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## Interview: Nelson Onono-Onweng

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# Uganda's religious leaders work for peace

*The Right Reverend Nelson Onono-Onweng is president of the Religious Leaders' Initiative for Peace, formed in northern Uganda in December 1997. He is the Bishop of the Diocese of Northern Uganda in Gulu of the Anglican Church of Uganda, in northern Uganda, which has been the battleground for the war between the Museveni government and the Lord's Resistance Army for the last 12 years. Bishop Onono-Onweng was interviewed on July 20 in Canterbury, England by Linda de Hoyos.*

**EIR:** You are the head of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative in northern Uganda. When was this formed?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** It was formed last year in December. The first meeting was held on the 15th of December in 1997. We had a meeting with the United Nations Development Program representative, who is also the UN System Resident Coordinator in the country, Prof. Thomas Bagakunde. So, that was the process when we started to come together. The process for the religious leaders' coming together started in November of last year, but the first meeting in which we sat together as a team was in December 1997, when we met the resident representative of the UNDP. The primary purpose of the first meeting was to talk about the problems at home, which our flock are experiencing. So, we felt, the Catholics, the Anglicans, and the Muslims — there is no distinction in the suffering, whether you are a Muslim, a Catholic, or what. We felt we have to work together, stand up, because that is why we have been called into this leadership. We have to stand up, not only in words but also in action, so that we see how we can move together, with the people, out of the problem they have been wallowing in for the last 11 years.

When we invited the UN heads of agencies to Gulu for a meeting with the religious leaders in February this year, at the end of the meeting we formalized the position of the Religious Leaders' Initiative for Peace, and I was asked to coordinate the Initiative of the Religious Leaders that was now officially formed. And, when we took the heads of the UN agencies to Gulu, we wanted them, together with the religious leaders, to see the suffering of the people of God in that land.

**EIR:** Can you describe this?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** The most appalling situation is the living in camps; it is a sad affair, when you see the condition the people are living in. For example, when I became a Bishop, the first pastoral work I did, was to visit the camp. I saw the malnutrition of the children. The children are my greatest concern. The condition in which our children are living in the camp is so bad, that it puts the Acholi future at risk. A future without children is dead.

The worst thing is the abduction of children. Now, many of our young children are being abducted. These children have no future.

When you look at the children who are not being abducted, who should be going to schools — there is no education. Children are displaced. And the schools are displaced. There are schools in town, but what kind of education is going on? A society without education — what future is there for it? So, when I look around, the situation of the children is very painful to me, very painful. The few who are going to school, are studying under very hard conditions. The parents have left them around town, where they feel it is safe. They are studying. We thank God, government has put in place a free universal primary education program. This has given many of our children the opportunity to go to school — those who are displaced in towns. But, after primary education (those who are geniuses and can pass primary education under these hard conditions), where is the money for school fees? Where is the money? The parents are in the camp, how would they get money to put their children into school?

The dropout rate in secondary school is very, very high. It is even worse for girls, because parents have to make choices: Who is to go to school? So, between the boy and the girl, they would prefer to have the boy go to school, and leave the girl at home. I know this because one of the girls whom I had paid for, to go to school — I was still getting a salary, and was able to help this girl — she has eight brothers, the mother is a widow. The uncles are helping to support the children, but they cannot manage all, and the girl was the first to be dropped.

So, when we look now at the future of my society, which I am serving as a religious leader, it is very painful, and it is very, very dark, if the war continues.

I have looked at it from the perspective of children and education. Now, let's look at it from the physical hunger, the food people need. You know we are called upon to feed the people of God, both physically and spiritually. People are hungry. The people are naked. And our Lord Jesus Christ says, we have to clothe the naked, we have to feed the hungry, but as a Diocesan Bishop in northern Uganda, where everybody is displaced, where do I get resources? I have to run to international organizations, to partner-churches, to help my people. People are dying of hunger in the camps, and I tell you, in one camp which I visited, where we took some blankets, in that camp the population has swollen to 42,000 — that is in Pabo, in one camp. When you go to that camp, we thank God that, by the grace of God, we are still surviving. The radius



*Ugandan leaders leaving the Bedo Piny Pi Kuc conference in Gulu. In the foreground, from left: UN Development Program representative Prof. Thomas Bagakunde; Minister of Northern Reconstruction Alphonse Owiny Dollo; Bishop Nelson Onono-Onweng.*

where people are living is so small, so people are packed—42,000!

At another camp in Amuru, where we also took the blankets—for the children again, because I was more concerned about the children. And the *aged*—I forgot to talk about the aged. The aged are also dying, because of the hard conditions in the camps. So, I thought of getting them tarpaulins, because they are weak and cannot build their own shelter. I got only 100—we needed so much more. At Amuru, the population had swollen to 36,000 in one camp, and those are the largest camps in Gulu district.

The Northern Uganda Diocese alone has 20 camps—20 protected villages. Right now, everybody is displaced. I do not know how many people are in their homes, except those in urban centers, where they may be in their homes. But in most places, the people are in the camps. The worst-affected area is Kilak County, where nearly everyone is in the camp. The counties which are affected most are Kilak, Achua, and, partly, Moya.

So, if you look at the situation of children living in camps, what is the future for *Uganda*—leave alone Acholi? What is the future for Uganda, a country where the children are dying, the children are abducted, where the children are not going to school because of the rebel activities? What is the future of that nation? And those who will *survive* this situation, what kind of people will they be? Will they not be *violent*?

That is the challenge which comes to us, we the religious leaders. What role do we have to play, as religious leaders, regardless of where we are needed? We all have a task to play. We have the ministry of love and reconciliation. As a

Christian, as a leader of the Christian community in the diocese, I would like to say that the love of Christ will be the answer to solve our problem. I strongly believe in this. Our Lord Jesus Christ says, treat others in the way you would like to be treated. And He says, love your enemy, love those who hate you, love one another. If we are able to love our enemies—whoever our enemy is, like Kony, who is now our enemy, the rebels who are the enemy, the ADF [Allied Democratic Forces] who are the enemy of the people of Uganda—if we can *love* them, and they, too, love us, then they would stop the rebel activities, the war would end, if we stop hating one another in the country. We should not only talk of love, but our faith means something different. We need to face the issue of peace with sincerity.

So, loving one another is the only way forward, because that is the only way we can forgive those who have done wrong to us, that is where we can tolerate those who have done wrong to us. Once we have rooted our problem in love, I am convinced without doubt that Uganda will be a peaceful country. But, if we do not have love in our heart and our face, in words and in what we do, Uganda will continue to suffer, there will be no peace.

Also, I want to talk about those who have created more problems in Acholiland. The Sudan element has made the situation so complicated. Before the Sudan element came in, the rebels were almost beaten up completely by the army. But when they found refuge in Sudan, the situation became complicated. They are getting support.

And, some powers use Uganda as a base to uproot the government of Sudan, and the arms go through the country,

and that is what people see. Nobody is allowed to talk about this kind of thing, and that is *dangerous*. It is dangerous when we do not speak the truth. It is true that the people of southern Sudan are all brothers, and cannot continue suffering like that. Now, if we want to support Sudan, let us end the war in Sudan, and if that war can be ended, to bring peace to Acholiland, I will be very happy. Do it now. But, if it keeps on dragging out and we blame Sudan for the Acholi-Uganda problem, then I think we are absolutely wrong. Because we are creating more problems for innocent people, and we are creating even more problems for Uganda. Uganda needs to be *peaceful*, it has been in trouble for many, many, many years. I think it is time for Uganda now to settle down and rebuild the country.

**EIR:** How do you see the peace being achieved?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** Dialogue. You see, the military solution will *never* solve any problem. I do not know if it has solved it anywhere in the world. Violence will increase violence, so it keeps a vicious cycle. It keeps going round and round. I will give you an example in the Ugandan situation. When [Idi] Amin was overthrown [in 1979], and [Milton] Obote came into power, another round of violence started. The late Tito Okello came into power [in 1985]; he was overthrown. President [Yoweri] Museveni came in, more violence, and rebel activities everywhere in the country—in the east, in the west. Thank God that the government was smart and talked peace to many rebels—and I must praise them for that—talked peace to the rebels in Soroti area, and talked peace to the rebel groups that were in Acholi. The most powerful group came out, but the rebel activities still have continued in the north. Another one has started in the west; it is now about two years old. Coming into power by *might* creates another force to come in to challenge it. So, I do not think a military solution is the answer. Dialogue provides opportunity for permanent peace.

I would like to think that, in the context of *forgiveness*, in the context of accepting our weakness, the wrong we have committed, we will build a peaceful Uganda—through dialogue. We must admit where we have gone wrong. It is also a sin for the rebels to have been disturbing the country, and when we talk of dialogue, it does not mean that we just let them go. They have also to take responsibility for the wrong they have done. And from that point, when people take responsibility for the wrong they have done, we forgive them. Like the Acholi people, for example, if they can forgive Kony, if all Acholis were to say, “Okay, you have killed us, you have maimed us, you have cut our lips, and so forth, but in the name of peace, we forgive you.” And Kony would also come and say, “I am sorry for what I have done. Thank you for forgiving me.” I think that that would be *smart*.

**EIR:** Do you have any messages to the American people and to the American government, as to what they can do to help bring peace?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** America is the closest friend of Uganda. We have a very good relationship with the American government. In that context, from that point, America can play a role to see that the people they relate with, make peace, as they are in their own country. I remember one time also, America said, they have an obligation to lead the world. If it is true that America has an obligation to lead the world, it can then lead us to peace, as they are leading the world to democracy. I know that if the President of the United States were to intervene through his own system to see that there is a policy for peace in Uganda, there *will* be peace in Uganda. I challenge anyone who can refute this, to have America put in place a policy for peace in Uganda, and see if there will be no peace in Uganda tomorrow.

**EIR:** What do you think the American people can do?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** The American people in general want peace, they want to live in peace. We want them also to do the following for us, so that we can live in peace. One, to pray. Can they pray for us, to have peace in our land? Two, can the American people help us in our suffering situation, like our Lord Jesus Christ says: When I was hungry, you fed Me; when I was thirsty, you gave Me water; when I was naked, you clothed Me; when I was in prison, you visited Me. Can the Americans do that enough for us, particularly the American community who are Christians, who believe in Christ, and even non-Christians who believe in human dignity? Can they help us, in practical terms?

**EIR:** Is there anything else you want to convey?

**Right Reverend Onono-Onweng:** Yes, I want to say something to the rebels, particularly. Recently, the rebels wrote to us, we the bishops. The Lord’s Resistance Army wrote to us, the religious leaders in Acholiland. And I am sure they know what we are doing—they got the declaration of *Bedo Piny*. I would like to request and ask here, in love, can the rebels open contact with the religious leaders, open communication? Because we are now talking in darkness; there is no open communication. I am sure they can reach us, because the church is everywhere in Acholiland. They can give a letter to bring to any religious leader; it will reach them. And, if they tell us how we can give the feedback, it will be very good. And also, how we can meet face to face the commanders of the rebels, so that we open communication to see how we can together walk through the problem of war, and follow the path of peace. I am sure that we, the religious leaders and the rebels, can work together for the good of the people of Acholi.

So, we are seeking for them to open the way, so that we walk together in the path of peace. We are already talking to the government, and the government has indicated cooperation, and they are open to holding dialogue with the rebels. But we have not opened communication with the rebels, so that is our prayer. Can they open communication?