

## **Ugandan Ceasefire Lapse Stokes Fears of Violence**

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Negotiations to end northern Uganda's 20-year civil war have run into trouble.

When residents of the northern Ugandan town of Gulu erected a large white sign on a tree near a child soldier rehabilitation centre demanding "Peace not War" they could not have imagined how difficult it would be to translate good intentions into practice.

An eight-month ceasefire between the Ugandan national army and rebel guerrillas of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, lapsed in the early hours of March 1, fuelling fears that northern Uganda could be plunged into violence yet again.

"Everybody had hopes in the peace talks, but all the hope has been lost because the peace talks have become 'peace jokes'," said Cosmas Onen, who manages a shelter in Gulu town for children who leave their village homes every night to seek refuge in urban areas, where they are less likely to be abducted by the LRA.

Gulu, like several other northern towns, is still recovering from two decades of brutality that only recently began to subside. The conflict has blighted a country once described as the Pearl of Africa.

Since 2006, the Ugandan government has been engaged in negotiations with the LRA, an insurgent group which has waged war for more than 20 years in the north of this small east African nation. Tens of thousands of civilians, 90 per cent of them members of the Acholi ethnic group, have died as a result of the conflict.

Aid agencies estimate that 230,000 displaced persons returned to their villages last year as prospects for peace began to improve following breakthrough talks in Sudan. However, some 1.7 million others are still living in around 200 desolate camps for displaced persons. In many areas, 90 per cent of the population count as internal refugees. An estimated 25,000 children have been abducted, the boys to serve as fighters and the girls as porters and sex slaves for senior LRA commanders.

The core of the LRA consists of former soldiers from the north who left the Ugandan army after President Yoweri Museveni, a southerner, assumed office in January 1986. Discontented, the rebels began a savage campaign to regain power for a more northern-aligned government, forcing women and children to join their ranks.

LRA leader Joseph Kony - who says that he is a channel for spirits and wants to rule the country by the Ten Commandments - has been indicted, along with four other commanders, by the Hague-based International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In late August last year, a landmark truce was signed between the government and the LRA following peace talks in the south Sudanese capital, Juba. Chaired by Riek Machar, vice president of the government of South Sudan, the negotiations resulted in agreement on a formal cessation of hostilities.

Under the agreement, the LRA was to relocate its forces to two designated assembly points in remote parts of southern Sudan. However, progress quickly stalled over arguments about ceasefire violations and

whether LRA fighters really were gathering at the assembly points.

"We are getting concerned about the pace of the peace talks; the pace is very slow and people are dying with anxiety. They want to go back home," said Ruth Nankabirwa, Ugandan state minister of defence, as the talks faltered.

The LRA had accused the Ugandan army of violating the truce by deploying troops in different locations inside Sudan and along the Sudan-Uganda border. Meanwhile, Kony and his deputy, Vincent Otti, who are hiding out in northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, refused to enter either of the two assembly areas, saying they feared arrest by the ICC.

Both sides in the negotiations claimed that the chances for peace improved when a revamped truce was signed in November. This new agreement addressed the LRA's security concerns, including providing security for the assembly areas so that LRA fighters might gather without worrying about attacks by the Ugandan army.

The truce also extended the mandate of a monitoring team until December and called for the withdrawal of Ugandan troops near the Sudanese border. Museveni has promised LRA leaders an amnesty if they sign a peace deal, but the ICC charges - made at the request of Museveni - would still be outstanding, and could jeopardise such an arrangement.

Besides the ICC charges, the parties still have other issues to resolve, such as calls for reforms of the Ugandan army and power-sharing in government.

Such questions may never be answered if the Ugandan government and LRA prove unable to find common ground following the collapse of the formal ceasefire.

In mid-January, the LRA's commanders ordered their delegates not to return to Juba for the peace talks. This decision came only two days before the scheduled resumption of the talks after a Christmas recess.

The rebels said they would not resume talks because of worries over their security after Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir vowed to "get rid of the LRA from Sudan". Although Ugandan government representatives said al-Bashir's remarks had been misinterpreted, most of the rebel delegates walked out of the negotiations. Ironically, Khartoum has been accused of arming and supplying the LRA in the past.

As a solution, the LRA suggested both Kenya and South Africa as possible neutral venues for further talks. However, Nairobi has already refused to host the talks and Ugandan foreign minister Sam Kutesa, recently told journalists that South Africa would not host the rebels either. Museveni has also ruled out holding talks anywhere but Juba, saying a new venue would only hinder the peace process.

Meanwhile, both Uganda and the South Sudan regional government have continued to appeal to the rebels and the international community to help the negotiations resume.

"The talks must continue and Juba shall remain open. In spite of the insecurity caused by the LRA in Eastern Equatoria [the main Sudanese province bordering northern Uganda], we are asking the LRA to assemble so that we can end this thing once and for all," said South Sudan regional cooperation minister

Barnabas Marial Benjamin.

But if the LRA still refuses to go back to Juba, what happens now that the official ceasefire has expired?

From his hideout on the Sudan-Congo border, Otti told the Reuters news agency via satellite phone that the LRA is prepared to "start war" in Uganda if a new mediator is not found.

However, his comments are in stark contrast to a statement released by the international non-government organisation World Vision, which recently hosted a teleconference with the Ugandan government's chief negotiator Ruhakana Rugunda, LRA delegation head Martin Ojul and LRA spokesperson Godfrey Ayoo. World Vision said that although the LRA expressed reluctance to return to Juba, both Rugunda and Ojul agreed that the issue of a venue should not be a hindrance to peace.

In the meantime, thousands of people in towns affected by the rebellion such as Gulu and Kitgum are waiting to see if the promised peace now evaporates.

"The international community must insist that both parties take urgent and extraordinary measures to ensure a peaceful resolution," Save the Children said in a statement, reiterating that the majority of fighters within the LRA ranks were children.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Gulu, John-Baptist Odama, expressed hope that the government and the rebels would renew their truce and resume peace talks. "In spite of the fact that the truce agreement is expiring, there is still hope that both sides will consider the suffering people and renew it in order to stabilise the peace process," said Odama.

Some are preparing for the worst.

"We have been working on a contingency plan in case there is a resumption of the insurgency," said Alex Loriston, deputy director of the United Nations' World Food Programme in Uganda. "The peace talks are at a critical point and, according to the information we have received, this uncertainty has forced people to slow down their return to their villages."

Another LRA spokesman, Obonyo Olweny, said the group would not attack civilians even though the ceasefire had expired. Urging humanitarian agencies to continue with their work, he said, "LRA will not attack any civilians, and therefore they should just go back home."

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

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

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