

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**

## Ex-peace mediator sees hope for settlement in Northern Uganda

**The Associated Press**

A former Ugandan government minister and peace negotiator says a series of developments, including reduced arms flows to the Lord's Resistance Army, have brightened prospects for settlement to the long-running war in Northern Uganda.

Betty Bigombe, who served as peace mediator between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army until early this year, said Tuesday an apparent cutoff in arms and material support to the LRA from Sudan may make the LRA leader Joseph Kony more amenable to a settlement.

She also said International Criminal Court indictments handed down against five LRA militants last year are another "pressure point" on the rebel group.

"The LRA realizes that if they don't do something now, the whole world will be against them," Bigombe said.

The war has caused incalculable human suffering. With almost 2 million people uprooted from their homes, the U.N. undersecretary for humanitarian affairs, Jan Egeland, has said the Northern Uganda conflict is the world's most neglected humanitarian crisis.

Bigombe, who has waged her peace effort off and on for 20 years, spoke Tuesday to a gathering at the U.S. Institute of Peace, where she is a senior fellow. Over the years, she has had direct discussions with the reclusive Kony, who believes he is under instructions from God to punish anyone who collaborates with the Ugandan government.

Bigombe is writing a book on her experiences.

She has hopes for a peace effort now under way in the southern Sudan city of Juba. "The Juba talks are the best opportunity for peace," she said.

As Bigombe sees it, the peace agreement last year that ended the north-south civil war in Sudan also is providing an incentive for peacemaking in Northern Uganda, whose border lies just south of Juba.

She also said Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni may be pushing harder for a settlement after two decades of conflict.

"The Northern Uganda situation has tainted Museveni's image, and he is now taking the issue more seriously," Migombe said.



The dire humanitarian situation in Northern Uganda, she said, also increases the pressure on the parties to reach an agreement.

Among countervailing pressures, she said, are the "unrealistic demands" of LRA negotiators in Juba. She suggested that the LRA delegation there may not be reflecting the wishes of the LRA fighters. In addition, she said, a successful end to the negotiation could leave the negotiators unemployed, giving them an incentive to prolong the process.

"It's possible that the Ugandan government will sign an agreement, but the sticking point is whether it will be implemented," she said.

According to Bigombe, about 80 percent of LRA fighters are kidnapped children. Any fighter who tries to escape faces the death penalty, she said.

"That has enabled Kony to maintain control," she added. Kony's fighters, she said, believe that he will someday become president of Uganda and as such will ensure that they no longer need worry about an impoverished existence.

The war drags on because many people benefit from it, Bigombe said.

"How do you deal with the spoilers?" she asked. "How do you make them promoters of peace?"

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