

**UGANDA VICTIM RIGHTS WORKING GROUP  
ACTIVITY REPORT  
COMMONWEALTH PEOPLE'S FORUM 20<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2007  
AT HOTEL AFRICAN, KAMPALA**

Once more I extend our appreciation to Redress Trust London to sponsor two members from the Ugandan Victims' Rights Working Group (U-VRWG), namely Acam Hellen and Labeja Santos, who represented our position at the Commonwealth People's Forum, thereby giving U-VRWG a national and international outlook.

HURINET, through the Ugandan Coalition for the International Criminal Court (UCICC), made it possible for the U-VRWG to get the flat form. We appreciate their efforts and the welcoming hand of their coordinator John Francis Onyango, and Joseph Akwenyu who ensured the logistics amidst a tight schedule. It is upon this basis which U-VRWG is taking shape and impacting on the life of other organizations in the North, motivating them to build partnerships with us and to work for the common good of the victims.

The presence and contribution of activists and human rights organizations from across Africa and beyond help us to get feedback and comments, which keep us in focus.

However as a young coalition we need to double our efforts and make the best use of every opportunity to take off at a slow pace with enough energy that can contain the pressure and challenges that demand our contribution, you as members can take note.

**Opening remarks by UCICC Coordinator John Francis Onyango**

In order to have along lasting peace, our nation should not exclude justice. The history of our country points out a cycle of unending conflict accompanied with impunity, which is not addressed through our national judicial system, this has led to the abuse of the human rights of many victims who suffered harm at different levels.

Even as we pray for a return of peace to Northern Uganda there must be justice. At the end of the day the most serious crimes must be brought to justice.

John Francis Onyango called upon everyone present to support the system of accountability on issues of impunity, which should not be condoned if we are to stop violence in our society.

Presentations by the U-VRWG covered the abuse of women and children's rights.

**Hellen Acam: Abuse of Women in war situation**

There is need to stand up in support of laws which can defend the rights of especially women's who are one of the group which suffers most when wars are all over.

They are rapes, sexually abuse, suffers from lost of children and husbands who are either abducted or killed. The abused exposed them to diseases including HIV /AIDS, family breakage, moral decay and poverty.

This is a trend which should not be allowed to continue in Uganda if we are to develop.

From this point the ICC becomes one of the most important tools to help victims of this kind to assert their rights by helping them to access justice, reparation, information. On this note she observed the loopholes in the traditional system of justice which does not give women fair system of justice. Perhaps only one but usually none at all are part of the local judicial system, so we better support a strong national judicial system which takes into account international law, a fair and independent judicial system and international standards of human rights.

She concluded by showing a video on massacres in different parts in Northern Uganda which later touched the emotion of many who were present, who were moved but appreciated the viewing.

### **Labeja Santo: the Rights of children**

He pointed out the abusive culture where children are not respected in Uganda in particular, and in Africa at large. This abusive culture ranges from abduction, child labour and the use of child soldiers, which are all forms of child abuse. He called upon everyone to rise up and to be the voice of these voiceless children before we surrender and loose of them. He called upon those present to rescue the ones who are still alive and being born.

He explained at length how their endeavours have created an impact in Eastern Uganda with Soroti being the base. The motivation of this campaign came out after the Teso sub-region lost many of its children to the hands of LRA rebels. He also explained that he himself lost a child in this way.

This is the time to team up with the Uganda Victims Rights Working Group to fight abuse starting at home and influencing our continent which has a similar spirit of child abuse, most especially of child sacrifice, child soldiering and trafficking.

We need a strong judicial system to fight such criminal acts and abuses and we must influence our legislature to enact laws that protect the children from these abuses.

### **Summary: Ongom Chris**

In all these activities, from networking, sharing information to being proactive where necessary, we can push the levels of our advocacy for the rights of victim of serious crimes in Uganda. First of all these victims do not even know that they have a right to access justice, to obtain get information, to claim reparation, to protection and participating in the judicial process.

In Northern and Eastern Uganda victims still suffer intimidation and social exclusion. They lack the power to make decisions about their rights, particularly due to the big information gap.

This keeps them in total black out and allows for uninformed compromises whereby they surrender their unalienable rights to the justice they deserve.

Every organization present needs to lobby their friends to continue with the journey in Northern and Eastern Uganda to ensure that peace prevails with the components of justice together.

I register my appreciation to the Trust Fund for Victims which has sent a medical specialist working in Lacor Hospital carrying out Plastic Surgery for 50 victims with immediate medical needs. I call upon organizations who have friends who do such work in any area of specialism to invite them to help. We have many victims with bullets in the body, amputated legs, arms and extensive needs of psychosocial support and trauma healing.

In all, our people need justice and there is no way we can overlook it or under look it but only uphold the principle firmly until one day it will stand tall and speak by itself. The U-VRWG has accepted to stand up and be counted, but it is still seeking the continuous support of HURINET through the UCICC. In the same spirit we call upon any other partners to join hands with us.

#### **Observation by forum members present;**

1. Uganda has a systematic problem which needs a systematic solution: it is not about individuals it goes beyond individuals.
2. There is need to see justice from all angles and wider perspectives.
3. The challenge is to answer the current imbalance between peace verses justice as a solution to the 20 years long war in Northern Uganda
4. African practice of child sacrifices which spreads even into cities need to be checked very fast by enacting appropriate laws.
5. Ways of influencing legislatures need to be devised so as to put in place sustainable laws.
6. Levels of abuse during the war require that some people answer and be held responsible for their acts.

#### **CLOSING REMARKS**

##### **Coordinator UCICC :**

The ICC indictments are not spoiling the peace talks as people think. No suspect or accused person will ever hand himself to the court of law. However, the Rule of Law is the system put in place to bring law and order to society and requires that a suspect face court of law. We can not sacrifice justice because of fears in the name of peace. Rather we need justice to put an end to cycles of violence, to bring about peace and impunity in Uganda.

##### **African coordinator CICC :**

If Africa is to move forward there is no way we can ignore justice in return of superficial peace, which cannot be sustained. It is not true that the ICC is spoiling the peace talks. It is true that ICC arrest warrants have contributed and forced the rebels to remain committed to the current talks compared to the past failures.

This is the time to join the work of the coalition so that we can ensure every country obeys the principles of complementarity to strengthen our national judicial system in order to monitor and stop impunities against our people. Things that happened in Rwanda, Darfur, Congo and Uganda should not be allowed to continue.

**We Recommend that:-**

- U-VRWG needs further collaboration with UCICC to expand its advocacy on the rights of the victims;
- We need to earn the attention of our legislature and legal practitioners, to lobby them to ensure that the ICC Bill is prepared fast and tabled in parliament for Uganda to domesticate the Rome Statute;
- More strategies need to be developed to pass information to victims;
- The challenge of activism should be realized, calling for stronger ties to stand by each other at local, national and international levels.

**Ongom Chris**

COORDINATOR U-VRWG

C/O AYINET UGANDA

P O BOX 981 LIRA.

Plot 12 Otim Tom Road

Junior Quarters LMC

+256 78 2 499532/39 2 940042