

Negotiators Try Again

Author: [Bill Oketch](#)

Northern Ugandans say they prefer talk of peace to talk of war.

Negotiators plan to meet with Ugandan rebels in the coming days over stalled peace talks – welcome news for many of the nearly two million former internal refugees here, who have only just begun to reestablish their farms and livelihoods after two decades of war.

The Ugandan delegation, led by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Henry Okello Oryem, reportedly will meet with rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, in Ri-Kwangba, a remote location in southwestern Sudan this weekend, July 12-13.

The meeting takes place despite the fact that rebel leader Joseph Kony failed to show in April and May to sign a peace agreement that has been two years in the making.

Oryem said the team intends to clarify portions of the deal that Kony claims are confusing, such as how Uganda plans to administer justice for Kony and his rebels. The accord has Uganda creating a special war crimes tribunal that would apparently supplant the International Criminal Court, ICC, which indicted Kony and his top commanders in 2005.

Kony has cited concerns with the ICC as well as the non-existent Ugandan special court as reasons he did not sign. Chief mediator for the talks, South Sudan vice president Riek Machar is also expected to attend the weekend meetings.

Many northern Ugandans say they have hopes that Kony may still sign a peace deal and fear that a military response to Kony would only mean a return to war.

"The LRA should be handled like an egg," said Santa Adokorach, a 34-year-old woman from near Lira, who was a victim of rebel atrocities. "Any harsh military action against the rebels means many non-combatants and civilians [will be] losing their lives."

Her 18-year-old brother, who declined to be named, agreed.

"The government must understand that this war is not [against] anybody but the northerners," he said. "What we want is durable peace that can allow us to recover from war."

"We don't want any war again. Those who say peace talks have failed and are bound to collapse ... want to keep us in a circle of poverty."

"We don't want this useless war to continue. It must stop so that we also compete with other regions in terms of education, health and development."

Adokorach said that if the LRA is to be defeated, it will require a unified front in the north with both the Acholi people and the government working together.

“If we are to fight [the] LRA evil, we should forget about divisions..come together as a block and denounce rebellion,” she said.

Yeko Omara, 68, says the Ugandan government should work hard to bring about a lasting peace rather than looking to military solutions.

“This [impasse is] not because Kony does not want peace, but because peace negotiators on the rebel side are giving the rebel leader [bad] advice,” said Omara.

A village official in northern Uganda noted that although Kony has failed to sign a peace accord, the region has enjoyed calm for two years.

“Since peace talks started we have not had any death,” said Denis Odongo.

“But if [the] UPDF begins fighting LRA, the people who are going to die are Ugandans. Both sides should stop talking about war. I’m happy that our economy will begin to take shape when this war ends.”

Although Kony recently told French radio that he wants peace, questions remain about his statements.

As IWPR reported in April, Kony’s rebels left their base in Garamba Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, to conduct an extensive raid in February and March into South Sudan, also striking the town of Obo in the Central African Republic.

The LRA reportedly captured several hundred people, ordering the men to work as porters and fight for the rebels, and pressuring the women to become cooks and sex slaves.

Although Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni has said Uganda’s fight is with Kony, not the people of the north, some disagree.

“Nobody can trick me that this government is not fighting us,” said 64- year-old Joel Ogwal of Abella village. “Everybody knows this, even God.”

A former pro-government militia fighter, who would not give his name, also urged peace over renewed fighting. Many militia fighters, he said, are not interested in more war.

“Government should engage in peace talks so that LRA war can come to an end,” he said. “But if [Uganda] wants to pursue Kony using [the militias], its dream might not come true. We want to go back home and attend to our wives and children.”

“Peace talk is better whatever cost it can be,” said a 48-year-old Jackson Okoo. “When there is war only two categories of human being suffer – women and children.”

Rehema Ajonga, a 48-year-old widow, said few benefit from war.

“I’m condemning war, because even if Kony is fought and defeated, we are going to experience great loss,” she said. “I want to settle physically and psychologically, so that I can provide [for] my six children.”

Bill Oketch is an IWPR-trained journalist in Uganda.

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