

Efforts weren't in vain

Juba talks didn't end in a deal with the Lord's Resistance Army, but life for Ugandans has improved

BY JOHN SIEBERT

The frustrated outburst in mid-September from former president of Mozambique Joachim Chissano said it all.

"Whoever manages to get to this man, tell him that this is the last time I am trying to meet him. It should not be me to ask for a meeting with him. I do not need a meeting with him; it is him who needs a meeting with me. If he wants help, we will help him, if he doesn't we will not."

The infamous leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, had once again failed to sign the Final Peace Agreement negotiated with Chissano's expert assistance as United Nations Special Envoy to the Juba peace talks.

It was left to Dr. Riek Machar, vice-president of the government of southern Sudan and chief mediator in these talks between the army and the government of Uganda, to declare that "the negotiations are over."

That does not mean that the Juba peace talks were a failure, and Canadians, whether they know it or not, should care. Even without Kony signing, the Juba peace talks have led directly to a large improvement in the lives of two million Ugandans in the north. Canada has played a prominent diplomatic role behind the scenes in supporting these talks and is the largest international financial contributor to the process.

In September my colleague Kenneth Epps and I conducted research in the internally displaced persons camps in northern Uganda. We came away with clear indications that something else was in play with the army's non-signing of the Final Peace Agreement.

The well-deserved demonization of the army has obscured the fact that throughout its armed struggle, it has maintained a political program to represent and forcibly guarantee the rights of the Acholi people in northern Uganda -- despite depredations visited on the Acholi by the army that were worthy of International Criminal Court indictment of its leaders for war crimes.

Systematic human rights violations of the Acholi by the Ugandan military simultaneously reinforced Acholi longer-term political aspirations to end their marginalization by a national government that favoured the south, and made passive support for the army the choice between conflicting evils. During the misery inflicted by the army starting in the mid-1990s, the Acholi did not stop believing at some level that the soldiers in the army ranks were still their children, who were there through forced

abduction and brutalization but would return home. Such hopes were often fulfilled. As many as 66,000 youth were abducted over the 22-year insurgency, but many did return.

The "decongestion" of the internally displaced persons camps in Acholiland, that used to hold two million people, is well underway. The Acholi are rebuilding their lives and getting on with the adjustments required in post-conflict circumstances.

It isn't easy. There are tensions and wrangles about land as people go home, domestic abuse, banditry and criminality, and the re-establishment of a local social order that was badly frayed in the Lord's Resistance Army war. But they are moving forward. The land to which people are returning is fertile, markets are bustling and trade with a resurgent south Sudan is flourishing. Development in the north is gaining traction, some of it the result of implementation of provisions of the Final Peace Agreement by the government of Uganda.

Northern Ugandans' dread of the army has not disappeared. We heard people's fears that Lord's Resistance Army units could make a break for it at any time and return to northern Uganda to wreak havoc.

However, we also were told that the local response by people to renewed army attacks would be different from what it was in the past.

Even the passive support for the army among the Acholi seems to have evaporated. Today, if the army returned, support for "the rebels" would have to be extracted from the people with far greater intensity and force. Reforms, or at least different operating procedures, by the Ugandan military and even modestly improved security from the police and locally organized defence units will make the Lord's Resistance Army movement more difficult.

And the army, now sporadically abducting child recruits in the Democratic Republic of Congo will no longer have the advantage of native Ugandans in their front lines, able to operate on Ugandan soil with the same dexterity.

While there may be validity to the argument that the Lord's Resistance Army has used the interregnum of the Juba peace talks to rearm and strengthen, another argument made in interviews in September was that settling into the tropical Congo forest and cultivating crops has dulled the army's appetite for going on the offensive back in Uganda. The army will likely remain a highly lethal mercenary force, unbeatable on its claimed territory in DRC and immediate environs, and open to being rented out by others such as the government of Sudan or rebel Congolese factions. Thus the army will continue to be a threat to regional security.

Over time, the death of Lord's Resistance Army leadership, specifically Kony, by disease, age, or internal misadventure, may cause a dispersal of army fighters. This scenario, while good news for Uganda, must be sorely disheartening for communities in Congo and southern Sudan, which are coping with recently stepped-up army terror incursions, killings and abductions.

The debate about peace versus justice in the Juba peace talks has been rendered moot. Would it have been preferable to see the International Criminal Court's indictment of Kony lifted in favour of a

Uganda-based alternative process if by this means a final peace agreement could be secured? With no military solution to the army in sight, Kony cannot be arrested or compelled to stand trial either in Uganda or The Hague.

The Juba peace talks have already achieved a qualified peace in northern Uganda. They were not in vain. Post-conflict challenges are being faced. Peace can be further solidified with continued government support for development and increased political inclusion of the north, backed by international pressure from the likes of Canada to follow through.

Should the Ugandan government renege on its peace commitments and pursue or allow reverses in the north, it will give the army an excuse to exercise its self-defined if perverse power to intervene again in northern Uganda as military guarantor of Acholi interests.

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