

Report on the visit by Mr. Malcolm Charles Harper - Advocacy Director, Friends of Northern Uganda (FONU) and Richard Tinkasimire Baguma – General Secretary, United Nations Association of Uganda (UNAU) to Kalangala, Gulu and Kitgum.

Wednesday, 26th January – Monday, 6th Feb.2006

By Richard Tinkasimire Baguma

Mr. Harper arrived in Uganda on 25th January and I joined him in Kampala on 26th January having left Kisumu after participating in the official launching of the UNA Kenya office there.

That evening we hosted him to a private dinner with my (Baguma) family.

We held a meeting in the morning of Friday, 27th January to concretize the programme of activities and make the necessary logistical preparations e.g. hiring transport for the visit.

On the 28th January, we left for Kalangala on the Ssesse Islands through Masaka arriving at night. The ferry was delayed over one and a half hours due to engine repairs. In Kalangala, Mrs Stella Dambya received us, and we put up in Ssesse Islands Guest House. Mrs Dambya (our host) is the link teacher at the Bishop Dunstan Nsubuga Memorial School, which has a twinning programme with the Buford School in the UK. Mr. Harper is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Buford School.

The next day, Sunday, we were invited to evening tea and dinner at the home of Sam and Mary ...where we discussed among other things the possibility of starting a UNAU branch in Kalangala. They agreed to talk to other people and make the necessary initial activities. We also discussed the possible advocacy activities for the MDGs and they emphasized targeting educational institutions. I left behind brochures, posters and contacts for follow up.

On Monday, 30th January, we left Kalangala for Kampala. Before departure, we had a brief conversation with Rev. Dambya Patrick about the proposed UNAU branch and he was enthusiastic.

In Masaka we met the Principal Town Clerk for Kalangala, Mr. Kyembu with whom we also discussed the proposed branch as well as building alliances with the local governments in the district particularly for the MDGs awareness and advocacy project. He pointed out the difficulty in the timing due to the political campaigns going on saying it was challenging to attract the attention of local leaders in the prevailing circumstances. He proposed a workshop for the relevant district officials after the elections so as to mobilize them to support the programme. He promised to set up follow up meetings with the target district officials for Kalangala and invite UNAU for further deliberations. We arrived in Kampala later that night.

Tuesday, 31st January was spent making the necessary contacts for the discussions with relevant officials in Kampala, Kitgum and Gulu as well as finalizing preparations for the trip to Northern Uganda.

On 1st February, we flew to Kitgum aboard Eagle Air. The flight was delayed for more than one and a half hours and we arrived later than scheduled. We were received at the Kitgum airstrip by Ms Rose Ogaba who is a partner (foster parent) in the child sponsorship scheme. Ms Ogaba was accompanied by Mr. Patrick ... who assisted in working out our programme and setting up appointments in Kitgum.

Our first meeting was with the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) Mr Okumu Christopher who updated us on the situation obtaining in the district especially in the social and economic sectors. He emphasized that although the situation was improving, a lot of work still needed to be done to improve the welfare of the people. He said the priority was on the needs of children, women and the disabled. He pointed to the need for increased investment in education particularly special attention for teachers' welfare, HIV/AIDS especially ARVs, water and sanitation and reintegration of returnees.

Next was a detailed briefing from the District Internal Security Officer (DISO) who gave an overview of the security situation in Kitgum district. He described the prevailing circumstances as a "situation under control" and cautioned that it was however still fluid. He said the attacks, abductions and ambushes had greatly reduced that one could easily move without escort. He was generally optimistic that a resumption of hostilities, if any, would not escalate over many areas.

Both officials reported that there was some decongestion of IDP camps going on; some of it spontaneous and also encouraged as well. They said this created new and emerging challenges of provision of services and security. The DISO gave an example of Madikloch where there are about one thousand users to a borehole. They also reported that the number of night commuters had considerably reduced. The DISO's estimate was that they had reduced to about six thousand.

On the 2nd February, we met the WFP Kitgum Office head Robert Dekker who appraised of the food and welfare situation in the district. He said they are feeding about three hundred thousand people and are providing up to 60% of their food needs. However the extremely vulnerable groups continue to get 100% of their food needs.

He also reported that they were focusing on the school feeding programme, HIV/AIDS nutritional needs and feeding centers, among other activities. As future focus, WFP is planning with flexibility with an eye to reintegration and resettlement.

He said there had been no hiccups in their distribution activities in the recent past due to the lull in fighting. He said there was need for greater security around the camps so as to enable increased production. He however noted that the problem of land shortage around the camps was quite exaggerated and reasonable production could start if seeds and appropriate tools were availed to the people.

Later we met the Programme Coordinator for the Kitgum District NGO Forum George Pele who talked about their revival period since November last year as the organisation's activities had been suspended for over ten months prior to November. He said the forum has about one hundred and fifty members including CBOs, as well as local, national and international NGOs.

We also visited Kitgum Comprehensive College that has some of the children in the sponsorship programme. It is a private school, which despite the difficulties has continued to grow and expand. The Head teacher Ms Mary Suzan Lameny conducted us around the school and pointed to the lack of library and laboratory facilities. There is an acute lack of science and English teachers as well. The school that is among the ranking in Kitgum district managed ten first grade candidates in last year's O'level results and has trophies from athletics competitions.

She revealed that the dropout rate was high because many of the children are orphans and former abductees who lack school fees.

We also visited the Florah Tailoring School where the first beneficiary of the Sponsorship programme -a formerly abducted child mother- Jacqueline Aryemo is undertaking a course in tailoring and dress making. Part of the funds necessary for the final term of her course was paid and she was given an extra USD one hundred to enable her five year old daughter join pre-school for a year.

We held a meeting with the Kitgum district chairman Nahaman Ojwee who also emphasized that the priority was education particularly scholarship sponsorship. He emphasized the need for empowerment through agricultural production saying it was important to introduce appropriate technology like ox-ploughs.

On decongestion, he said the exercise had started in the areas of Palabek and Lukung with the target of reducing IDPs to about three thousand per camp. He also emphasized the need for protection of the camps as well as construction of basic public amenities.

He decried the lack of qualified personnel in the district even when vacancies are repetitively advertised. He cited the area of health and that of education as most severely affected giving the example that the district had over five hundred teachers' vacancies but no teachers to fill them.

He said there was need to emphasise vocational training for empowerment of especially the formerly abducted children. He revealed that the Amnesty Commission had developed a curriculum for vocational training, which was appropriate, cheaper and covers a shorter instruction period.

We visited the Y. Y. Okot Memorial College where another of the sponsored children Prisca Gladys Aciro is schooling and the funds for her tuition were handed over to Mrs. Ogaba.

At the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) office in Kitgum, Lukwiya Francis briefed us about the organisation's activities aimed at peace building and conflict

resolution. He outlined their interventions which include: mediation services, peace rallies, peace education and training, community awareness meetings, conflict prevention, management and resolution, psycho-social support. He reported that the educational support programme had been suspended due to lack of funds.

On Friday 3rd February, we started with the UN OCHA Kitgum office where Mr. Mohammed Siryon the Humanitarian Affairs Officer briefed us on the humanitarian situation.

He pointed to the need for strengthening District Disaster Management Committees noting the need for stronger coordination and monitoring of humanitarian interventions especially down to the sub county level saying currently there are serious gaps.

The other area he said needed attention was the improvement of information management so as to have clear information for stakeholders.

He revealed that there was talk among some of the humanitarian agencies that the numbers of IDPs could have again hit the 1.6 million mark however the reasons for this were still unclear.

A major priority he singled out was providing assistance for resettlement. He said there were some resettlement activities going on in the areas of Lango and Teso while in Kitgum, Pader and Gulu, some satellite camps were developing especially around army detachments.

One of the most difficult and recurring challenges is the outbreak of fires, which are causing major destruction of shelter and disruption of lives.

He said the other very major gap was in the water and sanitation sectors that need urgent and serious attention.

He clarified that the donor community was committed to assisting people who were moving on their own volition but was not willing to support the setting up of new camps where people may not move if they are not feeling adequately secure. The status should be resources follow the people not vice versa.

He echoed the need for incentives e.g. hardship allowances to attract qualified staff to work in Northern Uganda.

He said the night commuters had reduced considerably and that the survey in December put the number at below nine thousand. He said however the numbers could even be lower but for some factors like electricity lights which attract some children to revise, the need for some privacy by some parents and reducing congestion at home as well as the search for 'freedom' by the older adolescents.

We also had a meeting with the Assistant District Education Officer, Kitgum, Mr. Christopher Oballim who explained that the office was severely constrained in terms of transport and facilitation for supervision, monitoring and community mobilisation.

He said the severe shortage of teachers in the district was exacerbated by the lack of accommodation in IDP camps and this was worse for female teachers. He reported that in several schools there were no female teachers at all. He appealed for assistance towards the construction of teachers' accommodation to ease this problem.

He also said the schools were too congested and the student to teacher ratio exceeded one hundred to one in some instances. He explained that this was caused by the amalgamation of several schools which were originally located in different places but now all have to be put together in the IDP camps.

He also emphasized the importance of student exchange programmes for children in Northern Uganda and other parts of the country, which would help promote understanding and information flow regarding the humanitarian situation.

During our meeting with Mr. Wilson Bala Nyeko the Rehabilitation Assistant, we received detailed information from a disability census his department had conducted with the Italian NGO –AVSI in four sub counties of Kitgum District.

He decried the acute lack of personal in the department as well as in the special education division.

He reported that a group of landmine victims had an association called the CANA GIRA Support Landmine Victims Group.

Mr. Bala pointed to the difficult he was facing paying his children's fees and we gave him Ug Shs 20,000/= which he said was the outstanding balance on the fees for Ogen Rwot Geoffrey who is in Kitgum High School.

We briefly met the Kitgum Women Bee Keepers' Association whose leader Ms Margaret Rose Ogaba is a foster parent of the sponsorship programmes in Kitgum.

That afternoon, we left for Gulu on an Eagle Air flight and were met at the Gulu Airfield by Mr. Anthony Akol and Mr. James Kidega of Action for Children in Conflict based in Gulu. We settled into the Acholi Inn where we were to stay for the time we would be in Gulu.

Later in the evening we visited Children at home night commuters' center run by Action for Children in Conflict. Mr. Akol and Mr. Kidega conducted us around the center and later the commuters entertained us to songs and performances. The centre currently holds nearly two hundred and fifty children and is being run by volunteer staff. On behalf of the Friends of Northern Uganda (FONU), Mr. Malcolm Harper donated USD 350 towards the running of the centre.

In addition to providing a secure environment for the children, they are equipped with income generating skills and psychosocial support.

On Saturday 4th February, we visited a youth education center in Tetugu IDPs Camp in Koro Sub County that started off with over seventy youths. Here the children are helped to acquire basic reading and writing skills especially in English language. Besides, business skills for income generating projects are taught both orally and through practical project work. Many of the beneficiaries of the centre are formerly abducted returnees and child mothers. They have impressive poultry and bakery activities for generating income. Psychosocial skills and music, dance and drama are some of the other activities undertaken here. I gave Ug. Shs. 20,000 to the bakery project, which they said, covered the cost of a packet of wheat flour for baking.

We also visited the Gulu offices of the Action for Children in Conflict where we were briefed about their programmes and the challenges they were facing.

We later had a meeting at Lacor Seminary with Monsignor Mathew Odong of Gulu Archdiocese who is also a member of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). We discussed the peace process in general and particularly the efforts of ARLPI. He noted that despite the teething challenges the peace process has faced, his organisation is still convinced a non-military solution is the best way forward.

On Sunday morning we met Brig. Sam Kolo, the most senior member of the LRA command to have come out of rebellion. He said he was convinced that peace would be restored to the region despite the many unsuccessful efforts in the past.

He revealed that he and his colleagues who were formally fighters with the LRA had formed the Northern Uganda Re-Integration Initiatives, and were in the final stages of registering it formally.

Brig. Kolo who outlined his role in the different peace initiatives over the years castigated some NGOs, which he intimated were out to make money and were not keen on seeing the end of the war. He also noted that the peace process had been complicated by competition for resources and profile as well as the various interests of the different stakeholders including individuals, politicians, local, national and international organisations.

He said his organisation was undertaking the process of registering former rebel fighters starting with Gulu district and later to Kitgum and Pader with the aim of pursuing resettlement and integration. He expressed disappointment at the lukewarm response that their appeals for help had received from the numerous organisations they had approached and appealed for assistance towards reintegration. He emphasized that when meaningful assistance is given to former rebels, it may provide a powerful incentive for the others who are still fighting to abandon the rebellion.

Later that morning I had a brief meeting with Brig. Kenneth Banya who is in charge of the government farm offered to assist former rebel fighters who said so far over twenty three thousand former rebels have returned from the bush and they needed urgent

support. He also echoed the sentiments of his colleague by reiterating his disappointment at lack of effective assistance from humanitarian and donor agencies.

I also had a brief conversation with the manager of the local radio station Mega FM who reported that they had increased their focus on peace programming. This, he said, is because the management of the radio station is convinced they can play a useful role in peace building and conflict resolution. He gave an example of a regular talk show that features fresh returnees and is geared towards promoting peace and reconciliation.

At the Gulu District NGO Forum offices, the Programme Coordinator Mr. Otim Micheal, told us they have about eighty members comprising of local, national and international NGOs as well as Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

The Forum's programmes include: capacity building; community based assessment, monitoring and evaluation; peace and conflicts resolution; strengthening civil society participation in local governance; among others.

The priority areas for intervention that Mr Otim pointed out include preparation for resettlement programmes that require enormous resources.

The other area is education where he says although some work is being done, there are glaring gaps in the secondary school sector, vocational training and the retention of girls in school.

He noted that assistance should also be given for improving livelihoods and income generation, capacity building for grassroots organisations, data collection and management for effective coordination of interventions, as well as strengthening health services especially in the area of HIV/AIDS.

In the evening we had dinner with the UN Humanitarian Access Advisor, Mr. Lars Erik Skansaar who said the humanitarian situation had remained unchanged since we last visited two years ago and it may even become worse.

He agreed that there was a reduction in fighting and access to camps was currently much easier. Like most of the others we had talked, Skansaar said this could be partly attributed to the dry season, which normally is a period of minimal LRA activity. This is because the area is dry and there is no vegetation cover so a lot of the rebels keep in hiding and move in groups of an average of two or three to avoid detection or confrontation.

On the morning of 6th February, we had a meeting with Archbishop John Baptist Odama who is the Chairman of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) who graciously accepted to meet us at very short notice.

He expressed his disappointment that the peace process had stalled and the momentum towards a negotiated settlement was at very low ebb. He opined that the war was still going on and there was strong need for renewed energies towards reconciliation and

conflict resolution. He was hopeful however that the commitment of his team, that of Mrs. Betty Bigombe and all the others involved would enable the continuation of the search for peace.

He revealed that the organisation was undergoing restructuring and appealed for technical assistance to successfully achieve this feat.

On the political situation in the country, Arch. Bishop expressed worry about the acceptance of the outcome of the election by the political players who will have lost. He said the current levels of tensions and stiff differences emerging out of the ongoing political process did not portend well for the future.

On the activities of the ARLPI, Arch Odama noted that focus was on the areas of reconciliation, reintegration, resettlement, education initiatives, HIV/AIDS, income generation, psychosocial rehabilitation and pastoral work.

He said they had strong working relations with the traditional leaders despite very minimal differences on some activities like some of the rituals and this was in no way a hindrance to the strong ties. He also said that they always consult with government at the local and national levels on the different peace and development undertakings.

He regretted that depression and disillusionment in camps was very high leading to suicides in some cases. He said that the danger of HIV/AIDS was of great concern to him because the rate of infection was on the rise and this was one of the greatest silent killers.

The Archbishop also disputed the estimate of poverty levels in the region that is estimated at 67% by development agencies saying it must be higher.

He expressed his gratitude for the continued commitment that we had demonstrated towards advocacy and assistance for the welfare of the people in the region and wished us all the success.

The last meeting before departure was with Rev. Vincent Ochen the acting District Education Officer (DEO) for Gulu who was together with the Schools' Inspector Ceaser Akena. They pointed to the dire need for bursaries for students in high school and tertiary institutions.

He reported that due to lack of resources, the district had discontinued the sponsorship programme for academically endowed but resource constrained children and this role was being left to NGOs, individuals and well-wishers.

He commended the efforts of various organisations that are sponsoring children to go school saying this is the most important investment for the future generation.

Insecurity, overcrowding of students, shortage of teachers, lack of teachers' accommodation, inadequate departmental transport and facilitation, inadequate number of

institutions willing to help those outside the age bracket of children i.e. 18 years, very poor remuneration of teachers, are some of the numerous challenges facing the education department according to the DEO.

Citing the example that approximately only 20% of the children who complete primary continue to secondary school in Gulu, the DEO passionately appealed for donations towards sponsorship targeting this level. He counseled that it was important to keep those sponsored in the good schools in the region so as to keep the costs reasonable and not to alienate them from their social context.

He also advised that selection of bursary beneficiaries and the schools that they could attend ought to be done in liaison with his department so as to avoid mishaps.

We left Gulu and flew via Kitgum back to Entebbe where we had a dinner at which we shared our impressions from the visit and agreed to work towards concretizing our partnership in the search for a return to normalcy and peace in Northern Uganda. We also agreed to intensify our efforts towards advocacy and direct contributions to ameliorating the appalling conditions in which the people are living.

On behalf of the United Nations Association of Uganda (UNAU), and on my own behalf, I am sincerely grateful to Mr. Malcolm Charles Harper and the entire membership of the Friends of Northern Uganda (FONU) for putting together the resources that made the visit possible.

More importantly, our gratitude for the inspiration, for the continued support and commitment to programmes aimed at contributing to positively making life better for the people in Northern Uganda. This is more so because the challenges are enormous both on the individuals and organisations working for the improvement of the region.

We pledge total commitment to all well-intentioned efforts and partnerships in pursuance of peace and prosperity in Northern Uganda and beyond.