

## FRIENDS OF NORTHERN UGANDA (FONU)

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September, 2005

Dear friends,

This is the first comprehensive newsletter which we have produced to let you know of the current emphases in the work of the Friends of Northern Uganda (FONU) in relation to the appalling – and largely hidden – tragedy in northern Uganda as the Ugandan government and the Lord's resistance Army continue their hostilities to the total detriment of the *modus vivendi* of the people of the region.

### *Current trends in Uganda*

There is increasing concern in many circles both in and outside Uganda at the broad direction that political events in Uganda are following.

The present constitution limits an incumbent President to two terms in office. However, President Yoweri Museveni is doing everything that he can to seek a third term for himself. The Christian religious leaders of all the major denominations (and Uganda is a *very* religious country) have come out strongly against any amendment to the Constitution. There is much evidence in Africa that “permanency in office” can lead to increasing power becoming vested ever more strongly in the hands of a small minority and that nepotism, corruption and, ultimately, tyranny can become the order of the day. Certainly, the President is appointing more and more family, tribal and clan members to an increasing number of senior posts throughout the system of governance. A close Ugandan friend and former colleague visited her mother in Uganda (not the North) in April and she had some very serious things to say about increasing corruption from the very top downwards. I can send to anyone who is interested (either by email or hard copy) a copy of that report, but will be unable to name the writer. She is nervous – since she still has family members living there – of her name being attributed to it but I can assure you that she is a fully reliable witness who retains a deep love of Uganda and a solid commitment to good governance there.

There was a referendum in Uganda on 28<sup>th</sup> July when people were asked to say whether or not they support an amendment to the Constitution being presented to Parliament in Kampala which would enable Uganda to return to multi-party politics and allow the office of President to remain open to any candidate for more than two terms. There is much evidence to suggest that the official media is being used to advance the wisdom of a “yes” vote and that bribery and intimidation are very possibly also being employed. At the same time, the real possibility of serious alternative presidential candidates being allowed to campaign on equal terms with the present incumbent appear to be virtually non-existent.

In FONU we see that these developments could have potentially far-reaching effects on the situation in northern Uganda which I will outline to you later in this newsletter.

We have tried to discuss our concerns about the level of good governance in Uganda with our own Government and I have re-established a conversation with Hilary Benn which we had started before the General Election. I am also in touch with the former senior staff of the (Blair) Commission for Africa secretariat about the priority of good governance within its proposals and how this is interpreted. While it is comparatively easy to argue, for example, that what is happening in Zimbabwe at the moment or the level of corruption in Kenya under President Daniel arap Moi (and, increasingly, we fear under the current government led by Mwai Kibaki) are appalling, nevertheless the more “hidden” corruption in countries like Uganda has to be tackled as well. This is made harder by the fact that, when in office in what is now the Department for International Development, both Lynda Chalker and Clare Short saw Yoweri Museveni as one of the “giants” of the new Africa who could, apparently, do no wrong. And, to be fair, in his earlier years in office, he proved a creative and able leader in the major effort to enrol (through debt relief savings) children into primary school and in the national struggle against HIV/AIDS. Uganda now, of all children of primary school age in the country, has a higher percentage enrolled in primary schools than any other country in sub-Saharan Africa. While questions remain on the table to be answered regarding class sizes, availability of books *et cetera* and the number of qualified teachers, nevertheless this is a very positive development in relation to one of the UN Millennium Development Goals. And, in so far as HIV/AIDS is concerned, Uganda had been in the vanguard of the struggle within Africa and now has (with the exception of the north) a very considerably reduced infection rate.

While I was briefly in Uganda in late-January, I spoke with a number of Ugandans about the referendum/third term issue. I came away very concerned by the number of people who told me of their fear that, if the President manipulated the outcome in ways which were clearly and manifestly less than transparent and properly democratic, there could be increasing unrest – including, some of them said, within his heartland of south-west Uganda – with a real possibility of an ultimate return to a civil war to oust him; something which Uganda needs like a pain in the head.

We (FONU) spoke with Lord (Frank) Judd and drafted some questions which he put down in the House of Lords before the summer recess began in mid-July regarding UK policy towards the referendum issue. The reply from Lord Triesman was somewhat vague on details of whether Her Majesty’s Government believed that the referendum would be fully transparent, open and democratic and, if so, what were the grounds for that confidence; if not, what would HMG seek to do about it? While it is perfectly legitimate for a third (or open) term of office to be agreed in a fully open and democratic process, it is the level of that genuine openness which is under such tight scrutiny.

We are also discussing with Lords Judd and (Ivor) Richard and with Baroness Northover the possibility of there being a debate in the House of Lords in the autumn on Uganda and, not least, the crisis in the north.

## *Northern Uganda*

And so to northern Uganda!

### *A President for FONU*

FONU is delighted that the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Gulu, John Baptist Odama, has agreed to become our President. He chairs the all-important Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) which strongly advocates a non-military solution to the civil war in the region, a policy which FONU fully endorses. (The basic argument is that, since the majority of the troops in the Lord's Resistance Army are forcibly abducted children, every effort should be made to rescue and rehabilitate them rather than slaughter them on the battlefield; an approach to which their distraught parents are staunchly committed). FONU is working closely with ARLPI in Uganda and with their Justice and Peace contacts in the United Kingdom.

We were delighted when, through our FONU Chairperson Aldo Okot, the Archbishop – on a private visit to London – agreed at very short notice to brief us on the current situation in northern Uganda (in late July). Lord Ivor Richard very kindly booked a room for us in the House of Lords and we had a very useful meeting. More recently, Aldo and I tried to set up a meeting in London with the Paramount Chief of the Acholi. It had to be cancelled at the last moment when he had suddenly to bring forward a visit to the United States but he has promised to fulfil it on his next trip to London.

### *A non-military approach to resolving the crisis in the north*

We see that the current commitment of President Museveni and many of those closest to him to such a settlement in the north is sadly lukewarm. He seems better able to think in military terms and to believe, if his statements to the (Ugandan) *New Vision* newspaper and other media outlets are to be believed, that a military solution lies just round the next corner. The evidence to support such an approach is relatively slender.

He has a peace negotiator, Mrs. Betty Bigombe, a former government Minister and now working with the World Bank. Her efforts are being supported internationally by representatives of the American, British, Norwegian and Netherlands governments, but the evidence which we have gleaned suggests that the LRA do not see her an independent negotiator but as a mere mouthpiece of the President. It is certainly evident that she is given little leeway by the President to pursue “windows of opportunity” as and when they appear without referring everything back to him first (which often leads to those “windows” closing before they can be discussed further). This stalemate is very sad, since it enables the suffering of almost the entire population of northern Uganda to continue in a seemingly hopeless rut. FONU is looking into possible initiatives which non-governmental actors could take to try to promote alternative ways forward, but the United Nations and most interested governments (of which there seem to be relatively few - the Canadians are the best of them) seem scared of upsetting the Bigombe apple cart, however much progress it is or is not actually making.

### *Life for the people of northern Uganda*

There is a deeply tragic situation in the north of Uganda. Currently, over 90% of the population are confined (on Government orders) to internally displaced people's (IDP) camps. This is deemed necessary for their personal security and there is a ban on anyone moving out of the camps by more than 2 km. This makes it impossible for people to till their fields, plant crops or harvest food, making them almost totally dependent on supplies from the (UN) World Food Programme and others. (We are talking of almost 1.5 million people). Life in the camps is grim. Often they are inadequately protected by government troops and, from time to time, they have been attacked by LRA fighters. People have been abducted, women abused and houses set on fire. On other occasions, government (UPDF) soldiers have misbehaved and, on occasion, have – without any attempt to question them – shot and killed people who have left the camps for whatever reason (in case they are “LRA terrorists”). Morale is low.

The most recent edition of the newsletter of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Gulu Archdiocese stressed the depth of the tragedy:

*One thousand internally displaced persons die every week in Acholi. On average, there are 1.54 deaths per 10,000 per day. The shocking fact is the conclusion of a survey conducted by the Ugandan Government, UN agencies and NGOs. One of the chilling conclusions is that most of the dead are children, who are dying of malaria, diarrhoea HIV/AIDS and violence. Given the appalling conditions of lack of hygiene, insufficient feeding and poor health services, the conclusions come as little surprise.*

*As the intensity of rebel violence appears to be scaling down ... other worrying factors are coming up. For instance, only during August this year six civilians have been shot dead by UDFP soldiers in displaced camps. In many cases the culprits get total impunity while people wonder why some of the very people who are in charge of protecting them become a threat to their lives.*

*Diseases, depression and desperation are also preying on the IDPs. On top of that, cultural and family values have collapsed. Because of all this, displaced camps are becoming places where death reigns.*

*An urgent solution is needed. The death rate in displaced camps in Northern Uganda is unacceptably high. In the last term, people need to be helped to be resettled in their original homes with enough security provisions. The Government needs to come up with a resettlement plan. The earlier this is done, the more human lives will be saved.*

This statement compares very interestingly with a passage from a book on their civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) from the late 1990s

onwards, which I am currently reading (“*The African stakes of the Congo war*”, editor: John F. Clark, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, Uganda 2003, ISBN 9970 02 388 8):

*(After the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement of 1999) the belligerents persisted with their military adventurism precisely because neither side was able to accomplish its objectives.*

*Unfortunately, as a result of their persistence, the war became more intense; it then dragged on for two and a half years and caused staggering destruction to infrastructure, human life and the environment. According to a survey conducted by the New York-based International Rescue Committee (IRC), the death toll approached three million by April, 2001. Significantly, the survey, which focused only on rebel-held territories, attributed a relatively small proportion of the deaths – a few hundred thousand – to the battles waged by the warring armies. The vast majority of deaths resulted from starvation, disease and deprivation. For instance, it is estimated that, of the first 1.7 million war deaths recorded in the Congo by 2000, only 200,000 were by violence ...*

*The children were particularly vulnerable to war-related diseases and starvation in the Congo, where they perished at an extraordinary rate. (An example is then given: Around Moba, in the province of Katanga, nearly half of the infants died before reaching their first birthday in 2000. By March 2001, infant mortality had worsened in the province, with three out of four children dying before age two in the district of Kalemie.*

In addition the phenomenon of night “commuters” from villages and homesteads around the towns of Gulu and Kitgum continues unabated. Tens of thousands of people, from small children and their parents to the elderly – a large number are young people – trudge into town before nightfall for overnight protection. Some sleep in temporary shelters which have been erected for the purpose but many doss down in the open. When it is cold and/or wet, that is no joke at all. Bored young people are tempted to seek fun in the bush and the result is a very high rate of new HIV infection (over 30%, compared with c. 6% nationally in Uganda). In the morning, the children walk to school and others to their homes, ready to repeat the exercise next evening.

FONU believes that it may have secured funding for a further major shelter in Kitgum. It would be built in such a way that, when peace is finally restored, it could be used for other longer-term training or other purposes.

### ***Punishment or reconciliation***

The Government of Uganda, some while back, requested the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague to investigate the leadership of the LRA in order to establish whether a case exists against them on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. (The Chief Prosecutor believes that the Uganda People’s Defence Force and, possibly, others, should also be investigated on the ground that there are

cases of physical or other abuse against IDPs in the camps which should not be allowed to enjoy impunity).

ARLPI and other groups have expressed considerable concern at this referral of the LRA to the ICC. They argue that it could cause the LRA to become even less prone to some form of negotiation than is the case at the moment and that traditional ways of seeking reconciliation, such as through the process of Mato Oput, would very possibly prove more fruitful. (I have a paper on Mato Oput if anyone would like to see it, either electronically or in hard copy format).

FONU believes that there should be no impunity for any perpetrators of war crimes or crimes against humanity, unless this is agreed by all parties within a comprehensive peace settlement. (Even then, it may prove that impunity is the lesser of evils to be chosen between, rather than a positive outcome). There is a difficulty in that, once an ICC investigation has begun, it cannot be stopped at the request of the instigator of it. Nevertheless, Archbishop Odama and others from ARLPI have met the Chief Prosecutor in the Hague and have expressed their concerns to her. She understands their approach and has agreed that traditional methods of reconciliation remain of great importance.

FONU has also submitted an application to the National Lottery Fund for support on a major project in Kitgum to establish and run a centre which would train key local leaders and others in the skills of mediation, reconciliation and reintegration into the community of returnees, many of whom have been forced by the LRA to commit the most appalling atrocities, often against their own family members or neighbours in their home villages. There is also a great need to encourage those who have suffered atrocities, either directly or as witnesses, to seek an approach of reconciliation rather than hatred; never easy in such situations, but vital if the community of northern Uganda is ever to come to terms with itself and to build for the future.

### ***Helping rescued and returned abductees***

There are a number of local Concerned Parents and other groups in northern Uganda with which FONU has developed – or is developing – functional links. They are much involved with helping children who, having been abducted by the LRA, have either been rescued or have managed to escape. FONU has fundraised – and is continuing to do so – in order to raise bursary funds for such former abductees to be able to go to school (secondary education in Uganda is not free) or to get some form of skills training.

The Australia-Uganda Foundation is much involved in this educational work and FONU is working very closely with it. We are also co-operating with the very active Kitgum Women Beekeepers Association and its President, Margaret Rose Ogaba, who are also involved with helping returnees – not just as potential honey producers! (My local church, via FONU, is sponsoring Jacqueline Aryemo, who was forcibly abducted at the age of 14, to undertake skills training on a basic tailoring course in Kitgum. She had been given to a commander in the LRA as a “wifelet” – young girls are attractive in that they are less likely to be HIV+ - and, by the time that she escaped back to Kitgum, had delivered one child by him and was pregnant with a second. Her parents are basically destitute in an IDP camp, but Margaret is securing practical

support for her with our grant [such as somewhere to live during the course] and she is doing very well. A group of churches in the west country and in Nottingham are sponsoring the school fees over 5 years for some returnee boys. It is vital to secure the full sum required for the whole secondary school curriculum since, if this does not happen, very often entrants in year 1 of the course have to drop out, with many negative effects, if further funding is not available. Two of our committee members, David Luwum and Noel Harrower, are leading this side of our work).

### ***Developing media links***

One of the major problems regarding northern Uganda is that this story “is not new”; indeed, it is now 19 years old. As a result, the media has “done it” and, unless there is some dramatic new story emanating from it, there is likely to be only modest and sporadic coverage. To be fair to a number of committed journalists, there is coverage from time to time – on television and radio and in the written press – but nothing systematic.

To challenge that, we approached the *Daily Mirror* to see whether they would be interested in running a campaign and appeal with us – like they did for Cambodia with John Pilger in 1979 – but they did not bite at the cherry. That was a sad day for us.

We subsequently – paying for it out of our own pockets – invited a number of journalists (including Jon Snow of Channel 4 News, who had worked as a VSO in Uganda in his youth) to an informal dinner discussion at Soho House, a journalists’ club in central London, in order to speak with them about the northern Uganda crisis. We had a very useful exchange and have fed information and invitations to our meetings to the group. One of them, Karen Allen, is about to become the BBC Correspondent in East Africa and has said that she wants to remain in touch.

Influencing the media – and especially the editorial and other decision-makers – is often an uphill task but this group is excellent and we are delighted to have built a link to them. We were helped greatly by Mark Galloway, the Director of the International Broadcasting Trust, and by an independent television producer, Carol Haslam, in getting this initiative off the ground.

### ***Fundraising***

To date, the founders of FONU have largely covered the – albeit modest – running costs through voluntary effort and dipping into their own pockets. We have discussed a fundraising strategy with a professional company which works at the grass roots level and are currently seeking a grant of £16,000 to enable us to employ them to raise funds for us. We have applied to two trusts to date to raise that sum but they have been unable to help. We are now approaching others but, if anyone knows of possible grant-making trusts which might be able to help, we would love to hear about them.

We are supporting a number of individual returnees with school fees or skills training and continue to seek sponsorship from church and other organizations. As mentioned above, we have prepared a major application to the National Lottery for a reconciliation programme in Kitgum.

So! We are on our way; but there is still much to do.

### ***Learning about northern Uganda***

One challenge facing Uganda is the relative ignorance of people outside the north of the country about the situation there.

I chair the Governors at the comprehensive school at Burford in west Oxfordshire. For ten years we have enjoyed a very creative friendship link with the Bishop Dunstan Nsubuga Secondary School at Kalangala on the Ssesse Islands in Lake Victoria. Every year there is an exchange – from Uganda to Burford one year and vice versa the next. This July, while a group of teachers and students from Burford were in Kalangala, we organized – with generous financial support from the Burford-Uganda Fund and one or two individual donations – for a group of teachers and students from both Gulu (through the good offices of a local project, “*Through Art Keep Smiling*”) and Kitgum (with much practical help from Margaret Rose Ogaba) to visit the islands and to participate in a series of activities on a Kalangala-Gulu-Kitgum-Burford basis. These included expressing thoughts through art and a debate on the theme, “*peace in northern Uganda can only be secured through non-violence and reconciliation*”. All the participants found it a very creative experience and the descriptions of the visitors from northern Uganda on their lifestyle opened many eyes – both British and Ugandan.

The students from the north and from Kalangala have said how creative the initiative was. As a result, we are working with the UNA of Uganda and others to see how far the British Council could support the widening of this scheme to other schools in Uganda.

### ***Recent update***

News was recently published that there had been contact between the UN and the LRA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It appears somewhat confusing as to what exactly took place. One report says that several hundred LRA rebels went into eastern Congo where the Government announced its intention to disarm them. There are UN peacekeepers in this area and their role (if any) appears very unclear. FONU is seeking clarification at UN Headquarters in New York as to the exact situation.

Another report said that Vincent Otti, second in command of the LRA under Joseph Kony may be seeking political asylum in the Congo.

### ***Conclusion***

FONU will continue to develop its financial base and its activities as fully as possible. Any ideas or support which you can share with us would be much appreciated.

Malcolm Harper

Advocacy and Promotions Officer (FONU)