

Uganda reinstates key tool to boost defections from the Lord's Resistance Army

In an unexpected move late last week, the Ugandan government reinstated a critical tool for combating the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA: amnesty for members of the LRA not indicted by the International Criminal Court, or ICC. During a debate in Uganda's parliament, outgoing Ugandan Minister for Internal Affairs Hilary Oniek ordered the reinstatement of Part II of Uganda's Amnesty Act, which was passed in 2000 following a major advocacy campaign by religious, traditional, and other local leaders from northern Uganda. The Amnesty Act has been one of the foremost factors in weakening the LRA. It allows for nonindicted members of the LRA to return home safely, countering Joseph Kony's rumors that abducted fighters will be killed if they run away from the LRA. Northern Ugandan leaders predictably welcomed the news warmly this week.

Part II of the act, which provides amnesty for Ugandan rebels once they denounce the rebellion and lay down their arms, was scrapped last year, mainly due to external pressure from U.N. organizations and internal pressure from human rights organizations such as the Justice Law and Order Sector. Their main aversion to the act has been that it promotes impunity and thus undermines human rights. While this is partly true, they fail to recognize that LRA rebels were abducted at a young age and forced to commit atrocities against their own will. Therefore, transitional justice must form a critical part of reintegrating former LRA fighters not indicted by the ICC.

The Enough Project has advocated repeatedly for a reinstatement of the act because it is a crucial tool to increase defections from the LRA and bring a peaceful end to the conflict. We have been working closely with a broad-based Ugandan coalition of civil-society organizations, with members such as the Refugee Law Project, Justice and Reconciliation Project, Human Rights Focus, and religious and cultural leaders; as well as our U.S.-based partners, Resolve and Invisible Children; through statements, press releases, and meetings with Ugandan Parliamentarians; and acclaimed international lawyers with experience from the Juba Peace negotiations provided vital technical legal advice.

In the final days leading up to the reinstatement of Part II of Uganda's Amnesty Act, a timely visit by U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues Stephen Rapp may have

helped give the act the final push it needed. This is a scholarly example of how civil-society pressure, advocacy, and sound arguments can actually change political decisions and bring homegrown peaceful solutions to violent conflicts.

Going forward, the U.S. government should work with the Ugandan government to fully exploit the provisions in the act and issue amnesty cards to the LRA rebels that have escaped over the past year. Furthermore, the Ugandan government Amnesty Commission should be provided sufficient funds to continue the long-term reintegration of former rebels, a massive task that has completely stalled due to a lack of resources.