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Africa's peace seekers: Betty Bigombe

Betty Bigombe spends her days talking to rebels and Army officers in Uganda's bush country. She is one of Africa's peace seekers - individuals willing to leave loved ones behind, shrug off personal threats, and even spend significant amounts of their own money to end some of the continent's most intractable conflicts. Part 2 of three.

By [Abraham McLaughlin](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

GULU, UGANDA - It was a CNN "breaking news" flash that first caught her eye.

On the chilly morning of Feb. 22, 2004, Betty Bigombe was racing around her cozy condo in Chevy Chase, Md. She was focused on paying bills, packing for a business trip, and hoping to squeeze in a workout.

Walking past her bedroom TV, she suddenly froze. In her native Uganda, the anchor said, the Lord's Resistance Army had just massacred more than 200 villagers. They had forced entire families to stay inside huts - then set the houses alight, shooting anyone who ran out. Ms. Bigombe remembers whispering, "Oh, my God, I can't believe it's still happening."

Her own picture appeared on the screen. The reporter explained that Bigombe, a former government minister in Uganda, was the one person who'd ever gotten the rebels and the government close to peace. But that was back in 1994.

Now the ongoing barbarity in her homeland filled her with shame. Standing there in her nightgown, she was deeply torn. Should she go back to Uganda to help? Could she afford to lose her well-paying job at the World Bank? Could she stand to leave her college-age daughter alone in the US? After hours of pondering, she concluded, "Maybe ... maybe I can give it another try."

* * *

That February day marked Bigombe's reluctant reentry into an elite group at the center of efforts to end this continent's most-intractable conflicts. They are Africa's peace seekers. And these days they're increasingly successful: Last year, the number of major conflicts in Africa (six) hit its lowest level since 1997, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which tracks global conflicts. It spiked in 1998 and 1999 to 11, but has since trended downward.

The geopolitical reasons for the shift include the end of the cold war and the proxy conflicts it spawned in Africa, the rise of democracy on the continent, and the new peacemaking strength of African regional organizations. But the change also springs from individuals such as Bigombe - peace seekers who are willing to leave loved ones behind and strike out on quests others have failed to finish. They often work 20-hour days, endure sleepless nights, and even spend significant amounts of their own money. Some have succeeded. Others, like Bigombe, are pushing hard.

There's been a recent "surge in willingness" of individuals and regional groups in Africa to "be responsible for getting out of the mess" that has long pervaded their continent, says Sharon Wiharta of SIPRI. These people and

organizations, she says, "have been more and more successful in negotiating the end of conflicts."

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Little did Bigombe know her initial "maybe" would turn into 18 months of grueling work. She's mostly been camped out at a one-story motel in rural northern Uganda. It's a far cry from Chevy Chase. The sheets are so scratchy that Bigombe swears she'll bring her own set next time. Order chicken in the motel's dining room, and the staff goes out back to kill a squawking bird.

Bigombe says she has spent about \$8,300 of her own money on the peace effort - on things like calls to rebels' satellite phones. In the past year, she has seen her daughter, Pauline, for only a handful of days - and once nearly had to pull her out of college because money was so tight. Bigombe is on leave from the World Bank - and isn't getting a salary. Sitting in jeans and a white T-shirt at a plastic garden table on the motel lawn, she sighs, and adds with a laugh: "Three weeks - I thought I would be here three weeks" before a peace deal was struck.

When she arrived last year, two months after the February massacre, she began her one-woman peace effort with no official position or outside funding - just a history of trust among all sides. Hopes were high. The rebels seemed desperate - and willing to negotiate. International pressure was building on the government to end the war. But today, 1-1/2 years later, despite some near successes, the 19-year conflict rumbles on between essentially three factions: The rebels who've been branded terrorists by the US, and who've killed more people than Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hizbullah combined; Uganda's headstrong president; and profiteering Army officers who apparently manipulate their commander in chief to prolong the war.

To some, her style seems organic, even haphazard. One day, she'll be poring over maps with government soldiers to establish the boundaries of a cease-fire zone. Other days, she'll joke and flirt with a commander to persuade him to delay a counterattack long enough to let her get between the two sides. At times, she's the target of expletives and even death threats.

"Oh, what I have to put up with," Bigombe says with an exasperated smile.

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The thump-thump-thump of a borrowed British helicopter echoed over the scrub-brush of her native land. In December 2004, Bigombe was flying to meet with the rebels. She had a peace offering.

With the wind and dust still swirling after the landing, a sealed, 40-pound bag of rice from the World Food Program was unloaded. Bigombe ordered it deposited in front of the rebel officers, who were standing sternly in their crisp military uniforms. Twenty or so child soldiers in torn T-shirts were nearby, fingers on rifle triggers. They gazed longingly at the rice.

"Take it," Bigombe recalls telling the rebels.

But no one moved in the hot sun. "It might be poisoned," the top officer said.

He ultimately refused the rice. At first, Bigombe thought it was a setback. But her willingness to bring the food - even if they didn't take it that day - turned out to be a breakthrough on one of the most important elements of peacemaking: trust.

The rebels already knew Bigombe as a member of their ethnic group, the Acholi. They knew that in 1994 she got them closer than they'd ever been to peace. And, after the rice-bag offering, they figured they could rely on her for supplies.

"We're hungry," one skinny rebel whispered at a subsequent meeting. With her own money, she bought sugar, coffee, cooking oil, and salt at local markets. Then she began arriving with cartons of soap and other supplies. The more they have, she explains, the fewer deadly raids they make on local villages.

Furthermore, as she brought supplies, the often-elusive rebels began contacting her more regularly, willing to talk peace. Some analysts worry the LRA is just manipulating Bigombe for their own gain. Regardless, outside observers say one of her great talents is building and keeping the trust of the warring parties.

Of that day with the rice, she says, "They were trying to see if they could trust us."

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The LRA is a mystical group led by Joseph Kony, a recluse who claims he's a spirit medium. He reportedly wants a Ugandan government based on the Ten Commandments. In recent years, he's apparently been holed up across the border in southern Sudan - and hasn't issued any formal demands.

The LRA used to enjoy support among northern villagers, who complain of economic marginalization by Uganda's central government. But its brutality has turned villagers against it. Lately, the LRA has just been trying to survive, say analysts.

During village raids, LRA soldiers seek supplies and young recruits. They mutilate civilians who don't cooperate. Captured girls are forced to be sex slaves to LRA commanders. Sometimes boys are made to kill their parents before being turned into LRA soldiers. The UN estimates that 80 percent of LRA soldiers are children.

Independent estimates are that 100,000 people have died in the conflict, 20,000 children have been kidnapped, and 1.6 million people have fled their homes.

As one Western diplomat in Kampala puts it, the LRA represents "a different order of magnitude of evil" than most African rebels.

Bigombe has seen the LRA's brutality first-hand. In 1995, when she was a government minister, she was the first outsider on the scene of one of its bloodiest massacres. Rebels attacked a town and captured about 220 men, women, and children. The villagers were marched several miles to a riverbank and all methodically executed.

Yet sometimes Bigombe sees glimmers of humanity, too. Once, one LRA commander grew pensive during a conversation. He wondered how his fellow northerners would perceive him after all the terrible things the LRA has done. He asked plaintively, "Can I ever go home again?"

* * *

"Do you want to pamper these killers?" shouted Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. It was 6 a.m., the time he often calls Bigombe. On this November morning he was seething.

"Hello, Mr. President," she answered in her gravelly voice.

The tirade continued. Mr. Museveni had declared a unilateral cease-fire to give rebels time to move toward peace. But his patience was wearing thin. Bigombe wanted an extension. He implied he was ready to end the cease-fire and loose the military on the rebels.

At first, Bigombe responded quietly, trying to soothe: "Do you want the killing to stop?"

But he continued, ending with: "Don't you ever ask me again for an extension" of the cease-fire.

So she just remained silent. Bigombe spends hours every day talking on her two cellphones - coaxing, encouraging, and scolding the Army commanders, President Museveni, and rebels. But sometimes one of her most powerful tools is not talking at all. In the ego-heavy circle of guerrilla commanders, Ugandan military officers, and heads of state, she says, silence works wonders.

After a few quiet moments, Museveni said, in a slightly repentant tone, "OK, Betty." Then he began listening. He eventually extended the cease-fire from its original seven days to 47.

This episode "shows the president is patient," says his spokesman, Onapito Ekomoloit, even though he's skeptical the rebels want peace. "They have never been serious," he says. "They have never been sincere."

Rebel commanders also call Bigombe from their satellite phones in fits of rage, she says. They demand, for instance, that Uganda's Army withdraw fully from the north.

Bigombe goes quiet. After a while, the commander often asks, "Are you still there?"

Eventually he barks, "I'll call you back in 30 minutes." When he does, she says with a knowing smile, he's "much more reasonable."

"When I go silent, they know I'm not pleased," she explains. It sends a simple message: "Do you want to blow it all up - or move toward peace?"

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Several recent changes, experts say, have improved the prospects for peace.

- Donor nations are pressuring Museveni to end the war. After largely ignoring the conflict for years, outside powers now worry about the scale of the humanitarian crisis and its destabilizing effects on the region. The US is providing "nonmilitary" support to Uganda's Army. But that's not enough, argues John Prendergast of International Crisis Group in Washington: "The lack of a direct American role - when both sides of the equation care more about the Americans than any other government - tells you the peace process is going to have tremendous limitations" despite Bigombe's efforts. He urges President Bush to appoint a high-level envoy, as he did in Sudan, to support Bigombe.

- The tactics of Uganda's long-ineffective Army have improved, in part because of US help. Fresh battlefield victories make Army commanders, now in a stronger position, more supportive of talks. Yet there's an economic incentive to prolong the war. The Acholi Inn where Bigombe stays, for instance, is owned by a top army commander. The war helps keep the motel full of diplomats, aid workers, and others. Commanders "deliberately misinform the president" to extend the war, says one source who requested anonymity.

- The LRA has lost most support from its long-time patron, the government of neighboring Sudan, whose leaders had long accused Uganda of backing Sudanese rebels in their 21-year civil war. So tit for tat, Sudan supported the LRA. But when Sudan signed a peace deal with its rebels in January, it no longer needed the LRA.

Last December, amid these changes, Bigombe engineered the first face-to-face talks between the government and the LRA in a decade. Hopes were high for a full cease-fire and a start to formal peace talks. But at the last minute, the deal collapsed. Both sides blame each other, and the fighting continues today.

The setback revived concern that Bigombe isn't tough enough to pull off peace. "She needs to be able to say, 'No!' to the government," says Sheikh Musa Khalil, a local religious leader.

It may be a matter of outside support. "A mediator must have leverage," says Paul Omach, a professor at Uganda's Makerere University. As an independent peace seeker, he argues, Bigombe has none. Whether it's her or someone else, "You need somebody with authority and power," he says.

* * *

To ask for help or not?

In January 2005, the rebels wanted more food - more than Bigombe could buy herself. She could have turned to one of the donor-nation embassies, which are supporting her - paying her cellphone bills, lending her helicopters, and more. But there's a downside. "I could go to [one embassy] and get the food tomorrow," she says. "But if I did, the others would complain that I hadn't gone to them."

Despite a desire to help, she says, diplomats often complicate negotiations by jostling for the glory of supporting the peace effort. It's a common problem mediators face.

Sometimes diplomats "are like a bunch of jealous wives," Bigombe says in exasperation. Recalling her own divorce with a laugh, she adds, "I know - I was one."

In the end, she got the food from Museveni. "Everybody agreed it would send a better message if it came from the government," she says. It underlines her approach of putting Ugandans at the center of any solution here.

Yet she now faces the biggest outside intervention yet: The International Criminal Court in the Hague is expected to indict LRA leaders as early as this month.

The ICC's role in Uganda is controversial. Outsiders say Kony must be brought to justice, but locals worry indictments will make him feel cornered and less willing to end the war.

If the ICC indicts, it will end this phase of Bigombe's work, she says, and send her "back to the drawing board." But she won't give up: "I'll keep looking for opportunities for peace."

* * *

When the peace process hit a lull in May 2005, Bigombe made a five-day dash to the US. The last thing she wanted to do was see "Hotel Rwanda," a film about the 1994 genocide. But her daughter insisted. Pauline wanted her mom to see how the film's success in US theaters shows that Americans are capable of caring about Africa - about the kind of work Betty is doing. "It was important for her to see that people are paying attention," Pauline says.

So they went. Pauline watched her mom wince at several scenes. She'd been in Rwanda after the genocide - even to Hotel des Milles Collines, where the movie is set. People "can be so cruel to each other for no reason," Pauline remembers her mom saying, "and not even understand what they're doing." Such brutality "affects her deeply," Pauline says, and keeps her working hard for peace.

My Mom, the negotiator

Most of the time, Pauline Bigombe lives the normal life of a college junior studying history in Washington, D.C. But when people ask about her mom - where she lives and what she does - it gets a little weird.

"The joke with my friends is that no one knows what my mom does," she says. "I never quite know how to explain it." Her friends know Pauline sees her mom only a few times a year - and that Betty is usually off in Africa. "They

just figure she's in the mafia," she laughs.

But there are unexpected moments when someone recognizes her mom's work.

At a Borders bookstore in D.C. recently, Pauline handed the clerk her mom's credit card. He glanced at the name, glared at her, and started yelling: "You're not Betty Bigombe."

He accused her of impersonation and credit-card theft. It turned out he's from Gulu, Uganda - the very town Betty is working in. Pauline finally convinced him that Betty is her mom. She promised to ask Betty to e-mail him. He beamed.

And there was the time she caught a ride with an Ethiopian cab driver. "Oh, you have problems there," he said of her native Uganda. But then he mentioned "the woman they're always talking about" who's making peace there.

"I'm pretty sure that's my mom," Pauline said quietly.

Astounded, he tried to refuse payment for the ride. She smiled, and paid anyway.

"I miss her a lot," Pauline says. "But I'm so proud of her."

Bigombe Biography

1954 Born in northern Uganda

1981-84 Became corporate secretary of the Uganda Mining Corporation

1986 Elected to parliament

1988 Appointed minister of state for pacification of northern Uganda

1993 Named Uganda's 'Woman of the Year' for her peace efforts

1997 Received master's degree from Harvard

1997 Appointed senior social scientist at postconflict department of the World Bank

Children: Pauline and Emmanuel

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