



UPDATE

# Responding to the Crisis in Northern Uganda

Conflict and Development Program



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## **An Interview with Human Rights Focus: Responding to the Crisis in Northern Uganda**

Mr. Martin Komakech, a human rights monitor with HURIFO (Human Rights Focus) in Gulu, Northern Uganda, participated in the Armed Groups Project (Centre of International Relations, Liu Institute for Global Issues) conference, '*Curbing Human Rights Abuses by Non-State Armed Groups*,' in Vancouver, BC (13-15 November 2003). He granted an interview to the Liu Institute's Conflict and Development Program on current responses to the crisis in Northern Uganda.

Mr. Komakech reflects on the importance of Jan Egeland's (Under-Secretary-General of the UN Humanitarian Affairs) visit to Northern Uganda (7-8 November 2003). He outlines what he believes the UN and the African Union (AU) can do to bring peace to Northern Uganda, as well as the activities of HURIFO in partnership with other civil society organizations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

HURIFO is a member of the Gulu District NGO Forum (GDNF), a network organization of civil society actors. GDNF has a membership of about 60 non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs) and associations. GDNF also partners nationally with members like the Human Rights and Peace Centre at Makerere University and Human Rights Network-Uganda (HURINET-U), and internationally with the Liu Institute for Global Issues and Human Rights Watch. Other national and international partners include Amnesty International, Conciliation Resources, and the Augsburg Diocese.

### **1. What is the current human security situation in Northern Uganda?**

The current situation in Northern Uganda has deteriorated over the last year and a half. **An increased number of communities have been internally displaced and live in "protected" camps where they lack access to their means of livelihood, such as land and general socio-economic and cultural resources.** IDPs (Internally displaced persons) are now entirely dependent on humanitarian agencies. Due to inadequate protection, humanitarian agencies have limited access to the camps dotted all over the conflict sub-region.

The current crisis is a result of the government military offensive code, Operation Iron Fist (OIF), which started in February 2002 against the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) in southern Sudan. The operation is part of a protocol between

the Sudan and Uganda governments, and allows the government of Uganda access to South Sudan. The operation destroyed four major bases of the LRA in southern Sudan. As a result, the LRA re-entered Northern Uganda in July 2002. The LRA presence created high insecurity in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, as they attacked and burned several IDP camps, dispersing the population. It appeared the LRA was attempting to forcibly return people to their places of origin. But unfortunately the IDPs had no houses in their places of origin, and thus nowhere to return to. The attacks on camps with the intention of burn them down ceased after about two months. Today, there are still raids and attacks on camps, but mainly for food and abduction. The camps are protected by ill-trained home guards, many of who are said to be under-aged.

The crisis spread to the Katakwi and Soroti districts in Eastern Uganda, and to the neighboring Apac and Lira districts. This situation makes it difficult for NGOs to operate or even assess needs, as many areas --particularly in Pader district-- have become increasingly inaccessible and mobility is hampered.

Displacement prior to early 2002 was about half a million people. After the rebel re-entrance into Uganda in July 2002, and an ultimatum issued by the Ugandan Army on local radio on October 1, 2002, the number of displaced persons has risen to over 800,000 people. The October ultimatum ordered the population to move to designated camps or the town centers. Currently the **total displaced population is estimated to be over 1.2 million people**.

The number of **night commuters** increased after the October ultimatum. Night commuters, mainly children, sleep on the verandah of shops in the streets, fields and bus stations. Night commuters exist in all three districts of the Acholi sub-region, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. Prior to this, they slept in the bushes in what they called *alup* (hideouts), hiding from the LRA for fear of abduction. NGOs have tried to help this vulnerable group by creating temporary shelters, as the children are prone to illness and sexual violence. NGOs are battling to strike a delicate balance between giving assistance and not encouraging more children to sleep in the street; or removing the responsibility from the parents. Recent estimates indicate that 16,000 children spend the night in Gulu, some coming from as far away as 10 kilometers.

**Abductions** have continued, and between July 2002 when the LRA re-entered Uganda and mid-2003, abductions are estimated at 8,000 children. This figure excludes another 8,000 abducted adults, although most adults are soon released. UNICEF estimates that prior to OIF, about 10,000 children had been abducted between 1990 and 2001, and about 5,500 have yet to be accounted for. The comparison in figures shows an escalation of the abductions in the last year and a half.

**2. Jan Egeland stated that he “cannot find any other part of the world that is having an emergency on the scale of Uganda that is getting such little international attention.” Why?**

Uganda appears to have a dual image internationally. **The image of the more stable South is projected internationally, at the expense of the conflict in the North.** Perhaps this is why the international community has not realized the magnitude of the humanitarian emergency in the North. Perhaps the escalation of the conflict into the Eastern part of the country has given it increased attention in the media and raised the awareness of the international community.

**3. How have recent events in Eastern DRC and Southern Sudan affected the conflict and human rights situation in Northern Uganda?**

We don't know how it has been affected at the moment. But there is optimism among stakeholders in the North that peace initiatives in Sudan could have a positive effect if handled well, although the skeptics feel that the conflicts in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan should have been dealt with together. That is, peace initiatives in Sudan should have been handled concurrently with peace efforts in Uganda. There is also a perceived double standard in that there were peace talks for the former, and a military solution for the latter.

**4. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) calls for greater UN involvement and placement of “peace observers.” What scope and role could international peace or human rights observer's play?**

The international community could offer a neutral third party and help to set up peace-building and confidence-building processes. The international community could play a crucial role in moving the area towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict by building confidence among the communities, but more importantly between the rebels and the government. These interested international actors could also help improve the humanitarian and human rights situation, by aiding the coordination of the needs of the civilian population and the reduction of human rights violations. I believe the peace observers ARLPI request would help prevent the kind of breakdowns in talks that have happened in the past.

**5. Humanitarian access to civilians is extremely limited due to ambushes and high levels of insecurity for aid workers. How can this be changed?**

The civilian population needs access to their means of livelihood, such as land, which requires adequate protection in their areas of origin. Humanitarian agencies require access to these affected populations wherever they are. In concert with the government of Uganda, the international community could seek ways to provide this much-needed protection. In the event of the government's

inability to do so, the international community could explore the option of a foreign peacekeeping force.

During his recent visit, Jan Egeland committed to opening three or more UN OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) sub-offices in the region. Through provision of adequate and meaningful protection, humanitarian agencies will then have the much-needed access to the affected populations. With an increased number of offices the UN OCHA shall have more capacity to champion the issues of appropriate protection and humanitarian access. In addition these offices could provide entry points for other UN agencies and interested parties.

**6. What channels can be used to send messages to the LRA? Is there any hope of dialogue?**

We ask that the international community be open-minded when handling all issues in the conflict. It is important to avoid certain blanket conceptions and decision such as that the LRA should not be talked to but be dealt with militarily, or that it is not a rational actor in the peace process and cannot be talked to, as these conceptions tend to be pre-judgmental of circumstance.

It is only after meaningful engagement with the rebels over a period of time that certain deductions can be made. Organizations at the grassroots level may be able to make contact, but there is the fear of being labeled a LRA collaborator. In the past, cultural, traditional and religious leaders have made contact. To a certain extent, some political leaders have also had telephone contacts with these rebels. Some LRA commanders have phoned into local radio programs in the past year to join in discussion and offer statements. In a recent meeting among peace stakeholders in Kitgum, the rebels sent a message saying they were interested in what was being discussed. This implies that they may have an interest in the peace processes. It may not immediately signal willingness for negotiation, but at least it demonstrates a desire for dialogue.

**7. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has forwarded a report to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council for debate, which states the UPDF recruits child soldiers. Will the report have any impact for the security of children in Northern Uganda?**

The report brings to light the lack of protection for children in Northern Uganda, as some children are forced to join the military. In the short term, it is hoped that the government will take serious measures to end recruitment of children into the army through home guard units, and to demobilize these child soldiers. In the long-term, resolutions from the Security Council could help prevent further recruitment and hasten the process of demobilization.

**8. What indicators are there that the *Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons* in Northern Uganda are having an impact on the Ugandan government policies and actions, and did the visit by Francis Deng make a difference in this regard?**

The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Internal Displacement, Dr. Francis Deng --drawing from his experience in the area of internal displacement-- is said to have made some input and comments to the Government of Uganda's draft policy document on IDPs that is now in its final stages, thereby making it more concrete. He has therefore helped to hasten the process of writing the draft policy. Since April 2003, the draft policy has stayed at the 'door-step' of parliament, and it is hoped that it could soon be adopted by parliament. Our concern as Human Rights Focus is that there is a need to look beyond policy guidelines and actually put laws in place that could protect the IDPs.

**9. The Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation Ms. Agnes Van Ardenne visited Gulu in October 2003, and among other issues requested extension of Amnesty. What must change for the Amnesty Commission to work more effectively? Why is it so central to Acholi culture?**

Amnesty has its roots in many cultures of the people of Uganda that do not have things like prison sentences or even death sentences. In the communities, traditional systems exist for conflict resolution, traditional justice, reconciliation and compensation. These traditional systems strengthen bonds within the community rather than divided people, thereby minimizing revenge tendencies.

The Amnesty Commission set up by government of Uganda is a reflection of aspects of conflict management, justice reconciliation and compensation in many African cultures, including that of the Acholi people. It is based on the wishes of the people of Uganda to make amnesty a part of the peace processes. The capacity of the Amnesty Commission should be built to enable the quick demobilization and reintegration of former combatants. Amnesty should be looked at as an important part of peace processes that should exist throughout. Uganda's laws should be harmonized in regard to amnesty, terrorism and treason, in the interest of peace.

**10. What initiatives are Human Rights Focus currently involved in? What does HURIFO hope to achieve in the medium to long-term and how can the international community offer support?**

Human Rights Focus (HURIFO) has several programs with the communities. There is a **paralegal** training program, currently supported by the Swedish NGO Foundation for Human Rights, where individuals from the community at the parish level are trained on human rights and basic laws. Each parish, being the lowest government administrative unit, has one trained HURIFO paralegal living in the community and acting as a resource to the community. The program began in the year 2000, and so far has trained paralegals in all of the 124 parishes in Gulu district. HURIFO wishes to expand the program to the other conflict affected districts of Kitgum and Pader, where violations of human rights now appear to be higher than in Gulu.

HURIFO also has a project on monitoring the human rights situation in internally displaced persons' "protected" camps in Uganda. This project funded by the Ford Foundation for Eastern Africa started in 2000 and produced a first report, called "Between Two Fires", on the situation in IDP "protected" camps in Gulu district in February 2002. HURIFO carried out advocacy on the report and also held consultative workshops with IDP populations in the east, west and northern parts of Uganda culminating in a national dialogue with Parliamentarians from affected sub-regions. It was also combined with the issue of the IDP policy under the theme "The IDP Saga: The Need to Look Beyond Policy Guidelines". More national debates on topical IDP related issues are being planned.

With support from Human Rights and Democratisation Program, Danida (HRDP-Danida), HURIFO started a litigation program with 11 test cases of human rights violations. It is hoped this litigation program would enlighten and encourage the communities to use the judicial system in place to address human rights issues as well as help identify for flows in the system. It is hoped that a revolving fund could be availed to enable victims of human rights violations to have access to justice, as many of them come from the poorest of the poor populations.

HURIFO together with the Legal Aid Project (LAP) is an implementing partner of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) project called Information, Counseling and Legal Assistance on return (ICLA) for IDPs in Gulu. HURIFO implements the Information and Counseling aspect in the project, while LAP implements the Legal Assistance aspect in the project. The project, while preparing the displaced populations for eventual return to places of ancestral origin, is also related to issues such as land and property, among others with the aim to ease the return process.

In the area of economic, social and cultural rights HURIFO has a Resource Centre supported by HRDP-Danida that provides the general public with free access to reading material and Internet access at a greatly subsidized fee. At various stages assistance came from the British High Commission, the German Embassy, Book Aid International (UK), the Ford Foundation for Eastern Africa and more recently from Books For Africa USA.

HURIFO provides technical assistance to a special secondary education scholarship program of the Acholi Education Initiative (AEI). AEI, a creation of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI), is currently heavily supported by HRDP-Danida.

HURIFO is a member of Human Rights Network, Uganda (HURINET-U) a network of 24 human rights organizations in Uganda; the Gulu District NGO Forum (GDNF) with a membership of 60 civil society organizations and a loose coalition of civil society organizations called that operates at the national level called Civil Society Organization for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU). Through the Liu Institute program in Northern Uganda, HURIFO, together with a few other NGOs, formed a loose coalition under the co-ordination of GDNF to work with the Liu Institute Initiative, which allows academics, practitioners and community to work closely with each other.

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The Conflict and Development Program (CDP) at the Liu Institute for Global Issues pursues interdisciplinary and policy-related research and advocacy on global public policy issues related to human security, security and development. Its geographic focus is the Great Lakes Region of Africa, and thematically on gender, youth, informal economies and the displaced. The CDP at the Liu Institute, together with Makerere University Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPEC) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), are working to coordinate and consolidate an immediate civil society response to Northern Uganda.

Contact CDP Director Dr. Erin Baines: [ebaines@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:ebaines@interchange.ubc.ca)

Complete project description, reports, pictures, news and links about the country and the conflict are available in the **Human Security in Uganda** Website: <http://www.up.ligi.ubc.ca>

Statements by Northern Ugandan civil society organizations to:

- UN Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland
- The Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, Her Excellency Mrs. Agnes Van Ardenne
- Special Representative of the Internally Displaced, Francis Deng