

U.S. Ambivalence Undermining Historic Uganda Peace Talks

By Peter J. Quaranto and Michael Poffenberger | August 10, 2006

Historic peace talks currently underway between the Government of Uganda and rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are the best opportunity in over a decade to end Africa's longest running war. Yet the Bush administration and State Department—distracted by unrest in the Middle East and priorities that lie outside of Africa—have been ambiguous about the U.S. position on the talks, undermining opportunities to help end one of the world's worst humanitarian nightmares.

Situation Overview

The war in northern Uganda has persisted for twenty years. The LRA, based in southern Sudan, has terrorized the northern population to challenge the Ugandan government and sustain its existence. The rebel group has abducted more than 25,000 children, using them as child soldiers and sexual slaves. Tens of thousands more have been wounded, maimed and killed by their attacks.

People in northern Uganda are caught between the terror of the LRA and the neglect of their own government. Since the current Ugandan regime came to power in 1986, northerners have been marginalized in political and economic processes. Further, the government plan in 1996 to confine people in war-affected areas to "protected villages" has collapsed into a displacement nightmare. The U.N. estimates that 1.6 million people are displaced in squalid camps. According to a July 2005 mortality survey conducted by the International Rescue Committee, approximately one thousand people die weekly in these camps.

By its own initiative, the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) has agreed to mediate and host peace talks between the warring parties. The involvement of such a strategic third party mediator, combined with apparent openness of both par-

ties to end the war and mounting international pressure to resolve the conflict, gives this process serious potential to succeed.

A Historic Opportunity

GoSS leadership to both host and mediate negotiations makes these talks unlike any of the past. The GoSS has much to gain from peacefully expelling the LRA from within its borders. Elements of the northern-based National Islamic Front regime are continuing to use the LRA as a proxy militia to destabilize the South and derail Sudan's fragile 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Further, the LRA is embedded within networks in southern Sudan that have not yet joined the Southern Sudanese governing coalition and are not parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It is therefore in the interest of Southern Sudan to demobilize the LRA and its proxies.

The LRA, recognizing the stakes for the GoSS, wants to avoid military confrontation with regional forces. At present, no force has been able to apprehend LRA leaders, but International Criminal Court (ICC) indictments issued in October, 2005 for top commanders have generated new pressure. Indicted LRA leadership want guarantees for their post-conflict security and livelihood.



Finally, the crisis has become an increasing liability for the reputation of the Ugandan government. With Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's repeal of term limits to win a third term in elections, his regime has suffered a significant fall from grace. Ending the war would redeem Museveni's image abroad, especially if it were accomplished before the 2007 British Commonwealth meetings to be held in Uganda. Moreover, the Government of Uganda (GoU) has sought a strong diplomatic and trading partnership with the GoSS; bad faith in these talks could jeopardize that strategic relationship.

Policy Scenarios

As peace talks continue, the Ugandan government must reflect on the needs of northern Ugandans. President Museveni has made clear that he will offer amnesty to all rebels if they accept a peace deal. While some have criticized this as undermining the ICC, northern Ugandan leaders have expressed full support, conveying that long-term issues of justice can be addressed after the cessation of violence. Once the basic rights to their people have been restored, local leaders will help set the agenda for long-term peace and justice.

In negotiations, the government and LRA will have to consider issues of reconciliation, truth telling and even some form of power sharing. While structural change is unlikely, all parties should be supportive of processes that build trust and relationships between segments of society that have been polarized and separated for several generations. Lasting peace in northern Uganda will require addressing northern marginalization. Peace talks can help initiate processes that unleash the agency of war-affected people.

Role of the U.S. and International Community

Elevated and targeted attention from the United States and donor countries can be decisive to the success of the negotiation process. The U.S. government has been unclear about its position on peace talks, intentionally avoiding the issue. In March, the State Department announced that ending the war before the end of 2006 was a priority of the Bush Administration. Supporting these talks would be a good start toward that end.

The international community has a critical role to play in monitoring the talks to hold actors accountable. In past talks, schizophrenic signals from the government and corruption within the military have undermined talks. The United States should send an envoy and stand willing, at the invitation of the GoSS, to aid and encourage the process when needed.

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Especially as a non-signatory to the ICC, the United States may be able to impact the talks in ways that European countries cannot. The European countries, for their part, can urge the ICC to show restraint and to employ Article 53 of the Rome Statute. Under Article 53(4),

the Prosecutor can reconsider a decision at any time "based on new facts or information." ICC continued disapproval of talks could derail the process when discussions shift to post-conflict security guarantees.

The U.S. can also help build a peace dividend so that if an agreement is reached, the financial and political resources will be available for its implementation. The return of displaced peoples, compensation of victims and reintegration of rebel fighters will require extensive international support.

Finally, the international community can ensure that the ultimate stakeholders, northern Ugandans themselves, are given a voice in the peace process. Their involvement—through their religious leaders, traditional elders and political officials—will hold all parties accountable. It will further remind all that the priority is peace, not for political gain, but for the people caught amidst the horror of this war.

FPIF analysts Peter J. Quaranto and Michael Poffenberger are the co-founders of the Uganda Conflict Action Network (Uganda-CAN), a grassroots campaign of the Washington-based Africa Faith and Justice Network advocating for more responsible U.S. policy to end the war in northern Uganda. Learn more and get involved at www.UgandaCAN.org.

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