The Northern Uganda War: “The Small Conflict” That Became the World’s Worst Humanitarian Crisis

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Acholi, a term that comes from an area within Uganda’s Northern region, is known for its rich cultural and historical legacies. The region has been home to various waves of conflict, including the brutal Abokatleke Civil War of the 1980s, the civil war against the LRA, and the more recent conflict in Sudan. Despite the challenges, Acholi has always been a beacon of hope and resilience.

In 1986, two of the most powerful rebel movements of the time, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the National Resistance Army (NRA), started fighting against the Ugandan government. The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, was supported by Sudan, while the NRA was led by Yoweri Museveni. The conflict dragged on for 18 years, with both sides committing atrocities and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

The war left a profound impact on the region. It destroyed homes, businesses, and schools, and forced people to flee their homes. The LRA, in particular, was known for its brutal tactics, including the recruitment of child soldiers, the burning of villages, and the killing of civilians. The war caused a massive displacement of people, with hundreds of thousands being forced to live in IDP camps.

In 2004, the war continued to escalate, with the LRA committing more atrocities and displacing more people. The government responded with military actions, including the Operation Iron Fist, which was designed to rout out the LRA from its bases in Sudan.

Despite these efforts, the war continued, with the LRA launching periodical attacks in Acholiland and making the population live in terror. The war was a testament to the human cost of conflict, with thousands of people killed or forcibly displaced. The region was left in a state of devastation, with a broken infrastructure and a shattered society.

The war ended in 2006, with the LRA captured or killed in a joint operation involving the Ugandan and Sudanese armies. However, the aftermath of the war left a lasting impact on the region. The people of Northern Uganda continue to face challenges in rebuilding their lives and restoring their communities. The region remains a testament to the human cost of conflict and the need for peace and reconciliation.

In the years following the end of the war, there have been efforts to rebuild and renew the region. The government has invested in infrastructure development, education, and health care. The region has also become a hub for humanitarian aid organizations, with a focus on providing relief to the displaced and rebuilding the infrastructure.

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Judging things from the ground, experience has taught us that in the Northern Uganda war things need to be taken cautiously, avoiding being over-optimistic. During the 18-year old war there have been some other similar moments. The much-repeated statements that "the war is almost over" or that "the situation is generally calm" are not new to our ears. There are moments in which we are told that the violence is scaling down, only to be taken by surprise by another massacre, as it happened in Olak on April 29, in Papak on May 16 and in Lukote on May 20. The situation continues to be very serious, and so far the supposed wearing out of the LRA is not having much effect in having any significant impact in changing in the lives of the at least 1.6 million displaced persons staying in the camps living in constant fear. Abductions, although generally unreported in the Press these days, continue almost on a daily basis. A good number of abductees end up being killed in armed clashes and are reported as "rebels killed".

**Conclusion**

Is an outright victory by the UPDF possible? Supporters of this view often refer to the defeat of the ADF in Western Uganda as an example. Whether this is possible or not, ARLPI's view has always been that peace achieved by military means on the long run is not as sustainable as peace achieved by dialogue. The thousands of parents whose children were abducted and who have lost them during armed clashes may remain with a bitterness that will not go away easily.

Moreover, even with the scenario of a weakened LRA without support from Sudan, the chronic insecurity might not stop at once. The LRA violence may continue even without any military assistance from Sudan.

In order to get a comprehensive solution that will last we need to keep working on a peaceful settlement that will end with a general demobilisation of the LRA.

This is the main challenge ahead of us.