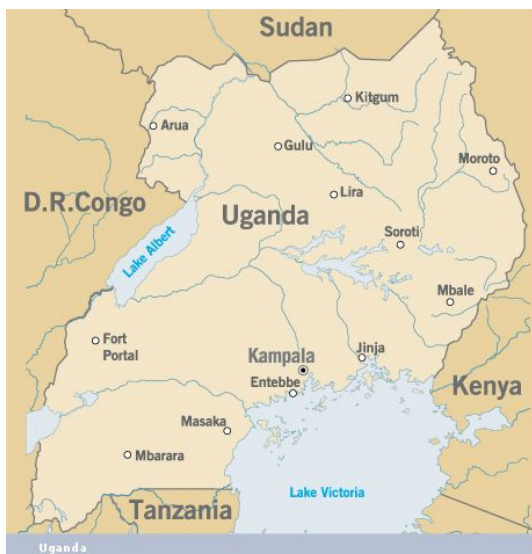


Backgrounder: Uganda



Head of State: President Yoweri Museveni, January 1986– (first elected 1996, re-elected 2001, 2006)

After gaining independence from Britain in 1962 Uganda experienced nearly two decades of repression and civil strife, first under the increasingly autocratic rule of President Milton Obote (1962–71) and then the brutal dictatorship of President Idi Amin Dada (1971–79), during which some 200,000 Ugandans were killed.

Initially Ugandans were enthusiastic about Amin's rise to power. But that quickly evaporated as Amin moved to dissolve the Parliament and altered the Constitution by giving himself absolute power. His eight-year rule was brutal. In addition, Amin's government crippled the developing economy by expelling all Asians, who formed much of Uganda's merchant class.

Exiled Ugandans invaded the country in 1979, aided by a Tanzania-backed rebellion that included the current President Museveni. Obote returned to power through rigged elections in 1980. This fraud fuelled Museveni to launch a guerrilla war. Obote's regime committed massive human rights abuses in its effort to crush Museveni's continued insurgency. By 1985 Obote had again been overthrown, and by 1986 Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) had pushed its way to Kampala. The NRA took the capital in 1986 and installed a "no-party" political system.

Since Museveni and his National Resistance Movement took power several rebel movements have arisen in northern Uganda; the government has defeated them or signed peace deals with them. The most brutal insurgency, led by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), continues to fight the government and has focused on the Acholi people in northern Uganda. Its political objectives have been poorly defined, but the LRA is responsible for massive human rights abuses—most notably, the abduction of an estimated 30,000 children in northern Uganda to serve as soldiers or sex slaves and indiscriminate killings and mutilations. At the same time the Ugandan government's counterinsurgency tactics have caused tremendous suffering. To prevent looting and abductions it created "protected villages"—overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous internally displaced people's camps where millions of northern Ugandans have been forced to live. Government soldiers also have been known to loot villagers' meager possessions and arbitrarily detain, torture, and disappear suspected insurgents. In 2002 the government launched Operation Iron Fist in an attempt to definitively defeat the insurgency, but the operation sparked even more intense and violent attacks by the LRA and dramatically increased the number of internally displaced people. It also failed to end the war.

The rest of Uganda has enjoyed relative calm since the mid 1980s, enabling President Museveni to gain a reputation as a reformer and reap the benefits of unconditional backing of the donor community while the forgotten conflict in the north has festered. The international community looked the other way when Uganda joined a broader regional alliance in 1996 to help a rebellion in the Democratic Republic of Congo topple and replace President Mobutu Sese Sekou.

That regional alliance split two years later when DRC President Laurent Kabila asked his former Rwandan and Ugandan allies to leave the country. Instead they tried to overthrow him. When they failed they occupied the eastern half of the country, starting a war that drew in a dozen African countries on both sides. Uganda and Rwanda acted as classical colonial powers in areas under their respective occupation, providing next to nothing for the welfare of the local population while propping up weak local rebel movements and training ethnic militias and children for the armies of their local proxies. They later fought each other over the rich resources. In the violence resulting from the foreign occupation, national civil war, and localized violence, some 5.4 million Congolese died, mostly from hunger and diseases as all parties preyed on them. Ugandan troops were accused of looting natural resources in eastern Congo and were condemned by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

In July 2005 Ugandans voted in a referendum to establish multiparty democracy. Parliament passed a constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits and allowed Museveni to run for a third term. Opposition leader Kizza Besigye returned from exile to challenge Museveni in elections, only to be arrested in November 2005 on treason and rape charges. Although he was granted bail, Besigye's campaign was hindered by frequent court appearances and a historical lack of balanced party competition that favored Museveni's ruling party. Museveni won the February 2006 elections and began his twentieth year in power.

The LRA has been supported by the Sudanese government, from which it received sanctuary and supplies, in retaliation for the Ugandan government's support of a rebel movement in Southern Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army. Negotiations to end Sudan's 21-year civil war between the government and southern rebels led to decreasing tensions between Uganda and Sudan. In 2003 they reached an agreement allowing Ugandan army troops to pursue LRA soldiers into Sudan. The Ugandan army enjoyed a series of successes against the LRA in 2004, and a number of senior rebel commanders took advantage of an amnesty offer to desert. But sporadic violence and abductions in northern Uganda and southern Sudan continued throughout 2005, even as mediation efforts ran parallel to the military campaign.

In late 2005 to early 2006 the LRA shifted its base into northeastern Congo near Garamba National Park, reinforcing the regional character of the LRA conflict. The International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed arrest warrants for five LRA leaders in October 2005.

Talks brokered by South Sudan Vice-President Riek Machar opened in Juba, Sudan, in July 2006. The Ugandan government and the LRA rebels signed a cessation of hostilities in August. Over the next year-and-a-half the parties signed agreements on comprehensive solutions, accountability and reconciliation, DDR, and a permanent cease-fire, although serious questions remain about their implementation.

Uganda's attempts to grapple with the legacies of domestic political repression, civil strife, and foreign aggression have been one-sided at best. President Amin's 1974 Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearance of People in Uganda ignored disappearances under his own regime. A 1986 Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights examined violations since independence but excluded those of President Museveni's NRM/A. In late 2003 Uganda gained much praise for making the first state referral of the protracted conflict in its north to the recently established ICC. The move was evidently politically motivated, as it sought to focus the new institution on the atrocities committed by the LRA.

In 2005 President Museveni wrote a letter to then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan requesting that the ICC investigation into the case of Ituri district of the DRC be suspended to pacify the strife-torn region. Ituri was under the direct occupation of the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) during the 1998–2002 war in the DRC. UPDF instructors trained thousands of Congolese children for militias to secure the loyalty of warlords on whom the UPDF depended to control the resource-rich region. And Uganda continued to intervene in Ituri affairs even after its withdrawal from the DRC in late 2003, continuing to manipulate the region's abusive ethnic militias.

The ICC was investigating these warlords in a conflict it called "non-international." This characterization was later challenged by the ICC's pre-trial chamber. In a December 2005 ruling the ICJ found that Uganda had violated the principles of non-use of force in international relations and had violated international human rights and humanitarian law and other obligations to the DRC. The Court unanimously ruled that Uganda is obliged to

make reparation to the DRC for the injury caused; it will decide such reparation if the two states fail to agree. Uganda has yet to comply with this ruling.

Uganda is currently exhibiting increasingly undemocratic tendencies with the amendment to the Constitution allowing Museveni to run for a third term, the prosecution of opposition leaders, and the suppression of the relatively free media. Moreover, Uganda is still enjoying additional foreign policy successes on the back of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Kampala in late Nov. 2007. Uganda has also volunteered to host the ICC Review Conference.

The Juba talks remain the best opportunity in 20 years to end the conflict in northern Uganda, but outstanding ICC arrest warrants, stalled progress on the political front, and unclear commitment by both parties remain complicating factors. The peace process in Juba presents a chance for a comprehensive national reconciliation process and a review of the past.

In June 2007 the parties signed a framework for an agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation. The agreement specified that the approach to be taken should be national, with a commitment to the requirements of the Rome Statute, and that there should be a national consultation process to ensure that the views of all stakeholders were taken into consideration.

The parties held their own national consultation processes, involving a series of discussions with religious, traditional and civil society leaders, some community members, and local government representatives. After 6 months the parties returned to Juba to negotiate the annexure to accountability and reconciliation.

The resulting implementation protocol included a comprehensive listing of mechanisms to deal with accountability and reconciliation, notably the creation of a special division within the High Court of Uganda to try those alleged to have committed serious crimes during the conflict.