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Thank you.

I have been asked to speak on issues surrounding IDPs—short for internally displaced persons—something I have been concerned with and worked on, here and in northern Uganda, since 2001.

We have all, I hope, heard of the crisis of displacement in northern Uganda. At its peak, two million Ugandans—almost 10% of the entire population—were driven from their homes through a government campaign of murder, torture, threats, and bombing and burning down villages, and forced to live in squalid, unprotected internment camps.

Every week, it seemed, a new UN or World Vision or MSF report would come out on IDPs in the north. The government promulgated a national IDP policy. The phrase IDP has almost become synonymous with northern Uganda itself.

But let me break somewhat from the orthodoxy to say that I don't think that there are or ever have been any IDPs in northern Uganda.

Or rather, I think that calling the Acholi living in internment camps IDPs is unhelpful to their cause and to the cause of justice.

What do I mean? By calling someone an IDP, we obscure the reasons why they were displaced and why they continue to be displaced.

The label IDP hides the very deep differences between those displaced by natural disaster, those voluntarily fleeing war or catastrophe, and those intentionally forced from their homes by government or rebel coercion.

It hides the reasons for displacement, and turns people into just one more bureaucratic acronym, a buzzword. It makes them out to be helpless victims in need of salvation from the so-called international community.

Now, when the United States forcibly interned American citizens of Japanese descent in prison camps during WWII, did we call them IDPs, and request humanitarian aid as the solution to their plight?

When the US now toys with the idea of interning American citizens of Arab descent, do we prepare for an IDP influx, collecting jerry cans, tarps, and making food aid appeals to help IDPs? When the US drove native Americans from their land and forced them onto reservations, did we call them IDPs?

No. We condemn the government for its grave violations of human rights and constitutional rights, and demand that our fellow citizens and fellow humans be released from their illegal, humiliating, and often deadly forced detention.

So when it comes to northern Uganda, I think we need to have this same honesty about the origins and perpetuation of forced displacement and internment.

We Westerners have a tendency to ignore the politics that are involved in conflicts in Africa and to see those conflicts in purely humanitarian terms—helpless civilians who need our assistance.

The practice of terming the Acholi “IDPs” fits squarely within this pattern. By doing so, we hide the reasons for displacement, and make the so-called IDPs solely the responsibility of international aid organizations. We reduce mass forced displacement to a humanitarian issue, and hide its political and legal dimensions.

But mass forced displacement in northern Uganda is not primarily a humanitarian issue.

It is first and foremost a political issue and a legal issue, and by labeling the interned Acholi “IDPs” we hide the fact that they did not flee voluntarily for their safety, but were forcibly displaced and interned in prison camps by the Ugandan government through a campaign of military terror. They have been

forced for years to live in camps so wretched that the excess mortality rate reached 1000 people a week. Indeed, the camps themselves produced the humanitarian crisis, not the other way around!

Displacement is a political issue because it was a political decision on the part of the Ugandan government that created the camps, where the humanitarian crisis exploded.

It is a legal issue because that mass forced displacement and internment was a war crime under the Geneva conventions and a crime against humanity. The humanitarian crisis, which is very real, was an entirely avoidable consequence of the Ugandan government's illegal and unjustifiable counterinsurgency strategy.

So, that's why I choose not to use the label IDP.

Back to the present: right now, it appears that displacement is finally coming to a slow end in Acholi.

Despite mixed messages from the government, despite attempts by local and foreign agents to steal Acholi land, despite the reluctance of the UN and international NGOs to let people leave the camps, despite on-and-off peace talks and warmongering by the ICC—despite all these obstacles, people are slowly, hesitantly, but persistently going home.

In this context, two questions arise concerning forced displacement in Acholi.

One question is about its legacy, and the other is about its future.

First, on the legacy of forced displacement, there are two issues that northern Ugandans will have to address in coming years.

The first issue is that of Reconstruction. This concerns social and economic questions about land access, development, local authority structures. I'm not going to attempt to discuss this vast topic further.

The second issue around the legacy of forced displacement is accountability.

That is, Ugandans, and Acholi in particular, face political and legal questions about how to hold accountable those parties who are responsible for the policy of forced displacement and internment, and the massive human cost it incurred.

I believe that the fundamental criterion of this process of deciding what accountability means is that all parties responsible for the suffering of civilians need to be dealt with. This is why the ICC is so bankrupt: it refuses to deal with the government, and acts as if the LRA is the only group responsible for violence against civilians.

But it is not only the government and the rebels that are responsible for civilian suffering, I argue. Indeed, there has been a third party to the armed conflict almost since the beginning, one whose responsibility for prolonging the war and enabling the government's policy of forced displacement is almost never discussed.

This third party is the international community.

In this group I place the donors who have fed Uganda's war machine, who have funded it and allowed it to continue to persecute its destructive war, and who have looked the other way from the policy of forced displacement. In this group are the World Bank, the United States, Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries.

They all are responsible for enabling and allowing the Ugandan government to wage the war and to put into practice its policy of mass forced displacement and internment.

Along with Uganda's donors I would also call attention to the international NGOs, especially WFP, working in northern Uganda. From the very beginning of forced displacement, these NGOs and UN agencies have played an essential role in helping to establish the camps and then sustaining and managing the camps for the Ugandan government. The international aid agencies gladly collaborated with the government's counterinsurgency, and the camps simply would not have been able to be created or sustained without the hundreds of millions of dollars spent by international NGOs on maintaining them.

Why did the aid agencies do this? Well, the same qualities that made the camps attractive to the Ugandan government—a concentrated, easily

surveilled, accessed, and controlled population—made them particularly attractive to aid agencies.

Furthermore, Uganda's global status as a favorite of the World Bank (for its embrace of neo-liberal economic restructuring policies), of Great Britain and other European states (for its putatively enlightened leadership and concern with good governance), and of the United States (for its cooperation in providing support to the SPLA and its cooperation in the "War on Terror")—all these made the provision of humanitarian aid to displaced civilians in Acholi a particularly easy and potentially lucrative opportunity for international NGOs.

Instead of refusing to collaborate with the Ugandan government's counterinsurgency and refusing to help establish and run the camps, instead of making clear to the Ugandan government that they, as humanitarian agencies, would not be complicit with war crimes and crimes against humanity, the aid agencies put their self-interest before the interest of the Acholi and have played an essential role in enabling the government's policy of forced displacement and internment.

So, with all this said, how can this legacy of forced displacement be dealt with?

First, it is up to the Acholi to decide on how to pursue an equitable and sustainable reconstruction strategy,

Second, it is up to the Acholi to decide whom to hold accountable for their responsibility for forced displacement.

These processes will need to be led by the Acholi community itself, something that is becoming increasingly difficult given the huge sums of foreign money and foreign organizations and individuals that are pouring into northern Uganda at present.

From the legacy of forced displacement to the future of forced displacement. On the question of the future of forced displacement, what is essential is to determine how to prevent it from happening again.

Now, some may say that displacement doesn't have a future, it's over for good.

But, who would have thought back in 1996 that twelve years later people would still be living in camps?

I believe that the question of how to ensure that people are not forcibly displaced again is still a question of fundamental importance.

And to try to answer this question, we need to ask how displacement could happen in the first place?

That is, how can a government have so little accountability to its own people that it can intern them by the millions, in such conditions that they die in droves, that their entire society faces destruction?

I think we can see this as an extreme case of the political crisis of neo-liberal Africa, in which states derive their support not from their citizenries but from external donors. In Uganda, for many years, over half the national budget came from donors.

Museveni is not isolated like, say, Mugabe, who uses a violent state apparatus despite international condemnation. Instead, Uganda uses its violent state security apparatus against its own people with international support, and would not be able to do so without that support!

So, why this massive failure of political accountability, and how might it be remedied in the future?

First, the donors need to stop providing funding to Uganda that ends up feeding the war. This can be a task for the citizenries of donor countries. [A large part of this begins here in the United States: Uganda is America's key regional ally in the so-called War on Terror: it has troops in Southern Sudan, troops in Somalia, and the US is happy to support the Ugandan military as long as it fights its proxy wars for it. So bringing the so-called war or terror to an end is part of bringing the war in Uganda to an end.]

Second, as mentioned, international NGOs were witness to the government's campaign of terror and saw only a good business opportunity. We need to make clear to the NGOs and aid agencies that it is unacceptable for them to enable forced displacement again, and we need to shame them into not collaborating with war crimes once again.

In this sense, I think it's rather ironic when people say that northern Uganda has been forgotten by the international community. The war in northern

Uganda only exists in the form it does because the international community has been deeply involved in it for years, and continues to be involved.

Furthermore, one should be careful what one asks for: people asked for further international involvement, and they got the ICC.

Third, I think the most important reason why the government has not been accountable to the Acholi is the incapacity of alternative political forces inside and outside of Uganda.

Who are these forces?

Diaspora that cannot escape the accusations of being spoilers, warmongers, self-interested war profiteers. Whatever the validity of these accusations, it is certain that the diaspora is fragmented within itself and generally out of touch with the concerns and experiences of the displaced Acholi.

Opposition parties that have won massive victories in northern Uganda not because they have addressed the needs and hopes of the Acholi, but because the Acholi will vote for anyone who runs against Museveni and the NRM.

Local Acholi politicians that have been weakened by political repression and whose voice has been undermined by rigged elections.

Acholi civil society that is dominated by international NGOs and foreign-funded local NGOs. These groups only have beneficiaries, not constituencies. Thus, they have no power to hold the government accountable and are driven primarily by the pursuit of donor funding.

So, what needs to happen is for all these groups—diaspora, formal political opposition, local Acholi politicians, and genuine Acholi civil society—to come up with a morally and politically legitimate voice, a unified voice, that can demand the permanent end of forced displacement, and can coherently oppose any attempt to send people back to the camps.

This voice can also demand the continuation of peace talks, and once this voice has emerged, then international friends of peace can support that voice for peace and justice.

At present, because this coherent, legitimate voice does not exist, anyone who wants to—the ICC, the International Crisis Group, the Enough Project, President Museveni—can claim to speak for the Acholi, and can say whatever they want.

Instead, a legitimate Acholi voice needs to be heard, one that can denounce local forces that are undermining the peace talks and can denounce those international actors who claim to speak for the Acholi but who are only working against peace out of ignorance, self-interest, political opportunism, or more sinister motives.

It will not be easy for this voice to emerge and be heard. I believe that the first task is for the diaspora, the political opposition, local Acholi leaders, and civil society to go back to the people, to go back to the Acholi as they leave the camps.

And I do not mean by conducting surveys and questionnaires and such things. The so-called consultations carried out by the government and LRA on Agenda Item 3 were a farce. I mean going back to the Acholi by living with them, accompanying them as they try to rebuild their lives and their societies. This is what no one—researchers, politicians, international agencies—has done so far. It is time for everyone to see the Acholi in the camps and in their villages, as social, political, and cultural subjects instead of objects for political, economic, or personal profit.

If this happens, then I think that a legitimate Ugandan and Acholi voice might be able to make itself heard, a voice that demands peace and justice, a voice to which those of us who are not Ugandan can respond and give our support.

Thank you.