

Africa Report by Linda de Hoyos

In about-face, Museveni offers amnesty

The Ugandan President's offer to the Lord's Resistance Army is a sign that he may be willing to end this conflict.

In a sharp reversal of his previous policy, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has offered rebel leader Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) an amnesty if the 13-year war between the LRA and his government is ended. Heretofore, Museveni has been completely opposed to any amnesty. "I was angry with Kony as he killed many people, but now I have been persuaded and I have agreed to give him and his fighters amnesty," Museveni said on May 14, during a visit to Kony's village in northern Uganda. "Tell Joseph Kony to come back home and stop disturbing people. Tell him that you people have the power to decide the future and who is to lead you through elections," he said.

Government officials said the President had been persuaded that an amnesty is the best way to end the war, in which brutality on both sides has brought total destruction to the two war districts of Gulu and Kitgum in northern Uganda.

Over the past five years of the war especially, the LRA stepped up its abduction of hundreds of children, who are then terrorized into becoming child-soldiers. On the other side, Museveni's Popular Defense Forces have refused to provide security for the population, and Museveni has instead carried out a program of placing the Acholi people of the area into so-called protected villages, where children are dying of diseases like measles and diarrhea and from malnutrition.

This has led to an outcry from the Acholi community and religious leaders for Museveni to settle the war one way or the other. Up to now, Museveni has considered only a military victory

over the LRA, declaring that he would never talk to "terrorists," a line in which he is supported by the likes of U.S. Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice.

However, the LRA has ceased its attacks on the two districts for the last four months, while the pressure has continued to build for peaceful negotiations. Museveni's declaration in favor of amnesty was prompted by a row caused in the northern districts when Museveni's Presidential adviser on political affairs, Maj. Kakooza Mutale, attacked Local District Council leaders Walter Ochora and John Bosco Oryem, along with religious leaders, for seeking dialogue with the LRA to end the war. Mutale called for the arrest on charges of treason of Ochora, claiming that he was in cahoots with Kony. Mutale said that Ochora had committed treason by sending a Christmas card to the LRA sick bay, as a gesture of good will. Ochora charged that Mutale was conspiring to murder him, calling him a "mad dog that must be tamed by its master," Museveni. Ochora organized a petition drive to have Mutale removed.

In the midst of this fracas, Museveni toured the northern districts, and in a meeting with regional parliamentarians, came down hard on the side of Ochora: "Ochora is 100% correct," Museveni told the MPs, adding that he was fully aware of all that Ochora was doing with the LRA. Later, at a rally, Gulu district MP Okello-Okello confirmed that Museveni had blamed Mutale and that Ochora was rightly seeking dialogue with the LRA leaders.

In a separate rally in Gulu, Musev-

eni said that he would use four ways to end the war, according to the pro-government daily, *New Vision*: "First he would use military means, followed by the peaceful means. He said in the latter means, religious and international organizations would be used to persuade the wayward rebels back home. The rebels must promise to come out peacefully and settle down without causing any more trouble. He said he would use economic development in the region and lastly consolidate constitutional governance."

The economy in northern Uganda has been devastated since Museveni came to power in 1986, first by the robbery by the army of all the region's livestock, which has never been replaced, and by the war with the LRA, which resulted in the burning of most of the districts' farms, where 90% of the people live.

A negotiated settlement for the northern Uganda war could have ramifications beyond Uganda. Since 1995, after peace talks between the LRA and Museveni failed, the LRA found safe haven and some logistical support in Sudan. Since then, Museveni has used this as an excuse to seek military aid and to give support to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army of John Garang. Garang, with the backing of Museveni, the U.S. State Department, and British intelligence, has been the last hold-out among the rebel factions to sign the April 1997 peace accords with the Sudan government. Thus, a settlement in northern Uganda opens up possibilities of dialogue between Uganda and Sudan for ending the 16-year war in southern Sudan which has resulted in the deaths of millions of civilians there through starvation and disease.

In Khartoum on May 21, Sudan Foreign Minister Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail said that Sudan wants to normalize its relations with Uganda.