



**STATEMENT**  
**OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP**  
**"MEMORY, TRUTH, JUSTICE – DEALING WITH THE BURDEN OF THE PAST"**  
**HELD AT THE BOMAH HOTEL – GULU, UGANDA**

From 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2011, the Catholic Archdiocese of Gulu - Uganda, AGEH (German Association for Development Cooperation) and the German Commission for Justice and Peace organized an international workshop focussing on issues of "Memory, truth and justice – dealing with the burden of the past". The workshop took place in Gulu where we enjoyed the hospitality and generosity of the people of Northern Uganda. Gulu is located in the very centre of the region heavily affected by the Northern Uganda conflict between 1986 and 2006. We also with much gratitude appreciate the cooperation we received from the people in sharing their experiences and re-living their memories of the conflict.

We, the workshop participants, are Christians from countries most of which have experienced long periods of war and armed conflict, including Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. In our countries, we all work in the field of peace building and reconciliation, most of us in Justice and Peace Commissions and other church-related organisations engaged in peace issues.

The major goal of the workshop was to get a deep understanding of the challenges societies and individuals are facing after having gone through a long period of armed conflict, in order to strengthen our capacities and improve the peace work we are engaged in. We talked to victims and perpetrators who shared their stories with us and we shared our own experiences and perspectives with them. We interviewed government actors, NGO and church actors and other local peace initiatives, in order to complete the picture.

While focussing on the example of the Northern Uganda conflict and its devastating consequences for the population, we also shared experiences from other countries that have gone through conflict and who were obliged to find their very specific way of dealing with the burden of the past.

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Moreover, our aim was to learn more about the role the Ugandan people would assign to different aspects of peace building such as transitional justice, amnesty, prosecution, compensation, reintegration, rehabilitation, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Finally we wanted to express our sincere solidarity and feelings of compassion with all those who have suffered from the atrocities and extremely violent crimes that were committed during the conflict.

This international workshop had the goal to contribute to such an understanding and to an improvement of our capacities in relation to "Dealing with the burden of the past" as one of the core questions of peace building and reconciliation. When reflecting on our various capacities in peace building and reconciliation, it is of high importance, that we develop a deep understanding of the problems and challenges in dealing with the consequences of injustice and violence and its manifestations such as fear, shame, rejection, awkward self-related discourses, grief and commemoration.

We have through the shared experience developed an impression of the problems faced in establishing a sustainable peace mechanism in the aftermath of war.

In showing solidarity with the victims, our focus is on the emphasis to restore victims dignity, the involvement of the offenders, linking the observable fact of violence to concrete human guilt and its consequences, revealing the systems behind the violence and repression and observing the role of external players in dealing with burdened past.

Our interactions with different groups and actors have offered us the opportunity to get a better understanding of the context of the people of Northern Uganda, especially the Acholi people; their experiences in the conflict and the post conflict period. These groups included war victims such as abductees, children born in captivity, torture victims, widows and widowers, orphans and vulnerable children and the survivors of massacres.

Others were what we termed "victim perpetrators" such as LRA ex-combatants and beneficiaries of amnesty; we also interacted with some commanders of the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF), political leaders, a traditional King (Rwot) and cultural leaders presenting their traditional reconciliation mechanism, peace actors including non-governmental and faith based organizations working in the areas of peace and reconciliation.

Many things become necessary in the aftermath of war; there should be a balance between the need to re-establish the rule of law and enhance social responsibilities and that of coping with memory, seeking truth, rebuilding trust, achieving justice and trying to rebuild lives marred by a legacy of violence and impunity.

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The conditions enabling reconciliation processes to take place in Northern Uganda have all been clarified. Despite the considerable influence on the current trends; the destructive potential of this heritage is frequently underestimated in considering the deceptive "return to normality".

We are in solidarity with the people who experienced conflict, and believe that forgiveness is possible. However we recognize that sometimes the circumstances that those affected by violent conflict find themselves in seem to impose reconciliation – this is our impression in the case of Acholi sub-region.

There is a need to prioritize compensation and rehabilitations for the victims and to help them regain their dignity. We have the conviction that only the victims have the power and right to forgive and nobody can claim that for them. True reconciliation will be difficult without justice for the victims and forgiveness. The government of Uganda, the Churches and other interested actors can only guide and provide an enabling environment for reconciliation to take place and not make it obligatory.

Is it possible to live without violence? Is there a guarantee that the war is completely over? Have the people of northern Uganda secured sustainable peace? How do we ensure that they, people affected by this conflict are able to re-build their lives, and secure a future for themselves and their families? These are the challenges that we take up as peace actors in the region. We appreciate that naturally any given society would wish to move on from the horrors of the past; but this cannot be done at the expense of the victims of that past as to do so is to re-victimize them. We all have responsibility towards continued efforts focused on developing mechanisms that can help resolve our differences without necessarily allowing the conflict situations to deteriorate into a violent one.

The peace building aspects that enhance reconciliation is that which involves all parties in the environment of the conflict. The right to justice for the thousands who have suffered at the hands of the LRA for instance should not be left to the victims and perpetrators only. Our fear is that we are witnessing persuasive impunity for serious crimes and human rights violations. The atrocities perpetuated over the 20 year period such as murder, abductions, kidnap with intent to kill, rape, aggravated robbery, destruction of property and other offenses should be investigated.

While we appreciate the benefits of the Ugandan Amnesty law, whose purpose was widely achieved, its continued implementation leaves a lot of open questions regarding its consistency with established international humanitarian law.

We acknowledge the efforts that have been and are continuing to be made by the Government of Uganda, the international community, NGOs and the Churches. During the workshop, we were especially impressed of the role that the Catholic and Anglican Churches played in the transformation of the conflict, including the assistance they gave and continue to give to the victims. Moreover, we note that

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the interreligious collaboration and efforts that were made by the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) are a remarkable example of our common love of God and humanity.

Based on the things we have seen and heard, this group is only left wondering - how can we expect people to deal with the present without resolving the burdens of the past?

The participants of the workshop

Gulu, Northern Uganda

5<sup>th</sup> of November 2011