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Contacts:
Kavita Shukla and Sarah Martin

Northern Uganda: Political Process Must be Bolstered to Bring Peace to the Region

The 20-year conflict in Northern Uganda between the Government of Uganda and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and its resulting humanitarian crisis has affected millions of people.

Peace talks currently underway in Juba, South Sudan, are the best chance for peace that the region has seen during the two-decade conflict, but the negotiations have not yet reached a point of no return. It is imperative that the parties to the conflict and the international community take immediate measures to address shortcomings in the process in order to ensure that the talks succeed.

In contrast to prior peace attempts, the Government of Uganda and the LRA appear committed to negotiating an end to the conflict. Indeed, recent reports indicate that LRA leader Joseph Kony is open to direct talks with Ugandan President Museveni. The Government of South Sudan (GOSS) has played a vital role in the process by supporting and mediating the talks. Peace in Northern Uganda is essential in order for South Sudan to develop economically and to allow displaced Sudanese to return, as well as to prevent the LRA from committing violent acts against southern Sudanese civilians. In March 2006 Refugees International documented displacement resulting from LRA activity in South Sudan. [For more on this issue, see Sudan: Expand UNMIS Mandate to Protect Civilians from LRA Violence available at <http://www.refintl.org/content/article/detail/8620/>]

Each party involved in the negotiations faces issues that require resolution with external assistance if necessary. For the LRA, the paramount issue is that the military leadership is fearful of attending the talks due to outstanding International Criminal Court (ICC) warrants against them. With the military leadership absent, prominent members of the Acholi diaspora are representing them. This has led to a focus on addressing the marginalization of the Acholi people in Ugandan society, a vastly different agenda from that of the LRA military leaders, who are more concerned with their own safety and security. In

effect, the LRA for the first time is putting forward a political agenda, but one which includes demands that could stall the negotiations, such as insisting that the Ugandan government provide three million cattle as reparations.

Although the ICC indictments against the LRA's four top commanders most likely played a role in bringing Kony to the table, ultimately they could derail the entire peace process. There is confusion in both the LRA military leadership and the LRA delegation about the ICC process and whether there are any options available to those indicted other than arrest and trial at The Hague. In November, when UN Under-secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland met with Kony, he brought along a Ugandan human rights lawyer to explain the indictments to the LRA military leadership. Clarifying the ICC process gives hope that a solution consistent with the Rome Statute can be reached.

At his meeting with Kony, Egeland attempted to secure the release of women and children who are 'affiliated' with the LRA, but Kony refused. The LRA military leadership claims that these individuals are their wives and children and that they will all return together. Releasing these non-combatants would affirm the LRA's commitment to the peace process.

Despite the failure of the Uganda Peoples Defense Force (UPDF) to defeat the LRA, the Government of Uganda has not entirely ruled out pursuing a military solution to the conflict. Pressure from the international community is keeping President Museveni from launching an attack on the LRA at its hideout in the Garamaba National Park in the DRC. Belligerent statements by Museveni are not conducive to confidence building during fragile peace negotiations.

The Vice President of the Government of South Sudan and Chief Mediator, Riek Machar, has played a critical role in bringing both sides to the negotiating table. However, with recent violence in the Upper Nile States and the presence of other armed groups causing problems around Juba, Machar's time to devote to the negotiations is increasingly limited. The LRA delegation has called for co-mediation from other African countries, such as South Africa, but this has been resisted by the GOSS. Hosting the peace talks, however, has been a challenge for the GOSS and it should not hesitate to request additional assistance. The recent appointment of former Mozambique president Joaquim Chissano as UN special envoy for the LRA-affected areas is a positive step towards getting more high-level involvement in the talks. The Special Envoy could play an important role in the negotiations and take some of the pressure off Machar.

The peace talks are being funded through the Juba Initiative Fund administered by the UN Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This fund covers the costs of running the GOSS Peace Secretariat and the Cessation of Hostilities Monitoring Team. At the time of RI's visit to Juba in late November, 11 donor governments had pledged \$5 million to the fund, yet OCHA had received less than \$300,000.

Under the Cessation of Hostilities agreement, LRA fighters are to assemble at two sites of Ri-Kwanga and Owin-ki-bul. Although LRA fighters are currently not assembled at either site, many are in areas surrounding the assembly points. LRA fighters say that the lack of services at Ri-Kwanga and recent UPDF attacks near Owin-ki-bul are preventing them from assembling. "We cannot give them any more excuses for not moving into the assembly sites," said one senior UN official in Sudan.

Because of controversies surrounding humanitarian assistance to combatants, the UN and many donors have been reluctant to become involved in providing aid to LRA fighters at assembly points. Nevertheless establishing services at the sites must be a top priority. One international NGO, based in Uganda, is involved and in spite of initial difficulties, progress is being made with regard to supplying the assembly areas with water and food. Meanwhile the humanitarian community in South Sudan is assisting populations surrounding the assembly areas to ensure that the local people are not marginalized in the process.

The UN Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) has provided logistical support and helicopters on one or two occasions. For the most part, however, such support is seen as outside UNMIS's mandate and organizers must struggle to find support for

this critical aspect of the peace process. "The UN bureaucracy is enormous but their cooperation has been essential," said one insider.

One of the criticisms of the talks has been that the women of Northern Uganda are not truly represented. Women are largely absent from the Government of Uganda and LRA official delegations. The recent decision by Riek Machar to allow women from conflict areas to act as observers is a welcome one; however, it is essential that the issues concerning the violations of women's rights and their needs for peace and reconciliation are raised and discussed at the negotiations.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The Government of Uganda focus on peaceful resolution to the conflict, respect the Cessation of Hostilities agreement and cease all attacks against the LRA.
- ❑ The LRA order all fighters to assemble and immediately release the women and children to UNICEF.
- ❑ Donors immediately provide all pledged funds and in particular support services for combatants at the assembly sites.
- ❑ Donors ensure the provision of technical assistance to the LRA and mediation teams to improve their negotiation skills and their understanding of the ICC.
- ❑ Donors ensure that communities near the assembly areas continue to receive assistance.
- ❑ The United States use its influence as a major ally of the Government of Uganda to insist that the UPDF stays away from LRA assembly sites and the DRC.
- ❑ The United States urge the Government of Uganda to fulfill its \$1 million pledge to the Juba Initiative Fund and provide its own financial support to the Fund in the long term.
- ❑ UNMIS become more actively involved in providing logistical support to the peace process.
- ❑ UNMIS use the appointment of the Special Envoy as a way to maintain the involvement and commitment of the international community to the peace process.
- ❑ NGOs based in South Sudan assist with infrastructure and service provision at the LRA assembly areas.

Kavita Shukla and Sarah Martin recently returned from a one-month assessment mission to northern Uganda and southern Sudan.