CANDIDATE FOR UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL, 2026

Editorials and Commentaries on the work of *Olara Otunnu*

The following excerpts from editorials and articles, written by editors and commentators, document Olara Otunnu's journey from his student leadership against the Idi Amin regime in Uganda, to his role at the U.N. Security Council, protecting children in war, providing community leadership in rebuilding war-torn Northern Uganda, and current candidacy for the position of U.N. Secretary-General.

The New York Times

CLIP 01

NEW YORK, USA

December 13, 1981

THEME

Breaking Deadlock

THE NEW YORK TIMES · ARTICLE PUBLISHED · DECEMBER 13, 1981

U.N. Vote Propels Ugandan and China to Center Stage

By Bernard D. Nossiter, Special to The New York Times

Javier Perez de Cuellar won the job, but many diplomats here think the big winners in the battle for Secretary General were China and Olara A. Otunnu of Uganda.

But he might still be waiting to get in if it had not been for Mr. Otunnu.

Mr. Otunnu, 31 years old, a diplomat educated at Oxford University and Harvard Law School, leads Uganda's mission here.

'HE HAS BEEN ASTONISHING'

"I did not look forward to Otunnu as President of the Council," an American diplomat, who asked not to be named, said. "But he has been astonishing. Fair, even-handed, imaginative and lucid, explaining complex choices with rare skill."

It was Mr. Otunnu who determined that neither Mr. Waldheim nor his own favorite, Mr. Salim, could break the Chinese and American vetoes. The Ugandan persuaded both to drop out of the voting. Confronted with nine new names, he designed a straw poll that enabled the Council members to see which candidates had any hope of success. It took only one formal ballot after that, and Mr. Perez de Cuellar was elected.

THE NEW YORK TIMES · DECEMBER 13, 1981

READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

The Washington Post

CLIP 02

WASHINGTON, D.C., USA
April 12, 2005

THEME
Protecting Children

THE WASHINGTON POST · EDITORIAL · APRIL 12, 2005

Children in Combat

There is much that the United Nations cannot be expected to do, but it can focus attention on human rights issues, particularly in lawless places where nobody else has much influence. For the past several years, the U.N. Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, has been building a framework to put pressure on armies that send children into battle, particularly in the kinds of places where neither the laws of war nor generally accepted standards have penetrated.

According to information he has compiled during travels to Colombia, Sri Lanka, Congo and elsewhere, more than 250,000 children are exploited in conflict, as child soldiers and porters, spies and sex slaves. In the past decade, more than 2 million children have been killed in battle, and more than 6 million have been injured.

Mr. Otunnu has now presented his report on child combatants to the U.N. Security Council. Unusually, for a U.N. document, it names names, concluding with a list of offenders. Very unusually for the United Nations, which is rarely involved in internal conflicts, it lists both governments and insurgent rebel groups that exploit children. Among them are the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, the Janjaweed of Sudan, the Communist party of Nepal, as well as both irregular rebel forces and government forces in Uganda, Burma and Congo.

Mr. Otunnu proposes specific actions, mostly involving careful, continued monitoring of these conflicts by existing regional and U.N. authorities. Already, he says, his list has generated a reaction from groups that 10 years ago might have ignored international criticisms. Because they rely on international connections for weapons, supplies and support, and because many hope to take power, they appear more sensitive to U.N. criticism than might have been expected. This is "more than just words," he says. "This is concrete, tangible."

Perhaps fearing the specificity of these recommendations, the Security Council has not yet developed a resolution based on them. This is an area where the U.S. government, if its diplomats were to take an interest, could push the United Nations to make a difference. Monitoring the use of children in the informal, insurgent wars that torment so much of the developing world might inhibit those who would otherwise violate the norms without a second thought.

THE WASHINGTON POST · EDITORIAL, APRIL 12, 2005
READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CLIP 03

TORONTO, CANADA
August 2, 2005

THEME
Ensuring Accountability

THE GLOBE AND MAIL · EDITORIAL · AUGUST 2, 2005

Save the Child Soldiers

Laws without teeth don't mean very much. All the international treaties and conventions banning the use of children in armed conflict by and large have failed to protect them. Over the past 10 years, two million children have been killed in war zones and another six million disabled and injured. Today, more than 250,000 traumatized children around the world bear arms in conflicts adults have created. Land mines kill or maim as many as 10,000 children every year.

These United Nations statistics should shock. Remarkably, they have finally moved the UN Security Council to reach the obvious conclusion that concrete gestures must accompany well-meaning words. It has been far too long in coming, but the council has unanimously adopted specific measures to curtail serious violations against children caught up in armed conflicts. "For the first time, the UN is establishing a formal, structured and detailed compliance regime of this kind," said Olara Otunnu, UN special representative for children and armed conflict.

Here's how it is supposed to work. First, the UN is setting up a comprehensive mechanism that will monitor and report on specific violations by governments and insurgents. The violations include the killing or maiming of children; the recruiting or use of child soldiers; attacks against schools or hospitals; abduction of children; and the denial of humanitarian access for children. The UN already has a long list of known violators, including Sudan's Janjaweed militia, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army. The UN teams will carry out their monitoring in stages. This year, they will scrutinize Burundi, Congo, Ivory Coast, the Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sudan; next year, they will monitor Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

What makes the Security Council's resolution especially noteworthy is that it orders offending parties that are already on the name-and-shame list, and any new ones as well, to draw up concrete plans and timelines to stop the abuse of children. If they don't, the council may take action — imposing arms embargoes and cutting off access to money, and imposing travel restrictions on leaders and barring them from taking advantage of any amnesty provisions. "Today, as never before," said Mr. Otunnu, "we have the necessary norms, institutions and means to realize the 'era of application' for the protection of all children exposed to armed conflict."

The council's resolution is an important step in protecting children in places where neither international conventions nor generally accepted standards have penetrated. Still, its success will depend on the will of the council's 15

members to see that it is implemented fully and adequately enforced. In other words, words must be turned into action.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL · EDITORIAL, AUGUST 2, 2005
READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

MONITOR

CLIP 04

KAMPALA, UGANDA
August 25, 2026

THEME
Best Prepared

DAILY MONITOR · OPINION PIECE PUBLISHED · AUGUST 25, 2026

Otunnu is the best choice for UN Secretary-General job

By Dr. Muniini K. Mulera, Daily Monitor

It is worth pausing over, because the procedure now being used by the Security Council for selecting the Secretary-General was not handed down at San Francisco in 1945. It was invented in December 1981 by the man who was presiding over the Council that month, a 31-year-old Ugandan named Olara Otunnu. The UN has used his formula ever since. This year, for the first time, his own name will be on those slips.

That skill is not established by holding high office. It is established by having done it, and Otunnu's record of doing it is documentary rather than anecdotal.

He did it in 1981 with the straw ballot, when the Council could not agree how to choose a Secretary-General without humiliating the losers, and again in 1983, when the Grenada crisis deadlocked the Soviet and American blocs over credentials in the General Assembly.

He did it most consequentially for people with no vote at all: as the first Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, he persuaded the Council to treat war-affected children as a matter of international peace and security – Resolution 1261 of 1999 – then built consensus for Resolution 1612 of 2005, the regime that names and monitors the armies and militias that kill, maim and recruit children.

He led the campaign that wrote child-specific war crimes into the Rome Statute, provisions that have since put men in the dock at The Hague.

A man from a small and broken African country arrived at an institution famous for producing paper and left behind laws that bind and machinery that runs. Few international officials of any era can claim as much.

He also knows how to talk to everyone, which is the other half of the job. He chaired the Group of 77 in the Law of the Sea negotiations and the UN

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Commission on Human Rights, served as Vice-President of the General Assembly, ran the International Peace Academy for eight years, helped build the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) conflict management mechanism, and won a child protection mechanism from ECOWAS heads of state.

He is at home in the Global South without being a stranger to the West.

He co-founded Rocco Paco to help heal the Acholi community and led the campaign that made February 16 a national day in memory of Archbishop Janani Luwum. These are the acts of a man who builds things that outlast him. The world should take him. If it will not, Uganda should.

DR. MUNIINI K. MULERA · DAILY MONITOR, AUGUST 25, 2026
READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

The Standard

CLIP 05

NAIROBI, KENYA
October 4, 2026

THEME
Consensus Builder

THE STANDARD · OPINION PIECE PUBLISHED · OCTOBER 4, 2026

Why Uganda's Otunnu is the man needed to revive the UN

By Salim Lone

It is instructive to look at how Mr. Otunnu radically transformed how this issue was perceived, lifting what was considered a humanitarian issue into one which directly affected international peace and security. On that basis, he won support from the Security Council to name and hold accountable not just insurgents but governments. Child Protection Advisers were introduced in peacekeeping missions, and child-specific war crimes were incorporated into the Rome Statute framework for the International Criminal Court.

Sixteen years earlier, as president in December 1981 of the UN Security Council, aged only 31, Mr. Otunnu had astonishingly managed to break through a prolonged and bitter impasse in the election of a new Secretary-General that was threatening to paralyze the entire Organization.

In the process, he also introduced an innovative procedure including straw votes to help the Security Council gauge the level of support for the various candidates running for Secretary-General. This was a transformational innovation and immediately adopted for all future elections and named The Otunnu Formula – under which Mr. Otunnu is now competing!

In my view, the candidate most qualified among the many electable candidates is Uganda's Olara Otunnu, who has spent his entire life dealing within international conflict resolution and found ways to create consensus among entrenched opposing interests.

The Standard

> He has also enjoyed global standing spanning decades.

SALIM LONE · THE STANDARD, OCTOBER 4, 2026
READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

CLIP 06

CHENNAI, INDIA
August 11, 2026
THEME
The Otunnu Formula

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS · ARTICLE PUBLISHED · AUGUST 11, 2026
Picking the Top Global Diplomat
By Shyam Bhatia

Forty-five years ago, Ugandan diplomat Olara Otunnu devised an informal voting system to break a bitter deadlock over the appointment of a United Nations secretary-general. Now, in one of diplomacy's more intriguing ironies, the same 'Otunnu Formula' is being used to determine whether he should occupy the world's highest diplomatic office.

As a student leader in Uganda, Otunnu witnessed the descent of Idi Amin's regime into terror. "I experienced first-hand the nature and magnitude of evil," he recalls. The experience taught him how easily brutality can become accepted as normal, how institutions crumble under political pressure and how dictators seek either to eliminate opponents or buy them off. "This searing experience was the beginning of my lifelong commitment to human rights."

He believes the next secretary-general must also confront challenges scarcely imagined when the UN was founded. Artificial intelligence, he says, requires an international framework bringing together governments, technology companies and experts to establish shared rules before the technology outpaces regulation. One of his first priorities would be convening a global round table on AI.

Whatever the outcome, Otunnu has already shaped the office he now seeks. Four-and-a-half decades after devising the informal straw-poll system that transformed the selection of secretaries-general, he now finds himself subject to the very process he created—a fitting twist in a diplomatic career that has taken him from the terror of Idi Amin's Uganda to the threshold of the world's most demanding international post.

SHYAM BHATIA · THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS, AUGUST 11, 2026
Senior journalist based in London; author of The Quiet Correspondent. Views are personal.
READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

DAILY NATION

CLIP 07

NAIROBI, KENYA

August 23, 2026

THEME

Grassroots Engagement

NATION AFRICA / DAILY NATION · OPINION PIECE PUBLISHED · AUGUST 23, 2026

Uganda's Olara Otunnu Electrifies in a UN Debate, but Will It Be Enough to Make Him Secretary-General?

By Salim Lone

> In another unusual twist, Olara, five years ago, deserted the global political and diplomatic world that he was an intricate part of and moved back to Gulu in northern Uganda to work at the grassroots to help resuscitate and resurrect his devastated region and community and, of course, re-integrate it with the rest of Uganda as part of the healing process – *Rocco Paco*.
>
> The region's cultural, economic, and political bearings had been ripped apart by the Lord's Resistance Army's two-decade-long reign of violence and brutality, which then led to a wider civil war.
>
> As we all know, it is extremely rare for leaders to do such profound grassroots engagement after reaching their pinnacles in service. Leaders invariably do it, if at all, in their earlier years. Olara, on the other hand, took all the great principles the UN has helped entrench in the global conscience by trying to live them in practice. President Jimmy Carter is the only other example I can think of.
>
> This Gulu commitment and work truly set him apart – a global figure not travelling to the US for five years! Doing such painstaking work out of the world's sight and without using it to burnish one's public image is absolutely remarkable for our super celebrity and influencer culture.
>
> SALIM LONE · NATION AFRICA / DAILY NATION, AUGUST 23, 2026
> READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›

MONITOR

CLIP 08

KAMPALA, UGANDA
June 22, 2013

THEME
Moral Courage

SUNDAY MONITOR · ARTICLE PUBLISHED · JUNE 22, 2013

Otunnu rubs Amin regime the wrong way, flees into exile amid threats

By Henry Lubega, Sunday Monitor

Olara Otunnu joined Makerere University in 1971 after the Idi Amin coup. And a year later, he became the guild president, but little did he know that his student body was to become the only voice for the rest of the country against government excesses as Idi Amin had banned all forms of political organisations in the country. Otunnu recounts the students' resistance against the Idi Amin regime. Below is his narration.

We started talking openly against the ills of the regime. As the guild president, I was the face of the opposition in the country, appearing on TV and radio talking about the killings and disappearance of people.

This put me at loggerheads with the government. Amin was a very charming man. He cultivated ways of co-opting me into the system, by inviting me to State House dinners and foreign trips.

This did not silence me, and the more I talked, the more Amin sought ways of silencing me. I started fearing for my life at some point.

Late in 1972, I was asked to be part of his delegation during a State visit to Somalia. While there, Minister Erinayo Oyrema called me to his room. He took me to the toilet, fearing that maybe the room was bugged and he told me, "Look, you have to be very, very careful because Amin is very angry with what you have been saying and what you have been doing - asking about the disappearance of people and other things. He is plotting to get rid of you. Don't be deceived by the charming reception when he invites you to State House." This just helped me confirm what I had all along suspected, that Amin's charm was up to no good.

FLEEING THE COUNTRY

With the minister's warning, I was on the lookout. But the immediate trigger was the visit of the Somali vice president to Uganda in 1973.

The Ugandan Minister of Education, Brigadier Barnabas Kili, arranged for the visiting vice president to come and address the students at the main hall. We did not invite him. The government just decided to bring him there. And as the students' leader, I welcomed him and gave a speech in which I raised issues in the country that were of concern to us as students.

I called for international assistance and support to stop the way things were going in the country. We wanted the friends of Uganda to be concerned about the mysterious deaths and disappearance of Ugandans.

When I made the speech, Brigadier Kili did not say much and he did not show any anger, but I later learned, through a senior civil servant who was

among the many who were sympathetic to our cause, that he (Kili) was very furious that I had raised such issues before the visiting vice president. He went and reported to President Amin what had happened at Makerere.

The senior civil servant sent me a message, saying: “After Brigadier Kili reported to Amin what happened at Makerere, they have now decided that there is no point in trying to win you over, they are set to get rid of you. There is going to be a move to remove you from the post of guild president, ban the Makerere Students’ Guild, and this evening they are going to send soldiers to Makerere to apprehend you.”

The person who sent the message also said: “I cannot do much, but I wanted to alert you. If you can do something, do it, but this is what is happening.”

That very day, an announcement was aired on Radio Uganda that I had been dismissed as the guild president and that the guild had been banned. I immediately moved from my room in University Hall to another student’s room. Soon after I had moved out, soldiers came to my room, searched everywhere but didn’t find me. They remained stationed at University Hall and all over Makerere’s campus. They came to the room three consecutive nights, but I was not there.

By this time, there was a small group working from my hiding place on what to do next. They included Godfrey Kazungu (the genius of our group), Mwakasongola (from Tanzania), Alfred Ogada (from Kenya), Filda Lanyero Ojok (from Uganda), and others.

The group decided I was not going to hide forever; the best thing was for me to get out of the country. There were both uniformed and plain-clothed soldiers at the university, manning roadblocks within the campus.

I had several options - going through the lake to Tanzania or through Masaka to Tanzania or through the north into Sudan - or go by air to Nairobi. In the end, we decided to take the most risky, but at the same time the quickest, and that was going by air.

The reason for this option was that if I went by road, the authorities could get wind that I had left campus and track me down before I could cross the border.

On the agreed day of departure, I was disguised and a pre-arranged car arrived at University Hall. There were soldiers at the gate of University Hall, and roadblocks from the main gate all the way to the airport. I assumed the identity of a Kenyan who was a member of my cabinet, Alfred Ogada.

I had become a Kenyan from a particular family, village, and tribe. I boarded a Kenya Airways flight as Alfred Ogada. The plane was delayed for some time. In my mind, I thought that they (the government) had got wind of my escape, and they were on their way to come and get me. We finally took off, and when the pilot announced that we were flying over the Kenyan rift valley, I knew I was safely out of Uganda.

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> The following weekend, I was supposed to be the best man to my good friend John Sentamu, then chairman of Uganda Makerere Students Association (UMSA), now Archbishop of York in the United Kingdom.

HENRY LUBEGA · SUNDAY MONITOR, JUNE 22, 2013

READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE ›