

Whose land is this?

Assessing the land conflict between the Acholi and Jonam tribes in Northern Uganda

Land and resource-based conflicts are leading conflict drivers in Northern Uganda. The region is characterised by a great number of conflict ‘hotspots’, for example, in Purongo sub-county in Nwoya District. There, the Jonam and the Acholi tribes share a history of both peaceful coexistence and violent competition for land in the sub-county. The recent discovery of oil ignited historic conflict legacies and triggered hasty acquisition of land in the area, illegal land sales by non-bonafide owners, and (fatal) violence. Based on a conflict assessment, Saferworld will provide conflict-sensitive technical support to strengthen land governance processes and will advocate for timely intervention in this hotspot in order to prevent the spread of violence and to solve the conflict peacefully.

With its partners in the Advisory Consortium on Conflict Sensitivity (ACCS, hereafter, the Consortium) – the Refugee Law Project and International Alert – Saferworld works on conflict prevention and conflict-sensitive development in Northern Uganda. The Consortiums’ aim has been to contribute to building a just and sustainable peace in Northern Uganda since the end of the Lord’s Resistance Army’s (LRA) insurgency in the region.

In the Consortium, Saferworld takes the lead on land issues – a main conflict driver in Northern Uganda. Saferworld provides conflict-sensitive technical support in the form of knowledge and capacity enhancement to selected districts in Northern Uganda. The focus is on areas referred to as ‘hotspots’, that is, areas characterised by a high magnitude of land conflicts, incidences of violence, disruption of service delivery, and heightened tension in local communities.

Purongo sub-county in Nwoya District is an example of a land conflict hotspot, where two tribes, the Jonam and the Acholi, are parties in a protracted land conflict. The disputed land is located in Latoro parish at Got Afoyo, close to the eastern bank of the River Nile. In total, it stretches some 55km from the Nile River into Nwoya District. The area extends to a tree,

which has been referred to as ‘Yagopino’. Saferworld, in cooperation with Nwoya District Reconciliation and Peace Team, Nwoya and Nebbi District local governments, as well as independent facilitators, conducted an in-depth assessment on this conflict.

Conflict background and timeline

Historically, both the Jonam and the Acholi tribes settled on and cultivated the eastern bank of the Nile, which lies in Nwoya District. Due to a tse tse fly outbreak at the beginning of the 20th century, the British Colonial Government relocated the Acholi community further east. The Jonam, who settled on the eastern bank, were moved across the river to the western shores of the Nile, in Nebbi District, where the majority of Jonam presently reside. Subsequent to the evacuation, the British established wildlife reserves in the uninhabited areas. The area east of the Nile was gazetted as Murchison Falls National Park and Aswa/Lolim Games Reserves in 1952, which initially made it impossible for the Jonam and the Acholi to return to their former homes after the eradication of the tse tse fly. In the following years, however, the area was opened for settlement or de-gazetted, and Jonam and Acholi returned to the banks of the Nile. At the end of the 1980s, the insurgency of the LRA again displaced the local population.

Land ownership

With the dissolution of the camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) in Uganda in 2007, the process of resettlement on the banks of the Nile repeated itself. By then, shared memory of former land ownership and physical features marking the boundaries between homesteads had disappeared, leaving the local communities without a reliable land ownership system.¹ The conflict in Purongo sub-county concerns two different aspects of land ownership. Firstly, the ownership issues affect Jonam and Acholi, who have settled and lived in Nwoya District on the eastern bank of the Nile for some time

¹ In Uganda, there are four types of land tenure, that is, customary, leasehold, freehold, and mailo (registered land held in perpetuity). Customary land ownership is the most common tenure system in Northern Uganda.

or who want to settle there permanently. Secondly, and more recently, the assessment team deduced that both Jonam and Acholi – who do not necessarily live in the disputed area – sell land there. While both aspects have negatively impacted on the relations between Jonam and Acholi in general, it is most notably the selling of land that causes tensions. There is another factor that further complicates land ownership in the sub-county: based on a concept referred to as ‘cultural boundaries’ (as opposed to administrative ones), there are claims from the Jonam side to the area on the eastern bank of the Nile up to the ‘Yagopino’ tree, some 55km inside Nwoya District.

Conflict causes

The majority of respondents believe that the current conflict along the Nile started with the return of the IDPs to the area. This development, however, coincided with the discovery of oil in the region in 2007/2008. Already, land sales are reported to have increased due to rising land prices. Almost all respondents voiced that the conflict is caused, related to, or intensified by the oil discovery in the region. For instance, one respondent stated, “both Jonam and Acholi are acquiring land to sell because of the discovery of oil”. Due to the region’s historical legacies, such as a lack of land demarcation and land ownership documentation, acquiring or selling land in the disputed area is conflict prone to begin with, yet is heightened by an alleged corruption in the responsible structures of local authorities. According to a respondent, “the same piece of land is being sold several times”. While this is not in itself causing the conflict, it does perpetuate it and is among the reasons which have so far prevented a peaceful solution.

Conflict intensity

The intensity of the conflict is difficult to determine, as accounts differ especially when it comes to specific incidents. It has generally been established that the conflict has fluctuated in the level of violence. This includes violent clashes, which are accompanied by a level of violence or threats of violence that affect people’s life in the area on a daily basis. This also mirrors the above observation that two different aspects of land ownership are involved: one pertaining to regular/ continued or aspired settlement in the area, the other pertaining to specific occasions of land sales. The most common on-going type of violence is the destruction of properties, such as huts and crops. Isolated incidents of violence beyond the individual level have occurred and have, depending on the account, caused several persons to be injured or even killed. There have been cases of sexual and gender-based violence occurring when women cultivate their land. Women are also affected by isolated cases of violence in the conflict, being injured or even killed in the course of clashes.

Peacebuilding efforts

There have been various attempts to build peace between Jonam and Acholi. The two most important include a meeting in Masindi, which took place in 2009, and a meeting which took place at Got Afoyo in early 2014. Both arrived at tangible resolutions addressing political, security, and technical aspects of the conflict and, hence, had some potential to mitigate or even resolve it. While these reoccurring efforts at transforming the conflict reflect a willingness to build sustainable peace in the region, the resolutions nevertheless lack implementation. Others are more critical, pointing out that the local communities were not sufficiently involved in those peacemaking efforts, thereby undermining the local ownership necessary for sustainability, and that political leaders “were not neutral, because they need votes”, indicating the lack of another critical component for successful conflict resolution – impartiality.

Key recommendations for intervention

The assessment team strongly recommends central and local government to implement the resolutions of Masindi (2009) and of the peace meeting in early 2014 as soon as possible. This includes setting up a technical land verification committee to establish a reliable land ownership system in the disputed area, and to set up a community police post at the most disputed location in Got Afoyo to improve the communities’ security. Saferworld intends to respond to the willingness of key stakeholders to end the land conflict in Purongo sub-county by providing technical support on conflict-sensitive land governance and supporting dialogue processes aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence in the area.

Methodology

For the assessment, 30 individual interviews were conducted with individual community members (elders, youth, women), traditional leaders, (technical) officials at sub-county level [local council (LC) I, LC II, sub-county chiefs], district officials [chief administrative officers, LC III, LC V, resident district commissioners, (assistant) community development officers, land officers/surveyors], and a Member of Parliament. Interview partners belonged to the Jonam, the Acholi, or other tribes. Complementing the individual interviews, six targeted focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members (women, elders, youth) from the Acholi and the Jonam tribes were conducted in Purongo sub-county (Latoro parish, Got Afoyo). The average size of the FGDs was 15 participants. Each FGD represents one single response.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

Saferworld – P.O Box 8415, 4th Floor, National Insurance Corporation Building, Pilkington Road, Kampala, UGANDA

Telephone: +256(0)414231130/ +256(0)414231150

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Website: www.saferworld.org.uk