



Working for justice & reconciliation with grassroots communities

Official Remarks

Launch Ceremony and Reception

Friday, July 23, 2010

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Introduction

To celebrate JRP becoming an independent NGO and to officially launch the new organisation, we hosted a ceremony and reception on July 23 at our offices in Gulu's Senior Quarters. The event -- which was attended by the Ambassador of Norway, H.E. Bjørg S. Leite, Hon. Norbert Mao, members of the community, civil society and government representatives, cultural leaders, and many more-- was lively and eventful. Bwola dancers from Ker Kwaro Acholi kicked off the event by performing Acholi traditional dances. Brief remarks were made by:

- Mr. Lino Ogora, Master of Ceremonies
- Mr. Boniface Ojok, Programme Coordinator
- Mr. Michael Otim, Board Chairman
- H.E. Bjørg S. Leite, Ambassador of Norway, Guest of Honor
- Mr. Geoffrey Okello, Gulu District NGO Forum
- Dr. Erin Baines, Liu Institute for Global Issues
- Delis Palacios, Adom in Quibdo, Chuco, Colombia
- Leyner Palacios, Cocomacia in Quibdo, Chuco, Colombia
- Hon. Justice Remmy Kasule, Resident Judge, High Court of Gulu
- Hon. Santa Oketta, Gulu District Secretary for Community Development, Labor, Gender and Children
- Hon. Norbert Mao, Gulu District LC V Chairman, Guest of Honor

Further enriching the evening, a poem to remember our sisters who died in captivity and a statement on women's justice was read by women from our partner project with the Liu Institute for Global Issues, Ododo wa. After reading the statement, the women's group Rwot Lakica performed a drama on women's justice.

The evening concluded with dinner and a reception and performances by northern artistes Jeff Korondo and Jahria Okwera from the initiative Music for Peace.

The event allowed us to celebrate our past accomplishments, whilst marking the start of this new era for the Project. We would like to thank everyone who attended for sharing the special day with us.

Remarks by Programme Coordinator, Mr. Ojok Boniface

The Chief Guest

Her Excellency Ambassador to Uganda

His Lordship, the Honorable Justice of the High court, Government officials, the LC 5 and DP president Norbert Mao, Representatives from the Acholi Royal Palace, Development Partners, our distinguished visitors all the way from Colombia and University of British Columbia, Civil society Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen in your various capacities.

Welcome to the Justice and Reconciliation Project; I am really honored to be given this opportunity to address the special gathering tonight. Our distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen as we celebrate this occasion, I wish everyone of us gathered here today to reflect on how far we have come from; Over two decades have passed and we are proud to be here inaugurating a struggle that many of us should embrace; a struggle for victims who have lost loved ones during this conflict; a struggle for the plight of those abducted, tortured and turned against their own communities; a struggle for the young girls who were taken out of school, forcefully turned wives, porters and slaves of commanders at tender age. Together with their children born in captivity, they now have to live with stigma and humiliation among their own communities; The struggle is also never simple for many of us who were just a little fortunate not to have been abducted but were forced to displacement camps where we lost all our cultural values and the traditional means of survival; we also recall the struggle of those children who could only find safe haven as night commuters in urban centers; We recall those tortured, butchered or maimed and today still recount every horror they went through.

And yet at the end of these all, not all hope was lost. For those of us still alive, 'Life itself is hope'. As we turn up in large numbers to inaugurate this day, it should be no surprise that JRP has pledged to begin a long journey that all of us here are part of. A journey not to the promised land, but a journey to sustainable peace. A peace that begun at Juba, and ended up in the various IDP camps. We argue that the silencing of the gun is not the time to rejoice! Sustainable peace goes a little step further. Sustainable peace means when people return to their homes, they can now live side by side with former enemies and eat from the same plate. Sustainable peace is when victims become victors seeing those who caused suffering to them go down on their knees and beg for pardon. A pardon that comes with apology, a truth telling process, compensation and reparation for loss and meaningful symbolic gestures. We also argue that this peace will be attained when northern Ugandans unite with the rest of nation to overcome the past and look to the future. A future which begins with all Ugandans collectively saying, 'never again' will our children and our children's children live to see what happened to us.

I wish to add that the question of justice and reconciliation that JRP hopes to confront is not a mere lip service. It was a big point of contention during the Juba peace process that began in 2006. Though the CPA wasn't signed, we applaud government commitment to adopt important elements of the agreement on accountability and reconciliation. We also applaud government commitment to rehabilitate northern Uganda, BUT let us not forget that the root causes of our conflict resonated from the lack of space to address the past grievances. The time is now and we are saying, 'it is never too late'... and as JRP we are here to make a contribution as facilitators of this process. We have worked with war affected communities for over five years and strongly believe victims feel a sense of both peace and justice. In Acholi for instance, they need the kind of justice that is locally owned; one that is critical to peace and social harmony; but also one that promotes holistic development and community reconciliation.

Since 2005, we have embraced a transitional justice agenda that seeks to understand and explain the needs and aspirations affected by the LRA war. Our work has been disseminated nationally and internationally informing landmark policy discourses on local mechanisms. Today, we are here not to celebrate these achievements but to inaugurate the hard task ahead of us. This task is most often difficult to achieve but JRP counts on all gathered here today.

At this juncture, allow me briefly introduce the work we do and staff we have so far recruited to move this project forward:

1. Documentation team: This department documents the experiences of communities who remain living testimonies of what happened to their lives and the lives of their loved ones over the past two decades. As an elder we interviewed once said, 'they crush us, but not our souls. Our souls will live forever to inspire young generations like you to demand for justice'. The purpose of this department is to erase the silence that the victims had been living in for the past many years of atrocities; promote preservation of history and memory as well as use this as a basis of acknowledgement of loss and promotion of healing and reconciliation.
2. Another form of documentation will take the form of storytelling; a project we call – 'Ododo wa': This department is summarized in the words of one survivor ... a formerly abducted girl who told us, 'I am happy I survived to tell my story'. Indeed today JRP is here to have their stories told.
3. Community mobilization: Unless victims are organized with a common voice and a clear agenda for justice, all our efforts as civil society is put to waste. This department will work with the victims to help identify what needs to be done to promote justice and reconciliation through dialogues, local workshops and training to equip them. This is to empower them to become their own advocates.
4. Research and Advocacy: In order to propel voices of the marginalized we shall always engage in action –oriented research. The results of these research shall be communicated at the national and international level. In carrying out this we always partner with JLOS, NUTJWG, UCICC, ICTJ, PILPG, RLP, IJR, LIGI, Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), ICC, local institutions such as Gulu University IPSS, institutions of religious and cultural leaders.
5. Information, Resource and Communication: In order to assist the project reach out to a larger audience, maximize its knowledge management, utilize ICT and its public relations we established a Communications branch;
6. Under this branch we are in the process of lobbying to obtain funds to establish a resource centre we shall call NUTJRC to facilitate public lectures and engagements.

With these few remarks, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, allow me thank you once again for listening to me and above all honoring our invitation to attend this launch. This means a lot for us and the future of justice for this country. Thank you!

Remarks by Board of Directors, Mr. Michael Otim, Chairman, JRP

The Chief Guest

Her Excellency, Norwegian Ambassador to Uganda

Government officials, Representatives of Development Partners, Representative of the Liu Institute for Global Issues, Visitors from Columbia, Civil society Representatives

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the JRP, I would like to formally welcome you to this important occasion when we formally launch the JRP as an Independent non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting community level transitional justice initiatives in Uganda. Am particularly delighted because its 5 years ago when JRP was started as a small project of a collaborative partnership between the Gulu District NGO Forum and the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia Canada to promote locally sensitive approaches for community healing, justice and reconciliation.

As many of you are aware, conflicts around the world and in particularly the conflict in northern Uganda has had negatives consequences for the vast majority of our people who were forced to flee their homes during the violence that left many dead, maimed and others still missing to date. While the guns have since fallen silent many questions still remain unanswered and perpetrators of some of these abuses and victims have to continue living side by side with no form of accountability or acknowledgement. Given the vast number of participants in the violence, there are various perceptions as to who is to blame for this tragedy hence complicating the pursuit of justice and reconciliation in northern Uganda.

While the peace process between the LRA and the GoU in Juba that ended in 2008 was inconclusive, its important that stakeholders remain engaged in fostering peaceful co-existence through the conduct of justice and reconciliation initiative at all levels.

JRP's core goal seeks to contribute to the understanding of the needs of victims of gross human rights violations by giving them a voice in the design and implementation of local level transitional justice initiatives in Uganda. JRP does this through advocacy, research and empowering communities to take charge of their own destiny in the pursuit of justice for the victims.

JRP chose this path partly because most transitional justice processes around the world have mostly been top-down hence the need to involve local actors in the debate by providing them a voice so that they can effectively input in the decision-making processes that affect them. While the task of administering justice at local levels could potentially be a daunting, it is worth pursuing because of its legitimacy in communities where people are familiar with the processes and can make a major contribution in the attainment of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Community reconciliation process could arguably complement the work of formal mechanisms for perpetrators of lesser crimes when they accept guilt and victims and community members determine appropriate actions for restitution. JRP equally recognizes the fact that in the past, women have often been absent as decision makers in local processes and realize that they should be given an opportunity to exercise their rights especially in cases of gender crimes as in most instances women

are often reluctant to come forward to make accusations of different forms of sexual crimes committed against them.

JRP is uniquely placed in supporting efforts aimed at the quest for justice for the vast majority of victims in the northern Uganda conflict, since they offer expertise in implementing justice mechanisms, gathering information through documentation and well as mobilizing communities to participate in transitional justice processes.

Since GoU has committed to implement fully the agenda item 3 on accountability and reconciliation of the Juba accord, its important communities are adequately informed of the developments so that they can participate fully in the process.

As I conclude my remarks, I want to once again that in a very special way the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Uganda for their generous support to the JRP and we do hope that this continued partnership will be strengthened in the coming years as we support our community's access justice for past abuses.

Thank you.

Remarks by Guest of Honor, H.E. Bjørg S. Leite, Ambassador of Norway

I am very pleased to be invited to give a few remarks at the launch of the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP). The issue, as we all know, on transitional justice, the debate on peace, justice, and reconciliation, have become topics of crucial national importance to Uganda. Norway is committed to the peace process in northern Uganda and has provided over the last few years support for processes and projects aimed at sustainable peace and reconciliation both through the Government, through the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS), and civil society actors, notably JRP, Refugee Law Project, and others. We appreciate the need for stronger involvement in peace-building and reconciliation activities to inform and to complement the formal initiatives undertaken by the Government.

You play a crucial role in bridging the gap between the Government, the international community, and the people directly affected by the conflict, and in this context, especially the women and children.

Norway and other JLOS development partners provide support to the Government's transitional justice consultations, which are aimed at developing a policy framework for promoting reconciliation and the implementation of local accountability mechanisms. And, as I think you all know, these consultations are planned to commence in August this year. In our dialogue, we have emphasized to JLOS that such consultations must be inclusive, transparent, and should involve CSO actors such as yourself. This we think is one way to ensure a broader participation by the grassroots communities that have directly suffered from the conflict. We all know that northern Uganda has suffered a long and costly conflict and for many years people's lives have been driven by fear, by want, by insecurity. It will take sustained effort by different stakeholders including Government, civil society, and the international community to restore this area to peace and then develop it.

This trip for me to Gulu is very special in two ways. It is my last visit as Norway's Ambassador to Uganda, and I take the opportunity to say farewell to all of you present, as I will be returning to Norway in a few days. I will add that my first visit in Uganda outside Kampala when I arrived 4 ½ years ago was to Gulu. I came here to inaugurate the eye care centre of the Gulu hospital. At that time, you had night commuters all over Gulu and the situation was terrible. So when I come back today, I am so glad at what I have seen and heard. It is a Gulu at peace. Not even that uneasy peace that we saw a few years ago. It is green. It is raining. It looks very good. I hope this will continue.

And as I said before, it is going to take sustained effort to really restore the hope and the confidence of peaceful and prosperous times ahead in northern Uganda. But we live in hopeful times. And I am also confident that JRP, as we launch it today, will play a catalytic role in generating support for justice for national reconciliation and for sustainable peace all over Uganda. And I wish you the best in this endeavor.

Thank you.

Remarks by Liu Institute for Global Issues, *Dr. Erin Baines*

It was five years ago when Michael Otim and I sat down underneath a tree and wondered what we could do together. I am a researcher from the [University of British Columbia, Canada], and I wanted to make sure that we did something that was sustainable, some kind of project that reached out to the communities and involved them in the process of research that was also transformative.

And I think from that brief discussion and idea about concentrating on what do communities think about justice, how do they practice reconciliation in their day-to-day lives because it is the communities on the front lines of dealing with the aftermath of violence. They are the ones who are learning to live together again day by day. And as you can see from that simple idea, and by working with others who shared that vision that the communities were the most important and front and center, we have really grown to this beautiful institution that you see behind us, to all of you surrounding us supporting us. Today we see members of our community who are here, people we have worked with over the years who are out there, that we met during our first adventures into testing out community-based research, people who are living down in the communities, survivors.

And now they are here as well as advocates, speaking on their own behalf, making their own statements, advocating on behalf of other victim groups.

This is really a dream come true for myself, for my colleague Michael Otim, for all of us who began at the beginning when we used to drive bicycle 'boda bodas' from place to place. Before Gulu had the SUVs going around, it was us on the back of bicycle 'boda bodas' going from place to place trying to make things happen. Boniface Ojok, Ketty Anyeko, Lino [Ogora], we all remember those days, so this is a huge thrill to us.

Again we're so grateful for the Norwegians for making it happen, but to all of you for being here to celebrate it with us. We look forward to continuing for many years as this family grows larger and larger and larger. Thank you very much everyone.

Remarks Ms. Delis Palacios from the organization Adom in Choco, Colombia

Good afternoon, brothers and sisters.

From the Choco, we have come to say hello, to share with you all our history and friendship.

Today, we want to thank you for your hospitality and warmth. This is a good sign to build fraternity and a stronger path.

From the Choco, we have come to know your situation and see how we can build brotherhood ties.

Now that we are united, we cannot be set apart, and recording our memory, we will conquer our rights.

Our history and wisdom we would like to share so that violent acts do not happen again.

African brothers, we would like to invite you to construct together paths of freedom and justice.

The riches we have, we should put them to good use, and, with them, we will build a future of peace.

Remarks by Mr. Leyner Palacios from the organization Cocomacia in Choco, Colombia

For us as Colombians, it is a great honor to be here in this very important moment for Ugandans. We acknowledge the efforts of the Government of Uganda in reconstructing justice in Uganda.

And we cannot let pass to thank you and to acknowledge especially the Justice and Reconciliation Project team for this great effort that they have been making and be sure that we will take this experience and share it in Colombia.

Colombia has also lived a very difficult situation of conflict, particularly in the Choco, the department we come from, and where the great major are black people. For that reason, from our culture, we have been recreating mechanisms to remember.

We are going to share with you a form of verses that is one of the most traditional forms to share memories in our culture. From these verses, we want to share with you what has happened in these experiences we have had.

Remarks by Resident Judge, High Court of Gulu, Hon. Justice Remmy Kasule

Our colleagues in Tanzania, in Kenya, in Rwanda have taken and took, longing for very serious measures to put down those indigenous customs, practices, laws that govern us in our everyday lives.

In Uganda, we have just started, and that affects the type of justice that we give our people.

Is it justice that reflects our everyday lives? Is it justice that reflects and is based on our ways—culturally, socially, and in our indigenous type of life that characterizes us as Ugandans.

It is ironic and unfortunate that it has taken to have a tragedy like the one we have had in northern Uganda in order to be able to address.

Justice is from two angles. There is justice where a decision is enforced upon the parties for the dispute. You kill somebody, you are tried, and then you get the punishment of death yourself. You have no choice in that. And that is the type of justice that the courts of law tended to give.

But, there is also another type of justice. And these days, we try as much as possible to administer this type of justice. Parties are called upon to come out with a solution to their own dispute. The courts even try as much as possible to give the parties an opportunity so that if reconciliation is possible then that is advocated and encouraged. It is justice which is inbred in us, and it is extremely important in our societies that we practice this kind of justice.

That is what justice and reconciliation is about.

Remarks by Guest of Honor, Norbert Mao, LC V Chairman, Gulu District

I can say on behalf of the local government that we have every confidence that this project will achieve its goals. Now, in case you the Staff and the Board do not know, you have managed to gather a very high-powered gathering here. I have been looking into the tent, I am not seeing very well, but I think you have virtually got the “who is who” in this field of justice and reconciliation. I see people who have not been to Gulu for long, Mr. Sorota there. [By the way, I found you disappearing from the Uganda embassy in Washington. Then, you crossed the road and jumped into a taxi. I tried to chase you but I failed.] I see here our friends, the ‘NUTIsans’ led by Amanda [Willett]. I think that is John [Gattorn] with a head that looks like Julius Caesar’s. I think that is you. Now, rumor has it that John is going away to Kampala one of these days. I see our friends from Tennessee. I think I saw Lindsay [McClain] of the Jazz for Justice Project. I have seen Jessica [Huber] who has been here for long enough to know what this means, and now with the SPRING project. I have seen the boss of the Board, Mike Otim is here. I think this in a way is a reunion.

So is this therefore an organization or a meeting point? I think the Justice and Reconciliation Project is a meeting point. You have brought the key development partners. You have brought the victims. I see there a lady called [NAME WITHHELD] with whom we made many journeys into the bush to visit the LRA in their hideouts. Of course you have the local government here represented by myself and the lady who has made the cause of vulnerable children and women a personal crusade, the Honorable Santa Oketta. And of course you have got the judge who wears black or red depending on his mood. And you better not appear when he is wearing red in the trial of capital offences. So in a way, just in case you do not get it, you have achieved something that many organizations do not achieve here. We have so many NGOs and they have all sorts of functions, and even though you are calling this a ‘launch,’ but I think you know it is usually the telecommunications companies that say ‘reloaded,’ so I think this is now Justice and Reconciliation Project ‘Reloaded’ because you are not restarting your journey today.

On behalf of Gulu district, I congratulate you for finding a home, for continuing to be worthy of financial support from sponsors. Because of the ‘credit crunch,’ donors have become not mean, but they find many more reasons not to give you money, including ‘hard times.’ But the fact you are still standing shows your cause is an important cause.

I wish to encourage you to reach into our villages and if you do not have answers, ask. Particularly those of you who are not natives, one of our desires as the Acholi people is to find people who can advertise what we consider to be the most superior justice system in the world, restorative justice. Our justice system is not the justice system of an ‘eye for an eye.’ It is a justice system which restores broken relationships. We urge you to speak for us. We may be villagers, we may be in Africa here, we may be poor, but this justice system has been tested and it has kept us going. And sometimes we feel unhappy when our justice system is dismissed because it is not written in English. We feel upset when our justice system is ignored because it is not taught in Harvard and Oxford. So we ask that you prepare curriculum for those lawyers in Harvard and Oxford so that they can understand. If you don’t understand something that doesn’t mean it is a silly thing. Actually this justice system has a lot of meaning for us, and we actually don’t care whether the lawyers of Harvard or Oxford take it very seriously or not. We take it very seriously ourselves because from the time that the British colonized us in 1894, that is when we got to know of this justice system of which I am a victim because I am a lawyer. And so I also go to court and appear before Justice Kasule and speak in a language my people do not understand. And then Justice Kasule gives judgment in a language that the accused people do not understand. And then the accused people are handcuffed and locked away. And then

we say justice has been done. But is that justice? So today, we are expanding the concept of justice to include the voices of victims in a setting that is not adversarial.

We congratulate you for having the courage to say the things that you are saying in your reports. We congratulate you for documenting the many cases in Uganda today. We are talking about reconciliation and peace, but we need truth first and foremost. Most Ugandan politicians are not ready for the truth. We urge your Project to prepare Ugandan leaders for the truth. Not so much in order that they may be sent to jail or executed, but we cannot come together as a nation unless we find the truth and we rise above our dark past. The Honorable Justice Kasule has said other countries have confronted their past. Uganda is still shy. That shyness is going to continue, especially now that elections are around the corner. But this issue is going to be a campaign issue. I want to promise you as one who is going to be a presidential candidate that this issue is going to be a campaign issue.

Victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity have got to be assured that their country has not abandoned them. It is very important for you to hear that. The issue of treating victims of war crimes well, as opposed to only treating the perpetrators well, must become a campaign issue. I want to pledge that in the same way that some of us campaigned vigorously in Parliament for peace talks, for a general amnesty, we shall also work to deliver a law, which will ensure that war victims are compensated, not at the whim of leaders, but based on legislation. We are pledging to work for a War Victims Compensation Act. The War Victims Compensation Act will ensure that irrespective of your political color, you will be compensated because you are a war victim.

We also pledge to work to ensure that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has been much talked about, becomes a reality in Uganda so these voices are not only heard in Gulu. These voices must be heard in a national forum, covered by international media, so that people know that unless we find the answers to this suffering, Uganda cannot go forward. I am convinced that we still need these kinds of initiatives. And on behalf of Gulu district, I pledge my personal support and the support of local government. God bless you. Congratulations.