

Shaping Peace Together

Every 21st day of September, the World comes together to commemorate the International Day of Peace. As noted by the United Nations, this year it has been clearer than ever that we are not each other's enemies. Rather, our common enemy is a tireless virus that threatens our health, security and very way of life. In 1981 the United Nations General Assembly established the International Day of Peace, and in 2001 it unanimously voted to designate the day as a period of non-violence and cease-fire. It is perhaps this spirit that prompted the Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres on the 23 March 2020 to appeal for a global ceasefire amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. *"The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war. That is why today, I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives,"* he said.

While the COVID 19 pandemic has overshadowed 2020 as a year, we cannot overlook the different dynamics that suppress people's peace in their day to day lives such as famine, war, human rights violations, climate change and other social and political issues. As a country Uganda's history of conflict has continued to sprinkle into today's realities. The Refugee Law Project's *Compendium of Conflicts in Uganda*, mapped out over 125 pre- and post-Independence armed conflicts in Uganda and their reconciliation needs. The country may be experiencing stable peace but, without addressing the needs of those communities with a violent past, the effects of this conflict will continue to surface and impact their day to day lives.

A reflection on the word peace

The Refugee Law Project through its various engagement with stakeholders such as the National Reconciliation and Transitional Justice Audit, community dialogues and Peace Film Festivals, has often posed the question of what "peace" means to different people; young, old, men, women, refugees and hosts. What is consistently striking about the responses is the fact that there is a widespread understanding that peace is not merely the absence of war or the silence of guns but the ability to live in a conducive environment where people are free to express their thoughts, marry who they want to marry, get a job they want among others. Peace is said to exist when people's wellbeing is assured, when discrimination is combated, when opinions and identities are respected, when there is justice and human rights for all, when the plight of forced migrants is highlighted.

Uganda is blessed with diversity. While there are traces in our history showing how this diversity has sometimes been used as a conflict driver, it is important to note as we observe the International Peace Day, that we are stronger together and that as we shape peace, we need to work together across lines of ethnicity, political divide, caste, religion and so forth to find a solution to our issues.

2020 and the Need for Cooperation

This year's theme "*Shaping Peace Together*" is a call for cooperation if we are to achieve and sustain peace. Maintaining international peace and security is the core reason the United Nations was formed and that is why in the preamble of the Charter of the UN, the word peace appears over 10 times. The UN thrives on the cooperation of its member states; for it to achieve its mission of a peaceful and secure world.

This year, we commemorate the day amidst the COVID19. The pandemic is complicating fragile peace processes. In many parts of the world It is also derailing and distracting communities that had been hoping to pursue peace during this time. In Sudan's Darfur region, the pandemic has led to repeated extensions of the deadline for completing the Juba peace process. Elsewhere, terrorist and violent extremist groups see the uncertainty created by the coronavirus as a tactical advantage. In Somalia, there is a risk that Al-Shabaab could increase attacks while security forces focus, by necessity, on the pandemic. In the local context it is difficult for conflicting communities to carry out processes such as dialogue, victims' exchange visits, memorialization, reconciliation events amongst others. While the digital phase of working and communication has taken precedence during the pandemic, it remains an avenue that is not open to all, especially not to grassroots communities whose access to digital era is still limited.

For countries that are preparing for elections, referenda, attempts to use the pandemic as a pretext to postpone the holding of elections have created tensions and processes of election under the current pandemic have been hijacked by those with the advantage. This is likely to leave communities bitter and more divided, thus compounding the already significant challenges of dealing with the health and social effects of the pandemic and related lockdowns.

Humanity is not only dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic but also conflicts brought about by climate change such as floods in some parts of the world like Sudan. The United Nations says humanitarian needs have surged with more than 1 billion children out of school, 135 million people facing starvation, and routine immunizations disrupted on an unprecedented scale. The vulnerability of refugees and internally displaced persons has grown more pronounced. This certainly complicates the expectations of communities on what peace is as was earlier explained from our experience working with the communities.

As we continue observing the International Day of Peace and finding lasting solutions for peace in our communities and with our neighbors, it is important that we remember and appreciate the sacrifices, bravery and courage of all the peace builders who have ensured that Uganda is pacified. Most notably the religious leaders, cultural leaders, Opinion leaders, Politicians, Musicians, Media, Medical practitioners, uniformed personnel, and the local communities

We appreciate the development partners such as the European Union, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands among others for continuously investing and contributing resources to ensure that we have a peaceful world and a peaceful Uganda. They have ensured that partners engage, build capacities on rule of law, education, peace and security. They have also availed resources to ensure that communities living with untreated war related ailments can access medical and psychosocial support to ensure that they live lives of dignity and attain full productivity. With this support victims of conflict related sexual violence and victims of torture among others have undergone specialized surgical processes. Those with retained bullets and bomb fragments have had them removed and begun to live dignified lives.

We also salute the Government of Uganda for adopting the National Transitional Justice Policy, an overreaching structure and framework designed to address justice, accountability and reconciliation needs of post-conflict Uganda and to provide a holistic intervention to achieving lasting peace in the country. It is a great contribution to shaping peace together. All other additional processes including passing supportive legislations should be fast tracked so that this commitment from government comes to life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the theme of the year is “Shaping Peace Together,” we call upon everyone to work together to combat violence, discrimination, and human rights violations, to stand for humanity and to ensure that we create an environment that is safe and peaceful for our co-existence. Amidst this Pandemic let’s continue to stay safe, if you must move or indulge in any activities in public spaces, Wear that Mask, keep safe social distance, washing hands all the time with soap should no longer be a duty but rather a discipline and a delight. Let this be our contribution to putting off the fire that is consuming the global village.