
APG Presentation KM97 Keynote Address

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The Chairman of the LOC, the International Coordinator, Acholi from other countries and Acholi Londoners,

We members of the Acholi Parliamentary Group (APG) wish to convey our warm greetings to you while thanking the good Lord for keeping all of us alive till now. The APG learnt of the intention of the Acholi community in the Diaspora to hold a meeting in London.

We were therefore pleased to receive the invitation to attend, and more so to give an opening address to the meeting. We salute you for such efforts, which we believe, will provide an open forum for our people to discuss our common concerns and take measures towards the resolution of our problems.

We are aware that the Kacoke Madit (KM) has come to fruition after a lot of turbulence at virtually all stages of its organisation. This was not to be unexpected. The KM is the first meeting of its kind. The issues it is set out to debate are very sensitive and are at the core of our survival as a community and people. The APG kept its hand on the pulse of the KM from the time of its inception as an idea in Toronto through the initial organisation on until now. We are glad that the KM survived. So what is the KM?

To us the KM embodies the concept so eloquently stated in the bible “Come let us reason together.” The KM personifies the unity of purpose of members of our community wherever they may be? The KM is a rejection of defeatism and resignation to fate, which can erode a peoples’ ability to respond creatively to problems afflicting them. The KM is a forum for making an unequivocal statement of commitment to peace, unity, justice and development. This forum is therefor historical. Many people out there are hopeful that it will be positive rather than destructive, that it will result in hope rather than despair.

This KM should therefore be a kind of “wang oo” (fireplace) for us. It should provide an opportunity for sharing information on the problems facing our people, especially the endless war, and above all it should be for consensus building as a way forward. In our last letter to the organisers of the KM we emphasised the theme of unity. We were at pains to point out the need for unity as a prerequisite for advancement in all arenas including politics. I recall what we wrote.

“Like all long suffering ethnic groups known to history, Acholi has a potential to rise from the ashes of war and destruction like the legendary phoenix and play a key role in all the affairs of Uganda. All this however depends on whether we learnt anything from our long years of suffering. When we are divided over petty grudges rather than principles, it shows that we have not learnt anything from our suffering. Our people in the Diaspora must show that they have learnt something from the long years of bitterness and anguish in exile. Suffering is bitter but it tempers the human spirit making it more purposeful and resilient. It does to the human spirit what the hot furnace does to iron, transforming it into steel. The numerous burdens imposed upon our people by circumstances and designs of our detractors will one day be behind us. And at that future date when we look back we shall agree with Don Williams that pressure makes diamonds the hardest of stones. All these possibilities are before us now. We can rise from the ashes of war like the phoenix. We can emerge from the red-hot furnace of war and march on with the strength of stainless steel. And above all we can claim the unchallenged hardness and brilliance of diamonds - the most precious of stones”.

We still stand by this vision and we wish to impart it to all the participants and to posterity. This is the vision that has made the delegates from Uganda to make the sacrifice of meeting the cost of flying to London to attend the KM.

We expect the KM to show that as a community,

we can achieve more when we concentrate on the things which unite us rather than those things that divide us. Whatever our differences we should be able to find some small patch of ground where we can all stand. That common ground is the need to rescue our people from the fangs of war, destruction and hopelessness. The KM is therefore about consensus building and community dialogue.

As MPs we have to endeavour to lead by example. We do not preach unity and practice division. Indeed we have united in an unprecedented manner irrespective of our political differences for the common purpose of achieving peace, justice and prosperity for our long-suffering people. Our hope is that our unity as elected leaders will be an example so that our people in all stations of life may start working together instead of against one another. We are determined to remain united in spite of all attempts by the enemies of our people to divide us. This is the reason why we enjoy the good blessings or “laa” of the people at home. If the Acholi in the Diaspora also want to enjoy this “laa” then they must unite. We cannot afford the luxury of division, factionalism and disunity at this time. Indeed our unity is compelled by the demands of these hard times. Our very survival is threatened. Therefore our unity is for survival. We therefore urge all our people wherever they may be to be tolerant and to unite.

To us the significance of the KM lies in four areas i.e to seek an end to the war, to build consensus and unity among our people, to lay a foundation for a blueprint for post war reconstruction and to address the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict. All this is in line with the efforts the APG has been making.

For ten agonising years, Acholiland has been engulfed in insecurity. Every household in Acholiland has known bereavement, fear, abject poverty and loss of hope.

War is a very divisive issue; talking about it cannot be easy, especially when one is seeking to present the truth and that truth has as many sides to it as there are protagonists and interests. A war in a country with as many ethnic groups, religious sects, social classes and conflicts as Uganda)has serious repercussions for individuals, families and communi-

ties. Talking about it is equivalent to walking a minefield. It places a dire responsibility upon the writer. This responsibility we in the APG accepted long ago and have reacted with due seriousness and diligence. We do not claim to be infallible but I assert that we always speak from as objective a viewpoint as possible in the circumstances. The APG’s statements are never designed to please anyone. We expect our statements to provoke debate and thought, to add to the corpus of viewpoints on the war, and to help chart a new path in the political thinking and social behaviour of Ugandans.

The war in the north is not an Acholi affair. It is a national one. That is why the Parliament of Uganda appointed a Committee to inquire into all its aspects and make recommendations. It would be wrong for anyone to leave the matter in the hands of our people to sort it out alone. This is not to suggest we should abdicate our responsibility as a people affected by the war to contribute to bringing it to an end. The manner the Government has handled the war which has been raging on in the North leaves a lot to be desired. Government position on the manner of resolving this conflict has been too rigid; notwithstanding the fact that the Sudanese Government involvement in the conflict has given it a geopolitical dimension.

To many people in Uganda the Acholi in the Diaspora stand accused of fanning the war in northern Uganda. This forum affords us the opportunity to discover whether the Acholi in the Diaspora have divergent views or positions on the war. Whatever position the Acholi in the Diaspora may take, the fact is that they do not enjoy the same advantage, to know the facts on the ground, like the Acholi in Uganda do.

This KM is not designed to be a forum either pro-Uganda government or anti-Uganda government. It is also not designed to be pro-LRA or anti-LRA. It is expected to be a non-partisan forum of the Acholi community to brainstorm on the challenges at home and come out with solutions. Indeed even if we fail to come up with solutions we hope to at least emerge with a clearer view and perspective on the problem. This is not to say KM should shy away from constructive criticism of those who have brought this suffering on our people.

.It is common to hear people say any Acholi who serves in Government has been bought or compromised. The same goes for any Acholi who has travelled to Uganda from abroad. To us this serves to further disunity among us. There is nothing wrong in holding a position in Government per se. What should concern us is whether an Acholi in Government works for the good of our people or not. This is the same for any Acholi who travels to Uganda from abroad.

Let me recount to you what the APG has done so far. As mentioned earlier, we have united in an unprecedented way. Our unity as members of parliament transcends our political differences and is cemented by a burning zeal to serve our people faithfully. Secondly we have spoken out more than ever before about the legitimate grievances of our people. The APG supported the Parliamentary inquiry into the causes effects, and possible solutions of the war in northern Uganda. Indeed the APG submitted a memorandum to the committee, which unequivocally called upon government to settle the conflict peacefully. Our stand has not changed. We believe that the war in the north cannot be ended by military means alone. Part of the reason is that the majority of the people in the LRA are to our knowledge victims of circumstances who were abducted and conscripted into the LRA. These infants are the ones who face the UPDF fire. There is no heroism in killing these children even though they may be entangled in the conflict. It is our view that Kony's LRA is pushing the UPDF's hand against our children. That is why we call for a peaceful resolution of the conflict - in order to save lives.

We now turn to the role of LRA in the conflict. The LRA has been guilty of killing, maiming and terrorising civilians. The proof of their involvement is that some of their commanders are well known to the local population and therefore they cannot claim that they are wrongly accused. The LRA has not yet discharge the burden of proving they are in the bush for reason other than committing atrocities. The image of LRA and the reality of their existence in Acholiland has been one long trail of blood and tears. The activities of LRA have been license to all sorts of bad characters to also commit atrocities on our people. We therefore wish to call upon the LRA to

release all the innocent people abducted and are in their custody. We also call upon the LRA to stop atrocities and to hearken to the people's cry for peace. Guns will not achieve anything. The LRA should know that the Parliamentary inquiry though it did not recommend direct peace talks nevertheless recommended amnesty, dialogue with political dissidents, and economic empowerment of the people in the affected areas among other things. We have to acknowledge that this is a remarkable change in the attitude of the Parliament to the conflict in the north. It is the Parliament which pronounced that this is a national problem not an Acholi problem. This must be applauded.

The APG has excellent working relationships with international NGOs and UN agencies and indeed we contacted some of them like the UNDP, UNICEF, OXFAM, the Red Cross, World Vision etc to assist the internally displaced people in Acholiland. We must however point out that the international community's reponse to the cries of our people has delayed for too long. International lobbying had earlier been a neglected frontier. The APG has done a lot in this field, especially by visiting representatives of foreign government and putting our case forward. In some instances our viewpoints have been reflected in international reports of these agencies.

We are also doing everything possible to improve the working relationship between the APG and the government of Uganda. We think that there should be a good working relationship based on mutual respect rather than suspicion if we are to achieve our common goal. To that end we are committed to seeing to it that the Government carries out its responsibility to our people irrespective of our people's political stand or belief. The APG and the government can identify an intersection, which unites us, and we can concentrate on that.

So what is to be done now? Firstly, the government should actualise its promise of peace in the whole country. Secondly pressure should also mount on the LRA to cease their activities in order that our people can recover from the years of dehumanisation. Thirdly, efforts should be intensified to secure humanitarian assistance. Finally, as a community we should plan strategies of how to respond to the chal-

lenges of post-war reconstruction. There is no war, which never ends. Even the wars now raging in northern Uganda will one day end and then we shall be faced with task of re-construction. We have to prepare with a programme of action. This would in itself be an act of faith that the hopes are finally beginning to out weigh the despair.

We reiterate the task will not be easy. We shall be starting from a manifestly weak position. Our children are largely out of school and university, many families have lost their breadwinners and the economies of our districts have collapsed completely. Our position is certainly not enviable, not even by comparison with other nationalities in Northern Uganda. But the measure of our success will be the way, manner and time in which we turn this position of weakness into strength. It is not an impossible task, and we urge that the sufferings of the past years should not dishearten our young men and women. We stand convinced that we shall rise.