

Acholi

Profile

Estimated at 1.1 million, or 4.8 per cent of the population (2002 census) the Acholi live in Northern Uganda, in the districts Kitgum, Pader and Gulu. They are speakers of Western Nilotic languages, and are traditionally farmers.

Historical context

The Acholi have played a pivotal role in the turbulent post-independence era. Milton Obote the independence leader, relied heavily on the support of his fellow Luo-speakers - Acholi and Langi - in government. Similarly, General Okello Lutwa who toppled the Obote II regime, was an Acholi. But when Idi Amin over-threw Obote's first spell in power, and when Yoweri Museveni ousted Okello, the Acholi paid heavily for their allegiances. Under Amin's brutal regime, an estimated 300,000 died - many of them Acholi. Similarly, when Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) took power in 1986, there were revenge killings and looting of livestock in the North of the country. In 1986 Alice Lakwena's charismatic Holy Spirit Movement mounted an insurgency in the Acholi region. This has continued in various guises ever since. From the Holy Spirit Movement, the notorious Lord's Resistance Army, led by Acholi Joseph Kony, emerged. His stated political aims are to rule Uganda according to the Biblical Ten Commandments. The cult-like militia has abducted an estimated 25,000 children over the years, forcing them to commit heinous atrocities against civilians. In response, Museveni's government forced 1.4 to 1.9 million civilians into camps where they ostensibly were to be protected by the Ugandan army. Yet the northerners living in these squalid camps were prone to attack by the LRA and the national army alike, and unable to raise their own food. The LRA received much of its financial, logistical and military support from the Khartoum government in neighbouring Sudan. With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan in 2005, and the establishment of the ex-rebel Government of South Sudan in territory in which the LRA once operated freely, those lines of support have been substantially weakened, if not severed altogether. In 2005, the new International Criminal Court in The Hague issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and other top LRA commanders. The combination of the two events, have put pressure on the LRA to lay down its arms.

Current issues

Peace negotiations to end the long-running rebellion by the Lord's Resistance Army continued, while security in the north improved through 2007. The 20-year civil war has devastated the lives - and livelihoods - of the Acholi people of the north. But by September 2007, in a tangible sign of progress, the first refugee camps began to close, as families finally began to return home. In October 2007, for the first time in 20 years, two commanders of the LRA flew into Entebbe to consult on the ongoing peace talks.

At the height of the insurgency, some 1.8 million people were living in camps in the north. While the peace process holds out the prospect of ending the marginalization of the Acholi, Oxfam reported in September 2007 that many Acholi communities were concerned that the peace was fragile and would quickly unravel in the absence of a signed peace deal.