

Pressure on Uganda's Museveni for peace

by Linda de Hoyos

In a reversal of policy, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni stated in a press conference on Oct. 28 that his government will soon present a bill to parliament for the granting of amnesty to all the leaders and members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony. Speaking to reporters, Museveni further made clear that he was taking this step against his will; heretofore, Museveni's policy has been a war of annihilation against the LRA.

"I am under a lot of pressure from those who want an easy way out. I can consider including the whole gang, but because of the pressure, and not because I support it myself," Museveni said, adding: "I don't want to appear an obstacle to the wisdom of so many people."

The LRA and Museveni's National Resistance Army (now the Ugandan Popular Defense Forces) have been battling for 11 years in northern Uganda, with little effect except the decimation of the region's productive capacity and the lives of its people. The opposition national Democratic Party in July issued a report stating that up to 300,000 northern Ugandans had died in the 11 years of war, or nearly half the population of the Acholi group inhabiting the war districts of Gulu and Kitgum.

The announcement of the Ugandan government's shift from its previous no-talk/no-amnesty stance comes at the same time that the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) began closed-door negotiations in Nairobi, Kenya, to end the 14-year war in southern Sudan. In those talks, held under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development, comprised of seven nations of East Africa, the SPLA delegation is led by Commander Salva Kiir, the SPLA's chief of staff, and the Sudan side is led by Foreign Minister Ali Osman Mohammad Taha.

The success of a peace process on both sides of the Sudan-Uganda border is crucial to avert a total war in the region, a policy advanced by the Christian Solidarity International of Caroline Cox, deputy speaker of the British House of Lords, and various British sublets in the United States led by Roger Winter, director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees. Such a war, Winter blithely admitted at a Washington conference on Sept. 17, would cause a "humanitarian catastrophe"—that is, bringing to northeast Africa the London-instigated holocaust the world has already witnessed in Rwanda and eastern Zaire.

The Ugandan people want peace

Pressure to change is increasing on Museveni from all over Uganda, from all opposition leaders, from the entire parliamentary delegation from northern Uganda, and from church leaders.

On Sunday, Nov. 2, Catholic prelate Emmanuel Cardinal Wamala will be leading an inter-denominational peace march through Kampala with the leaders of all of the churches of the country. The march is being directed at the government, calling upon Museveni to negotiate with the LRA and the western insurgency, the Alliance for Democratic Forces. In mid-September, Ugandan church leaders meeting at a conference on the conflicts in the country, had called upon Museveni to take responsibility as head of state to bring about a peace process for northern Uganda.

In endorsing the Sunday peace walk, the *Monitor* newspaper of Kampala editorialized: "Guns are smoking; people are crying, running and dying across almost half the country, in Kasese, Acholi, West Nile, the blood of the innocent is flowing and crying out. . . . The people want peace."

Resolutions have also been coming from opposition parties, including the Ugandan Peoples Congress, which in late October called upon the government to end the war, and address the economic destruction of the northern districts.

Pressure has also come from the military. Maj. Gen. David Timyefunze, a long-standing political ally of Museveni, opted to retire rather than prosecute the war in the north any further, calling upon the government to end it through dialogue.

Museveni also indicated that he is under pressure from outside the country, particularly from Washington. At his press conference, Museveni referenced a report by Robert Gersony of the U.S. Agency for International Development written this year. The Gersony report, entitled "The Anguish of Northern Uganda," documents in detail the toll that the war has taken upon the Acholi population, including the current policy by which up to 200,000 Acholi farmers have been rounded up and placed in "protective villages." The farmers and their families, uprooted from the farms and their means of survival, are undernourished and easy prey for disease. Further, Gersony notes, the peasants are arrayed around the military barracks—acting as a human shield for the military, rather than the other way around.

Gersony notes also that many of the northern Ugandans he interviewed, stated their belief that "international attention to the conflict itself and to its human rights violations would increase the chances of a durable solution."

In its recommendations, the AID report calls upon the government to take responsibility to bring the war to an end peacefully. Said Museveni on Oct. 29 on the report, in protest against his own change of policy, "I don't agree with Gersony that our strategy [of military confrontation] is not working." Nevertheless, a step toward a meaningful peace process has taken place.