

A Concern for Peace, Unity, and Harmony in Uganda

Easter Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda

April 2004

To:

Catholic Clergy,
Religious,
Lay men and Women,
Our Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ
Religious leaders and members of other religions
All Ugandans of Goodwill,

May the Lord Bless you and Keep you
May the Lord let His Face shine on you and be gracious to you
May the Lord uncover His face to you and bring you. Peace

1.0 The Easter Blessings:

Throughout the Lent Season, which has prepared us for the great event of the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the liturgy has been calling every faithful, every one of us, to radical conversion and trust in God's mercy. Easter season is a Great Feast of our Christian Faith, where our Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ overcame death and proclaimed the new life of the resurrection. All of us who follow Him are the Easter People whose lives must be anchored in the joy of Christ's victory over death and in the hope of a new life, both here on earth, and in the everlasting life in heaven. It is therefore our mission and duty to stand for life, and life of every one; here in Uganda and in the whole world. We stand for peace for everyone; and for human dignity of everyone; and for tolerance with all.

Let the unity that Christ's death proclaimed on the cross be a strong bond among all us citizens in this country. Let the unity in diversity, as God's eternal design, be upheld as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians.

"I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live a manner worthy of the call you have received with all the human love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit as you were also called to the hope of your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism,, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-6).

However it is very disheartening to note with great pain that our brothers and sisters in the northern and eastern part of the country still groan under the suffering of the ravages of armed conflict and violence and therefore cannot enjoy the peace and unity that we all long for.

2.0 Ending the Armed Conflict:

The war in Northern Uganda, which started, in August 1986, has posed a serious challenge to all of us, the people of Uganda. The loss of so many human lives, the maiming and disfiguring of so

many people, the disappearance of so many young and innocent children, the destruction of property and the resultant poverty are all a cause of great shame to our country and to our conscience. We can never, never keep silent on this great evil in our country. We can never say enough has been done to restore peace. We can never give up the search for peaceful means to end this long and bitter war.

We have observed that instead of talking peace, preparing for peace negotiations and promoting the necessary mutual trust between the Government of Uganda and the LRA, the language is once again of full military action on both sides. The hope for urgent peace through negotiations is being lost among many leaders and people.

3.0. Our Appeals on the Armed Conflicts in the North and Eastern parts of the Country:

We renew our loud and most concerned appeal to the President, his entire Executive, the Parliament and the military leaders of the UPDF to do all that is possible to give the peaceful negotiations a chance. We insist that the ending of this dangerous armed conflict must be the first priority of the Government.

Government should never give up the search for peaceful solutions. Disappointments should only make our Government more committed to the peace-process. It should enable Government search for new ways, new strategies, meet more peace supporters in the community, seek for more assistance from other countries and International Organizations and avoid giving the impression to the rebels and the people of Uganda that it has totally given up the peaceful option.

We appeal to both Government and LRA to be sincerely and honestly committed to peaceful negotiations and to agree on a complete ceasefire. Meanwhile the LRA should desist from acts of killing and abduction and fully utilize the Amnesty Act, the Government instituted peace initiative, the Acholi Religious and Cultural Leaders Peace Initiative and other relevant provisions to renounce rebellion and give peace a chance.

We appeal to Government to immediately provide the necessary moral and Legal framework within which the humanitarian crisis in some parts of Northern and Eastern Uganda should be handled through a combined effort between Government and the international community, so that more services may be rendered and on time to fully address the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the war.

Government should desist from recruiting and arming local militias in its military pursuit to end the war but instead use the reserve force and the UPDF to protect civilians in the camps. Government should desist from subjecting people surrendering and those captured to undue treason charges as this contradicts the existing Amnesty provisions.

We appeal to all the people in the affected regions of the North and East especially the Districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Lira, Apac, and Soroti: to unite and form a very strong ***Movement of People for Peace*** to put pressure on both sides to negotiate. Let the warmongers be fully isolated

by the united, effective and powerful movement of people for peace. We appeal to all donors, both within Uganda and from abroad, to fully support this Peace Movement.

Government should desist from any practices that might act as recipe for further violence in the country: reference is made to the lifting of the constitutional presidential term limit which within a short time has created untold tension, sometimes violence in some parts of the country; We call upon the Uganda Joint Christian Council and other religious umbrellas and networks to undertake this mission of peace and peace-making urgently and quickly. Civil Society Organizations including religious institutions should embark on and commit themselves to a process of national reconciliation.

A Concern of the Catholic Bishops:

As we learn from Exodus, Moses had to take the counsel of Jethro, his father-in law, on how to handle the problems that people were bringing to Moses for arbitration. Moses had tried to handle the problems alone and his father-in-law told him: "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone. Listen now to my voice; and will give you council, and God be with you" (cf. Exodus 18.13-23).

In the early Christian Church, when the number of disciples increased, we are told what started happening: "the Hellenists MURMURED against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, It is the not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2-3). It is from this background that we wish to share with you our concern for unity and harmony in our beloved country -Uganda.

5.0. Sings of transition and High Expectations:

Since the year 1986 when the citizens of this country were promised a "fundamental change" the expectations of the people were raised very high. The people enthusiastically participated in local and national elections and felt they were contributing to the shaping of the destiny of their country.

We are grateful for these developments in our country. We have also witnessed the making of the New Constitution with the participation of the citizens, and appreciate too the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE), the freedom of the media and freedom of expression as whole and the revitalization of some sectors of the economy.

As years have gone by, some sections of Ugandans who had developed high expectations on the development of democracy and progress in this country have started lowering their expectations, even though all is not lost. During the campaigns and elections of 2001, there were reports of increased violence and since that time intolerance seems to have set in and increasing, thus causing more and more tensions.

The Church is particularly concerned by the fact that some organs of government appear now to be giving undue attention and energy to issues that can detract the Government from the crucial needs of the majority of the people who are still suffering. The legitimate needs of the poor are being sacrificed for the interests of a few individuals. There is a resulting climate of anxiety and fear for the future. Some groups of people do not feel free to organize themselves and demand their legitimate rights.

The recent opening of political space by the Movement Government and the current dialogue between the opposition parties and the Government are positive signs that the current political transition is taking the right course. The just concluded Constitutional Review process and the recommendations therein are another indication that a smooth transition is very much in view.

These developments are yet again raising high expectations, but also certain fears and anxieties, especially if they are not handled in a spirit of unity, selflessness and harmony for our country as a whole. It is in view of the people's aspirations for a more just, tolerant and peaceful society that:

1. We call upon Government and all citizens to seriously adhere to the constitutional and moral principles of good governance so as to avoid creating unnecessary political uncertainties in the country.
2. We call upon Government to continue with genuine dialogue with all political opposition groups in order to reach an understanding and address all disagreements in a peaceful manner.
3. We call upon the citizens of this country to take advantage of the available constitutional framework to express their discontent other than resulting to violence.

6.0 Comments and Observations on the Current Situation:

The year 2006 is expected to mark yet another landmark in the political history of our country. This landmark should be prepared for with all due diligence and in a spirit of patriotism. We salute our government for abiding by that constitution, in season and out of season. Even when some constitutional rulings have not been in favor of some government organs, the observance and acceptance of the constitutional rulings have been a great lesson to all Ugandans. We commend the government on that good score.

Since late 2000, there have been a number of developments pointing to the process of a peaceful transition from the Movement system to a pluralistic multiparty system. These developments have included: the establishment of the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) which now has submitted its report to cabinet; the Recommendation of the National Executive Committee of the Movement to the Movement National Conference to open up political space and to embrace competitive multiparty system, which recommendation was fully endorsed by the Conference in March 2003. Other developments have included the enacting of the law on Political Parties and Political Organizations; the beginning of registration of political parties and organizations. At the moment the country is waiting for the guidelines on how the recommendations of the Constitutional

Review Commission are to be discussed in an inclusive manner. Some of the above developments still need improvement as various sections of our country are requesting. The Political Parties and Organizations' Act has been successfully challenged in the Courts of Law and sections of it have been declared null and void. Amending this Act is now a priority of Cabinet and Parliament. The talks between government and political parties have so far failed to include several of the older political parties. This impasse must be removed so that these talks include all stakeholders. The discussion and adoption, rejection or modification of the recommendations of the CRC Report should be transparent, honest and fair so that it builds unity, peace, harmony and democracy and not the opposite.

In order to achieve a genuine and democratic transition which will ensure peace, harmony and unity, we offer to Government a few contributions as follows:

a. We encourage Government: the President, Cabinet and Parliament to ensure that the transition process is credible, inclusive and not manipulated in any way. Several proposals given to the CRC at the last moment by Cabinet, particularly those that aim at undermining the powers of Parliament and autonomous constitutional bodies, while increasing the powers of the presidency, these proposals appear to us as not having taken seriously and reflected on the lessons of our past political history.

b. We call upon Government to show a clear and transparent spirit and commitment to the transition to multiparty system, as endorsed by the Movement Conference and as has constantly been advocated for by leaders and members of political parties.

c. The independence of the Judiciary and the autonomy of Parliament and other constitutional bodies should be enviously maintained in order to ensure that the necessary checks and balances among the organs of the State are guaranteed.

d. To ensure that the necessary amendments of the laws for the transition as constitutionally mandated in 2006 are not delayed nor done in a hurry due to absence of the necessary laws and other mechanisms demanded by those laws.

e. As a nation we must be more committed to the observance of Human rights and their promotion, totally eliminating any type of torture by any security agency and committed to observance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human Rights Conventions, Covenants and Treaties Uganda has duly signed and ratified and committed to all human rights provisions in our Constitution. We need to respect the sovereignty and will of the people as the 1948 Human Rights Declaration states:

"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of the government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures" (ART. 21).

As a nation we live and exist in the public eye of the International community. We deserve a good name everywhere in the world. Any Government agent and any other person, who behaves or acts contrary to the law and the established human rights should be dealt with according to the

law, since no one is above the law and all persons are equal before the law. It is this enforcement of the rule of law that will assist us to get rid of violence, torture and arbitrary actions by anyone, including law enforcement officers.

7.0 Greater Energy in the Fight against Corruption:

Corruption has become a cancer that needs greater energies and special attention. It has and still continues to eat away all resources at the expense of the lives of the vulnerable groups, who should have been at the center of every step to meaningful service delivery. This makes a very big contribution to the poverty and underdevelopment that make our country lag behind. Wealth in the hands of a few is undermining the dignity of the people who are turned into beggars for the rest of their lives. Calling again the attention of all the faithful to our Pastoral letter dated April 1995, "Political Maturity: Consolidating Peace and National Unity" pg. 11. We repeat that: "Ugandans are beginning to become impatient with the Government's apparent incapacity to deal with, fight and eventually eliminate corruption. It is believed that millions of shillings of public funds end up in the pockets of individuals, and this creates frustration and erosion of confidence in public authorities. Legislation which exists to ensure proper accountability and transparency in the use and administration of public funds, must be enforced; where it is lacking, new laws should be enacted to stamp out the evil practice of corruption".

8.0 Calls and Commitment of the Catholic Bishops:

We call upon and request our catholic clergy and all pastoral agents to encourage all their congregations to say one Our Father, each day at the end of the Holy Mass, calling on the Father of us all and in the words of our Saviour Jesus gave us, for the intention of Peace in the Northern and Eastern Uganda. We encourage all catholic families and individuals to do the same each day before they retire to bed, beginning with the first Sunday after Easter 141 April 2004 until peace will be achieved in Northern Uganda. Let this prayer daily join us all in this one intention for peace.

We commit ourselves to encouraging our congregations in our respective dioceses, to make special collections and donations to victims of war and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country.

9.0. Our Concluding Recommendations:

We should, and indeed we must move away from the dangerous sub-culture of war, violence, revenge, intolerance and use of any extra-legal means in pursuit of any goal and fully embrace a culture of peace, peaceful resolution of conflicts, tolerance, genuine forgiveness and reconciliation and a culture of Constitutionalism. This is the key to consolidating unity, peace and harmony in the country, and the best means to end the armed conflicts in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country and to prevent deadly conflicts in the future.

We must all build peace in our hearts as individuals; we must build peace in our families and communities and then we shall be able to build peace in our nation. This is the big call we want

to make to our pastoral agents, all leaders in the country to build a culture of peace, security and tolerance among all individuals and communities in Uganda.

We need to build strong institutions for peace in the country and in every community, using fully both the good traditional means and the modern ones and particularly the Christian means of Peace-making, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Both church and state should set up coherent peace strategies to address conflicts in the country. As Catholic Bishops we are ready to work closely with the State in the realization of this noble cause.

There should be a good national agenda for inculcating a strong and genuine sense of patriotism, unity in diversity and respect for legitimate differences.

There should be a national commitment to peace education aimed at demilitarizing the minds of the people, replacing a language of violence with a language of peace, eliminating acts of violence and replacing them with acts of peace, thus building a permanent culture of peace among all people.

Government should develop a sincere will to fight corruption and violation of human rights at all levels of society by strengthening the anticorruption institutions such as the Inspectorate of Government, the Uganda Human Rights' Commission, Directorate of Ethics and Integrity, together with the judiciary.

10.0 Conclusion

May the peace and joy that the Mystery of Easter bring fill you with new life that will bear much fruit and enable all people of Uganda and in all parts of Uganda to live in Permanent Peace, Unity and Harmony.

+ Paul Bakyenga

*Chairman of the Uganda Episcopal Conference
and Archbishop of Mbarara Archdiocese*