

Former Ugandan Mediator Optimistic about Agreement with LRA

By Lisa Schlein
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A former Ugandan minister who has mediated peace efforts between the government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army says she is optimistic that a peace deal can be reached. Lisa Schlein in Geneva interviewed her and has the report for VOA.

Betty Bigombe facilitated peace talks between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA between 1992 and 1994. She mediated a second round of negotiations between 2004 and 2006.

Bigombe says she is optimistic that the latest round of peace negotiations will eventually end in agreement.

Both the rebels and the government have said they are committed to the peace talks in southern Sudan. However, alleged violations of an August truce have slowed progress toward a peace deal.

The rebels also want the International Criminal Court to drop arrest warrants for five top rebel leaders accused of war crimes.



Joseph Kony, LRA leader (right), with an Ugandan delegation near the Sudanese border, 31 Jul. 2006

Bigombe says the LRA leader, Joseph Kony, knows that no country will offer his group protection, so a deal is of interest to him. She says ending this war is also of regional interest, because of the threat that continued instability in Uganda could spill across borders.

She said, "The regional dimension, definitely has attracted the international community. And, they feel that a lot has been invested in peace in Sudan, Southern Sudan in particular."

"A lot has been invested in peace in the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo]. And they would not want anything that would come back and unravel what has been invested," she added.

Nearly two million people have been displaced during the rebels' 20-year insurgency in northern Uganda. The war has killed tens of thousands of people, and rebels are accused of committing war crimes, including the kidnapping of an estimated 20,000 children for use as fighters and sex slaves.

Bigombe says the number of children being abducted by the LRA began going down at the end of 2004. And, for the last nine months, she says no children have been taken.

"And even the commuter children, who have been running away from home to go and stay in the cities for their own protection, the numbers have dropped significantly," she said.

Bigombe says life has improved since negotiations began. About 300,000 have returned to their homes, and the U.N. says hundreds of thousands more are preparing to return.

Bigombe says many people still live in the camps, but that is because they have no homes to go to.

"But, the fact that they can now leave their camps, go to the field and be able to cultivate, to be able to produce their own food, that is something that we have not seen in a long, long time," she said. "The curfew that used to be around the camps is no longer there, so people can move back and forth."

Bigombe says the negotiations are moving in the right direction, but they are still very fragile. She says the international community must continue to apply pressure on the parties to talk in good faith. Without that, she warns, the whole peace process could unwind.

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