

TOWARDS HUMAN DIGNITY

Seeking an End to Human Suffering in
Northern Uganda through Non-violent
Faith based Action

Presented by
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The paper discusses the concept of human rights and human dignity and the fundamental requirement of peace and security for its achievement. Focusing on Uganda and northern Uganda, and delving into the experiences of Bishop Onono-Onweng the paper explores how the selfless concerted efforts of a few can work towards protection of the security, welfare and rights of individuals and groups in the society, thus kick starting the process of the restoration of human dignity.

TOWARDS HUMAN DIGNITY: SEEKING AN END TO HUMAN SUFFERING IN NORTHERN UGANDA THROUGH NON-VIOLENT FAITH BASED ACTION

*“May human rights create a special climate of solidarity and responsibility.
May human rights become the common language of humanity.”*

His Excellence Boutros Boutros-Ghali¹

Introduction

The phenomenon known as the human rights movement – the totality of norms, institutions and processes that seek to shield the individual from arbitrary and excessive state action – grew out of the specific abominations of the Second World War. Sixty two years later, this movement is slowly being universalised as people everywhere seek constitutional and political arrangements that limit state power and conditions of popular accountability.²

However, sixty two years after this phenomenon was first introduced, most people of the world to whom this compelling declaration belongs and for whose empowerment it was intended, do not know of its existence and are not aware of the prophetic moral aspiration it contains for the promotion and protection of human dignity.

Additionally, six two years after the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the basis of the human rights phenomenon, conditions – including but not limited to; abject poverty and conditions of scarcity; Internal Displacement and Refugees as a result of armed conflicts; Infant mortality as a result of preventable diseases; and dictatorial states with despotic leaders to mention but a few; - continue to prevail that bar the full enjoyment and protection of human rights.

One of the continents where these deplorable conditions continue to prevail unabated is Africa. For centuries the citizenry of the various African states have had to live with malevolent governments responsible for unspeakable abuses inflicted on the people and repression. How then can we state that human rights are the basis for human dignity when over half of the world’s population, continue to live in conditions which perpetuate the violation of human rights and degradation of human dignity?

¹ Quoted by R. Reoch, “Human Rights: The New Consensus.” Regency Press (Humanity) Ltd 1994, P.10

² M. Mutua, “Human Rights Discourse: African View Point” in Human Rights: The New Consensus, Regency Press (Humanity) Ltd, P. 87

From a Christian perspective, the Bible in Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created man³ in his own image and made them the crown of all his creation. God gave them the position of honour and dignity to enable them live a fulfilling and quality life.

However, when man's relationship with God was corrupted the same corruption was reflected in his relationship with fellow man. It is at this point that man decided that there were those people more deserving than the others. This brought about suffering for those considered less deserving than others in society.

To bring good news and hope to the oppressed and excluded, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that the poor, the sick, the hungry, the rejected and excluded, the immoral and the oppressed, could have life in fullness.⁴

Jesus' mission was to proclaim and show by way of example to man that they are supposed to; (i) live all aspects of their lives (social, economic and political) justly; (ii) show love and love all including their enemies.⁵

Jesus in addition and by way of example showed to man that despite man's own insecurities and need, man should at all times ensure that the basic needs – food, water, clothing and shelter - of those least fortunate in society are met.⁶

I believe the rationale of Jesus' teachings rest on the simple fact that when society allows a large sect of its population to live in conditions of continuous deprivation because the few who have – ignore the basic needs and appeals of those who do not have – society wilfully creates favourable conditions for human right abuses and violations to happen.

The Northern Uganda story

One such condition created by such a culture of social injustice is armed resistance against the legitimate government stemming from the common root of violation or denial of a right to freedom or equality.

Uganda – once referred to as the Pearl of Africa by the Colonial powers, is one of the countries on the continent of Africa where the most civil wars have been fought as a rebellion of different sects of its citizenry against its various post independence governments.

³ Man – meaning human beings both male and female

⁴ The Gospel of John 10:10

⁵ This is found in the Gospel of Luke 1:52-53; 6:20 -27

⁶ Mathew 25:35 -36

From 1966; four years after the nation gained independent rule from colonial administration; violence has been rampant in the country as the means through which political power could be retained or achieved. Obote I overthrown through a coup by Idi Amin; Idi Amin overthrown by Obote II; followed by short stints in power by various gun wielding brute; 1986 the then guerrilla group National Resistance Army (NRA) overthrew Tito Okello and has managed to retain power to date.

It should be noted that 1986 marked the change in the nature of armed rebellions in Uganda.⁷ The armed rebellions were waged with differing intentions ranging from; attempts to reinstall past leaders, to attempts to overthrow the government so that the needs of the marginalised could be addressed. It should be noted that some of the rebellions were fought as retaliation against atrocities committed against people.

In Northern Uganda after the National Resistance Army (NRA) took over power, numerous groups took up arms against the government, the most notorious being the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group who waged a brutal armed rebellion. Unfortunately, as the LRA and the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF) engaged in battle, the innocent Acholi population bore the brunt of their fighting. Uncountable lives were lost; over 30,000 children were abducted and indoctrinated to become fierce fighters among the rebel ranks⁸; entire populations were unceremoniously uprooted from their homes and sources of livelihood and forced to live in squalid condition camps; many lost limbs and lives to land mines; countless women and girls were raped and turned into sexual slaves; countless women seeking security and a means of survival became military '*camp followers*' and social outcasts.

The resultant effect of these violations was the loss of "*ubuntu*"⁹ by the people of northern Uganda. Men and women who once had such pride in their capacities to provide for themselves were reduced to beggars solely dependent on humanitarian relief; children who had bright futures and hope became disillusioned and lost with no moral or cultural up-bringing to guide them.

These conditions notwithstanding in 1997 I accepted my calling as the new Bishop of the Diocese of Northern Uganda – a diocese which covers the

⁷ Since the National Resistance Army took over power in 1986 there have been over 22 armed rebellions fought throughout the country with the longest running rebellion being in Northern Uganda

⁸ Uganda's Child Soldiers (Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army) accessed on <http://www.Kabiza.com/Lira-Children-Rebels.htm> 14 October 2010 at 12:41hrs

⁹ Ubuntu is a Bantu term meant to imply that which makes you and human and not an animal – human dignity

political districts of Gulu, Amuru and Nwoya in northern Uganda and inhabited by a people who had been caught-up for the 12th year in the vicious jaws of the protracted armed conflict between the LRA and the UPDF.

My decision to leave the relative comfort and safety of Kampala for the war torn northern Uganda was grounded in my conviction that through the office of the Bishop I could help make a positive difference in the lives of all the people of northern Uganda.

This conviction was given further credence by a joint pastoral letter written in 1976 by the Rt. Rev. Cipirian Kihangire (R.I.P) and the Rt. Rev. Dr. Benoni Ogwal-Abwang; urging the churches to unit for the common good of the people of Uganda which had come to my attention as I prepared to take office in 1997; a paragraph from the letter reads

“We should be committed to the work of liberation and redemption. We must be especially committed to fostering of unity [...] of our nation and common brotherhood, and a unity of mankind. We will expose and condemn any disruptive forces which attempt to destroy unity. Our churches must be the voice of conscience of society, having the responsibility of seeing that the common good of all people in our areas and in Uganda is promoted and realised [...]”

Witnessing the suffering of the people and closely associating with the suffering people, I challenged myself to dare and take action – as I made a decision to take up this challenge my major goal was to use my office as Bishop to bring an end to the suffering of the people. As I set out to achieve this purpose I was guided by my belief in the power of unity of purpose; a unity which I sought to achieve at a level where division was most apparent because of our different practices – religion.

During these reflections and with religion as my chosen front for proposed action, I remember asking myself, “Can there be sufficient platform for religious leaders to engage their flock in the process of ending the war in Northern Uganda?”

It became not only justifiable but a conviction for me to initiate a coalition between Muslims and Christians at a functional level to transform the armed conflict in Northern Uganda.

The coalition so initiated was to be driven by the strength of unity of purpose and its main force for transforming the unjust society in northern Uganda non-violence.

Encouraged by these seemingly bright ideas and emboldened by the fact that religious leaders have divine authority to intervene in a hopeless situation and create a semblance of hope, I initiated the formation of the Acoli Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, ARLPI, an interfaith organisation comprising of religious leaders of the Anglican, Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox organisations.

Once legalities were completed ARLPI embarked on its journey to end the conflict in northern Uganda non-violently. Because peace is not only the fundamental guarantee of everyone's right to life but also the prior condition for the progress of any society and any nation.¹⁰

As we tried to market the benefits of inter-faith action as a force against violence ARLPI, the President of Uganda Mr. Museveni gave us the green light to start our peace work. At about the same time ARLPI was challenged by Major General Katumba Wamala, the then 4th Division commander based in Gulu. He urged us to use the ARLPI platform to initiate contact with the rebels and engage them in discussions on how best the reasons they were fighting could be addressed diplomatically.

My experiences

1. A journey into the bush in the middle of the night

Most of my peace activism has been based on an inner urge to go the extra mile to help create a positive change in the lives of the groups or individuals in the community whose security, welfare and even survival is threatened by avoidable situations such as violent conflict and preventable situations such as disease, poverty and hunger.

After the challenge presented by the 4th Division Commander, I thought about the benefits such contact would have for the people suffering in the camps and I dared myself to act. I decided to personally initiate contact with the rebels, and on 28 November 1998, a rebel commander granted me the opportunity to meet him at 22:00hours in the midst of the bush at an unknown location.

The meeting was for two major purposes, namely; to initiate communication with the LRA for purposes of furthering the cause of a nonviolent resolution of the conflict and to relay some concerns of the community to the LRA.

In particular the people had three major issues they wished to be addressed by the rebels. The people wanted the rebels to;

¹⁰ J. Mayer, "A Programme for the Future: A Solidarity Pact," in Humanitarian Intervention, Peace-keeping, Peace-making and Peace-building, Paper prepared for Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, June 1992

1. Stop the rampant ambushes and attacks on vehicles in transit
2. Stop the use of land mines
3. Release the nuns and three boys abducted during the Wii-Anaka ambush.

In response the rebel commander promised to discuss the issue of attacking vehicles in transit and the use of land mines with Joseph Kony their leader and promised to give us a fed back within seven days.

Regarding the release of the nuns and the three boys the rebels promised to have them released within two days. True to their word, the rebels released the captives within two days.

After discussing some issues on how best the religious leaders could meet Joseph Kony and initiate diplomatic talks about the peaceful ending of the protracted conflict, the meeting finally came to a conclusion at about 2:00am in the morning.

My actions although positive created problems for me as a public figure, since I had not informed the military of my midnight tryst with the rebels I was immediately under investigation and suspected as a rebel collaborator with the possibility of being charged with treason.

When questioned by the Major General Katumba Wamala, I reminded him about the meeting we had had where he challenged me as the Chairperson of ARLPI to work closely with my colleagues and make contact with the rebels. The objective of the contact was to initiate talks with the rebels.

I told him that I had accepted the challenge on behalf of my colleagues and initiated contact with the rebels. Although in honesty I had not done all the work, prior to my foray into the bush, I had been contacted by an LRA Commander Michael Odong Acellam, inviting me for a meeting.

The invitation, I told the Major General, was to me was like a golden opportunity to initiate dialogue with the rebels on the possibility of peacefully ending the protracted conflict.

Thankfully I was only served with a letter from the President, saying that although I had a very good intention – pursuit of peace – my approach had been unethical and wrong.

Looking back on the incident I do not regret for one moment having done what I did, it took astronomical courage and maybe a dash of a death wish for me to do what I did. But one cannot be too sure when success will come especially after successive failures when dealing with a difficult situation,

and as risky or daring as the mission was I believe someone had to make the decision to go.

2. Solidarity with the Children

Another experience which was shared with the other religious leaders under ARLPI was in 2001 when we decided to join children, sleeping on the streets as an advocacy for the government and the international community to see the suffering of the children and take action to address their plight.

Children of ages started flocking Gulu town at night following the launch of another military offensive against the LRA, code named Operation Iron fist (OIF). OIF dislodged the LRA from their safe haven in the Gatong hills in Southern Sudan, re-entered Uganda and went on rampage. They destroyed IDP camps, abducted children, killed civilians, brutally amputated civilians and on more than one occasion boiled the bodies of their victims in large clay-water pots.

Their indiscriminate and extremely ferocious acts which were aimed at making a statement as to their military might, spread like the proverbial bush fire, creating total insecurity in the Acoli sub-region and spilt over into the neighbouring areas of Lango and Teso.

The particularly hostile environment in Gulu district (now Gulu, Amuru and Nwoya) and the unchecked abduction of children by the LRA forced children to seek refuge at night in the relative safety of the township.

From dusk to dawn every day for over four weeks children travelled miles to reach the town centre where they spent their nights on shop verandas, in the Bus Park, on the verandas of Gulu Referral Hospital and Lacor Hospital, Christ Church and Holy Rosary Primary School, with nothing to protect them against the elements of weather and disease vectors.

The first time I saw the masses of children and infants huddled together seeking warmth and shelter from the rain, I was ashamed of what we were doing to our future. These precious gifts from God were being made to endure a punishment no human being should be allowed to endure.

Seeing the suffering children and having placed myself in the shoes of the parents of these children, I was compelled to act. I could not bring myself to sleep in the safety of my house with a blanket and yet innocent children were out in the cold paying a price for a war they had no part in starting, obviously very little say in how it was being fought and even lesser influence on how it would end.

My first proposed course of action was to take up residence with the children on the street so that I could share in their suffering.

I discussed the issue with the other religious leaders; I said to them we needed to be in solidarity with the children – night commuters. I believed our solidarity would have a far reaching impact than my individual effort. I explained to my colleagues that, as a sign of our concern for the plight and suffering of children we needed to stand together and make an unequivocal statement against children having to spend the night on the streets in search of security.

In engaging the religious leaders I based my belief in the power of non-violence which to me has the potential to change the world for the better, all we have to do is look to India's Mahatma Ghandi and South Africa's Nelson Mandela to get the picture of the potency of non-violence.

Our resolution and actual sleeping on the streets was to be a beacon which not only unveiled the suffering of the children, it also helped build momentum for concerted effort by child protection organisations and the government to bring an end to children sleeping on the street which not only left them vulnerable to disease but also exposed them to other social risks such as defilement.

Of course our non-violent act although viewed by many as very important in bringing the plight of the children in northern Uganda to light, did not sit very comfortably with some members of the society. For instance, security officers and some government officials were perturbed and restless. They had heard through their various intelligence and grape vine networks, that religious leaders planned to sleep on the streets with the children they thought we were 'all talk and no action.'

To us our action was grounded in the fact that we viewed these children as our children and we as their parents owed them a duty of care. We thought of our act as that of a parent fleeing the insecurity to seek refuge for his or her children in the relative safety of the town centre.

We shocked them when we carried out our plans and since we had not officially inform the government of our intentions they had no reason to actually believe that we go out there and sleep on the streets.

Although, I have many stories to tell on my work as a peace-builder, I chose these particular story to share with you because, through these stories I learned many lessons in going the extra mile to secure human dignity.

Lessons Learned

- Respect for human rights can be achieved by means of voluntarists actions of solidarity in support of persons and groups in society whose security, welfare and even survival is threatened especially by conflict and or oppression
- In order to serve in an environment of scarcity and many needs, you need to act beyond self. I was ready to serve and work for the return of peace in Acoli land without any rewards or assistance, my goal achievement was rewarding enough for me. So you need to forget about self when seeking the restoration of human dignity
- Non-violence is not about inaction – non-violence is taking action when no-one else will. Taking the chance of being laughed at or ridiculed by society, we took action and slept with the children on the street. Our non-violent action helped change the face of the “night commuters” as NGOs came up constructed night commuter centres where the children could seek refuge from the LRA
- As a peace-activist, one must always be ready for persecution. My risky journey into the bush had me labelled a collaborator and I was partially harassed by the military, however, I stood firm in my faith in my action and did not waver in my determination to help bring a peaceful end to the protracted conflict in northern Uganda
- Prayer without ceasing in love for the suffering people is a very powerful force to help you keep the determination to undertake action for the good of others

In conclusion I would like to note that for each one of us the world is our stage and it is through our actions that we are remembered by the rest. This was reiterated by Stanislaw who in his tribute to Pope John Paul II rightly noted that;

“For each one of us there is a unique and unrepeatable role to be performed on the stage of this world...everyone has behind him his actions. With these each person leaves the stage of this world that passes but through them he remains in the memory of those on this stage who have not yet finished reciting their part. He remains in them as a stumbling block or as a help...”¹¹

¹¹ S. Grygiel, “That Encyclical Written throughout his life.” Pg. 8 OASIS Year 1 No. 2 September 2005

God Bless You