

**Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV)
THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC) and
THE UGANDA JOINT CHRISTIAN COUNCIL (UJCC)**

**REPORT OF THE LIVING LETTERS VISIT TO
UGANDA**

27 October - 2 November 2008

"The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 13:1-3

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Glory to God and Peace on Earth
International Ecumenical Peace Convocation
WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES



May 4-11 2011



Theme of the Visit:
**“Transitional justice and forced displacement in Uganda:
Churches’ response”**

Introduction

In 2001, the World Council of Churches launched a Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches seeking reconciliation and peace. As the decade draws to an end the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been sending teams of people to different countries that have experienced some form of violence to express solidarity with them. These teams have been called Living Letters. From 27 October – 2 November 2008, one of the Living Letters teams visited Uganda a country that has experienced civil conflict for a long time.

What does the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) mean to the churches striving for peace building and Reconciliation in a context of transitional justice? This was the main question that the team reflected on as we travelled through Uganda. Living Letters visits are meant to strengthen the work of the churches for reconciliation and peace and to be a symbol of the solidarity with the churches around the world. They also prepare the churches for their participation in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation planned for 2011 in Kingston (Jamaica), and give content to the Declaration on Just Peace Declaration that will be adopted at the IEPC.

Hosts and words of thanks

We are grateful to the Ugandan Joint Christian Council (UJCC) for welcoming the Living Letters delegation, organising our visit and taking care of all the necessary details. We would like to express our deep appreciation to Rev. Canon Grace Kaiso, General Secretary of the UJCC, to Canon Joseph Oneka, Director of the Human Rights and Good Governance Department, Fr. Silvester Arinaitwe, Director of Finance, to Mrs Elizabeth Kisigha and to Mr Lucas Atama for their contribution to the success of this visit. A special word of thanks goes to Canon Joseph Oneka who accompanied us all along the visit, and to Mr Stephen Kitembo who took part of our group in the field visit in Katakwi. Our heartfelt thanks go to all the Bishops, clergy, NGOs, civil society, government officials and others who we met in the places we visited – for their courage, compassion and commitment to the people they work with. We truly appreciate that the people we met made space in their busy schedules to meet with us and answer our various questions.

Background to Uganda (from <http://www.world66.com/africa/uganda/history>)

When Arab traders moved inland from their enclaves along the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa and reached the interior of Uganda in the 1830s, they found several African kingdoms with well-developed political institutions dating back several centuries. These traders were followed in the 1860s by British explorers searching for the source of the Nile River. Protestant missionaries entered the country in 1877, followed by Catholic missionaries in 1879.

In 1888, control of the emerging British "sphere of interest" in East Africa was assigned by royal charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company, an arrangement strengthened in 1890 by an Anglo-German agreement confirming British dominance over Kenya and Uganda. In 1894, the Kingdom of Buganda was placed under a formal British protectorate.

Britain granted internal self-government to Uganda in 1961, with the first elections held on March 1, 1961. Benedicto Kiwanuka of the Democratic Party became the first Chief Minister. Uganda maintained its Commonwealth membership. A second round of elections in April 1962 elected members to a new National Assembly. Milton Obote, leader of the majority coalition in the National Assembly, became prime minister and led Uganda to formal independence on October 9, 1962.

In succeeding years, supporters of a centralized state vied with those in favor of a loose federation and a strong role for tribally-based local kingdoms. Political maneuvering climaxed in February 1966, when Prime Minister Milton Obote suspended the constitution, assumed all government powers, and removed the ceremonial president and vice president. In September 1967, a new constitution proclaimed Uganda a republic, gave the president even greater powers, and abolished the traditional kingdoms. On January 25, 1971, Obote's government was ousted in a military coup led by armed forces commander Idi Amin Dada. Amin declared himself president, dissolved the parliament, and amended the constitution to give himself absolute power.

Idi Amin's 8-year rule produced economic decline, social disintegration, and massive human rights violations. The Acholi and Langi ethnic groups were particular objects of Amin's political persecution because they had supported Obote and made up a large part of the army. In 1978, the International Commission of Jurists estimated that more than 100,000 Ugandans had been murdered during Amin's reign of terror; some authorities place the figure much higher.

In October 1978, Tanzanian armed forces repulsed an incursion of Amin's troops into Tanzanian territory. The Tanzanian force, backed by Ugandan exiles, waged a war of liberation against Amin's troops and Libyan soldiers sent to help him. On April 11, 1979, Kampala was captured, and Amin fled with his remaining forces.

After Amin's removal, the Uganda National Liberation Front formed an interim government with Yusuf Lule as president. This government adopted a ministerial system of administration and created a quasi-parliamentary organ known as the National Consultative Commission (NCC). The NCC and the Lule cabinet reflected widely differing political views. In June 1979, following a dispute over the extent of presidential powers, the NCC replaced Lule with Godfrey Binaisa. In a continuing dispute over the powers of the interim presidency, Binaisa was removed in May 1980. Thereafter, Uganda was ruled by a military commission chaired by Paulo Muwanga. December 1980 elections returned the UPC to power under the leadership of President Obote, with Muwanga serving as vice president. Under Obote, the security forces had one of the world's worst human rights records. In their efforts to stamp out an insurgency led by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA), they laid waste to a substantial section of the country, especially in the Luwero area north of Kampala.

Obote ruled until July 27, 1985, when an army brigade, composed mostly of ethnic Acholi troops and commanded by Lt. Gen. Basilio Olara-Okello, took Kampala and proclaimed a military government. Obote fled to exile in Zambia. The new regime, headed by former defense force commander Gen. Tito Okello (no relation to Lt. Gen. Olara-Okello), opened negotiations with Museveni's insurgent forces and pledged to improve respect for human rights, end tribal rivalry, and conduct free and fair elections. In the meantime, massive human rights violations continued as the Okello government murdered civilians and ravaged the countryside in order to destroy the NRA's support.

Negotiations between the Okello government and the NRA were conducted in Nairobi in the fall of 1985, with Kenyan President Daniel Moi seeking a cease-fire and a coalition government in Uganda. Although agreeing in late 1985 to a cease-fire, the NRA continued fighting, seized Kampala in late January 1986, and assumed control of the country, forcing Okello to flee north into Sudan. Museveni's forces organized a government with Museveni as president and dominated by the political grouping called the National Resistance Movement (NRM or the "Movement").

A referendum was held in March 2000 on whether Uganda should retain the Movement system, with limited operation of political parties, or adopt multi-party politics. Although 70% of voters endorsed retention of the Movement system, the referendum was widely criticized for low voter turnout and unfair restrictions on Movement opponents. Museveni was reelected to a second five-year term in March 2001. Parliamentary elections were held in June 2001, and more than 50% of contested seats were won by newcomers. Movement supporters nevertheless remained in firm control of the legislative branch. Observers believed that the 2001 presidential and parliamentary elections generally reflected the will of the electorate; however, both were marred by serious irregularities, particularly in the period leading up to the elections, such as restrictions on political party activities, incidents of violence, voter intimidation, and fraud.

A Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) issued a report proposing comprehensive constitutional change in December 2003. The government, however, took issue with many CRC recommendations and made counter-proposals in September 2004. A July 2005 national referendum resulted in the adoption of a multiparty system of government and the subsequent inclusion of opposition parties in elections and government.

In February 2006, the country held its first multiparty general elections since President Museveni came to power in 1986. The election generally reflected the will of the people, although serious irregularities occurred. Ruling NRM candidate President Museveni was declared the winner with 59.26% of the vote, giving him a third term in office following the passage of a controversial amendment in June 2005 to eliminate presidential term limits. Opposition FDC leader Kizza Besigye captured 37.39% of the vote, while the remaining contestants received less than 2% of the vote each, according to official figures from the Electoral Commission.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS (from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2963.htm>)

Since assuming power, Museveni and his government have largely put an end to the human rights abuses of earlier governments, initiated substantial economic liberalization and general press freedom, and instituted economic reforms in accord with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and donor governments.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which seeks to overthrow the Ugandan Government, has murdered and kidnapped civilians in the north and east since 1986. Although the LRA does not threaten the stability of the government, LRA violence at one time displaced up to 1.7 million people, creating a humanitarian catastrophe, particularly when they were forced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps for their own protection. The Uganda Peoples Defense Force (UPDF) launched "Operation Iron Fist" against LRA rebels in northern Uganda in 2002 and conducted operations against LRA sanctuaries in southern Sudan with the permission of the Sudanese Government. The Sudanese Government had previously supported the LRA.

There have been significant new developments in this conflict since January 2006. With the signing of the Sudanese "Comprehensive Peace Agreement," the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) was created. To protect this fragile peace from LRA incursions in southern Sudan, Riek Machar, GOSS Vice President, launched efforts to broker a peace agreement between the Government of Uganda and the LRA in July 2006. The peace process is ongoing. Many northern Ugandans are leaving the IDP camps and returning to their villages.

In 1998, Uganda deployed a sizable military force to eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C.), ostensibly to prevent attacks from Ugandan rebel groups operating there. There were widespread allegations that Ugandan military and civilian officials were involved in the illegal exploitation of D.R.C. natural resources. After much international pressure, Uganda withdrew its troops from D.R.C. in June 2003. Relations with the D.R.C., however, continue to be frosty. When the LRA left southern Sudan and relocated to eastern Congo in September 2005, Museveni threatened to enter D.R.C. and go after the LRA if neither Congo nor the UN peacekeepers in the region would take action. The recent peace talks have taken a lot of steam out of those threats, however, and Uganda seems focused on seeing the talks to conclusion.

Our programme

Our seven-day programme was intense and rich. The team travelled North and North-East of Uganda. After a briefing in Kampala from the General Secretary of the UJCC, we visited several groups – bishops, clergy, government officials, NGO – in Kampala. The third day, the group split into two: Group 1 went to Gulu (Northern Uganda), and Group 2 went to Soroti and Katakwi (North-East of Uganda). Both teams stayed three days in the regions, visited camps of Internally Displaced People (IDP), and met with bishops, government officials and civil society. The two simultaneous visits culminated in a public dialogue/discussion with key local actors engaged in transitional justice both in Gulu and Katakwi. The team travelled back to Kampala, and a public hearing gathered several peace agents (church groups, NGOs, civil society, etc.) on the sixth day. The last day, the team was invited to attend the Sunday worship at the Anglican Church in Kampala.

The team had a number of meetings with church leaders, government officials and members of the community. What follows is a record of the team's visit.

Kampala

UGANDA AMNESTY COMMISSION

Our visit began with a meeting with the Chairman of Uganda Amnesty Commission, the Hon. Justice. P. K. K. Onega. He explained that the Amnesty Commission was established in order to facilitate the implementation of the Amnesty Act that was enacted by the Parliament in 2000.

The Amnesty Act gives mandate to sensitise people on the question of Amnesty, to grant amnesty to former rebels - who surrendered or have been arrested - and to reintegrate them into the society. Those who are seeking to be granted amnesty are called “reporters”. Amnesty protects one from prosecution by the state. It seeks to end the conflict that has been raging since 1986, to reconcile with those who have committed crimes and to rebuild communities.

The Amnesty Commission has the mandate to promote dialogue and reconciliation with the former rebels and the victims, with the involvement of traditional leaders.

When asked about how the victims felt about this Amnesty Act, he explained that although anger and bitterness was expected from those who were direct victims of the war, the society welcomed those who were granted amnesty. This is mainly due to the peculiar nature of the conflict where the perpetrators were themselves primarily victims, and had now to go back to their own parents and elders. The Amnesty Act also includes those who have committed sexual violence.

With regard to the regular Ugandan army, he noted that there was already an Act that punishes any excessive behaviour committed by members of the army.

With regard to former child soldiers, the Commission has classified them in several categories, and intends to give them special attention. With regard to their reintegration within society, the Commission works closely with agencies specialised in trauma-healing and counselling. He shared with the group that the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Uganda is 12 years-old. Hence, and amnesty certificate is required for former child soldiers who are above 12. He added that, ironically, the Lord Resistance army (LRA) was very strict on alcohol drinking.

With regard to the post-conflict situation, he explained that the Juba document provides for mechanisms that will lead to truth telling and story telling. Indeed, the Peace Agreement stipulates for accountability. The government is planning to establish a hybrid judicial system where the less serious crimes will be dealt by traditional mechanisms (involving elders, traditional leaders, etc.). Other minor offenders will receive blanket amnesty.

When asked if the Amnesty Act applied to Joseph Kony, he explained that it does in theory. However, the government has already made a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) which wants to trial him. Hence, there is a need to find a compromise situation where he will be trialled by the Ugandan government (and not the ICC). He reminded the group that the ICC was not meant to supplant the national judicial system, but rather to trial Kony only if the Ugandan government cannot or does not want to trial him.

UGANDA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Defending of human rights in Uganda is complex and rarely goes smoothly. Sincere appreciation was given to Rev Canon Grace Kaiso (Uganda Joint Christian Council) and the World Council of

Churches for standing with and joining in the fight for human rights. The Uganda Human Rights Commission was established under the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda to promote and protect human rights, both funded by the Government and with its members appointed by the President of the Republic of Uganda and approved by the Parliament. There was some concern raised by the Living Letters delegation whether this structure is a conflict of interest, potentially precluding the successful functioning of the commission. In this regard, it was noted that those in authority (such as Government Officials), who should promote human rights, are often the violators through their positions of power - not the ordinary civilians. Despite this, it was reported not to be a problem thus far.

Uganda has experienced a long history of violence, turmoil and violation of human rights; including torture, arbitrary and indefinite detention, child neglect, defilement, and rape, etc. The Commission's role in this context is to: monitor compliance and report on the status of human rights violations, provide input into parliamentary processes, domesticating conventions and treaties into local law, investigation of complaints and the general promotion and education of human rights in Uganda. It was encouraging to hear of their work and partnerships towards this end.

One such example is the Amnesty Act, 2000. This was enacted as a last resort to facilitate peace and security. The resounding message that the Living Letters delegation heard throughout their visit was that violence does not bring peace - it has not worked in the past and cannot work now. The combination of efforts by faith communities and government through processes of amnesty, truth telling, reparation, reconciliation, forgiveness and resettlement is making progress but not with the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) leaders, so far.

Some of the specific challenges that remain and were tabled in conversations were: continuing reports of torture by police and military; the ongoing need for forgiveness - no forgiveness, no peace; ongoing conflicts with rebel (LRA) and tribal (Karamoja) groups; further work under the Amnesty process; the cultural pressure for women to remain silent post rape; and the inability to protect both witnesses and complainants through human rights investigations, reporting or other due processes.

UGANDAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

Msgr John Kauta General Secretary of Ugandan Episcopal Conference (UEC) gave a short and comprehensive briefing about the different departments and commissions within UEC. UEC was established in 1979 and mandated to support the Catholic bishops in their efforts to protect and promote values of justice, peace, human dignity, human rights, reconciliation, democracy and solidarity among the people of Uganda.

He emphasised the role of CARITAS, through its Justice and Peace Commissions (JPC), in promoting reconciliation, unity and solidarity within the whole country. Inclusive in these activities, JPC also promotes and defends human dignity for all disadvantaged groups, women, children, refugees, workers, prisoners and orphans. JPC is deeply involved in promoting a culture of peace through peaceful coexistence and resolution of conflicts. JPC believes that there cannot be total transformation of human life, culture and religion without the involvement of women. In Uganda, women continue to be oppressed and have little or no space to influence governmental policies.

JPC collaborates with government and non governmental groups at different levels, through monitoring, capacity building, investigation and documentation of human rights violations. JPC monitors the abuse of power by government authorities, adherence to principles of good governance and democracy of relevant institutions in the country especially in North and North-East Uganda.

JPC operates peace-clubs in schools. Through this programme, education is given to children so that they grow up understanding peace and the importance of co-existing together in peace, the focus being Northern and North-East Uganda. Reconciliation, justice and peace make people become co-workers with Christ in promoting peace and justice.

CARITAS, as the Catholic arm of their humanitarian response, reacts to emergencies, relief, recovery and development needs of the community. This is done through activities such as agriculture, livestock, micro projects, community-based health care, water and sanitation and shelter. CARITAS provides capacity development at all levels as well as awareness raising sessions to combat HIV/AIDS and malaria. It also has a programme on prison ministries.

Peace-building, through capacity building, engaged many people in constructive discussions focussing in conflict areas. It addresses such issues such as small arms and light weapons, good governance, which includes the public monitoring government's use of public funds.

UGANDA ORTHODOX CHURCH

The WCC Living Letters team paid a courtesy call on the Metropolitan Jonah Lwanga of the Uganda Orthodox Church at his office. Metropolitan Lwanga stressed that the work of peace is very difficult, because peace today seems to be a product of humans, according to the Western concept. Because of this misconception, it has led to human suffering in many parts of the world. However, the Metropolitan noted that the church will remain the prophetic voice, being representatives of God to the people. Metropolitan Lwanga hopes that churches around the world would emphasise the message of love from God, instead of trying to rationalize the gospel and stop trying to do things the way they understand it. He further noted that sometimes the impacts of our approaches to peace are not reflected according to theological perspectives.

On the peace process, the Metropolitan said that there is no sincerity in the process and that the churches can only try to press forward in encouraging the parties to continue the talks. As for amnesty, he said that the country had no alternative, noting that the other option is to take perpetrators of violence to court, but that doesn't work in the case of Uganda, as love is much needed in the society today.

The Metropolitan Jonah Lwanga also thanked the Living Letters delegation for their visit to Uganda and encourages the members of the delegation to continue praying for Uganda and be the voice of the suffering people to the world.

ANGLICAN CHURCH OF UGANDA

Archbishop Olobi explained that the Churches have worked very hard for the attainment of peace in Northern Uganda. He said that the whole of the Great Lakes region was very volatile and spoke on the current crisis between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda.

He stressed that there was need for immediate humanitarian intervention to help the thousands of refugees now fleeing DRC. He commended the collaboration of the different faiths in Uganda under the Uganda Inter-Religious Council which has enabled the different Religious leaders to speak in unity.

He indicated that the country faced post conflict challenges now that there is some peace since the cessation of hostilities agreement in commencement of the Juba Peace Talks on 2006. He enumerated the challenges as the provision of Psycho social support for returnees who include former rebels, young mothers and youth; the provision of basic amenities such as water, health facilities, schools; and the difficulties posed by reintegration challenges between former rebels who have returned to live within the same community that is traumatised by atrocities committed by the rebels.

He concluded by saying that the churches have a lot to do so that the affected people can embrace their aggressors through forgiveness for the sake of lasting peace in the affected area. He referred to the Bible saying that Jesus did not condemn the adulterous women and urged the community to accept the young mothers who have returned with children born out of acts of sexual assault.

He commended the WCC for having sent the Team to Uganda.

REFUGEE LAW PROJECT

The team was received by the Head of Research and Advocacy of the Refugee Law Project (RLP), Mr Moses Chrispus Okello. RLP is a community outreach project with the Faculty of Law of Makerere University. The project has three main departments: a pro bono legal service to refugees and Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) (by analysing the situations that caused the displacement), an educational training (by providing functional adult literacy class for refugees and IDP), and a research and advocacy department.

The Project is involved in the analysis of the conflict. In 2002, RLP did a study on the conflict in Northern Uganda for USAID to gain a better understanding of the IDP situation in this area. In December 2006, they organised a workshop aimed at assessing and testing some assumptions about the conflict. They finally came with the conclusion that the conflict that is raging in Northern Uganda is a national problem (i.e. not caused by external factors). As a result of the above initiatives, the Swedish government gave financial assistance for RLP to undertake more work on transitional justice, including beyond the Juba Peace Agreement providing conceptual guidance around transitional justice issues.

The project has three main pillars: a multi-layered public information campaign, a process of transitional justice, and research. The Project does research on six key thematic areas. One of them is the psychological implications of violence on the population. Another area of research is the paternity law in Uganda that allows amnestied men to claim paternity of a child that was conceived while they were in the bush, the mother being an abducted girl/woman.

The research also focuses on decentralisation and sedentary livelihoods, especially with regard to the conflict in the North-Eastern part of the country. Research has showed that most of the violence takes place around the area, and not within. Education policies are to be developed in order to fix people in one place.

With regard to the Amnesty Act, it should be noted that legally speaking, amnesty does not require forgiveness. Legal amnesty should be distinguished from religious amnesty and from cultural amnesty. In Uganda, there was a strong cultural and religious push to get an Amnesty Act. However, there have been some cases of blanket amnesty – which are completely left out in the in-built judicial system.

Gulu

The Living Letters Team visit to Gulu consisted of four members of the delegation. Members of the Team consisted of Ms Semegnish Asfaw, Mrs Mbari Kioni, Mr George Hazou, and Mr Frederick Nzwili. The Team was accompanied by Canon Joseph Oneka and Rev. Godfrey Loum.

During the visit, the team participated in a number of activities involving visits to important places and meeting with a cross-section of people including religious leaders, representatives of civil society organizations and government officials.

ONGAKO INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP

The Ongako Internally Displaced People's Camp is located about 30 kilometres West of Gulu Municipality. The camp had a huge population, but many people had returned to their homes following the return of relative peace in Acholi. During the visit the Team talked to the local council chairperson of the area. The Team also interviewed three former abducted people, including a female, who narrated the ordeals they faced during captivity in graphic details. One of them pointed out that life in the bush with the LRA was a constant nightmare. There was shortage of food. Everyone was forced to move long distance daily, with hardly any rest. They were constantly battered by mosquitoes. Young people who attempted to escape from captivity were treated cruelly and even killed.

One of the young men interviewed said he was unhappy because he could not continue with his education due to lack of funds. He said he wanted to forget his misery but he finds it hard to reconcile himself to the fact that he was now condemned to perpetual poverty because of the conflict. He said he was ready to forgive his tormentors, but would not forget the suffering he experienced at the hands of the LRA. The Church, he said, was helping them to cope with their suffering. He said he was a regular church attendant. He said sermons preached have helped him to regain confidence in humanity.

ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF NORTHERN UGANDA

The Bishop Nelson Onono Onweng started the meeting by pointing that for us to move freely and safely at this time of the day – around 6-7pm – is due to the relative peace that has been prevailing in the region for the past 2 years.

From a church perspective, he started his position as Bishop with 4 points to address: to work for the renewal of faith of the people in this region affected by the war; to work for peace and reconciliation, by carrying advocacy on his own, by taking his own initiative to contact the rebels and dialogue with them – he managed to meet Joesep Kony in DRC, and was actively involved in the Peace Talks; to reduce poverty, not through relief programs, but rather by giving a small piece of land to needy people in order to help them manage their own life and get a meaning in life – the education of children (as a means of reducing poverty) is crucial in order to form the future leaders of the country; and to build institutional capacity of the church itself, in order to be able to respond as a Church.

From an inter-faith perspective, the bishop explained that Christian and Muslim leaders decided to work together in order to find peaceful solutions for the situation in Northern Uganda. In 1997, they formed the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). The ARLPI is quite a powerful organ when it comes to its response to the problems generated by the conflict, for it works hand in hand with religious leaders, cultural institutions, local political leaders and other key players. Religious leaders went to sleep during 4 nights in the streets of Gulu to show solidarity with the

“night commuters”, i.e. children who seek safety in shelters and protect themselves from rebel attacks and abductions.

Although there are still some rebels in the bush, the Bishop affirmed that the war was over. Most of the refugees and displaced people have returned home, although there are some who still remain in camps because they don't trust the situation unless the Peace Agreement is signed. After what they have been through, some fear to return home because they are not sure what they will find there. Amnestied returnees have been well integrated so far in their society. However, they haven't yet been a face to face with those who were injured, maimed by them.

When it comes to statistics, he reported that 79% of the population in Northern Uganda lives below the poverty line (whereas it is only 38% for the whole country), and 11% of the population in Northern Uganda is affected by HIV/AIDS (compared to 6.2% at the national level). World Vision International and Caritas Counselling Centre are very active when it comes to trauma-healing of victims of the war, and also those who faced sexual violence.

He concluded by insisting on the need to stop Kony from abducting children. Although he is not making a case for the resort to force, he underlined the need to stop Kony so that the people can live in peace.

GULU DISTRICT COUNCIL

The Team met the Vice-Chairman of Gulu District Local Government, Mr Kitara Mmot. Mr Kitara welcomed the team, pointing out that the visit was an indication that the international community was concerned about the plight of the people of Uganda. The leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Joseph Kony, was not keen on concluding a peace agreement with the government.

The main challenge facing the Gulu was resettling internally displaced people who were returning to their homes following improvement in the security situation. The government is encouraging people to go back to their homes, through a weekly radio programme.

Mr Kitara explained that water infrastructures have been destroyed and water points blocked. Government was not doing much to resettle the people. Animals are destroying crops of people living along the National Murchison Falls National Park.

DEPUTY RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER OF GULU

The Team also met the Deputy Resident District Commissioner of Gulu, Mr Milton Odongo. He explained that Gulu and Northern Uganda in general have enjoyed peace for the past three years. Mr Odongo said the LRA were operating in parts of DRC, Sudan and Central Africa where they were committing atrocities, becoming a problem not only for Uganda but also for the Great Lakes Region as a whole. He said government was committed to assisting people who were returning to their homes.

He explained that the priority for the government is improving water and sanitation, health services infrastructure and livelihood support. Land disputes are one of the major challenges to resettlement programme.

DEPUTY DISTRICT COMMISSIONER OF GULU

The Deputy District Commissioner welcomed the team and gave a brief history of the genesis of the conflict in Northern Uganda. The conflict was caused by the non recognition of President Museveni's government by factions led by Alice Lakwena and others, and Joseph Kony became leader of LRA later. The LRA had unleashed terror for 20 years causing great damage to the lives of the community whose people had been abducted, killed and maimed. During this crisis, the government worked hard to restore peace and in his words: "The rebels have been defeated Peace, and it is irreversible."

He acknowledged the role played by the religious leaders of Northern Uganda under the auspices of Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative which brings together the Church of Uganda, the Catholic Church and Muslim leaders.

70 to 80% of IDP's had returned to their homes and the World Food Programme would be facing out its programmes to IDPs in December 2008. The government had initiated the Poverty Reduction and Development Programme (PRDP) for Northern Uganda whose main objectives are: to restore of state authority; to drill water boreholes; to improve quality of education, health and infrastructure; and facilitates income generating activities for the people of northern Uganda, including small scale industries for women groups and youth.

The government still faces challenges such as land disputes caused by interpretation of government policies by politicians and lack of funding.

"SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN NORTHERN UGANDA: THE ROLE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES"

The Team participated in a dialogue meeting involving civil society organizations in Gulu, as well as several religious leaders. The participants included representatives of Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), Gulu Save the Children Organization (GUSCO), Concerned Parents Association (CPA), ACCORD, Gulu NGO Forum, and the Church of Uganda. During the meeting the Community Service Organisations (CSO) shared their work and concerns as follows.

The CSOs in Gulu advocate for amnesty for LRA rebels, and promote dialogue between the Government and the LRA. They provide counselling to trauma victims, rehabilitation for formerly abducted people, and skills training to children who have returned from LRA captivity. They also undertake research on traditional justice (truth-telling, confession, forgiveness, etc.), and advocate for the release of women and children who are still under LRA captivity, as well as putting an end to the LRA-led abductions.

Assistance is provided to formerly abducted people to be re-united with their family members. Once united, they are given assistance through income-generating activities, vocational skills training, and soft loans. Peace building focuses on land dispute mediation and settlement.

Participants expressed concern on a number of issues including the failure by the Government and the LRA to sign the final peace agreement, the possibility of recurrence of violence if a peace agreement is not concluded, the lack of adequate information about the PRDP, the impact of ICC indictment on the peace process in Uganda, the danger posed to the resettlement programme by unexploded ordnances, and the fear of re-abduction by formerly abducted people.

CSOs have contributed substantially towards efforts aimed at resolving the conflict in Northern Uganda. These efforts have rotated around advocacy for dialogue and reconciliation. CSOs have also participated in highlighting the plights of the people and calls for humanitarian support, rehabilitation and reintegration. In brief, CSOs contribution can be broadly classified into seven categories as follows.

Dialogue: Religious leaders and the rest of civil society organizations have been in the forefront of advocating for peace. For a long time, the Uganda Government was reluctant to talk to the LRA. Religious leaders and civil society organizations took the view that sustainable peace could only be achieved through dialogue. After a long period of sustained advocacy, the Government of Uganda accepted to talk to the LRA and peace talks begun in July 2006 in Juba, Southern Sudan.

Amnesty: Civil society presided for amnesty which has benefited some 23,000 people since the Amnesty Act was enacted in 2000.

Psychosocial support: Civil society have provided psychosocial support to address the problem of stress, depression, and trauma

Human Assistance: Many civil society organizations have provided humanitarian support-food, blankets, water, and many other forms of support to the displaced people. Local civil society organizations also advocated strongly for the provision of humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced people.

Resettlement: Following the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government and the LRA in August 2006, relative peace has returned to Northern Uganda. This has enabled the people in the LRA conflict affected areas of Acholi, Lango and Teso to return to their homes. However, the Government of Uganda has not lived up to its commitment and obligation to support the internally displaced people.

Reintegration: Through the interventions of the religious leaders and other civil society organizations, many people who have returned from LRA captivity have been successfully reintegrated within their communities. This has been done in the spirit of forgiveness, love, and reconciliation.

Peace: The people had divergent views about the peace process. Some people stated that the LRA were not interested in signing the Peace Agreement. Government officials stated that the LRA would never again return to destabilize the country. Some people said as long as the Final Peace Agreement is not signed there would be no peace. Said attention needs to be focused on getting the parties back to the negotiating table and pressurizing the LRA to show commitment.

DISPLACED PEOPLE IN IRAQ

Mr George Hazou shared, with the cross-section of people present at the meeting, the situation of IDPs in Iraq.

UNHCR estimates more than 4.7 million Iraqis have left their homes, many in dire need of humanitarian care. Of these, more than 2.7 million Iraqis are displaced internally, while more than 2 million have fled to neighbouring states, particularly Syria (1.2 million) and Jordan (3/4 million).

Many were displaced prior to 2003, but the largest number has fled since. In 2006, Iraqis became the leading nationality seeking asylum in Europe.

Iraqi refugees throughout the region have become increasingly desperate. Despite a decline in violence in the second half of 2007, only a small number have gone home, often because their resources are exhausted. Of those who returned to Iraq, many found their property occupied and suffered secondary displacement. Others are reluctant to go back due to the continuous violence and insecure environment.

There are several humanitarian priorities.

Protection – Wide-ranging protection activities including advocating to all parties to the conflict for respect for international humanitarian and human rights law (specifically the protection of civilians), legal aid and assistance for victims of human rights abuses, capacity-building for authorities (judicial, police, etc.) and other protection actors, monitoring and documenting.

Food – Rehabilitation of Public Distribution System (PDS) as much as possible, targeted provision of full and partial food rations as appropriate and non food items

Water and sanitation – short-term provision of potable water through water trucking, urgent repairs to infrastructure, installation of temporary systems

Health – Emergency provision of primary and secondary health and water services and supplies, particularly is ensuring appropriate services for vulnerable populations (trauma victims, etc) rehabilitation as possible of existing health infrastructure: capacity building for health care workers, particularly in trauma response.

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Archbishop Odama is the leader of the ARLPI. He explained that the room we were meeting in is called the “Island of peace”, because during the insurgency, most the meetings with NGOs, civil society, UN, etc. took place in this room. Jan Egeland – who was also in this room – described the situation in Northern Uganda as the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world”. He noted that although a lot has been achieved, there is still a long way to go before reaching peaceful brotherhood.

The result of war is always destruction. It destroys the dignity of the human person at the psychological and physical levels. There were lots of displacements in the Acholi area. This has of course resulted in a hand-to-mouth livelihood for most of them. The economic total dependency had in turn affected those who, in other circumstances, would have been the bread-winners of their families. With regard to education, the war dragged the region behind the rest of the country. The number of people attending schools and university has dropped due to a situation of abject poverty. Also, most of the people living in the area were traumatised by the war, and constantly feared of being attacked.

The ARLPI inter-faith group was established as a response to the prevailing situation of war. Three Christian and one Muslim leader came together for peace, to appreciate and uphold life, to promote love, unity, peace, reconciliation, development, hard work (all these values are shared in the various denominations). They undertook lots of sensitisation work, of local advocacy, research and studies. They had common prayers where they celebrated each holy book: a common theme is

chosen, and both the Bible and the Quran are read. Both religious communities mix and celebrate together. The prayers are lead either by a Christian or a Muslim religious leader. At the end, a common message concerning the main theme is delivered: it's a message from God to all human beings – irrespective of their religious affiliation. The local population like to see the ARLPI meet often. They celebrate major events together (wedding, funerals, etc.). The ARLPI also undertook bridge-building between the government and the LRA. They undertook several mediation initiatives when the violence broke out.

The ARLPI also do advocacy at the national level in collaboration with the UJCC, and at the international level: the group sent a delegation to visit different countries (USA, Canada, Belgium, the EU, Germany, etc.) to advocate for dialogue instead of violence.

The Bishop noted that full reconciliation was not possible everywhere because there is still a lot of suspicion left among the people. Unless the Peace Agreement is finally signed, there will still be some uncertainty among the people.

With regard to returnees, and particularly formerly abducted child soldiers, the Bishop is involved in several reintegration initiatives, especially when it comes to the girl child. There are integration schools where these girls can study with the local girls, and day care facilities have been provided so that single mothers can pursue their studies.

Now, with the peace that is coming ahead, several people are returning home. Most have to start everything from scratch. The deeper one dives, it'll take him long to rise back. The Bishop explained that 11 of the 36 district covered by the PRDP were highly affected by the war, and deserved a special program tailored to address their specific needs. Otherwise, if the general programme is applied to these 11 areas, the outcome will not be as good as expected.

When asked if he thinks that peace will prevail, given the fact that the Peace Agreement has not yet been signed, the Bishop explained that even during the tough times, he never lost hope. "If I lose hope, I betray God and the people". He continued by stressing that the outcome of the peace process should be constantly followed. Both sides should be reminded of that the best interest of the people should be the guiding element in any negotiation. When asked how the victims perceived the Amnesty Act, he explained that so far there is no reconciliation process. For the time being, it is mainly about receiving the amnestied people. Then, with time, question on what happened exactly will come up.

CARITAS COUNSELLING CENTRE

We were received by Mr Lucy Onen – Administrator of the centre, and Mr Angeletta Otto – Deputy Director. They explained to the group that the Centre started in 2004, and covers the districts of Amoro, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. They provide a service free of charge and open to all (cross-gender), and they cater for the psycho-social needs of the people in the area. They focus on formally abducted children, and those who have traumatic problem

They explained that they were only a small group providing this kind of service. There is a need to train civil society, social workers, church leaders, animators in schools, community networks, catechists and other key actors who are essential in the development process. They also train the military, and try to reach out to them as much as possible. They try to make sure that their influence is felt at all levels. However, the Centre is limited in terms of resources, both human and financial.

They pointed out that people came easily or voluntarily to the Centre. They have a radio programme aired on several stations. Also, people hear through friends about the Centre. Hence, people know the service is available. There are not many paracounsellors in the area, and therefore people have a tendency of easily coming to the Centre. World Vision and other NGOs and agencies often refer people to the Centre.

When asked about the most frequent forms of symptoms that they had to deal with, they listed a few: absent minded, lack of coordination when they speak, depression, suicidal tendencies, high level of anxiety, schizophrenia, mania, muteness (some can't talk anymore), etc. some patients are transferred to clinical therapy at the psychiatric hospital in Gulu. The youngest of their patients are 7-8 years-old. Some are returnees, others were born in captivity, some are orphans, etc. Most have been indoctrinated in a violent environment, and it is difficult for them to come back to a peaceful environment. In addition to that, the returnees are often stigmatised in the society.

Katakwi and Soroti

The Living Letters Team to Soroti consisted of three Team members, namely Mr Sydna Nduna, Rev. Keith Brian, Mr Janejinda Pawadee and Mr Thimotheus Kamabaoko. The Team was accompanied by Mr Stephen Kitembo, Assistant Officer for Peace Building at UJCC Secretariat. The Team travelled from Kampala to Soroti in the morning of 29 October, 2009. The Team participated in a number of activities involving visits to important places and meeting with a cross-section of people including religious leaders, representatives of civil society organizations and government officials.

Background information

Teso as a region experienced three different forms of conflict-UPA conflict, Holy Spirit Movement Conflict and the Lord Resistance Army conflict. Teso has also experienced incursions by Karimojong cattle rustlers. This has been going on for the past 50 years. The attacks gained momentum in 1979 when the fleeing soldiers of former President Idi Amin who had been defeated by the combined Ugandan rebels and Tanzanian troops abandoned thousands of guns in Moroto barracks. The arms were grabbed by Karimojong warriors who then started using those sophisticated weapons to raid each others cattle and also from the neighbouring communities of Acholi, Lango, Teso and Bugisu.

Karamoja district has been afflicted by natural calamities- draught, water scarcity, and floods. Humanitarian support is also affected by poor infrastructure. Many people in Katakwi district, especially those in sub-counties bordering Karamoja live in internally displaced people's camps in abject poverty and destitution. Insecurity has led to the impoverishment of the people of Teso. People are willing and able to work but insecurity has reduced them to a life of destitution.

KATAKWI DISTRICT COUNCIL

The team was received by the Chairperson of Katakwi District Council. The Soroti district has had a number of disasters, the problems can be traced back to the 1940's and they reached the pick 2000 with the Karimojong raids. The Karimojong attacks became very violent; they would attack the neighbouring communities, steal cattle, rape women and kill people. Hence, people run away from their homes into camps. Even after the government soldiers came people did not feel safe to return and remained in the camps.

At the pick of the conflict, 85,000 people were displaced in 56 IDP camps covering a wide area. Currently some people who still live in the camps have two homes, one in the camp and one in another area outside the camp not necessarily their home land. This is so that they can run back to the safety of the camp if their home outside is attacked; secondly most of the areas outside the camps have not been inhabited for such a long time that they lack the basic resources. People living in the IDP camps wish and want to go back to their home land and live a normal life because the camps have become places where there are high incidents of rape, HIV/AIDS infection is the highest in the country, with 16% compared with 6% for the rest of the country. Most times people are idle with little or nothing to do so they resort to drinking and promiscuous activities.

The government is trying to address the issue through disarmament, of the Karimojong. Government soldiers have deployed the anti stock theft unit which checks the cattle raiding however the patrols are not regular and it frustrating to the community. Government have also put police units in the sub counties to check lawlessness and improve their response to crime. The government distributes

cassava, groundnut and sweet potatoes and vegetable seed. However the agriculture activities were affected by the draught and now by the water logging. Other government actors helping with the resettlement program are the office of the Prime Minister with relief food. There are gaps in this assistance as communities need oxen to plough with and or low cost tractor but people instead use holes.

The District Disaster Management Committee plans for IDP's. PRED framework is used to guide the region implement reconstruction in the region in terms of the infrastructure as a priority. The churches have proved to be one of the great partners in helping people. They participate in disaster management, clean water provision, farming input distribution. The Pentecostal Church distributes non food items together with the Church of Uganda and the Catholic Church. Religion is not contributing to the conflict in the region instead its efforts are building peace and reconciliation. The churches are being urged to do more work among the Karimojong.

RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER OF KATAKWI

The Religious Group for Peace and Dialogue (RGPD) have been established and have achieved a lot. However, the problem they address is bigger than the community they operate in, peace must come for all Ugandans. Little or no resources is another challenge to people, they tried to farm and plant but the floods came and people were overwhelmed and now this year the fields are water logged and this kills most of the crop leaving people with little or no food. When people receive visitors like you, they have hope, because they say, "a problem shared is a problem halved."

There are 44 Internally Displaced Camps (IDP) and most people including herself, have known no other life than one in the IDP camps. The people who suffer most are women and children. Men get killed or they are captured and they join the army or the civil defence group, while for girls they drop out of school and or are forced into early marriage and they become child mothers. The people say that the richest person in war is a soldier because they have a gun and can get anything they want.

Peace is still to come because land issues are still to be resolved, when people return to their home land, which they left 40 to 50 years ago, how will they claim it back if some one lives there, what proof do they have that it is their land, and what about children born in the IDP camps and who have not known that place as home? What about children born in the camps whose parents have died, who will show them the land that belongs to them? The people who own the land on which IDP camps have been established want their land but now they complain that their land has been depleted and that they should be compensated. In Uganda a person can not just go and settle on a piece of land because traditionally it belongs to someone and that ownership is respected. Will it be a source of future conflict because the owners of the land will feel cheated by the now IDP camps resident?

VISIT TO ORUNGO ALONG KATAKWI-MOROTO BORDER

The WCC living letters team was received by the community with happiness and joy beyond our understanding, being thanked for giving special attention to their many challenges. The community also thanked the church and their pastors for working tirelessly towards providing spiritual counsel, hope and direction at every point of need.

The major problem there is their relationship with the Karimojong people. For there is a certain

group within Karamoja who resort to violence and killing as part of their livelihood – commonly referred to as cattle rustling or raiding. These activities have led to the loss of many innocent lives, particularly men and their women have been raped. The Karimojong have long been marginalised since Uganda's colonisation and the complexities of the situation continue to present significant challenges for establishing peace.

The community at Orungo are some of the victims of this ongoing violence and have been displaced to life in these refugee camps for more than 26 years. Words cannot adequately express the extremely complex and difficult experience of living in the camp. Life in the refugee camp is debilitating: it has killed people's spirit and creativity, they have lost their dignity and direction, and feel like they cannot support themselves even while knowing they have the potential (these people are farmers and raised animals but life in the camp does not even permit this).

The challenges of camp life begin with the reality of loss and being disconnected – from land, resources, the village community, and their family groups. This disconnection and disorientation was said to be the fundamental challenge to collaborative initiatives of providing for themselves, care, learning, etc.

This was particularly noticed when it came to caring for the aged in their community. The elderly feared their future, for even if they could go back to their villages, they are too weak and frail to work the land, becoming more and more dependent on the occasional help from NGO's or other community members who are also struggling.

The breaking down of the family unit has caused many difficulties with life in the camp. For example, one man explained how the displacement has divided his family: his wife was in Katawki in order to get access to basic provisions like sanitary items and the children were in Kampala for work. If there was peace he said - his wife and children could return to the village and live fulfilling lives there. The women, particularly the widowed, are overburdened with the total responsibility of farming, cooking, cleaning, teaching and every other aspect of village life. This often leads to an impossible situation where many needs and relationships unintentionally go unmet. General moral degeneration, copying of bad behaviour, lack of resources and opportunities for education (especially secondary) often lead to drinking and other social problems like the spread and impact of HIV AIDS.

Many other challenges were shared. Among them: famine and malnutrition; the lack of food and clean drinking water (old water bores are not safe or have collapsed); sanitation is also not good in the camps – the soils are very soft, so when digging latrines they just collapse; flooding - which breaks down the walls of huts and communal buildings, contaminates water sources, and destroys crops; very small health clinics, very far away, under resourced and often inaccessible.

Speaking with the children, it was shared how especially the young girls (13-17yrs) experienced camp life as an incredible challenge to morality - getting pregnant, dropping out of school, looking for 'sugar daddies' who can look after them. Because of the hardships of poverty, parents drive them to marry early - to take care of them or to get money. Some parents are not good models for the children, when parents are rude or rough with the children they run away (often due to alcohol).

While we were there we asked if the young girls were to marry a man - who they would be likely to marry. They said any working people, but not teachers or NGO workers as they don't stay long. We also asked what their dream was. It was simply to finish school - but their fear is that they

cannot finish due to lack of money or access to schools. Their future, their dreams and their hopes were limited to finishing school – a tragic story for such young lives with so much energy and potential.

We then reflected together on: What can you do to help yourselves? What can your Government do for you? And, what can we do for you? The following is in response to these questions.

The churches have provided safe houses. They are very good; they are a real source of encouragement, hope, comfort and safety. They have been more useful than any other institution throughout their time in the camps. The churches have also helped through their preaching of hope, their call to morality and their teaching about peace. They explained how peace begins within yourself and then it can be passed on to others – this is their responsibility - slowly changing peoples hearts and attitudes one at a time. They also recognised the need for better collaboration and networking but had found this very difficult, eg sharing plough and other equipment, labour, skills, etc.

The community had many requests.

For the Ugandan Government to stop the crimes committed by their military – often sent to help bring about peace, but they too have raped women (especially young girls), abducted women and spread HIV AIDS, continuing to break up families.

For the Government to attend to the needs of the Karimojong first. The community constantly spoke of their conviction that if the Karimojong had all their needs met from other sources the violence would cease, they could then return home and rebuild their lives in peace.

For resettlement assistance: For example, if they could be provided with basic farming implements and learn about more suitable farming methods this had the potential to quickly generate income and provide for many of their needs like the children's education. Other skills would also be of great benefit like learning how to build stronger and more sustainable homes that would withstand the regular floods they now experience.

For better resourced and accessibility of health services, especially HIV AIDS testing and ongoing health care. Support for all their orphans, children, and widows – to give them a future

Prayer for peace, and that their voice would be made bigger and stronger; Support and resources for education on peaceful coexistence amongst the Karimojong.

That the World Council of Churches would add its voice, to tell their story and to advocate for an end to the pain and suffering, creating a new beginning, a new story of life and hope. Please do not let this be the last visit as there is so much to learn and it is a great encouragement to us – a sign of solidarity.

In closing, our delegation gives thanks to the people of Orungo for their kind hospitality and we offer these final words from Reverend Canon Philip Okiro from the Church of Uganda who helped facilitate this conversation. May we have ears to hear and hearts to enact.

“Brothers and sisters - we are so, so grateful, our happiness has increased because you actually came to visit and share with us, you have come and stepped on our soil, now when you read and when you write you will feel exactly what you are writing and you take back the right report to the whole world that this

is really what is happening. I want to pray that God blesses you and takes you back to communicate this information from wherever you have come from. Because we need peace, we all talk of peace, we are looking for peace. We have suffered locally, you have heard from us, more than 26yrs, too sad, some of us are born here in this camp, some have died in the camp, and some still continue to stay in the camp. Until when? So that is why we say God has heard our prayer that is why God has brought you to us. Brothers and sisters may God bless you as you go back and I also want to pray that you come back, come again and hear from us, take all these stories to your people and may God take you safely home. Thank you.”

“SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN GREATER NORTHERN UGANDA: THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES”

During the meeting with IDP community leaders from the different camps, several issues were raised. They shared the history and background of the conflict which they said started in 1952. Since then, the conflict has been on and off. First it was the Karimojong with cattle rustling, then followed by the Idi Amin war. In 1972, it was a conflict between the military and people who wanted their animals back. The LRA also attacked this area. During these periods, some people have been displaced more than 3 times for nearly 3 decades. Now the problem is resettlement: many people want to go back to their village because life in the camp is very difficult and cruel. Many people are unemployed. Some people have lived in the camps for decades, got married and have given birth to children when living in the camps. They want to be assisted to return to their homes where they can live normal lives.

The situation in the camps has led to loss of dignity and family values. The situation is characterized by immorality, drunkenness, and early pregnancy. There are many broken families. People living in internally displaced people’s camps lack water. Sanitation is poor. There are inadequate health and teaching facilities. Children expressed disillusionment saying they have no faith in the future. Due to lack of money their parents cannot educate their children. Schools are also in a sorry state. Many people from the area have moved to other parts of Teso and other areas in the country to seek safety and a better life. Family members have been forced to separate and live apart.

Government, non-government organizations and the Church have all given one form of support or another to the internally displaced people. These include provision of social services such as medical services, education, water and sanitation. Humanitarian assistance in the form of food, blankets have also been given to the IDPs. Scholarships have also been given to children of vulnerable members of the IDPs communities.

Religious leaders and non-governmental organizations have been actively involved in the peace process. They have advocated for dialogue and continue to do so. Religious leaders in Teso were instrumental in brokering the peace between the government and UPA rebels. On one occasion, the Bishop sent a priest to Kampala to perform a “talk show” on radio. It was fruitful that the church was telling the government to do something. As a result of the broadcast, the country realised that the problem was not a North-Eastern problem, but rather a national problem. This led to increased awareness among the public, media coverage and civil society’s pressure towards the government to intervene.

Key Challenges facing Internally Displaced People in Teso

Resettlement: People want to go back to their homes. They require resettlement packages-seeds, implements, household items. They require infrastructure and social services including schools, roads, health facilities, and water. They also require psychosocial support.

Education: There is need for special support to the girl child education. The education of the girl-child has been badly affected by camp life. Early pregnancy has denied many girls the chance to pursue education. Boarding primary schools would be a good contribution in furthering the cause of girl-child education.

Health and HIV/AIDS: There are many people living with HIV/AIDS. Well over 19% of the population is living with HIV/AIDS. There is therefore great need for Voluntary Testing and Counselling (VTC) Anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). EJACs need to sensitize the population on the importance of VTC and ARVs.

Water: There are some boreholes in the camps and in trading centres. Boreholes in villages have broken down. Therefore, there is need for more boreholes.

Psychological Support: Many people-women, children and men- are traumatized. Some people who have returned to their villages claimed they have been tormented by ghosts, hence they need counselling/social support networks.

Security: Attacks by Karimojong cattle rustlers have decreased. However, there are few incursions involving the theft of a few cows. Therefore the people of Teso still feel insecure. The Churches are addressing this problem. There is ongoing dialogue between the Karimojong and the Iteso. Karimojong warriors are said to be willing to give up their guns, but the Church does not have the means to help them settle down after abandoning the life of a warrior. Therefore there is need for financial and other forms of assistance to support the ongoing community dialogue peace process.

Lobby: Religious leaders and NGOs operating in Teso are overwhelmed by the demand for services and humanitarian support. They need support to continue to lobby and advocate for further assistance and to engage government on service provision-through programmes as the peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda- (PRDP) as well as security matters. They need to lobby for forgiveness and reconciliation, leading to permanent peace.

CATHOLIC BISHOP OF SOROTI DIOCESE

The WCC Living Letters team paid a courtesy call on the Bishop of the Catholic Church of Soroti, Rt. Rev. Emmanuel Obbo, who is also the Chairman of the Soroti Religious Leaders for Peace. Bishop Obbo noted that people in the region were frustrated to participate in any development because of fear, but that the church is trying to preach the message of hope.

Having spent 5 years in the Karamoja region on missionary work, the bishop hopes that the culture of the Karimojongs would fade away, because it is a major cause for the conflict in the region. He noted that there was a time when the people of Karamoja and Teso lived together, but the culture of cows' ownership and raiding of cows to maintain honour has ruined this relationship. The main challenges in the affected areas, according to the bishop, are clean water, security, sustenance and resettlement, noting that the peace process that would pave the way for the realization of these has a lot of challenges, but that there is also hope.

Though the Catholic Bishop of Soroti was appointed less than a year ago, he has been actively involved in the peace process, especially with other religious leaders. Given the strong recognition of the church in both regions, he is confident that the churches will continue to push for the peaceful resolution of the conflict so that people can return home and play an even bigger role in the reconciliation and healing process.

The Rt. Rev. Emmanuel Obbo was happy for the visit of the Living Letters team, adding that it is important for the people to see Christians from other parts of the world that can come and share their experiences. He believes that this will strengthen their faith and promote the work of peace already being done by the churches.

ANGLICAN BISHOP OF SOROTI DIOCESE

The RT. REV. Charles Obaikol welcomed the team after the introductions were done by Fr Jerome. The bishop of Soroti for the Anglican Church covers four districts including Katakwi. The church has played a very important role and the church is a place of hope for most people. The Church in Uganda is united in the quest for peace. When the RT. REV. Charles Obaikol became bishop for Soroti in 2000 the problem was the cattle rustling by the Karimojong. When Idi Amin was overthrown a lot of guns found their way to the Karimojong, and these weapons were used to steal cattle. The Karimojong, need some change of culture because their district was deliberately set up by the British to demonstrate how primitive people live.

The British left the area undeveloped and people continued to live in primitive ways. This was used as a tourist attraction for people who wanted to see primitive people were taken there. By 2000 people were already living in internally displaced camps especially in Katakwi. In 2003, the Lord Resistance Army attacked the community and people got displaced for the second time and in search of security people moved without resistance and this time Soroti was also affected. It took the government soldiers and civil defence forces four months to push back the Lord Resistance Army's offensive.

Through out this time the churches were very close to the people and the bishop encouraged the priests to stay because it is the only way to demonstrate Gods love for his people. The church also received information on the activities of the armed groups and used it for advocacy. People want to work and earn a living and they have tried over and over again to plant crops. However, they want their land, for having your own land gives you security. People are therefore asking and longing to return to their home land. They want to go back but they are still scared as there is no security yet. But the situations in the camps have serious effects, destruction of morality, people drinking and high incidents of early marriages.

The Church of Uganda built a school but there are no students, there is another government school in Katakwi and it is also empty because parents cannot raise the 30,000 Ugandan Shilling that they are supposed to pay. Hence the education standards have gone very low, good teachers do not want to teach in the camps or remote areas like these. There are high incidents of HIV/AIDS infections due to unprotected sex; the rates are said to be between 19-30 % as compared to the national infection rate of 6%. The area has remained isolated with little or no development due to insecurity in the area.

The Bishop suggested that government could put in more effort and make anti-retroviral drugs more available and accessible. Human touch is a key element in the healing process of displaced people and the efforts by UJCC are to be commended but should not stop. UJCC should continue to let the rest of Uganda know about the plight of people in the North and Eastern regions of Uganda.

The church is deeply concern by the impact on the family unit, separation and its consequences has been family break down. This concern should be brought to the awareness of the appropriate authorities. The children have pleaded to the church to highlight this issue. Children who don't have parents and are not supported by the extended family have little hope, and should receive adequate assistance including the child headed households and families. Small scholarships to girls should be given, because right now only 250 of them receive scholarships and this is a drop in the ocean compared to the number of girl children affected. As part of the scholarship, the girls are housed in a hostel in order to keep them safe and give them a conducive learning environment.

There is a diocese in Karamoja which receives good cooperation from the people: this is an effort to bring about peace between the two communities. The diocese has and continues to organise cross border meetings on peace building and the people of the Karimojong welcomes the efforts. The church is also promoting joint schools, prayer for peace meetings at the border.

Kampala

MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The WCC Living Letters team paid a courtesy call on the Minister of Internal Affairs, Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda at his office in Kampala. The minister noted that he was grateful for the role of the UJCC in the peace process and happy for the first visit of the WCC to identify with the church of Uganda in the peace building process, adding that he believes that people must have appreciated the international team's visit in the areas that were visited.

The teams that visited Gulu and Katakwi then briefed the minister on their experiences.

In Gulu, the team was impressed with the collaboration of religious organizations, government and civil society in the peace efforts and noted that many IDPs were returning home. There were about 2 million people displaced by the conflict. There were also thousands of children separated from their parents, and sleeping on the streets, while fleeing from the rebels. However, with the recent status of the peace negotiations, people are hopeful that they can return to their homes.

In Katakwi, the team was impressed by the willingness of the people to forgive those who committed atrocities against them. They added that in a meeting with a cross section of people from Katakwi, the team was amazed by the position of the people: calling for development activities in Karamoja. There is willingness among the people to resettle, but they have fears about their safety. The high rate of HIV/AIDS in the displaced camp and the desire of the people for voluntary testing, as well as provision of anti-retroviral drugs to affected people were also highlighted.

Dr. Rugunda said that the government has worked closely with the UJCC, civil society and traditional leaders in the peace negotiations process in Uganda. He noted that the peace process is on course and awaiting the signing process, though that has been delayed for unknown reasons. The minister also added that the government has a Peace, Recovery and Development Program (PRDP), a program that would help bring development efforts to the conflict affected parts of Northern Uganda.

The Minister was convinced that the peace process would be successful and that the government is doing all it can to enhance this. He also added that the LRA had three main commitments in the plan: disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The Minister mentioned that there has been no other situation in the country where the government, religious leaders and civil society have been united.

Dr. Rugunda also stressed that the leader of the LRA, Joseph Koni, will face justice according to the Ugandan law. He added that though the ICC has released an indictment for the LRA leader, the government would prefer that he be treated fairly and account for all the atrocities committed by his forces.

On the situation in Katakwi, the minister noted that voluntary disarmament has begun in the Karamoja region and that government is forcefully disarming some of those who refuse to disarm voluntarily. He added that government has decided to end the situation permanently and will be sending troops and police soon so that people in the displaced camps can feel free to return home. Minister Rugunda also expressed his appreciation that the people of Katakwi were calling for development in the Karamoja region because they have been bitter at previous meetings, citing that government has started to do water projects in the Karamoja region so that they don't go out and

terrorise others. The minister is calling on government and the international community to intensify efforts in the fight against HIV, which is highly prevalent in the displaced camps.

PUBLIC HEARING IN KAMPALA

Churches' efforts through dialogue, together with those of civil society advocacy, paid off when the Amnesty Act was passed in 2004. It provided blanket pardon for the rebels who voluntarily surrendered and came forward to ask for protection. Provisions of humanitarian assistance to IDPs communities were also as a result of advocacy by churches. This includes both food and non food related items, as well as psycho-social support for survivors of violence.

There is a deeply rooted fear among the LRA fighters that they would be persecuted, arrested or sent to the ICC in case if they surrender. Hence, they need assurance from the government that all aspects of the peace agreement will be respected. The conflicting signals from the government only increases their lack of trust and confidence in the process. The government move in working and collaborating with neighbouring governments where the LRA is operation, reinforces their fear that there is not real commitment to ending the war. Both the government and the LRA do not want to be seen as having failed to win the war: they both want to come out victorious.

During the negotiations it was clear that there was confusion among the negotiating delegation of the LRA. Some got killed and were replaced, and the ones who negotiated are not the ones who initially signed the peace agreement. Churches and civil society need to keep up the pressure to get the peace treaty signed; otherwise there is fear of going back to war. So many people would again be killed and displaced as some of them have returned to their home.

The way the government handles the conflict in Northern and North Eastern Uganda has had an impact on the population. The Teso people used to be the largest ethnic group in Uganda but now they are the 5th biggest ethnic group living in 44 IDP camps. The conflict has affected more than one third of the people in Uganda.

The government claims that it is encouraging the Karimojong to disarm voluntarily. Actually, it is rather a process of forced disarmament, which results in serious human rights violations. The government has gone as far as lobbying the Kenyan government to also disarm the people inside Kenya.

All efforts must be made to end the prolonged stay of people in IDP camps. Children cannot continue being born in camps with no idea of what a normal life is or can be. Initially, the Teso people hated the Karimojong for the suffering they brought to their families and communities; it is therefore encouraging to see that they have had a change of heart and are willing to help and forgive them.

The government should be encouraged to include and work with other actors involved in the conflict and the peace deal. The affected people should also play a significant role: they should have representatives in all these forum that are negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

Peace has come to stay, and the agreement must be signed. The government should start implementing its programs and religious leaders can only continue to stand with the people by

doing all that they can to pressure the two parties to honour their obligation. The church message to the government continues to be: “let us continue with the efforts to pursue peace” and invest in the people by ensuring security and peace so that the conflict can be avoided in future.

The government should be encouraged to reassure Joseph Kony of his security, and that they will not hand him over to ICC. However they should hold him accountable for the atrocities he committed under the Ugandan law.

Members of the Living Letters team shared their experiences and what has had the most impact on them during the visit to Uganda:

Australia: Poor communities are struggling with issues that are as a result of climate change and environmental degradation/changes. The rising sea levels are of major concern to islands in the Pacific and here we found communities struggling with logging which destroyed most of their crop. Developed countries contribute highly to root causes of climate change therefore countries like Australia should share and take responsibilities and provide support to the communities that are affected.

Asia: I have been deeply touched by the forgiving spirit among the people of Teso. They have not only forgiven the Karimojong but they have forgotten the atrocities they committed against them. I wish people at home can learn from this true expression of loving your neighbour. At home once perceived as an enemy one is always seen as such, there is no desire to show love in action by forgiving and forgetting the wrongs done to them. Forgiveness brings hope dreams and peace to young people.

Middle East: I have felt your grievances and your pain because I have gone through the same myself; I was once a refugee who fled for his life. The loss one experiences once uprooted cannot be described. I therefore hope that the peace lasts and people will have an opportunity to go back to their home.

Liberia: The church is the source of hope and encouragement, after the rain the sun will always shine again. Liberia is no stranger to conflict but with Gods help peace has come, I have the same hope for Uganda that the sun will shine again and heal the community.

Kenya: I admire Uganda in that the church had accompanied the people through out the time of conflict up to now; in Kenya people felt the church abandoned them. The church became aligned along political lines and therefore could not have a united voice. The church has apologised to the people and asked for forgiveness.

Civil society and political leaders are there but the church stays the beacon of hope and truth. The prophetic voice always remains with the church, calling those in authority to account. The church must leave the comfort zone and speak the truth all the time. The church must not be complaisant and continue to lobby for the government and the rebels to sign the peace agreement and then implement it so that people can again feel safe. There is also need for the church to lobby for the resources the government has committed for implementing post conflict development to the infrastructure, social, medical and educational service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Living Letters Team to Uganda makes the following recommendations to the churches all over the world:

- Bring Uganda back to the forefront of the international efforts for peace making.
- Empower the churches and affirm their role in building relations with other faith groups and in working for peace and reconciliation.
- Churches and civil society need to keep up the pressure to get the Peace Agreement signed.
- Highlight issues of sexual and gender violence faced by girls and women perpetuated by armed groups and also by fellow Internally Displaced People in camps.
- The church needs to have a stronger voice when speaking on the impact of displacement on the family unit, and its related consequences.
- Pray for the churches and people of Uganda.

ANNEX 1

The following articles were written by some members of the Living Letters delegation that visited Uganda. Members of the delegation were asked to write an article about their visit in Uganda, and share their impressions. They were also asked to raise awareness, within their own regional context, about the situation that is prevailing in Uganda.

"You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:3, RSV)

"The Kalamajong is not seen as 'an enemy', but the community appealed to everyone to 'forget and forgive' them – this shows to me real love in action, not only talk.



I was so blessed to have had the opportunity to be part of the "Living Letters" team visit to Uganda, together with 5 delegates from Australia, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia and 2 staff of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The living letters visit was hosted and organised by the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC). The ecumenical delegation was sent to Uganda as "living letters" to express solidarity with churches in Uganda who are living within contexts of violence, to share the

common commitment to find creative new ways to overcome violence and to pray with the churches and the Ugandan peoples and to carry their concerns for prayers. Until 2010, several Living Letters visits will take place each year throughout the world within the context of the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) project, as a means of preparing for the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in 2011.

The plight of people displaced by war was the main topic and discussion took place with representatives of churches, state and civil society concerning the protection of refugees, with a specific focus on sexual violence and the vulnerability of children. Thankfully, Uganda has recently returned to relative stability after decades of military dictatorship and civil war. The government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that had infested northern Uganda for nearly two decades, signed a truce in August 2006 and a permanent ceasefire in February 2008 during talks in Juba, Sudan.

According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), more than half of the 1.8 million internally displaced persons in the north have now returned to their villages of origin or to transit sites closer to their homes. However, the UNHCR reports that some 3'000 widows and orphans

have nowhere to return to following the death of family heads during the 20-year war in the north or the sale of their land by relatives.

Christianity (including Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox) is in a majority in Uganda, some 89% of the population of 27 million, and the churches are very united and play a very important role toward bringing peace and reconciliation to the country, most especially on peace and justice issues. Naturally, the UJCC (United Joint Christian Church) members play a big role and work in close collaboration with the Uganda National Human Rights Commission as a member of the peace process team within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Many church leaders were among the first to call for immediate humanitarian intervention to help the thousands of IDPs in Uganda and thousands of refugees now fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. In addition, the urgency of the issue has inspired the collaboration of the different faiths in Uganda under the Uganda Inter-Religious Council which has enabled the different religious leaders to speak out in unity.

Uganda is now experiencing some long-awaited peace since the cessation of hostilities agreement coming out of the Juba Peace Talks of 2006. However, this peace is not without its 'post-conflict' challenges: the need for psycho social support for returnees (former rebels, young mothers and youth), the provision of basic need such as water, health facilities, schools, as well as reintegration difficulties experienced by former rebels who have returned to live within the same community that has been traumatised by atrocities committed by rebels. The ultimate hope of church leaders is that the affected people can embrace their aggressors through forgiveness for the sake of lasting peace in the affected area. One example used was that Jesus did not condemn the adulterous women and urged the community to accept the young mothers who have returned with children born out of acts of sexual assault.

Katakwi is a District located in Northern Uganda, about 400 km. from Kampala. There are about 2 million IDPs (internally displaced people) living in 56 camps along the Katakwi-Soroti border. Most of IDPs ran away from their villages for fear of rebel attacks from an ethnic group called the "Kalamajong". The conflict forced them to live in IDPs camps for nearly 3 decades. Most of the IDPs are now old men, women and children because most of the young men ran away from the killing from rebel and government forces (to be military). District officers in Katakwi admired the work of the UJCC and encouraged them to continue their work for peace and justice in Katakwi. Even government officers pointed out that many programmes which help to bring peace and spiritual support are initiated by the UJCC and churches in the area such as relief food for effected communities, committee meetings, water supply management and education. They reported that priority areas for the government in Katakwi are primary education, the reduction of poverty, and development of infra-structure. A woman officer shared with the team that domestic violence in the camps is very high and there is a resulting need for expert psychological support to handle the cases . HIV/AIDS is also spreading rapidly among IDPs when women sleep with other men because their husbands ran away.



We made a very meaningful and poignant visit to one camp and met with peoples who shared their stories and problems with us. Most of them would dearly like to go back to their villages – back home - but their land and cattle have been taken by the rebels. They have no place to stay, no land to farm (meaning no income with which to support their families and permit their children to go to school). Resettlement still presents many challenges such as the lack of basic need especially clean water and a secure place for young girls, lack of food and the resulting malnutrition. Sanitation in the camp is sub-standard and, as a result of HIV/AIDS, children are becoming orphans. Basically, life in the camp has no future, and people have no idea of how to support themselves; children drop-out of school or are unable to continue secondary school when their parents have no money to support them, children have no future and many young girls get pregnant after dropping-out. Life



in the camp does not even allow them to cultivate the land in order to feed their families and provide some well earned dignity.

I was most impressed with the unity of Christians in Uganda and their important role in working with their government to bring peace and reconciliation to the country; I was similarly impressed with the work of the UJCC on issues of social justice and interreligious dialogue, which is an excellent model, not only for other churches

in Africa, but also in Asia and especially in Thailand. It would be wonderful to somehow bring Ugandan church leaders to Thailand to benefit from their unique experience (usually we only have visits from Korea and Europe). The government officers (at both the local and national levels) with whom we met said that they received a great deal of support from the churches and felt that “*We are not alone*” A female officer in Katakwi and Ministry of Internal Affairs expressed her feeling that my “smile” brings hope and encouragement to her.

Conflict happens everywhere in the world. We have to learn to bring peace and reconciliation instead of fighting and using “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” reasoning. Churches and Christians have to continue their work to be the “Voice of the Voiceless” in their societies and communities. I am so grateful that the WCC included me in the team as an advocate for women and GEM member. The experience has inspired me to reaffirm the vow I have made to myself: to work in social justice issues for those who are oppressed – especially women, children and the marginalised.

Janejinda Pawadee
Thailand

FAITH MATTERS: Discovering community together

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” – Micah 6:8b



Have you ever been extremely excited about the vision, commitment and actions of a community? Could you, even when that community may seem so small and incapable of making any difference? This has been my journey this past year. I pastor a small community in Surrey Hills, Melbourne and have been proudly telling people a wonderful story of hope and possibility, about a small community who are facilitating great things to happen both at home and abroad – a community who truly cares and should not be underestimated for its size

or potential to impact on the lives of people in need. This is a window into our story. In June 2007 I commenced attending a network meeting of the World Council of Churches, Migration and Social Justice project, namely the Global Ecumenical Network on Migration (otherwise known as WCC GEM). I continue to serve in this capacity with Fr Maurizio Pettena CS who is a great support and companion. This was a new network established to start addressing one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century - Migration. This includes responding to the various and complex needs resulting from the global movement of people. This first gathering was in Nairobi, Kenya and began an incredible journey of discovery, learning, networking and sharing with faith representatives around the world who hold a common vision to respond to the needs of people who are displaced, particularly through natural disaster, poverty, war, terrorism, or climate change. Throughout 2008 I received invitations to attend four different initiatives with the World Council of Churches. Firstly, the WCC GEM reconvened in April in Beirut, Lebanon. Secondly, the WCC GEM network held its biannual regional meeting in September in Toronto, Canada. Thirdly, I was invited to join a Living Letters visit in October to Kampala, Uganda. This was a solidarity visit under the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) initiatives of the WCC. Lastly, in November I was invited to attend a WCC Global Advocacy meeting on migration at the United Nations in New York, USA. Now when I received these invitations the last thing I thought was that I would attend them all – especially given my pastoral commitments in Surrey Hills. But here was the surprise – the community gathered together its resources and vision for the opportunity that lie ahead and all four visits were made possible. What follows is a glimpse into the stories of hope, desperation, responsibility, but also of possibility. As I sit, reflect and write this article I do so in my comfortable and well resourced office, sitting at a computer, stomach content and comforted in the knowledge that I live with a relatively high level of security and safety. This image is everything that was not in many of the places I visited, particularly in Africa and Lebanon. In fact, shortly after I flew out of Beirut the airport was shut down and fighting broke out again throughout Lebanon – now a very surreal experience. In general my travels have burned live images of how the majority of the worlds population live; the growing inequality, the largely invisible cost of our wealth and how it is often borne by the developing world. A challenge for us, the church, which I wrestle with daily. The WCC GEM gathering in Beirut was focused around the theme, “The Changing Ecclesial Context: Impact of Migration on Living Together”. During this time we were immersed into the local



experiences of migration, particularly in the Middle East and across faith traditions, and affirmed that migration is a human concern, not a Muslim or Christian one, and therefore Christians and Muslims (in fact all people) must address them together. There was also a recognition of the changing shape of the church and the global reality; with an urgent call for intentionality and leadership in the areas of hospitality, defending human dignity, public witness and education, advocacy, and deepening interfaith collaboration for the common good. The WCC GEM regional meeting in Toronto focused on two themes: the exploitation of migrant workers, with case studies in Canada; and prioritising common advocacy issues in Canada, Latin America, USA, Caribbean, and the Pacific (which was also important preparation for the United Nations Advocacy meeting in November). One exciting dimension of this new network is its movement beyond “meeting” status. Through the past 18 months the network is now functioning more like a team with close relationships of trust and movement towards closer global collaboration. One heartening example from our Toronto gathering was the vulnerable sharing of our partners from Latin America – and how they were experiencing the disempowering reality of isolation in the ecumenical scene. As a result we were able to commence work towards establishing initiatives to overcome this through the building of solidarity and better networking. (This issue of solidarity I will return to later.)

The most profound of my trips in 2008 was the Living Letters visit to Uganda where we visited Kampala and refugee camps in the northern region, to strengthen the work of the churches for reconciliation and peace, and to be a symbol of the solidarity with churches around the world. Our team divided into two for visits to the refugee camps, one going to Gulu and the other to Katawki. In Gulu, Rev. Julius Peter Olugu, the priest of the Anglican Ongako parish, told the delegation "You could not pass here. It was too dangerous to walk. They could kill you. If they did not, they would abduct you. Other people's lips and limbs were cut off." Here and in other parts of northern Uganda, the



Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels have waged war since 1986, but things are changing. For example, Seventeen years ago, Irene Abonyo was held down to the ground and her lips and ears were viciously sliced off by rebels. But 71-year old Abonyo is in a forgiving mood. She attended a steamy, overcrowded town-hall meeting to see, on better terms this time, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). After a dialogue, she went over to shake the hand of a former LRA fighter. He held her hand, but refused to have his picture taken with the disfigured woman. "I will still forgive," Abonyo explained. "They are embarrassed of what they have done." Nearly 23,000 former rebel fighters have surrendered and returned to civilian lives in northern Uganda since the parliament passed an amnesty act in 2000. An initiative spearheaded by the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC). Which reminds me, it would also be amiss of me not to highlight and praise the proactive engagement and initiatives of the ecumenical body in Uganda, particularly through the UJCC. Through their initiatives they have been able to: implement election and media monitoring; provide platforms and resources for peace mediation; provide a strong public witness challenging myths that perpetuate the injustice and violence; provide alternative pathways and approaches for community and government; and establish trusted and valued relations with the government such that if UJCC does not submit comments on new bills of concern they are called on to make a special submissions prior to decisions being made. This was such an encouraging example of the effectual work of faith communities collaborating - the ecumenical movement. In Katawki, the major problem there is the relationship with the Karimojong people. For there is a certain group within Karamoja who resort to violence and killing as part of their livelihood – commonly known as cattle rustling or raiding. Some of the discourse includes comments like “If you don’t go and raid you’re not a real man...” and “Any Karimojong who is not armed is a woman!”. These activities

have led to the loss of many innocent lives, particularly men; and communities continue to be ravaged through rape, abductions and many other forms of violence. The Karimojong have long been marginalised since Uganda's colonisation and the complexities of the situation continue to present significant challenges for establishing peace. Meanwhile the church is present in both communities and is actively working towards peace and reconciliation through education and facilitating dialogue. When we visited the people of Orungo refugee camp they described life there as debilitating: “It has killed peoples spirit and creativity”, “we have lost our dignity and direction, and feel like we cannot support ourselves even though we have the potential”. While there, I was deeply moved, especially by their love and readiness to forgive and to work for reconciliation – even in the face of continuing violence and human rights abuse. During one community consultation in Katawki the community asked us to plead with the Ugandan government to first meet the needs of their perpetrators (eg. clean water, food, jobs, education, etc) even though they themselves do not have these things. They described how if the perpetrators had all their needs met, their need for violence would stop and they would then have peace and could rebuild their lives. A standout example of loving your enemy.



In both Gulu and Katawki the resounding voice of the suffering was “we are willing to forgive for the sake of peace”, “violence does not work”, “there is another way”. Representatives of the church reminded us how they have remained present throughout the many attacks, while government, NGO's and others fled. They said, “Our presence in times of conflict represents the faithfulness of God who remains with us, even in

suffering.” The communities spoke of our visit saying, “Your presence with us is a sign of the world caring” and “please come again” - another reminder of the importance of solidarity, particularly after they shared a real sense of global and national isolation. We saw and heard first hand of the churches role as peacemakers, advocates for restorative justice, in providing hope and hospitality, loving (feeding, clothing, etc) their enemy, capacity building, facilitating conflict resolution, and dialogue. Startling, prophetic words – given the current global context. Their stories shine like a beacon that the world would be all the better for seeing and hearing, in every context of conflict, discrimination or violence – even here in Australia. *Note: I am keen to organise an opportunity for Ugandans to come to Australia to share their stories and insights. I believe it holds great potential for being a platform to engage in and gain skills in peacemaking and reconciliation, to experience their stories of hope and to demonstrate solidarity. Please contact me if you would be interested in being part of this.*

“The degrading conditions in which refugees often have to live; the continuation over long periods of situations that are barely tolerable in emergencies or for a brief time of transit; the fact that displaced persons are obliged to remain for years in settlement camps: these are the measure of the urgent need for a just solution to the underlying causes of the problem..... My appeal is for greater international solidarity and the political will to meet this challenge. I plead with all who are sincerely working for justice and peace not to lose heart. I appeal to political leaders to implement agreements already arrived at, and to go forward towards the peace for which all reasonable men and women yearn, to the justice to which they have an inalienable right.”

Pope Jean Paul II

In wrapping up, I have to say that 2008 was a very challenging but rewarding year. My family, small faith community in Surrey Hills and ecumenical friends all enabled me to become immersed in large-scale issues that seriously impact on the lives of literally millions of individuals. Some of these included: human trafficking (modern day slavery \$32billion/yr industry involving ~27 million people); skilled migration (draining skilled workers

from already under resourced developing countries); exploitation of temporary migrant workers; forced migration of refugees and displaced persons (Currently at 163 million people, currently projected to reach 1 billion people by 2050 through ongoing conflicts, disaster and the impacts of climate change – in particular addressing issues of protection, settlement, food, security, shelter, health care and education); living with diversity (engaging issues of integration, discrimination, resulting violence and social cohesion), etc. All with many more stories to tell Today, I have never been so proud to be a part of Gods collective – the ecumenical church. My ecumenical involvement last year (especially in Uganda) has helped cast a vision of the church at its best and leaves me here in Australia with great responsibility. As people of faith are we ready to stand, to speak truth, to respond, and to lead. Can we hear the eternal cry of God, calling for all Gods people to stand, live, work and play together? The power of being one, of collective discernment and action is unsurpassed. Together we can open eyes, speak the truth and create a world of peacemakers – ushering in the vision of the Kingdom of God. Are you part of a faith community who are facilitating great things to happen both at home and abroad – a community who truly cares and should not be underestimated for its potential to impact on the lives of people in need? I would love to hear your stories. Or if you would like to chat or hear more about any of my visits or work please contact me. I am happy to arrange discussions, presentations or provide further information on request. Towards peace, justice and the realisation of the Kingdom of God.

Rev Keith Briant
Australia

Living Letters – Bringing Hope to People in Despair

From October 27 to November 2, 2009, Timotheus Kamaboakai, Young Professional at the World Alliance of YMCAs, was part of a delegation of the World Council of Churches to Uganda. The team visit took place under the program 'Living Letters' and comprised 8 people with experience in peace building and migration issues from all around the world. The visit to Uganda was hosted by the Ugandan Joint Christian Council under the theme: 'Transitional Justice – the Role of the Church.'

The visiting delegation met with government officials, religious and community leaders and made field visits to two of the areas affected by the conflict in Uganda: Gulu, in northern Uganda and Katakwi in northeastern Uganda. During these field visits, the group had the opportunity to meet with religious and community leaders, students, internally displaced people and government representatives from the areas.

Timotheus, who was the youth representative in the delegation noted,

"It was a great opportunity to understand how the conflict in Uganda is affecting the daily lives of the people. Coming out of the experience of conflict in my country, Liberia, I saw a lot of things in common that we have experienced. This also gave me the honour to share with Church and community leaders in Uganda on how we addressed some of the challenges in Liberia so that they can learn from our experience.

When I talked to some children and young people, they sounded frustrated about the situation that they are facing and expressed that it was difficult for them to plan for the future because of the uncertainties surrounding them. As a young man growing up during the Liberian war, I could feel what they were going through and could only offer them hope that things would get better one day. I feel that the message of hope is important in times of despair, because when hope is alive, people have something to hold on to while waiting for change, but if there is no hope, it is like surrendering your spirit to whatever comes your way. This was my main message to the young people, the church leaders and people that we met."

Speaking at a public forum, Timotheus also shared some of his experiences based on the Liberian conflict on crucial issues like transitional justice mechanisms, war crimes tribunal or truth and reconciliation commission, reintegration of ex-combatants into the society, and community based peace building programs, among others. He also stressed that now that a peace deal is being brokered in Uganda, the church and civil society leaders should do all they can to make it work and invest in post-conflict peace building initiatives to prevent another crisis; noting that whenever a peace deal fails, the aftermath is worse.

The Living Letters Visits are small teams of 5-8 people organized by the World Council of Churches to visit countries experiencing some form of violence. Through interaction with church leaders, government and civil society, we gain more insight about the many issues that arise out of situations of conflict and how churches and Christians around the world could help address those.

Timotheus Kamaboakai

Liberia

“God’s people are not meant to be camped, caged, warehoused, imprisoned nor confined” That is why God put them in a garden: migrants, refugees, and the internally displaced are a people God made in his image; part of that image is the freedom of movement.

(...)

2008 Living letters to Uganda

It had been six years since I had been in a refugee or Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) camp; little was I prepared for this experience. I went convinced that surely something had changed. What I found was different. It was still a camp.

We met with people who had lost hope, those whose spirits were broken. We met with more than eighty school children and asked them, as one does with children, what their dreams were. Sadly, they had none. They said “we can only achieve our dreams if we get educated and we know that our parents will not be able to pay for our education, so we have no dreams”.

High alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity; the HIV infection rate was 16% in the camp as compared to 6% for the rest of Uganda. Violence (especially that visited upon child mothers), boredom, broken families, low social morals – these are all accusations that we heard. Does it sound familiar? I heard the same when I visited the First Nations in Canada and in the USA. The same is said of migrant workers in labour camps in the Gulf States, in Canada, and was said of the labour camps in South Africa during the apartheid era. The same is said about the indigenous people of Australia and New Zealand. What is the similarity? The people are blamed; the Africans, the indigenous people, accused of have low moral standards, a tendency to be alcoholic, and basically through their own fault. However, let us ask our selves what is the common denominator among all these groups of people? Could it be that they were moved from the garden and put in a specified place and confined to be taught how to be taken care of?

What happens to people when they are camped, warehoused or confined? The internally displaced people in Uganda, for example, are first and foremost in their own country but they are not called Ugandans, but rather IDP’s - they have lost their national identity. Secondly, they are not in their home area so they are not called the Soroti people, but IDP. Thirdly, they are not called by their home, village or family name of their residence, it is simply IDP camp. Fourth, they are not individuals; they are a homogenous group, easily defined, controlled and understood. They are a community beyond differences, families, cultures, beliefs and personalities. Does this reflect any of Gods purpose for his creation? Does this reflect any of the Christian principals of human dignity and Gods image? Was it by accident that God gives us an identity as individuals, members of a family, society, community, country, to world levels? Why has so little changed in six years? Why has it remained a camp? Why do I feel so sad, so helpless, so unable to help? All they ask of us is for us to “Urge the government to resettle us, we want to GO BACK HOME, we want to be human again”. Why is this so difficult, given that these people are in their own country, and even in their own province?

In the middle of the IDP camp there was a church made from mud and smeared with cow dung; this church is where we would meet. But for me that room put a human face on the church brought a sense of hope to all of us present. It reminded us that, God has not forgotten his people; they still will get their freedom of movement in an open garden as it was in the beginning.

The Global Ecumenical Network on Migration keeps me connected to the reality, from visiting the refugees in Nairobi in 2007, to the Middle East migrant churches and labour camps in the United Arab Emirates, to the migrant workers in Canada. To us as a group sitting around a table discussing migrant issues, it all says we are about people. GEM members are as at home in a camp, in Africa or the Middle East as they are in a meeting room in Geneva, Canada or the USA, with UN, NGOs and government representatives. The church is about people, about welcoming the stranger among us and within us. That is what I find so impacting about the GEM – a group of people who see, feel and relate to the issues we discuss and act upon, with empathy. They open a window to their hearts and talk and share personal experiences that ensure that discussion on the changing ecclesial landscape and migrants are rooted in reality.



We all accept that we learn from every situation. The group of people which comprises the GEM has such outstanding conceptual abilities that even I, though not a theologian, have been known to have instances of subtle and original thinking about the theology of migration, pastoral care and welcoming the stranger. At the WCC Migration and Social Justice Programme all we do is facilitate a process that brings all these qualities to bear on the work we do as GEM and hopefully, globally through the network membership's own work. Even though the

WCC project on migration has a small staff, the GEM has increased our capacity tremendously and we feel represented regionally and globally. From representing and participating in meetings to hosting meetings, studies, public hearings and planning field visit to individual initiatives that support and promote the same cause, the GEM has made it possible to share ownership and build partnerships. We have not reached the peak yet, but we as a group are willing to work towards that. The GEM makes staff at the WCC feel supported and held in solidarity through efforts toward building an understanding of the changing ecclesial landscape and anchoring the principle of human dignity in Christian ethics.

The GEM has helped me trust enough, forgive and want to believe in humanity again.

My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness. All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse. To the discerning all of them are right; they are faultless to those who have knowledge. Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Proverbs 8 7:11

*Sydia Nduna
Zambia (WCC staff)*

ANNEX 2

Personal stories of two people interviewed by Timotheus Kamaboakai, Liberian member of the Living Letters team, at the IDP camp in Katakwi

Israel Icumar

Israel Icumar is 38 years old was born in Amukurat Village. He is one of 9 children and his father was a teacher. 25 years ago, when Israel was only 13 years old, his family had to flee their village because of the neighbouring Karamoja tribe. For about 30 years now, the Karamojongs have been raiding their neighbouring towns and villages of cattle, sometimes killing people and destroying homes in the process. As a result, many families, like Akude's had to escape their lands and seek refuge in camps, where they can be far from the Karamojongs and under the protection of government forces.

Israel and his family now live in the Nyariam internally displaced camp in Katakwi district, about 400 km northeast of Kampala, Uganda. During this time, most of his siblings have died due to hunger and illness. His parents are old, so he does small gardening to grow root crops for food, but this is usually not enough to feed the family.

He recounted that during his stay in the camp, there has been a moral degeneration among the people and they have lost the dignity of life. "There are lots of rapes, poor sexual behaviors and teenage pregnancies and this has led to the rise in HIV in the camp," Israel said. "In the camp, there is food shortage, malnutrition of people, and lots of orphans. The situation in the camp has made people to feel lost and they can no longer be creative or look into the future."

Israel is happy about the relative peace and the prospect of people returning to their homes, but he is also concerned that health services are not adequate and the hospitals are far away, with no means of transport nearby. He feels that many people will stay in the camps for a longer time because of fear and sometimes that's the only place they can access help from aid agencies. Israel noted: "There is no source of safe water and recent flooding in the areas have affected the possibility of constructing homes and agricultural activities. However, I am happy that I will be returning to my homeland after 25 years in a displaced camp. When I get back, I will begin agricultural activities and would hope for aid agencies to conduct education for us on modern farming methods that would boost agricultural production and encourage more people to leave the camps."

On the Living Letters visit, Israel feels that the delegation is representative of God, who have come to provide inspiration and faith for the people. "When we see all of you here from many miles across the world, we know that we are not alone and that people are praying for us. Please be our voice to the world. We have suffered enough. We want peace and we want to resettle. We have forgiven those who hurt us and want to have a better life," Israel concluded.

The Living Letters Visits are small teams of 5-8 people organized by the World Council of Churches to visit countries experiencing some forms of violence. Through interaction with church leaders, government and civil society, Living Letters gain more insight about the situation of conflict in a particular country and share some experiences from other countries that have experienced some forms of violence in the past as a way of giving hope to the country visited.

It is for people like Israel that the WCC Living Letters program was established. It serves as a medium to bring hope, peace and smiles to people in such situations as a way extending the love of Jesus Christ to those in difficult circumstances.

Akude Anna Grace

17 year old Akude Anna Grace was born and lives in the Nyariam internally displaced camp, in Katakwi District about 400km north-east of Kampala, Uganda. About 20 years ago, her parents fled their town because of the neighboring Karamoja tribe. For about 30 years now, the Karamojongs have been raiding their neighboring towns and villages of cattle, sometimes killing people and destroying homes in the process. As a result, many families, like Akude's had to escape their lands and seek refuge in camps, where they can be far from the karamojongs and under the protection of government forces.

Akude is one of 8 children in the family and her parents are old, so they can neither do farming or engage in anything to help the family. She is in the 7th grade and hopes to be a nurse in the future to help other people.

In the Nyariam displaced camp, many girls drop from school due to teenage pregnancy and sometimes lack of money to continue their school. "Due to the level of poverty and hunger, many parents encourage their children to find men who are working. This push some of the girls to go after aid workers, soldiers and other working people so that they can have money to support their families," Akude said, "This is causing high rates of teenage pregnancies, and HIV."

She also fears that many children in the camps do not have a dream of what they want to be in the future because they don't know if they will even complete secondary education. Many of them wish they would have the opportunity to return to their homes and get educated.

Akude is happy for the visit of the Living Letters Delegation from the World Council of Churches and calling on the church worldwide to continue praying for the children of Uganda, especially those in displaced camp. "When we see people from around the world coming to visit us, it gives us hope that things will get better and there are other people who care about us," Akude concluded.

The Living Letters Visits are small teams of 5-8 people organized by the World Council of Churches to visit countries experiencing some forms of violence. Through interaction with church leaders, government and civil society, Living Letters gain more insight about the situation of conflict in a particular country and share some experiences from other countries that have experienced some forms of violence in the past as a way of giving hope to the country visited.

It is for young girls like Akude that the WCC Living Letters program was established. It serves as a medium to bring hope, peace and smiles to people in such situations as a way of extending the love of Jesus Christ to those in difficult circumstances.