



Refugee Law Project

Faculty of Law, Makerere University



27th February 2004

STATEMENT ON THE OUTBREAK OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN UGANDA

On the 25th February 2004, there were reports of violent attacks against members of the Acholi community living in Lira. The attacks followed a march that began as a peaceful demonstration against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government's failure to protect the people, following Saturday's massacre of approximately 200 civilians in Barlonyo IDP camp. This development has further resulted in retaliatory attacks against members of the Langi community resident in Gulu district.

The Refugee Law Project (RLP) of the Faculty of Law, Makerere University, notes with the gravest concern that the above events represent a development in the conflict that, if not addressed immediately, could both increase and spread to other parts of the country. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the recent violence is the result of ongoing ethnic articulations of the LRA conflict by government, the media, and other voices. As the RLP notes in its recently published report, *Behind the Violence: Causes, Consequences and the Search for Solutions to the War in Northern Uganda* (see www.refugeelawproject.org), this ethnic representation of the conflict has had three results.

First, it has generated a perception that all Acholi are LRA supporters, thereby fuelling intense hatred for the former among many Ugandans, especially those living in the Lango and Teso sub-regions. For example, one politician recently urged people living in Teso sub-region to "kill all Acholi above the age of 18." Extensive RLP interviews across northern Uganda, however, revealed that the LRA is extremely unpopular among the Acholi.

Second, the articulation of the conflict along ethnic lines has resulted in a sense of social alienation, political isolation and economic marginalisation on the part of many people in the Acholi sub-region, a feeling reinforced by the government's seeming lack of commitment to peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Third, and most dangerously, the situation has only been made more precarious by the arming of ethnic-based militias (Arrow Group, Amuka and Frontier Guards). Rather than

relying on a professionally trained national army, the use of regional militias has served to increase tensions between different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the RLP firmly believes that the recent violence is generated not only by the ongoing attacks by the LRA but is also underpinned by factors that run deep within Uganda's socio-political history. As such, while the deployment of police and the army to quell the violence may offer a degree of short term stability, nothing short of a process that addresses the above ethnic animosities in a genuine and holistic way will forestall future ethnic clashes.

In conclusion, the RLP makes the following recommendations:

- We support the move by parliamentarians to finally declare the conflict zone a humanitarian disaster area. We hope this will translate into practical responses from both national and international sympathisers to address the needs of the over 1.4 million displaced Ugandans.
- That all persons in Uganda, but particularly in Acholi, Lango and Teso sub-regions, rise above the prejudices and consequences of the LRA on their lives, and stop blindly attacking innocent people who are victims like themselves. If violence continues, it will only further complicate the situation and harm attempts at future resolution of the conflict.
- We would strongly urge all politicians to avoid statements that either portray the war in ethnic terms, or that declare the war to be over. This is a time for our politicians to demonstrate that they have the capacity to hold the country together and prevent an escalation of ethnic violence.
- We call on the LRA in the strongest terms to stop attacking, killing and abducting harmless civilians.
- We call upon Uganda's development partners to use their good offices and influence on the government to create an environment conducive to reaching a negotiated settlement to the war.
- The recent attacks further highlight the need, as recommended in the RLP's report, for a process of national truth and reconciliation to take place. Recent developments only show the urgency of establishing such a mechanism.
- Finally, the RLP calls on all Ugandans to urge their representatives in government to demand a peaceful end to this conflict. We can no longer remain complacent towards the war.