

# **Uganda Government Approach to Conflicts in the North and North Eastern Uganda**

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I feel immensely honoured and privileged for your invitation to me to address this Conference. Secondly, I would like to express, on behalf of my colleague, our deep appreciation to the organizers of this conference: the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies in Uppsala and the Department of Asian and African Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. I am confident that this conference will realize its objectives of exploring optional avenues to minimize conflicts.

The presence of my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, and of myself in front of you here, I believe, is a testimony of true friendship that exists between the organizers of this conference and the government of Uganda which the two of us have the honour to represent.

We regard our presence at this gathering as a sign of positive recognition of the efforts being made by Uganda Government in various conflict resolutions.

It is the experience in various fields of conflict resolution that we would like to share with the conference organizers and all other participants.

Before I proceed with my presentation I would like to confess and ask for apology for having probably taken an improper unilateral decision to change the original title of the topic that was given to me. The original topic was "Uganda Government Approach to conflicts among Pastoralist in the North", but I decided to make a slight change by deleting the word "pastoralist". I chose to speak rather on the subject of "Uganda Government Approach to Conflicts in the North and North Eastern Uganda". My decision to change the topic was communicated to the Project Leader via a fax message sent in the middle of December, 1992.

I have been stationed in the North and travelling regularly to the North Eastern region since 1988. I have been in the two regions when the insurgency was at its peak until now when peace has been established in all the areas. People of both the North and North East cannot be classified as being pastoralist. Many are peasant farmers dependent purely on the cultivation of crops; and there are equally many who depend on both cultivation and looking after animals.

It is important to note one fact that historically most conflicts in the world have been caused and continue to be caused more by failure of leaders to diffuse

tensions that lead to armed confrontation than their desire to allow their belligerent forces to physically face each other in the name of "show of strength". The world would certainly be a better place to live in if all leaders of countries, tribes, clans and communities would always opt for diffusion of issues of conflict between one another by negotiations and agreement.

There are two distinct categories of conflicts in this regard namely, conflict caused by the leaders who manipulate the emotional and physical power of their subjects to fulfil their personal, social class or political ambitions. World history is abound with this category of leaders who on many occasions translated tense situations from a night of possibility into a day of conflict actuality. That is how a son of Aloice Shueklegrubber, named Adolf Hitler, caused ineffable suffering to the World in the middle of this century. It is also a historical fact that some of these leaders actually did not even have support of their people like Benito Mussolini in Italy, Hideki Tojo in Japan, Idi Amin in Uganda etc. Such leaders are common in the developing countries, I dare submit.

The second category is that of leaders forced into conflicts by the populace under them. These cases are very rare. One finds in one way or the other leaders like Sir Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But there are instances in history of futile popular wish by general population which have pushed a community to pursue the course of armed conflict. A case in point is perhaps the civil war led by Lt. Col. Emeku Ojuku whose aim was to break away from Nigeria and form a separate state of Biafra.

In discussing conflict resolution in Uganda we need to take a quick look at the history of Uganda. The country's history will help us to discuss the subject with a better understanding and appreciation.

The present country called Uganda was forged by the British Imperial power at the turn of this century. It was created out of many differing and varying ethnic groups or nationalists. In that kind of situation, it is not difficult therefore to see that it was expedient for the colonial Government to establish in the country structures which would help to exploit and repress the indigenous people for the benefit of the metropolitan power, the British. Resistance by local rulers by that time, for example by Kabalea and Mlwanga and others, was crushed without any dialogue with the natives as they were referred to by then.

The Ugandan Independence constitution was negotiated in London and handed over by Her Majesty's Government 1962. It made provisions for kingdom areas, for example Buanda was to be administered under federal system while others like Ankole, Bunyoro, Toro and Busoa under semi-federal arrangements in relation to the central Government. The non-kingdom areas were to be administered directly under the central Government. Thus, you can see that Uganda had neither a purely federal nor a unitary system of Government. Barly four years after Independence, there was a head-on collision between the traditionalists, mainly from Southern and Western Uganda (monarchists led by Buganda), and the political leader who supposedly wanted to force unity and nation building. The latter group, headed by Dr. Milton Obote from the northern

part of Uganda, succeeded in removing the former group by use of military force, subsequently resulted in the abrogation of the 1962 Independence Constitution. In its place another Constitution was introduced which made Uganda a republic and unitary state.

Although Dr. Obote inherited a superficially functioning system of Government at the time of Independence, the situation degenerated fast as politicians more and more divided people on the basis of tribe, religion and party politics. An atmosphere of discontent, mistrust and dissatisfaction developed.

But a much worse era was still to come for my country. Idi Amin came to power through a military coup in 1971, and after eight years of unprecedented brutal rule, he was chased away by the combined forces of Uganda exiles and Tanzanian soldiers. Amin's tragic rule is well documented, including a movie which depicts his rise and fall. After Idi Amin, there came successive Governments including the second regime of Dr. Obote. Dr. Obote was overthrown by Major General Tito Okello and Okello was removed from power by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) under the leadership of President Yoweri Museveni in 1986.

What is important to note is that the type of politics we inherited since Independence was based on "divide and rule" tactics: unprincipled pay politics, exploitation of religion, tribal or regional difference. The type of pay politics prevailing created a lot of suspicion and mistrust among the various groups in Uganda. Let me also point out that according to Uganda's experience, it is difficult, if not impossible, for multi-party a democracy to co-exist along side with wide spread ignorance and illiteracy. The political elites who form the tiny majority of the educated class are bound, by design or otherwise, to manipulate the vast majority for their own selfish ends to remain even in power and enrich themselves. It is therefore necessary to give the people time to develop political maturity.

So Uganda's problems were caused and perpetrated by self-seekers and unprincipled politicians who were to trample on the rights and freedom of the people for the sake of self aggrandizement.

The first important point to note in this brief historical account of Uganda is that for well over two decades there has never been a smooth succession of Governments. There has been for a long time state inspired violence; that is whoever formed a Government had to be maintained in power by the Army which meted out violence, other atrocities on those they even merely suspect to be non-conformist. The whole period was characterized by violence, abuse of human rights and dictatorship of the first order. The third point is the ruin and breakdown in administration, economy and social services. Almost every fabric of society was infested with corruption, a situation which inhibits the existence of democracy in any meaning form.

Let me repeat here, what may be familiar to some of you, that the National Resistance Movement with her armed wing, National Resistance Army, in 1981 took up arms in order to fight for democracy and to restore human rights, peace,

security and reconstruct and develop Uganda. The struggle took five years and in 1986 NRM seized the state power.

Before it took over power in Kampala, NRM adopted a ten-point programme which was to act as a guide and philosophy of thinking by its leadership. The first point in the programme contains proposals for political action that could form a basis for a national accommodation of divergent political and social forces in order to usher in a new and better future for all Ugandans who have for so long suffered. The first objective of the NRM has, therefore, been to bring about political stability and unity regardless of differences in tribe, religion or other sectarian considerations which had bedeviled the country. It is for this reason that the NRM has formed a broad-based Government, representing various interests groups but working together for unity, peace, stability and development.

Some other points in the Ten-point programme are: restoration of democracy and security of all persons and their property; consolidation of national unity and elimination of all forms of sectarianism; laying a basis for building an independent, integrated and self-sustaining national economy. These points and those I have not mentioned indicate the noble intentions of the NRM in taking over power. To date concrete steps have, and continue to be taken, to achieve these objectives.

In an endeavour to restore and promote democracy, the NRM has introduced a system of governance which is somehow peculiar to Uganda. At the national level there is an elected National Resistance Council which is the supreme law-making body or parliament. At other levels of administration, there are elected resistance Councils and Resistance Committees down to the village. The RC system, as it is popularly known, is intended to give power to the people—power to elect their own leaders, for self-determination and development, and power to be responsible for their own security. RC Committees at village and parish levels have proved very useful in vetting and recommending persons in their areas who may wish to be recruited in the Army, Police or Prison services. By statute, the RCs have been given powers to adjudicate over civil cases that would usually take a longer time to resolve in the courts of law. After three years, another election for RCs was held last year except for members of the National Resistance Council (NC). the National legislative body.

To demonstrate its commitment to the people of Uganda in particular and to the outside world as well, that it is determined to follow a course action different from all the previous regimes, the NRM administration on assumption of office constituted a Human Rights Commission to investigate the violation of those rights since 1962 to 1986. The report of the commission is expected to come out fairly soon and the findings should lead to those incriminated to be brought to book. The Commission is also required to recommend ways and means of preventing the reoccurrence of the violation of human rights in the country now and in the future.

As a permanent institution of Government, the NRM administration has established by act of parliament an office of the Inspector General of Government

(IGG). Reporting direct to the president and parliament, the IGG is responsible for investigating accusation that may currently be raised regarding the violation of human rights. Another major task of the IGG is to probe into corruption and injustices that may occur in government offices and institutions of all kinds. It is now widely accepted that the creation of this office is an important ingredient to bring about lasting peace, democracy and development in the country.

As I stated earlier, Independence Constitution was more or less handed over to Uganda by the British Government. The Constitution which followed in 1967 was worked on by a couple of individuals and presented to Parliament by Dr. Obote just for endorsement. Since then, successive Governments in Uganda have been amending or deleting parts, sentences or words of either the 1962 or 1967 constitution to suit their intentions.

Right from the beginning of its administration the NRM Government realized that constitutionality was another serious shortcoming in the the country's stability and development. To solve the problem, hopefully, for ever, the government therefore appointed a Constitutional Commission. For the last three years, this Commission has carried out consultations of people throughout the breadth and length of the country to collect their views on what kind of Constitution to be put in place to meet their desires and aspirations. I am pleased and proud to let you know that the Commission has a few weeks ago submitted to the Government its report and a draft Constitution based on the consultations and findings conducted all over the country. The debate going on now is to establish a supreme authoritative body to thoroughly discuss and agree on a Constitution suitable, acceptable and held in awe by the present generation and posterity. The present NRM Government will, without doubt, relinquish power after a general election to be held in 1994 in accordance with the Constitution due to be formulated.

The institutions of law and order, that is the courts and Police, the Army, Prisons and security organs of the state have in the past been at the heart of corruption, abuse of power and violation of human rights. They have been a source of insecurity to the population rather than safe guarding them.

Beginning with the Army, the NRM government as soon as it came to power, took one more step by incorporating in the basic movement a strict code of conduct for the Army. A violation of the code by any member of the National Resistance Army (name given to the national army) is therefore, not merely a breach of the Army regulations, but a violation of the basic law of the land. I shall deal with the accusations of the NRA soldiers for abuse of power and violation of human rights in the North and North East later.

If the code of conduct for the Army has been a major innovation, another one has been the establishment of the state security organization by a statute debated and passed by Parliament. They have been established openly and not secretly like in the past. the statute spells out the functions and the limits of powers of such organizations and their personnel.

Up to those point I have been recounting the major policies and actions which the present Government in my country has taken to redress the ills of history. As I

said before, I have been on the spot of conflict in the North and North East for a period of several years. It therefore gives me pleasure, but at the same time sadness, to relate my experience and analysis of the causes, the events and consequences of what took place.

Within one year after the NRM had established its administrative sovereignty throughout the country, a rebellion broke out in the North and North Eastern region. Like any Government in the world would do, the NRM government was faced with the disappointing and unenviable task of quelling the rebellion. The reasons why the rebellion broke out in the North and North eastern regions are multi-faceted. The main one, however, is the ethnic hatred which past political leader, had garnished in order to come and remain in power. In my opinion the following are the underlying and immediate factors which led to the conflict:

- a. Northern Uganda are dominantly Nilotics while central south and west are Bantus. Right from the colonial period Army had become an industry for the North and North East. It had become the preserve of those people. therefore a myth had been created that people from those areas were best suited for armed forces. When the National Resistance Army which was dominantly from the south and western Uganda shattered this myth by defeating them during the bush war, they lost job opportunities and suffered humiliation.
- b. Fear of revenge - since by composition of the two opposing groups (NRA and the dominantly Northern UNLA) appeared to be a long ethnic divide; and since UNLA committed state inspired crimes against the People from the south, central and west there was therefore fear of revenge by the incoming force.
- c. Loss of income since Army was a short cut to earning a living—there being no other sources of income.
- d. Political opportunists took advantages of the situation and manipulated them into taking up arms.
- e. Over the years there was a build up of arms and ammunition.

The first group that sprung up to start an armed rebellion in August 1986 was Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA) which operated mainly in the districts of Gulu and Kitgum. About the same time a short-lived group calling itself Cel-lbong also launched an armed rebellion against the NRM Government. Cel-lbong operated in Lira and Apac Districts.

The third group to emerge that advocated violent resistance was the Uganda Peoples Army (UPA) - these operated mainly in the eastern districts of Soroti and Kumi.

The fourth group was the mystical fanatic priestess Alice Lakwena, the "Holy Spirit Mobile Force".

The fifth group to declare violent intentions against the Government was Holy Spit Mobile Force II of Catechist of Joseph only in 1987.

Thanks to leaderships commitment to bringing peace all over the country, and believing that military adventurism and war per se as a means of solving conflicts is not the only way to resolve problems. It therefore resorted to other avenues of politically solving the conflict peacefully. In search of peaceful means to solve the conflicts the following measures were instituted:-

- a) A Resident Minister in my person was appointed.
- b) Amnesty was declared for all those persons waging and those assisting in the prosecution of war against the Government of the Republic of Uganda so as to give them an opportunity to lay down arms and to provide for their resettlement. This plan was passed by Parliament and was followed by Presidential pardon.
- c) Teso Presidential Commission whose mandate was Principally to bring together all the vital organs of Teso to talk, think and effect peace and development was also established.
- d) Peace talks were initiated with some groups. These talks have yielded dividends because peace agreements were concluded with UPDA who have been fully integrated in the National Army, others have joined politics, and some absorbed in top Government positions. These efforts have over the years achieved tangible results which the rebels took advantage of by surrendering in thousands.

By being stationed in the North as a Minister, my first task was to persuade rebels to lay down their arms. Rebels enjoyed a lot of support because through propaganda the people had been prejudiced against the Government. The rebels had fertile grounds where they exploited the ignorance of the people. To counter their propaganda, I and other officials had to embark on intensive mobilization programmes. This was done through public rallies, holding meetings in rural areas encouragement of discussions to allow people to air out their grievances, and conducting seminars where amnesty and Government policies were explained. This meant staying in rural areas to identify myself with the rural peasants and share their sufferings. Agents and relatives of rebels and, occasionally, rebels themselves attended such meetings under cover and were able to convey the correct messages. Through experience, I was able to learn that in order to end the conflict the rural population, especially women, must be key players themselves.

I came to realize that once convinced, women were the most effective agents of peace. This is because it was their sons, husbands and daughters who had been lured to fight for politicians who were outside the country together with members of their families. The propagations of the rebellion were people with the means to go abroad and enjoy superior social services which such countries offer. Furthermore women bear the brunt of the war directly. In a war situation they are normally widowed, maimed and raped.

As a result of the war, about 2.7 million persons were displaced, the vast majority fleeing to urban centre to seek in protection by government security

forces. These displaced persons had to be catered for in terms of provision of food, drugs, blankets, clothing and cooking utensils. My office, jointly with that of the District Administration and with the help of NGOs, had to ensure efficient distribution of the relief package.

Being responsible for pacification, my other task has all along been to resettle former rebels to civilian life. The task involves the provision of resettlement to every one of them. This programme has played a positive role in convincing the rebels who had surrendered and those yet in the bush that Government intention was all for peace without recrimination against anybody misled to join in a senseless civil war.

However, one difficulty encountered in this exercise was the desire by the victims of the rebel activities to have those who had surrendered punished. It was quite a work to convince such victims to forgive some of the former rebels who were known to have committed inhuman acts.

Although there is still a handful of the Holy Spirit Mobile Force II, normal activities have resumed. The truth is that the remnants who are still operating in the so called bush are hard-core criminals. They fear revenge from the civilian population. Their fear emanates from the fact that they killed and maimed very many innocent civilians and subjected the whole population to physical and mental torture. Militarily, their strength is of however no consequence to normal activities.

It would not be fair if I do not expose mistakes that were made during the peace process. Admittedly, during the military operation there were some excesses by some soldiers of the National Resistance Army. There were reported incidents of killing, rape and robbery. I must, however, hasten to add that such mistakes should be looked at from the point of view that even with explicit army regulations and code of conduct, armed conflict usually gives rise to a breakdown in law and order in the area affected. In this case, therefore, violation of human rights that have occurred were invariably carried out by individual soldiers, and not as a government policy or connivance. The NRM Government is very strict on discipline of soldiers and any reported misconduct against civilians is thoroughly investigated. The code of conduct for NRA clearly spells out the kind of punishment to be meted out to a soldier depending on the nature of crime.

Several years of insurgency has lamentably destroyed all social and economic infrastructures. A Programme of major reconstruction has been worked out with the assistance of international agencies and friendly countries. This programme, coined NURP, the Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme is multi-sectoral and designed to repair the damages that were caused by several years of insurgency; and to restore socio-economic activities and a framework for medium and long term sustainable development of the region; alleviate problems of unemployment through the initiation and revitalisation of income and employment generating activities. Notably poverty and redundancy has been one of the reasons for the uprising.



## *Uganda Government Approach to Conflicts*

I take this opportunity to announce that I have for the most part worked myself out of the job pacification in the North and North East of Uganda. Peace now prevails in the two regions. My main concern as a resident Minister is rehabilitation and development of the districts concerned.

I will conclude by pointing out that the role of social scientists in conflict resolution is immense, but they have not been able to play a significant role because their intervention is normally remotely felt by the warring parties. It is done at an arms length, sometimes too superficial to be adopted. There is therefore need for the social scientists to bring their level of involvement as much to the ground as possible and appear to be more assertive. Thank you.