

# EIR Conference Report

## Acholi leaders seek peace for war-torn northern Uganda

by Linda de Hoyos

After 12 years of war which have witnessed the social and physical disintegration of their society, the leaders of the Acholi community of northern Uganda came together on July 18-19, at a conference in London, to take action to bring peace to their land. Religious, community, and political leaders from both the two war-torn districts of Kitgum and Gulu and from the large Acholi exile community met under the banner of a *Kacoke Madit* (Great Gathering). “Concerned that the Government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army have failed to appreciate the futility of war as a means of resolving conflict,” the *Kacoke Madit* affirmed that the “conflict in Acholiland should be ended expeditiously, through peaceful means.”

For the last 12 years, but especially since 1994, northern Uganda has been part of a far larger war zone where the battle lines have been drawn not by those fighting on the ground, but by the geopolitical dictates of the British Commonwealth’s financial interests, as conduited through the British Ministry of Overseas Development and complicit channels in the United States. The demands for a full-scale war in Sudan to “bring down the Khartoum government”—heard regularly from British Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords Caroline Cox and such minions in the United States as Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.)—have brought unspeakable suffering to both sides of the border shared by Uganda and Sudan.

For years, Ugandan dictator Yoweri Museveni has been aiding and abetting the insurgency of John Garang’s Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), while refusing to end the war in northern Uganda, either by defeating *or* by negotiating

with the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Museveni’s game is to keep that war going, in part because it provides the pretext for the Ugandan military deployment against Sudan. The LRA, headed by Joseph Kony, is a ferocious force of up to 3,500 fighters, most of whom are abducted youth; it has, in turn, found safe-haven across the border in Sudan, in territory held by the Khartoum government.

On the Ugandan side of the border, the mere 20,000 troops of the Ugandan Popular Defense Forces that Museveni has deployed to the north cannot possibly deal with the LRA, and the rebel force has now been given free rein of the countryside of Gulu and Kitgum districts, comprising 15% of the total Ugandan land mass. More than half a million people have been uprooted from their homes and forced to live in jam-packed “protective villages,” where their basic necessities are not met. For the first time in decades, famine now stalks northern Uganda.

On the Sudan side of the border, despite the crowings of Payne and of Roger Winter, executive director of the U.S. Committee on Refugees and Garang’s chief proponent in Washington, there has been no significant military progress since the policy of full war was forced through the Clinton administration in October 1997 by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice and National Security Council assistant on Africa John Prendergast. However, the unending low-intensity war has completely disrupted food production in southern Sudan, forced thousands to move from their homes, and placed upwards of 2.6 million people at risk of death by starvation.

The terrible human cost, combined with the total lack of

military success, is now forcing a reassessment of policy in certain quarters in Washington, as reflected in hearings held in the House of Representatives subcommittees on Africa and International Operations on July 29, where Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio) told star witness Susan Rice point-blank: "U.S. policy has failed. We need a policy for peace."

### **'Promote peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness'**

Ten days before, the Kacoke Madit meeting in London had come to the consensus: "Enough is enough. There must be peace."

Although representatives of the Museveni government, Alphonse Owiny Dollo, Minister of Northern Reconstruction, and Peter Odok, Resident District Commissioner for Gulu, attempted to blame the war and its afflictions on either "the Acholis themselves" or on Sudan, this idea was not embraced by the Acholi leaders present. Coming under greater attack were: the British government for harboring the war-mongering, so-called political leader of the LRA, Paul Onen; the Ugandan government for its failure to protect the people; and the geopolitical pressures coming from Washington and London.

In its resolutions passed on July 19, the Kacoke Madit "noted with deep concern the continuous killings, maiming, and abductions being perpetrated in Acholiland and the neighboring districts of Apac, Lira, and Adjumani by elements of the Lord's Resistance Army, and the failure of the Government of Uganda to provide adequate protection to the people and their property, [and]

"Further noted with deep concern the heartless and manipulative role being played by certain foreign powers, non-governmental organizations, and individuals who have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict."

The first issue addressed in the resolutions was the urgent necessity for relief to be brought to the people of northern Uganda who are now on the brink of starvation. The Kacoke Madit "called upon the Government of Uganda to declare Acholiland a 'Disaster Zone' in order to pave the way for the international community to respond urgently to the humanitarian needs of the people living in the protected camps in Gulu and Kitgum Districts." The second resolution "calls upon the Government of Uganda to adhere to its constitutional responsibility to protect the lives and property of all its citizens."

On the issue of peace, the Kacoke Madit called upon the "Government of Uganda and the Leadership of the LRA/LRM to declare an immediate cease-fire and enter into dialogue, if necessary with the facilitation of a third party." The conference noted that the letters exchanged in November 1997 between Dr. James Obita, then foreign secretary of the LRA, and President Museveni should become the starting point for negotiations.

The resolutions further "called upon the Government of Uganda to seek every possible avenue to normalize the strained diplomatic relations with the Government of the Sudan."

The conference also addressed the question of amnesty. Except for rare occasions, President Museveni has avowed that only a military solution could be pursued against the LRA, and that the LRA cadre should either be killed outright or charged with treason and murder, if captured. The Acholi community, led especially by the Religious Leaders' Initiative for Peace, has forged a consensus that forgiveness and reconciliation are required, not retribution (see interviews with Msgr. Matthew Odong and Rt. Rev. Nelson Onono-Onweng).

The Kacoke Madit therefore called upon "the Acholi community and all Ugandans to promote peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and to embrace all measures that will promote unity and national reconciliation." If this is carried out in the process of establishing peace, the modalities for such reconciliation could become a model for bringing peace to the entire violence-wracked Great Lakes region.

The religious leaders who attended the Kacoke Madit had come together June 28 in Gulu in a meeting called *Bedo Piny Pi Kuc* (Sitting Down for Peace). The Bedo Piny declaration called for an "olive branch to be extended to Joseph Kony and his combatants. The participants strongly recommended that Parliament should enact an Amnesty Law to pave way for dialogue and reconciliation. . . . The participants appealed to the people of Acholi to engage in an all-out effort of *mato oput* reconciliation."

The Bedo Piny meeting also had delineated the reasons why the war in northern Uganda had dragged on for 12 years, singling out the following reasons:

- "i. Low morale among the soldiers who are on the front line;
- "ii. Lack of political will to find a peaceful solution to the conflict;
- "iii. The support being given by the SPLA/SPLM by the Government of Uganda;
- "iv. The support being given to the Lord's Resistance Army by the Sudan Government;
- "v. Some individuals within the army and the civilian population are benefitting economically by supplying food-stuffs and other items to the army and the rebels;
- "vi. Some foreign powers are using Uganda and Acholi in particular as a base for fighting the [Sudan] Government of El Bashir;
- "vii. Lack of trust between the population and the Government."

The videotapes of the Bedo Piny meeting of the Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, which were to be edited to promote such a peace initiative, were seized by security officers from President Museveni's Office on June 7.

## Last call?

The Kacoke Madit resolutions for peace in northern Uganda come at the point of opportunity for forging a peace in Sudan and the region, if the United States, in particular, musters the political will to reverse its failed policy of war. Under pressure of the famine conditions in Sudan's Bahr el-Ghazal state which is under his control, John Garang's SPLA has announced a three-month cease-fire in that area in order to permit the delivery of urgently required food aid. The Sudan government's call for a cease-fire at the negotiations held under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) had met with a refusal from Garang. In the Congressional hearings in Washington, Unicef director Carol Bellamy and World Food Program director Catherine Bertini urged that the United States take full advantage of the cease-fire to push a breakthrough toward peace.

Another round of IGAD negotiations between the Sudan

government and the SPLA begins Aug. 7, in Adis Abeba, Ethiopia. This time, Susan Rice said, the United States will send a "high-level diplomat," but she declined to say who. Heretofore, the United States has largely ignored the IGAD process, as it pursued its war course.

However, Congressmen Tony Hall and Frank Wolf (R-Va.) are calling for a Special Presidential Envoy to put peace on the front-burner of U.S. policy toward Sudan and Uganda. This envoy would need to be appointed immediately in order to take advantage of the partial cease-fire that now exists. For the people of southern Sudan and the people of northern Uganda—as the Kacoke Madit made clear for the latter case—peace is the first requirement. In both cases, populations face near annihilation as they are caught in the cross fire. Given the desire on the part of major parties for peace, further pursuit of the failed policy of war in southern Sudan and northern Uganda by the United States can only be taken as a death sentence against the people of the region.

## Hunger, disintegration in Kitgum District

*Here are excerpts from the presentation to the Kacoke Madit given on July 18 by George Odwong, Resident District Commissioner of Kitgum District, reporting for the District Disaster Committee:*

Kitgum District has been experiencing intermittent insecurity for the last 12 years as a result of insurgency that began in 1986. The war has changed form many times and consequently also its objectives, targets, and operational modes. From about 1992, the emergence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group, saw the emergence of a military operation that increasingly began to target civilians especially children, who were specifically targeted as a means of forced recruitment into their ranks. The consequences of this insurgency are numerous and obvious. Over time, the people and their societal codes have become overwhelmed and disorganized by the magnitude of this problem. Testimonies of awful experiences among all categories of people reveal the extent to which people have suffered physically and psychologically. As a result of the degradation of the status of the people, they are now compelled to live under very stressful conditions like displacement, abduction, deprivation, victimization, humiliation, separation, and institutionalization. All these have prompted people to develop life support mechanisms that in most cases have high elements of negative social

and economic trends. This is seen through the increased signs of hopelessness, helplessness, and desperation, such as high rates of alcohol intake, rise in prostitution, child-family neglect, etc. These arose because the power that held the society together is lost with all life's investment, yet nothing seems promising in the future.

This already precarious situation has been aggravated further by the dry weather conditions. Being predominantly dependent on agriculture for food production and income, the nutritional levels have seriously dropped throughout the district. A food security survey conducted by an integrated team from the district under the District Extension Coordinator revealed severe food shortages in many households, where up to 73% of the population sampled in five worst-hit sub-counties of Ormo, Namokora, Madi Opei, Agoro, and Paimol, were not sure of their next meal. There has also been a marked increase in malnutrition cases in the feeding centers, especially at the supplementary feeding center run by Action Contre la Faim [Action Against Hunger] at the St. Joseph's Hospital. Registered cases of famine-related death have been reported in the sub-counties of Orom and Madi Opei. It is important to note that the problem of food scarcity is no more critical in areas or sub-counties that have no relief food supply. . . .

The district is experiencing a big problem in addressing the needs of other people who are suffering other forms of disaster [not in the camps], especially food scarcity, which has now become a very critical matter that if not addressed with some urgency may lead to a calamity. This is because of the limited resources at its disposal, and the poor response from donors, including government.