

## Turning a blind eye to democracy and displacement: Uganda on the road to a dead end?

March 1, 2006 – Kampala. At 7am on February 23, the Presiding Officer of the Acholi Inn polling station B in Gulu in northern Uganda, held the transparent ballot box upside down to the six waiting voters to show that the box was empty. He then sealed the box and the voting began for the next Ugandan President, Members of Parliament (MPs), and women MPs. Polling stations such as these were set up in open fields with little to no furniture and no niceties such as booths or tables. To protect the secrecy of the vote, there were three plastic laundry basins with a pen in each laid on the ground and a ballot box nearby each basin so that voters could move from one basin to the next, checking each ballot for President, MP, and Woman MP.

When the polls closed at 5pm the ballot boxes were opened at each polling station as crowds gathered to hear the tally. The Presiding Officer at Acholi Inn polling station B took a ballot out of the box, read out loud the name checked on that ballot, then turned the ballot around and held it up for all to see. Present throughout the entire day were representatives of each political party, local observers (about 20,000 Ugandan citizens were trained as polling station observers), and international observers such as myself. With Uganda's past history of violence, people were nervous about the possibilities for violence to erupt. But election day passed quietly, with few incidents and with many polling stations, such as the one I observed, modeling great grassroots support for and vigilance over the electoral process.

All eyes have been on these elections – a constitutional amendment last November changed the constitution to allow the President to run for an unprecedented third term even though his 2001 campaign was based on it being his last term in office. Museveni and his National Resistance Movement, once the savior of Uganda from the likes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote, has become increasingly unpopular as poverty, war, disease, and electricity outages seem to take root – Museveni has been in power since 1986 and while there has been amazing progress in some areas, other critical areas remain neglected. Few people I've spoken with in Kampala, the capital, supported Museveni and indeed, he lost Kampala to the opposition. Most say that 20 years is enough but were nervous that if Museveni were to lose, he would retain his hold on power through military means. The results, issued Saturday evening by the Electoral Commission, give the incumbent, President Museveni, 59% of the vote to 37% for Dr. Kizza Besigye, the opposition leader. Dr. Besigye immediately launched an appeal, citing unfair conditions in the lead-up to the elections, including his own arrest on allegations of rape and treason. Dr. Besigye spent a major part of the campaign period obligated to show up in court, thus removing him from campaign appearances – some say he had to make 75 court appearances in the campaign period. Pre-election violence, intimidation, politically motivated arrests, and the use of the apparatus of the State for Museveni's own campaign seriously marred the process and tipped the scales unfairly in his favor.

Uganda now enters the small but growing club of nations ruled by leaders who will either not leave or will not hold elections – think Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Moammar Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Fidel Castro of Cuba, the late Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, Isaias Afewerke of Eritrea, Hassan al Bashir of Sudan. Museveni,

once lauded by the U.S. as one of the “new breed of African leaders,” has become part of an old breed that Africa knows too well.

The election results issued this past weekend demonstrate clearly what a divided nation Uganda is with the north overwhelmingly voting for Dr. Besigye and the south for Museveni. While there may be nothing Museveni can do to alter his image as the man who would not leave, there is much he can do to heal and unify the nation over the next five years. More than 1.7 million northern Ugandans live in appalling conditions, forced by the government into what only they dare call “protected camps.” There are over 200 such camps, created a decade ago because of the instability caused by the rebel Lords Resistance Army, a mostly ethnic Acholi group that targets its own people. Since then, while some people chose to move into the camps on their own, the government has forcibly displaced almost the entire Acholi population into these camps, arguing that it is the only way they can protect citizens from the LRA. But the people in the camps are neither protected from the LRA nor from the army that rapes with impunity. Driving to Pabbo IDP camp from Gulu, our driver pointed out two spots known to be crossing points for the LRA. I asked if the army knew that the LRA crossed the road at these points. He laughed and said everyone knew. Poorly paid soldiers from all over Uganda have little desire to die in this bizarre war of spirits and brutality. Nor do they protect people from physical and mental disease, malnutrition, and extreme poverty. People in the camps are dying at a rate of up to 1,000 a week according to the government’s own Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization. This far exceeds the threat from the LRA.

People in the camps say that many would choose to stay in the camps until the war is over but that many want to go home now, to live in their own homes, cultivate their own lands, and not depend on others for basic survival. The government does not allow them that basic right – there is no freedom of movement. They are prisoners in these appalling camps, guarded by an army that does little to capture the LRA and more to keep people under control. People in one camp told me that they cannot speak from 8pm till the following morning so that the military can patrol and “hear” the LRA if they have infiltrated the camp. If people are heard speaking, the army will beat them. This is social control par excellence through intimidation and violence that adds to the abuse and helplessness of camp inhabitants.

This social control of a large segment of Uganda’s population leads people in the camps and towns to believe that the camps are a ruse by the government to confiscate their lands. There is historical enmity between north and south, neither trusting nor understanding the other’s motives. In fact, there have been a number of proposals by government officials to create community farms and get people to “offer” their lands to the government for the creation of more camps for no compensation. The north was, and could be, the bread basket of Uganda and the region. Northerners know this, and thus suspect the motives of a government that seeks to keep them penned up in camps.

As Museveni enters his 20<sup>th</sup> year of power, so the north enters its 20<sup>th</sup> year of hell at the hands of the rebel Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and, tragically, at the hands of a government uninterested or incapable of exercising its sovereign responsibility to protect its citizens. The north has been terrorized by rebel groups since Museveni took power in 1986, advocating the overthrow of the government and rule by the Ten Commandments. People in the north have

witnessed the death of parents, spouses, children – sometimes physical death, sometimes psychological. One man said that the Acholi culture had been destroyed in the camps, that their children had no values or knowledge of Acholi traditions. “What are we as a people if we have no culture?” he asked.

Museveni has an opportunity to unify and heal the nation as he has not done in the past although he faces new challenges. The International Criminal Court has issued indictments against the top five commanders of the LRA but has no military or police force with which to find and apprehend them. These commanders remain at large, having crossed into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A war that was waged by the LRA from bases in Sudan and Northern Uganda has now become a problem for the Great Lakes region of Africa. The international community is taking note, concerned that the January 2005 peace agreement in Sudan may be jeopardized if the LRA continues to wander around the region causing death and destruction. Further, the potential for a profitable and legitimate trade route between Uganda and Sudan via the north, bringing goods and economic development to Uganda and southern Sudan, will be unrealized if the war and displacement in the north continue.

Indeed, it is only recently, since the Lords Resistance Army, a group known for its brutality in killing, raping, and abducting its own people, moved into neighboring Congo last fall, and since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, that the international community has realized that peace in Uganda is a critical building block to a stable and peaceful region. After two decades, the inhumane conditions under which most northern Ugandans live is being recognized. Next month will see the return of UN Humanitarian Affairs coordinator, Jan Egeland, who, late last fall, referred to the crisis in the North as the most neglected crisis in the world. His visit will add to the visibility of the plight of Uganda as a divided nation and as a nation that has failed to protect its own citizens.

Bridging the north-south divide will take concerted actions from different actors. The international community of donors needs to send a clear and consistent message to the Ugandan government that development in one part of Uganda does not constitute success and that failure to allow freedom of movement and to protect its own citizens are violations of humanitarian law that will bring economic and political consequences. Together with experts in Uganda, international experts on property rights and land reform can help design ways to determine ownership and ensure compensation for lands confiscated or used by the government or others.

Ugandan civil society throughout the country can be more active in pressuring the government to temper its language and take more constructive and conciliatory gestures – the President saying that the LRA “are finished” convinces no one when abductions and killings continue. But it does minimize the problem and further marginalize a large segment of Ugandan society. Civil society organizations are already active in working for peace throughout the north, and could use more support in assisting the victims of the conflict – those who live in the camps, in the towns, and those returning from the bush with the LRA. Southerners need to recognize that a generation of illiterate youth trained to use weapons and brutalize people will have consequences nationwide unless action is taken to reintegrate them through community-wide education, mental and physical health care, and opportunities to make a living. Stakeholders throughout the country need to mobilize to ensure that the north of the country remains high on the government’s agenda

and that opportunities for north-south collaborations are undertaken. Civil society can lobby for more progressive policies, such as the passage of the Domestic Relations Bill, which gives women the right to own land, a critical component of long-term durable peace.

The Ugandan government must allocate resources – human and financial -- to the 1.7 million displaced persons as well as to those coming out of the bush. It must also rein in its military – there is a culture of impunity for crimes committed by the army. For its own health, the government needs to undertake an examination of corruption and war profiteering by local leaders and the military. This could be assisted and pushed by the international donor community. Phenomena such as ghost soldiers and illicit trade continue in the north.

In last week's elections, the president lost the north by a margin of about 6 to 1. Let him take this opportunity, going into his third decade of rule, to demonstrate that he is the leader of all Ugandans by fully engaging to resolve the war in the north, by liberating the camps, and by protecting all Ugandans from war and abuse. Failing that, let the international community send a clear message that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no ruler has the right to hold his people hostage.