

The faith leaders who helped bring about peace in Uganda

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [March 24, 2021](#) issue



Women in Northern Uganda welcome visitors into their village. (Photo by David Hoekema)

On February 4, the International Criminal Court found Dominic Ongwen, a trusted lieutenant in the Lord's Resistance Army, guilty of 61 counts of murder, rape, sexual enslavement, and the "forced pregnancy" of women—a charge not previously lodged in that court.

In founding the guerrilla group known later as the LRA in 1987, Joseph Kony declared that its purpose was to restore the dignity of the ethnic Acholi people in northern Uganda and to call them to return to the dictates of God's law.

But spiritual warfare soon became a brutal civil war. LRA forces began rampaging through villages, killing and maiming indiscriminately. Abducted boys, indoctrinated in the bush, were trained to be ruthless killers. Abducted girls were distributed to officers as sexual prizes.

For two decades Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni launched one major operation after another, with material and technical assistance from the United States and European nations. The tactics of the National Resistance Army often matched the rebels' violence in brutality and excess.

Five officers of the LRA were indicted in The Hague in 2005, but only Ongwen and Kony remain alive today. Kony remains in hiding in the region with a small band of loyalists. Ongwen surrendered to American Special Forces stationed with African Union troops in 2015 and was remanded to The Hague for trial. He is expected to be sentenced to life in prison.

While Ongwen's conviction made international headlines, outside Uganda little is known about the work of religious leaders who helped bring an end to the civil war in 2006 and create a pathway for healing.

In 1997, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders came together in the northern Ugandan city of Gulu to create the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative. Leaders of the ARLPI worked to bring the government and rebels together and to help LRA abductees return to the villages through which the LRA had once rampaged.

Its work continues today, with an emphasis on land ownership, education, gender equity, and healing from lingering wounds of war. Begun by Muslim and Christian clergy, the organization now works through interfaith councils in each town and region to ensure responsiveness to local needs and customs.

Another important catalyst for peace has been the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay Catholic order devoted to healing conflict. Founded in Rome in 1968, the community has affiliates in 70 countries. Sant'Egidio served as a mediator when the government of Sudan invited the LRA and the Ugandan government to Juba to negotiate terms of peace in 2006.

Ongwen's recent conviction elicited prayers of thanks from Ugandans. Witnesses in The Hague identified Ongwen as one of the cruelest of Kony's lieutenants—even though he had himself been abducted into Kony's army as a young boy.

“We shall tonight sleep soundly knowing at least one of our tormentors will spend time in jail, without fear he will get out to come and kill us in revenge,” one survivor of LRA raids told the Kenyan newspaper *EastAfrican*.

But others were troubled by what they considered to be an inconsistent application of an amnesty law.

“Ongwen was kidnapped, and that could justify him—but then as an adult he made very bad choices,” another Ugandan man said in a BBC interview. “But why was he put on trial when other officers were not? Why wasn’t he a beneficiary of the amnesty?”