

## **Villagers Confront War Crimes**

**Author:** [Bill Oketch](#)

Local courts now judging former rebels for abuses committed in the LRA war.

Binoni Abwango's wants justice for the four brothers and two nephews that he lost to the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Abwango recently took his fight to a local village court, rather than waiting for regional, national or even international courts to act.

This new and very local approach to dealing war crimes for thousands of victims of Uganda's 20-year war with the rebels has generated controversy across the north.

But it reflects a growing frustration with the administration of justice that has gripped the region.

Increasing numbers of northern Ugandans are now turning to these local courts that once only dealt with crimes such as theft and land squabbles.

As a result of Abwango's complaint, Joel Odir and Tonny Ogwal, both former LRA men, are now accused in a village court of killing Abwango's relatives during a rebel attack nearly ten years ago.

The accusation surfaced after Odir revealed details to the same court recently about events that had occurred in the village of Dino east of Gulu in 1989.

Odir reportedly testified that some ethnic Langi, the dominant tribe in the Lira region, had killed four Acholi, the principal tribe around Gulu and northern Uganda.

After saying he knew who had killed others in Dino, Odir then was suspected of killing Abwango's relatives, according to those who attended the village court hearing.

"By breaking the silence, the defendant thought he had done his best," said one man who attended the hearing, but refused to give his name.

"But he only found out that he was making things worse for himself and some members of the Langi whom he identified before the court."

Odir and his co-accused have been forced to appear before the village court to answer the murder charges.

Trying former rebels for war crimes is a huge expansion of the normal role performed by the village courts,

set up more than a decade ago to handle local issues.

The courts have adopted the new role, sources told IWPR, in part out of public frustration that rebel leader, Joseph Kony, has not signed a peace agreement which has been two years in the making.

As part of that peace deal, Uganda has agreed to establish its own war crimes court to judge Kony and other rebel commanders. No action has been taken regarding this special court, however, because the agreement has not been signed.

Although Uganda has said it is prepared to discuss the special court with the International Criminal Court, which has indicted Kony and his commanders for dozens of counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the ICC has not signed off on the Ugandan proposal.

Because of this, increasing numbers of villagers across northern Uganda believe that former rebels will never be punished.

Although the local courts are anxious to put former rebels on trial, they will also refer complex cases to higher courts, said Anthony Nam, a village elder.

"We shall make referral ... of those cases beyond our jurisdiction," said Nam. The courts are authorised to resolve land disputes, domestic violence and other conflicts.

Conflicts over land have divided the Acholi and Langi – but under the village courts, there has been progress in repairing the relationship between the two tribes.

Nam said the idea of using the village courts to try war crimes suspects arose when residents demanded that their views be heard to help establish peace in the region.

A committee of locally elected officials oversees a local court, explained Nam, and will decide which cases can be tried or referred to another court.

Sessions are held out-of-doors and are open to anyone willing to testify about events during the LRA's war.

The village court also serves as truth-telling and confessional forum for former rebels suspected of committing crimes.

Critics say the local courts could fail because tribal loyalties may undermine their fairness, but supporters insist that they are the only hope of finding justice for local victims of war.

The sentences issued by the courts include expulsion from the community and a requirement to pay for compensation, depending on the gravity of crime.

For instance, someone convicted of murder would have to provide the family of the victim eight cows. According to custom, one of the cows would be slaughtered and eaten by the two parties to show that they had forgiven one another.

Despite the public backing for village courts' new role, some do not take this form of justice seriously.

"This is just a joke," said David Livingstone Okwir, who lost two of his sons to the LRA. He thinks payment in cows is inadequate justice.

"The court can only handle minor crimes such as stealing chickens, but is not mandated to handle high profile criminal trial. And the punishment [of] perpetrators does not match the crime they committed."

Those who committed atrocities, he continued, should be hanged, "Asking murderers to say they are sorry, or expelling them from the community, is not adequate punishment."

Former LRA rebel Jimmy Odongo, 29, told IWPR that he was prepared to submit to the court on condition that his community stop discriminating against him and other former rebels.

"We are ready to honour the court if people stop looking at us as wrong guys. We did not join the insurgent [willingly]...we were forced to do so," said Odongo.

The new role for the local court is good, said Odongo, adding that it would help reconcile ethnic groups, "We ....have a forum, where one can say we are sorry for our action."

Others are worried that the courts will only deepen animosities between the Langi and Acholi.

"Tribalism will affect the progress of the courts. This is not what we are after," said an elder, Alfred Opong.

Bill Oketch is an IWPR- trained reporter.

**Location:** Uganda

**Topic:** Uganda

**Focus:** ICC - International Criminal Court

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/villagers-confront-war-crimes>