

Retired Ugandan bishop seeks restorative justice for former child soldiers

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

Macleod Baker Ochola II, 84, a retired Anglican bishop in northern Uganda, is agitating for restorative justice in a region where the wounds of a brutal war unleashed by the Lord's Resistance Army persist.

Ochola has been responding to concerns that the modern court system may not deliver justice for the people who suffered in the complex conflict.

Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA rebels combined African mysticism and Christian fundamentalism in fighting to establish a theocracy. In the 1980s and '90s, the LRA abducted more than 60,000 children, sexually abusing them and forcing them to commit acts of violence against their own communities. By 2005, the LRA had killed more than 100,000 people and displaced 2.5 million.

Ochola buried the dead, including his wife, who was killed by a land mine, and his daughter, who died by suicide after being gang-raped by the rebels. At one point Ochola went into exile.

Yet he has walked with returning child soldiers.

"If there is no process of reconciliation, there is no healing, and if there is no healing there is no restoration and justice," Ochola said. "Healing and restoration brings transformation of life for those affected."

The International Criminal Court in The Hague indicted five top leaders of the rebel group in 2005. In December, the court began the trial of Dominic Ongwen, a 41-year-old former rebel commander who was abducted at age ten. He faces 70 charges, including murder, rape, torture, enslavement, and forced marriage. He is the first former child soldier to appear before the court.

"In the name of God, I deny all these charges," Ongwen said in court.

Ochola has been urging the court to reconsider the circumstances under which children turned commanders were trapped in LRA captivity. Like many other cultural and religious leaders in Uganda, he stresses a traditional justice system called *mato*

*oput* of the Acholi people of northern Uganda, the community most affected by the LRA conflict. Centered on forgiveness, it involves truth telling, compensation, and a ritual in which food is shared.

“It brings restoration to broken human relationships, transforms lives, and heals the hearts of those involved,” Ochola said. “The court system, which is retributive, promotes polarization, alienating both sides.”

*Mato oput* mirrors many of the forgiveness and reconciliation efforts central to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa and the Gacaca courts used in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide.

The LRA left northern Uganda in 2005 and is now believed to operate along the border region of the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

“The LRA is still at large and they are still fighting,” Ochola said, “so we must continue with the work.”

In 1997, Ochola was one of the founders of the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative, an interfaith organization that has sought to peacefully end the LRA insurgency. The initiative has worked on reconciliation and peaceful coexistence at the grassroots level, as well as trying to help the government and the LRA in a process of truth telling.

“This would involve accepting full responsibility and making public acknowledgment of what one has done,” Ochola said.

One problem, he said, is the government’s lack of political will to dismantle the LRA.

In the case of Ongwen, Ochola had hoped the former rebel would be brought to the community for truth telling. Since that did not happen, Ongwen will likely refuse to accept responsibility.

“As a victim, he continues to be punished twice,” Ochola said.

Sheikh Musa Khalil, a northern Uganda Muslim leader and vice chairman of the religious leaders’ initiative, backs Ochola, saying that with Ongwen, the traditional system could have achieved more.

“It mirrors what is in the Qur’an and Bible,” said Khalil. “It’s based on forgiveness. We feel he should have been brought to us.”

The bishop does not agree with the view that when a child is abducted—as in the case of northern Uganda—he or she must take full responsibility in adulthood for any crimes committed while a captive.

“For northern Uganda,” he said, “this is wrong because the children had their humanity destroyed.” —Religion News Service

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