

## The Children Who Braved the Toughest Battle.... and Are Still Fighting!

By Hawa Noor

Any stranger visiting the town of Gulu in Uganda for the first time gets a share of the obvious hospitality of its inhabitants. Life is natural and nice, free from the effects of harsher realities mainly experienced in cities. Foodstuffs, particularly agricultural products, are in plenty and sold at affordable local prices, especially now that most inhabitants have returned to their old agricultural lifestyles— thanks to a peace deal struck between the Government of Uganda and the LRA leader Joseph Kony back in 2007. Being here, it is difficult to comprehend the reality that Gulu is one of the places that was so badly affected by hostilities involving LRA rebels and the Ugandan army (UPDF) that cost many civilians their lives, including children who were abducted and forced to be part of a war that some of them are yet to understand.

As I sat at a quiet corner of the Bomah hotel in Gulu, where a major research planning meeting was taking place to establish new strategies for re-integrating former child soldiers back into the society, I had the chance to hear some of the child victims of the war tell their stories. It was hard to believe just how real and near the mention of big names like “Joseph Kony” was. Personally, I have read about him only in publications and even doubted his existence. He is a wanted man and a world celebrity for all the wrong reasons — but to his victims, the name sounds normal, just like any other Acholi name, what strikes them is that its owner has caused them so much suffering.

Sixteen year old mother of two Christin Labeja (not real name), has undergone much already at the hands of the LRA. Her troubles started in the year 1996 when, one day between Kitgum and Gulu as she headed home from school, about thirty armed rebels attacked the vehicle she

was traveling in and shot down all of her fellow passengers before stealing all their belongings. Christin managed to cheat death because a dead body of one of the passengers fell and protected her from the bullet sprays. Later, upon realizing that she had not been injured, the rebels abducted her, throwing her in with about three hundred others, among them only four women, and took them to Sudan.

*“I was lucky because a dead body fell on top of me and protected me from being shot, but as I lay there, the rebels discovered that I was neither dead nor injured, and so they took me with them. If I had been injured, they could have killed me on the spot. To them an injured person is a burden that they do not wish to carry,”* recounted Christin.

Upon arrival, she and about 15 other girls were distributed to senior rebel commanders to be their wives while the boys served as security men and caretakers. Christin was handed over to Joseph Kony himself — “the commander” as she puts it. As a tradition, she first had to spend three months as his private domestic worker before officially becoming his wife. Little did she know that she was not the only one — many women before her had experienced the same fate and God knows how many will still do. Her biggest surprise, she told me, was the jealousy of the older co-wives, who even tried to kill her... but slowly she adapted and this was what was to become her lifestyle for the next nine years. She now has two children fathered by Joseph Kony.

*“I was handed over to the commander but did not know that I was going to be his wife. At first I became his domestic worker but after about three months he made me one of his wives. I later found out that all my co-wives had the same experience. That was when I understood the rea-*

*son for their jealousy when I arrived, to even attempt to kill me,”* she said. One day as she undertook her daily chores, something unique happened that presented her a slight opportunity to escape. UPDF soldiers went very close to her camp and launched an attack, so everyone had to scatter and run in different directions. She knew that this was the moment she had been awaiting for all her life and did not waste even a second. She struggled with her two children and dared to take her own route to nowhere — most importantly was to get back to her village. Amidst the confusion, she initially was separated from one of her children, but fortunately, she managed to get her back before embarking on her daring journey.

After a whole night of walking, she finally approached a place where she saw civilians attending to their farms. Her instincts told her that she would be mistaken for a rebel and so she had to find a strategic way of presenting herself to the UPDF soldiers — which she did by requesting a passerby to escort her and her two children to the military camp. Luckily she was well received.

Godfrey Owor is another such victim. He is quiet and contributes only rarely to discussions in the meeting. One would think it is because of his young age, at least until he tells his story. He is only seventeen and was abducted in the year 2000 from his parent’s home in Pobo when LRA rebels attacked them at night. He was then forced to carry a heavy load on their way into the bush, otherwise the worst could have come his way. This was nothing compared to what followed. He later learned that it was a tradition for the rebels to look out for the weaker ones among the abductees and force the newly abducted children to brutally kill them. This was in order to “brave” and integrate them into their gang so that they

could also kill without fear and guilt. Besides, one of the tightest rules was that no one must stay in isolation, else be suspected of wanting to escape.

*“Although I was very young, they forced me to carry a heavy luggage that I did not know what it was. I had to hide the fact that I was too tired otherwise they could have thought I was weak and killed me. I was too scared but I had to fight on,”* said Godffrey.

After one year in the camp at the age of only seven, Godffrey together with thirty others of his age were trained as soldiers, after which they were charged with the responsibility to take care of injured senior rebels. His duties also included preparing meals and attending to their immediate needs. He would cook only at night in a confined hole in order to prevent suspicion arising from smoke and fire. Likewise, any movement to new locations was done at night, and as they moved, they were forced to uproot cassavas and sorghum from nearby farms for food. During such movement, Godffrey’s work was to carry his gun, a heavy bag and to take care of a six year old child abductee. Apparently, the child had been trained to scream while calling Godffrey’s name whenever he sensed danger.

One day, however, he and two others plotted to escape. This was planned on that same night, but it was not to be, since one of them was coincidentally assigned to guard a different location. He however promised to join them later in the night, something that took too long to come forth. The second boy, John (not his real name) decided to go for him so they could all depart but he too did not return in time — so Godffrey waited alone for about two more hours before taking off alone. It was a dangerous journey, and his instincts warned him sharply that someone might have been following him — in fact, at one point, he had to hide in the bush when he heard a gunshot not very far behind him. Luckily, he made it through to the UPDF military camp and to his surprise he met John who explained

how their third accomplice had attempted to hold him back to prevent him from leaving and had even threatened to shoot him. His argument had been that it was morally wrong to escape and leave the other abductees suffering under the LRA, but somehow John managed to overpower him and escaped, while his friend returned to the camp.

*“I moved fast because I felt like someone was following me from behind. I was happy to see a UPDF camp from a distance,”* said Godffrey.

Although they had fears that UPDF soldiers would torture them upon return, they were ready for anything since they did not have any other option. The soldiers, in collaboration with local NGOs, later handed them back to their families.

That was in 2004, and although Godffrey was happy to return home, he was confronted with the fact that his father had died immediately after his abduction — and as if that was not enough, his mother followed,



after falling sick shortly after his return, leaving him with the respon-

sibility of taking care of his five younger siblings.

With assistance from an NGO, he is now pursuing an agricultural course at a local polytechnic as he takes care of his siblings – and when he is away in school, his fourteen year old sister takes charge. This he does while hoping that, one day, his extended family will accept them in spite of his experience as a child soldier. Life is not easy for Godffrey, Christin and other children like them, both psychologically and in their communities. Christin is now taking care of Kony’s two children (aged 12 and 8 years), and the scorn and judgment of the society is her daily reality. This she shares with her aging mother who has agreed to take care of the children while Christin is away doing her volunteering work at a local NGO. Christin says that, one day after listening to her in a radio program, Kony managed to contact her through a friend, who delivered the message that he wished her well and would allow her even to get married to someone else on condition that she takes care of his children — whether he comes back alive or dead. There are many like her in Gulu — with children fathered by LRA rebels — in fact, she tells me she knows of over twenty identified children fathered by Joseph Kony himself. So, together with the other mothers, she plans to introduce the children to each other as siblings, gently, without making them vulnerable to any trauma. This she does as she looks forward to the day when she will get a job to support her mother in gratitude for her understanding and assistance — something she hopes does not come in too late.

For Geoffrey, there is no guarantee of pursuing a diploma course after his current one, but before he worries about that, he first has to figure out where he will get the next meal for his five siblings. His elder brother, who could probably have been of help, was abducted long before him — never to return. He is not even sure if he is still alive.

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