

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

Conflict and violence have plagued much of Uganda since independence, from Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 to the fourteen insurgencies since Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) took power in 1986.¹ Indeed, violence in Ugandan politics dates back further, to the attack on the residence of the Kabaka of Buganda in 1966, followed by the abrogation of the 1962 independence constitution by Obote. The attack brought the quasi-federal arrangement under the constitution to an end and forced the Kabaka to flee to the United Kingdom. Yet, the most protracted of these conflicts has been the continuing war in northern Uganda, which has lasted nearly 18 years,² encompassed five different rebellions and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths in districts from Adjumani to Soroti (see map). In addition, the war has displaced over 1,4 million people and all but destroyed northern Uganda's agriculture, its economic base.³ Beginning in 1986 when Museveni captured power from General Tito Okello Lutwa,⁴ the northern war was initially a popular revolt by Okello's ousted army troops and their numerous civilian supporters who formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Both these rebels and their successors, who came together to form the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Auma "Lakwena", received massive popular support in the north and thus seemed to act on behalf of an Acholi population that was both alarmed by, and angry at, the new Museveni regime. Fear of national marginalisation by a government they perceived to be dominated by western Ugandans, as well as resentment against what were believed to be NRM-sponsored atrocities and devastating cattle raids, were at the heart of the early insurgencies.⁵

As these rebellions ended, in 1987 Joseph Kony began what later become known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and the northern conflict entered an entirely new phase. What was unusual is that although the grievances of the original war remained unaddressed, Kony's LRA has done virtually nothing to mobilise support on this basis. His worldview is steeped in apocalyptic spiritualism and he uses fear and violence to maintain control within the LRA and sustain the conflict. The current war is thus actually two conflicts in one: the long-term underlying grievances in the north and the persistent, destructive

activities of the LRA. Both are relevant today, and each requires focused attention by policymakers if the situation is to be successfully resolved.

An overview of the conflict

The war in northern Uganda has gone through a series of transformations, from a revolt by former Ugandan soldiers angry at the violation of the Nairobi power-sharing agreement⁶ to unconventional rebel activity combining traditional African spiritualism with Christian fanaticism and the killing of civilians. Each of the earlier rebellions is described thoroughly in other studies, such as those by Behrend, Gersony, and Doom and Vlassenroot,⁷ and therefore they are outlined only briefly here.

The northern conflict, which encompasses all of these different insurgencies, began in 1986 when soldiers from the former national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) of Milton Obote and later Tito Okello, fled to the north after being ousted from Kampala by Yoweri Museveni's NRA/M. UNLA's anger was sparked when Museveni reneged upon a power-sharing agreement brokered with Okello in Nairobi in December 1985, an event still resented by many northerners. The UNLA forces were defeated in March 1986, but many remnants of the former army joined with Acholi politicians, former Idi Amin troops and others in Juba, southern Sudan to form the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) that same month. These ex-soldiers initially posed a threat to the new regime, but the NRM's carrot-and-stick approach resulted in a peace deal in June 1988 that brought most of the fighters out of the bush. The Gulu Peace Accord, brokered by Museveni's brother Caleb Akandwanaho (Salim Saleh), gave amnesty to the combatants (2 000 of whom subsequently joined the NRA) and attempted to address political and economic issues by calling for the discussion of a new constitution and a northern reconstruction programme.⁸

Meanwhile, another rebellion began to capitalise on the anti-government sentiments of many northerners: the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Auma "Lakwena". According to one study, Lakwena "offered hope for worldly as well as spiritual redemption in a dark hour of despair", since the Acholi had been ousted from power and were facing what many of them at the time believed to be persecution and possible extinction.⁹ Lakwena energised and disciplined her soldiers with cleansing rituals and strict rules of moral behaviour, and received numerous civilian donations as a result of her popularity.¹⁰ She led the movement all the way south to Jinja, allegedly because NRA soldiers feared

her spiritual powers and therefore allowed her to pass through much of the country,¹¹ but was eventually defeated by a revitalised NRA military force in November 1987.¹²

In retrospect, the UPDA and HSM were similar in that they tried to mobilise popular grievances in a struggle against the new government. Although the former was more about capturing political power and the latter more about rejuvenating Acholi society, they both articulated reasons for rebellion with which most Acholi sympathised at the time. These popular causes can be summarised as follows: they feared reprisals for what many perceived to be Acholi-led massacres in the Luwero Triangle during the early 1980s; they were upset at their loss of political and economic power as a result of Museveni's violation of a 1985 power-sharing agreement, and destructive cattle raids that they believed were sponsored by the NRM; they were afraid the new government – believed to be controlled exclusively by western Ugandans – would marginalise them after their dominance in the national army; they were defending themselves against atrocities committed by certain NRA units in 1986-7; and they saw violence as the only means to address these grievances after witnessing Uganda's successive violent power struggles since independence.¹³ Since they were trying to gain popular support, neither the UPDA nor the HSM committed significant atrocities against their own civilians, although such a trend began during Severino Lukoya's brief rebellion in 1987. Severino, the father of Lakwena, tried to take over the movement following her defeat, but was unable to motivate the population and therefore turned to terror tactics, particularly against children, to sustain operations.¹⁴ Poor leadership and organisation, however, meant the group quickly dissolved.

The UPDA peace deal, Lakwena's defeat and Severino's failure left a significant power vacuum in the north – a vacuum that was quickly filled by Joseph Kony. Kony, an independent UPDA commander who had also tried to take over Lakwena's HSM, had already been amassing a small contingent of fighters. He took over a UPDA division in February 1987, persuading a few soldiers to join and kidnapping the rest, and later incorporated a small number of UPDA fighters who refused to give up their arms following the 1988 Gulu peace accord.¹⁵ Initially Kony targeted mostly government fighters, but soon turned against civilians, particularly after government-sponsored "Bow and Arrow" civil defence militias in Gulu and Kitgum were raised against him in 1991-1992. At the same time, the government launched the brutal "Operation North", which reportedly damaged LRA capacity considerably but also generated significant resentment after the arrest of several popular northern politicians.¹⁶ The most successful peace initiative to date was launched in

1994, led by then-Minister for the Pacification of the North, Betty Bigombe.¹⁷ Despite achieving ceasefires and extensive face-to-face talks with Kony himself, the mission failed as a result of communication difficulties, alleged vested interests of certain high-ranking officers and politicians, Museveni's strict deadline of seven days for negotiations and the LRA's recourse to Sudan for rearmament.¹⁸

The war has dragged on for another ten years since the Bigombe negotiations without significant hope of resolution. Brief talks were held in Rome in 1997 with exiled businessmen claiming to be the LRA's political wing, but failure ensued after the principal negotiator was almost killed by Kony during their first meeting in the bush (see below). After considerable lobbying by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), the government introduced the Amnesty Act in 2000, which gave a blanket amnesty to all LRA fighters who returned from the bush. Early in 2002, however, Operation Iron Fist was launched, in which Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) troops attempted to drive the LRA out of southern Sudan; this eventually worsened the humanitarian situation and dramatically increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northern Uganda.¹⁹ The war spread east to the Teso and Lango regions in 2003, and new government-sponsored militias called the "Arrow and Rhino" groups began to counter the LRA in these areas.

Today, there is renewed hope for an end to the conflict, with the accelerating Sudan peace process and the Presidential Peace Team constituting potentially important steps in the right direction. Whether this hope eventually bears fruit depends on the government, Ugandan civil society and the international community prioritising the resolution of the conflict and coordinating their actions.