

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Experts say U.S. must be more active in seeking peace in northern Uganda

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON: Inaction by the United States runs a risk of letting a feeble northern Uganda peace process disintegrate and prolong a vicious, decades-old war, according to a panel of experts.

"If the U.S. does not step up engagement, then we are not going to get a peace deal," John Prendergast, Africa expert of the International Crisis Group, which monitors global hotspots, said Thursday at a discussion in a Senate office building on the problem.

Worry over the prospects for a lasting settlement accelerated with the expiration on Wednesday of a truce that the government unilaterally declared in August.

Prendergast said the peace process could be revived if Joseph Kony, leader of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, received assurances that he would not be hunted down once a peace deal were signed.

He also said the United Nations should lead an effort to "name and shame" LRA supporters around the world who have been financing its operations in the 20 years since warfare began in northern Uganda.

The LRA could be pushed toward peace in other ways, Prendergast said. "There needs to be a visible process of military planning to pressure the LRA if they are responsible for the demise of the peace process," he said.

Betty Bigombe, a Ugandan who has spent much of the past 20 years trying to negotiate a peaceful settlement in the region, agreed with Prendergast that security for Kony is an important key to peace.

"In my dealings with him, that has been his number one concern all along," Bigombe said.

More than 100 people crowded into a Senate hearing room for the discussion on northern Uganda, where more than 1.5 million people have been uprooted from their homes and countless thousands have died as a result of LRA atrocities.

The rebels gained notoriety for cutting off the tongues and lips of civilians and abducting thousands of children, turning the girls into sex slaves and the boys into fighters.

Michel Poffenberger, executive director of Resolve Uganda, assailed what he said was a lack of State Department support for the Juba negotiations.

"The U.S. should play an important part in marginalizing those who are not playing a constructive role," he said.

He noted that President George W. Bush recently telephoned Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. Unfortunately, Poffenberger said, the call was related not to the northern Uganda situation but to recent unrest in Somalia.

The State Department view has been that a prominent role for the United States could have a chilling effect on the negotiating process and produce unintended consequences.



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A department official said the Bush administration feels that the Juba deliberations have been flawed because the LRA negotiators have been living outside Uganda for some time and lack the ability to win support from top LRA leaders on any peace deal they might conclude.

U.S. relief aid totals \$95 million (€71.8 million) annually. Another \$13 million (€9.8 million) is used for rehabilitating children who manage to escape their LRA captors.

Hopes for peace rose in recent months with indications of progress during negotiations in the southern Sudanese city of Juba, close to the northern Uganda border.

The region has been generally peaceful, with many who had been confined to camps for the displaced opting to go back to their homes.

Bigombe said many of these became alarmed by the expiration of the truce, and some decided to return to the camps. Bigombe lives in Washington and recently undertook an extended visit to northern Uganda.

She said the situation is not hopeless despite the truce expiration.

"We can still have a breakthrough," she said. "There is no option but to continue to have hope."

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