

What a Woman Can Do

by Betty Bigombe

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Conflicts and violence have plagued Uganda since 1966. Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 was followed by successive governments being overthrown, with Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) coming to power in 1986. When Museveni defeated General Tito Okello Lutwa, the northern war became initially a popular revolt by Okello's ousted army troops and their numerous civilian supporters who formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). On the other side was Alice Auma Lakwena who claimed to be a prophet and formed the Holy Spirit Movement. These two rebel groups enjoyed popular support in the north from the Acholi population that was both angry and alarmed at the new Museveni regime. Fear of national marginalization by the government they perceived to be dominated by western Ugandans was at the center of the rebellion. Alice Auma Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement was defeated in 1987 and she fled to Kenya, while the NRM government negotiated and signed a peace agreement with UPDA. While these rebellions ended, Joseph Kony started that same year what later became known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the northern conflict entered an entirely new chapter. Joseph Kony's worldview is steeped in apocalyptic spiritualism and he uses brutality and fear to both maintain control within LRA and sustain the conflict.

In 1988, as an Acholi member of President Yoweri Museveni's cabinet, I was appointed Minister of State for Pacification of north and northeastern Uganda resident in Gulu. It was hard leaving my children, but at least I knew

that, unlike the children in north and northeastern Uganda, they had food, shelter, school, and their father. Reactions to my appointment were mixed: Most were skeptical whether a woman could manage such a task; others thought Museveni wanted to kill me. "Why appoint someone without military experience to such a task," they asked. Others even believed I was a girlfriend he wanted in a place he could access alone. The rebels felt insulted that the president had sent a "girl," as they put it. I had to show them what a woman could do, coping with everything from poisonous snakes to assassination attempts, going through ambushes, and escaping land mines, in order to reach people in internally displaced camps (IDPs). Two thoughts prevailed at my lowest moments: if God does not call your number, you will not die; and if you have been given a mission, you will be able to accomplish it. Each time I went to the camps, it gave the people hope. On these visits, I did not simply stay for a few hours and leave, nor did I lecture people and praise the government. Rather, these visits entailed pitching camp in IDPs to listen to people vent their anger. The visits enabled me to identify rebel collaborators so that I could later make direct contact with the rebel leader.

In 1992 I established contact with Kony and met with him four times between 1993 and 1994. I went to the jungle to meet him although I knew the chances of being killed or held hostage were high. I talked to him daily through radio communication. We got very close to reaching a peace agreement; a date and venue for signing had been agreed upon. But two weeks before signing, President Museveni cancelled peace talks and opted for a military solution. This devastated me, as I had invested heavily in the peace process.

In 1997 I joined the World Bank in Washington, D.C. While preparing to go to Burundi on a World Bank mission, I saw a CNN "breaking news" flash indicating that the LRA had massacred about three hundred people in IDPs in Lira district. They had set huts alight, shooting anyone who ran out. The reporter said that I was the only person who had

met this bizarre leader and gotten the rebels and government close to peace—and my picture came up on the screen. I remember whispering, “Oh, my God, I can’t believe it’s still happening. This can’t go on.”

Should I go back, I asked myself, could I afford to lose my World Bank job, could I leave my college-age daughter behind? Maybe, I thought, I can give it another try. I did so. As a rationale for accepting talks. I told the president, “You’re a father, you have beautiful children; if they were abducted how would you feel; look at the economic cost, the way it is affecting the country, allow dialogue.” I persuaded the LRA to accept a negotiated settlement. I said to them, “you have been fighting for twenty years, you have a terrible image, you have a chance to talk, to get to the table.” I spent eighteen grueling months as chief negotiator between the LRA and the Ugandan government. My only weapon was the trust I had established. As a peace activist, I encourage parties to seek dialogue as the first option.

I spent hours every day talking on cell phones, coaxing, encouraging, and scolding the UPDA officers and the rebels—and listening, which is a part of making peace. You can’t address problems without hearing what people think and feel. Even the devil wants to be listened to. Sometimes, one of my most powerful tools is not talking at all. Silence works wonders.

I am confident that peace will eventually be reached through the Juba talks that began two years ago. True, a peace deal will not be arrived at easily. When people have been killing one another, they do not overnight start seeing one another in a different light. People who have been fighting for twenty years are very suspicious. They think: “We’ve been enemies for so many years, can I start trusting so-and-so?” I have learned as a mediator that it is important not to jump straight into talks but to spend time in confidence building, where the parties can interact with different people and among themselves to move toward understanding. When people are given a chance, they can reform. Even the spoilers, those who benefit from war, can

become promoters of peace. It does not matter who you are as long as you are human, we all deserve peace.

Amnesty encouraged LRA members to risk coming out to integrate into their communities. They find it as difficult to integrate as those communities do in forgiving them for their crimes. Forgiveness is very personal. Traditional justice alone—accountability, truth, and compensation—might not always reach the heart and soul of people who have borne the brunt of the situation. Traditional justice is not an alternative to international and national justice. People want peace and justice sequenced. “Let’s first have peace,” they say, “then justice will follow.”

I have a lot of hope. I see promising commitment from both sides that the process should continue. Back in the United States again, I remain immersed in my quest for a settlement, thinking about the situation when I go to bed and on my computer after waking.

We easily could be discouraged by the continued failure of the international community to do more to end the misery in the camps and the years of warfare. But we owe it to the tens of thousands of children to keep pressing to bring the nightmare of LRA atrocities and suffering to an end. Armed conflict has had disastrous effects on children in Africa. How do you deal with children who are one day victims of the perpetrators of violence and the next day perpetrators themselves? In the case of northern Uganda, children have become protagonists of war when they are forcibly recruited to be combatants and are instilled with hate, the skills of warfare, and devotion to armed factions.

Young people in conflict areas are often displaced, lose educational opportunities, suffer the destruction of family structures, and struggle with physical and psychological trauma. My concern always has been that if these youths are not supported to recapture their childhood and make them productive members of the community, they will be poverty strapped for the rest of their lives. They will also be a source of insecurity. That is why finding strategies to alleviate the suffering of children and rehabilitate them and their communities is imperative.

Asked what I would regard as success, I say it is when the war ends, people are resettled in their homes and are able to live in dignity, children go to school, all have access to basic services. It is a daunting task but doable. I have a long way to go. I'll try to remain young so I can achieve that.

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