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Northern Uganda: Strong International Commitment Needed to Ensure Peaceful Resolution to Conflict

The war in northern Uganda has just passed its 20th year. Without a renewed commitment from the international community, the conflict that has displaced up to two million people and has led to almost 1,000 deaths a week will continue.

The insurgent Lord's Resistance Army is by all accounts weaker than it was a year ago, but it is still capable of inflicting damage, as seen by their murder of eight United Nations peacekeepers in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. To make matters worse, there is evidence to suggest that elements within the Sudanese government continue to support the LRA in southern Sudan. LRA activities in southern Sudan and eastern DRC undermine fragile peace in both countries, posing a threat to regional peace. Bringing about a peaceful end to the conflict in northern Uganda should be a top priority for the international community.

Regardless of the outcome, the Ugandan Presidential election on February 23, 2006 provides an opportunity for donor governments to re-engage with the victor on the necessity of making the achievement of peace a national priority. Through the appointment of a high-level special envoy, the UN Secretary-General can contribute to this process.

The environment for a peaceful resolution of the conflict is poor. It is unlikely that the Ugandan military will defeat the LRA militarily. The International Criminal Court's unsealing of arrest warrants for the four LRA top commanders has further complicated efforts to persuade its top command to end the war, and many believe that it is now unlikely that LRA leader Joseph Kony will give up fighting.

Despite the stalemate, most agree that some sort of political settlement is the only way to end the war. According to a UN official, "It is not clear that the Government of Uganda is interested in moving peace forward, but at the end of the day, it is up to the Government to take the lead on making overtures to the LRA to begin discussions. They have been unsuccessful in defeating the LRA through military means.

Discussions with the LRA are the only real way forward at this point." While the Government's commitment to peace is unclear, the LRA's willingness to engage in dialogue with the Government remains even murkier. Therefore, peace-building initiatives at the local, national, and regional levels should be strongly encouraged and supported.

The 1.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in squalid, overcrowded camps in northern Uganda are a visible reminder of the inability to bring about an end to this brutal conflict. Although the displaced reported that security immediately around the camps has improved, there are attacks and abductions when they travel outside the perimeters of the camps. IDPs are losing hope that they will be able to return to their homes in the near future. In the meantime, the Government, UN agencies and NGOs are not meeting their basic needs. Few government employees stay in the camps to fulfill their jobs. Protection and effective psycho-social programs are non-existent in most camps. Primary education in camps is of poor quality and schools are over-crowded. Secondary education and job opportunities are scarce, which has led to under-age recruitment, early marriage and sexual exploitation. LRA activity outside of the camps makes it difficult, if not impossible, for people to leave the camps, and insecurity limits the ability of agencies to provide assistance.

The Government of Uganda's response to the war in the north, despite a few half-hearted attempts to engage in dialogue with the LRA, has focused almost solely on a military solution. The Government has consistently used the war with the LRA as a justification for increasing the military budget without developing parallel political and non-military initiatives in response to the conflict.

The displaced report that they now feel safer in the camps than a year ago and that they have more trust in the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and the Local Defense Units (LDUs), although abuses are still widespread. While improvements in the security forces are a step forward, rule of law and access to justice are absent from most camps, and insecurity prevails outside the camps. The Government's poor response to the humanitarian crisis in the north and its lack of support for an effective demobilization and reintegration process, particularly for the Amnesty Commission, are other examples of non-military initiatives falling short.

Support for effective reintegration programs is a necessary component of long-term peace in northern Uganda. Since the beginning of the war, the LRA has abducted as many as 35,000 children. Thousands of these abductees escaped or were rescued from the LRA and have had access to few opportunities—education, training, counseling, income generation support—to assist them in rebuilding their lives in their communities. There are even fewer programs to assist the communities to which the abductees return, sometimes leading to resentment toward these former fighters. Programs that encourage dialogue between formerly abducted people and communities should be a priority, as should community-based reintegration programs that target the most vulnerable people in communities. In the past year, the number of LRA fighters seeking amnesty has decreased. Non-indicted LRA fighters must be encouraged to seek amnesty, and expanding programs that ease their transition into communities could be an incentive for them to give up the struggle.

In January, the UN Security Council finally broke its silence on Uganda, a silence that had been in deference to Ugandan government insistence that the conflict was an internal matter. Security Council Resolution 1653 recognizes the threat the LRA poses to regional peace and security and calls on the Secretary General to make recommendations on how to support the efforts of regional states to mitigate the threat of illegal armed groups, as well as recommend ways the UN can support these efforts.

Donors are weary and frustrated with the lack of any tangible improvement in the situation in the past 20 years. Although the ICC arrest warrants have complicated attempts to encourage LRA top commanders to stop fighting, all avenues in pursuit of a peaceful end to the conflict in northern Uganda must be pursued. Actors in northern Uganda admit that Betty Bigombe made more progress than anyone in the past 10 years in starting a dialogue process in northern Uganda, although her work ultimately

did not bear fruit. It is imperative that donors maintain their support for such efforts. Donors must pressure the Government of Uganda to make more credible overtures to LRA fighters, and regional governments and the African Union must pressure Sudan to cease all support to the LRA. The conflict in northern Uganda has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world; therefore, ending the conflict should be one of the top priorities of the international community.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The Government of Uganda include solving the conflict in the north as part of a broader national agenda and increase resources to improve its non-military response, particularly support for basic services in IDP camps, support for peacebuilding initiatives and the amnesty process, as well as reintegration support to former LRA fighters and their communities.
- ❑ The Secretary General offer his assistance in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the conflict and appoint a high level envoy to coordinate peace efforts and facilitate a peaceful end to the conflict.
- ❑ The Government of Sudan ensure that no government actor is providing support to the LRA, cooperates with the ICC in its execution of arrest warrants, pressures Joseph Kony to commit to a ceasefire, and protects civilians in south Sudan from LRA attacks.
- ❑ The UN Security Council review the mandates of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUC) to ensure that both have the mandates and resources necessary to protect civilians from LRA violence and to mitigate the threat the LRA poses to regional peace and security.
- ❑ When the Security Council is reviewing the current mandate of UNMIS in relation to Darfur, it should ensure that UNMIS has the resources and mandate to monitor LRA activities, work with the Ugandan Amnesty Commission to assist in disarming LRA fighters, and assist the ICC in executing its arrest warrants.
- ❑ The UN Security Council, following the recommendation made by the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, form a Panel of Experts to investigate LRA funding sources and activities and the impact on regional peace and security.
- ❑ Donors hold the Government of Uganda accountable for acknowledging the scope of the conflict, for respecting basic rights of internally displaced persons, and for implementing the National IDP Policy to protect and assist the displaced.
- ❑ Donors support peacebuilding efforts, conflict resolution initiatives and community-based reintegration programs that target vulnerable people.

Advocates Michelle Brown and Sayre Nyce, accompanied by Board Member Jan Weil, just returned from a two-week visit to northern Uganda.