

Ugandan Peacemakers Take On Cattle Rustling Gunfights & Range Wars



An On-the-Ground Report

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Having been raised in Montana, I grew up with stories of cattle rustling, gunfights, and range wars. Thankfully, these Wild West stories were of the distant past, so my family does not live in fear of violence today.

Not so the people of northern Uganda! In addition to the oppression they experience from rebel groups like the “Lord’s Resistance Army,” they also live under the looming threat of deadly fights within their own tribes over cattle and land. These internal conflicts claim thousands of lives each year and impede desperately needed economic and social progress.

But God is raising up a group of reconcilers in Uganda who are using Peacemaker

Ministries’ resources and training to turn back this tide of bloodshed with a wave of reconciliation. The more I heard of their remarkable stories, the more I wanted to see their work firsthand. So in February I traveled to Uganda to spend two weeks with some of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. Accompanying me were Chip Zimmer, our VP of International Ministries, as well as Jim Rosser and Mike Hildenbrand, who represent some churches in Portland that are supporting peacemaking efforts in northern Uganda.

During our visit, we listened in awe to testimonies of warriors, village elders, mothers, orphanage workers, pastors, bishops, judges, a presidential advisor, and the Paramount Chief of a 2-million-person tribe. Over and over we heard how gospel-driven peacemaking is reducing cattle raids, gunfights, land disputes, and family violence. The resulting peace has drawn thousands of people to Christ, triggered church growth, and opened the door for resettlement projects and life-changing economic development.

The first tribe we visited is called the Karamojong. Cattle stealing, primarily to pay bride prices, has been a way of life within this tribe of 700,000 people for generations. Fatalities during raids were rare until thirty years ago. Then Idi Amin fled the country and abandoned his armories in northern Uganda. This allowed thousands of AK-47s to fall into the hands of Karamojong warriors, some as young as fourteen. Since then, 50,000-100,000 people, many of them only small boys herding family cattle, have been killed in bloody raids and reprisals.

Two sub-tribes, the Pian and Bokora, had previously lived peacefully near each other in a fertile area called Nabwal. But as violence increased, they moved thirty miles apart, abandoning the fertile valley as a skeleton-covered “demilitarized zone” and living in dry lands that produced little food. Malnutrition, starvation, and violence continued to haunt both sub-tribes.

Ten years ago, Dr. Val Shean, a Christian missionary veterinarian, came to live among the Karamojong. Working through a non-profit group called CLIDE (Community Livestock-Integrated Development Consultancy), she steadily built credibility by caring for the two tribes’ cattle, goats, and camels. Sensing an opportune moment in 2007, she sent a copy of my book, *The Peacemaker*, to four churches in Portland that support her, and asked them to prepare



and send a team of mature men (the “grey hairs”) to provide training on peacemaking to pastors in the Pian and Bokora tribes.

One of those men was Jim Rosser, who joined us on our trip in February. As we traveled the dusty roads of Uganda together, he told me about the training he and his fellow grey hairs had done in 2008. Using the biblical principles laid out in *The Peacemaker*, they worked with Dr. Val for two weeks to equip sixty of the most influential pastors, tribal elders, warriors, and women in both sub-tribes to be peacemakers. Little did they know how God was planning to use that investment.



The Peace Villages

After the grey hairs returned to Portland, Dr. Val and the Karamojong pastors arranged for a larger training to take place in Nabwal, the uninhabited valley midway between the two sub-tribes. They

brought food for 300 people, but God had bigger plans. He moved over 2,500 people to walk fifteen miles from both the Pian and Bokora areas to seek peace!

The peacemaking training went on for three days. The pastors and leaders taught the people how they could be reconciled to both God and one another through Christ. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully, bringing many people to their knees in repentance, faith, and reconciliation. At the end of the meeting, the people agreed that they should plant a “Peace Village” on that very spot, populated by people from both sub-tribes.

As word spread about Pian and Bokora villagers living in peace, that one Peace Village quickly multiplied. Through careful planning by CLIDE, over 9,000 others have relocated to Nabwal, founding sixty-one similar villages. Another 2,000 people have established a Peace Village in a nearby valley. As we drove between these areas, I witnessed another group of Karamojong families clearing the brush for yet another settlement. Leaving their AK-47s behind, they are eagerly moving toward a life of peace and sustainable community. God keeps his promises:

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the best from the land” (Isa. 1:18-19).



Peacebuilders in Action

These villages have established a “Peace Council” comprised of sixty men and women from the various villages. There is also a group of “Peace Builders,” many of whom are tribal elders, who have been trained and commissioned to promote peace within and between the villages.


I had the opportunity to see one of these Peace Builders in action. During our visit, the villagers slaughtered three bulls—a rare treat—to celebrate the anniversary of their reconciliation. After the elders received their portions, some young men shoved their way in and grabbed chunks of meat out of turn. This resulted in angry protests by those who did not get any meat. As we heard them shouting throughout the night, violence seemed imminent.

But the next morning, the village elders convened a meeting to resolve the matter. I was able to watch

and listen as one of the Peace Builders put his training into practice. As God’s grace and wisdom flowed through this gifted young man, he helped the disputing warriors work through a story-telling and problem-solving process that resulted in confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Violence was averted, peace restored, and the reconciling power of Christ was on display to the entire village.

This was just one of many conflicts that have been resolved by the Peace Builders. In another example, a man was kidnapped and killed in the only cattle raid that has taken place in Nabwal since 2008. Dr. Val and another Peace Builder tracked the murderer to his village and persuaded the elders to turn him over to the army for justice. His family eventually paid a large restitution in cattle. By God’s grace, a cycle of revenge was broken and peace was restored.

Exalting the Gospel of Christ



These events have opened many people's hearts to the gospel. Before the peace gathering, CLIDE was seeing only about 40 conversions a year, most of whom were women or children. Within a year of the peace gatherings, over 1,800 people came to faith in Christ, many of them men whom I had the privilege to worship with during my visit. Frequent conversions continue. As people see the fruit of God's peace and reconciliation in the Peace Villages, more and more of them are being drawn to the Giver of that peace.

As word of the Peace Villages spread, NGOs (non-government organizations) associated with the

United Nations and the European Union have sent people to Nabwal to learn how the Karamojong were persuaded to lay down their arms and live in peace. When they meet Dr. Val, they usually say, "Many organizations have come here in the past to promote peace, but most of them have failed. What is your secret?"

Her consistent answer has been, "It's the gospel of Christ. Everyone else brought processes and techniques for resolving conflict. We brought the Prince of Peace himself. It is his love and power that has changed these people and enabled them to obey his Word and live in peace." What a vivid application of Isaiah 9:5-6!

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning...for unto us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And He will be called...Prince of Peace.



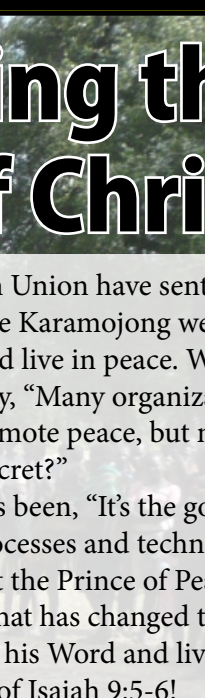
Landgrabs & Murder

After leaving Nabwal, Chip and I spent a week in the nearby city of Lira with our friend Dickson Ogwang, a member of the Lango tribe. While the Karamojong fight over cattle, the Lango fight over land, often because they lack reliable ways to establish property boundaries and record titles. These problems were greatly aggravated when thousands of people were driven from their lands in the 90's by the ill-named Lord's Resistance Army, which kidnapped children in northern Uganda, brutally indoctrinating them and forcing them to become child soldiers.

Now that the LRA has been driven out of the region, most of the Lango are returning to their hereditary lands, often finding someone else farming them. The resulting property disputes often lead to deadly clashes.

Enter Dickson Ogwang. As a child, he narrowly survived attacks by Idi Amin's soldiers and then by the LRA. He went on to serve as a military officer, gain a law degree, and serve as a public prosecutor. Seeing his people's need for better ways to resolve conflict, he left his secure government position to found Peace and Reconciliation Ministries of Africa (PRMA). He has received mediation training through Peacemaker Ministries and has put those skills to work in dozens of conflicts.

I met one of the men Dickson served and heard from his own lips how his brother had been murdered last year by his own wife, who was then killed by the husband's family. Further reprisals were prevented as God worked through Dickson to mediate confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation between the two families. Wanting to serve his village by following Dickson's example of being a reconciler, the surviving brother asked me for a copy of *The Peacemaker*, which I was delighted to place in his hands.



Dickson Ogwang teaching a group of national soldiers.



Hearing of Dickson's reputation as a peacemaker, Yosam Odur, the Paramount Chief of his tribe, asked him to train forty-five tribal leaders to resolve land disputes using the biblical principles Dickson had learned through Peacemaker Ministries. That training took place in the fall of 2009, with two mutual friends, Sam Casey of Advocates International¹ and Craig Conrad of Community Mediation Project², also trained by our ministry.

I had the privilege of meeting with Chief Odur and his Prime Minister, both of whom are committed Christians. They described how their traditional tribal mediators are struggling to resolve thousands of land disputes. After thanking me for how Peacemaker Ministries' resources have aided PRMA's training efforts, they went on to say, "There is a significant, noticeable difference in the effectiveness of mediators PRMA has trained in biblical peacemaking as compared to those who have not yet received this training."

As these two distinguished leaders described the peace that God is bringing to their people through the efforts of men like Dickson, I could not help but think of how their labors are mirroring the promise made in Isaiah 2:4-5:

"He will judge between nations and settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation nor will they train for war anymore. Come, ... Let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isa. 2:4-5).



The Gospel Destroys Walls

Everywhere we went in Uganda, the reconciling power of Jesus and his gospel was demonstrated in countless personal testimonies and by the sight of former enemies living and farming side by side. As I saw these people living at peace I kept thinking of Ephesians 2:14-15: *"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility..., thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross."*

Small Seeds, Big Harvest

I was humbled to see how God has used our resources and training to bring about peace in a culture that is so different from ours. Our brothers and sisters in CLIDE and PRMA have sown our resources and training all over Uganda. Much of that biblical seed has fallen on good soil and is yielding a crop a hundred times more than what was sown.

Pastors, bishops, warriors, chiefs, military officers, court justices, prime ministers, and even a personal advisor to Uganda's President Museveni told us how *The Peacemaker* has helped them to understand the Bible's teaching on gospel-centered peacemaking and live out the reconciling love of Christ in their areas of influence. Having tasted the first fruits of this harvest, they urged us to continue supporting the efforts of CLIDE and PRMA to train Peace Builders and land conciliators to promote peace and justice in their clans and communities. We are eager to do this.

Please Pray with Us

Since our staff is small, we are able to personally teach only a limited number of training events outside the U.S. each year. But by God's grace we are equipping mission-minded churches in the U.S. and partnering with overseas ministries like CLIDE and PRMA to sow our resources and training all around the world.

Even as you read this report, we are working with dozens of ministry partners who are taking the message of peacemaking into Russia, Mongolia, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, Peru, Columbia, Kenya, Jordan, India, and Bangladesh, to name but a few.

Please pray with us that this seed will fall on good soil, like the Peace Villages of Nabwal, where it will grow and produce a crop of peace, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times, to the glory of Jesus Christ and the building of his kingdom.



1. www.AdvocatesInternational.org
2. www.MediationProject.org