

# Broadcasting peace: radio a tool for recovery

*Unbiased information empowers communities after conflicts*

By **Mary Kimani**

**M**ega FM's broadcasts may not reach far outside northern Uganda. But in an area that has been brutalized by decades of insurgency by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), it is having an impact. Oryema, a former LRA child soldier who later returned home, explains why. "I did not feel anything bad about killing," he says. "Not until I started listening to Radio Mega.... I actually heard over the radio how... we burnt homes.... And I started to think, 'Are we really fighting a normal war?' That is when I started realizing that maybe there is something better than being here in the bush."

According to Mr. Boniface Ojok of the non-profit project Justice and Reconciliation, located in Gulu, northern Uganda, Mega FM's programme "Dwog cen paco" (come back home) "succeeded in encouraging rebels to come out of the bush." The programme brought former soldiers like Oryema on the air to talk about their experiences.

Funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), Mega FM is one of several such stations that have been set up in Africa by the United Nations, donor agencies, churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help communities overcome the challenges of rebuilding peace after wars have ended.

## **Rights and law**

Southwest of Uganda is Ituri, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where thousands were killed during the country's civil war. There another project, called the Interactive Radio for Justice (IRFJ), seeks to raise public awareness of human rights and the options for dealing with crimes during and after the war.

Set up in June 2005 with funding from the US philanthropic MacArthur Foundation, the IRFJ produces programmes in which members of the public pose questions and get answers from local and international officials. The goal is not just to inform the public, says producer



*Radio can be a powerful medium for spreading misinformation and insecurity — and for building peace.*

Wanda Hall. "The project allows us to push authorities to do their job. Local leaders know what their job is. They know the law and their role. Our job is to get them to say these things on the radio so that the population knows what their rights are."

According to Congolese journalist and IRFJ co-producer Richard Pituwa, the project's programmes are intended to help people understand local and international law. Comparing the current situation to the period before the project came to Ituri, he told *Africa Renewal* that he saw a marked change in the "police's approach to people and people being more observant of the law."

According to one participant in an October 2006 listeners' poll, "We are starting to understand our rights, and even the police have stopped arresting us arbitrarily." Said another: "These programmes are very important for justice and peace to return.... It would have been better to have programmes like this on the air before the war."

## **Not a luxury**

In West Africa, the NGO Search for Common Ground (SFCG) produces and airs programmes on peace, disarmament and

reconciliation in Liberia, using 22 partner radio stations — 10 in the capital, Monrovia, and 12 in rural communities. In 2004, when the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees needed to repatriate 340,000 Liberians from neighbouring countries, the SFCG developed a programme with UN updates, news on the peace process and information on safe areas.

Similar programmes produced by SFCG's Talking Drum Studio are still being aired in neighbouring Sierra Leone, which has also been recovering from war. Mr. Christopher John, then regional commissioner for the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), told independent evaluators in 2004 that the SFCG's programming "has helped the SLP become even critical of itself.... It helped the police draw closer to the people and build confidence and trust." Such efforts, he added, "need to be sustained if we are to be successful in consolidating peace."

Similar stations seeking to promote peace include UNAMSIL Radio, set up by the UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra

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