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Casting election ballots to address victimhood

GULU— The 2011 Ugandan elections need candidates and parties who commit themselves to sustainable peace in Uganda. This requires not only forward-looking planning and development, but also stakeholders who address past abuses and feelings of injustice. Today, the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) officially launches an advocacy campaign titled, “Casting the Ballot to Address Victimhood: A Call to Put Transitional Justice on the Election Agenda,” to engage war-affected communities and candidates into bringing transitional justice (TJ) issues to the forefront of the elections.

As Uganda enters election season, we see an immense opportunity for war-affected communities to influence the direction that the justice and reconciliation debate takes in this country, whilst informing aspiring politicians of the political and social value of prioritizing transitional justice. Internationally, transitional justice, or TJ, is increasingly recognized as an important tool in resolving post-conflict instability. However, in many circles, especially among politicians and policy-makers, TJ still remains underestimated and largely misunderstood. In a country like Uganda, with a history of violence, citizens and leaders informed of the merits of TJ mechanisms are vital to healing the wounds of war and ensuring the sustainability of peace—locally, regionally, and nationally.

In order to ensure that victim’s voices and interests are at the forefront of contestants’ minds in the upcoming elections, transitional justice must be prioritized on the election agenda. War-affected communities can prioritize TJ by using their votes wisely and voting only for candidates and parties who address and acknowledge their concerns.

According to the communities in which we work, votes this election should be in favour of contestants and parties who commit to:

- 1. Accountability for past abuses:** That they support a fair, transparent and balanced national transitional justice system that includes judicial investigations and prosecutions and traditional justice mechanisms, so those responsible for human rights violations are held accountable.
- 2. National reconciliation through truth-telling:** That they support provisions for truth-telling both at the national and community-levels, so that forgiveness, healing and reconciliation can take place in Uganda.
- 3. Reparations for war victims:** That they support a national reparations policy to fairly administer reparations to war victims in Uganda. There is need for coordination of all compensation efforts to ensure that reparations schemes across the country are consistent and that victims are consulted throughout the process.
- 4. Memorialization:** That they commit to undertake symbolic measures to promote remembrance, healing and closure nationally and among their constituencies.

5. **Gender justice:** That they support efforts that challenge impunity for sexual and gender-based violence and ensure women and children's equal access to redress of human rights violations.
6. **Structural reforms:** That they support efforts that transform state institutions from instruments of repression and corruption to instruments of public service delivery and integrity, with a transparent and independent military, police and judiciary.

This strategy to encourage voters to hold candidates accountable matches our general approach to community involvement: the most successful activities will engage and empower communities to act for themselves. By reminding voters to ask their candidates where TJ is in their manifestos and then offering six general action points to guide their advocacy, we frame these communities' arguments into a unifying demand that provides strength in numbers.

Throughout the region, and unfortunately much of the world, there is still a profound lack of understanding of how transitional justice can be effectively implemented. But by mobilizing war-affected communities to demand their grievances be addressed and acknowledged, we are providing communities and the country at large a space for reflection, debate, and analysis of the issues.

Knowledge on effective (and ineffective) TJ measures in these complex environments can greatly combat prevailing cycles of violence and contribute to lasting, sustainable peace in northern Uganda and elsewhere. Putting TJ on the election agenda is crucial to prioritizing the issues, meeting victims' and survivors' needs, and constructively ending impunity for past abuses and moving forward as a peaceful Uganda.

For more information on this campaign, email info@justiceandreconciliation.com or call Lindsay McClain, Communications Officer, at +256 (0)471433008. Or, visit us on the web at www.justiceandreconciliation.com.

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ABOUT JRP

The Justice and Reconciliation Project promotes locally sensitive and sustainable peace in Africa's Great Lakes region by focusing on the active involvement of grassroots communities in local-level transitional justice. Formerly a partnership of the Gulu District NGO Forum and the Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, Canada, JRP has played a key role in transitional justice in Uganda since 2005, through seeking to understand and explain the interests, needs, concerns and views of the communities affected by war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and Government of Uganda (GOU). JRP became an independent NGO in 2010 with support from the Royal Norwegian Embassy, Kampala.