

Ugandan Mediator Critical of ICC Indictments

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Peace negotiator says arrest warrants for LRA chiefs severely undermine local efforts to end the war. Six months after the International Criminal Court, ICC, issued indictments for the arrest and prosecution of the leaders of the Lords Resistance Army, LRA, the local chief peace mediator in northern Uganda, Betty Bigombe, maintains that the involvement of the ICC was ill-timed.

Bigombe said the ICC should have taken more time to study the situation and understand it fully.

"I think they should have waited," Bigombe told IWPR in Gulu, the main town at the centre of the insurgency by the LRA. "It would not have cost them much to wait for two years to give this process [a local peace initiative, based on traditional reconciliation methods and headed by Bigombe] a chance."

"In principle, the ICC is good but the time the ICC came here is wrong. They came during an ongoing war."

Bigombe said it is unlikely that the issuing of ICC arrest warrants for the LRA rebel leaders will bring the war to an end. "The question is: if you arrest Kony [Joseph Kony, the LRA leader], will that end the war?" she said. "We are talking about ending the war and you cannot end the war if the LRA leadership is not involved in the process."

Bigombe first became involved in the peace process in northern Uganda in 1988 when she was appointed State Minister for the Pacification of Northern Uganda.

During the 20-year war an estimated 20,000 children have been abducted and forcibly recruited into the LRA as guerrillas, sex slaves and porters. Other people have been maimed, killed or displaced from their homes into squalid camps strewn all over the Acholi ethnic region.

The ICC began investigating war crimes in northern Uganda in 2005 at the invitation President Yoweri Museveni who referred the matter to it to the court in The Hague.

The ICC, set up in 2002 as the world's first permanent global war crimes court, is also probing human rights abuses in the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Darfur region of western Sudan.

According to an arrest warrant issued in September last year by the ICC, Kony is accused of murder, torture and mutilation, abduction, sexual violence, forced recruitment of children and the killing of people the LRA took to be supporters of President Museveni.

Bigombe said the ICC's intrusion severely undermined local efforts to end the war. "It is now extremely difficult for me to talk meaningfully to the LRA leadership when they know they are being hunted down to be locked up behind bars in Europe," she said.

However, despite what she described as the "ICC setback", Bigombe has not given up and continues to pursue her peace efforts, insisting that it does not mean the war is going to end simply because ICC has issued arrest warrants.

Bigombe said the ICC intervention would have been more effective if the court's Argentinian chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno Ocampo, had introduced an additional force to try either to arrest the rebels or to end the war. The ICC has no police force of its own and relies on member states which have ratified the founding statute to carry out arrests.

Without such an additional force, it was unlikely that much would result from the ICC indictments. "Have they put in their own army? No. They have given the task to UPDF [Ugandan People's Defence Force]. The UPDF has been trying to capture and kill Kony for 19 years, so the ICC coming to give them another bit of paper does not make any difference," said Bigombe.

She added that she was still managing to talk to the rebels in various ways, including by satellite phone. She said the LRA had been greatly weakened as a consequence of casualties and defections. She said she still hopes to find a way round the obstacles she said have been created by the ICC initiative.

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Location: Uganda

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South Sudan

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