

## **Uganda's road to recovery long and bumpy; Calgary-based groups offer hope in wartorn regions**

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On April 20, 1995, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) entered the trading centre of Atiak and, after an intense offensive, defeated the Ugandan army stationed there.

Hundreds of men, women, students and young children were then rounded up by the LRA and marched a short distance into the bush until they reached a river. There, they were separated into two groups according to their age and sex. After being lectured for their alleged collaboration with the government, the LRA commander in charge ordered his soldiers to open fire three times on a group of about 300 civilian men and boys as women and young children witnessed the horror.

The LRA commander then turned to the women and children and told them to applaud the LRA's work. Before leaving, youth were selectively rounded up and forced to join the LRA to serve as the next.

- From field note No. 4 of the Justice and Reconciliation Project compiled by the Gulu NGO Forum, April 2007 --

There have been no major attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda for 18 months. Yet, the war is not over for many of the 1.5 million displaced people who suffered a 21-year reign of terror by the brutal LRA leader, Joseph Kony.

They continue to huddle in refugee camps like Palenga, on the outskirts of this commercial centre of 80,000 people 100 kilometres from the Sudan border, fearful of returning to their villages. With the capacity of the local government in tatters, reconstruction efforts have fallen to relief agencies. Among them are Calgary-based groups like CAWST and Ssubi, just two of the 150 registered non-government organizations (NGOs) from around the world that are operating in Gulu.

Although life appears to be returning to normal in this bustling commercial centre, aid workers and local leaders say it will take several generations for the scars of war to heal.

The scars are deepest for those who were the most vulnerable. In any conflict, it is the children who suffer the most. And for the past two decades, Gulu may have been the toughest place in the world to be a child.

"We have a saying. You can take a child out of a war, but how do you take the war out of a child?" says Frank Velthuizen of War Child Holland, which uses music, drama and play to help war-affected children adjust to normal life.

Many of the children here have forgotten how to play. Abducted and forced to become rebel child soldiers and sexual slaves for LRA commanders, hundreds have grown up in the bush. Thousands more who were forced to flee their homes to escape the conflict have known no life other than the grim hardship of refugee camps.

One toddler at SOS Children's Village, a local care centre, breaks into tears as I gently approach with a camera. He is the offspring of a rebel soldier and a young woman who escaped the Atiak massacre as a child.

Throughout the displaced persons camps and aid centres, the reaction of most children is quite the opposite. They swarm around the visiting mizungu, or white-skinned person, and happily mug for the camera. They are impish and point and giggle. Considering what they have been through, it is amazing they can laugh at all.

At Palenga camp, which houses 19,000 displaced persons 30 kilometres south of Gulu, head teacher Angie Openie runs a school built by Ssubi, a small Calgary foundation. She tells of one student, a 15-year-old boy named Olam, whose parents were killed in the conflict. He is now the head of a family of younger brothers and sisters and by necessity dropped out of school.

"He told me, 'If I study, we will starve to death,' " says Openie. "There are many child-headed families in the camp, beginning from as young as 12, even nine. Many drop out of school. It is really tough for a child to look after a family and go to school. They are afraid to return to the villages. They think the war will come again."

Like his cousin Alice Auma Lakwena, a self-professed spirit medium who formed an anti-government movement called the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces in the 1980s, Joseph Kony felt he, too, had divine spirits calling on him to overthrow the government. Believing he was ordered by God through the Holy Spirit to rule Uganda by his interpretation of the Ten Commandments, Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, formed in 1987, became merciless in its bloodletting.

An estimated 25,000 male children were abducted and forced to serve as his soldiers, many of whom were made to return to their villages and kill their parents and relatives. At least 7,000 young girls were also abducted and forced to become "wives" of Lord's Resistance Army commanders, according to UNICEF.

It is believed 80 per cent of Kony's army were children. Many grew up in LRA camps in the bush, living there for 10 years or more. They, in turn, fathered or gave birth to more children in remote army camps, who ended up being abandoned or orphaned as their fathers were killed or their mothers died of AIDS.

Kony's men abducted most of their child recruits at night, forcing fearful children to leave their villages and walk at night to the safety of bigger towns like Gulu to sleep. In 2003, with a dwindling supply of potential child soldiers in small villages, LRA rebels came into a Gulu school and brazenly abducted a group of children at 9 a.m. Other children were abducted at night from boarding schools.

Today, with a ceasefire in place, former child soldiers and child wives have returned home. Traumatized and incapable of reintegrating into normal schools, about 680 attend the Laroo Boarding Primary School for War Affected Children in Gulu, opened in 2006.

"When they arrived, they were very fearful. Most of them would not even want to be in school because they know that is where they were abducted," says Rev. Ocheng Vincent Ocen, the director of the Gulu school district, whose uncle has a carpet and flooring business in Calgary.

In Palenga camp, where most of the population are children, 120 youngsters attend the one-room school opened in August through the financing and sweat of Ssubi, which means "hope" in the local language. Founded by Calgary's Ellie Siebens with Ugandan-Calgarian Philip Ndugga and his wife, Tracy, Ssubi also provides small micro-finance loans enabling local women to start businesses and sponsors' children to attend school.

"Ellie has a mother's heart. She comes here and sees the children and she cries," says Dusman Okee, Ssubi's field director in Uganda.

Spurred by the plight of Gulu's children, Siebens felt compelled to help.

"I have everything I need and they have nothing," Siebens says. "People in Calgary ask me why I don't buy a better car. I don't need another car."

The Ssubi Foundation built the school at Palenga camp in one month, unheard of in a region where some NGOs run around in white Land Rovers looking busy, but achieve little in tangible results.

It's an issue that bothers Norbert Mao, a former Ugandan MP and chairman of the Gulu district council.

"Some NGOs, they are just following the money. They are like scavengers. When they hear that a country has announced aid to northern Uganda, they use their leverage power and lobbying capacity to feast on the money. When the money is over, they disappear.

"They are used to distributing food to displaced people. They are used to distributing tarpaulins to shelter people from the rain. Now, all of a sudden, we have the need to renovate schools. We have the need to renovate health centres. Some of the relief organizations are not equipped to do that. The reconstruction NGOs are still welcome. The relief NGOs, I don't think we need them in large numbers."

Mao, an aspiring Ugandan presidential hopeful for the opposition Democratic Party, is one of the few Ugandan leaders who has the ear of Kony, who is in hiding in neighbouring Congo.

"I wouldn't say he trusts me, but he phones me often," says Mao, who last heard from Kony on Dec. 29.

The Ugandan government had threatened to hunt down Kony at his hideout in eastern Congo by Thursday unless he comes back to the negotiating table at peace talks in Juba, the capital of south Sudan. The peace talks have been stalled for six months.

According to Mao, Kony fears an international force will be dispatched to root him and his 200 core supporters out of his camp in Congo.

"He said he fears the British and the Americans want to declare war on him. He also says he doesn't want to be hanged like Saddam Hussein."

In 2005, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against Kony for crimes against humanity, including sexual enslavement, rape, mutilation and abduction of girls. Others in his command were also indicted, including Kony's second-in-command, Vincent Otti, who led the massacre at Atiak, launched to punish the locals for not supporting the Lord's Resistance Army.

Kony had Otti killed in October and reportedly refused to allow his body to be buried for three days. Otti was the main LRA backer of the peace talks.

Mao says there is a desire in northern Uganda to deal with Kony locally, which is in part the reason for the stalled Juba talks.

"We really don't see any role for the ICC, except an advisory role," say Mao. "We really think that those who have been silent and ignored our suffering for so long have no right to come and lecture us now on justice."

He believes Kony and other senior LRA commanders should face a Ugandan tribunal and should also be made to face the traditional justice of the Acholi people to whom Kony belongs.

Traditional Acholi justice includes a form of apology and reconciliation known as "mato oput," where the perpetrator takes responsibility for his crimes. Mato oput is a type of confession ceremony that includes the guilty person breaking eggs with his feet as part of a cleansing ritual.

Mato oput is occurring throughout Acholi lands in northern Uganda as former child soldiers return home. Most have been forgiven for their actions because they were taken away at gunpoint and threatened with death if they did not join the LRA.

"They are accepted because it is not their fault that they should be abducted. Their life is distorted. Most of them are not happy people," says Openie.

Mao says the biggest challenge facing northern Uganda is getting people to leave camps like Palenga and return home.

"The majority are still very anxious. Many of them feel the war may restart, especially since there is no signature in Juba."

In the Gulu region, Mao estimates that 65,000 of 350,000 displaced persons have returned home. The demobilization of former combatants also remains a huge issue in Gulu, where poverty and the proliferation of guns force many ex-rebels to form roving bands of thugs.

"These are men who don't have the skills for peace," says Mao. "They have the skills for conflict. Many of these ex-combatants became soldiers at the age of nine. They grew up to be almost 30. The only thing they know is how to rob and steal and kill. So, the period of adjustment needs to be given time. It will take time for them to realize that a normal society has no use for their kinds of lawless skills."

Grace Aciro, Mao's assistant, tells of one former child soldier who came to Mao's office looking for help. The rebel soldier met his wife in the bush, where they had four children. Now back home, jobless and evicted by his landlord for defaulting on his rent, he's looking for someone to sponsor his children so they can go to school. Aciro hopes Ssubi or some organization will help.

"He was so desperate. It really affected me," says Aciro. "He wants his children to go to school. Himself, he knows his life is over. He has no future. He has lost hope."

The situation is perhaps even more grim for girls who were abducted as sex slaves for LRA rebels or raped by members of the Ugandan army.

War Child Canada, part of the international War Child network, is working in Gulu to help formerly abducted girls get legal redress against their captors. Local police, plagued by inadequate resources and high fuel costs, often ask for payment to investigate rape and abduction cases. The girls or their families are also asked to pay for medical exams they cannot afford.

Cases are usually resolved by compensation rather than incarceration. Amnesty International documented one case where the uncle of a girl accepted \$30 from her abuser.

According to Amnesty International, the Ugandan government "is failing in its international and domestic legal obligations relating to the protection of women and girls, and their right to access justice in northern Uganda."

Ugandans are incredibly soft spoken, polite and friendly. In the nightmarish traffic of Kampala, the capital, there is no road rage. It is difficult to find a more benign people, or to imagine that their country, where some of the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were spread at the source of the Nile River near Jinja, is capable of such brutality.

Yet, the main image of Uganda is one of Idi Amin, Joseph Kony, and repressive presidents like Milton Obote and Tito Okello, all of whom were northern Ugandans. This is especially troubling to Mao, a secretariat of the World Bank and a 2003 recipient of Yale University's World Fellows program for emerging world leaders.

"I believe that my job is to represent the new face of northern Uganda," he says, sitting in his office in Gulu.

"The face of northern Uganda that most people have in mind is the face of Idi Amin, Obote, Tito Okello and so on. That is the face which the the majority of people in foreign countries have in their mind. They think nothing good can come out of northern Uganda. It is my intention to change that."

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Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Robert Remington, Calgary Herald / At Palenga camp, which houses displaced persons 30 kilometres south of Gulu, head teacher Angie Openie runs a school built by Ssubi, a small Calgary foundation.
- Photo: Robert Remington, Calgary Herald / Thousands of children in Uganda were abducted and forced to become soldiers and sexual slaves for the Lord's Resistance Army. Photo: Robert Remington, Calgary Herald / A child stands under a sign warning about land mine dangers near Gulu, Uganda. Photo: Robert Remington, Calgary Herald / About 19,000 people live in Palenga. Although there has been no rebel activity in Uganda for 18 months, people are wary of returning home.

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