
Interview: Matthew Odong

'We need dialogue and reconciliation'

Matthew Odong is the Monsignor of the Diocese of Gulu of the Roman Catholic Church, and the secretary of the Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative. He was interviewed in London on July 18 at the Kacoke Madit conference by Linda de Hoyos.

EIR: What called the Religious Leaders' Initiative for Peace into being?

Monsignor Odong: It is actually born out of the suffering of the people. The Church is there for the people, to speak for the people, to defend the rights, to fight the injustice, and to seek also a solution.

EIR: When this organization was formed in 1997, had the suffering of the people become more acute?

Monsignor Odong: Yes, the situation has been intensifying. Even as I speak now, the intensity of the situation is worsening.

EIR: Why is that?

Monsignor Odong: We see the abduction of children, displacement; people run away from their homes; people cannot settle in their homes.

EIR: So a lot of the suffering stems from the fact that people are being displaced?

Monsignor Odong: That is correct.

EIR: People cannot stay in their homes, but are they still within their districts?

Monsignor Odong: Yes, they are still in their districts. They cannot stay in their own homes because of fear of being abducted, of being killed, of being burned in their houses — these painful experiences. The most targetted people are the youth.

EIR: Has the violence been increasing incrementally, or did it take a leap at a certain point?

Monsignor Odong: The intensity has been increasing gradually, over a period of time.

EIR: What is the food situation?

Monsignor Odong: Some parts are really starving, especially in Kitgum District, and parts of Gulu — the people living

out in their houses are the people suffering so much. The people who live in the protected villages — there, there are the NGOs [non-governmental organizations], the United Nations, the CRS [Catholic Relief Services]. But then, in the camp, there are 4,000 people, and the ration that is given is between 4-5 kilos for a family of four. But it is not enough. People cannot cultivate because of fear of being abducted, fear of being killed. You cannot settle in your farms — be a small farmer and work.

EIR: What is happening to livestock?

Monsignor Odong: The people of Acholi have lost 95% of their cattle during this war. This loss of the cattle has reduced the people to the primitive stage of agriculture, digging physically. When the livestock used to be there, people were at least using the oxen to plow, and that would increase the rate of production.

EIR: How do you see the Church's role in bringing about peace?

Monsignor Odong: The mission of the Church in Acholi is a mission to be the light of the people. The Church has to give people hope. In a situation of hopelessness, in a situation of misery, the Church is always there. When there is a conflicting situation, the Church is there to come up with some proposal on how to handle the situation. In this case, the position of the Church is very clear: We need a peaceful solution, a peaceful approach. This is dialogue and reconciliation. Let the two parties sit down, just as I am sitting with you now, and let us talk out our differences.

EIR: And those two parties would be — ?

Monsignor Odong: The government and the LRA [Lord's Resistance Army]. And the Church is there in the middle.

EIR: By Church, you mean the Religious Leaders' Initiative?

Monsignor Odong: Yes, the Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, which is composed of Anglicans, Catholics, and Islamic leaders.

EIR: And the Religious Leaders would be the major mediators?

Monsignor Odong: Yes, they are there. They tell the government, "Look, the people have suffered enough. Why do you have to use military means when this military means is actually killing the people?" Again, these religious leaders will come to the LRA and say, "Look, the people are dying; the people are being killed. You are not respecting their rights. Abduction is bad. Killing is bad. Looting is bad. Why don't you sit down? You in the LRA, you are claiming to be fighting the government of Museveni. Why don't you sit down and settle?"

This is the position of the Church. The Church will never identify itself with the government; the Church will never identify itself with the LRA in this conflicting situation. But the position is clear: We need peace. Stop the war. People are dying.

EIR: Would you agree with the position of total amnesty for the LRA, to enable them to come out of the bush?

Monsignor Odong: Oh, yes. Let us agree that something bad has happened. Let us accept that—really something bad has happened. But we have to settle this. We do not need to go ahead with this kind of suffering, we don't need to go ahead with these killings and atrocities. We need to stop now. What do we do? Okay, let us have a different kind of approach, an approach that will enable the other party that has really done wrong to see that they can come home. Let us begin a new life. I think this is what will help the situation, because if we say, "Now we are going to do it by force," it will not work. Because the military option for 12 years now has failed.

EIR: How do you see the role of the international community in this?

Monsignor Odong: That is my main concern. I think that for so long the situation in northern Uganda was not known. It is only now that there is the creation of awareness. As far as a real move to see an end to this war, this has not yet been taken seriously by the international community. I really would like to emphasize that it is the international community that could really help the government of Uganda, could help the people of northern Uganda, to bring an end to this war.

EIR: If you had a message to the American government, what would it be?

Monsignor Odong: If the American government can intervene—This war already has international dimensions, because Sudan is involved. Sudan provides hospitality for [Joseph] Kony; Sudan provides the conducive environment for Kony. Because of that, Kony is able to come and destabilize the people of northern Uganda, and then goes back to southern Sudan. We know that America is a superpower; America can intervene, can put sanctions on Sudan. It can also help mediate between the Ugandan government and Sudan. That is how I look at it. That is from the point of view of talking peace. Economically, America can help, but the priority is peace. Right now the people of northern Uganda need one thing, and that is peace. Peace, then development.

EIR: Would you be for a Sudan peace process?

Monsignor Odong: If America can do that, that would be great. We need someone to mediate, to heal the broken relationship between Uganda and Sudan, so that the diplomatic relations between Uganda and Sudan are restored, and they are once again at peace with one another. The problems of

Sudan are the problems of Uganda, the problems of Uganda then become the problems of Sudan. The lack of diplomatic relations is the cause of this problem.

EIR: Would you be in support of the United States coming in with a peace initiative for Sudan?

Monsignor Odong: That is what I would highly recommend, because Sudan is not at peace. The international community should really take this situation very seriously. They should not just look at the people of northern Uganda in isolation. One of the biggest problems that our government has made right from the start of this war, was to underrate the intention, the seriousness of this war. The government of Uganda has thought that this is just a war that is Kony and a few guys, who can go nowhere, who cannot do so much destruction. This was actually the thought of the government. The government took the war lightly, and now you see the consequences.

EIR: Have the people of northern Uganda ever supported this war?

Monsignor Odong: No. Even 95% of the people who are with Kony are there against their will. They were forced at gunpoint to go there and join him. So, when you are there because you fear for your life, you have to do exactly what they tell you, because you cannot escape. You escape at your own risk.

EIR: You do not see that there is support within the population for the LRA?

Monsignor Odong: No, absolutely, there is no support.

EIR: The military, however, is unable to protect the population?

Monsignor Odong: It has already failed; it has completely failed. That is why I say that the military option is not the solution to the problem. The two parties just need to sit down and talk peace, and find out their differences and settle them by dialogue.

EIR: Do you see the Church playing a key role in bringing these two parties together?

Monsignor Odong: This is exactly one of the objectives of the Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative. We would love to meet Kony, as religious leaders, and talk to him, find out what his problem is, and tell him that what he has been doing is bad. This is what the Religious Leaders would like to do.

This is my prayer. In spite of whatever struggle we are going to make, to see the war in the North brought to an end, we must also bring in God. For I believe that what really makes a man good is the *inner* transformation. That is what I believe, and it is God who can really help us to understand that life is sacred.