

Talking to tyrants: Jan Egeland meets Joseph Kony
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On November 11, Jan Egeland, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, met with Joseph Kony, leader of the Lords Resistance Army, a Christian cult-like rebel group in northern Uganda that has waged war for 20 years, notorious for its senseless brutality against its own ethnic group, the Acholi people. The LRA abducts children and adults, rapes, mutilates, destroys, and kills. Egeland, the UN's top humanitarian official, was already in the region when Kony reportedly had expressed an interest in meeting with him. This was a stunning development. Few have ever seen Kony – he is highly elusive, shunning meetings with those who come to talk peace, sometimes ordering their death. There have been LRA commanders who act as his spokespersons, calling radio stations, political and religious leaders, and even some members of the international community to express their views, deny wrongdoing, or make requests. But Kony himself has been wary of meeting with anyone and has rarely asked to meet with anyone. Only one peace process has taken place in all these years that involved face-to-face talks with Kony. But following the break-down of these talks in 1994 because of an ultimatum issued by Ugandan President Museveni for the rebels to surrender, Kony has met with very few people and has not directly engaged in any other peace talks.

Thus it came as a surprise that Kony wanted to meet with Jan Egeland, the first international official to declare the situation in northern Uganda one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. Almost two million people have been forcibly displaced into squalid camps where 1,000 people are dying each week of disease and malnutrition and 25 – 40,000 children have been abducted by the LRA. Nonetheless, talking with Kony offered an amazing opportunity to test his commitment to peace. The meeting took place November 12 in the forests of Southern Sudan – it was reported to be very short, about 30 minutes, with LRA commanders and Southern Sudanese and Ugandan officials present. Within hours of the meeting, the Ugandan press was reporting that the LRA had declared the talks a failure.

Egeland's instinct to talk to Kony was a good one. Talking to terrorists and tyrants who have the power and inclination to destroy and kill, as despicable as it may be, is often necessary. When such odious people are willing to talk, we must choose whether we do so and under what conditions. When the key actor in the conflict has not been willing to engage for over a decade, there is little choice but to grab such an opportunity when it comes. Importantly, however, engaging with terrorists and tyrants requires preparation to minimize legitimizing them and to maximize chances for assisting those most in need.

We have learned some lessons from talking to tyrants. The first lesson is knowing what leverage you have. In this case, because Kony allegedly wanted the meeting, Egeland held some power. With arrest warrants issued for Kony and four other top LRA commanders by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in October 2005, Kony dares not venture out of the bush for fear he could be captured and sent to the ICC in The Hague. With Sudan no longer offering shelter to the LRA, and with peace talks launched this past July mediated by the Vice-President of Southern Sudan, the timing is ripe for Kony to seek a solution to his increasingly untenable situation. The peace talks taking place in Juba, Southern Sudan, have been seriously hampered by an LRA delegation that has its own agenda that is often at odds with Kony and his fellow

commanders, demonstrated by their calls to radio stations to disclaim the demands made by the delegation in the peace talks. Kony has been demanding that the ICC indictments be dropped so that he can participate in the talks himself and wanted to discuss this with Egeland. This is an absurd demand given that he has provided no evidence to suggest that he would engage in talks in good faith nor should anyone accused of such heinous crimes be granted impunity. Nevertheless, Kony's desire to have a voice in the peace process offered Egeland some leverage.

Having leverage is key to being able to set conditions for the meeting. This is the second lesson in talking to a tyrant -- not to give away one's status and prestige by meeting with the person without extracting some concrete confidence-building gesture from them first. Kony might have been asked, for example, as a sign of goodwill, to release injured or ill child combatants under the age of 18. But it does not appear that Kony was asked to demonstrate his good faith as a pre-condition to the meeting.

The third lesson is that for these gestures to be meaningful, they need to be reasonable. Reasonable conditions are ones that the person is willing and able to fulfill. In Kony's case, for example, he has the capacity to release some of the abducted children and adults who have been held against their will to fight his war.

The fourth lesson is that such conditions must be agreed on prior to the meeting so that it is clear whether or not the person is genuinely interested in moving towards peace. If Kony wanted to meet with Egeland, then there was a good chance they could have agreed on one or more gestures Kony could have been taken to indicate his seriousness. Agreeing on the conditions for the meeting beforehand permits Kony to re-frame them however he likes to his commanders so that they will accept and fulfill those conditions.

Finally, the fifth lesson is that discussions to agree on conditions must be private. If others find out about the discussions before the conditions are agreed on, Kony may shy away entirely from the conditions and the meeting as he may believe he has lost face in front of his commanders. While it may seem perverse to be concerned about helping someone like Kony save face, it benefits no one to place Kony in a no-win situation which he could not accept. He must appear to be the leader and in control. However, once the conditions are set, it would be up to Kony and Egeland to decide if they wanted to go public with the conditions before the meeting. Publicizing such conditions would have the potential to show Kony to be acting in good faith and therefore serious about moving towards peace, and could also hold his feet to the fire to fulfill his public commitments.

If conditions are not agreed on, the meeting does not take place. If conditions are not fulfilled, the meeting does not take place. We should not beat a path to Kony's door, according him a status and legitimacy he does not deserve. Certainly those of us who have come away empty-handed from meetings with Kony had hoped that Egeland would apply some of these lessons so that even if the meeting ultimately failed, some good would have come from it.

From all public accounts of the meeting, Egeland held the meeting with Kony without getting anything in return. Egeland expressed regret that a request he made to Kony during the meeting, for the release of women, children, or wounded, had not been granted. He is reported to

have said that Kony had agreed to get back to him in a month on humanitarian steps that could be taken concerning the women, children and non-combatants who are with Kony's army. Neither Kony nor Egeland got what they wanted from this meeting; I suspect Kony will not seek another with Egeland.

Egeland left empty-handed despite the unique alignment of leverage and timing. Perhaps something will come from this meeting of which we are yet unaware. There may be another saving grace: this may not have been a one-shot opportunity. With the ICC indictments hanging over his head, Kony has tremendous motivation to come forward with something – while he has had time on his side the past 20 years, it may be running out. Kony may seek to meet with another interlocutor to resolve his status. For the sake of the children and adults of Acholiland -- the displaced, the abducted, the victims and the perpetrators – let us hope it will be soon.

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