

Ugandan Anglican bishop defends rebel commander accused of war crimes

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue

In its heyday, the Ugandan rebel force known as the Lord's Resistance Army was accused of killing more than 100,000 people, abducting 60,000 to 100,000 children, and displacing more than 2.5 million civilians.

Yet a retired Anglican bishop in northern Uganda says he is ready to defend a top LRA commander who was accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Nelson Onono-Onweng said rebel commander Dominic Ongwen was a victim of circumstance, having been abducted at the age of ten and transformed into a marauding killer.

"I am willing to go and give evidence at the ICC about him; I am not afraid," Onono-Onweng said. "The world betrayed this child. The state, which had the instruments to protect him, did not. The international community also took too long to act [against the] LRA. The world can see how things conspired against him."

Ongwen appeared at the ICC in late January after surrendering to U.S. special forces in the Central African Republic. He was indicted in 2005, together with three other top commanders.

Onono-Onweng said he had met Ongwen in 2006 when religious, cultural, and political leaders took a trip into the Congo forest to ask the rebels to end the violence.

Ongwen commanded the deadly Sania Brigade within the LRA. The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, a former Catholic altar boy, appeared in northern Uganda around 1986. Combining African mysticism and Christian fundamentalism, it fought to replace President Yoweri Museveni's government with a theocratic one.

In 2008, the LRA left northern Uganda, and it is now believed to be operating in a densely forested area between the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and the CAR.

In 1997, northern Uganda religious leaders formed the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative. Since the ICC indictment, the peace group has been calling for a cultural justice system called Mato Oput in place of the international court.

Mato Oput, which is based on forgiveness, can achieve more than the ICC, since it aims at healing and transformation and restores relationships, according to Sheikh Musa Khalil, a Muslim leader in Uganda and vice chairman of the peace group.

—Religion News Service

*This article was edited on February 17, 2014.*