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The Woman Behind Uganda's Peace Hopes

Betty Bigombe Put Life on Hold to Intercede in Northern War

By Nora Boustany
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Betty Bigombe plowed her own path as a mediator between two men at war. Her bodyguards addressed her as "Sir," but it was her womanly nurturing side, her wiles and selfless sacrifices that took her where no man had been.

For the better part of two decades, the lonely peacemaker has traveled through war-lacerated northern [Uganda](#) in a bid to help end one of [Africa's](#) longest-running insurgencies, negotiating with Joseph Kony, the notorious commander of the [Lord's Resistance Army](#), or LRA, and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

Activists who have accompanied Bigombe to northern Uganda described her rock star appeal as she entered squalid camps and toured schools in her native Acholi region.

"Betty Bigombe is one of my heroes in this world. I am captivated," said actor Ryan Gosling, who is working on a film about child soldiers. "When she speaks, everybody listens. She walks into the bush, puts her life on the line and travels even to southern [Sudan's](#) no man's land to keep lines of communications open."

Bigombe, 53, is now a senior fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington. Sitting in a conference room, at ease in a stylishly flared orange skirt and jacket, she is thousands of miles from the grim wasteland of northern Uganda but never disconnected from it. She is here to share her observations about the craft of conflict mediation.

"In our development of best practices of conflict management and mediation, her knowledge adds something. It is real experience," said Richard H. Solomon, the institute's president. "She is an experienced academic. How does one negotiate in difficult international ethnic and religious conflicts? Betty enriches our understanding as a very respected practitioner."

In April, representatives of Museveni and an Acholi delegation designated by Kony resumed negotiations in Juba, Sudan, to end the 21-year-old war. Late last month, the head of the LRA delegation announced that three segments of the five-phase agreement had been signed. The on-again, off-again peace process had gotten back on track in July 2006 but had broken down after several months.

That the talks restarted at all is testament to Bigombe's personal efforts.

After reading news dispatches of a massacre at a displacement camp in Barloonyo on Feb. 21, 2004, she was jolted into action. Bigombe said she took a leave of absence from a [World Bank](#) position in Washington, emptied her bank account, delaying her daughter's university education by a year, and flew to Uganda to jump-start the peace process.

She traveled to Sudan and met with President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who was providing Kony and his men

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with sanctuary in the southern part of the country. After seven weeks, Bigombe succeeded in reestablishing ties with one of Kony's chief deputies.

She brought representatives of the government and the LRA to the table in 2004, footing the rebels' costly satellite telephone bills as well as her own to stay in contact, she recalled. She declined help from Museveni's government. Norwegian, Swedish and other grants kept her afloat, but Bigombe found herself bankrupt after talks stalled again in 2005.

She organized meetings in northern Uganda's bush heartland. For the first time, Ugandan government ministers came face to face with Kony's warlords. The ministers of interior and security with a staff of 30 met with an LRA delegation of 11 commanders at the brigadier level, with Bigombe negotiating cease-fire drafts. The last meeting, scheduled for April 20, 2005, which Kony was due to attend, fell through after Ugandan authorities refused to clear it.

"I continued to talk to Joseph until late 2006," Bigombe said. "What happened then laid the groundwork for Juba."

But her story had begun much earlier, when she agreed to undertake an unorthodox and untested mission to head into isolated regions and live among disgruntled communities that she had been asked to win over, but that she wanted to save.

Since the start of the war, the LRA has kidnapped 25,000 children, forcing them to serve as soldiers and sex slaves. The conflict has displaced nearly 2 million Ugandans and scattered families into 200 holding camps without adequate food, water, sanitation or medical care. One in five infants die from preventable diseases such as malaria, respiratory infections and diarrhea because of the paucity of medical facilities and personnel in an isolated, inaccessible swath of territory, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

Bigombe, whose father was a nurse, was one of 11 children and had a carefree childhood. The first sounds of gunfire came with the rule of dictator [Idi Amin](#) -- a period that changed the lives of all Ugandans. Underground opposition groups formed. One of her uncles hid in her dormitory to stay safe. She later married and became an ambassador's wife in [Tokyo](#).

Bigombe was working on development projects in Africa when Museveni, who seized power in 1986, tapped her to work for him. He needed someone to help him connect with the north as he established his hold on the country.

She declined but later traveled to eastern Uganda and then to the north on limited assignments to survey the excesses of Museveni's army. Her main brief was to win over the disgruntled Acholi tribespeople, who had been given army appointments, education and assorted benefits under British colonial rule. After Museveni came to power, they fought to regain their privileges.

In 1988, without consulting her in advance, Museveni told Bigombe he was announcing her appointment as minister of state for the north. "Don't go," she recalled friends pleading. "He wants to kill you. Why else would he send a woman with no military experience?"

"Skepticism about my assignment took other forms," she added, "such as rumors I was one of his girlfriends and he could not get enough of me, so he had to keep me out of the way.

"I thought of the 2 million people who wanted to go home. They had nothing. I told myself my children will be safe. Not everyone saw it that way," she said. "It was a choice to put a smile on these poor souls' faces or give them hope for another day, but it was not risk-free."

Her husband, who died two years ago, had been appointed ambassador to [Germany](#) in 1989, so she knew her family would be cared for.

Bigombe's appointed staff members were afraid to accompany her, so she went north with two bodyguards. She drove trucks, navigating mined roads, and held on in terror as MiG-17s crash-landed in the wilderness. One day she scooped up an infant whose mother's arms had been torn off by a land mine. She recalled how she at first gagged at the thought of eating food prepared by soldiers because they did not wash their hands after coming out of latrines. Later she gave in to her pangs of hunger.

To get to know mothers whose sons had been abducted and who had fallen under Kony's spell, she roamed the camps, living with the women for several days.

To win their trust, she encouraged them to criticize leaders openly so she could convey their complaints to the top. She danced with them around a communal fire as is customary with each evening meal. She paid for food and bought alcohol for them, she said, "to loosen their tongues and open their minds."

What she mostly did was listen. "This work took over my life," she said. Bigombe repeatedly missed her children's birthdays. "It cost me personally," she said. "I did things, yes, but I also lost opportunities."

Museveni pressed her to goad the LRA into surrendering. But Bigombe knew that for peace to be sustainable, Acholi grievances had to be addressed.

On May 1, 1993, assassins came after Bigombe in the dark, torching a camp where she was speaking. Tipped off by one of her guards, she melted into a crowd of women shrieking and running in horror. She recalled one woman crying for her baby, left behind in a burning hut.

On May 9, she headed into the bush with six religious elders.

"Those were scary, lonely moments," she said. "Nobody spoke in the car, each in his own world. We assumed we may not make it alive. I wrote letters to my children and to Museveni to make sure they got an education."

When she finally met Kony, she recalled, his costumed followers chanted and splashed butter oil and ashes on themselves to ward off bullets and evil spirits.

Boys with frozen stares jumped out of bushes with AK-47s, she said, never blinking, as if on drugs. Kony eventually arrived in a cloud of dust. Fireflies flickered through the night as they talked.

There were six such encounters. By Jan. 11, 1994, Kony was calling her "Mummy Bigombe" at a rally. She urged Museveni and the army to sign a peace agreement by the end of that month.

Taking the same dirt road where a python had once held up her convoy to [Kampala](#), Uganda's capital, she carried a letter to Museveni from Kony asking if he might leave the bush to address Ugandans publicly. That afternoon, two weeks ahead of the scheduled signing, Museveni called off the peace talks. A handful of individuals, war profiteers, had "poisoned his mind," she said.

"It was devastating. The kidnapping, the killing resumed," she said. "The impulse to undermine me was a diversion."

Bigombe continued to talk to Kony via radio every morning at 11. She made up dreams to dissuade him from attacking areas she knew to be vulnerable. Disillusioned by the collapse of the peace for which she had put her life on hold, she left in 1996 to begin graduate studies at Harvard's [Kennedy School of Government](#).


Last year, former president Joaquim Chissano of [Mozambique](#) brokered the resumption of talks in Juba,

suspended since 2005. As southern Sudanese mediators took over, Bigombe stepped aside. Kampala officials and the LRA continue to consult with her regularly as she speaks out on her country's behalf.

"At first I resisted, mainly out of fear, but I was happy in the end to make my contribution," she said.

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