

Uganda's child soldiers

Molly was 15 when the rebels took her as a fighter and sex slave. 'After one month,' she says, 'you feel like killing.' One day, she sliced a woman open. In Acholiland, there's a Molly in every family

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GULU, UGANDA -- The man came out of the bush scratched, sweat-streaked and naked. He reached the edge of the camp and sank to his knees in the long grass. People came running with a plastic mug of water, and then a pair of old trousers -- four sizes too small, but the only pair left. They asked, quietly, how he had escaped and made it home.

Two nights before, a well-armed band of rebels had poured from the bush into Palenga camp. People were hauled from the reed mats where they slept. Pointing with guns and machetes, the rebels separated out 30 fit and strong people and marched them away. A handful were adults, but the children were the prize in this raid -- the rebels took 25 here, and 50 more from a village a few kilometres up the road.

Abola Embakasi, a slight man of 40, is the leader of this camp of 10,000 people driven from their village by the rebels six years ago. In the bleached heat of this December afternoon, he paced between the mud-and-thatch huts and made a grim account.

"They took two from this house, and three from this house," he said. "They took all the beans from here, all the goats from here, all the dresses and the pants, all the jerry cans. All our money." And something else -- his 13-year-old daughter, Akello, and his son, Ddongkava, just 9.

When Mr. Embakasi heard about the latest escaper, he hastened through the unnatural quiet to greet him. He gave thanks for the man's safety, tried to say the things a leader should. But soon the question burst out: What news did this man have of his children, marched off into the dark with the muzzles of AK-47s jammed against their young spines?

The man had not seen Ddongkava. But the news he delivered about Mr. Embakasi's daughter made the camp leader's knees buckle: "I saw her," the returned man said. "She has put on a uniform."

This country is an African success story. Uganda has a booming economy, averaging 5-per-cent growth over the past seven years. It has a functioning elected parliament, although political parties are outlawed. In the past decade, the government has lowered the HIV/AIDS infection rate from one in three people to one in nine, with an unparalleled campaign of education and support. It is an ocean of stability in the bloody Great Lakes region of East Africa.

Except, that is, for a nasty war that has raged in the north of the country for the past 16 years. Not that you hear anything about it on the gleaming streets of the capital, Kampala, or on the news there or abroad. The only people who remember this war are its victims -- the one million people, mostly from the Acholi tribe, who live in squalid camps such as Palenga, or spend their nights hiding in the jungle or behind church walls.

This is a war of particular savagery. The rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) focuses its military effort on soft, civilian targets. They rape and loot, they burn down houses, and they indulge in wanton,

gratuitous acts of cruelty before they kill their victims, often with the families looking on. And these soldiers, the rapists and looters and murderers? They are children, almost all. Many are seven, eight or nine years old, barely taller than the automatic weapons they haul along.

About 80 per cent of the LRA's estimated 12,000 troops today are children 6 to 17 years old. In the course of the war, 7,000 have escaped or been released, but more are abducted continually. The young females have a particularly fearsome reputation on the battlefield, but they also are given to adult commanders as "wives" -- about 2,000 more children have been born in LRA captivity.

So contained is Uganda's war, affecting only about 4 per cent of the national population, that it is written off by outsiders and even many Ugandans as a "typical" civil or ethnic conflict, one of the many that rage across sub-Saharan Africa.

But it is not a war over land or water or oil. It is not a war pitting one race, religion or political ideology against another. Rather, it is a war of children against their own families, their schoolmates and their very best friends. Its weapons include the most intimate knowledge of families and communities -- who grows what crop, who walks what path to the well, who is strong and will be able to kill.

Araghadi Oyet was abducted from the village of Agwyugi just before he turned 18. He had hidden from the rebels for six months, sleeping in the bush each night, but LRA fighters repeatedly returned to his house, and he feared that eventually they would kill his family if they did not find him. So one night he slept at home, and they came.

"They were looking for me because I was a sportsman," he said. "The children I did sports with were abducted, and they knew me. They knew I could go fast and carry heavy loads."

There are child soldiers employed in conflicts across the globe -- forced into labour to support adult troops, or, as in Sierra Leone, subjected to elaborate psychological and physical torture to turn them into zealous killers. Uganda's civil war is different. The Lord's Resistance Army is led by Joseph Kony, a lunatic who believes that the Holy Spirit directs him. He relies on abducted children to carry out his mad plan.

"It's a senseless war," said Semei Okwir, the Deputy Resident District Commissioner for war-torn Gulu district. "There's no reason why this war should have started, and no reason for it to continue."

But it does, and its cost is massive. More than half of the people in the three northern districts live in camps. Traditional knowledge is lost in these dependent environments -- no one can farm, or raise a bride price. Girls taken and used for sex by the rebels frequently come home infertile from sexually transmitted diseases, and no one wants to marry them.

The war costs Uganda 3 per cent of its annual gross domestic product in military spending alone, plus untold millions in lost homes, livestock and farm produce. Few health or education services can be provided. The Acholi receive no compensation for lost property, and every extended family has lost a child. The entire civilian population of the north lives in a state of suspended panic, their shoulders collectively hunched against the next blow.

But is the war truly senseless? Spend some time in Acholiland, talking with children who have been ordered to kill and maim, and talking with their victims, and other questions seep in. This war has nothing to do with the power of the Holy Spirit. But it has everything to do with power, and the lack of it.

The civil war has its roots in ethnic and political conflict. Northern Uganda was economically and politically marginalized by British colonial rulers, but its people were tapped to make up the bulk of the armed forces. Uganda's first president after independence in 1962, Milton Obote, was a northerner who used Acholi soldiers as his enforcers. He was ousted by Idi Amin, who attacked the Acholi, but in 1979 Mr. Obote was restored and the Acholi were once again in the thick of state-sponsored looting and torture.

When Yoweri Museveni, the southerner who is now the President of Uganda, seized control in 1986 after a five-year guerrilla struggle, the defeated army fled north. From Acholiland, they fought the new regime until a peace deal in 1988. Some, fearing government reprisals, then joined with a young fisherwoman named Alice Auma, called the "Lakwena," or messenger.

She blended mystic Christianity and Acholi traditions in what she called the Holy Spirit Movement. She told her followers that she could bless rocks and they would explode as bombs, that bullets could not penetrate their bodies if they marched forward singing hymns. She sent them south against Mr. Museveni's troops and they were killed by the thousands, but they got within 100 kilometres of Kampala before they were defeated.

Alice Lakwena fled to Kenya, where she lives today, but her cousin, Joseph Kony, began to recruit her former supporters into a group he eventually called the Lord's Resistance Army. He took Alice's hybrid spiritualism and added his own bizarre dictates: Mr. Museveni had to be overthrown and government conducted according to the Ten Commandments.

Mr. Kony, a son of peasant farmers, was raised devoutly Catholic in a household that nonetheless had a reputation for mysticism. He was in his early 20s when he first assembled the LRA in the mid-1980s; senior members of the Ugandan army today admit that they badly underestimated him. The man who seemed an ill-educated thug has proved lethally charismatic and cunning, and his net of terror has spread to blanket the rolling emerald hills of Acholiland.

At first, Mr. Kony focused on fighting government troops, and his forces were adult volunteers. But a government offensive in 1991 decimated the LRA, and a bitter Mr. Kony blamed the Acholi for their weak support. That is when he began to target civilians and to swell his ranks by abducting children -- easily frightened, and susceptible to his tales of the Holy Spirit. Roads were mined, buses and trucks hijacked, fields stripped of crops, villages razed and more and more children taken.

The government tried peace talks in 1994, but Mr. Kony rejected the demand that his troops disarm and come out of the bush. International politics then began to complicate the issue. Mr. Museveni had long supported the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in their struggle for self-determination in southern Sudan. The Islamist regime in Khartoum, in turn, was looking for a way to destabilize Uganda -- a predominantly Christian, black-African state on its southern border -- so it began to support the LRA. Until March of last year, the LRA's main force was based in Sudan, where it was given training and supplies.

With Khartoum's help, the LRA could wreak monstrous havoc on Acholiland. The government's Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) found them an elusive enemy. It promised protection, ordering thousands of people off their farms and into Internally Displaced Peoples camps -- and yet the raids continued.

Today, more than half the northern population lives in fetid, crowded camps and relies on food

handouts from the United Nations, whose relief efforts are constantly disrupted by the war. "We are dying of hunger because everything has been looted," Mr. Embakasi said. "The government says to stay here in the camp because it is protected. We remain here because we have no money and we can't rent in town and there is nowhere to go. We're like a ball -- [the rebels] are kicking, the government is kicking."

Twice before, they said Albino Ayella was too small. The rebels came to his village, Pypi, when he was 3 and again when he was 6, but they took other children. Then, one morning in 1995, he was weeding his family's cassava field when he was surrounded. At 8, he was big enough: They beat him, tied his hands with his T-shirt and marched him into the bush. His attackers were about his own age, dressed in rags and odd pieces of camouflage, their hair in rasta braids. They carried machetes and automatic weapons.

Albino was held in the jungle for a few days, then marched into Sudan with a 30-kilogram load balanced on his third-grader's head. There was military training, instruction in weapons and in how to kill. "The rebels don't consider anybody as young. When you're trained and have a gun, you're a soldier."

There was little food, but they were kept in camp on a steady diet of terror. Would-be escapers were hacked to death by other children. Mr. Kony, advised by the Holy Spirit, accused young soldiers of random offences, and they were tied to trees and shot. They fought the SPLA, and sometimes made raids into Uganda for food and more children. The camps were plagued by outbreaks of cholera.

The commanders told Albino that they were fighting to bring peace to Acholiland and to stop people from breaking the Ten Commandments. "Initially, I believed in [Mr. Kony], but then I saw his soldiers killing." Mostly, Albino said, he was confused. He started to forget what home was like -- the classes at the primary school, the long games of soccer with other boys. But he never forgot that he wanted to go there.

"There was no sharing of ideas with the others, about coming to Uganda," he said. "If you raised the idea, you were killed immediately. Everybody behaved as if they were staying there. But each one made their own plan of escape."

For five years, he saw no way out. The SPLA stood between him and home. But one day this past autumn, his detachment was raiding near Atyiak, 40 kilometres north of Gulu town, and his line of marchers was straggling. "I saw a chance to escape and ran," he said.

Albino hid in the bush for three days, before local people tracked his footprints and persuaded him to turn himself into the army. He was afraid of the UPDF, who had been his enemy; the troops held him in Gulu barracks for two months, quizzing him on LRA tactics and weapons, but he said they were kind.

When they released him, it was into the custody of Charles Wotman, a social worker who runs the shoestring World Vision Gulu Children of War Centre, one of only two operations providing counselling to returned child soldiers. Funded by the Canadian branch of the Christian charity, the centre has provided what medical care (for gunshot wounds and STDs), therapy and family tracing for about 7,000 ex-rebels since it was opened in 1995.

"If somebody has killed, raided homes, and comes back, it's very easy to say 'forgive' . . . but that thing stays in the heart," Mr. Wotman said wearily. "People perfectly well know what [the children] did -- some killed their own parents."

Every few days, Mr. Wotman goes to get a few more children from the UPDF barracks. When he brings them back, the 250 resident children line up at the gate to greet the truck, clapping and singing, to let the newcomers know they have come to a good place.

But the welcome is not always that easy. Albino's mother has died and he fears that his missing father may be dead too. He wants desperately to go home to Pypi, to be a little boy who plays soccer again, but he walks with military bearing and carries his LRA years in the harsh lines of his face. "People may think badly of me when I go back," he said, his ancient composure cracking. "But I was forced. I didn't do these things because I wanted to."

Albino Ayella's story has all the horrifying hallmarks of a child soldier's tale -- an eight-year-old ripped from home, starved, terrorized and forced to fight. But Araghdi Oyet, the good sportsman, was more ambivalent about his three years with the LRA.

"I achieved a high rank," he said with a certain pride, then added, "I did not have a way of surviving. I had to stay with them." He did murder for them: "You have to kill someone, immediately."

But one day he heard that his family had been moved into the refugee camp at Awer, and so he sneaked away from the rebels and walked for a day until he reached the camp. Now working as a bricklayer, he still prefers the company of other ex-rebels, and LRA gangs are known to be just a few kilometres away, in the bush. He acknowledged that his transition in and out of the ranks was a fluid one, but could not find words to explain how that worked.

Stories such as Mr. Oyet's puzzle David Onen Acana II, the paramount chief of the Acholi. He receives visitors in a living room full of overstuffed furniture -- and his plain wooden throne -- in a small bungalow on a hill outside Gulu. The floor is decorated with an antelope skin and there are traditional drums against the walls; the king's tiny silver cellphone rests on one of them.

He inherited this post from his father only three years ago. It is, he said, a terrible time to be king. Obviously, there is poverty, and the war. But he had more existential questions as well. He is troubled by many abductees' rapid turn from child to killer: "If they are abducted against their will, why do they not escape? I ask myself. I haven't got an answer. They are taken and within a few days they are carrying out orders."

Why do the LRA's tactics work so quickly and so well? Stella Laloyo, a social worker with a Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief project in Gulu, spends her days encouraging village elders to welcome escaped children home and training community counsellors.

But she does not think all LRA soldiers are just victims of terror. "Some went voluntarily," she said. "Some kids enjoyed it and want to go back." They don't miss the hunger and the fear, she said, but she has counselled plenty of returned 13-year-olds who miss the power, and chafe at becoming children again.

Molly Achola, for one, has found it impossible. In 1997, she lay sleeping one night in a row with her siblings when a gang of rebels burst in the door of her small house. The other three escaped in the melee, but not Molly. She resisted -- today, she points to three tight-skinned bayonet scars, on her shoulder, her jaw and her forehead.

Lush young Molly, then 15, didn't really know what sex was, "but I was taken there," she said -- to the bed of the commander. For the next three months, they marched toward Sudan, stopping regularly to

take more children. "If you are really pretty, you will most likely be killed, because three, four commanders will fight over you and they will kill you to avoid further problems."

Once in Sudan, they smeared her chest and face and back with oil in an initiation ceremony: "It gets you confused." They brought a witch doctor who slashed her skin with a razor at the wrists and ankles, then filled the wounds with herbs to make her a killer. It definitely worked, she said, her face ferocious: "After one month, you feel like killing."

When a woman from her own village was caught trying to escape, Molly took a knife and sliced her from neck to pubic bone. "The drugs they give you make you lose your memory, and you don't think about whether it's a human being."

After threats from her new "husband," she acquiesced to his sexual demands, and eventually began to try to persuade him to take her home to his village in Uganda as a real wife (an idea he found preposterous). "When you are there, they tell you all kinds of stories and you start thinking like them. I had given up hope of returning home. I was comfortable."

A year ago, her unit was caught in a UPDF ambush, and scattered. Molly found herself near an Acholi village, where a woman was farming. "I had a feeling I wanted to kill that woman -- I wanted to beat her with a club." But she was caught and tied up by the villagers. A message was sent to her parents.

She thought that they would be angry that she did not escape, as her siblings did, but the family held a traditional ceremony: They had her step on an egg, whose yolk would bind what was broken; they slaughtered a goat and sprinkled its blood to represent the shedding of tears. Then they took her home. She learned that the rebel group that took her had later killed her brother, 13, and burned all the village houses.

"When I first came," she said, "the feeling of killing was so strong. I kept wanting to kill. After they did a second ceremony, the feeling went away. I had been staying alone because of the feeling of killing."

A year ago, she had a child with a villager. He torments her, asking, "Do you want to kill me like you killed that woman?" That, she added ominously, hurts her "more and more." She doesn't see how she can marry: "Men will keep hurting me, and it will remind me of my past."

In theory, the LRA is despised by the Acholi, who have lost their children and their homes and their land and their cattle to the guerrillas. But the rebels are their children. How can they hate them?

The LRA has done an insidiously good job developing its image. Their ferocity is so well-known that abducted children instantly start killing and mutilating. Long before, they have absorbed the legend that anyone who doesn't will die. They grow up believing they will be taken, they will become killers, then perhaps they will escape or be captured, and come home to play soccer and weed the cassava again.

There are people who give the LRA information about where the army is, some Acholi admit privately, and others who give them money and supplies. No one likes the Museveni government much; northerners have been left out of Uganda's economic miracle, they resent their marginalization from national affairs, and they remember that it wasn't long ago that Acholi soldiers were fighting Mr. Museveni's men.

Lloyd Axworthy, Canada's former foreign affairs minister, is one of the few foreigners who has taken an interest in Acholiland. He has visited Gulu twice and, in his new position directing the Liu Institute for

Global Issues at the University of British Columbia, has issued a call to bring an international human-rights team to the area and support traditional justice.

"The underlying issue," he said, "is that the government is not paying attention to the north. . . . [The Acholi] were on the wrong side of the war with Museveni and they feel they are being punished for that."

They certainly don't like Operation Iron Fist, a massive assault on the LRA launched by the President last March. "You were here, you failed to protect them when they were taken away," the king would say to the Ugandan army. "Take that into consideration before you go shooting them down." Ugandan troops, he said, mysteriously never seem to be around when there is a rebel raid on the villages or camps they are meant to guard. He said the new operation has brought "just chaos."

As a fat red sun sank behind his modest house, the king mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and softly voiced another unpopular idea: Mr. Kony, he said, has no agenda, doesn't want anything; his political aspirations are ridiculous. And the government claims to want to end the war. Yet it goes on. Clearly something propels it. "There are definitely people making money out of this, locally in Uganda and internationally. People who want to see it go on," Mr. Onen said. "These things are there."

Uganda's military budget increased 7 per cent this year; many key contracts are held by friends of Mr. Museveni. While the war is a blight on his otherwise strong record as a statesman, it does give him a battlefield to hone the skills of his army -- which has allegedly been involved in the plunder of natural resources from the neighbouring Congo, and might well be needed in any engagement with Sudan.

Mr. Museveni recently appointed a high-level delegation of ministers to negotiate with the LRA, but the composition of the delegation left the Acholi shaking their heads -- all southerners, close to the President but with no legitimacy in the north. The LRA rejected the meeting.

Father Ciprian is a Catholic priest at St. Mary's, a tranquil Italianate compound in Lacor, in Gulu district. The rebels have abducted dozens of the young seminarians in seven different raids. The army detachment assigned to guard the school recently decamped without explanation, and the students sometimes sleep hidden in the attic above the church. He is part of the Acholi Religious Leaders, an alliance of senior community figures interested in dialogue with the rebels.

In the cool hours of the late afternoon, he walks the seminary garden, looking out at the low fields below. "This is such a beautiful country. The land -- is this why the war goes on?" With more than half the population displaced, the traditional system of ownership has broken down. Plenty of small farmers are working land they do not own, and may have to relinquish it or fight if people come home from the camps.

The priest wonders about resources, and about power. When girls were abducted from St. Mary's convent school in 1998, they came back months later to take their schoolmates away at gunpoint: "They said, 'I cannot go to school. If I suffer, you should also suffer,'" Father Ciprian recalled. He has seen children abducted, and seen them come home and move back into their village lives -- until sometimes, they are taken to fight again.

He wonders if somehow the LRA is an outlet for a more general anger, a subsumed struggle for power on the part of young people growing up desperately poor, who see little in their future in Gulu. "If we had a strong will, if people came together . . ." The priest's soft voice trails off. He has studied liberation theology, and envisions mass resistance to the LRA. But few people are ready to resist.

Ms. Laloyo, the social worker, is more blunt. "There must be an underlying grievance or conflict. There is frustration. The grievance is about lack of development."

As Mr. Axworthy put it, "It's better to be a swaggering leader of some kind of group than sitting around unemployed, drinking banana beer."

The Iron Fist has not proved as mighty as its name. The UPDF insists that the LRA is crippled and desperate, down to small groups of five or six ragtag and starving soldiers, soon to be finished completely, according to spokesman Major Paddy Ankunda. "On a daily basis we are reducing Kony's ability to make war."

But he had no response when asked how a group of five or six hungry children with no weapons managed to abduct 80 people in Palenga that December night. The UPDF's daily statements about the imminent end of the war do not even provoke derision among the Acholi anymore; they are simply ignored.

Geopolitics provides an extra wrinkle: After the attacks on the United States in September, 2001, Sudan was eager to disavow terrorism. Khartoum made overtures to Kampala, and the two governments signed a pact saying Sudan would cease support for the LRA and the UPDF could go after the rebels in Sudanese territory. So the LRA moved its camps back into Uganda, and the Acholi once again felt the full destructive force of a rebel army living among them.

The UPDF is committed to this war, though apparently unable to win it -- the failure of one of Africa's best-trained armies to defeat an insurgency of children is doing nothing to undermine the idea of Mr. Kony's demonic powers. And the LRA appears to continue to have support from Sudan; while the UPDF has a long list of captured armaments, the LRA always seems able to resupply its arsenal.

In Acholiland, everyone agrees it will take outside intervention to end the war. The king wonders if the United Nations could do it, while Father Ciprian thinks it might be a country such as Canada. But no outside power has shown any interest, and conditions in the north continue to deteriorate. In raids this past week, LRA rebels took more Acholi cows, clothes and people.

The children-turned-warriors lose something more. Albino Ayella knows what they took from him when they marched him away from his father's cassava field. "They cost me my education. The care of my father. Love."

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