

**Annex 8: Monitor Online, I fled in 87 when my bank account was seized-Obita,
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From Monitor Online

I fled in '87 when my bank account was seized – Obita

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By

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Former Lord's Resistance Army peace delegation chairman James Obita has been granted amnesty by the Ugandan government. He tells Grace Matsiko what it all means to his life: -

What made you apply for amnesty?

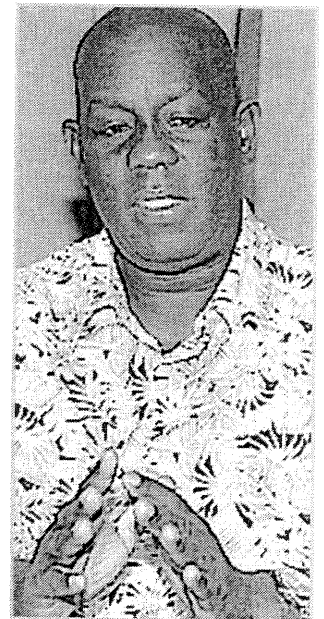
It is a requirement for all returnees who are in one way or the other involved with fighting groups. By applying for an amnesty it helps clear the air – sometimes people fear to interact with you. They ask themselves whether you are in the country legally or illegally.

Why did you apply for amnesty now not years back?

The timing had to be right. The agreement we negotiated [through the Juba peace process] was good. That is why I was convinced it was time to come out. The fundamental issue of the peace agreement is to reconcile. I believe if the Final Peace Agreement was signed all the people in the bush and Diaspora would return home and expect they will be welcomed by the government. Therefore returning home was proof of goodwill on my part and an example to the rest that it was safe to return.

Do you regret joining the LRA?

Not at all because I believe that my role was constructive – aimed at bringing peace to my region. I sincerely believe without my constructive engagement with the LRA, peace could not have been achieved in northern Uganda.



FREE: Dr Obita

You served as the LRA spokesman before, then director external relations. Wouldn't that role make you culpable as the LRA field commanders?

No. The LRA was the most demonised and most hated organisation in the world and my role was basically to distinguish between the LRA and the plight of the people of northern Uganda. Nobody can deny the fact that there was injustice in northern Uganda and marginalisation over the years.

But does it make sense to kill people you claim to be fighting for?

Over the years I have worked tirelessly to persuade the LRA to move away from the path of violence against civilians. I was instrumental in convincing the LRA to stop using landmines. In 1996 and 1997 I worked in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross and conducting workshops in LRA camps.

Do you believe in the notion Museveni's government has an agenda against northern Uganda

I don't subscribe to those allegations. Suffice to say when NRM came to power in 1986 there was open hostility and hatred toward Acholis because there was belief they were responsible for the suffering of the people from the south and this is the root cause of the conflict.

How did you come to get in contact with Kony?

The LRA was an offspring of UPDA – Uganda People's Defence Army. When they were defeated, the Holy Spirit Movement led by Alice Lakwena took over. When Lakwena was defeated, the LRA was formed. In UPDA I knew the overall commander, Col. Odong Latek. He later died in the field. I kept in touch with them until Kony's group got in touch with me in Nairobi. In 1995 I flew from Nairobi and then I was flown in a Sudanese military plane to Juba and then to the LRA camp. I met Kony in Jabelin [in South Sudan].

Is it true Sudan gave arms to LRA?

Absolutely. When the LRA moved to South Sudan it had the backing of Khartoum government in direct retaliation for the Uganda government's support for the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army. There was hardly any financial support. Food and military supplies were taken care of by Khartoum.

What is your perception of Kony because some people believe he is mentally ill?

Kony has exceptional leadership. Whatever we may say about him he is able to control his fighters. There reason people think he is not normal is the fact that he has instilled the belief in his fighters that he has direct communication with God or the spirit. Fighters believe he possesses special powers.

You seem to be close to Kony. Why did he sack you as the peace delegation chairman?

I was not fired. The peace delegation finished its mandate in Juba and what was left was signing the Final Peace Agreement. When David Matsanga abandoned the delegation in Ri-Kwang-Ba on April 10, Kony asked me to take over the team until the peace agreement is signed.

It is Matsanga who came up with the story he had been re-appointed and to-date nobody can confirm that. When Kony failed to show up when we went to meet him on May 10 with leaders from the north, we came back to Juba and stayed for a month waiting for him to call us. He did not. Out of frustration, we left Juba. When we left, Matsanga claimed I was sacked. The peace delegation mandate ended when the agreement was ready for signature. Therefore, to say I was sacked does not make sense because our mandate technically ended.

What's your perception of Matsanga?

Matsanga is a man without shame. The reason Matsanga had an upper hand in dealing with Kony is that in the past he had access to funds coming from unexplained sources that he used to buy his way up to the position he attained [as the second leader of the LRA peace delegation after the sacking of Martin Ojul]. He could send airtime to the fighters, send money to their families. Matsanga has said he is Museveni's public enemy number one yet we know the bulk of the money used to lure LRA fighters was probably coming from the same government he claims to hate to his bone.

What are your plans?

I want to rebuild my life. I want to bring my family home from Canada.

Why did you go into exile?

I was identified as one of the supporters of the rebellion. I was targeted by security agencies. I was under constant surveillance as lecturer of industrial chemistry at Makerere University and part-time businessman. I fled in 1987 when my assets, including bank account, were seized.