

# The Campaign for Political and Human Rights in Uganda (CamPHRU)

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**PRESS RELEASE**

**7<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2003**

## **PRESSURE BUILDS FOR PEACE TALKS IN NORTHERN UGANDA**

### **UGANDAN ARMY AND PRESIDENT STILL CHOOSE MILITARY OPTION**

The joy that greeted last weekend's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire by the rebel LRA in Northern Uganda has been undermined by the cynical response of the Ugandan army and President Museveni. Last weekend, the LRA's declaration was welcomed by traditional, religious and political leaders in Northern Uganda. In Gulu, the largest town of the war ravaged region, people took to the streets in celebration. Across the north people rejoiced. The ceasefire was described as 'Easter come early' and *the Monitor* newspaper quoted a Rev Kenneth Oyet:

'I rejoiced in my heart and I also shed tears of joy. We stayed outside until midnight after hearing the good news. We did not even fear the dogs that were barking.'<sup>1</sup>

The semi-official *New Vision* newspaper welcomed the ceasefire and urged the government to 'make real concessions to the LRA in pursuit of peace'<sup>2</sup>.

Donor countries added their voices in support of a ceasefire. Britain called on Uganda to 'respect and respond positively to the ceasefire'. High Commissioner Adam Wood reportedly said 'We welcome the ceasefire announced by the LRA. Though still fragile, it could be an important

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<sup>1</sup> 'For Once We Stayed Outside Till Midnight' *The Monitor* 4<sup>th</sup> March 2003

<sup>2</sup> Editorial 'Give Kony Immunity' *New Vision* 4<sup>th</sup> March 2003

beginning in realising lasting peace'<sup>1</sup>. The 'Donor Group on the North, Amnesty and Recovery from Conflict' comprises thirteen countries including many from the EU and the US and Japan. It also includes the World Bank. It encouraged Uganda's government to 'respond positively to the cease-fire announcement by Mr Joseph Kony' and urged both sides 'to continue their efforts to achieve a lasting peace'<sup>2</sup>

During this same week the World Food Programme has made it very clear why peace is so desperately needed. Over the last seven months of intensive conflict the number of internally displaced people in Northern Uganda has increased by 33%. 70% of the population have fled their homes. Food aid can only move with a military escort and at times food distribution has been halted. In Pabbo camp, the largest in the region with 45,000 people, 18% of children under 5 are suffering from acute malnutrition whilst in Anaka camp the figure is as high as 31%. People lost their harvest in August and September 2002 and could not plant food for their second annual crop in October. The next harvest next August is crucial, but people need access to their fields soon<sup>3</sup>. Any respite or reduction on the level of the conflict will enable some of the people to feed themselves. A genuine peace would dramatically reduce the need for food aid by the end of this year.

Some in the government appear to understand this. The President's brother, Salim Saleh, a member of the Presidential Peace Team, was amongst the first to welcome the ceasefire<sup>4</sup>. This commitment to build a peace initiative upon the unilateral ceasefire appeared to remain at least until Friday's *New Vision* went to press. It reported that Salim Saleh was to lead a 16 man delegation including two ministers and a representative of the European Union to meet LRA commanders for talks 'aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the war'.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, Army spokespeople at first seemed hesitant in its response to the ceasefire, saying they could not reciprocate without instructions from their commander-in-chief, the President. Over the next day or two their rejection gained in force and confidence. They gleefully picked on evidence

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<sup>1</sup> 'Respect LRA Ceasefire - UK' *New Vision* 6<sup>th</sup> March 2003

<sup>2</sup> Badru D. Mulumba 'Agree on Truce, Donors Tell Govt. *The Monitor* 6<sup>th</sup> March 2003

<sup>3</sup> 'Malnutrition Rates High Among Displaced Children' UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2003

<sup>4</sup> Will Ross, 'Uganda rebels call ceasefire' *BBC News* 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2003

<sup>5</sup> 'Salim Saleh Leads Govt Team to Meet Rebels in Pader' *New Vision* 7<sup>th</sup> March 2003

of the LRA breaches in its own ceasefire, publicised their own continuing operations and repeated their demand first made last August that the LRA assemble at pre-determined locations before any cease-fire could be considered. On Wednesday the President confirmed that this was his position and 'scoffed at' the ceasefire as 'a ploy for him and his terrorists to survive through the dry season'. The President appeared to be mocking the efforts of his own brother, saying Saleh had agreed to meet 'some rebels or some people connected to the rebels, so we wait and see whether they agree or not'<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this unhelpful rhetoric, CamPHRU remained hopeful that the peace talks would go ahead. **However we now understand through unconfirmed reports from a member of the proposed peace delegation that the meeting did not take place yesterday {Thursday} and no plans were made to hold it on an alternative date. Instead the army yesterday {Thursdasy} evening conducted military operations within the area of the designated venue for the meeting. If this is confirmed, it is a slap in the face for the ordinary Ugandans across Northern Uganda who last weekend dared to hope for peace.**

We are delighted with the international pressure for the ceasefire to be taken seriously. We urge the donor countries to keep up the pressure for a peaceful solution, whatever the immediate future of this unilateral ceasefire. If talks initiated within the country fail, international mediation will remain the only option. We urge the donor countries to seriously investigate this option.

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<sup>1</sup> 'No Ceasefire, Says Museveni' *New Vision* 6<sup>th</sup> March 2003