

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE:
Moving Beyond 'Protected Villages' in Northern Uganda

Prepared by

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Preface

The following report presents analysis, findings, and recommendations resulting from a study conducted in Uganda from 29 November 2001 through 8 January 2002, under a contract with UNOCHA, for which the Terms of Reference (TOR) were widely circulated in advance to relevant governmental (GOU), UN, NGO, and civil-society partners in Uganda and approved by letter from the Hon. Minister for Disaster Preparedness to the Resident Coordinator, UNOCHA, Kampala, dated 10th July 2001.

The consultant spent approximately 3 ½ weeks traveling within in the northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader; the remainder of the time in country was spent in Kampala, in consultation with relevant Ugandan and international partners.

The consultant visited ten “protected villages” within the three districts and conducted a series of meetings with representative community members, in addition to holding private discussions with many village residents. These meetings were conducted using independent Luwo-English interpreters, and were held, upon little or no advance notice, with groups selected with the help of the interpreters and community residents. No officials of the GOU or of any other agency, international organization or NGO accompanied the consultant on these visits or was present during these group or individual interviews. An interview was also conducted, under these same conditions, with a group of 16 former combatants of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) at Pajule Catholic Mission (Pader District); additional, private meetings were held with ex-LRA combatants in Gulu and Kitgum towns. The consultant held extended interviews in each district with officials of local councils, with senior officials of the central government, with the military, with staff of UN agencies and NGOs, with individuals in the private sector, and with ordinary citizens at all levels of society.

On 7 January, the Hon. Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees kindly hosted a meeting of relevant partners from the GOU, international agencies, the donor community and local and international NGOs at which the consultant’s preliminary findings and recommendations were presented and discussed. Substantial changes from what was presented at that meeting have been incorporated into the present report, reflecting the input of participants there as well as the many thoughtful and constructive corrections, suggestions and updates that have been received by e-mail since then, for all of which the consultant is most grateful.

Thanks are due to all those who took the time to meet with the consultant, and particularly to the protected-village residents, for the openness and thoughtfulness that characterized all interviews and discussions. The report, including its findings and recommendations, is largely a composite of their responses. As with all composites, though, each interlocutor will doubtless find something here with which he or she violently disagrees. Apologies are extended to all.

Particular thanks are owed to the staffs of UNOCHA in New York, Kampala and Gulu for the unstinting support and facilitation they provided throughout the consultancy, as well as to the UNOCHA driver, John Nzabandora, without whose patience in the field and willingness at the end of a long day to go tearing off to yet another interview this study could not have been completed.

To the great credit of all, the independent nature of the consultancy was fully respected, and the findings and recommendations that follow are thus those of the consultant alone, as are any errors of observation or interpretation. In particular, the views expressed should not be taken to be those of UNOCHA or of any other agency.

Willet Weeks
New York City
March 2002

Introduction

Displacement of Acholi Populations into “Protected Villages”: Scope of the Problem

The three districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader¹ are home to most of the Acholi people of Uganda. Recent, accurate figures are not available, but by general consensus the combined population of these districts in 2000 was on the order of 700,000-750,000. Of this population, at least 450,000 have been living for varying periods in a state of chronic internal displacement, clustered in what are known as “protected villages”² — settlements that have been established, generally around small trading centres and adjacent to military cantonments, in response to the ongoing security threat posed by an insurgent movement, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), and to counterinsurgency measures taken by the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF), the national army.

In Gulu district, the most populous of the three, the protected-village population exceeds 320,000 out of a total of some 420,000; most of the remaining population of the district lives in Gulu town, where many families have settled after fleeing the insecurity of the countryside and should also be counted among the displaced.

Kitgum and Pader districts are less populated in absolute terms and in terms of overall density. Of a combined population of approximately 265,000, at least 135,500 (90,200 in Kitgum and 45,300 in Pader) live in protected villages for at least part of the year.

The LRA is the latest in a series of armed messianic movements that arose in the Acholi districts beginning in 1986 with the Holy Spirit movement of Alice “Lakwena” (and which in turn was founded amid conflict between armed Acholi elements and the National Resistance Army, which had taken power in Kampala). It was founded by Joseph Kony, who claims to be a cousin of Alice’s; whereas the earlier movements of Alice and of her father, Severino Likoya, were short-lived, Kony’s has remained active since 1987. Its main force has since the 1990s been based in southern Sudan, where it received protection and support from the authorities in apparent retaliation for the Ugandan government’s support of the Southern Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), which operates from Ugandan territory.

¹ The former district of Kitgum was divided by administrative reform in January 2001 into two districts, Kitgum and Pader.

² This total is for 2000, derived from village-by-village information furnished by the Gulu and Kitgum field offices of the ICRC. Village population figures provided by camp chairmen tended to be considerably higher than the more conservative ICRC estimates.

In its base in the Sudan, the LRA is said to be well-armed and trained, with a main force of perhaps 2,000-3,000 fighters, though this is hard to confirm. In its incursions into Uganda, it preys upon the civilian population, killing, looting, and abducting adults and, particularly, children who are subsequently indoctrinated and trained as LRA fighters or, in the case of girls, as fighters' wives and concubines. A small body of perhaps 50 fighters seems to have managed to maintain a presence in Gulu, though it is unclear to what extent it is in contact with Kony in the Sudan.

In ways characteristic of such warfare throughout Africa and elsewhere, the LRA has used florid and traumatizing violence to maintain its hold on the imagination of the civilian population, which remains its main target.

The "protected" villages were created by the authorities as a means of isolating the civilian population from the LRA, in order to protect it from LRA attack while reducing the ability of the LRA to strengthen itself through looting and abductions and preventing the LRA from receiving active assistance from the population, some elements of which were suspected by the authorities, despite the suffering it has inflicted, of being in sympathy with it.

In Gulu district, the establishment of the villages followed a decision by the military authorities in 1996; most of the villages appear to have been established between August and October of that year. The population was ordered into the villages on short notice; those who remained outside them were subject to army attack. In Kitgum/Pader, the villages were more often established as a result of the flight by rural residents following LRA attacks in 1995-97; these villages evolved more spontaneously, with people moving near trading centres and military cantonments in search of security; there has been more movement back and forth from people's original homes than is the case in Gulu.

Despite this mass movement, with all the disruption and destitution that have accompanied it, the residents of these "protected villages" do not in fact feel protected. Attacks have continued on a regular basis, and the small, poorly armed and trained units that are assigned to each village, usually without communications or access to mobile reinforcements, find themselves helpless to respond. In all too many cases, the military are themselves the source of insecurity, committing acts of brutality and lawlessness against civilians that rival those of the LRA.

While the populations of these villages have been able to develop a range of economic activities (petty trading, artisanal production for the local market, small-scale crop production where circumstances permit), these do not provide the means to meet basic household requirements. From the time of the villages' inception, these populations have therefore required substantial humanitarian assistance, and this is being provided on an ongoing basis by the international community. The World Food Programme (WFP) provides basic rations to most,

while UNICEF and a host of Ugandan and international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many with support from bilateral donors, provide a wide range of services, from health to education to psychosocial counseling.

Despite the humanitarian assistance they have received, and while conditions vary from village to village, the overall picture is one of severe destitution: of a population accustomed over generations to a situation of relative self-reliance and even prosperity that has been reduced to dependency, idleness and debilitating uncertainty with respect to what the future may hold for them and their children.

In impromptu discussions with the consultant for this report, village residents unanimously expressed frustration and anger over their prolonged, enforced encampment, while at the same time expressing deep-seated fear of LRA attack.

Whereas the Acholi are accustomed to living in widely dispersed settlements, the populations of the “protected” villages are tightly packed together, often with only an arm’s length between houses.

Sanitation is inevitably poor, and exposure to communicable diseases high. Social conditions are a matter of universal concern: parents feel, in particular, that they are losing control over their children’s behavior. Sexual promiscuity is perceived to be unacceptably high, with correspondingly high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Girls and women turn to prostitution in the absence of other economic outlets, boys to brawling, to petty crime, to rape, and in some cases to armed banditry.

The situation in the three Acholi districts is a catastrophe for the people of the region and for the nation of Uganda as a whole. The fact that it has become a chronic, rather than acute, catastrophe, should in no way lessen its claim to the attention of the national and international communities, if only because international humanitarian support at current levels is in all likelihood unsustainable. In discussions with senior officials in Kampala and within local government, with civil society, with ordinary Acholi, and with members of the international community who work in the region, the universal feeling was expressed that the situation must change, yet there remains substantial disagreement as to when and how such change is to be brought about and what form it should take.

This report will present and discuss security, humanitarian, economic, and social aspects of this problem and will analyze the relative merits of some of the available solutions. Particular reference will be made where appropriate to the United Nations “Guiding Principles On Internal Displacement”, which have guided the study throughout.

The report concludes with a series of specific recommendations that are summarized by the report's title: "pushing the envelope". For all the direct and personal suffering it has inflicted on the Acholi people – the killings, the rapes, the looting and, above all, the abductions of children (and thus of future hope) – its most damaging achievement of all has been to inflict economic and social paralysis on an entire society, which has thereby been reduced to destitution and dependency. It certainly must be hoped that a way will soon be found to bring about the LRA's dissolution, but it is unfortunately entirely possible that it may be able to carry on committing terrorist acts for some time. Ways must nonetheless be found to support the Acholi people in lessening the grip the LRA holds on their society and in returning to productive lives, and this means supporting them in moving beyond the stifling "protected villages".

There are risks involved in adopting such a strategy, but, as people in other parts of the world have come recently to realize, if the perpetrators of terrorist acts are allowed to keep a society paralysed, the society loses and the terrorists "win". The protected-village system has contributed mightily to putting the Acholi in the losing position. It is time for Ugandan society and its political leadership, which in this generation have shown themselves to be so creative and resourceful, to find ways of restoring the proper balance.

I. Background: Security Issues and the Quest for Peace in Acholiland

Acholi Political Alienation

The emergence, beginning in 1986, of a series of armed prophetic movements coincided with a period of uncertainty and upheaval within Acholiland and among Acholi, as well as of strains in the Acholis' relationship with the rest of Uganda, and with the central government in particular³.

While they had been held in suspicion and persecuted during the paranoid reign of Idi Amin, from the latter's overthrow in 1979 until the seizure of power by the National Resistance Army (NRA) in January 1986, the Acholi had had been a significant presence in government and, especially, in the military. The Acholi played a prominent role within the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), which overthrew Amin with Tanzanian backing and returned Milton Obote to power; in 1985, the UNLA overthrew Obote and the Acholi placed one of their own, Tito Okello, in power. The Okello government was in turn overthrown by the NRA insurgency in 1986, following which many Acholi in the military retreated and regrouped in the north, eventually crossing into the Sudan, from which attacks were planned and carried out against the NRA, which had taken control of Gulu and Kitgum in March of that year.

Animosity against the Acholi on the part of the NRA and of southerners in general was hardened by memories of the "Luwero triangle" massacres of civilians and military, committed by UNLA elements in 1983-84 in the course of its war against the NRA. Acholi military units had been deeply implicated in these events.⁴ Yet in the months immediately following the NRA victory in Gulu and Kitgum, fears that the NRA would exact wholesale revenge against the Acholi were not borne out, the initial NRA garrisons having by all accounts conducted themselves professionally and creditably.

³ Probably the most cogent extended analysis of developments during this period is to be found in Robert Gersony, "The Anguish of Northern Uganda"; useful background is also provided by Heike Behrend, "War in Northern Uganda" (in Clapham, ed., *African Guerillas*) and in Human Rights Watch, "The Scars of Death", pp. 60-80.

⁴ See Gersony, pp. 8-11 on the hardening of attitudes on all sides that resulted from the Luwero massacres.

This situation changed, however, as unrest continued and the UNLA elements which had fled to the Sudan regrouped as the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UDPA), which continued to mount attacks against the NRA and against civilians in Acholiland. At that time,

[A] new battalion was stationed in Acholi, consisting of soldiers who had fought against the Acholi in Luwero during the civil war. When these soldiers took revenge on the people through acts of looting, torture, murder and rape, some former [UNLA] soldiers took their weapons from hiding and joined the [UPDA]...The NRA then ordered the general disarming of the Acholi, and carried out 'operations' in the course of which Acholi were tortured or disappeared into so-called 'politicization camps', leading more soldiers to join the UPDA...UPDA soldiers in turn began to terrorize the civilian population....It was in this situation of extreme internal and external threat that Alice Auma became possessed by a spirit called Lakwena, who ordered her to build up the [Holy Spirit Mobile Forces] in order to bring down the government, purify the world of sin, and build up a new world in which humans and nature would be reconciled.⁵

During the colonial period, the Acholi had been heavily represented within the armed forces – soldiering for the British and subsequently in the armed services of independent Uganda had become an important part of the region's economic life and of male Acholi identity. The military life had become the road to prestige and riches, and this had encouraged a feeling among the Acholi that they had a natural, prominent role to play in national military and political affairs. The rise of the NRA, largely composed of ethnic groups from within the (southern) Luwero triangle, and its subsequent Uganda-wide victory threw these key Acholi assumptions into question and raised immediate practical questions about what young Acholi men would do now that their traditional military vocations were foreclosed and the wealth and prestige these had generated eliminated.

These questions have not been fully resolved as of early 2002: while there are a few Acholi in high positions in Kampala, there remains a sense among both Acholi and non-Acholi interlocutors that Acholi are considered by the current government and its supporters to be of suspect loyalty and to bear responsibility for past atrocities and acts of resistance. The fact that the three districts have consistently voted for the political opponents of the present government (which, in a situation in which political parties remain banned, has formed a political entity known as "the Movement") has cemented the latter's view that Acholiland is inhospitable territory.

Acholiland had long been considered "backward" by southerners, but its economic strengths, based on a form of agro-pastoralism that was well adapted to the ecological conditions of the region, were very real and its contribution to the national economy substantial⁶. The extended interlude of insurgency, counterinsurgency, displacement and disruption that began in 1986 and that has

⁵ Behrend, 'War in Northern Uganda': pp. 108-109.

⁶ On the origins of Acholi society and the origins of its economic and political strategies, see Ronald R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: the Origins of the Acholi of Uganda*, *passim*.

persisted, albeit through various phases, since then has devastated the local economy and left Acholiland feeling largely excluded from the very substantial economic and social progress that has occurred elsewhere in the country (and particularly in the south) since the present government came to power.

These factors – the loss of Acholi preferment and prestige at the national level, the related crisis of identity within Acholi society itself, the economic collapse and social disruption that have accompanied prolonged civil strife and enforced displacement – have left deep wounds within the society and a sense of bitterness and alienation, particularly among the younger generation.

This alienation has in turn been aggravated by two key, interrelated factors that will be discussed at greater length below: the actions of the UPDF, which has at various times behaved with severity and often brutality in dealing with civilian populations; and the support the central government provides through the Acholi districts to the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), which is seen as the motivation for the Sudanese government’s support for the LRA, without which, residents feel, the LRA would never have been able to find a safe haven in the Sudan or to continue its operations against the Acholi districts, as it has done since 1994.

Acholi Insurgencies, Past and Present

The existence of this alienation and the nature of its origins in turn raise the question of the degree to which any insurgency, including that of the LRA, might receive support from within Acholi society.

In his report on conditions in 1997, Robert Gersony summarized five overlapping “phases of [Acholi] insurgency”, beginning in 1986, as follows:

Phase I: UPDA, March 1986 – July 1988

Phase II: Alice Lakwena (Holy Spirit Mobile Force), Late 1986 – End 1987

Phase III: Severino Likoya (Alice’s father, Holy Spirit Movement), January 1988 – August 1989

Phase IV: “Early [Joseph] Kony”, late 1987 – Feb. 1994

Phase V: “Current Kony/Lord’s Resistance Army”, March 1994 – Present.⁷

Each of these insurgencies began within Acholi society and fed off of the volatile mix of alienation, resentment against the newly-formed central government, and internal turmoil that afflicted Acholi society in the period following the fall of the Okello government and the defeat of the UNLA by the NRA.

⁷ Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda”, p. 18; the “present” is in this case 1997, but for all practical purposes could also be 2002.

Of these movements, only the earliest – the UPDA and Alice’s HSMF – seem to have had strong popular support among large numbers of Acholi. The former was seen as defending what the Acholi perceived to be their legitimate claim to a significant role in the central government and of asserting their right to self-governance in their region. Reporting at a time closer to the events than the present consultancy, Gersony says:

Almost all of the assessment’s sources agreed that the UPDA enjoyed overwhelming popular support among the civilian population of Gulu and Kitgum. Most recruits joined voluntarily, and civilians shared food, livestock, intelligence and other support with these forces. It appears that although the UPDA was unable to capture and control towns and trading centres, it controlled extensive portions of the countryside and regularly attacked NRA positions... Operating in a hostile civilian environment, the NRA reacted in an angry and brutal manner against the civilian population.⁸

The campaign against the UPDA was ultimately successful, and it gradually ceased to be force to be reckoned with, as many of its members shifted over to Alice’s HSMF, which added a spiritist and ethical dimension to the struggle that, despite its syncretic doctrine (in principle distasteful to orthodox followers of the Catholic and Anglican churches, the dominant religious forces in the area), had broad appeal. The HSMF was, however, in turn defeated by the UPDF, and Severino Likoya’s Holy Spirit Movement, which was far more loosely structured and was ultimately overtaken and defeated by Joseph Kony and what became his Lord’s Resistance Army. (Alice fled to exile in Kenya, where she remains in a refugee camp; Severino was taken prisoner by Kony and then, having escaped, by the UPDF.) Some military personnel (including some well trained NCO’s from UNLF and UPDA days) migrated from these movements into Kony’s organisation; many others, according to sources, simply returned to their homes or drifted into Gulu and Kitgum towns.

The LRA at present

Ugandan and foreign military and diplomatic sources were broadly consistent in their assessment that the LRA main force, in the Sudan, consists a well-armed and trained body of perhaps 2,000 –3,000 fighters, located in an encampment that is also crowded with those fighters’ wives and consorts, and with their children as well as young children who have been recently abducted from Acholiland and are undergoing training as fighters – the total population of the main encampment is perhaps 5,000 people. According to international military observers, this encampment is over 100 km. from the border (others in the military place it closer in, at 65 km. from the border), in territory nominally under Sudanese government control, and it is shifted periodically for security reasons.

The arms and ammunition in this camp are thought to have been provided by the Sudanese authorities. It is generally accepted – and this was confirmed to the consultant by recent escapees – that the Sudanese have reduced or ended their

⁸ Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda”, p. 23

direct material support and that the materiel in hand has been hoarded over time. (Escapees also claim that they have captured weaponry from attacks on the SPLA; these claims are difficult to verify). Training has in the past been provided by Sudanese government personnel, but, as with weapons resupply, this form of support is said to have been suspended, though there seem to be at least tacit ongoing arrangements with local Sudanese commanders. The camp is well-organized, with Defence perimeters and regular patrols.

Life in the present camp is described by the escapees as spartan, but tolerable – the community raises its own food, though there are serious shortages of salt, soap and other commodities. The population is cut off from the outside world – all radios, for example, have been destroyed, in order to prevent news of matters such as the GOU's amnesty for returnees from reaching the camp.

The returnees interviewed at Pajule Mission (Pader District) and international observers in Gulu, Kitgum and Kampala all agree that the LRA has in recent years become weakened and demoralized. Encouraged by the prospect of an amnesty and by news of the safe return of earlier returnees, the rate of defections, though still very low, appears to be increasing. In its most ambitious operation, the LRA attacked and briefly occupied Gulu town in December 1999. The LRA did not launch operations of any scale or ambition in 2001, though there continue to be steady series of low-level attacks. Yet the ongoing existence of the main force in the Sudan, which is known to all and much discussed throughout Acholiland, means that the threat of attack continues to grip the imaginations of the people of the region.

LRA Attacks on Civilians

From the beginning, the LRA's principal tactic has been to target the civilian population of Acholiland, terrorizing the community and creating paralyzing despondency. In its attacks, it characteristically kills, maims, rapes, loots, burns homes, destroys crops, and – most traumatically – abducts civilians, especially children. Kony is said to believe (or to have been told by his spirits) that the Acholi are to be punished for their lack of support to his cause.

Beyond this vague objective, its own survival and a vaguely-stated goal of “overthrowing the Museveni government”, the LRA seems to have no coherent political programme. As a channel for spirits, Kony has created an aura for himself and his organisation of deliberate irrationality and obscurantism. As a practical matter, the LRA exists as an end in itself, serving to prey upon the civilian population, keeping it in a state of terror and turmoil and preventing any meaningful economic reconstruction of the region. The main reason for being of the LRA seems, in other words, to be the maintenance of a state of terror among the population. A major tool in this endeavour has been its systematic abduction of children.

By one estimate, from 1997 to the present at least 14,000 children have been abducted. (Other estimates go as high as 30,000 abductees.) Of these, one observer notes, about half remain completely unaccounted for. The level of trauma engendered by child abductions on such a scale is hard to overstate. Every community, every family has been affected, many repeatedly.

Even in 2001, which was by all accounts a relatively “quiet” year, the Acholi Religious Leader’s Peace Initiative has documented a steady stream of mostly low-level LRA attacks.

Many incidents go unreported. For example, on his visit on 18 December 2001 to Awer protected village (Kilak County, Gulu District), the consultant was informed that an LRA attack had occurred the preceding Saturday (15 December), an event of which there had apparently been no reports in nearby Gulu town. According to the group with whom the consultant spoke:

It was Saturday, so most people were on the outskirts of the village, about 2 km. from the center, attending the weekly “auction” [periodic market]. At around 3:00 p.m., a small group of LRA fighters came out of the bush and began shooting into the air. They ordered us to assemble any goods that could easily be transported. They selected ten people, including four children, to transport the goods they had looted. Of these, eight were released later that night, after carrying the looted goods into the bush, but two children – and boy and a girl aged 11 and 9 – are still missing. Some of us rushed back to alert the military [unit] in the village center, but no action was taken until the next morning at 9:00, when the members of the detachment went to the auction area, firing their weapons [so that any lingering LRA would know they were coming], but the LRA fighters were long gone.

The attack described in this account appears to be typical, although in this event (as in many, if by no means all, attacks in 2001) there were no killings. In this case, as in almost all others, the attackers took care to strike out of sight and hearing of the military detachment in the protected village, characteristically avoiding any danger of an actual engagement. The main purpose of the attack appears to have been the looting of merchandise; the abductions seem to have been of secondary importance. However, the continuing steady stream of such abductions, even from areas in principle under UPDF protection, remains deeply upsetting – the abduction of the 14,000th child is no less traumatizing than the first. (When asked how the villagers knew that the attackers in this case were indeed LRA – as opposed, for example, to free-lance bandits or to soldiers posing as LRA – they responded that the abductees who were later released had listened to the attackers’ conversation among themselves, and were convinced on that basis that they were dealing with LRA.)

The cumulative effect of LRA attacks and pressure has had deep effects on civilian consciousness. Psychological pressure is maintained through the enforcement of arbitrary behavioural strictures imposed by Kony. Thus the LRA has banned the use of bicycles throughout Acholiland, since Kony sees them as satanic inventions. Cultivation is forbidden on Sunday, but also on Friday, the Muslim day of rest, and on Tuesday. To be caught on a bicycle, or farming on a Tuesday, by a chance LRA patrol means instant execution. Such strictures may seem frivolous, but the chance that flouting them might lead to one's death is just great enough that they appear to be almost universally heeded.

Local Support for the Insurgency

As in cases of counterinsurgency warfare everywhere, there is a legitimate concern on the part of the authorities that the LRA insurgents are receiving the active support of the local population.

In this case, however, Acholi support for armed resistance to the central government seems to have burnt itself out with the defeat of the UPDA and the HSMF, at least for the present. The fact that Kony and his LRA have been so relentless in their attacks on the civilian population amply explains how they should have come to feel that the Acholi population has turned its back on them. Kony is said by the returnees with whom the consultant spoke in Pajule Mission and in Gulu town to feel that the Acholi need to be "punished" for having turned their back on the LRA – this, at least, is his rationale for conducting what amounts to a campaign of terror. The population seems on the whole to be profoundly weary of violence and eager to return to their homes and way of life. It is in any case adamant that it despises Kony and his movement and what they have done to life in Acholiland.

Certainly the consultant could find no one in Acholi who would admit to having any sympathy for the LRA as such (sympathy for the abductees is another matter). Over and over, in large and small groups and in one-on-one conversations, people stated firmly and with apparent sincerity that there was no support whatsoever among the Acholi for Kony as a leader or for the LRA as a movement, though there was considerable sympathy for the young people caught up in the movement, virtually all of whom had been abducted as children.

The absence of civilian support within Acholiland was also cited by the returnee LRA fighters themselves as a source of considerable discouragement and demoralization.

There has emerged in the region a genuine *culture of peace* (see "Peace Initiatives" below) – opinion appears overwhelmingly to be in favor of a peaceful solution to the conflict that will allow the LRA to disband and its fighters (who are,

it cannot be emphasized enough, seen as being overwhelmingly unwilling abductees) to return home.

This does not, however, mean that the central government enjoys strong support in the region (which in the elections of 1996 and 2000 voted heavily against the Movement ticket), or that there is support for the counterinsurgency measures that have been taken so far. For one thing, the local perception is that the government is convinced that a military solution to the conflict is achievable and, as of early 2002, that it is making preparations for this. Such a “solution” would inevitably entail substantial loss of life, including among women and recently-abducted children, leading to further alienation among the Acholi.

The sense of alienation from the central government is already very high. The UPDF has in many ways comported itself as an occupying force in hostile territory. Its commitment to finding a peaceful solution appears to many Acholi to be at best questionable. Acholi political leaders speak darkly of a situation that has been allowed to fester for too long. The danger, they imply, is not that there is much chance of a sudden surge in support for the discredited LRA, but that some new form of Acholi armed resistance may come into being if greater heed is not paid to Acholi political aspirations, and in particular to the strong desire for a negotiated, peaceful settlement. In this view, the best means for heading off the possibility of a new (and presumably more effective) Acholi uprising is to achieve a peaceful outcome to the LRA issue, close the protected villages, and set about rebuilding the devastated Acholi economy.

The Sudan Factor

The problems of Acholiland are deeply intertwined with international aspects of the ongoing Sudanese civil war.

Northern Uganda houses a substantial population of Sudanese refugees who, resident in camps, benefit from protection and humanitarian support from UNHCR and the WFP. Uganda also serves as an important staging area for cross-border international humanitarian aid to rebel-controlled areas of Southern Sudan.⁹

The Ugandan government is seen by diplomatic observers as being deeply concerned about the threat of Islamist expansionism in the region. It is widely accepted in Acholiland that the Ugandan government actively supports cross-border operations by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and provides

⁹ The consultant was able to observe convoys of international food aid being transported from Gulu toward southern Sudan in large 4-wheel-drive lorries carrying “NS” (“New Sudan”) license plates. These lorries were accompanied by armed escorts identified by local observers as “Dinka” – i.e., SPLA.

the latter with base facilities and supply lines along which international military support can be channeled.

Among Acholi at all levels with whom the consultant spoke, it was accepted as an article of faith that Sudanese support to the LRA has been provided in direct retaliation for Ugandan support to the SPLA¹⁰. Over and over, villagers, politicians and civil-society leaders expressed dismay at this state of affairs and expressed the feeling that there could only be an end to the LRA threat if the Ugandan side cut off assistance to the SPLA. It is generally accepted that the Sudanese authorities have used the LRA as anti-SPLA proxies within the Sudan itself, as well as in Northern Uganda. The LRA and SPLA are understood to have clashed frequently, and LRA returnees interviewed by the consultant spoke vividly of major engagements in which the LRA was able to seize substantial weaponry.

The December 1999 agreement between Presidents Museveni of Uganda and Bashir of the Sudan (see "Peace Initiatives" below) calls for just such a mutual cessation of cross-border assistance to each country's respective insurgent protégés. Acholi-based observers express skepticism that there was ever any serious chance that this agreement would be seriously implemented by either side, though some forms of overt Sudanese military assistance to the LRA have, according to returnee interviewees, been substantially reduced or eliminated. Acholi interviewees consistently expressed the feeling that more needed to be done to reduce Ugandan support to the SPLA in order to remove the Sudanese government's pretext for supporting the LRA.¹¹

Regardless of how one reacts to the idea that the Government of Sudan might somehow be justified in aiding and abetting the LRA because of its perception of Ugandan support to the SPLA, the presence of the LRA, operating with impunity cross-border from the Sudan raises serious issues in its own right.

The LRA has, at the very least, many of the attributes of a terrorist organization: it lacks any clearly formulated political objective, it tends to avoid direct contact with opposing armed forces, and its hold on the imaginations of the people of Acholiland derives directly from the terror it inspires. By targeting civilians almost exclusively, by burning, raping, looting, mutilating and abducting, the LRA would seem to cross an important line. And to the extent that it also operates from the territory of another state, this aspect of the problem takes on very specific meaning in the context of the global war on terrorism that has been waged since September 11, 2001.

¹⁰ See also Gérard Prunier, "Le Soudan au centre d'une guerre régionale", in *Le Monde diplomatique*, Feb. 97.

¹¹ SPLA activity within Uganda itself is a further complication. Interviewees in the Palabek village (Kitgum District) complained specifically of assaults, looting and rape conducted in their village by SPLA personnel from nearby camps.

Security Council Resolutions 1373 (28/09/01) and 1377 (12/11/01), passed in the wake of the events of that day, place specific obligations on states that would appear to be clearly applicable to the LRA's actions and thereby to the Sudan from whose territory those actions are planned and launched.

For example, in Resolution 1373 the Council “[2.] *decides also* that all States shall... (c) Deny safe have to those who finance plan facilitate, or commit terrorist acts...(d) Prevent those who finance, plan, facilitate or commit terrorist acts from using their respective territories from using their respective territories for those purposes against other States or their citizens...” The nature of the LRA and the circumstances of its presence in the Sudan are obviously far removed from the concerns that were at the forefront of minds the drafters of this Resolution¹². Yet the implications of its wording as applied to the LRA ought logically at least to inform the dialogue that is presumably ongoing between the international community and the Sudanese government.

Because of the presence of large numbers of women and children within the LRA camp, and because so many of its fighters are minors who were themselves abductees, there is a consensus within Acholi society that a direct military attack on the LRA would be morally unjustifiable – and would seriously derail long-term reconciliation within Acholi society as a whole. However, it would appear that the pursuit of a *political* solution ought to be accorded greater urgency as a result of changed international circumstances – and it appears to many that the Sudan has a key role to play in this process.

Peacebuilding & Reconciliation Initiatives

a. Church/Civil Society

For years, church and civil-society leaders have been active in the pursuit of a peaceful settlement that would bring an end to the LRA insurgency and peace to the Acholi region, and that would promote reconciliation with Acholi society. This quest led to the formation in 1997 of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI), an inter-faith network that brings together, in particular, the hierarchies of the Catholic Church, the Church of Uganda (Anglican communion), and the leadership of the Muslim minority in the area.

The ARPLI and its constituent religious bodies have been remarkably successful in promoting consciousness-raising within the Acholi community as a whole,

¹² However, the LRA has been placed on at least the U.S. list of terrorist organisations, and this move appears at least in part to have been impelled by contacts between it and the El-Qaeda network in the days when the latter was based in the Sudan.

increasing local understanding of the issues behind the armed conflict, and promoting support for peace among communities – acting, in effect, in support of peace on the demand side. It has also produced a substantial body of research and of real-time documentation of unfolding events.¹³

The ARPLI has specifically encouraged and supported a number of initiatives in the promotion of a peaceful settlement and attempted to identify channels through which it could communicate directly with Kony in the Sudan. (One such effort, predating the formal establishment of the ARPLI, ended in catastrophe: in early 1996, two elders who had begun negotiations with the LRA and felt they had an opening to meet directly with Kony were murdered as they undertook the journey.)

Partly as a result of these efforts, there has arisen a culture of peace within Acholiland that is remarkable, given the extent of the suffering that the LRA has caused. Conversations with community members individually and in groups made clear to the consultant how successfully this culture of peace has permeated the society. It is not that there is no resentment or bitterness against the LRA for past acts – such bitterness exists and is freely expressed. But there is also a very sophisticated understanding, strengthened by the realization that the great majority of today's LRA fighters are yesterday's abducted children, that the costs to the society as a whole of retribution or of vilification would be too great. When it comes to individual LRA members known to have committed specific atrocities, there are understandable reservations (and a sense that it may not be possible for some to return to their home communities), but the broad principle that these fighters are to be accepted back into the larger community with little or no demand for their punishment is firm and pervasive, the sentiment being that only thus can a return to peace and stability be achieved. Such forgiveness, it is maintained, reflects deep-seated traditional values within Acholi society, where forgiveness is natural and punishment aberrant. (These traditional values are given ritual expression through purification and forgiveness rituals which have been revived and performed for recent returnees.)

Key components of this culture are: the building of political pressure for voluntary surrender by Kony; support for reintegration of LRA combatants into the society (if not in every case into their home communities); and demands promulgation of an effective general amnesty at the national level. Thanks to efforts by MP's and civil society, as well as by the central government, the legal framework for such an amnesty is already in place.¹⁴

¹³ Much useful background is available from APRLI at www.acholipeace.org.

¹⁴ While the ARLPI has, given the importance of the churches within Acholi society, taken on a highly important and visible role in providing organizational structure to Acholi aspirations for peace, it should be noted that it is not alone within civil society in pursuing this aim. Groups of traditional leaders, MP's, and overseas Acholi (who have organized as Kacoke Madit, with headquarters in London).

b. The Amnesty Act of 17 January 2000

This Act is not limited to the LRA or to the conflicts in Acholiland. It provides for “an Amnesty for Ugandans involved in acts of a war-like nature in various parts of the country”. It provides that persons who have engaged in armed rebellion will, upon the fulfilment of the reporting conditions and upon making a statement “renouncing and abandoning war and rebellion” “shall not be prosecuted or subjected to any form of punishment for participation in the war or rebellion [or?] for any crime committed in the cause of the war or armed rebellion”.

While the Act applies to all of the several wars and rebellions that have afflicted Uganda in recent years, it has particular importance in the Acholi situation, since it is seen as providing of a powerful incentive for LRA fighters to desert and return home.¹⁵ (Though working against this attraction are the difficulties of getting information through to the LRA camp in the Sudan and Kony’s liberal use of disinformation, which mostly concerns the ways in which former LRA fighters will be killed when they return home, the perils of the journey, and the fact that the fighters often have wives or concubines and children of their own who must either be left behind or somehow taken on the journey.)

To date, the high hopes raised by the Act have not been realized. For one thing, the Act provides that the amnesty is to be administered by a Commission whose function is to monitor programmes of demobilization, reintegration and resettlement, as well as to co-ordinate and promote activities of sensitization, reconciliation, and dialogue.

By general agreement, the Amnesty Commission has been slow in fulfilling these obligations. In Acholiland, the commission has only one representative, who has little or nothing in the way of resources. Returnees, community members and civil society leaders with whom the consultant spoke complained of long delays in processing applications from “reporters”, of putting together the “packages” of material support the commission is supposed to supply to assist with reintegration, and, most disturbingly, in issuing the certificate that is to be provided to each “reporter” who has complied with the provisions of the act. LRA returnees see this certificate as essential protection against future harassment and prosecution, and while they have generally been issued with documents certifying that they have come forward and are being processed under the Act, the lack of final certificates is distressing to them, raising concerns in their minds about whether they are being dealt with in good faith.

¹⁵ The Act, which was promulgated on 21 Jan. 2000 for a period “not exceeding six months”, but with the proviso that “on expiry, the Minister may by statutory instrument extend that period”. Such extensions have similarly been issued for each succeeding period; there is, however, always the possibility that it could, by intent or through neglect, be allowed to lapse, one of several aspects of the amnesty that disturb the peace coalition.

Such failings are significant, as the peace process envisaged by the Acholi community depends heavily on the successful reintegration of the first wave of “reporters” serving as an incitement to additional LRA fighters to desert and come forward. The group of returnees with whom the consultant met at Pajule Mission, who had arrived in October after an arduous and dangerous escape from the LRA camp and journey through the Sudanese bush, were restive and uncertain that they had made the right decision. While some of their reactions may simply have reflected adolescent posturing and bluster, a number of them clearly felt that they had been lured back to Uganda under false pretences and that they were being set up to be arrested, killed, or (some felt) drafted into the UPDF. They claimed that their colleagues back in Sudan were waiting for news, and that they were standing by the desert and come home as “reporters” – but only if they heard that the first group had been granted the full amnesty, issued their “packages”, and allowed to return to their areas of origin¹⁶.

c) Reintegration of Child Combatants

The appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation of child combatants has rightly been a central concern of the agencies working in the Acholi area. UNICEF and other international agencies, churches, NGOs and donor missions have put considerable effort into ensuring that these are matters handled in ways consistent with international standards.

The Ugandan government and the UPDF share these concerns, and as a result, procedures have been devised and implemented for dealing with minors who are taken prisoner in the course of skirmishes or who emerge from the bush. Such children are in the first instance taken to a military barracks for debriefing and screening. These procedures are presently being performed in a segregated unit in Gulu barracks, where provision is made for access by outside agencies, for recreation, and for education. Upon their release by the military, the children are turned over to one of several NGO-operated residential programmes, where they receive counseling and some form of education or vocational training prior to being returned to their homes and families. While some human rights observers question the appropriateness of the transit through the barracks, the system is generally seen by the agencies involved as operating reasonably smoothly and in the overall best interests of the children concerned.

d) The Carter Initiative

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, through the Atlanta-based Carter Center, has proposed his good offices in pursuit of a solution to the crisis in Acholiland. This effort was initially conducted at very high levels and led to the signature of an agreement in between Presidents Museveni and Bashir December 1999,

¹⁶ The consultant was informed in later telephone conversations with Gulu that this group had been issued with certificates and packages, and had undergone traditional purification rituals on 22 Dec., and had thereupon dispersed.

mentioned above. Since that event, the Carter Center has remained involved in both Sudan and Uganda, but though it has tried to establish a direct link to Kony, this has been as unsuccessful as all previous such efforts. It is not clear how much interest Kony has in contacts or negotiation, or how much latitude he has to pursue them. As with efforts by Acholi traditional leaders (whom he is said to despise), he has remained out of touch and unwilling to respond to overtures.

II The “Protected Villages”: Analysis of Recent Trends

Creation of the “Protected Villages”

The circumstances under which the present network of protected villages came into being were different in Gulu District, on the one hand, and in Kitgum and Pader (formerly Kitgum) Districts on the other.

In Gulu, most of the villages were created in a brief period in 1996-97, during a period of intense LRA activity. According to the ARLPI,

The decision to create camps was officially announced by President Yoweri Museveni on the 27th September 1996 to members of the Parliamentary Committee of the Office of the President and Foreign Affairs. However, in at least in two of the camps surveyed (Pabbo and Ajulu) people told us that they remember that as early as August that year Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) soldiers were already moving in villages and ordering people to move to the trading centres.¹⁷

Interviewees with whom the consultant met in various villages in Gulu District broadly confirmed this account. For example, a group in Pagak village gave the following account:

We came to this village in September 1996 – on the 29th, to be exact. The LRA was killing us in our homes and abducting our children. The UPDF came and told us we had to move immediately – if we stayed in our homes we would be treated as collaborators. In some cases, word didn’t reach some people; they were driven from their homes by artillery barrages.

Other accounts were similar: Parabong was settled in “August 1996”, Alero and Anaka “in November 96”. (*We were brought here by the UPDF in only three days, after which villages were bombed [shelled]. Also, the LRA had started abducting so many children* – Anaka residents).

Writing closer to the events, in 1997, Gersony notes:

Advocates of the “protected villages” argued that the UPDF was in the process of an aggressive action against the LRA...By eliminating the LRA’s ability to loot food and abduct youngsters...rebel forces would be weakened...The Geneva Convention, it was argued, permits the Government to displace populations for their protection, although it also requires that adequate arrangements for their material well-being be provided...The army is criticised for not effectively protecting the civilian population from LRA assaults, yet it is also criticised for

¹⁷ ARLPI, “Let My People Go”, July 2001

attempting to concentrate the population so that it can address the problem more effectively.¹⁸

In the event, the population was concentrated but the problem remained unaddressed.

The situation in Kitgum, strategically more vulnerable because of its location athwart the border, was different. The levels of LRA violence here were even higher, and the population fled to the trading centers for their lives and to protect those children who had not yet been killed or abducted. According to residents of Palabek Kal, for example:

We came here voluntarily and gradually, in 1997. Insecurity was terrible then. Also, the UPDF said that we should leave our homes so that they could defeat the LRA. Our crops were being destroyed, our houses burnt, schools were destroyed, our animals were killed.

By mid-1997, then, the situation on the ground had become much as it is today – i.e., the quasi-totality of the rural population of the (then) two districts was living in displacement, either in “protected villages” or in Gulu or Kitgum towns. The level of insecurity was considerably higher than it was in 2001 or early 2002, with massacres and abductions commonplace, especially in Kitgum.

There is no need to vilify the armed forces – the business of counterinsurgency, especially when the insurgents operate cross-border, is enormously difficult under the best of circumstances, and the UPDF has been under strain from a number of directions for years. Residents of the area themselves freely allow that a number of the commanders who have been sent to the area have been competent and dedicated, and that many soldiers have lost their lives in their defence. Yet the fact remains that the military has not, for whatever reason, managed to provide security for sustained periods, and that, because of indiscipline and, no doubt, frustration, elements within the UPDF have been the source of much local violence.

¹⁸ Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda”, p. 51

Current Conditions

Today, while there continue to be regular low-level attacks on communities and on vehicles traveling along the roads in the area, the levels of LRA violence have been substantially reduced.¹⁹

In addition to attacks that they attribute to the LRA, however, residents of the protected villages complain that they are subject to attacks, looting, abductions and sexual assaults by indisciplined elements of the UPDF, by free-lance armed bandits (known locally in Luwo as *Boo Kech*), and, in some cases, by elements of the SPLA present in parts of Kitgum (see above).

Residents consistently complain that when they are under attack, the military detachments in the adjacent barracks fail to respond effectively or in a timely manner, and that these units (many of which are in fact under-paid and under-trained Local Defence Units, not regular UPDF troops) are in fact themselves often the source of violence and criminality.

Rape is a particular concern in this respect – residents in a number of villages stated categorically that women are regularly raped by members of the military detachments and that complaints have gone unheeded. Other complaints involve looting or assaults that occur in the open fields, in which village residents are set upon for being outside their village “without authorization”.

The following composite comments from residents of Palabek Kal are typical of those expressed to the consultant in most of the interviews conducted in the villages:

Since we came to the camp [sic] in 97, there have been many, many attacks, abductions, rapes, lootings, and burnings of houses by LRA units. The UPDF usually comes when the LRA has finished and left [though the military cantonment is only a short distance from the residential areas]. The government doesn't care – they say “the Acholi are killing Acholis – let them do it!”

(However, when pressed, these same residents did admit that things had improved somewhat in recent months. The most recent attack on Palabek had occurred in June 2001, when six camp residents were killed. At that time, the

¹⁹ On 22 February, after the consultant's departure, the LRA launched one of its most ambitious raids recent years. According to the ARLPI website, “After a period of relative calm in war-torn Acholiland, lasting several months, several hundred LRA rebels launched an armed attack on Agoro at dawn on 23rd February. The few Local Defence soldiers stationed there to protect the displaced people's camp and trading centre were taken by surprise. Three LDUs and two civilians were killed, and at least one hundred camp dwellers abducted. The trading centre was looted and the military barracks burnt down. The rebels later withdrew back to Sudan.” Other reports state that the LRA column was engaged by the UPDF on the Sudan side of the border and that a number of the abductees were rescued.

military detachment was on stand-by, residents said, and did engage the LRA attackers in a firefight which may have prevented greater loss of life and property.)

There is a pervasive sense of despondency, bitterness, and alienation that is palpable in every interaction with protected-village communities. *Every group and individual with whom the consultant spoke expressed in the most emphatic terms their desire to see the protected villages dismantled and for conditions to change to allow a quick return to their place of permanent residence.*

When asked what would be required for this to happen, however, groups differed considerably in their responses. For some, it would be enough for the GOU and/or the UPDF to declare that they would not oppose such a return. For others, such a return would need to be preceded by a “guarantee of security” from attack on the part of the authorities. Others still would require such guarantees and would also require a “package” of material assistance to make the transition. Meanwhile, some groups (though by no means all) felt that no return would be conceivable as long as Joseph Kony and the LRA remained in Southern Sudan, even if their level of activity were to continue to be substantially reduced.

Underlying these responses are two interrelated concerns:

- 1) *There is generalized and deep-rooted terror of the LRA, based on real and bitter experience.*

In every group meeting, the consultant asked who in the room had lost a close relative (a parent, child or sibling) to LRA killings or abductions. In every case, virtually every hand in the room was raised. The level of trauma that this situation has engendered cannot be underestimated: an entire community is, in effect, paralysed by ongoing fear that the LRA may return and resume violence at levels similar to those of, most recently, 1999.

- 2) *There is no clear sense on the part of the displaced population of its official status, and in particular of whether it is authorized to return home.*

While some of the displacement into the protected villages, particularly in Kitgum and Pader, was clearly voluntary, other groups were forcibly displaced by the UPDF, particularly in Gulu in October-November 1996. Since then, the UPDF has frequently assaulted civilians found outside of their protected villages (particularly in Gulu), so that while there is, as far as the consultant can determine, no officially-articulated policy one way or the other as to whether such return is prohibited,

there is a strong *perception* that this is the case until something specific is said to the contrary.

Military Options, the Central Government, and the Peace Process

Various proposals for “decongestion” of the camps have been raised and discussed in recent months. One proposal, described to the consultant principally by officials in Kampala, calls for the movement outward from the present villages and into what would in effect be smaller versions of the same thing – i.e. concentrated settlements adjacent to military cantonments. The theory is that such decongestion would allow easier and safer access to fields that could be used to re-establish a measure of food self-sufficiency, thereby reducing dependency on international humanitarian assistance, while reducing some of the quality-of-life problems associated with overcrowding. (In fact, such a solution is unlikely to bring about any substantial improvement in living standards or morale – to most of those involved, it would merely seem like moving from one protected village to another.)

Military authorities on the ground expressed to the consultant a hope for more radical change. In this plan, village residents would be encouraged to return to their home areas, and begin cultivation at once. Though they would not be concentrated in villages, these returnees, instead of returning to settlements widely scattered through the countryside, would be “encouraged” to settle along existing roads or along new ones they would help build, to provide the military with speedy access in the event of attacks. The military would in turn re-orient its strategy, replacing the passive village detachments with an active presence whose twin priorities would be interdiction of the Sudanese border and rapid response to attacks on the ground within Uganda. This strategy, however, would require a significant increase in the assets available to the 4th Division (based in Gulu), and, given the multiple pressures on the UPDF’s resource at present, it is not clear that these could be made available.²⁰

A still more controversial approach, which is said by some to have acquired favour within the senior command, would involve a direct attack on the LRA main force in Sudan, bringing the entire LRA interlude to an end in a single operation. The UPDF is said to have been conducting semi-clandestine operations with the Sudan for some time and, recently, with increasing frequency, and some military commanders feel that they have the knowledge of the terrain and the means necessary for conduct such a conclusive operation.

²⁰ Among experts, the question of whether and how the border can be interdicted is contentious. Some claim that doing this is beyond the means of the UPDF at present (or, in the view of some, simply impossible under any circumstances). Experienced military observers in Kampala, on the other, assert that a good deal of the job has been done already – albeit in part by, most controversially, laying land mines; these observers say that the LRA is already restricted to using a narrow corridor through the Lolibai mountains (on the Sudan side), which are arduous to cross. The incident of 22 Feb. 2002, however, would indicate that such interdiction, if it is indeed being practiced, has not yet been perfected.

While not arguing that, under the circumstances, such an attack would be unjustifiable under international law, even observers who do not share the dominant Acholi view (that such an attack would entail unacceptable violations of humanitarian principle and entail terrible long-term political consequences) do question whether such an attack is actually feasible given the resources available (especially in terms of air-ground support), and they express concern as to what the consequences would be in the event that it was attempted and did not succeed in decisively defeating the LRA²¹.

While each of these approaches (and others that may now be under consideration) has its flaws, and while it may be that none of them is practicable given the level of assets likely to be available to the 4th Division, the fact that they appear to be under active consideration indicates that there is momentum building for change of some kind to occur.

The problem, however, is that all of these options have been developed by and for the military and security services and, naturally enough, reflect military-centered strategies.

The UPDF has an unquestioned responsibility to protect its citizens. While discipline and training at the lower levels of the military in Acholiland (and especially among the LDU, as opposed to the UPDF main force) are said to be poor, the senior levels of military leadership in the region appear competent and dedicated. Given the levels and nature of the violence perpetrated by the LRA over the years, it would be unreasonable to exclude military options for dealing with it. But it is not clear how much military-civilian coordination occurs in Acholiland, and particularly how much the military leadership bothers to engage civil society (or vice versa).

It is the conviction of the Acholi leadership and society as a whole – traditional chiefs (*rwot*), religious leaders, civil-society leaders, as well as almost all of the ordinary citizens with whom the consultant spoke – that in bringing about a conclusive solution to the LRA question, military action should be the last choice. Again, both for reasons of international humanitarian law and for pragmatic reasons related to long-term issues of reconciliation within Acholi society and between the Acholi and the rest of Ugandan society, these leaders feel that it will be important for the LRA issue not be resolved by a large-scale slaughter of young Acholi.

Acholi civil society feels, however, that it has been left to pursue peaceful dialogue on its own. While the suspicions and lingering animosities that affect

²¹ In February 2002, the UPDF undertook joint civilian-military training manoeuvres with US military units, leading to a heavy increase in the numbers of troops and materiel in the region. Though these manoeuvres had been planned for some time, their occurrence led some to conclude that a cross-border attack on the LRA might be imminent – see “Big Military Build-Up in Gulu Raises Fears of Foiling Peace Process in Acholi” at www.acholipeace.org/militarybuildup.htm. The LRA attack on Agoro mentioned above was apparently timed to coincide with this event, indicating that the LRA may have had advance intelligence of the timing of the operation and chosen to strike when the military was otherwise occupied.

both sides and that are mentioned elsewhere in this paper must always be taken into account when considering such matters, there seem to be legitimate doubts as to the commitment of the government to supporting a sustained peace process. In this connection, a particularly unfortunate event occurred in Pajule (Pader District) in on 26 April 2001. A meeting had been arranged between representatives of the ARLPI and LRA commanders to discuss peace and amnesty matters. The ARLPI states that it had advised the authorities that this meeting was to occur and had received clearance. Yet the mission compound was attacked by a UPDF mobile force as the meetings got under way; a traditional chief was wounded in the exchange.

Such peacebuilding enjoys overwhelming favour among the Acholi, but it faces a massive, and perhaps insuperable, obstacle in Kony himself, who has so far shown no signs of responding or even of allowing himself to become engaged in contacts of any kind, either with other Acholi or with outside emissaries like the Carter Center. While there are many individuals floating around Gulu and elsewhere who claim to have connections to Kony or to those immediately around him, there is no indication that any of these claims is genuine or that any meaningful or sustained contacts have been initiated. For Kony to engage in dialogue, he would presumably have to be ordered to do so by his spirits, and these so far have evidently shown no signs of cooperating. Until this happens, the peace movement's recourse – important and useful in its own right – is to create conditions for return that, as word trickles back into the Sudan, make desertion and surrender under the Amnesty Act seem irresistible to his presumably demoralized fighters. Meantime, Kony has repeatedly said that he will negotiate only with President Museveni himself. Acholi leaders have tried to encourage the government to initiate a process that would induce Kony to think this objective achievable, but so far the Presidency has, for perhaps understandable reasons, chosen to stand aloof.

III “Protected Villages”: Specific Findings

Finding 1:

While the establishment of the “Protected Villages” may have been justifiable on grounds of military exigency in 1996, their prolongation into 2002 would seem to be inconsistent with international humanitarian principles.

In the UN “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement”²², Principle 6 states as follows: “(1) Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence. (2) The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement:...(b) In situations of armed conflict, *unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand; ...*(3) *Displacement shall last no longer than required by circumstances*”. [Emphasis added.]

While the LRA is still an active menace to civilians, it seems to have been substantially weakened in recent years. The “imperative military reasons” that presumably led to the establishment of the villages would thus seem to have receded accordingly, while the situation with regard to the security of civilians would appear to vary considerably from one area to the next, making the blanket prolongation of forced encampment to seem arbitrary and to reflect a failure to fully examine possible alternatives. Given that there has been only sporadic official interest in examining such alternatives, and that there seems to have been a willingness on the part of some to allow the situation in the villages continue indefinitely to drift, the question of whether this forced displacement has not lasted “longer than required” would seem to be legitimately raised.²³ All the more so as...

Finding 2:

The arbitrary nature of the forced encampment of the majority of the people of Acholiland, and the lack of clarity as to the circumstances under which they may or may not leave the “protected villages”, for example to pursue agricultural activities in their home areas, would seem to stand in contradiction of a number of core personal freedoms.

Though all of the interviewees with whom the consultant spoke expressed a passionate desire to return home as soon as feasible, many recognized

²² The full text of the “Guiding Principles” is to be found at http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html. It is also available as a printed pamphlet from UN OCHA. Although it is acknowledged in an introductory note that the Principles “do not constitute a binding instrument, [they] reflect and are consistent with international humanitarian law and analogous refugee law.”

²³ As it has indeed been in ARLPI, “Let My People Go”

that the circumstances now were not right, and that as long as insecurity continued to prevail they would choose to remain in the camps until (for example) “guarantees of security” could be given by the authorities. Many of these would doubtless choose to remain in the villages even if a blanket green light for a return home were given.

But many others feel passionately that the time to return is now. Guiding Principles 14 states: “(1) Every internally displaced person has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence. (2) In particular, internally displaced persons have the right to move freely in and out of camps or other settlements.”

It will be important to see outward movement as a gradual and, at least initially, tentative process. Individual family members may at first move out of their villages for brief periods and then return, then larger family units may do so, while more cautious individuals will remain behind and observe the process. Others still will have grown accustomed to their surroundings and to living in a larger community and will choose to remain where they are permanently. Thus, for reasons both of principle (i.e., that one’s place of residence must, as affirmed in the Guiding Principles, always be freely chosen) and of efficacy (people forced to make a definitive choice before they feel ready to do so will likely opt for caution), any process that presents outward movement as a single-stage, single-choice large-scale “event” (as seems to be the case for the concept of “decongestion” as it has been discussed) is likely to fail. The fundamental wrong of the present system is that it has deprived individuals of choice and initiative in the ordering of their own lives. No solution that perpetuates this defect can be an effective remedy.

While there appear to be few restrictions, if any, on the movement of village residents up and down the main roads, at least by day (residents say they are prohibited from traveling anywhere after dark) – e.g. to visit a major town or to attend a market (and there are certainly no gates on the villages, nor fences around them), repeated and consistent complaints were voiced to the consultant about what would happen to individuals discovered in “the fields” – e.g. a young woman from Pabbo (“*I was beaten coming home*”), or young men seeking to plant a crop a bit farther than usual from their village who were told that if they were caught “*we would be considered LRA*”. (Cf. principle 10 (2), “Direct or indiscriminate attacks against internally displaced persons who do not or no longer participate in hostilities are prohibited in all circumstances. Internally displaced persons shall be protected, in particular, against: (a) Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence, including the creation of areas wherein attacks on civilians are permitted...”)

Again, the exigencies of war in 1996 might have created circumstances in which it would have been reasonable to urge civilians not to be present in

certain areas. But the key issue here is the indeterminate and arbitrary nature of the régime in place – in their conversations with the consultant, none of the village residents spoken to had a clear idea of what specifically they could or could not do without facing attack or arrest, and indeed these restrictions seem to vary from one time or place to another.

Finally, Principle 7 (3) states that “[i]f displacement occurs in situations other than during the emergency stages of armed conflicts and disasters, the following guarantees shall be complied with: (a) A specific decision shall be taken by the State authority empowered by law to order such measures; (b) Adequate measures shall be to guarantee to those to be displaced full information on the reasons and procedures for their displacement....(c) The free and informed consent of those to be displaced shall be sought; (d) The authorities concerned shall endeavour to involve those affected, particularly women, in the planning and management of their relocation...(f) The right to an effective remedy, including the review of such decisions by appropriate judicial authorities, shall be respected.” There is no evidence that the nature of the emergency prevailing in 1996 would have precluded some or all of these measures from being taken; even if it had, there has been adequate time in the intervening years to remedy the lapse. Yet this has not been done.

Finding 3:

Most or all property and possessions of the internally displaced, including houses, have been destroyed or looted. Personal security in the “protected villages” is often poor, with attacks, abductions, rapes, lootings and other violent acts being committed variously by LRA assailants, by UPDF elements, by free-lance bandits, and by other village residents. While there is no evidence of a deliberate official policy to incite or encourage such acts, residents complain that too little is done to prevent them or to hold perpetrators accountable.

Guiding principle 11 (2) holds that “internally displaced persons, whether or not their liberty has been restricted, shall be protected in particular against: (a) rape, mutilation, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, another outrages upon personal dignity, such as acts of gender-specific violence, forced prostitution or any form of indecent assault.”

Guiding Principle 21 (2) states: “The property and possessions of internally displaced persons shall in all circumstances be protected, in particular, against the following acts: (a) Pillage; (b) Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence....”

(Recent progress in this area is seen as welcome, but it is uneven and inconsistent. For example, a few days before the consultant’s visit to the largest of the villages, Pabbo, a group of young men, he was told, had decided to hold an impromptu party. They set up a cassette player and began singing and dancing. Soldiers in the adjoining cantonment were irritated. They came over to the young residents, seized them and proceeded methodically to flog each of them. The young men complained to Division headquarters. The recently-arrived commander had the entire garrison arrested, moved out of Pabbo and replaced. The young men were gratified that action had been taken, but they noted that the consequences for UPDF misbehaviour in the villages has tended to be transfer rather than actual punishment, at least as far as they are aware.)

It should be mentioned in this context that, while there are rumors in Kitgum and Gulu concerning land alienation occurring behind the Acholis' back, with powerful people in the towns making grabs for attractive plots while their owners are in forced displacement, something that, if true, would unquestionably fall under the terms of Guiding Principle 21. The consultant made extensive enquiries in an attempt to verify the rumors, but while individual instances of such land alienation may indeed have occurred here and there, he could find no evidence of this having become a systematic practice. Such activities would be banned by Guiding Principle 21 (3): "Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation or use."

Finding 4:

Prolonged, enforced encampment of the Acholi threatens the basis of their economic system.

According to Principle 9, "States are under a particular obligation to protect against the displacement of indigenous peoples, minorities, peasants, pastoralists and other groups with special dependency on and attachment to their land."

As a long-established agro-pastoral society, the Acholi have such a dependency, and their displacement is consequently far more destructive, socially and economically, than might be the case for, say, a more urbanized population.

Finding 5:

There is no direct evidence that the Acholi displaced are being targeted for punitive treatment on ethnic grounds.

Principle 6, (2) (a) and (e), is relevant here: "The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement: (a) when based on policies of apartheid, "ethnic cleansing" or similar practices and at/or resulting in altering the ethnic, religious, or racial composition of the affected population...(e) When it is used as collective punishment."

When combined with the history of tension and mutual suspicion between the Acholi and the central government mentioned previously in this report, the very fact that Acholiland is ethnically so homogeneous (virtually all the displaced are presumed to be of Acholi origin and ethnicity) and so distinct from the rest of the country must raise some concerns. Loose talk noted among government officials in Kampala adds to the concern: at a superficial level, remarks are often made that, taken out of context, could be interpreted as laying collective blame on the Acholi for, for example, the actions of the LRA. If this came to reflect a clear pattern of thought, as opposed to being mere passing expressions of frustration, it would raise the matter of enforced encampment in Acholiland to the very highest level of international concern and invite a level of scrutiny that the circumstances do not at present appear to warrant. It will be important for the government of Uganda to require a high level of accountability from its civilian and military officials, to ensure that matters of ethnicity do not *per se* impinge on decision-making regarding the Acholi displaced.

IV. GENERAL HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Guiding Principles 18 and 19 are applicable to these matters and to those in the following section:

Principle 18:

1. All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living.
2. At the minimum, regardless of the circumstances, and without discrimination, competent authorities shall provide internally displaced persons with and ensure safe access to:
 - (a) Essential food and potable water;
 - (b) Basic shelter and housing;
 - (c) Appropriate clothing; and
 - (d) Essential medical services and sanitation.
3. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of women in the planning and distribution of these basic supplies.

Principle 19:

1. All wounded and sick internally displaced persons as well as those with disabilities shall receive to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention they require, without distinction on any grounds other than medical ones. When necessary, internally displaced persons shall have access to psychological and social services.
2. Special attention should be paid to the health needs of women, including access to female health care providers and services, such as reproductive health care, as well as appropriate counseling for victims of sexual and other abuses.
3. Special attention should also be given to the prevention of contagious and infectious diseases, including AIDS, among internally displaced persons.

Finding 6:

The minimal humanitarian needs of the displaced persons are broadly being met, at great cost, by the combined efforts of the Ugandan authorities and the international community.

Gaps exist, and the communities consulted voiced many complaints about the nature and timeliness of the assistance they receive, perceptions that are heightened and exacerbated by the degree to which they have been living in enforced passivity and dependence on international humanitarian assistance. Health services are on the whole basic but adequate.

Despite the food aid provided, malnutrition and stunting have been common, at least until recently.²⁴

²⁴ According to WFP, "nutritional studies undertaken by ACF and Oxfam in 1996 confirm that over half the children below the age of five are stunted, whereas one-third are wasted or underweight

Finding 7:

Conditions in the protected villages are nonetheless such that their residents live in what amounts to chronic humanitarian catastrophe.

Despite the substantial assistance provided hygiene is poor, access to sources of clean potable water (especially in the drier areas of Kitgum) is often limited or non-existent, and exposure to infectious diseases remains a constant threat, though large-scale epidemics seem so far to have been avoided.

These conditions are directly related to the specific configuration of the villages – their high population density (with in many cases only a metre or two separating houses) -- to limits on economic self-reliance imposed by the nature of the situation, and to general economic conditions in the area. There does not appear to be any intentional effort to starve this population or to prevent access to basic services – on the contrary, these are being provided with by and large with competence and dedication -- it is the nature of the situation and the pauperization that derives from it that cause the huge, and in many respects growing, humanitarian problems that remain. Thus...

Finding 8:

It is the very nature of the protected villages that engenders these unacceptable levels of human suffering.

Even with the best good will and effort, only limited and marginal amelioration in the conditions described can be achieved without at least a measure of return to people's home areas, or at least through the lifting of restrictions to allow people to increase the scope of their economic activity. (The proposals for so-called "decongestion" that have been discussed elsewhere would do nothing to remedy the loss of economic autonomy and personal autonomy that is at the heart of the problem.)

Meanwhile, the international community is already bearing a heavy burden of humanitarian assistance, not only to Acholiland, but to other conflict-stricken areas of Uganda and cannot be expected to provide support to this fundamentally flawed system indefinitely.

for their age. The high incidence of stunting reflects the cumulative effects of chronic malnutrition over the years of conflict." (WFP: "Country Case Study on Internal Displacement: Uganda", 1999. Aid workers have informed me that these figures have improved as the displaced have benefited from targeted feeding programmes since those studies were undertaken.

V. Economic and Social Issues

Traditionally, the Acholi are agro-pastoralists: they lived in widely dispersed settlements, raising cattle and smaller ruminants while practicing rainfed crop production, chiefly of maize, millet, sorghum, and a few cash crops, notably sesame (known locally as *simsim*). This way of life has been severely disrupted: the cattle herds that represented such an important fund of wealth and savings for the Acholi have essentially disappeared, ripping a huge hole through traditional society (see insert), and crop production has been catastrophically curtailed.

Finding 9:

Displacement and the ensuing disruption in Acholiland mean that the Ugandan economy as a whole is deprived of the contribution of what is in normal times a highly productive region. Yet there is now a perceptible movement outward from the camps, and crop production is starting to pick up in some areas.

The World Food Programme estimates that under current circumstances and on average, displaced communities in the three districts are able to meet 2/3 of their basic caloric needs through their own efforts. The resulting dependency of the displaced communities on humanitarian assistance for their basic survival is a huge drain on the resources of the national and international communities. The tax base from which revenue for local and national government could be generated is essentially nil.

In some respects, however, spontaneous change is beginning to occur, and patterns of crop production now vary significantly between the three districts. In Kitgum and, especially, Pader, there has in 2000-2002 been substantial movement back toward traditional fields.

In Pader, a significant (though unascertainable) number of families have migrated completely out of the protected villages and are resuming a semblance of normal life.

In Kitgum, the picture is more mixed: families tend to have one foot in the protected villages (where the children, in particular, stay behind, to minimize the risk of abduction) and the other in the family's traditional fields, or on temporary fields that are closer to their village. At Palabak, for example, an old man said, *"Some of us go back to our land to dig, but we don't spend the night there – we either come back here or, if it's too far, we sleep in the forest."*

In Gulu, there is similar spontaneous movement out of some, but by no means all, of the villages. In places like Pabbo, by far the largest of the villages, and one that has taken on the appearance of a settled town (albeit an extraordinarily crowded one), cultivation seems to be moving

outward in concentric circles. The problem, here as elsewhere, is that the land immediately surrounding the villages has been overcultivated and is exhausted. Also, the closer land is to a village, the more likely it is that it will belong to one of the trading center's permanent residents, who will demand high rentals fees.

Finding 10:

- A. *Displacement has put social relations and basic cultural values under severe stress.*
- B. *The socialization into violence of young people has grave implications for the future of the society as a whole.*
- C. *The conditions of destitution and the idleness to which young people in the camps are subject are also having a profoundly disruptive influence on the society.*

The basic tactics of the LRA, which in particular involve recruitment of its fighters and of consorts for its fighters by means of violent abduction of very young children, has profoundly traumatized the entire population.

Nonetheless, these communities have shown remarkable resilience. In particular, with strong support from the Churches, international NGOs and civil society, they have developed constructive ways of handling the LRA issue by emphasizing in particular the right of reintegration into Acholi society of former combatants and by revitalizing traditional mechanisms of forgiveness for violent acts.

Child fighters who are being returned to society are provided psychosocial counseling and some vocational training in appropriate NGO-operated centers in Gulu, Kitgum and more recently Pajule.

The task is enormous. In conversation with adolescent returnees, it becomes clear that these children have lived in something of a fantasy world, albeit a tough one. The result is that they exhibit far more than an ordinary share of adolescent posturing, bluster and manipulative charm.

Expectations of what they can expect are often highly unrealistic (the resettlement package, for example is quite modest, whereas the boys the consultant met at Pajule Mission seemed to expect that they would be given everything they needed to start up a comfortable, independent life right away). When frustrated, they become hostile and threatening, saying that they were better off with Kony and that if they don't get what they want they will return there. Helping such children to convert this kind of behavior and attitudinizing into effective resocialisation will be a huge challenge for the entire society, and not just for the NGOs who initiate the process.

Adults have expressed the further concern that, if forced encampment continues much longer, their children may have become so acclimated to a life of idleness and delinquency that they may be unwilling or unable to adjust to normal rural life, but will remain in towns and villages as unproductive marginals.

Finding 11:

Access to universal free primary education has been one of the brightest successes of this period of displacement among the Acholi.

According to Principle 23:

1. Every human being has the right to education.
2. To give effect to this right for internally displaced persons, the authorities concerned shall ensure that such persons, in particular displaced children, receive education which shall be free and compulsory at the primary level. Education should respect their cultural identity, language and religion.
3. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full and equal participation of women and girls in educational programmes.
4. Education and training facilities shall be made available to internally displaced persons, in particular adolescents and women, whether or not living in camps, as soon as conditions permit.

Thanks to the combined efforts of the authorities (through the national programme of universal, free education), the donors and the communities themselves, these goals have broadly been achieved, though too many children still fail to take advantage of the education on offer for lack of funds to cover the remaining, modest expenditures required, or because their support is required for other family activities.

The lack of a similar programme for secondary studies is a serious problem, as the destitution caused by more than 15 years of conflict and displacement prevents all but a few families from otherwise providing for their children's education. The sale of livestock was the principal source of cash to cover post-primary school fees; few, if any, families have any saleable assets remaining. Means need to be found to ensure that the emerging generation will have an adequate skills base to meet the economic challenges of the future, and to reduce the number of young people left entirely idle and marginalized.

Cattle and the Acholi: A National Catastrophe

According to census figures maintained by the Gulu District Veterinary Officer (DVO), there were precisely 123,375 head of cattle in the District in 1983. The comparable figure for 2001, as best the DVO can make out, was “perhaps” 3,000.

Many of the cattle were killed in the civil war; many more were rustled when the Acholi were on the run from the LRA. (The principal rustlers are said to have been the neighboring Karamojong).

The figures give an idea of the scale of the catastrophe that has occurred within Acholi society, but they alone cannot convey the economic and psychological damage that this loss has entailed. The Acholi do not have the kind of anthropomorphically cattle-centered culture of the Bantu-speaking agropastoralists of the interlacustrine regions, but their sense of wellbeing was nonetheless deeply linked to the wellbeing of their short-horned herds. As in all cattle-raising societies, herds represent a substantial capital asset fund. A family with a hundred head of cattle was well off; those with a thousand head or more were wealthy by any standards. This wealth has been completely wiped out of Acholi society.

In every group interview he conducted in the villages, the consultant asked who had formerly owned cattle and how many they had held. As soon as the question came up, the emotional atmosphere of the group changed entirely – people subsided into a wistful, dreamy mode, and spoke with pride and a special enthusiasm about what life had been like then. Every family, they claimed, had owned at least a few head.

There have been some small-scale attempts to introduce breeding stock into the protected villages, but these have been rather dismal failures: proper cattle breeding cannot be conducted amid such overcrowding, something that is confirmed by the fact that one of the leading causes of mortality among these animals has been the ingestion of polyethylene bags.

Any program of support to the Acholi if and as they begin to return home to settle in any numbers should absolutely include a restocking component. As has been mentioned several times in this report, cattle are central the Acholis' economic strategy – especially in Kitgum, where rainfall and thus crop production are more aleatory. Such a program would have to be designed with finesse – rapid restocking could create security problems, and the Karamojong are still next door. But the donor community could not do anything that would send a message of more hope and understanding concern than by supporting a project of this sort. Goat and sheep restocking would be quicker and less costly and should also be encouraged, but in the long term cattle will be essential.

V. Recommendations

The following recommendations assume that conditions in Acholiland will begin to improve in the coming months. A swift resolution of the LRA dilemma would of course be an ideal starting point but (as events in January and February 2002 have shown), this outcome cannot be taken for granted. Thus “pushing the envelope” proposals are put forward as an interim measure.

Many of these recommendations draw on activities that are already ongoing. The crucial challenge is of course to increase economic productivity among the Acholi. A number of NGOs are already conducting (or have conducted in the recent past) activities that enhance local infrastructure while providing vitally needed cash- (or voucher-) for-work. Such initiatives need to be encouraged and expanded. It cannot be emphasized enough how debilitating this prolonged period of enforced inactivity (or at least low-level activity) and economic passivity has been for the society as a whole, or how dangerous its prolongation could be for the society’s future. Acholi society has been through a long period of collective depression, yet it has within it terrific talent and a basic ecological/economic model (its particular form of agropastoralism) that is fundamentally sound.

A. The LRA Threat

In the context of the current global struggle against terrorism, the GOU, the government of Sudan, and the international community as a whole, should increase the pressure on the LRA to disband. Every effort should be made to protect the right of return for combatants and their families under the terms of the current amnesty, but the international community should also exercise the strongest available pressure for a peaceful outcome to this problem, keeping in mind that a military solution would almost certainly create more problems than it would solve. A concerted diplomatic effort should be undertaken as soon as possible to bring the Government of the Sudan to see that it would be in its best interests to use its good offices to help bring the LRA presence on Sudanese territory to a swift and bloodless conclusion.²⁵

²⁵ The LRA’s resumption of cross-border incursions in force raises issues that relate directly to Security Council Resolution 1373.

B. "Pushing the Envelope"

The movement away from the protected villages and back toward the population's areas of permanent settlement cannot await the outcome of efforts to neutralize and disband the LRA. Efforts should be made to encourage and support those who wish to return to their homes to begin doing so. The UPDF should be encouraged to reorient its tactics toward rapid mobile response to local attacks and toward efficient interdiction of cross-border incursions, now that these appear to have resumed, and it should receive international advice and support in doing this if necessary. As long as Joseph Kony and the LRA remain in Southern Sudan, some families will be too paralysed by terror, at least at first, to return to their homes, but others are already doing so, at least partially, and many others are ready to do so if given the right kind of encouragement. In order to break out of the current, stagnant situation, a policy encouraging rapid, *voluntary* outward movement of at least some communities should be developed and implemented immediately.

The military and civilian authorities should therefore work together with the displaced population and the international community to take the following measures:

1. *Develop and articulate a clear message on return.*

Such a message should state as clearly and as completely as possible what is permissible and what is not. Currently, movement home is significantly impeded by uncertainty over what is and is not allowed. Such a message need not be uniform for all areas or static over time: it should be possible to develop Parish-specific messages, on a month-to-month basis, and to state, for example that: there is no obstacle to return to (Sub)Parish X; that return is not at present encouraged to Parish Y because there may be a imminent threat of rebel attack (i.e., proceed at your own risk, but you are not at risk from the UPDF); while military exigency requires that the civilian population consider temporarily withdrawing from Parish Z.

If specific measures are required – e.g., the construction or widening of roads -- before return to given areas is seen as desirable, this should also be stated.

2. *The current process of rethinking military strategy should be encouraged.*

As the military leadership is well aware, the current system, which is based on the placement of static detachments alongside the “protected village”, has demonstrably failed to provide security to the area. The detachments are under equipped, often lack any communications with which to call in reinforcements if their villages are attacked, and remain idle most of the time. The nature of the LRA threat requires mobility and good communication, with an emphasis on border control and on rapid response in the event of incursions or attacks.

No one is more frustrated at the military’s failure to fulfill its statutory responsibility to provide effective protection to the civilian population than the commanders themselves. Many observers blame the current impasse on a failure to provide these commanders with the resources they need to do the job. If this is the case, then the assets they need should be provided.

3. *Under no circumstances should coercion be used to force individuals or groups to move out of the villages and into other areas.*

Guiding Principle 14 (1) is categorical: “Every internally displaced person has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her own residence.”

The authorities and the humanitarian community should be prepared to encourage and support return in function of the free choice of individual families. Sudden decisions ordering large-scale re-ordering of citizens’ lives are inconsistent with the Guiding Principles and in any case counterproductive. (Some of the ideas that have been discussed with respect to so-called “decongestion” fall into this category and should be vigorously opposed.)

4. *Once such a message is developed, it should be made known as widely as possible.*

Luwo-language messages should be disseminated, with clarity and consistency, in written form and over local radio and mechanisms for direct consultations between senior authorities and communities should be found. The greater

the transparency and consistency shown, the greater the likelihood of success.

5. *Once a clear message has been decided upon, plans for supporting return should be developed.*

It is important that the plans – i.e., the specification of resources and support to be made available and the procedures for doing so – follow the basic message, and not the other way around.

Such plans should again be context-specific. Parish-by-Parish consultations, ideally using Rapid Rural Appraisal or similar mechanisms, to determine likely intentions and to define needs, should take place as soon as possible. On the basis of such consultations, the authorities and the international community should mobilize the necessary resources on a priority basis.

6. *These plans must include provision for schools and other services to move with community members.*

Most displaced children attend “displaced schools”. Once a community has decided that it is time to return home with its children, inducements (including perhaps some kind of “risk pay”) should be found to ensure that school staffs accompany them.

In a number of cases, school buildings have already been reconstructed with support from far-sighted agencies in home areas as an encouragement to future return. Where this is not the case, plans for building new schools should be developed. Similar measures should be taken for other services, particularly community-level health care, but the movement of the schools will be crucial.

7. *There should be a high level of close coordination between military, civilian GOU agencies, and international agencies and NGOs and, of course, the communities themselves at each stage of the process.*

While inter-agency coordination is always a sensitive issue, given concerns that humanitarian agencies not be co-opted by military exigencies, civilian-military coordination centers, often staffed by a neutral party such as UNOCHA, have proven useful in many crises in other countries and could be crucial to the success of the “pushing the envelope” strategy.

8. *Such coordination should be a first step toward implementing Guiding Principle 7 (d) as fully as possible.*
(“The authorities concerned shall endeavour to involve those affected, particularly women, in the planning and management of their relocation.”)
9. *The Donors and the GOU should consult at high levels to ensure that the burden of support to the displaced persons, both during their ongoing sojourns in the protected villages and during the return phase, is fully shared.*

At present, there is a strong perception within the international community that GOU funding flows to the Acholi districts are marginal as compared to other areas and that the international community is consequently bearing the full financial burden of ongoing humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance to the region. If this were so, continuance of this distortion is in no one’s interest, as it will impede long-term normalization. One alternative would be for the GOU to strengthen the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness and provide it with the resources to establish a field presence exercise a more active role in coordinating and implementing humanitarian assistance in the transitional period.

10. *As communities relocate, consideration should be given to strengthening the civilian police function.*

At present, the burden for providing security in rural areas falls entirely on the military (including the poorly trained and motivated LDU). This is done, at great cost, by maintaining a large number of fixed (and often idle) cantonments adjacent to the “protected villages”. As people move back to their home areas, they will become stakeholders in the maintenance of security. A effective local police force, drawn from the civilian population and enjoying its support, could go a long way toward providing effective protection, complement the work of the military, and free up military assets for more appropriate tasks.

C. *Post-Return Issues*

1. *Every effort should be made to encourage and support the “peace ideology” already mentioned.*

Support should be provided to *communities* to reintegrate former combatants and their families and favored over the use of “packages” or other targeted assistance to the combatants themselves, and which over time are likely to create resentment and dissension.

2. *Implementation of the current amnesty must be improved.*

Explicit undertakings made to ex-combatants should be scrupulously respected; if these are found to have been unrealistic (e.g., the provision of “packages” of material support), these should be modified or eliminated in ways that are made clear to all.

Above all, *the provision of certificates of amnesty by the Amnesty Commission, which ex-combatants see as vital to their security, must be implemented.* Psychologically and legally, these certificates are central to the concept of the amnesty, the existence and proper implementation of which is in turn essential if the ranks of the LRA are ever to be significantly reduced.²⁶

3. *Given the extent to which it is involved in providing support in meeting basic needs, the international community should have a more permanent and pro-active presence in the region.*

While there are many able international staff working for UN agencies and NGOs in the region, there is no permanent overall monitoring presence (beyond the individual agency or NGO level) to assure that assistance is being appropriately used and that basic rights such as those under the Guiding Principles are being respected. UNOCHA or other international agencies should be encouraged to place senior

²⁶ In discussions with the consultants, some officials have stated that the issuance of the certificates is “not important” – that once a returnee (or “reporter”, in the language of the Act) has registered and been given a letter certifying this fact, he is adequately protected. But for the Act to function as intended, as an incentive to individuals to forswear armed rebellion, it is essential that the terms of the implied contract be scrupulously respected. The previous failure of the Commission to issue certificates is in this sense undermining the effectiveness of the Act, which is potentially a very powerful tool for peacebuilding.

long-term staff in the field to improve dialogue with the authorities and to assess the overall impact of international assistance. Such a presence could add substantially to the “comfort level” of returnees and encourage further return and resettlement.

4. *International humanitarian assistance must continue through at least the first successful harvest in each Parish.*

This applies particularly to WFP food distributions, which will be needed to sustain life through that period. Continuation of the existing school lunch programmes, in particular, will be vital.

5. *Standard “packages” of inputs should be avoided in favor of mechanisms that increase flexibility and reinforce individual initiative.*

Seeds and tools, and other inputs, can and should be made available through regular commercial channels. Mechanisms such as vouchers to be redeemed by merchants who agree to meet specified price and quality guidelines should be developed instead.

6. *Additional assistance during the transitional period should be provided in ways that increase public infrastructure and provide income.*

Excellent cash- and food-for-work schemes are already under way in many areas, building roads, rehabilitating or creating valley dams, etc. These should be continued and expanded.

D. Longer-term issues

After an initial transition phase, it will be important that there be support to the long-term reconstruction efforts in the Acholi districts. Given the degree to which productive capacity has been destroyed or stifled, lasting peace and stability cannot be taken for granted in the absence of significant efforts in this direction by the authorities and the international community. There should be at least a five-year plan for providing such assistance; such a plan, once developed, should have a strong claim to donor funding.

While it should be possible to return to a sustainable level of production of subsistence and cash crops over a reasonably short transition period, it must be remembered that the Acholi are traditionally agro-pastoralists. Means should be found over time to assist with the revitalization of the critical livestock sector, through restocking and training (by providing training and support to para-veterinary staff, for example) in this sector. The issue is one of tremendous emotional, as well as economic, significance to these communities. Nothing that could be done would be have greater significance in the eyes of these populations, or do more to convince them of the genuine concern of the national and international communities.

It is very important to keep in mind that (a) the basic Acholi economic/ecological model is well-established and has been proven over time, and that (b) the period of enforced encampment has been disruptive and traumatizing. *It is essential that reconstruction assistance be structured in such a way that it is just that – reconstruction by the Acholi of the lives that they had been forced to abandon and that they are desperate to resume.* The consultant spoke to a number of well-meaning technocrats who seemed to conceive of the return process as a blank slate, an opportunity to “modernize” the Acholi rural economy – by ending dispersed settlement patterns in favour of villagisation schemes (which may be more elaborate but don’t look much different from the protected-village settlements that the population has come to loathe), for example, or by eliminating livestock production in favour of mechanized agriculture. There will doubtless be opportunities to support incremental progress in the future, once normal life has been sustainably resumed. Until then, however, efforts to promote social engineering of this sort are inappropriate and dangerous and should be resolutely discouraged.

The issue of secondary schooling has been mentioned above²⁷. In addition to finding ways in the short term to help meet school fees for at least the brightest students, attention must be given to identifying appropriate forms of remedial and non-formal education and skills training to adolescents and young adults who are unable or unqualified to attend secondary schools, particularly for those whose opportunities were curtailed due to abduction.

²⁷ The London-based association of Acholi elders, Kacoke Madit, has begun to mobilize a bursary fund to cover secondary-school fees for deserving students. It is to be hoped that this fund can expand quickly and/or be widely imitated.

Abbreviations Used

ACF	Action contre la faim
ARLPI	Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative
DFID	(U.K.) Department for International Development
GOU	Government of Uganda
HSM	Holy Spirit Movement (Severino Likoya)
HSMF	Holy Spirit Mobile Force (Alice Lekwana)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LDU	Local Defence Unit
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army (Joseph Kony)
NRA	National Resistance Army (took power in 1986)
OCHA U.N.	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
UNLA	Ugandan National Liberation Army (Govt. military pre-1986)
UPDA	Ugandan People's Democratic Army (post-1986 Acholi insurgency)
UPDF	Ugandan People's Defence Force (present Government military)
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

“Protected Village” Populations

*Source: ICRC Field Offices, Gulu & Kitgum
Figures are for mid-2000, rounded to nearest '00*

TOTAL POPULATION	447,380
KITGUM DISTRICT	90,200
Agoro	3,200
Lokung	17,300
Palabek	11,200
	21,300
Padibe	29,700
Potika "A"	3,800
Potika "B"	3,700
 Total Kitgum	
PADER DISTRICT	45,300
Acholibur	9,200
Atanga	16,200
Kilak Corner	2,900
Pajule	14,000
Porogali	3,000
 Total Pader	
GULU DISTRICT, by County	311,880
<i>Kilak County</i>	
Amuru	13,700
Attiak	19,300
Awer	13,600
Bibia	4,900
Labongo Ogali	10,200
Okungedi	2,300
Olwal	13,700
Omara Awobi	1,500
Pabbo	41,500
Pagak	10,290
Parabongo	9,600
 <i>Total</i>	 140,590

Nwoya County

Agung	1600
Alero	10,800
Anaka	25000
Koc Goma	6500
Ongako	2100
<i>Total</i>	46000

Aswa County

Palero/Okoro	17,100
Paicho	16,300
Cwero	7,900
Awach	18,200
Ajuku/Patiko	11,300
<i>Total</i>	70,800

Omoro County

Lalogi	17,600
Opit	11,500
Acet	25,390
<i>Total</i>	54,490

Partial List of Persons Consulted

In Kampala

Christine Achieng	NGO Liaison Officer, Danida
Hon. Brigadier Moses Ali	Second Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Disaster Preparedness and Refugees
Hans Andersson	Ambassador of Sweden
Anton Baaré	Programme Advisor, Human Rights and Democratisation Programme, Danida
Jan Olav Barroy	Emergency & Conflict Resolution Officer, UNICEF
Charles Busingi	Project Officer, ActionAID
Graham Carrington	Emergency Field Manager, DFID
J.M. Castro-Magluff	Deputy Representative, UNHCR
Kenneth Noah Davies	Country Representative, WFP
Dereje Wordofa	Programme Representative, OXFAM
Hon. Agard Didi	Minister of State for Northern Uganda Rehabilitation
Thomas Djørhus	Deputy Chief of Mission, Royal Danish Embassy
Yves Drillet	First Counsellor, French Embassy
Kari Egge	Deputy Representative, UNICEF
Rhonda L. Ferguson-Augustus	First Secretary/Chief, Political Section, U.S. Embassy
Tore Gjos	Ambassador, Royal Norwegian Embassy
Randolph Harris	Programme Manager/Northern Uganda, USAID
Sigurd Illing	Ambassador, European Union
Michael P. Jones	Head of Office, UNOCHA
Stuart Katwikirize	Programme Officer, World Vision
Janne Marit Knutrud	First Secretary, Royal Norwegian Embassy
Hon. Norbert Mao	Member of Parliament
Paul Macek	Country Representative, Catholic Relief Services
Thomas Merkelbach	Head of Delegation, ICRC
Martin Mogwanja	Country Representative, UNICEF
Norbert Mugwagwa	Country Operations Manager, World Bank
Jackson Oculu	Emergency Coordinator, ActionAID
J.C. Odoki	Liaison Field Officer, LWO Development, Inc.
James Odong	Programme Manager, World Vision
Martin Odwar	Permanent Secretary, Ministry for Disaster Preparedness and Refugees
Hon. Oryem Henry Okello	Minister of State for Education and Sports
John J. Oloya	Rural Devt. Specialist, World Bank
Lt. Col. Richard K. Orth	Defence and Army Attaché, U.S. Embassy
Mads Oyen	Programme Officer, UNICEF
Mgr. Christophe Pierre	Apostolic Nuncio
Vincenzo Racalbutto	Director, Italian Cooperation Regional Technical Unit
Chris Skilton	Deputy High Commissioner, U.K.
Steinar Sundvoll	Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UNOCHA
Donald Teitelbaum	Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy
Lt. Col. Charles Thom, OBE	Defence Advisor, British High Commission
Carlos Twensingomwe	Commissioner for Refugees, Office of the Prime Minister
John J. Oloya	Rural Devt. Specialist, World Bank
Phil Vernon	Country Director, CARE
Oladapo Walker	Country Representative, WHO

In Gulu

Morfred Anestad	Country Representative, Norwegian Refugee Council
Mark Avola	Programme Manager, Save the Children (DK)
Hallvard Holoyen	Programme Manager, Norwegian Refugee Council
John Kisaira	Programme Officer, World Vision
Lacor Jackson	District Agricultural Officer
Christine Lamunu	Programme Officer, CARE
Capt. Khelil Magara	Public Relations Officer, 4 th Division
Liv Moberg	Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UNOCHA
Col. Geoffrey Muheesi	Commander, 4 th Division
Ochola Alice Jean	Field Officer, ACORD
John Baptist Odama	Archbishop of Gulu (Catholic Church)
Lt. Col. Walter Ochora Odoch	Chairman (LCV), Gulu District Council
Dr. Okiti	District Veterinary Officer
Semem Okwir	Assistant Resident District Commissioner
Max Omede	Resident District Commissioner
Oneka H. Richard	Programme Officer, Gulu Support the Children Org.
David Onen Acana II	Paramount Chief of the Acholi
Rt. Rev. Nelson Onono-Onweng	Diocesan Bishop, Church of Uganda/Chairman, ARLPI
Richard Opige	ICRC
Colin Opoker-Koc	Member, Traditional Leaders Council
Godfrey Orach	Concerned Parents Association
Michael Oruni	Programme Officer, World Vision
Lam Oryem Cosmas P'Tokwiny	Programme Coordinator, ARLPI
Rosalba Otwa	Coordinator, ACORD
Henry Owori-Achiel	Chief Administrative Officer, Gulu District Council
Philomen Nganda	Project Manager, CARE
Fr. Carlos Rodriguez	Executive Secretary, Justice & Peace Commission (Catholic Church)
Ray Studer	Agriculturalist, Catholic Relief Services
Latim Terrshom	Secretary, Traditional Leaders Council
Charles Uma	Assist. Chief Administrative Officer, Gulu District Council

In Kitgum

Barney Afako	Africa Rights
Sarah Akera	Coordinator, ARLPI
Okot Apolo	Resident District Commissioner, Kitgum District Council
Christopher Burker	Field Representative, Carter Center
Lucia Castelli	Team Leader, AVSI (Italian Volunteers)
Loti Lokonyomoi	District Secretary, Kitgum District Council
Makoha Raphael	Demobilisation & Resettlement Officer/Gulu & Kitgum, Amnesty Commission
Rt. Rev. McLoed Baker Ochala II	Bishop, Church of Uganda
Ofwono Richard	Project Coordinator, CARE
Jude Ojik	Africa Rights
Thomas Ojok	ICRC
George Otem	Programme Officer, OXFAM
Noel Warwick	International Rescue Committee

In Pader

Josephine Aber
Ola Ambrose
Hussein Mudir
Opio Leonard Ojok
Patrick Opiyo

Social Worker, Caritas (Pajule Mission)
Asst. CAO
Coordinator, FORDE Uganda
Chief Administrative Officer, Pader District Council
Social Worker, Caritas (Pajule Mission)

In London

Patrick Ogyuru Otto

Coordinator, Kacoke Madit Secretariat

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