

UGANDA'S UNDER-REPORTED WAR

FOR ALMOST TWO DECADES THE WAR IN NORTHERN UGANDA HAS RECEIVED SCANT ATTENTION IN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY

by Karen Williams



UN Photo/Marie Frechon

Journalists in northern Uganda have, for 20 years, been telling the stories of their own lives to their communities. The northern war has been brutal and it has sporadically also affected other parts of the country and was twinned with the southern Sudanese civil war.

Yet for almost two decades the northern war has received scant attention in the rest of the country. Not surprising when you consider that before President Yoweri Museveni took power in the mid-80s, the army and political power (and abuses) had been concentrated in northern hands.

But there has been relative peace in northern Uganda for the past 18 months – bolstered by peace talks between the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Kampala government, as well as the knock-on effect of arrest warrants for the LRA leadership issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

These developments have not only made the north much safer to move around in, but have also caught the interest of the rest of the country and the rest of the world, as well.

For 20 years, the northern war has been under-

reported and forgotten. But, now with more media attention on it, it's being reported as a running news story (which it also is) and, at other times, as a place of "horror" (thereby erasing the easily-understood political elements of the war).

But the challenge for journalists – both Ugandan and international – is being able to tell a complex story well – as well as *wanting* to tell that story in all its aspects, rather than providing an easy narrative of an "African bush war". (And it's not only Western journalists who tell clichéd stories about Africa.)

A large part of the challenge is framing the story.

The sudden interest in the northern Ugandan story – both to the rest of Uganda, as well as to the outside world – has translated into stories that are event-driven, as well as framed by the people who are willing to talk and are accessible – the government.

It is easy to tell hard news stories about the war, as well as surface stories where great atrocities have been committed. The war, conducted mostly by abducted child soldiers and featuring

massive sexual violations of women and physical mutilation of victims, provides easy copy and ready images.

Government has also consistently tried to characterise the LRA as an aberration that needs to be dealt with militarily. Yet at the same time, a political agenda is served when the LRA leader is characterised as a madman who is driven by a fundamentalist need to impose the Biblical 10 commandments on the country. If the LRA are seen as crazy, not understandable and have ridiculous demands, this washes away any possibility that there might be legitimate political grievances across the north – and not necessarily represented by the LRA.

But it's in the journalistic relationship between journalism and "peace" that some of the greatest challenges take place. And these challenges might not lead to an easy conclusion, or a tidy resolution at all.

It's difficult to tell a story of a situation where people are simultaneously victims and perpetrators (as child soldiers and abducted children forced to fight, are). It's hard to tell a story where more than a million people have been displaced across the north, and countless children abducted – often more than once.

This includes the possibilities that journalists reporting from the north were themselves abducted as children or lost family members to army and LRA attacks. And it's difficult to tell stories about politics when the humanitarian need is so apparent and so great, victims are everywhere, with child mothers and mutilated people living in displacement camps.

Also, how do you tell a story about conflict – including longstanding, unresolved, political conflicts between north and south – and not suppress the real issues, the causes of the conflict and the fact that conflict is a great catalyst for change, by working under the rubric of "peace reporting". (The danger is always in trying to whitewash real, deep issues, in the wish to provide easy answers.)

With its vibrant, extensive and stable media scene, getting information out to the Ugandan population is not a problem. At the same time, getting hold of basic information in the north is not too difficult. The army have also given out basic information on its "major operations" in the area, and have often taken Kampala journalists into southern Sudan (where Uganda supported the southern Sudanese former rebels and the LRA were armed by Khartoum in a proxy war) and to recent talks with the LRA. Similarly, NGOs and the humanitarian community abound in the north.

But what will happen to journalists who ask the bigger questions?

How do you question the veracity of the army's information, or raise the thorny issue of

their “successful” operations (killing of rebels on the battlefield is actually the killing of abducted children who are forced to fight)?

How do you question the reasons why people at the beginning were very against the indictments issued by the ICC? How do you raise the question of the complicity of the humanitarian movement in the war in their providing food and basic services to people who were forcibly displaced and herded into camps by the government – and thereby enabled the government to continue its policy of, what northerners see as, government hostility towards the north? (Not that this denotes northern support for the LRA – but rather a feeling of being under attack from both sides.)

When gender violence is rife – perpetrated by the LRA, the army and local communities – how do journalists tell complex stories on the phenomenon of this violence being so high in the north and in displaced camps – and not tell a very safe story on “it’s bad to beat your wife” (which many donors and NGOs would fund), but rather raising questions on impoverishment, army violence, the violence that comes with being politically marginalised, massive unemployment and alcoholism, and how that has a relationship with violence against women and children.

It’s not only the challenge of raising these issues, but knowing that you will be denied access and information from people who don’t like the line you are taking.

Some intrepid journalists have contacts with the LRA and know the group’s structure. This has made it easier to get information and to occasionally use them as sources in stories. Journalists are also increasingly sourcing political analysts and think tanks who raise complex issues.

Journalists living in the smaller towns also have access to victims on the frontline. But with

misinformation, accusations of subterfuge and sometimes not being able to verify information that you get off-the-record, much of the most interesting and complex rumours and half-information about the north can never be reported on and never stands up to be tested.

But besides access, peace has also brought about a number of ethical challenges. Child soldiers have mostly returned to their communities and are now easier to interview. But, how do journalists tell stories of great trauma of perpetrators and victims (and often the abducted children have been victims as well as a perpetrators) – without portraying the subject as helpless or an aberration – and still giving that subject dignity?

What ethical considerations do you have to consider when talking to child mothers: abducted girls who became pregnant at LRA bases (more often than not through sexual coercion), and might be the partners of top commanders (who themselves might have been abducted as children)?

How do you get a very interesting story, but still respect the parameters of good journalism practice and ethics?

Informed consent means that journalists have to work extra hard in providing options to people they’re interviewing, as well as really talking through the implications around issues of identifying them, providing information, detailing their time in captivity. It also means that journalists working on the ground often work very hard to provide a space of dignity for their subjects – not by going the extra mile, but by observing the basic journalistic principles of fairness and balance, and giving everybody the same due consideration: rich or poor.

The last anomaly that Ugandan journalists currently face is that they are starting to talk about

issues of transitional justice in a place where there is no real political transition, ie the government is not changing. The relative peace recently in the north has meant that there have also been calls for the set-up of a truth commission. Unlike the ICC indictments, civil society believes this will be a chance to get to the root causes of the northern war (as well as the myriad other armed conflicts in Uganda’s recent history), and investigate the behaviour and culpability of a range of actors in the conflict – including that of government and army.

The government has tried to limit the debate to the arrest and prosecution of the LRA leadership. And, since ordinary people really only get to know about the debates on transitional justice through the media – how can the media tell an in-depth story about the issues at hand, when they have little information on the justice debates being raised.

A few international organisations have started training journalists on transitional justice, but it’s only when Ugandans really own the debate – and are able to exchange views through the media – that they will really start talking on what real change can mean for the country.

Photograph from United Nations Photo
<http://www.unmultimedia.org/photo>