

## **Uganda: Mixed Feelings About ICC Warrants**

**Author:** [Chris Ochowun](#)

Civilians forced into refugee camps by the rebel LRA group are divided on whether prosecution or amnesty is the better option.

Four young women pound rice to remove the husks. Their giant pestles thud the wooden mortars rhythmically as their arms rise and fall in unison. This is the time as the sun sinks when every woman in this camp in conflict-torn northern Uganda prepares the one meal their families eat each day.

Dressed in a black tattered skirt and flowery blouse, 28-year-old Lucy Aciro puts down her pestle and hurries into her shack. Her baby has woken up and is wailing. Moments later, she emerges and sits in the dust at her hut door to nurse the child.

The acrid stench of urine emanates from the rags wrapping the infant, a one-year-old boy who is running a high fever. Earlier in the day, Lucy walked 13 km from the Pagak camp for internally displaced persons, IDPs, to the St Mary's mission hospital in the small town of Lacor. She spent several hours in a queue at the hospital waiting for a doctor to administer drugs for her son before walking back to Pagak to pound rice for the daily meal.

Lucy has been at Pagak, 17 km north of Gulu, the main town in the district of the same name in northern Uganda, for four years now.

Life, she says, is lived one day at a time. "This suffering is unbearable. We survive by the grace of God. I weed people's gardens for money which cannot even buy a packet of salt," she told IWPR.

"It is painful when I see my children crying for food. Many times we go without food. We live in fear of rape and death. You can't be sure you will see another day."

Lucy fled her home in the village of Otici in 2001 after it was raided by rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, a rebel group led by Joseph Kony which has translated a messianic vision into bloodthirsty action since it launched its war against the Ugandan government 19 years ago.

As a result of the conflict, about one and a half million people – mostly women and children from the Acholi ethnic group, with some Langi, Iteso and Madi people – have become IDPs. They are housed in 135 camps across northern Uganda, 54 of them – including Pagak – in Gulu district.

The Ugandan army repulsed the rebel attack on Lucy's home village, but other civilians have been less fortunate.

An estimated 20,000 children have been abducted and forcibly recruited into the LRA force as guerrillas, sex slaves and porters. They are inducted and bound to the movement by being forced to kill fellow children, and those who refuse to fight or become sex partners of top commanders are punished by having limbs amputated. In LRA raids, the child soldiers kill and mutilate their victims by slicing off ears, lips, hands and feet.

In one of the biggest LRA attacks, more than 300 people were shot, hacked and burned to death at an IDP camp called Barlonya.

But despite these horrors, many of the people of northwestern Uganda express a readiness to forgive the rebel leaders - for the sake of peace, and because it is their own children who make up the LRA force.

People from the Acholi, Langi, Iteso and Madi groups have pressured the government in Kampala, far to the south, to grant a blanket amnesty to the rebel fighters.

There have been formal mediation efforts, led by former Ugandan minister Betty Bigombe. Many local people are willing to seek reconciliation through less formal methods involving traditional rituals.

But peace efforts have so far proved futile. Whenever ceasefires have been declared, Kony's forces have used the time to regroup and extend their brutal campaign.

The Kampala government has grown impatient after two decades of warfare and asked the new International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague to investigate and prosecute cases of abuse in the north of the country. On October 6 this year, the ICC's chief prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo issued a set of five arrest warrants for Kony and four of his senior commanders, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo, Dominic Ongwen and Raska Lukwiya. All are believed to move between northern Uganda and remote areas of neighbouring Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Nearly all of Pagak's IDPs depend on food aid from the United Nations' World Food Programme. Few children go to school, and those who do attend do not get a meaningful education. Most aid agencies have withdrawn from the region because of LRA attacks on them last month, leaving the WFP the only body delivering aid in convoys protected by the Ugandan military.

"Even animals in the wilderness lead better lives than us," said IDP Benetencia Olal, 47. "At least they have the freedom to fend for themselves and get food. We can't. We have to wait for food and fight in lines with children."

There are only a few radios among the nearly 20,000 refugees at the Pagak camp, because batteries are too costly for most. Lucy Aciro had not heard about the warrants against the LRA when she spoke to IWPR.

"I have not heard about that court," she said on hearing the news for the first time, smiling shyly.

She continued, "If it can bring peace, why hasn't it done so already? Why are they taking so much time to catch Kony? He should be arrested and punished for the suffering he has put us through.

"He should pay, instead of coming back and getting a big job when our whole lives have been destroyed."

Unlike Lucy, Mzee Marino Oceng, 56, has heard about the international court from Mega FM, a community radio station in Gulu.

"Is it called the ICC? The one going to put Kony on trial? That is the only hope for us. But they shouldn't try Kony alone - they should try him with other commanders," he said, sitting in solitude behind his hut.

Mzee Oceng's attitude is understandable once he tells his story. He has been at the IDP camp since 1996, but has lived here longer than that because Pagak was built on the ruins of his own village, Apoto Kitoo.

A shiver runs through Mzee Oceng as he recalls how LRA forces attacked the village. Most people fled, but others were not so lucky. The rebels captured them and put heavy padlocks on the men's lips. For the women, the padlocks were inserted into their private parts.

Of Mzee Oceng's nine children, three have been killed by the rebels and one daughter abducted. "If she is still alive, I don't think I will see her unless the commanders are arrested," he said.

Mzee Oceng believes talking has not worked, and the time has come for action.

"To me, reconciliation is useless," he said, adding that despite Bigombe's mediation and other government efforts "the rebels seem not to be interested in reconciliation. The ICC should speed up the process".

Bigombe has accused the ICC of "rushing too much" with its indictments of Kony and his co-leaders, which she argues means "there is now no hope of getting the LRA commanders to surrender".

Last week, one of the men for whom the ICC issued an arrest warrant, Vincent Otti, spoke to both Bigombe and the BBC in an apparent attempt to sue for peace with the government - with Kony's approval, he said. "We are ready for this talk from today," he told the BBC.

Otti indicated that he might be prepared to face trial, under certain conditions. "I am ready to face justice because I know that I did nothing. If I am going to the court to be charged, then the government must also be taken into court," he said.

Interior Minister Ruhakana Rugunda said the LRA had made such offers before, but said the government remained open to any genuine attempt at dialogue.

IDPs at the Pagak camp express varying views of the ICC arrest warrants, ranging from support from people like Lucy Aciri and Mzee Oceng to concern that they might upset ongoing mediation attempts, or drive the LRA to brutal retaliation.

Charles Acaye, 24, who has a wife and four children, is unhappy both with the ICC indictments and, in an apparent contradiction, the fact that Kony remains at large. His main worry is that "issuing those arrest warrants will make LRA commanders take revenge. They will kill more civilians in camps to show that they are still powerful.

"Through all these years, capturing Kony has defeated the whole world. Why does ICC think it can arrest him now?"

Others, such as Jenecio Obwol, 60, are more hopeful that justice might be done. "If that court is strong, let them capture Kony quickly and get his collaborators also. Collaborators should not be spared, but punished just like Kony," said Obwol.

"Kony is our son, but it seems he has forgotten that. Our attempts to get him to sit with government have been in vain. Maybe we have to accept that he is beyond redemption. Let them catch him. Maybe that will save the children he has abducted."

William Oyet, a young man, is concerned that the ICC's actions could jeopardise the delicate mediation attempts made by Bigombe.

"This is going to complicate things," he said. "Amnesty [under Bigombe's scheme] was slow, but at least the rebels allowed some children to come back home. Now they are going to run further away, fearing to be imprisoned, and they will take more of our brothers and sisters."

Oyet says Bigombe's approach needs to be supported, if only to protect the many thousands of children in rebel hands.

"The best way to deal with the rebels is the peace process," he said. "That is the only way to help the children in captivity. My biggest fear is that if the ICC starts work, Kony and the other rebel commanders whose names are on the list will kill or mistreat their ordinary followers who are mainly children.

"We are praying that the peace process prevails in this land."

Chris Ochowun and Harriette Onyalla are IWPR contributors in Uganda.

**Location:** [Africa](#)

**Focus:** [ICC - International Criminal Court](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uganda-mixed-feelings-about-icc-warrants>