



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)

PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712

Email: info@nacs.org *** Website: <http://www.nacs.org>

"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**IMPLICATIONS OF WAR UPON PUBLIC HEALTH: A CASE STUDY OF
NORTHERN UGANDA**

By: Jessica E. Zerkle

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2009
October, 2009
Indianapolis, IN**

Abstract

This paper explores the implications of the Lord's Resistance Army conflict that has occurred in northern Uganda and how the conflict has impacted the public health of the region. A historical background of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army is given to provide an understanding of the reasons behind the conflict. The direct and indirect implications of the conflict upon public health are also cited as well as the challenges facing northern Uganda today. The final sections focus on how the social work and Christian community at large can provide assistance in the reconstruction process.

Introduction

All across the world there are numerous military conflicts occurring. The continent of Africa is a section of the globe that is far too familiar with the occurrence of war and the public health issues that inevitably arise from such conflicts. The country of Uganda located in East Africa has experienced decades of conflict with military coups overthrowing existing governmental leaders and other tribal and ethnic groups arising. The focus of this analysis of the implications of war upon public health will deal specifically with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in northern Uganda. In order to develop a foundation for analysis, it is necessary that the history of Uganda and the history of the LRA be reviewed. This allows for a broader understanding of the causes of the conflict and to see the public health implications in a variety of sectors, such as vulnerable populations, increase in HIV prevalence rates, and mental health issues. Although there is peace in the northern region at present, an assessment of the continued challenges helps direct how the social work and faith-based community should respond in the years to come.

History of Uganda

In order to understand the present situation of northern Uganda, an overview of the nation's history provides the necessary background to see how tribal conflicts and colonization influenced the LRA conflict. In its earliest known history, san-like people were some of the region's earliest inhabitants, and then Cushitic speaking migrants infiltrated to the region around 1,000 B.C. (Dickey, 2001). After 1,000 B.C., another influx of migrants came and they spoke Nilotic (Sudanic people) and Luo. Over the centuries, the kingdom of Bunyoro in the South became the most powerful because it was more politically centralized than other areas. But a

challenging force in the neighboring kingdom of Buganda arose in the eighteenth century, and the two states continued their power struggle up until the time the British explorers John Hanning Speke and J.A. Grant arrived in Buganda in 1862.

Bunyoro and Buganda's exposure to the outside world prior to this point was mostly limited to Arab ivory and slave traders passing through. But more British explorers continued to arrive in the region after 1862, and Christian missionaries from the Church Missionary Society came in 1877 with the Roman Catholic White Fathers arriving two years later (Dickey, 2001). Initially these missionaries and explorers were well received by Mutesa I, the ruler (kabaka) of Buganda, but relations between Christian and Islam representatives went downhill when neither group would help in providing protection from a possible Egyptian invasion. Mwanga, Mutesa's son, was even more hostile to Christians and Muslims when he came to power, but in 1888 he was driven out of the country by a unified force of Christian and Muslim converts in the region. Eventually he was restored to power in 1890 after Muslims expelled the Christians and Mwanga pleaded for Christians' assistance.

Under Mwanga's rule, the territory now known as Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894 with a British-Baganda force adding other areas, including Bunyoro (Leggett, 2001). But in 1897, Mwanga led a revolt against the British because they were taking so much power in the region. His revolt failed and Great Britain's power became more established as they set Daudi Chwa, Mwanga's infant son on the throne; he was under British supervision (Dickey, 2001). A diplomatic piece was established under the Uganda Agreement of 1900 where Buganda was ruled indirectly by the British, and then the British used the Baganda leadership to extend British control throughout the rest of the region. The system the British created was modeled after their hierarchal system led by a king, but this type of structure was unfamiliar to

areas in the north and east (Leggett, 2001). This placed the Bugandan tribe in a favored position, and it was something that other territories in Uganda would never forget, especially after independence was attained.

In 1962, Uganda was granted its independence without any violent takeovers. This was a unique occurrence for the region, but the sense of peaceful political processes would not be long lasting. At that time, the country consisted of four regions that had federal status; one region was the kingdom of Buganda (Maher, 2007). Uganda became a republic in 1963, and Kabaka of Buganda became the first president. However, in 1966, Dr. Milton Obote led a successful coup against the Kabaka with Idi Amin as his second-in-command as Deputy Army Commander. While in power, he managed to introduce a new constitution that ended all of Buganda's formerly federally sanctioned powers, and in 1969 all opposition parties were banned (Leggett, 2001).

But two years later, Obote was overthrown by the Ugandan army led by Major General Idi Amin Dada. Amin assumed full executive power and suspended political activity (Maher, 2007). Amin's regime was noted for ruthless acts of terror rather than a democratic process. Possible opponents were eliminated as well as anyone suspected of being connected with an Obote coup. Some of the first victims within the army were from the districts of Lango and Acholi, which was the area where Obote came from located in northern Uganda (Leggett, 2001). Refugees fled the country and Asians were expelled because Amin did not like their dominance in the commercial sector of Uganda. There was a significant economic downturn under his rule.

In 1979, Amin was overthrown, and for the next seven years, there would be an array of political coups with various heads of state: Dr. Yusuf Lele, Godfrey Binaisa, Milton Obote, Basillo Okello, Yoweri Museveni, and countless other insurgencies (Maher, 2007). Museveni is

the current president. He has remained in power by way of democratic elections, but he did amend the constitution so that he could remain in power longer than was previously allowed.

History of Lord's Resistance Army

The history of Uganda highlighted in the previous section demonstrates the use of violence used by Ugandans to gain political power with little to no accountability for the crimes committed against innocent civilians in the process (Anderson, Sewankambo, & Vandergrift, 2005). The beginnings of the LRA are rooted in this reliance upon military action to be heard and to attain power. So when Museveni came into power in 1986 after overthrowing Tito Okello Lutwa, a group of Okello's supporters, both army troops and civilians, formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA).

Certain sects of the UPDA banded together under the leadership of Alice Auma Lakwena to form the Holy Spirit Movement. Alice had no previous military experience but was a charismatic leader that was perceived to have the power to "cure illness in her society and purify her followers" (Leggett, 2001, p. 28). The Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) was complex in the sense that it combined political and military opposition against Museveni and his government with an additional mission to cleanse the Acholi (northern region) people of their sins they had committed in earlier conflicts. Another motivation was that they felt the National Resistance Movement (NRM), which is Museveni's political party, was responsible for attacks on civilians and cattle raids. However, their military tactics were very simplistic. Alice told her soldiers that stones they threw at the enemy would transform into grenades and that their bodies would be protected from enemy gunfire by smearing oil all over themselves (De Temmerman, 2001).

They came within 80 kilometers of Kampala, the capital, but were defeated within a year by the National Resistance Army (NRA), which was Museveni's force.

However, the days of the HSM were not yet finished as Alice's first cousin, Joseph Kony, reorganized soldiers in 1987 under a new name, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) with the same initiative: to gain political control of Uganda (Anderson et al., 2005). Kony had never finished primary school (De Temmerman, 2001). He added to that goal to also rule the country by using the Ten Commandments as the main guideline. Initially Kony did not have difficulty finding recruits because the Acholi received outside support in the form of weapons, training, and a safe haven from the National Islamic Front, which is the controlling political party of Sudan (now called National Congress Party). Their support was given as retaliation against the Ugandan government who they believed had been supporting the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which was a Sudanese rebel group fighting for the freedom of South Sudan.

Despite all this, Kony was not able to produce any worthwhile results for Acholi supporters, and many began to drop out of the LRA. In order to keep momentum going, Kony resorted to abducting children and making them become his soldiers. It is estimated that over 80% of the current LRA forces are children (Anderson et al., 2005). These children often times have to perform brutal acts of violence upon their own tribesman and family members. Girls are taken as "wives" for soldiers, but they have a dual role of soldier and sex slave. Fear, indoctrination, and terror are intended to prevent the escape of abductees, and to agitate regional despair and resentment against the Museveni government (International Crisis Group, 2004). Their brutal acts have spanned from northern Uganda, southern Sudan, and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Beneath it all, there is a very spiritual element, demonic even, that seems to drive the LRA's actions.

Impact Upon Public Health in Northern Uganda

Vulnerable Populations

The LRA did not discriminate when it came to their attacks upon villages, thus men, women, and children were vulnerable to the violence and the indirect effects the conflict instigated in their communities. Yet, like nearly all conflicts, women and children have been particularly vulnerable. One blatantly apparent way that children's lives have been impacted is the potential for them to be abducted by the LRA. In the biographical novel, *Aboke Girls*, Els De Temmerman (2001) tells the story of how on October 9, 1996, 139 girls between the ages of 12 and 15 were abducted by the LRA from St. Mary's College in Aboke, which was one of the top schools in the north. Her thorough account of that incident as well as the impact of the LRA activity is extremely poignant. The following is De Temmerman's (2001) description of children who had fortunately been able to escape the horrifying grip of the LRA and been placed in one of the few rehabilitation centers in the region:

There were not only visible wounds: the swollen feet, the scars of bullets and cuts, the mutilations, the skin diseases and germ infections, the malnutrition which had sometimes hampered their growth and development, the back pains from carrying heavy loads, the venereal diseases and pregnancies. Worse, and more difficult to heal, were the inner scars: the fear and mistrust, the feelings of guilt and self-contempt, and the anger towards a society that had failed to protect them. (p. 107)

Women were also at risk for sexual exploitation by both the LRA and UPDF soldiers. According to a pastor in Lira, community acceptance of women who had illegitimate children

that had been fathered by rebels was a challenge (James Okalo, personal communication, August 20, 2009). These girls and women were often rejected by the community because they were considered to have “rebel babies.”

The elderly were also at risk because of the transition from village to camp life. If the elderly did not have any family members supporting them, then trying to construct a new hut was a task that some did not have the strength to perform. This also meant that they likely did not have the strength to do their own “digging” (i.e. farming) and would thus be in need of a constant food supply. Also, the issue of their children dying, either from disease or conflict, left many as guardians of their grandchildren, which was a daunting and stressful task.

Life in IDP Camps

The result of the LRA’s presence in the northern region of Uganda is that people fled to internally displaced people camps for protection. Typical rural northern Ugandan life prior to this consisted mostly of people farming the land or raising cattle, which served to meet most of the physical and economic needs of families and communities. But the insecurity changed all this. Camp structures consisted of multiple blocks of dung and mud huts with grass thatched roofs; huts were packed closely together sometimes leaving only a few feet from one hut to the next.

According to UNHCR statistics, over 1.2 million people were considered internally displaced persons in January of 2007 (UNHCR, 2007). Latrines and sanitary water were another concern in which many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused their work because of diarrheal diseases and other health concerns resulting from latrines being too close to huts and water sources. Each block had a leader, and those leaders reported to a camp manager. There

were several IDP camps varying in size, one of the largest being Pabbo Camp in Gulu with over 60,000 displaced persons (Anderson et al., 2005). Fires were another safety issue because the closeness of the huts meant the fire could spread rapidly, damaging possessions, such as a required ID card that was necessary to receive items in a World Food Program (WFP) distribution.

This shift created a sense of idleness among the people since the majority of their time was no longer spent in the village. This had a significant impact on economic and health issues. For instance, since the IDPs did not have their cattle and farming like they once had, some families were so desperate for money for food and school fees that they would send their daughters to the UPDF soldiers at the end of every month when soldiers were paid (Cathy Adong, personal communication, August 18, 2009). The daughters became prostitutes in exchange for money and goods, and the risk for spreading HIV was heightened.

Another area of concern among the older generations was the issue of cultural identity and morals being lost. The war seemed to be destroying the social fabric of their moral and traditional systems, and the older generation felt the children were becoming spoiled and wild (Molly Akello, personal communication, August 21, 2009). They fear that the children who have grown up in the camps will lose their cultural identity and behave in defiance of cultural rules. "Street kids" are becoming a more common occurrence as their families are not able to afford school fees or materials and they begin to spend their days and nights scavenging and committing petty crimes.

Ironically, there were some positives in that community mobilization was easier and more efficient because there was often a massive and captive audience. Public health education on HIV/AIDS and other illnesses was able to benefit as well as Christian churches in sharing the

Gospel. One pastor reported that thousands gathered and accepted Christ when they showed the Jesus film one evening (James Okalo, personal communication, August 20, 2009).

HIV Prevalence Rate

Rape has been one of the many brutal tactics utilized by the LRA. With the increased poverty rates, women have turned to “survival sex” in exchange for money, food, soap, or other items (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 26). As previously discussed, parents have resorted to giving their daughters to the UPDF. According to the Ugandan Ministry of Defense, the UPDF has an HIV prevalence rate of 19%, which is more than three times the national prevalence rate of 5.4% (Mafabi, 2009) (UNAIDS, 2008). Some people, whether married or not, have multiple sex partners. As of 2005, over 42% of funds dedicated to HIV/AIDS work by both domestic and foreign entities was used for care and treatment of patients; it was by far the largest expenditure category for HIV/AIDS work (UNAIDS, 2005). Put all these together and it creates a daunting issue that still needs domestic and international attention. Uganda has been a leading example of HIV/AIDS prevention and risk reduction, but this demonstrates the continued need for ABC education, end-of-life care, and other creative new interventions to cover all areas of care and prevention.

Mental Health Issues

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression have infiltrated northern Ugandans because of the stress in fearing for their lives and having to relocate to IDP camps. In a 2008 study in which over 1,200 IDPs were surveyed regarding their traumatic experiences, 75% of the respondents said they had witnessed or experienced the murder of a family or friend and over

60% of respondents witnessed the murder of a stranger or strangers (Roberts, Ockaka, Browne, Oyok, & Sonderp, 2008). This alludes to the need for PTSD, acute stress disorder, and other anxiety interventions. Also, additional stress has been felt by families and communities for their inability to fully protect their children ((Lammers, 2005). As previously mentioned, there is a need for rehabilitative counseling and interventions for child soldiers and more programming to help families and communities accept them back. The mental health needs of a community are often overlooked in relief situations because food, water and shelter tend to be more pressing. Although northern Uganda is not an emergency relief location, the development phase of assistance needs to incorporate more mental health initiatives to create more stable communities.

Northern Uganda Today: Challenges Ahead

Thankfully times are more peaceful in Uganda, but the fact that the LRA and Joseph Kony are still in the bush in neighboring DRC means that the situation is not entirely resolved. Until the International Criminal Court is able to seize Kony and the other LRA leaders, the optimal chance for peace will not be realized. As northern Uganda seeks to move on, the following are some of the challenges and opportunities for moving ahead. One area is the disparity between the north and south in a variety of areas (education, economy, infrastructure, etc.). The north has been neglected and left for the NGOs to fund and develop, but it is time for the Ugandan government to take more ownership in the development process. Political corruption is a factor inhibiting this sort of transition.

Another challenge this alludes to is a heavy reliance upon western aid for resources. This statement is by no means inferring that developed nations need to pull their funding so that

Uganda will take care of itself. The call is for more responsibility on both sides. NGOs and other governments need to be careful and make sure that designated funds are filtering through to the people and areas for which they were intended. On the other end, the government of Uganda needs to reassess their motivations for wanting the aid. Relief money stolen and used to build another house or buy an expensive car is not acceptable, and the government needs to develop and implement policy that will hold corrupt leaders accountable.

The mental health of northern Ugandans should be a primary concern as well because these people have experienced such horrifying events. They have shown they are a resilient people, but rehabilitative counseling for former child soldiers and other types of community counseling will deeply impact the healing process. The economic stress has added another mental burden as well.

A final challenge is the transition for IDPs from camp life back to village life. The Ugandan government began forcing those living in the camps in Lira district to begin transitioning back to their home villages. For some, this meant going to a satellite village, which was a temporary living point between the camp and their home village. For most, their homes in their villages had either been burned by the LRA or had collapsed from neglect. Rebuilding their homesteads and beginning to farm again were primary goals. However, it was difficult for many to start farming again because they did not have the tools or seeds to plant because they did not have the monetary means to purchase the items.

These are only a few of the challenges faced by northern Ugandans today. As overwhelming as they are, they are truly opportunities for the social work community and faith-based community to respond professionally and compassionately.

Response of Social Work and Faith-Based Community

The first thing the social work and faith-based community needs to do to is to assist Ugandans with a humble attitude and to be prayerful of the situation in the North. It is necessary for anyone seeking to provide assistance to take the time to listen to the Ugandans about their needs and to professionally assess the needs of northern Uganda communities. Far too often, western relief sources have rudely come in with little regard for culture and the dignity and worth of the Ugandan people.

One of the more immediate steps is to continue to assist those transitioning back to their home villages. Some traveled many miles to reach the safety of the camp, so transport for those physically unable to make the journey would be ideal. Also, assistance in providing seeds and supplies (i.e. hoes) would be another step closer to self-sufficiency for these people. There would need to be some policies that sought to make sure the people used the materials and did not just sell them off, or if they did, then they would not be allowed to receive assistance a second time. Assistance in reconstructing homes, especially for the elderly or any child-headed households, is necessary.

Mental health initiatives are still necessary even though things are more peaceful in the region. Counseling services have been provided to an extent by NGOs and other groups, but there needs to be more community-wide initiatives that allows for all populations to dialogue and process their experiences. There have been so many hardships for people that there needs to be an outlet for them, especially if reconciliation and acceptance of former child soldiers and LRA leaders is going to occur. The church could be an incredibly huge asset because of its availability in several villages; it could be an ideal meeting place. Youth should be a primary target as they have grown up only knowing life in response to LRA activity. Trainings should be

done so that Ugandan persons and counselors are equipped to serve their communities. A ministry called Global Projects, founded by Dr. Sabrina Black of Detroit, Michigan, is a faith-based community service organization that provides counseling trainings to people in Uganda so that people are able to become more stabilized, self-sufficient, and aware of Christ at work in their lives (Black, 2008).

Another area of focus is building up the economy by providing no interest or low interest micro-loans. This will allow for the micro infrastructure to become more stabilized as people are able to slowly begin building sustaining work for themselves and provide for their families. Eventually the macro infrastructure will become more stabilized as more people are working and able to create jobs for others. After all, poverty is such a critical piece to the reason for the LRA conflict and the resulting ramifications as well. Kiva, a social lending organization, is a great model of how relatively small amounts of money given by donors (\$25) can go a long way to help someone in the developing world (Kiva, 2009). This could also be done in the form of livestock programs, and Samaritan's Purse has been doing goat, cow, and fish projects to assist Ugandan nationals in providing for their families (Samaritan's Purse, 2009).

For the social work community, there is a need for further research regarding social, health, spiritual, and political issues. Data collection had been difficult in previous years due to the insecurity. The more data available, the better informed human services professionals will be in assessing what the actual needs are in communities. Then the created interventions can possibly be modeled to assist in other conflict areas around the globe. In addition, the data can serve to awaken the international community to respond in prayer and financial support of organizations and groups *partnering* with the Ugandan people.

These are but a few of the ways that the Christian community and social work community can respond in Christ's love to assist those in need in northern Uganda. The call to act on behalf of the poor and oppressed is all throughout Scripture, and particularly poignant verse is found in Isaiah 58:9-10 in regard to what the Lord considers true fasting:

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

The Christian community needs to respond so that their light, the light of Christ, will be made known to all nations. Their response can be one of the greatest apologetics for the church for this generation and generations to come.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of northern Uganda will not be easy with all of its scars from years of warfare. The historical factors behind the conflict, such as colonization, violent political leaders, political coups, poverty, and warfare are some of the various hurdles the people have had to overcome. But as the social work and Christian communities unite worldwide in response, it will serve as a way of quickening the reconstruction process and building a better future for Uganda as a whole. With any assistance given, there should be a focus of partnership rather than a colonized model keeping Ugandans a level below. There is reason for hope because northern Ugandans are a resilient, beautiful people that want to see progress in their land. Now is a time for the church and social workers to respond with the gifts and resources they have to help bring this change into fruition.

References

- (2001). In S. Dickey (Ed.), *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations: Africa* (10th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 527-537). Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group.
- Anderson, R. E., Sewankambo, F., & Vandergrift, K. (2005). *Pawns of Politics: Children, Conflict and Peace in northern Uganda*. Washington D.C.: World Vision International.
- Black, S. (2008, August). The Macedonia Call from Saul: The Vision Trip to Africa--Busia and Beyond. *Global Projects* , 5 (3).
- De Temmerman, E. (2001). *Aboke Girls*. Kampala, Uganda: Fountain.
- Kiva. (2009). *What is Kiva?* Retrieved September 2, 2009, from Kiva: Loans That Change Lives: <http://www.kiva.org/about>
- Lammers, E. (2005, November). Community and Individual in the Aftermath of War: Perspectives from African Philosophy. *Social Identities* , 11 (6), pp. 607-629.
- Leggett, I. (2001). *Uganda*. Oxford, UK: Oxfam.
- Mafabi, D. (2009, February 11). HIV Spread Still High in Army. *Daily Monitor* , pp. <http://www.monitor.co.ug/>
- Maher, J. (Ed.). (2007). *The European World Year Book 2007* (48th ed., Vol. 2). London, UK: Routledge.
- International Crisis Group.(April 2004). *Northern Uganda: Understanding and Solving the Conflict*. International Crisis Group.
- Samaritan's Purse (2009). *What We Do*. Retrieved September 2, 2009, from Samaritan's Purse: <http://www.samaritanspurse.org>
- Roberts, B., Ockaka, K., Browne, J., Oyok, T., & Sonderp, E. (2008, May 8). Factors associated

with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression amongst internally displaced persons in northern Uganda. *BMC Psychiatry* , 8.

UNAIDS. (2008) *Uganda*. Retrieved September 2, 2009, from UNAIDS: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS: <http://www.unaids.org>

UNHCR. (2007, March). *Supplementary Appeal for Uganda*. Retrieved September 2, 2009, from UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency: <http://www.unhcr.org>