongly expressed by many of the informants, have been interpreted as ongoing causes of the conflict. Taking these different dynamics into account is vital when considering strategies for resolving the conflict: such perceptions are a real force in the lives of those involved and need to be treated as such.

##### 4.1 Ethnic Portrayals of the War and Political Marginalisation

Many people living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader referred to the fact that those from outside the region have expressed the conflict in ethnic terms. They spoke of how politicians or other Ugandans equate Kony, as an Acholi, with all Acholi people and the war has been seen not only as geographically specific to that area, but confined to one ethnic group. Many in the region, therefore, feel marginalised within the national context. Comments such as, “this war makes us feel that we are not being treated as Ugandans”,<sup>130</sup> “most Acholis feel that other Ugandans don’t care about their plight”,<sup>131</sup> and “this conflict is treated as an internal Acholi affair”,<sup>132</sup> are very common and show the extent to which people living in northern Uganda feel isolated from the rest of the country. Although people living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader clearly view themselves as Acholi, and were proud of their cultural heritage, they were upset about the extent to which their Acholi identity was seen both as something negative, and as being somehow outside a wider national identity. A senior government official in Kampala echoed this feeling: “There is a national issue involved in this war, and yet people are not viewing the war as one.”<sup>133</sup>

This ethnic labelling of the conflict has been translated into a feeling of political isolation. As one informant said, “In the last presidential elections, the issue of ending the war was brought up. But

<sup>129</sup> Interview with women’s peace activist, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with male teacher, Kitgum, 13/10/03.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with human rights activist, Kampala, 21/10/03.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with local government official, Kitgum town, 16/10/03.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 3/12/03.

that time, Museveni didn't have commitment to end the war because he was still seeing it as an Acholi thing."<sup>134</sup> Or, as a teacher living in Gulu town commented, "The northerners are not in the good books of government."<sup>135</sup> A woman IDP living under a tree in Kitgum town articulated such feelings of isolation: "Museveni hates the Acholis and does not care whether we are killed by Kony, abducted, or raped. It is none of his business."<sup>136</sup> Or, as one camp leader said, "We would like Museveni to come here, just to spend one night with us."<sup>137</sup> Numerous informants also expressed the belief that Museveni has deliberately isolated the conflict in order to keep the war hidden from the international community, a view reinforced by the recent HURIPPEC study.<sup>138</sup>

The feeling of political marginalisation was supported by allegations that other conflicts within Uganda had been resolved because they were 'closer' to the government. As one informant said, "We had conflict in Western Uganda with the ADF [Allied Democratic Forces]... but it was put off quickly because of the proximity to the centre. The war here was analysed and thought not to pose a serious threat to the centre, therefore it was kept away."<sup>139</sup> Another informant said, "He has been sending soldiers to DRC, but he has not finished his own war here."<sup>140</sup> Alleged derogatory statements made by politicians and the government concerning the conflict further exemplify the perceived lack of political will to end the war. For instance, as one IDP said, "Museveni has said the Acholi are like grasshoppers in a bottle biting each other. So he says that there is no war because his area has no war. Even the food we get is not from the government, it is from the WFP."<sup>141</sup> Further evidence of the ethnic labelling of the conflict is the way in which it has been increasingly articulated as a 'national' issue within the public discourse since the LRA spread geographically into other areas, rather than as simply an 'Acholi' problem. As one interviewee said, "There was a feeling that the war was of the Acholi, but now it has become a national issue because of abductions from other regions like the Teso and Lango."<sup>142</sup> Indeed, informants in Soroti and Lira showed the extent to which they did not know much about the LRA conflict before it spread into their districts.

For many civilians in northern Uganda, the government appears to be politically marginalising them by portraying the war in ethnic terms. Public portrayals of the war, especially through media accounts and public statements made by politicians, have continually underlined feelings of marginalisation and been interpreted as evidence of political isolation, resulting in accentuated divisions between those living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, and the rest of the country. As a result, the NRM's stated agenda of creating national unity within the country has been undermined by a conflict that has left people feeling politically marginalised and uncertain of their identity.<sup>143</sup> Such a sense of political isolation, in turn, has caused some in government to not work as hard in finding a solution to the war. As a government insider noted, "There is a lack of co-operation from northerners in fighting the LRA. They are antagonistic and see the UPDF as an enemy, so the UPDF doesn't want to fight properly and end the conflict once and for all."<sup>144</sup> While it may be

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with local government official, Gulu, 15/9/03.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with teacher, Gulu town, 15/9/03.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with IDP woman, living under a tree, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Uganda Human Rights Commission representative, Gulu town, 7/10/03.

<sup>138</sup> HURIPPEC, 2003.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Gulu, 30/9/03.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with alleged LRA collaborator, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 11/10/03.

<sup>143</sup> Point no. 3 of the Ten Point Programme, for example, talks of 'Consolidation of National Unity and Elimination of all Forms of Sectarianism.' NRM Ten-Point Programme, from original pamphlet, copy available on file.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

unfair to point a finger at who ‘caused’ the problem, it is clear that these attitudes re-enforce one another.

## 4.2 Displacement and Economic Marginalisation

The extent to which people living under the conflict feel politically marginalised is exacerbated by the current economic conditions in northern Uganda. While poverty in itself does not automatically lead to violence, and is not identified here as a root cause of the conflict, it is certainly a consequence of the war that, in turn, continues to feed people’s perception of marginalisation. In particular, notions of political marginalisation have been reinforced by the impact of displacement throughout the region. Widespread displacement is perhaps the most visible impact of the conflict and serves as a daily, physical reminder of the consequences of war on the everyday lives of thousands of civilians. Over 1.4 million people are currently displaced within the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Lira, Apac, Soroti, Katakwi, Kaberamaido and Adjumani.<sup>145</sup> While the conflict in general is seen to have been the cause of displacement, the majority of informants on the ground did not see the LRA attacks per se as the direct cause of flight. Instead, it has been the government policy of moving people into ‘protected villages’ that was the most common explanation given for the widespread displacement. The justification given by the government for doing this was to enable the UPDF to protect the civilians more effectively and to assist their military strategy by making rebels more visible. In the words of UPDF spokesman Maj. Shaban Bantariza, “the camps are a military strategy of the UPDF designed to deny the rebels manpower and other resources.”<sup>146</sup> However, a civilian population that has continued to be attacked by rebels even in the camps perceives this as a weak explanation. The LRA is reported to have attacked 16 of the existing 35 IDP camps in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader between June and September 2002 alone<sup>147</sup> and continues to do so persistently. Indeed, RLP was unable to visit several IDP camps in Gulu and Kitgum because of ongoing LRA incursions in these camps.

Not only are the camps inadequately protected, but also living conditions there are chronic. As a religious leader said, “The IDP camps are a death warrant to the people. There is hunger, disease, insecurity, malnutrition.”<sup>148</sup> According to the UN, global acute malnutrition rates for children under the age of five have reached approximately 31% and 18% in two IDP camps in Gulu, Anaka and Pabbo.<sup>149</sup> One woman in Kitgum town talked of how grateful she was not to be in a camp:

Myself I can say I am lucky. At least I don’t stay in the camp, and at least I have some money. Women in the camp are the ones that suffer the most. They do not have food, and they have to risk going to the farms every day to look for food to feed the children. Women are raped by both rebels and soldiers and sometimes by criminals. People are sick and hungry in the camps.... People are not safe in the camps. They are crowded and close together which makes it easy for the rebels to abduct them and steal food. When people were in their homes, they were far apart and could easily hide. When rebels attack they surround the camps and make it hard to run away. The army is here but the soldiers cannot do anything.<sup>150</sup>

As a result, the majority of the displaced harbour considerable anger towards the government for having forced them out of their homes and then having been unable to protect and provide for them.

<sup>145</sup> Only Sudan, Angola and the DRC have more IDPs in Africa. WFP Emergency Report No. 4 of 2004; UN 2004 CAP report for Uganda.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Maj Shaban Bantariza, 16/12/03, UPDF headquarters, Bombo.

<sup>147</sup> ICRC 4<sup>th</sup> September 2002.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>149</sup> UN 2004 CAP report for Uganda.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with war-widow, mother of 4, Kitgum, 12/10/03.

In the words of one informant: “The government, if they find you farming your lands, they beat you. But then they don’t feed you.”<sup>151</sup> A woman living in Kitgum interpreted her predicament in this way: “I used to eat fresh food from my gardens but now I am being fed like a child... My husband and children are dead. I am poor helpless and waiting to die.”<sup>152</sup> No longer able to farm their land, displaced people are living in dire poverty and being forced to resort to the most horrific means of survival: “Prostitution is rife. Parents send their girl children to the lodges to be raped so that they get money to buy food.”<sup>153</sup> As a hospital worker said, “They have nothing in the camps, so they just disappear into the bush because it is easier there. Instead of struggling in the camps, you can just loot. The government should not be asking why people do this.”<sup>154</sup>

However, the impact of displacement is not only interpreted in economic terms: it is also seen to have eroded the very roots of Acholi culture. A social worker commented: “Community laws are no longer there. There are very many family break-ups. Poverty is very deep.”<sup>155</sup> There was frequent reference to the fact that cultural taboos were being broken by families having to live close together, and that social support networks within the society were being eroded. As a local businessman commented, “We grew up with dignity. These children are not growing up as true Acholis. Our culture is being destroyed completely. The children won’t know about seasons and agriculture.”<sup>156</sup> A religious leader summarised the impression of humiliation that came through so tangibly in discussions about displacement:

This community is destroyed because the culture has gone. What is a community without a culture? There is no privacy, no morality in the camps. Children die very young. A young girl died yesterday giving birth. There were so many burials in this cemetery we had to take her elsewhere. The whole future of Acholi people is at stake, and this will also cause problems throughout the country. Even look at the night commuters. You are forced to let your children go each evening, but you don’t know where to.<sup>157</sup>

The dramatic increase in the number of ‘night commuters’, referred to as another form of displacement in the previous quotation, has further highlighted the disruption within families and communities. Every night, up to 25,000 people, mainly children, walk into towns to sleep on verandas out of fear of LRA attacks during the night.<sup>158</sup> As one informant commented: “The future of the Acholi is very bleak – in the whole of the Acholi sub region. The culture of coming to town is a bad thing. If the commuters continue coming to town at night as the normal thing for the next three years, I don’t know what will happen. It should be a concern for the whole nation.”<sup>159</sup> A Catholic priest talked of the situation in his church where many children were sleeping: “The children who are accommodated in the church use condoms. When I go to celebrate early mass I find a lot of condoms in my church.”<sup>160</sup> Lack of adequate parental control over the situation is having a devastating impact. As a teacher said, “The students have no respect. A very small child can abuse you. There’s no discipline. I found small children playing a game and one side played as rebels while the other as soldiers. Imagine these are nursery children!”<sup>161</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Interview with human rights worker, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with IDP woman living under a tree, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with hospital staff member, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with social worker, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with businessman, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>158</sup> UN 2004 CAP report. In Gulu, the children are forced to go and sleep in tents specifically allocated to them.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with local government official, Gulu, 1/10/03.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with male teacher, Kitgum, 13/10/03.

Displacement has also created generational tensions that are seen, in turn, to be potential sources of future conflict. Years of living under the threat of abduction have meant that children, who have known nothing but war and displacement, are becoming increasingly distanced from their familial and cultural roots. Indeed, while the issue of child abductions has been relatively well publicised – and is an undisputed reality with worrying consequences – less has been spoken of the everyday tragedies of the thousands of other children who are struggling to live in a harsh, broken environment.

Displacement, therefore, has not only underscored feelings of economic and political marginalisation, but also put huge stress on relationships within the communities. The reasons behind the suffering given by interviewees differ widely from the government's 'protected villages' rhetoric. There is a broadly held belief that the government has deliberately created displacement as a form of punishment for the Acholi people, as it has reduced them to dependency and helplessness. In the words of a religious leader, "The government said we should move off our land... and now everybody has become a beggar."<sup>162</sup>

Furthermore, many informants in the IDP camps and beyond suspect that there is a more sinister explanation: that the government wants people off their land in order to use it for its own purposes. One informant talked of a widely held fear that "the government has a long-term plan with the land of the Acholi and that is why they are putting people in camps, to free the land to be grabbed."<sup>163</sup> Another said, "There is such suspicion. When you go into the countryside where there is no human being, you find that's where the government programmes are happening. Acholi people are outward looking and they suspect that they're being kept in the camp because there is too much interest in the land. The land is very fertile."<sup>164</sup> In particular, Caleb Akandwanaho, a.k.a. Salim Saleh's Security and Production Programme (SPP) was referred to as an indication of this process happening, as it has been widely interpreted as an indirect programme for securing land in the region.<sup>165</sup> In light of this, many IDPs believe that they will no longer have ownership of their land once the war has ended, as external elements will have grabbed it.

Thus the many negative consequences of displacement have led people to feel economically and politically disempowered. Such perceptions, in turn, have come to be seen as ongoing causes of the conflict. Indeed, it was with reference to the issue of displacement that many informants related their situation to root causes of the war. As an IDP man said: "Kony says Museveni stood by as the Karamojong stole our cattle and now he wants to sell our Acholi land. That is why they are removing people and putting them in camps."<sup>166</sup> Kony may not have a political agenda, but the displacement issue has given him a new excuse to continue the war.

### 4.3 A Perceived War Economy

There is no significant war economy in northern Uganda on the level of Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where rapidly exportable resources such as diamonds or coltan provided the chief lifeline for globally connected rebel groups. However, interviews across the north reveal deep suspicions about smaller-scale war profiteering on the part of a number of

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Gulu town, 6/10/03.

<sup>165</sup> See *Salim Saleh Foundation for Humanity: A Case Statement*, 1997; and *Security and Production Programme (SPP): Concept*, May 2003.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with IDP man, Kitgum, 13/10/03.

different individuals or groups who are thought to be benefiting from the war. These accusations, in turn, reflect explanations for the conditions in which the war continues, as various actors were accused of benefiting financially from the war and actively encouraging it to continue. First, there was frequent reference to large sums of money given for defence, which were not reflected in increased military capacity on the ground. In particular, there is a strong belief among civilians that senior army commanders were benefiting financially from the war, something that the recent ghost soldiers enquiry has confirmed: “The top military are the ones who are benefiting from this war. They are doing a lot of business.”<sup>167</sup> Another informant described his understanding of the situation in the following words:

There are commanders doing cross-border trade openly. They collaborate with the SPLA and go into Sudan or use them to take the goods there.... If you try to take your own goods, they confiscate it and kill you or jail you and you never see the things again. Some others are destroying the vegetation and forests by cutting wood and making timber and sending the timber in army trucks towards Kampala. The army and soldiers get war allowances but some soldiers say they don't get these allowances because the commanders eat it after collecting it for them. Just look at the houses being built in Kampala! There is a lot of corruption.<sup>168</sup>

Additional comments such as, “some local politicians want the war to continue”,<sup>169</sup> and “The government sees that if war goes on, it is easy to fundraise in the name of the war. They call them terrorists so that even more money can come in because now even America is supporting Museveni,”<sup>170</sup> show the extent to which government and politicians more generally are suspected by many to be benefiting from the war. RLP could not independently verify these accusations. However, the December 2003 ghost soldiers scandal did reveal significant siphoning of defence funds, with some combat units missing up to 60% of their troops.<sup>171</sup> As a senior official told RLP, “I brought a case to Museveni where there were supposed to be 1.000 soldiers on the ground, but in fact there were only 300 actually there.”<sup>172</sup>

In addition, there were accusations that civilians living in the area were benefiting from the war. One interviewee gave his opinion on the subject: “There are sympathisers, co-ordinators [in Gulu town]. Otti [a rebel leader] can talk to me for 3 hours on the phone. Where does he get the money for that? Looted money always bounces back. Even in the camps you find a man building.”<sup>173</sup> Indeed, there were allegations that individuals and businesses were assisting rebels, for instance by getting hold of supplies and getting photos developed for them, and of buildings going up with ‘rebel’ money. Another informant told the story of a man whose rebel son gave him 5 million and then returned to the bush: “He is now on bad terms with his neighbours who have lost their children at the hands of the rebels.”<sup>174</sup> In the words of a social worker:

Your neighbour is the one who reports you to the rebels and they come to your house and steal money... Sometimes the rebels come and they are even calling names of people they were given by abducted people. Most of those who were abducted say that since their future has been ruined, they too should ruin other people's future.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Interview with businessman, Kitgum Town, 14/10/03.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with school teacher, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>169</sup> Group Interview with 18 civilians, Gulu town, 6/10/03.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with alleged LRA collaborator, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>171</sup> See *New Vision*, 5/12/03.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 3/12/03.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with local government official, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with social worker, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

Although many accusations remain unsubstantiated, they are indicative of the extent to which the war has generated an atmosphere of intense suspicion between different actors, both internal and external. Clearly there are individuals and groups who are benefiting financially from the war. While it is unlikely that such factors are enough in themselves to sustain the war, they are important secondary sources in the conflict, and need to be recognised as such.

What is perhaps more crucial is the level of suspicion that the war has generated within the communities, which has further contributed to the devastating impact of the war. For example, perceptions of corrupt UPDF officers mean that civilians are less willing to assist them with intelligence. UPDF commanders are then less willing to assist populations who are antagonistic towards them and are suspected of engaging in undercover business activities. These perceptions and suspicions have had important consequences for how the conflict has actually been waged on the ground. Although the overall impression among the communities was one of mutual support rather than antagonism, there was clearly a nagging undercurrent of suspicion among certain groups and individuals. Such misgivings highlight the chronic dilemmas that continually confront civilians who have been living with this conflict for nearly 18 years. While the recent ‘ghost soldiers’ investigation is an important step to mitigating one part of the ‘war economy’, other sectors such as rebel collaborators remain. Identifying such elements will be important during the peace process, given that those who are, indeed, benefiting may work against peaceful resolution.

#### **4.4 Physical Security and Ambiguities of Allegiance**

Feelings of political and economic marginalisation, coupled with both the reality and the suspicion of war profiteering, are underscored by the fact that people living in northern Uganda live in constant fear for their lives. As a senior government official said, “The top priority of people in their communities is security.”<sup>176</sup> Indeed, many of the dynamics within the conflict revolve around people’s perceptions of their physical security, and the way in which they view different actors. These perspectives reveal the extent to which complex allegiances and identities are operating that do not fit the categories applied by those observing and commenting on the war from a distance, in particular through the media. Thus, the perspectives of those living in the midst of the conflict are being defined on a daily basis by issues surrounding their physical security, while at the same time frequent accusations of LRA collaboration are being made against the civilians. These explanations for the war have further exacerbated feelings of isolation within the community and created huge misunderstandings, which in turn feed into the ongoing causes of the war. In light of this, it is vital to understand the way in which civilians living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader view both the UPDF and the LRA. Such perceptions give an insight into understandings of the conflict and the climate in which the war continues. In particular, it shows the extent to which there is a lack of trust and coordination between the UPDF and the local people in attempts to end the war.

##### *Uganda People’s Defence Forces*

Perceptions of the UPDF on the ground were mixed. In the first instance, many civilians expressed fear of an army that was supposed to be defending them from the LRA but was instead seen as the aggressor. As one informant said, “People fear to report abuses because they will be made to lead the ill-trained army to the place of the abuse. It becomes a punishment for doing a lawful thing.”<sup>177</sup> An abductee who described his escape from the LRA shared this opinion:

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<sup>176</sup> Interview with Senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with human rights worker, Gulu, 30/9/03.

I had not had anything to eat or drink for so long, I was so weak. When I came to a deserted hut, I found some rotten meat and ate it because I was so hungry. Then I heard soldiers coming and I hid. I heard them speaking Kiswahili, so I knew it was the UPDF. But it's not easy to give yourself up to them or they'll kill you. They found my bag and the soldier cocked his gun. They were searching the area, and I was forced to speak, 'it is me, I was abducted by some rebels but I ran away.' The soldier came up to me and said, how long have you been in the bush? Then he told me, you are a rebel, why should we waste our time with you? We will kill you. He was about to shoot me, but two Acholi soldiers came and said to leave me. They carried me to a hut, and then took me to the road. When a cyclist came along, they asked him to take me to a nearby place. I spent one night at the military detach, then one month in Pader at the barracks.<sup>178</sup>

Such accounts show the extent to which elements of the UPDF have generated fear among civilians, a perceived fear that is cause for serious concern. This perception is exacerbated by the fact that the UPDF are also being seen as incompetent in their ability to provide protection. One local peace initiative claims that the UPDF only intervened in 33 out of 456 attacks by the LRA between June and December 2002,<sup>179</sup> a statistic that was re-enforced in RLP interviews. Indeed, many accused the UPDF of arranging IDP camps with the detach in the centre surrounded by civilians, creating the impression of civilians protecting the UPDF. As a group of teachers commented: "When the rebels come, there is no defence. The government soldiers run away and tell you to 'protect yourself.'"<sup>180</sup> Or, as an ex-abductee alleged, with reference to his time in the LRA, "the UPDF runs away when Kony comes. Even a small number of LRA fighters can overcome a very large UPDF force."<sup>181</sup> Such apparent negligence and incompetence, reinforced by stories of abuse against civilians, has created a climate of fear and distrust towards the UPDF. Furthermore, the UPDF is seen to represent the government on the ground, and their inability to protect the people from Kony's attacks, feeds existing feelings of political alienation. Each child abducted, each home looted, and every family member killed, is viewed by the communities as further proof that the government is not protecting them.

Operation Iron Fist (OIF) was often referred to as an example of the UPDF's inability to adequately protect the communities from the LRA. Although security officials interviewed talked about some of the military successes to the operation,<sup>182</sup> on the ground it was seen to have made the situation considerably worse: "It was peaceful in Acholi for two years before OIF. People were settling and were already planting. Now they are paying back. The rebels came with a lot of anger, killing civilians because they were collaborators. OIF could only proceed when the Amnesty collapsed, and it has been a failure."<sup>183</sup> Another informant referred to OIF as 'waking up' the rebels from Sudan.<sup>184</sup> For many on the ground, it epitomised the worst case scenario: a 'military strategy' that did not deliver protection and, instead, unleashed a massive terror operation. Ex-abductees spoke of how before OIF, Kony had settled down: "They had nice houses, with lots of wealth [in Sudan]... People were relaxed and didn't have the idea of coming to war. Those private soldiers, the children who were new and didn't have wealth, were beginning to escape back because there was no war."<sup>185</sup> The violence that has followed OIF has further destroyed confidence in the ability of the UPDF to protect civilians, and highlighted their lack of military capacity in the face of the LRA.

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with escaped abductee, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>179</sup> Human Rights Watch, March 2003, cited in the Norwegian Refugee Council 2003 report.

<sup>180</sup> Group Interview with 18 Teachers, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>181</sup> Interview with school teacher and ex-abductee, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>182</sup> For instance, interview with senior security official, Kampala, 3/12/03.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with school teacher, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with ex-rebel, Gulu, 7/10/03.



Much has been said about the alleged abuses committed by the UPDF and its inability to effectively protect the civilian population. However, our findings indicate that civilians have a more subtle understanding of the situation: while the UPDF as a whole is equated with the government, there is a clear understanding of the difference between the foot soldiers whose job it is to confront the LRA on a daily basis, and those in higher-ranking positions.

Thus informants, while condemning abuses by the UPDF and expressing genuine fear in some instances, also showed an awareness of their predicament. For instance, there was regular acknowledgement of the fact that many UPDF soldiers have been killed in confrontations with the LRA, and that they, too, have lost friends and colleagues to the war. In addition, there was frequent reference to the conditions in which the foot soldiers were fighting. One informant talked of how UPDF soldiers were not getting their allowances and had to beg for food.<sup>186</sup> Another articulated the difference between foot soldiers and those in higher authority: “Those in the lower ranks are very resentful because they don’t get anything, but it is their lives that are exposed every day. That is why they run when there is an attack. They see no reason to die while the big shots are getting rich alone. There is very low morale among the soldiers.”<sup>187</sup> Others referred to the lack of adequate communications systems that constantly endanger the lives of soldiers<sup>188</sup> and the fact that “the soldiers don’t even have torches, so when the rebels come, they just run away.”<sup>189</sup> Such views were summarised by the statement, “We should strengthen the Ugandan army to protect its own people. They have torn uniforms and bad supplies.”<sup>190</sup>

Indeed, such frustration was expressed by the rank-and-file themselves: “Imagine when one of our trucks breaks down, it may take several months to repair it. Yet this is the same truck we need to transport our boys for operation... Sometimes we even end up begging for food from the civilians.”<sup>191</sup> Or, as another interviewee argued,

“The soldiers are tired and demoralised. They have no leave, so they want to go back home... They have poor welfare. Their uniforms are rags. They don’t even get all their salary because the bosses eat it... Then there is the military code. The administration of military justice is harsh and not morale boosting. The junior officers really suffer.”<sup>192</sup>

There was also an acknowledgement of the fact that the UPDF is confronted with an impossible military dilemma in which the ‘enemy’ is comprised primarily of abducted children. It has created a no-win situation for those who are supposed to be fighting a rebel army that is forcibly deploying children in its front-line military operations. Indeed, civilians referred to the fact that those killed during confrontations between the UPDF and LRA are referred to as ‘rebels’, and those not killed are referred to as ‘rescued’. The situation is complicated further with the inclusion of children who have been born in the bush, and are now deemed old enough to fight. As an interviewee in Kampala said with reference to this category: “For them, [rebellion] is a life. They are very daring. Government forces run away at the sight of them.”<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, ex-abductees revealed that the rebels often wear UPDF uniforms, and soldiers themselves admitted that they sometimes did not know who was a rebel and who was a fellow soldier.

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<sup>186</sup> Interview with male teacher, Kitgum, 13/10/03.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with school teacher, Gulu, 6/10/03.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with foot soldier, Gulu, 16/10/03.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with alleged LRA collaborator, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with government official, Kampala, 3/12/03.

Thus while civilians expressed grievances about the actions of individual soldiers and a more general distrust in their ability to defend adequately, they also recognised the dilemmas and difficulties facing them. While the latter does not in any way excuse the former, it shows a degree of understanding towards the UPDF that has been less well documented within the literature. That said, there is a major crisis in public perceptions of the UPDF: while showing varying degrees of understanding, civilians are still left feeling unprotected by the army and, hence, unprotected by their own government. Their lack of belief in the UPDF to protect them and, at worst, the fear that they will be accused of collaborating with the enemy, ensures that there is limited trust and co-ordination between the UPDF and the civilians.

### *Rebels or Children?*

Nearly every one of the over 900 people RLP interviewed unequivocally condemned Joseph Kony's LRA, particularly civilians living in the midst of the conflict. The group clearly does not receive popular support in northern Uganda, possibly with the exception of a few alleged collaborators. However, civilians are also confronted with two dilemmas regarding their attitude towards the rebels. First, despite their hatred for the LRA, they know the civilian-directed atrocities will increase dramatically if they actively confront the group. When the community defence 'Bow and Arrow' groups were organised in 1991 and 1992, the result was a new LRA retaliation strategy to cut off people's lips, ears, mouths and limbs. As one local government official said, "The Arrow group started here in Acholi, and that is why we even have an orthopaedic workshop to make artificial limbs for injured civilians."<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, the self-defence units received very few guns from the government, and so most civilians in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have become highly cautious in actively resisting the LRA.

The second dilemma is the result of the LRA's deliberate use of child soldiers. On the one hand is the horrific brutality meted out by the LRA, and on the other is the knowledge that those atrocities have often been carried out by their own children who have been forcibly recruited. As one ex-rebel girl said, "We were all given guns. I was taught how to shoot by the rebels. I was so scared to begin with, looting and killing people."<sup>195</sup> In a war in which the LRA views 9 to 12 year olds as the most desirable combatant age-group, and in which young girls run away leaving their children, fathered by rebel commanders, lying in the bush, there is little doubt in people's minds as to the level of brutal force being applied in making children use violence. One nine-year-old boy who had recently escaped described this process graphically:

There is nothing that I liked there. They collect all the children together and make you beat someone to death. Once there were about seven who tried to escape, including two girls. The commander decided not to kill the girls. He picked one boy to be killed. He placed his head on a piece of wood. He told one of the girls to come and chop this boy into small pieces. She started trying to cut his head off, but was not doing a good job. The other boys were told to help. When they had almost taken the head off, they had to chop the body into small pieces. Then they were told to play with the dead person's head. The boys had to throw it in the air four times, and the girls three times. The girls were bare-chested. After that, they commanded the girls to smear blood of the dead boy on their chest. After that, they put the head of the boy in a central place, put clubs all over it covering the head, and informed us that anyone who tries to escape will have the same thing.<sup>196</sup>

A young girl spoke of the horrific prevalence of rape: "My mother was raped. I was also beaten and defiled. The girls and sisters were raped. Some could not walk properly because of the wounds

<sup>194</sup> Interview with local government official, Gulu town, 15/9/03.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with ex-rebel girl combatant, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with 9-yr-old boy, escaped abductee, Gulu town, 6/10/03.

in their private parts.” These comments show the brutality inflicted upon those who are abducted, many of whom become the same individuals who are then forced to carry out atrocities.

The shocking, brutal reality of this war is that those who have been forcibly recruited, and those who are killed, raped, or themselves abducted, all come from within the same communities. It is the same actors being recycled by the non-abducted minority within the LRA who are carefully orchestrating a self-perpetuating conflict that enters people’s homes at the most personal of levels. One informant expressed this dilemma: “The people like Kony as their son, but they don’t like what he is doing. You can’t reject what is yours, but we don’t like what he is doing. He should not fight us because now there’s nobody who is not affected by the war.”<sup>197</sup>

Thus while there is tangible horror at the activities of the LRA, the lack of distinction between the ‘rebels’ and ‘abductees’ generates intense confusion. As one informant said, “A ‘rebel’ who is killed in battle may have only just been abducted one hour ago. If you are killed you are a rebel, if you are abandoned or escaped you are an abductee.”<sup>198</sup> Thus, while civilians clearly abhor the actions of the LRA, they cannot simply wish for them to be obliterated militarily, as that would mean killing their own children.

### *Survival or Collaboration?*

Given this predicament, the communities are caught in an impasse. Not fully trusting the UPDF, yet knowing that the LRA is full of their own children, they cannot wholeheartedly support the UPDF in their counter-insurgency campaign. As a result, a common accusation against the communities is that they are not actively trying to repel Kony, and somehow support or collaborate with the LRA. UPDF and government informants continually expressed their frustration that the communities were not doing enough to assist them in repelling Kony. As one security official said, “That culture of thinking that it is the UPDF alone which must fight the LRA while the civilians watch is what has propelled this war. The citizens must contribute to pacification. Everybody must contribute... But most of our people are only spectators.”<sup>199</sup>

This accusation has created intense anger among the communities: “The idea that local people support the war, I think it’s a great insult. Even politicians have said it. And it really hurts, because these are the people who have had their children abducted. Who wants to support the person who abducts their child? People here mostly don’t like Museveni, but that doesn’t mean they support Kony.”<sup>200</sup> It has also created an atmosphere of fear. In the words of one opinion leader:

The govt has failed to differentiate between the victims of the war, mediators for peace, collaborators to the rebels, and sympathisers. Those claiming to be mediators are arrested. Those who feel badly about their children in the bush are labelled collaborators and jailed. Others are forced to go to the shop to get supplies for the rebels, and then they’re called collaborators.<sup>201</sup>

History has taught civilians that arming themselves would be to risk incurring greater wrath from Kony. In addition, in undertaking such acts of self-defence, they would be potentially killing their own children. As an opinion leader in Gulu said, “If they go to the bush and discover the person they find is not Kony, it’s their brothers who were abducted. When they kill it is very painful. The

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with business woman, Gulu town, 1/10/03.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with human rights worker, Gulu, 30/9/03.

<sup>199</sup> Interview with security official, Gulu, 2/10/03.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Uganda Human Rights Commission representative, Gulu town, 7/10/03.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

government cannot claim to be powerful by killing the people who should have been protected in the first place.”<sup>202</sup>

Thus civilians are trapped in the middle of a war that is ostensibly between the government/UPDF and the LRA. Attacked from both sides, they are not sure where to turn. They are continually caught between accusations that they are colluding with the LRA, and LRA suspicion that they are colluding with the UPDF. As one informant said, “The rebels are killing us and the UPDF are killing us. Where should Acholis go?”<sup>203</sup> Or, as a displaced man commented, “If you go to the farm and dig, Kony comes and kills you. If you start a business in the camp, the government soldiers come and take it.”<sup>204</sup> The war has created an environment in which there is little neutral territory, and in which the actions of civilians are constantly misinterpreted. There is inadequate understanding of the fact that harbouring or protecting a rebel is not a sign of support for Kony, but a reflection of civilians’ fear of the rebels and distrust in the UPDF. The UPDF clearly needs to repair its image in northern Uganda as its current levels of mistrust with civilians hinder the effectiveness of its operations. As one official acknowledged, “People run away from the LRA and don’t talk to the government, which makes it very difficult for us. It denies the government intelligence. It’s like finding a needle in a haystack.”<sup>205</sup>

Thus, after nearly 18 years of fear, displacement, dismemberment and disempowerment Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts represent a society in crisis. Although the resilience of people observed by RLP is clearly remarkable, the intense pressure of living in the midst of a conflict over such a sustained period of time has taken a massive toll, and the lived reality of the war has left a confusion of allegiances. Perceptions of the UPDF and LRA are highly complex, as are interpretations of the condition of displacement. The war is being played out right at the centre of people’s lives, making it impossible for them to be mere observers to the conflict. Families have to make impossible choices and are constantly being forced to live with the shame of abduction, whether as abductees trying to come to terms with the guilt of atrocities they committed, or as families trying to re-integrate their ex-rebel children. At the same time, the consequences of the war have continued to perpetuate grievances that are, in turn, identified as the causes for the conflict. Both the war itself, and the way in which the war has been portrayed, has generated feelings of marginalisation that then serve to perpetuate the war. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that people have reached a point of near hopelessness. In the words of one informant, “This war has been going on for so long people don’t know what is happening any more. It has become normal.”<sup>206</sup>

## 5 THE SPREAD OF THE WAR

Apart from attacks in West Nile and Lango since the early 1990s, the LRA conflict has been felt most intensely in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. The year 2003, however, saw what appears to have been a deliberate and well co-ordinated spread of the war, in particular to the east. In May 2003, the LRA ambushed a bus along Pakwach-Karuma road in Gulu District.<sup>207</sup> This attack was followed on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2003 by simultaneous attacks on the districts of Lira, Apac and Katakwi in what some in Teso have called their September 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>208</sup> Three days later, the LRA

<sup>202</sup> Interview with opinion leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 15/10/03.

<sup>204</sup> Group discussion with 10 men, IDP camp, Gulu, 3/10/03.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03.

<sup>206</sup> Interview with hospital staff member, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

<sup>207</sup> *The Monitor*, 31/5/03.

<sup>208</sup> *The New Vision*, 17/6/03; interview with NGO worker, Soroti, 5/11/03.

attacked Adjumani town for the first time in fourteen years.<sup>209</sup> These attacks were soon followed by others of greater frequency and intensity in the districts of Kaberamaido and Katakwi in Teso region. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, the LRA attacked Soroti town, resulting in at least two hundred deaths and hundreds more children abducted, including one hundred schoolgirls.<sup>210</sup> A group of IDPs in Lira described this sequence of events: “The attacks were gradual. We knew the rebels were camped at a certain place, but they did not attack for a long time, so we waited. We told the UPDF but they did not respond. So we waited, and suddenly places were attacked and because they didn’t protect us, we had to run.”<sup>211</sup> Thus LRA attacks have not only continued with intensity across the Acholi sub-region, but have also spread to several other areas.

On 26<sup>th</sup> June, it was reported that over 2000 veterans of the defunct Teso-based rebel group Uganda People’s Army (UPA) led by then-RDC of Kasese Musa Ecweru and local MP John Eresu, had joined the UPDF to fight the rebels in Teso.<sup>212</sup> This development was later opposed by a group of northern parliamentarians, who viewed the deployment of paramilitary groups as unconstitutional.<sup>213</sup>

### 5.1 What was behind the Spread?

The spread of the LRA into Teso and Lango appears to have occurred for several reasons. First, many believe that the LRA were running short of food and other logistical supplies, having thoroughly looted Gulu, Kitgum and Pader for 17 years. With over 82% of the population in these districts displaced in IDP camps, most of the land currently lies fallow. Given the fact that the LRA relies chiefly on plundering agricultural stocks to re-supply its food needs, and that many planting seasons have been missed in these districts, there are few crops left to loot. Teso, on the other hand, is known as a fertile farming region that supplies beef, chicken and potatoes to other regions of Uganda. It was thus a key target area to attack when foodstuffs were in short supply.

Second, the LRA appears to have believed it could gain support from these areas, particularly among former rebels from Teso and Tororo/Busia. As an official in Soroti commented,

[Kony] thought that since we had a rebellion here, he could find potential allies. They thought they could then proceed to fight the government until Kampala. They wanted to spread their area of influence. The UPDF is taking over Gulu and Kitgum, so they came here. But the people of Teso have not joined them; we have the Arrows.<sup>214</sup>

RLP interviews reveal that the LRA first spent several days in both areas without attacking. According to local residents in Obalanga (Katakwi District, part of Teso region), the rebels were initially very friendly – playing football, watching videos, and generally interacting freely with the population.<sup>215</sup> Informants also reported that the LRA came with a list of names of former UPA rebels who had fought against the government from 1987-1992. They wanted to know the locations of these ex-fighters so as to activate them to fight the “dictatorial” Museveni government. A similar story appears to have occurred in Tororo and Busia in September and October 2003, with the LRA

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<sup>209</sup> *The Monitor*, 19/6/03.

<sup>210</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> June 2003, LRA abducted over 100 school girls from Lwala Secondary school in Kaberamaido. See *The Monitor*, 2/9/03.

<sup>211</sup> Group discussion with 10 IDPs, Bala Stock Farm IDP camp, Lira, 12/11/03.

<sup>212</sup> *The New Vision*, 26/6/03.

<sup>213</sup> *The Monitor*, 16/9/03.

<sup>214</sup> Interview with local government official, Soroti, 4/11/03.

<sup>215</sup> Focus group discussion with 18 male IDPs, Soroti, 6/11/03; interview with religious leader, Soroti, 6/11/03; interview with NGO worker, Soroti, 4/11/03; interview with security officer, Soroti, 4/11/03.

allegedly sending six scouts in search of fighters from the former 9 October Movement.<sup>216</sup> Kony appears to be following in the footsteps of UPDA fighters from Gulu, who in 1988 attempted to join UPA rebels in Teso against the government.<sup>217</sup> The move to Lango (Lira and Apac districts) came later in September, and appears to have been in part a reaction to being pushed back from Teso.<sup>218</sup>

The drive to activate former fighters in the east may have been an attempt by the LRA to reorganise itself in a time of uncertainty, given the potential implications of the ongoing Sudan peace process and the LRA's key supply line was coming increasingly under threat. In the past, Kony has shown his ability to adapt to changing circumstances. For instance, during the 1994 negotiations he reportedly took advantage of a lull in the fighting to abduct more children and go to Sudan for arms and ammunition.<sup>219</sup> With reports that the LRA command structure had been reshuffled in recent weeks,<sup>220</sup> something similar may have been taking place.

Another explanation for the war's spread was that it was an attempt to punish the Iteso for their continued support of the NRM. As one informant in Soroti said, "They say the Iteso are the strongest supporters of the Movement in the north, so they must be punished for it."<sup>221</sup> Others claimed that it was a deliberate attempt by Kony to prove that, after OIF, the LRA was still a force to be reckoned with, a show of might at a time when public statements were being made to the effect that the LRA was about to be finished once and for all. For instance, Museveni wrote in a letter to the *New Vision* in August 2002, "You can be sure this conflict will be over, latest by February, when the grass will have been burnt, if it goes that far."<sup>222</sup> As a religious leader said, "Kony wants to prove that he is alive and well after Operation Iron Fist, which is supposed to have finished him. So to show that it was a failure, the best way is to spread."<sup>223</sup>

Some interviewees believed that the LRA attacked Soroti because they were seeking revenge for Acholi UNLA soldiers who were killed in Teso in 1986: "During the withdrawal of UNLA, as they were running north, they were intercepted in Teso and killed. This was in 1986. The Iteso pretended to entertain them, but they killed them at night. Some people are coming to revenge these killings."<sup>224</sup> Others speculated that ex-UPA rebels who had joined the LRA in the 1980s, invited the LRA to enter their district: "We have heard of the invitation sent by the rebels to come here by many rebels, especially the ex-UPA ones who did not surrender. These ones are with the rebels and they are the ones directing them in this region."<sup>225</sup>

Whatever the reasons for the LRA extending its geographical focus, it has radically changed perceptions of the conflict. The extent to which the conflict is being seen increasingly within a national historical context is symptomatic of this change of opinion. In addition, and in response to

<sup>216</sup> The 9 October Movement, made up of former Obote II supporters, was an anti-NRM group based in Tororo and Busia that conducted assassinations and ambushes in the late 1980s. Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 4/12/03; focus group discussion with 18 male IDPs, Soroti, 6/11/03; interview with former senior government official, Kampala, 21/1/04.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with ex-UPA commander, Soroti, 14/11/03.

<sup>218</sup> Interview with senior government official, 4/12/03.

<sup>219</sup> Interview with senior government official, 4/12/03.

<sup>220</sup> Interview with senior government official, 4/12/03.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with local resident, Soroti, 15/11/03.

<sup>222</sup> See, for example, *Sunday Vision*, 25/8/03. See also *New Vision*, 30/9/02, in which Museveni is alleged to have said: "The anti-terror campaign will be finished by February or March next year. I will not leave Gulu until I see the last rebel come out of the bush in April." p.3.

<sup>223</sup> Group discussion with 20 members of the Lango Religious Leaders Peace Forum, Lira town, 12/11/03.

<sup>224</sup> Interview with journalist, Soroti town, 5/11/03.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Soroti town, 6/11/03.

such wider interpretations of the war, there has been an increase in pressure for the war to end both by those directly affected by the war, and by those increasingly aware of its protracted nature.

## 5.2 Rising Tensions: UPDF, Local militias and the LRA

Regardless of why the LRA spread its geographical focus, the impact has been horrific. Over 358,000 people have been displaced in Teso and Lango since the eastward move,<sup>226</sup> and so it is hardly surprising that informants expressed considerable anger and fear at the presence of the LRA in their districts. Such feelings have been translated into frustration and resentment towards a UPDF they view as unable to protect them from rebel attacks. The UPDF's military strategy is seen by many citizens on the ground to be wanting in the face of the rebel group's brutal and effective guerrilla tactics. In this respect, attitudes are similar to those in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, and the following comment summarises the prevailing attitude towards the UPDF:

The UPDF only fight during the day. If they keep doing this, they will never end this war. They only fight during the day and even then, only when they're attacked. That's why this war has gone on for seventeen years. And that's why we in Teso are very critical. There also seems to have been a big problem with the commanders. Many of them are used to soft life. We've refused that in Teso.<sup>227</sup>

### *Local Militias*

Following the LRA's continued presence in Soroti, and the UPDF's initial inability to cope with the incursion, the Arrow Group was quickly formed to mobilise the local population against the rebels. Indeed, the rapid deployment of Arrow forces appears to have been instrumental in halting the spread of the rebels further east. According to a government insider, the group intended to move further east to Kumi, Mbale and Tororo and to begin ambushes along the road to Kenya near Tororo in order to "provoke anger, make the population think the situation is out of hand, and give the appearance that the government is not in control."<sup>228</sup> In the words of an Arrow commander,

The UPDF had two main shortcomings when it came to Teso. First, they didn't speak the language, so they weren't getting precise information. Second, this area has very flat land – there are no physical features to guide you, so they didn't know the terrain. So it is our mission to plug this gap. We picked young men who had knowledge about warfare, and we use them for intelligence gathering and guidance. This is where the name Arrow comes in – the Arrow flies as if it knows where it's going. It's a codename for precision. This was our original mission, to help guide the UPDF.<sup>229</sup>

The Amuka, or 'Rhino' group was then mobilised in Lira, but to less effect. Many informants believed that the Rhinos had not been as successful as the Arrow Group because of fewer supplies and weaker support. As one ex-Rhino female recruit said, "The Amuka boys are very few, and many who had volunteered are leaving because they don't have guns, and you can't fight rebels with stones."<sup>230</sup> Although the Arrow group has made similar complaints, there was a clear perception that the Arrows had been more effective in resisting the LRA. In addition, there was concern within Lira, that mobilising local defence would increase civilian killing:

<sup>226</sup> UN 2004 CAP report.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with school teacher, Soroti, 06/11/03.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with senior government official, Kampala, 5/12/03.

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Arrow Group commander, Soroti, 4/11/03.

<sup>230</sup> Interview with ex-Rhino female recruit, 13/11/03.

They're a militia to supplement government forces to fight against LRA. The government has to assure compensation. Being militia is a risk, people think. Not everybody supports them."<sup>231</sup> "I don't think [Amuka] is good. Because this LRA, if they arrest you, they kill you because they say this place is full of Amuka."<sup>232</sup>

Rather than operate as independent militias, the Arrow and Rhino groups have thus far been deployed with UPDF units as "zonal forces" to protect civilians in rural areas. Although there are clear issues of capacity, the Arrow and Rhino groups have potential benefits. First, their detailed knowledge of the local terrain, particularly in flatland Teso, is helpful in tracking down LRA rebels. Second, their intelligence-gathering capacity is also boosted because of their local language skills and very high levels of trust with the local populations – key factors that have dampened UPDF effectiveness in Gulu and Kitgum. As one of the Arrow commanders commented, "The first thing in this kind of situation is you need the population on your side. You can have all the technology you want, but whoever has the numbers, the population and the organisational skill will prevail."<sup>233</sup> Some of the benefits of community militias in other conflicts strengthen this argument. The *Kamajors* or Civil Defence Force in Sierra Leone, for example, provided intelligence and local knowledge that were key factors in defeating the RUF in that country's civil war.<sup>234</sup>

However, as witnessed by RLP, support for the militias is mixed. On the one hand, the vast majority of people in Teso view the Arrow Group as a major source of defence against a rebel army that is creating havoc in their lives. Three IDPs echoed a widespread community sentiment: "The Arrow Boys are our saviours, because the UPDF sleep. We really appreciate them." "Arrows have been killing the LRA commanders. When we hear the name Arrow Boys, we feel saved." "They work so hard even without food and money and without bigger weapons."<sup>235</sup> However, the increase in reprisals from the LRA has created a more ambivalent attitude towards the local defence mechanisms. According to a local government official in Lira, "On 29<sup>th</sup> September, the local population reported the presence of the LRA to the LDUs who flushed them out. Then Kony sent a message to the locals that since they had refused to support them, they would come back and commit genocide on the people."<sup>236</sup> Once again, Kony appears to have become very angry against the population for not supporting him, and brutal attacks against civilians soon began in a repeat of the tragic "Bow and Arrow" saga of 1991-2.<sup>237</sup>

### *Anger towards the LRA, Increased Ethnic Tensions*

Thus there is huge animosity towards the LRA in both Teso and Lango, as was the case in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. As a rebel force, it is being judged purely on its actions: the terror tactics being employed have left little room for an understanding of why Kony is fighting. Instead, the impression was one of people in a state of shock, having suddenly been confronted by an enemy that had previously kept its distance. Although the LRA may have made some initial attempts to

<sup>231</sup> Group discussion with 12 students, Lira, 12/11/03.

<sup>232</sup> Interview with IDP leader, Lira, 13/11/03.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with an Arrow Group commander, 4/12/03.

<sup>234</sup> See, for example, Ibrahim Abdullah, and Patrick Muana. "The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone: A Revolt of the Lumpenproletariat." in C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas*. Oxford: James Currey, 1999: 185; Patrick Muana, "The Kamajor Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency", in *Africa Development*, Vol. 22, Nos. 3-4 (1997).

<sup>235</sup> Group discussion with 18 displaced men, Soroti, 6/11/03.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with local government official, Lira, 11/11/03.

<sup>237</sup> After civilians in Gulu and Kitgum organised themselves into Bow and Arrow groups to resist the LRA in 1991-2, Kony reportedly became extremely agitated, and LRA abuses against civilians were stepped up tremendously. This was the notorious period when the LRA cut off people's lips, ears and mouths for 'listening to and telling the government where the rebels were'.



draw individuals into its ranks, as with its previous tactics, it has continued to rely solely on forced recruitment. In the words of an NGO worker:

They are not interested in the local people's support because they can always abduct. They don't recruit those willing to join them because they don't want government spies. If they recruited people who went there voluntarily, there would be infiltration. Children are easily brainwashed and if they get lost, they can't easily find their way back home.<sup>238</sup>

However, the fear that has been generated has been translated into a more general anger towards the Acholi people, as Kony himself is an Acholi. At one end of the spectrum were those who equated Kony with all Acholi people. As a head teacher said, "We feel that the Acholis have come to destabilise the innocent and development in Teso without any genuine cause."<sup>239</sup> One secondary school girl alleged, "Most Acholi students turn into rebels during holidays in order to get enough money for fees and pocket money. Kony is fighting because the Acholi are generally rebellious and they like fighting."<sup>240</sup>

Many informants, when questioned a bit further, acknowledged that this was not necessarily the case: "You will hear people saying all Acholi or all people from the North are supporting the rebels, which is not true."<sup>241</sup> Indeed, there was recognition of the fact that there are non-Acholi elements within the LRA.<sup>242</sup> However, such levels of understanding have not stopped anti-Acholi sentiment from beginning to take root within the districts under recent LRA attack. A religious leader described the confused mixture of responses in this way:

Until June 15<sup>th</sup> 2003, this was a war of the Acholi and the Teso did not know what was going on. The initial reaction was of anger, and both religious and political leaders made serious attacks about the Acholi, which was not good. People do not equate LRA to Acholi, but there's certainly a lot of anger among all the people. Someone in the village who speaks Acholi may be mob killed. The rebels are sending spies pretending to be mad, but they were found to be spies and killed and they had to use other tricks. They killed two women dressed in the Buganda *gomesi* [traditional dress] who went to hospital and looked at the bodies of the rebels. The people were furious. The Acholi are happy now because the war has spread from their districts because it has now left them in peace.<sup>243</sup>

In particular, there was frequent reference to the fact that the LRA had survived for so long because the Acholi people were supporting Kony, evidenced by the fact that they were not organising themselves into effective self-defence units. The following comments underline this attitude: "The fundamental question is why they haven't mobilized an Arrow group"<sup>244</sup> "The only problem I have with the Acholi is that they have not come out openly to condemn Kony,"<sup>245</sup> "We went to Gulu ... as a delegation from Soroti. We wanted to gauge the feelings of Acholi. The assessment confirmed what we were hearing that these people were supporting Kony."<sup>246</sup> Such comments were made despite the well-known fact that previous self-defence mobilisation in Acholi in 1991 – 2 resulted in vicious reprisals.

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Soroti 06/11/03.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with a head teacher, Soroti, 11/11/03.

<sup>240</sup> Group discussion with 10 school girls, Soroti, 7/11/03.

<sup>241</sup> Interview with former rank-and-file UPA fighter, Soroti, 04/11/03.

<sup>242</sup> Group discussion with ex-combatants, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>243</sup> Interview with religious leader, Soroti, 4/11/03.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with local government official, Soroti, 4/11/03.

<sup>245</sup> Interview with school teacher, Soroti, 06/11/03.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with school teacher, Soroti, 06/11/03.

Such allegations of collaboration have meant that the spread of the war, perceived by many as an ‘Acholi’ war, has created antagonism along ethnic lines. On the one hand the conflict is seen to have become ‘national’ since spreading geographically outside of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, but on the other, it has become increasingly articulated along ethnic lines. For instance, this is how an Arrow boy interpreted the war:

You know, these days people are fighting against the tribe. The Iteso alone, Karamojong alone etc. For us, we don’t have a problem. If the Acholi stop their habit of taking our children, we don’t have a problem. We will not go outside Teso looking for Kony.<sup>247</sup>

Indeed, the rise of the Arrow and Rhino groups is potentially worrying in this context, as wider ethnic clashes among different northern and eastern groups are now a potential risk. Ethnic relations between the Iteso (the overwhelming majority of the residents of Soroti, Kaberamaido and Katakwi), the Acholi (Gulu, Kitgum and Pader) and the Langi (Lira and Apac) have been peaceful over the past several years. However, differences and stereotypes are easy to re-mobilise, particularly because of a lack of interaction and communication – very few people travel to and from the war-torn areas of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. These perceptions have risen to the surface as a result of the spread of the war, as some people confirmed their stereotypes of Acholi as ‘a warlike people’ because of the violence of the LRA in their region. As a teacher in Soroti observed, “Before this war, Acholis and Iteso were good friends. But now, there’s tension. The RDC of Kaberamaido is an Acholi, and he was attacked because he left a lot of loopholes for the LRA to come. The Deputy RDC of Katakwi, also an Acholi, has run away.”<sup>248</sup>

In trying to defend their communities, some citizens have already killed people in ‘mob justice’ attacks simply because they were speaking the Acholi version of Luo – thereby immediately equating them with the LRA.<sup>249</sup> Although conciliatory public statements by politicians and religious leaders have helped, there is little doubt that the situation brewing in the Teso and Lira sub-regions could have serious ramifications for stability within the area.

### 5.3 Future Implications

In addition to fears of tensions developing along ethnic lines, there were other concerns about the longer-term implications of arming local militias. In particular, there are a number of ways in which informants believe armed local defence units could use their weapons in the future. First, many informants expressed their fear that individuals could take advantage of being armed to settle personal scores or engage in criminal activities. This fear was expressed during a discussion with a group of IDPs: “We fear that some of them might become thieves and start robbing people with the guns they have.”<sup>250</sup> One local analyst added, “People are fearful of thuggery if they [Arrow Boys] keep their weapons after the LRA. There is a fear that some Arrow Boys will settle scores on family and individual levels.”<sup>251</sup>

Second, numerous interviewees commented that the local defence units could, in future, be used to protect against ongoing attacks by Karamojong cattle-rustlers. As one IDP argued, “When this war ends, we should go and disarm the Karamojong ourselves because the government has cheated us

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Arrow Group member, Soroti, 07/11/03.

<sup>248</sup> Interview with school teacher, Soroti, 6/11/03.

<sup>249</sup> The RLP was told of several such incidents taking place.

<sup>250</sup> Group discussion with 9 men and 13 women IDPs, IDP camp, Soroti, 7/11/03.

<sup>251</sup> Interview with journalist, Soroti, 6/11/03.

about disarming them.”<sup>252</sup> One informant even used the word ‘Konymojong’, to express the wider problems confronting civilians in the Teso sub-region. As a journalist argued, “Those [Arrow Boys] in Katakwi, where there have been Karamojong cattle raids, they will remain permanently armed.”<sup>253</sup> Given the impact of Karamojong raids on the population, and the inadequacy of defence during attacks, it is hardly surprising that civilians see increased defence capacity as a means to security in the future.

Third, fears that the Arrow and Rhino groups could turn their weapons against the government have already been raised in many circles.<sup>254</sup> Teso and Lango are majority opposition areas, and between 65-80% of the Arrow Boys are former members of the Obote II UPC army, many of whom joined the anti-Movement UPA rebellion from 1987-92.<sup>255</sup> Some informants believe that the fighters may therefore place significant demands on the government, become local vigilantes, or even rise up against the Movement in the event of a crisis. As one journalist commented, “The Arrow Boys are a big force of unemployed young people – they are not so educated and very energetic. If you promise them too much, there could be a lot of discontent.”<sup>256</sup> The government has been careful to integrate the groups into UPDF command structures so that the two will work hand-in-hand. However, rumours were already abounding in Soroti about tensions between Arrow and UPDF forces about minor issues such as who actually killed the rebels. While RLP was unable to investigate such claims, it is possible that these tensions could escalate into something larger in the future.

Fourth, some suspect that the Rhino and Arrow groups may be used to intimidate the opposition before the 2006 elections. Supporters of such an argument believe that the Rhino Group is much too closely assimilated into the UPDF, and that the Arrow leaders are too entrenched in the Movement to rise up against it. As one journalist said, “Once a rebel, always a rebel, but [Arrow leader] Musa Ecweru has a lot of ambition and has been a Movement supporter for a long time already. Let’s put it this way, after the war, Mukula will not be a junior minister, and Ecweru will not be an RDC.”<sup>257</sup> There is a suspicion that they will therefore use the militias to help the government win the elections and reap the political rewards afterwards. As one local analyst commented, “The Arrow Group is in reality a force to quell opposition groups in the lead-up to the 2006 election.”<sup>258</sup> While pure speculation at this point, such a development would not be without precedent: similar sub-state militias were used by regimes before elections in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Rwanda.<sup>259</sup> Thus the arming of paramilitaries, as well as having immediate consequences, could affect the stability of eastern and northern Uganda even once the LRA is gone.

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<sup>252</sup> Group discussion with 9 men and 13 women IDPs, IDP camp, Soroti, 7/11/03.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with journalist, Soroti, 5/11/2003.

<sup>254</sup> *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 44 No. 19, 26 September 2003, p. 3; interview with regional analyst, Kampala, 16 October 2003; interview with international official, Kampala, 8/10/03.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Arrow Group leader, Soroti, 4/11/03; interview with journalist, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>256</sup> Interview with journalist, Soroti, 6/11/03.

<sup>257</sup> In addition to his role with the Arrow Boys, Ecweru was, until recently, Resident District Commissioner (government-appointed governor) of Kasese, before being assigned to Soroti in the recent RDC reshuffle. Interview with journalist, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>258</sup> Confidential interview, Soroti, 5/11/03.

<sup>259</sup> See Philip Roessler, “Donor-Induced Democratization and the Privatization of State Violence in Kenya and Rwanda”, *Comparative Politics*, 2003.

## 6 BEYOND CONFLICT

Thus the northern conflict has continued for nearly 18 years and has only spread in its reach. Although the LRA is potentially weakened by the Sudanese peace process, there is no guarantee that this development in itself will end the war. Indeed, Kony has proved his ability to survive in the most hostile of environments, and could potentially continue to dispense his own particular brand of terror across northern and eastern Uganda indefinitely. While many informants believe that cutting off Kony's supply of arms from Sudan will help, it will not necessarily prevent him from continuing to wage war due to the LRA's effective and extensive use of axes and machetes: "They don't need anybody's support to exist. They don't need guns to kill or terrorise people. They can kill or displace thousands with machetes, which they can steal from the same people."<sup>260</sup> Whether new peace initiatives can bear fruit largely depends on understanding the successes and failures of previous efforts to end the war.

### 6.1 The Limited Success of Previous Initiatives

Both military means and dialogue have been used by the government on different occasions to try to end the LRA conflict.<sup>261</sup> While some of these initiatives have achieved certain successes, the war has not yet ended. Many of those caught up within the conflict have therefore become despondent about reaching a peaceful resolution. While this does not mean that there is no hope for ending the war, it indicates that the government will need to work hard to gain public support for any kind of initiative to end the conflict – whether it be peaceful dialogue or military measures. One informant summarised a commonly expressed sentiment: "Military and peaceful means have been tried, and none have succeeded. One emphasises one, the other the other. The rebels are confused, the government is confused, and the Acholi people are confused."<sup>262</sup>

Dialogue initiatives were seen to have ultimately failed in ending the conflict primarily because of contradictory messages being sent by both the government and the LRA. The following comment exemplifies this widely held view:

The leaders establish contact and something was going on, then someone in government says, these are bandits! Get out in two weeks! These things are said in the press, on the radio, and it defeats the purposes of the effort. ... If you tell your children to go and collect honey, you don't throw stones into the hive. That's what's happening. It cost the life of a very respected elder here.<sup>263</sup>

Although the government is frequently held responsible for the failure of dialogue among informants in northern Uganda, many people in the conflict zone acknowledged that Kony was also to blame: "Sometimes Kony calls for a ceasefire, and then he massacres many people. So people should be honest and know that it is not only Museveni who does not respect cease-fires."<sup>264</sup>

Previous peace talks have, however, yielded some positive results – achievements that can be built on in future initiatives. For instance the negotiations held by Betty Bigombe in 1994 were often referred to as having been the best opportunity for peace. As one religious leader said, "Betty – that one was almost through, but according to rebel commanders here, the problem was the Acholi

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<sup>260</sup> Interview with human rights worker, Kitgum, 10/10/03.

<sup>261</sup> See Barney Afako, 2002, as reviewed in the appendix.

<sup>262</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>263</sup> Interview with business woman, Gulu, 1/10/03.

<sup>264</sup> Interview with hospital staff member, Kitgum, 16/10/03.

people in government, people who didn't want Bigombe to get that credit, gave the wrong information to government."<sup>265</sup> As analyst Barney Afako points out, then-minister Bigombe's involvement of community leaders in the north was crucial to gaining support among their constituencies for the peace process.<sup>266</sup> However, the eventual failure of the Bigombe talks is attributed to both the government's lack of firm political will behind a negotiation strategy and the LRA's turn to Sudan for arms re-supplies. Furthermore, the talks at Awoo Nyim in 2001 highlighted that limited demilitarised zones and co-operation on the halting of looting could be achieved with the LRA through negotiations.<sup>267</sup>

At the same time, several military campaigns have also been unable to end the war. Operation North in 1991-2, the government's first major military initiative in the northern conflict, neither defeated the LRA nor brought them out of the bush. Indeed, the operation caused a significant increase in civilian casualties due to both the NRA's "brutality and heavy-handedness"<sup>268</sup> and the LRA's retaliation against government-sponsored civilian militias. Although the campaign did reportedly have "considerable impact on the LRA"<sup>269</sup> by weakening its command structure and operational ability, Operation North was profoundly unpopular among northerners following the arrest of 18 popular local leaders (who were subsequently released without charge). Such lack of support reveals the importance of government gaining the backing of the population in any initiatives to end the conflict.

Most recently, the appalling increase in displacement and human suffering following Operation Iron Fist has heightened perceptions on the ground of the UPDF's inability to defeat the LRA militarily. As one NGO worker summarised,

2002 was a disaster, with LRA attacks increasing vastly. It is true that there have been fewer attacks this year [in 2003], but 2003 was much worse last year in terms of the humanitarian situation. IDPs have gone up by 40%, many of whom are in new districts, malnutrition rates are higher, and thievery in the camps has gone up.<sup>270</sup>

Informants gave a number of reasons for these developments, some of which relate to perceptions of the UPDF discussed in section 4. First, because the LRA is comprised overwhelmingly of abducted children, many believe that a military solution has not and will not be feasible because it would mean killing children en masse. As one IDP woman said, "When the planes [UPDF helicopter gunships] come, the rebels change uniforms, and give them to the children, and force the new abductees to put on the uniforms. So the planes bomb the children."<sup>271</sup> Kony has created a war in which he has surrounded himself with abducted children, thus ensuring that conventional warfare military responses are closer to a massacre than a counter-insurgency campaign. Second, there is a widely held belief among people on the ground that certain elements within the UPDF are actively working against resolution of the war as they are benefiting financially, as discussed above. Third, the 'Sudan factor' was frequently cited as a major reason for the war continuing: the ease

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<sup>265</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>266</sup> Afako, 2002.

<sup>267</sup> Negotiations were held between Gulu LC-V Walter Ochora and LRA Lt. Col. Onen Kamdulu at Awoo Nyim, Gulu District, in June 2001. A demilitarised zone was set up, the UPDF provided logistical support for the talks, and the LRA agreed not to loot for a specified period. However, Afako reports that "the process simply lost impetus" and was not followed up. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>268</sup> Gersony, 1997: 31.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>270</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Kampala, 6/12/03.

<sup>271</sup> Group discussion with 12 teachers, Lira, 12/11/03.

with which Kony is seen to obtain arms from within Sudan is viewed as a major obstacle in the way of ending the war.

In sum, both negotiation and military initiatives to date have succeeded in limited degrees but have not yielded an end to the northern conflict. Indeed, in some instances initiatives have made the situation worse by angering Kony and fuelling his justification for using violence against the civilian population. New approaches are thus imperative, both in terms of putting full political backing behind dialogue initiatives, and in improving and focusing security strategies.

## 6.2 The Challenge of Leadership

Leaders in the north have also made significant progress in trying to bring the population they represent out of conflict. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), for example, was founded in 1998 as a consortium of Catholic, Anglican, Muslim and other religious leaders to engage Acholi society and the Ugandan body politic in finding a peaceful solution to the war. ARLPI's accomplishments include leading the fight for the passage of the Amnesty Act in 1999, training hundreds of local leaders in peace-building and conflict resolution, and "creating confidence and opening avenues of negotiations"<sup>272</sup> by acting as "Track 2" interlocutors between the conflicting parties. Other prominent northerners have also attempted to play a specific leadership role, particularly in ending the conflict. For example, the Acholi traditional chiefs (Rwodi) were formally reinstated in 2000 in an effort to further contribute to the peace process. The peace-building organisation ACORD has also been engaged in a traditional leadership revitalisation programme, and helped create two new structures to assist the peace process – the Council of Elders Peace Committee, headed by Okot Omony, and the Council of Chiefs, chaired by Rwot Acana.

Civil society groups have increased their activism, with 43 local and international NGOs working in the region forming a lobby organisation in 2001, the Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU). Thus far, CSOPNU has issued a series of advocacy reports on the conflict, analysing the economic impact of the war and urging for increased dialogue and a variety of measures for greater national reconciliation.<sup>273</sup> In addition, politicians from Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have also become more visible in recent years with regard to the conflict. For example, MPs Norbert Mao and Ronald Reagan Okumu are members of the government's Presidential Peace Team and have spoken out on numerous occasions giving ideas for ending the war.<sup>274</sup>

However, in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, interviews suggested that there was also dissatisfaction amongst much of the population with the political leadership for what they see as the use of public offices and positions for self-aggrandisement rather than working in the service of the electorate. According to an interviewee in Kitgum, "Our leaders have failed us. They don't understand the essence of leadership as a service to the people, but as an opportunity to enrich themselves and remain in power. That is why they don't support anybody's effort unless they are given credit for

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<sup>272</sup> Gilbert Khadiagala, "The Role of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) in Peace Building in Northern Uganda". In USAID report, *The Effectiveness of Civil Society Initiatives in Controlling Violent Conflicts and Building Peace*, Greater Horn of Africa Peace Building Project (March 2001): 11-12.

<sup>273</sup> See, for example, "Continuing Conflict in Acholiland: an Objective CSO Perspective," CSOPNU paper, Kampala, 16 June 2002.

<sup>274</sup> Okumu, for example, wrote an "Analytical Proposal for Peace in Northern Uganda" in January 2003, in which he called for greater attention to the political and economic marginalisation of the north to avoid future political conflict, more serious peace negotiations with the LRA and increased international involvement. Hon. Ronald Reagan Okumu, "Analytical Proposal for Peace in Northern Uganda", unpublished paper, January 2003.

it...<sup>275</sup> As one international official with long experience with the conflict revealed, “The prospects for peace in the north are diminished because the political leadership is very weak in Acholiland. They are totally divided, which undermines progress in the peace process, and many of them aren’t wanted by Kony [as part of the peace team].”<sup>276</sup>

In addition, there appears to be a lack of clarity in leadership roles on the ground, something that was alluded to in several of the interviews. Although the RLP was not able to gain the insight needed to fully analyse this issue, it is important to emphasise the need to address any underlying tensions that may exist, as a lack of clear leadership structures can too easily be translated into a lack of roles in any peace process. Indeed, the issue of leadership is clearly an area that needs further research.

### 6.3 The Amnesty Act

A great many of those living in northern Uganda often cited the Amnesty Act<sup>277</sup> as the most positive development towards resolution of the conflict. In particular, it is seen to be compatible with Acholi dispute resolution mechanisms: “Culturally, people’s ideas of forgiveness are entrenched. They don’t kill people; they believe the bitterness of revenge does not solve the problem. So it was easy for people to accept the idea of amnesty. The culture is for compensation.”<sup>278</sup> As a religious leader said,

I’m very proud of the amnesty. Some people say you can’t give in to Kony. But when you look at the Acholi people, they believe in *mato oput*, which is a reconciliation ceremony here. In Acholi culture there is no death sentence, because they know that the death sentence increases violence. They practice that in their culture, so why not in this?<sup>279</sup>

Thus, there was a clear feeling that the amnesty is based on values that are seen as compatible with the context in which it is being applied.

However, the implementation of the Amnesty has been problematic for three main reasons. First, many abductees said they had no access to radios when they were with the LRA, and therefore did not know about the Amnesty. Others spoke of how Kony had told them that the Amnesty was a lie, and that they would be killed if they handed themselves in. Second, there was concern that the government was not doing enough to support the amnesty. Public statements made by government advancing a military end to the war were seen to contradict the concept of amnesty. For instance, while President Museveni has repeatedly stated that the Amnesty does not extend to top commanders of the LRA and that it will not be extended past April 2004,<sup>280</sup> there appears to be strong support within the commission itself for its extension.<sup>281</sup> As one informant asked, “Museveni has agreed for the amnesty, but then he starts to talk of killing the rebels, of wiping them out. How can Kony know which one is true?”<sup>282</sup> Although public pronouncements have no legal significance, they add to the suspicion with which the amnesty is viewed – particularly among LRA fighters – and have created a lack of clarity among the LRA as to the scope and duration of the amnesty.

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<sup>275</sup> Interview with religious leader, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

<sup>276</sup> Interview with international official, Kampala, 23/10/03.

<sup>277</sup> Act number 2 of 2000.

<sup>278</sup> Interview with human rights worker, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with religious leader, Gulu, 7/10/03.

<sup>280</sup> See BBC interview with President Museveni, 25/12/03, reproduced in the *Monitor*, 27/12/03; IRIN news, 27/1/04.

<sup>281</sup> *The East African*, 12-18 January 2004, p. 5.

<sup>282</sup> Interview with IDP man, Kitgum, 14/10/03.

Third, some informants expressed confusion about how the Amnesty Act relates to the Anti-Terrorism Act.<sup>283</sup> there is concern that the latter might somehow be in conflict with the former. The Amnesty Act was written to “pardon, forgive, exempt or discharge from criminal prosecution or any other form of punishment by the State.”<sup>284</sup> What this means is that a person who is “engaged in or engaging in war, or armed rebellion” for the purposes of influencing the government or the public for whatever reasons – political, religious or economic – would fall under the Amnesty Act. However, the Anti-Terrorism Act states that “a person who commits an act of terrorism... for purposes of influencing the government or intimidating the public... for a political, religious, social or economic aim” is criminally liable for those acts.<sup>285</sup> The dilemma here is to know which acts of war or rebellion are not affected by the provisions of the Amnesty Act. Bombs and weapons are clearly used in war for purposes of influencing the government and the public. So which actions or omissions of war or rebellion do not constitute terrorist acts? The key phrase in the Anti-Terrorism Act that reveals the differences between the two Acts is violence used “indiscriminately without due regard to the safety of others or property.”<sup>286</sup> On the face of it, there appears to be no substantive disagreement between the two. However, critically examined, persons engaged in war or rebellion against the government would be charged with crimes under the Anti-Terrorism Act. It will then be a question of evidence as to intention. Therefore, it appears that, legally speaking, the Anti-Terrorism Act limits the Amnesty Act because of the certain kinds of violence that it prohibits. Given the apparent contradictions between the two Acts, Ugandan civil society groups should seek statutory interpretation from the Courts of Law in Uganda for a full analysis.

#### 6.4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has sought to show the extent to which there are three distinctive but interlinked issues that need to be addressed in resolving the war in northern Uganda: the wider issue of grievances in northern Uganda in relation to root causes, the LRA conflict itself, and the consequences of the war that have, in turn, fed into secondary causes. Also clear is the extent to which civilians on the ground view dialogue and the military approaches used to date as being antithetical. For the majority of civilians in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, there is little support for a military solution. Furthermore, not only is the UPDF seen to be inadequate in defending the communities, but it is also seen as compromising the potential for dialogue. In the final analysis, people do not want their children to be killed in the name of ‘resolution’, and there is overwhelming support for a peaceful end to the conflict. Not one informant in Gulu or Kitgum expressed a desire to see Kony meet a brutal end: this was not because they support him in any way, but because they see such revenge as continuing a cycle of violence that so desperately needs to be broken.

In light of this, the RLP puts forward the following ideas towards resolution:

1. Priority must be given to ending the LRA conflict. Information from LRA ex-combatants suggests that Kony perceives the problem in northern Uganda in terms of collective failure, and an evil that must be eradicated by visiting horror on the people to cleanse them and affect change. Thus, within his worldview, violence is a legitimate means of enforcing that change. The military approach to combating the LRA has simply served to support Kony’s agenda by supplying the very violence that his apocalyptic vision demands. Therefore it is recommended that the GoU strategically alter its focus from one of seeking to destroy Kony to one of

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<sup>283</sup> Act No. 14 of 2002.

<sup>284</sup> Section 2 of the Amnesty Act, Act No. 2 of 2000.

<sup>285</sup> Section 7(2) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, Act No. 14 of 2002.

<sup>286</sup> Section 7(2) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, Act No. 14 of 2002.

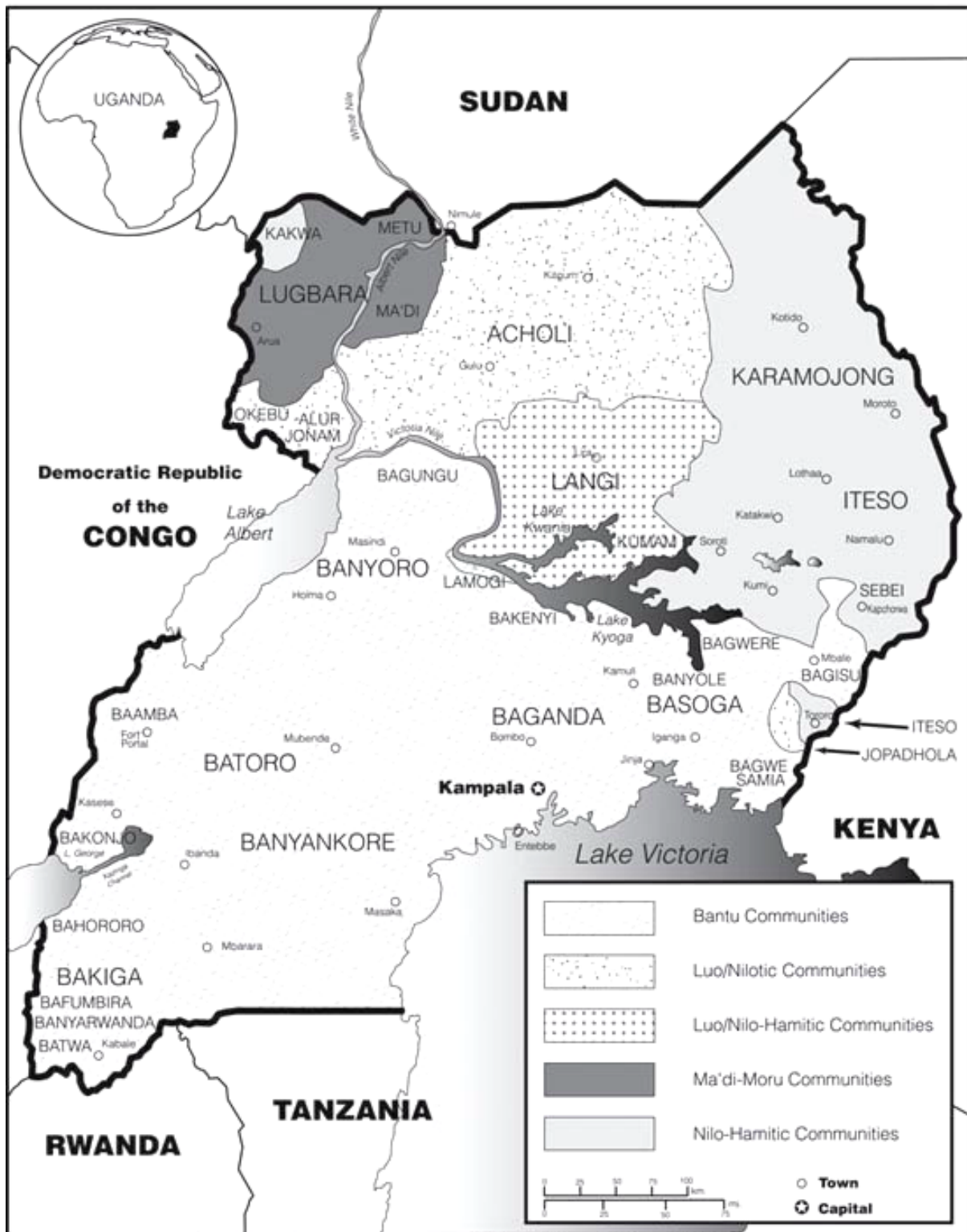


defending communities and maximising the protection of civilians. Such a change in military strategy, acknowledging that it is a state's legal responsibility to defend communities within its borders, would support rather than work against the possibility for negotiations with Kony. This shift in strategy may serve to open the political and social space needed to address the wider unresolved conflicts and perceived injustices that lie at the root of the historic northern conflict.

2. Negotiations, to date, have emphasised the need to function within a political framework. However, rather than approaching negotiation by demanding lists of grievances, it is recommended that a more open-ended approach be adopted, one that allows a better understanding of Kony's worldview to emerge. In particular, it is vital that he is approached with a desire to understanding him (which is not the same as endorsing his actions) rather than destroying him.
3. From an analysis of the root causes of the conflict, it is clear that Uganda is a country deeply wounded by injustice, fear, war, prejudice, hatred, and deliberate falsification of its history by successive regimes. In order to begin to address these issues, it is recommended that allowance for some form of Truth and Reconciliation process be set up that will allow Ugandans to come and objectively speak out about what happened in the Luwero Triangle, northern Uganda, West Nile, western Uganda and other areas that have been plagued by conflict.
4. Communication difficulties have been paramount to blocking progress in ending the conflict. Therefore, a new public relations strategy from the government is a crucial component of the peace process. The government must keep a tight control on the language its ministers use regarding the LRA. Phrases such as "annihilate the terrorists within weeks" or "finish off the bandits" only enrage Kony and could de-rail a peace process. In addition, a few conciliatory statements from the president and key government ministers would contribute substantially to building confidence to end the war.
5. The report has shown the extent to which there is both anger and sympathy towards the UPDF in northern Uganda. First, corruption in the UPDF has greatly undermined its capacity to protect the people. It is recommended that: a) the GoU genuinely purge the corrupt elements within the UPDF. The ongoing investigation of 'ghost soldiers' is in the right direction but more needs to be done; b) those found guilty should make full restitution for the monies and other resources they embezzled. Second, the government and the UPDF need to pay particular attention to reaching out to the communities to build confidence among civilians. This outreach would benefit the UPDF strategy by enhancing its intelligence gathering capacity, and would reduce fear and distrust among civilians. Third, and related to the first two issues, morale is low among the foot soldiers in the north. Therefore, tighter controls need to be put on individuals who have been documented to abuse their authority, and concrete steps must be taken to ensure that all UPDF soldiers are adequately and consistently paid.
6. Increasing numbers of armed militias poses long-term threats to the security of Uganda. Once there is adequate defence of the communities, it is recommended that the militias should be either disarmed or integrated into the national army. In the mean time, it is recommended that there be tighter control of all militia activities, that militias are properly trained, that all weapons are accounted for, that militias be used solely for defence of civilians rather than pursuit of the rebels, and that operations are closely grafted onto the UPDF hierarchy.

7. The majority of interviewees caught up in the conflict perceive the war in the north as a deliberate ploy by the government to destroy, in particular, the Acholi people. At the same time, some government officials have accused the Acholi of supporting the LRA and preventing the conflict from ending. Given such mutual suspicion, it is recommended that confidence-building measures be taken, such as an end to the hostile and conflicting rhetoric of the national government towards the LRA, a genuine apology from the government on some of its failings, and ending the wholesale condemnation of the Acholi.
8. While poverty is not identified as a root cause of the conflict, the effects of the conflict, in particular displacement, have had serious economic and social consequences throughout northern Uganda. Thus post-conflict reconstruction planning should be a priority. In addition, given that money in previous reconstruction efforts such as the Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme was often misused, the process should be open to public debate and scrutiny.
9. The conflict clearly has an international dimension involving neighbouring countries. The ongoing Sudan peace talks provide a glimmer of hope, but they might not mean an end to the LRA conflict. Therefore it is recommended that the GoU structure its foreign policy to reflect good neighbourliness that ensures long-term economic and political security, rather than mutual suspicion.
10. The Amnesty is popular with people living in the conflict zone, and is seen as a vital and positive element to ending the war. Thus it is recommended that the Act is extended for the duration of the present conflict. In addition, attempts at amending the Amnesty to exclude top LRA commanders are counterproductive to peaceful endeavours to end the conflict.
11. A lack of consistent and visionary leadership, both locally and at the national level, has been a primary factor exacerbating the conflict and working against building a lasting peace. This lack has made it difficult to engender real public investment in national politics and ensured that most Ugandans do not see the war as a national issue. Therefore the GoU must re-double its efforts for a genuine democratisation process that is transparent and honest, and moves away from the politics of blame, as this divides rather than unites people. Such steps would go far in the furtherance of President Museveni's stated goal of building a unified Uganda.
12. The war is increasing ethnic tensions, and some politicians have made inflammatory remarks that have contributed to this. The political leadership – both local and national – should endeavour to desist from making inflammatory statements about the conflict along ethnic lines, and should play a more active and vocal role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation. Instead, the political leadership should disassociate the rebels from the Acholi people and build a national consensus on how to end the war.

# ETHNOGRAPHIC UGANDA



Based on Minority Rights Group International's 'Ethnic Groups and Tribes of Uganda', Uganda: The Marginalization of Minorities (2001). Boundaries are not definitive but are intended to show traditionally inhabited areas.

\*This map's terminology indicates peoples, not regions. Areas referred to in the text as Teso and Lango, for example, are Iteso and Langi on the map, since those are the majority populations in these regions.

AREAS AFFECTED BY THE NORTHERN UGANDA CONFLICT



COURTESY: UN INTEGRATED REGIONAL INFORMATION NETWORKS (IRIN) OF UN-OCHA

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## APPENDIX: Literature Review

Several studies have been undertaken to analyse the conflict in northern Uganda. *The Anguish of Northern Uganda*, an US inter-agency report written by conflict expert Robert Gersony in 1997, is arguably the most widely cited analysis on the war. Gersony provides a detailed history of rebellion in the north and in most cases shows a balanced, complex understanding of the conflict through his over 300 interviews across the north and in Kampala. Its comprehensiveness in both examining the origins of the different rebel groups and making concrete, well-researched suggestions for ending the war is impressive. However, several weaknesses prevent the report from being the authoritative account it purports to be. First, the report fails to present the perspectives or quotes of insiders to the conflict. Its many generalisations, such as “the population still fears Kony”<sup>287</sup>, leave the reader wondering about the sources of evidence for such conclusions. Second, while the analysis on the causes of the first UPDA and Holy Spirit Movement rebellions is generally lucid, the author does not go into any depth about the motivations or interests – the ‘whys’ – of the LRA. The report often implicitly assumes the LRA to be a political insurgency – e.g. in recommending similar peacemaking strategies to the political UPDA and UPA rebellions<sup>288</sup> – while at the same time arguing that the group is “strikingly devoid of political content”.<sup>289</sup>

Finally, Gersony at certain points reveals an evident pro-NRM leaning. For example, by emphasising military humiliation, the loss of government power and the Acholi guilt associated with the Luwero Triangle massacres as the causes of the conflict (and ignoring crucial factors such as Kony’s revenge on an unsupportive Acholi population), Gersony falls into the trap of equating the current repressive rebellion with the previous popular insurgencies. His presentation of only ‘straw men’ critiques of the government’s “protected villages” displacement policy, failing to mention more substantive points about large-scale land development plans or the creation of Acholi dependencies on the government, further reveals such a bias.

“Kony’s Message: A New Koine?” is a strong analysis by Belgian academics Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot, which examines the history, root causes, and motivations of the parties to the conflict in northern Uganda. The root causes are identified as 1) the traditional north-south divide, with the Acholi branded by the British as ‘traditional warriors’ (a notion later debunked by Professor Mazrui) and used as a labour reserve for sugarcane, tea, and some cotton plantations in the south; 2) the militarisation of politics, with Idi Amin’s atrocities against the Acholi in the early 1970s and Obote’s Luwero Triangle massacres in the early 1980s as two key developments. The article details the history of the conflict, beginning with the “misbehaviour” of NRA and Baganda FEDEMU troops (the latter “organised massacres in 1986”), then moving to the formation of the UPDA with ex-Amin supporters in Juba, Sudan later that year and describing Lakwena as a visionary leader. This is where Kony came in – a school dropout and former gang member involved in petty thievery who was rejected by Alice and Fr. Severino as being impure – and began terrorising the population. The authors’ description of Kony is interesting – as someone who was rejected as community leader, but possessing a “mesmerizing voice” and his own “mix of political entrepreneurship, personal frustration, and warlordism”.<sup>290</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot’s analysis of the LRA’s motivations is probing, examining how the brutal violence gives power and self-confidence to desperate field commanders by instilling fear into others and making them passive objects. An alternative explanation – that Kony wants to bring a new, “purified” order to Acholi, using the youth he abducts as blank slates for his “cleansed” indoctrination – is original, if not a bit out of the

<sup>287</sup> Gersony, 1997: 61.

<sup>288</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

box. Unfortunately, the study ends with a rather superficial treatment on the international dimensions, but this does little to detract from the authors' previous analytical achievements.

*The Hidden War, The Forgotten People*, launched by Makerere University's Human Rights & Peace Centre (HURIPEC) in October 2003, analyses the war as an act of long-standing ethnic vengeance against northerners by the NRM government, asserting that "the war in Acholi was caused by bad government actions against the Acholi population".<sup>291</sup> It cites Museveni's formative days with the "ethnic-based" FRONASA in Tanzania<sup>292</sup> (made up of mainly western Ugandans), as well as "the strategy of ethnic cleansing embarked on by the NRM/A" against the Acholi before the Luwero Triangle massacres because of what the NRM leadership viewed as the latter's looting of the national cake.<sup>293</sup> However, the scant evidence provided does not back up the report's bold assertions sufficiently. Museveni's interview with *Drum* magazine in 1985, which is ambiguously anti-northern and pro-democratic, a single interview with an unidentified "key informant" that the conflict was a war of revenge against the Acholi, and inconclusive descriptions of the NRM's alliances with Yusuf Lule's UFM/A and Moses Ali's UNRF<sup>294</sup> as somehow cementing the anti-northern hatred.<sup>295</sup> While the evidence to back up the ethnic theory may be weak, it is people's *perceptions* that matter most in a peace process. As will be outlined below, a wide majority of northerners interviewed suspect such a theory to be true (if not believe it altogether), and therefore the ethnic explanation must be granted attention as part of a national reconciliation process or 'hearts and minds' campaign.

### Peace strategies

Ugandan independent analyst Barney Afako surveys a spectrum of peace efforts that have been tried over the past sixteen years, including several Ugandan government initiatives, various northern religious and traditional leaders' attempts, and limited international efforts.<sup>296</sup> Several lessons drawn by Afako are relevant today. First, both community (religious, traditional and others) and military leaders must be closely involved in any peace process, as these crucial figures can mobilise support for (or against) peace efforts among their powerful constituencies. Furthermore, a demilitarised zone designed to cool tensions and build confidence may be a model for future peace initiatives, as the exploratory talks in the zone set up in 2001 at Awoo Nyim led to considerable co-operation from the LRA. Unfortunately, the report does not go into detail about the substance of the unsuccessful talks, so that the reader is left with little idea as to what the LRA actually wants out of negotiations. One area of further research would be to glean lessons from how Uganda's many other insurgencies since 1986 were ended, which may provide important parallels for today's conflict with the LRA. Gersony argues that peace negotiations hold the way forward for ending the conflict, agreeing with Afako in that that these should be conducted directly between the two parties, as the "mediation of third parties, including the diplomatic community, would more likely encumber than facilitate a successful outcome."<sup>297</sup> However, his analysis is unfortunately unconvincing, as he fails to outline the substance of such talks and thus there is no evidence for how they would address the LRA's (or Kony's) seemingly non-political interests.

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<sup>291</sup> HURIPEC, 2003: 54-5.

<sup>292</sup> Front for National Salvation, which Museveni formed as a student at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. See *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-31.

<sup>294</sup> Uganda Freedom Movement/Army from Buganda, and the Uganda National Rescue Front from West Nile.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-6.

<sup>296</sup> Afako, 2002.

<sup>297</sup> Gersony, 1997: 93.