

GULU, Uganda -- Sitting in the main town in war-riddled northern Uganda, you get the feeling you are not in the middle of a conventional peace process -- not when two local women have just been abducted by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and had their hands chopped off in the name of divine retribution. You know something evil lurks just out of sight when you see thousands of children streaming into town every evening seeking refuge from abduction by the LRA.

And yet you are sure that history is somehow being made when the lead mediator in the process turns out to be a dynamic Ugandan woman who is shunning her comfortable office at the World Bank headquarters and risking her life to bring peace to the long-suffering people of northern Uganda. Her name is Betty Bigombe

This country may have its best chance for peace in 18 years -- a period marked by brutal warfare that has displaced 1.6 million people and sparked the first investigation into crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court (ICC). But the peace process is in trouble and needs a high-risk, high-reward gamble to move it forward.

The actions of the LRA's leader, Joseph Kony, will be crucial Kony seeks revenge for past transgressions the government committed against northerners -- literally an eye for an eye He attacks civilian targets within his reach because he believes he is instructed by God to punish anyone who collaborates with the government.

For all the havoc Kony has wrought, his insurgency is on the ropes. The Ugandan military has become more effective, and the government of Sudan, after years of providing support, has cut most of its links to the LRA But the LRA has a track record of coming back from near oblivion, and premature pronouncements of its defeat could prove deadly. Massacres over the past couple of weeks, in which hoes and machetes have been the sadistic tools of death, are reminiscent of the tactics used in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

In a country whose post-colonial history has been marred by extreme sectarian violence and some of the most murderous dictators in Africa, including the psychotic Idi Amin, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has demonstrated ways to bring conflict to an end other than through violence alone. Negotiations would isolate hard-liners and provide an exit strategy for the LRA

The window of opportunity for a peace settlement will not be open long. The U.S. role is crucial. Its support for Ugandan military efforts has led many Ugandans to believe that the United States does not support a peaceful resolution... Assigning a senior diplomat from Washington to support the peace effort would provide a boost to the negotiating process, giving the LRA commanders confidence that if they did lay down their weapons they wouldn't walk straight into an ambush.

The next month will be decisive and requires a major diplomatic gambit. Bigombe, as lead mediator, must go to the source in neighboring southern Sudan and meet with LRA leader

Kony. Once there, she should present a comprehensive settlement, rather than the current cease-fire proposal, for which the necessary levels of good faith and confidence simply do not exist. The settlement involves security and livelihood guarantees for the LRA. Getting the meeting requires the direct help of the Sudanese regime, which has provided a lifeline to Kony for the past decade. The United States and others would need to lean hard on Sudan to influence it to act.

Without such a diplomatic gambit and increased international support, the process could crumble

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32735-2005Apr6.html>