

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE INVOLVEMENT OF AFRICAN CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

The reception was so good for me because they had no hope that I was alive. They welcomed me but it seemed they had some fears I had done atrocities so they kept asking all these questions. I was not forced to kill anybody so I told them everything that had happened...I didn't like it because they wanted to know in detail all that had happened and I was not free about it. It made me sad.⁴

According to United Nations' estimates, a quarter of a million children under the age of 18 years serve as soldiers in national and guerrilla armies in conflict across the globe. In the past ten years, more than two million children have been killed in armed conflicts and almost three times as many – some six million children – have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. These conflicts have challenged comfortable, Western assumptions about war and about children: that war, while not always desired, is sometimes “necessary”; that war is fought between trained, adult soldiers; that casualties of war are primarily soldiers, not civilians; that there are clearly defined aggressive and aggrieved parties; and that children are innocents in need of benevolent state protection during war. The presence and participation of children in war and conflict, as casualties and soldiers, is not a new phenomenon. However, during the last few decades, a shift has occurred from using children and adolescents, not only as adjuncts to or the last line of defence in conflict, but also as ‘principal’ participants in many of the globe’s wars. Between 1998 and 2001 children were being used as soldiers in at least 87 out of 178 countries – including both conflict and non-conflict situations.⁵

The increase in the use of child and adolescent soldiers is directly related to changes in the value chain of weapons technologies, or, in other words, the proliferation of small arms. There are two points that need to be made here. The first is a design and development issue. For much of the 20th century, weaponry was either too expensive and/or too heavy for children to handle. Technological developments, facilitated by sophisticated information and communications technology-enabled design tools, have provided the means to manufacture simpler and lighter weapons. The second is a supply issue.

The post-Cold War era has resulted in the wholesale flooding of redundant, cheap but efficient weapons in Africa.

A further significant change has been the recruitment and inclusion of girls, alongside boys, as soldiers. There are confirmed reports of girls under the age of 18 in government forces, paramilitaries/militias and/or armed opposition groups in 36 countries between 1990 and 2000.⁶ The use of girl soldiers is revealed in an additional 10 countries in the 2001 Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers Global Report – bringing the total to 49 out of 178 countries between 1990 and 2001.⁷ Children under the age of 18 who serve in armed forces and armed groups around the world are vulnerable to serious physical and psychological violence. For some child soldiers the dangers faced include sexual violence.

Child soldiers serve within militaries and armed groups in which complete cooperation and obedience is demanded, in contexts where moral and legal safeguards against their abuse may have broken down. In this context sexual violence becomes sexual exploitation. For young girls, participation, voluntary or coerced within either formal military or militia structures, holds an ever-graver picture and has often said to be comparable to sexual slavery. Evidence suggests that in many of Africa's wars sexual slavery is imposed on most abducted girls, with possible exceptions of some pre-pubescent girls.⁸ In northern Uganda, for example, the majority of girls and women in rebel camps have syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases, against 60% of boys and men. The vast majority have been infected during their period in captivity.⁹ People who work with former child members of the rebel movements verify that female abductees inevitably become victims of rape by those to whom they are allocated or by senior soldiers.

Worldwide therefore, changes have occurred in the extent and nature of the participation of children in conflict and war and this means the issue of the reintegration of children and youth that have been distanced or cut-off from their communities of origin as a result of their participation in military units presents a challenge for social and political processes in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

The war in Northern Uganda

In order to understand the context in which children are being reintegrated, it is important to explore the dynamics and causes of the present conflict.

These lie in political disenfranchisement, long term economic under-development of the Acholi region, over-representation of Acholi in the military and the existence of a war economy in which ongoing conflict meets the vested interests of specific groups.¹⁰ To some extent, the present conflict also has its roots in the failed reintegration of earlier waves of demobilised soldiers.¹¹

Northern Ugandan history has witnessed endless wars and incursions, some of which are highlighted in the paragraphs to follow. In the 1850s, Arab slave traders established posts in Acholiland and plundered the resource base of the local population. Twenty years later, in 1872, the arrival of Nubian troops saw numerous atrocities committed against the Acholi, and Nubian troops were again used by the British colonial administration as a means of asserting power.

Soldiering or involvement in military activity has played a significant part in the social and economic life of the Acholi region over the past hundred years. Under British rule, the Acholi were significantly represented in the military. Soldiering was a source of prestige, employment and identity for young Acholi males in the absence of other economic opportunities. Given the complex military and political history of Uganda, the Acholi found themselves at times as part of the national armed forces and at others, as fighting as parts of various rebel groups against the Government of the day.

Uganda gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962 under Milton Obote, whose army was dominated by Acholis. Nearly ten years later, in 1971, Idi Amin Dada, the military commander of the mainstream army ousted Obote. Amin in turn was removed in 1979 by a coalition of forces from Tanzania and Ugandan opposition groups. After a brief transitional period, Obote was reinstated in 1980, but was once again overthrown five years later by the military.

Many of Obote's soldiers during his second regime were Acholi from Northern Uganda, with a significant proportion drawn from Acholiland.¹² During his time, General Tito Okello did little to change the composition of the army. However, a few years later, in 1986 Yoweri Museveni, the country's current President, removed Okello from power.

President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM), drawn primarily from the southwestern region of the country, started the process of decommissioning the Acholi. In their pursuit of ousting the last vestiges of opposition, they used violence and committed gross human rights violations

(of mostly Acholi), which ignited the fuel that resulted in a low-level conflict that simmered for years. Many Acholi members of the previous national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) fled north when the army disintegrated and some regrouped in Sudan, as the Uganda People's Defence Army (UPDA).

Alice Lakwena began mobilising small groups of these deserting rebel soldiers, mostly Acholi and Luo, along with some civilians into the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). Lakwena's movement gained popularity and support through a powerful combination of political disenfranchisement with local spiritual ideology and Christian beliefs. During the second half of 1986, the HSM engaged in numerous attacks on civilians and government forces. A year later (by the end of 1987), the HSM was defeated.

Following this defeat, a breakaway-armed group led by Joseph Kony, emerged as the focus of military opposition to the government in the Gulu District. Like Lakwena, Kony claimed to be possessed by spiritual forces, which used him as a medium. In this manner he was able to create a charismo-ideological notion that gathered support and momentum. The name of the movement was changed to the United Christian Democratic Army (UCDA). This army was responsible for several thousand child abductions to bolster its ranks, as well as serious human rights abuses against civilians in Northern Uganda.

The abduction and forced conscription of children into conflict as soldiers and combatants, however, first gained prominence during 1980, when Museveni's resistance force had recruited an estimated 3,000 kadogos (Bugandan for "child soldier"). All kadogos were under the age of 16 years and approximately one-sixth were young girls. It is difficult to form an accurate account of how these children were treated, as little documentation and few verbal accounts exist. Studies undertaken after the NRM came into power however, suggest that beyond insufficient training and exposure to risk, most children were treated the same as the adult soldiers.¹³

The history of conflict in Uganda has been tainted with brutality that extends into the heart of civil society. The initial NRM counter offensive in Gulu District reaffirms this. Government soldiers confused the Acholi for the UCDA and were responsible for a number of extra-judicial executions. Furthermore, in order to limit the UCDA's access to Acholi resources, thousands of people were relocated to internal displacement camps and their homes and granaries destroyed. The local economy – based on agricultural commodities like cocoa, vanilla and coffee – collapsed when farmers were forced to abandon

their land and take refuge elsewhere. Despite these 'military efforts' the UCDA forces were not defeated and by 1991, in yet another major military offensive, the north of the country was virtually sealed off from the rest of Uganda.

During the same time, the UCDA continued to plunder the local populace, abducting their children and utilising their resources. Some of the laws passed on local civilians in the countryside included: a ban on riding bicycles (persons on bicycles could quickly reach army detachments); habitation near roads (where people may witness landmines being planted or ambushes being laid); and keeping pigs (which appeared to be a response to support from the Islamic Sudanese Government). Punishment for breaking these laws was death. Despite these measures the campaign failed. As such, in 1992, a more politically orientated counter-insurgency strategy that sought the co-operation of Acholi civilian authorities was initiated.

By early 1994 a political solution was sought with Kony and his forces, now known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Before any progress could be made, the Sudanese Government – in response to Ugandan support for the mainly Christian Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rebels in the south of that country – formally offered the LRA military and logistical support. This resulted in an increase in the scale of violence and child abductions. To compound matters, since mid-1996 nearly half the population of Gulu District – approximately 200,000 people, who normally resided in communities of scattered farms – have been forced to flee their homes. They sought sanctuary in Gulu Town, or other outlying trading centres, small army posts (known as detachments) in so-called protected villages and Internal Displacement Camps (IDCs).

Conflict in Uganda continued until 1999, when for no given reason, the LRA almost completely ceased their activities. Relative calm returned to the area and many civilians were allowed to return to their villages. The LRA resumed operations in 2000, when violent acts against civilians and child abductions escalated once more. Although estimates vary, most would suggest that by the end of that year, in total since the beginning of the conflict over 15,500 children had been abducted since the beginning of the war. Less than 6,000 of these children had managed to escape or had been liberated from captivity.¹⁴ According to the testimonies of escapees, extreme violence was used as a tool to terrorise civilians into providing support, or for not obeying the laws put down by the LRA. Newly abducted persons were terrorised by LRA commanders to ensure that they stayed with their captors. Moreover, senior LRA combatants systematically used sexual degradation as a form of control and

authority. The UN Secretary General reported that at least 85% of girls who arrived at the Gulu trauma centre for former LRA abductees had contracted sexually transmitted diseases during their captivity.¹⁵

During 2001, the Canadian Government launched the first serious initiative aimed at securing the release of abducted children. This initiative came as a direct result of the September 2000 International Conference on War-Affected Children held in Winnipeg. Delegates released a 14-point plan to end the suffering of children caught in war zones and launched an optional protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child calling for nations to raise the minimum age of military service.¹⁶ Lloyd Axworthy, the (former) Canadian Foreign Minister, brokered a deal between Uganda and Sudan, aimed at putting aside differences and encouraging the LRA to release the abducted Ugandan children still held in their camps. Negotiations were extended to include the disarming of the LRA and the relocation of their camps to distances of one thousand kilometres outside of the Ugandan border. In return, Uganda was required to stop support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA based in southern Sudan is itself engaged in a war of liberation, in the hope of disengaging the southern and predominantly Christian part of the country, from the predominantly Muslim north.

Although a protocol was signed, which allowed access for the friendly Ugandan forces to execute limited military operation within the borders of Sudan in order to deal with the LRA problems, in reality, very little happened following the conclusion of these negotiations. By 2001, the LRA had curtailed their operations and relative calm returned to the region. The Ugandan government also began to relax its restrictions on the civilian population and some villagers were either allowed to return to their homes or to extend their farming activities in areas around the IDCs. However, following both the desire to exploit mineral resources in southern Sudan and in the wake of the 'September 11' terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington in 2001, Museveni successfully lobbied the United States to have the LRA officially labelled a terrorist organisation. The impact of the Sudanese government's cutback of aid to the LRA was to weaken the rebel group, but did not lead to its disintegration. In response to this, in late 2001, the LRA began moving from its bases south of Juba to Upper Talanga, a remote area of the Imatong Mountains on the Sudan/Uganda border. During this time the LRA also attacked and looted southern Sudanese villages for food.

In March 2002, impatient with diplomatic efforts to end the war in the north, Uganda launched a massive military offensive to ensnare the LRA. With

limited support by Sudanese government forces, "Operation Iron Fist" was initiated. The initial targets for elimination were four LRA base camps on the eastern bank of the White Nile in southern Sudan. The UPDF committed a full division of 10,000 soldiers to an offensive into southern Sudan. Frequent clashes with the rebels saw several hundred LRA combatants being killed.¹⁷ It was estimated that there were no more than 2,000 LRA combatants in Sudan.¹⁸

In addition to eliminating the LRA as a 'terrorist' force, another objective was to facilitate the release of captured children. However, after the first seven months, the military effort failed to rescue any of the abducted adults, youth or children. While the LRA released 100 captive women and children in mid-June, no further individuals were released or liberated by the Ugandan military. In effect, the LRA displaced from their bases in southern Sudan scattered into smaller bands and fled into mountainous terrain, leaving violence and destruction in their wake.

Relocating in northern Uganda they sparked a ferocious counter-attack that led to hundreds of casualties and forced thousands more civilians to flee their homes, adding to the already large number of displaced. One report suggested, that as of September 2002, an estimated 552,000 Ugandans were displaced or at risk of having no harvest.¹⁹ In addition to which, at least 24,000 Sudanese refugees were seeking refuge in northern Uganda having been forcibly displaced from southern Sudan by Ugandan forces. UNICEF estimated that, at the end of June 2002 a total of 5,106 children remain unaccounted for.²⁰ These figures, however, could not be verified, because United Nations agencies, international relief organisations and independent media were denied access to the area to monitor the situation.

It is also worth noting that the LRA is not the only armed group operating in the north of the country. In the northwest of the country, the Western Nile Bank Front (WNBF), which is also reported to use children as soldiers, is allied with the LRA and was also supported by the Sudanese government. The WNBF has launched incursions from bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the northeast of Uganda, armed members of the Karamojong, a marginalized minority group, have also reportedly abducted children for similar reasons. Armed gangs of Karamojong rustle cattle and ambush and raid vehicles. This is said to happen over a geographic area extending across the borders into Kenya and Sudan and on numerous occasions provoking serious incidents with neighbouring countries. Other armed opposition groups include the Ugandan National Rescue Front, which

operates in the northwest and the Tabliqs, a Muslim group with an estimated strength of about 400 men.²¹ It is not known whether these groups recruit or use under-18s as soldiers.²²

The Current Impasse in Northern Uganda

At the time of writing, there were no signs of LRA-abducted children emerging, even as prisoners of war, with Ugandan troops. The war with the LRA would appear to have reached a new stage and the UPDF has admitted that during military combat, its forces were unable to protect civilians in southern Sudan. It also admitted that children were being killed rather than rescued.²³ In response to international criticism, instead of committing to minimising child casualties, a UPDF spokesman emphasised that the children had been militarised, indoctrinated and trained to resist. Such statements served to legitimise in the spheres of the general public and other governments, the massacre of the captive children by Museveni's armed forces and government.

Undoubtedly, many of the abducted children have been forced to participate in atrocities and military combat and are thus 'legitimately' considered soldiers or even terrorists. As such they are viewed as justifiable military targets – forced to fight and are attacked for fighting. However, some of these children have embraced the doctrines of the LRA, because they believe that this is the only way to maintain their way of life, or even to survive.

Chris Dolan, who spent more than two years as a researcher in the war-ravaged north of Uganda for the London-based Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development, has questioned the accuracy of estimates on the numbers of "child soldiers" recruited by the LRA. Commenting on the fact that not a single child-soldier had been released, he said, "If there were 10,000 children, I can't believe 10,000 soldiers couldn't catch some of them."²⁴ Countering the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) April news web site, which stated that some 5,550 children were still missing, he claimed that the number of children working for the rebels was unlikely to exceed 900. Furthermore, he argued that focus on the rebels' recruitment of children diverted attention away from reports of the UPDF's own use of child soldiers since 1998 in conflict in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

It has also shifted attention away from the conditions of more than 500,000 people defined as "in need" in Uganda's northern area. These individuals were uprooted from their homes and were heavily dependent on food aid

supplies from the United States. Dolan suggests that the emotional impact of abducted children creates an enormous capacity for generating funds. Although not minimising the notion that child abductions for military or other purposes are both deplorable and traumatic, Dolan argues that the heavy emphasis on this single factor has done little to help resolve the country's 15-year long conflict and has diverted attention from the extreme needs of tens of thousands of children and adults.

Notwithstanding current developments, LRA leaders have on a number of occasions sent word through religious leaders in the north that they wish to discuss a peaceful end to the conflict. The Ugandan Government has indicated a desire to listen to the most recent of these, but has refused to suspend military operations while talks take place. However, if previous attempts to resolve the conflict are to be considered, the prospects are very dim indeed. The war has continued and although peace talks have been mooted, the impasse continues.

The most recent efforts were initiated during the last week of October 2002, when Museveni appointed the highest level delegation ever convened by the Ugandan government under the aegis of the First Deputy Prime minister and minister of Internal affairs, Eriya Kategaya, to head the Government's negotiating team. The Archbishop of Gulu, John Baptist Odam, who is the chairman of religious leaders and elders peace initiative, said (on October 23th), that Museveni wrote to him, saying the government had initiated an indirect dialogue with Kony and were exchanging letters. According to Odam, "after naming their team, the LRA and the government will then agree on the venue, time and agenda of the meeting." He said he was waiting for further developments before trying to send emissaries to talk to the LRA leadership. The following week however, the Ugandan government claimed that Kony had only narrowly escaped capture.²⁵

The LRA and the Acholi community: the position of abductees

Contexts of conflict are often discussed as if there are clear and identifiable groups with no ambiguity or contradiction. In Northern Uganda, the war is generally portrayed as a conflict between the opposing forces of the LRA, the UPDF and more recently the SPLA as the conflict has, over time, become embroiled in Sudanese politics. The civilian population is portrayed as passive and as a resource base that is terrorised and plundered. The terms 'rebel' or 'soldier', and 'civilian' are used dichotomously as a person is constructed

as either one or the other. The relationship between the warring factions and civil society then seems clearly demarcated. However, in a conflict like that in Northern Uganda, where perhaps as many as 90% of the 'rebels' are abducted children and youth of local communities, the relationship between the rebel group and civil society has to be much more complex than traditional language allows to be conveyed. As a child or youth is abducted and becomes part of the *adi* (rebels), he or she remains a son or daughter, brother or sister, niece or nephew to adults in the community. This has clear, but complex implications for reintegration.

At the core of most conflicts lies either an ideological discourse between competing forces, or a desire to impose hegemonic control of one of the forces over the other, in order to control either a spatial entity or limited resources. Neither the precursor of the LRA, Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement nor Kony's Lord's Resistance Army have presented political programmes that are readily comprehensible to western lay analysis, beyond the call for Uganda to be ruled according to the biblical Ten Commandments. While political marginalisation and long term economic underdevelopment of the Acholi region may be root causes of the present conflict, the LRA has not expressed a coherent political agenda in those terms. Many rebel groups have the tacit support of the communities out of which they operate; this is not the case with the LRA.²⁶ The rebels are not representatives of the people, nor do they attempt to articulate an agenda that could be construed as such. In addition, the LRA would seem neither to have the attitude nor structure of an effective military unit, but rather their combat effectiveness is largely symbolic and reliant upon evocation of fear, in both their abducted 'soldiers' and in the Acholi community in general.

In conflicts that take the form of civil war, there is an internal/external dynamic with respect to who the 'enemy' is. The conflict between Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement and the Ugandan Government forces initially had this structure. However, with the failure of Lakwena's movement to overthrow the Government, and the HSM's defeat and dissolution, Kony's LRA emerged in a political vacuum. While the LRA's stated enemy is the Government and is integral to Kony's account of why they are rebels, the present conflict does not have the dynamics typical of a civil war. It is more accurate to say that, as the LRA are almost entirely organised around the magnetism of Kony, it takes on the structure of a warlord and his militia. The relationship of the LRA with the Acholi community is therefore more accurately viewed through that lens.

In defining "warlordism", Mackinlay notes that warlords are a wholly negative phenomenon and should not be confused with insurgents fighting an ideo-

logical or political war.²⁷ The former deals with the local population in a rapine and predatory manner, while the latter has to use the population as its resource, often with civil society's tacit support. Insurgents may use some of the trading techniques of warlords, but if they really are insurgents with a long term political agenda, they will eventually return to a political end game, for at some stage they will either have to opt for co-existence or submit themselves to the electorate. The LRA are not insurgents and by labelling them a terrorist organisation, the Ugandan government has legitimised their existence when, arguably, there is no legitimacy at all.

Returning to the question raised above, how can we understand the relation of the LRA to Acholi civil society? In most cases, the conflict is referred to as a 'war', the targets of the LRA being both Government forces of the UPDF and the Acholi communities that it terrorises. However, the LRA is not at war with the community, but utilises the community as a resource base for both food and human capital – and uses terror as a mechanism to wield control and power. From the outset, Kony has acted as a warlord, plundering local resources and perpetrating human rights abuses. The web upon which the various relationships are spun is more complex than what is currently portrayed. Certainly, some accounts of the present attacks by the LRA on Acholi civil society relate that Kony is 'punishing' the people for withdrawing their support and the fighters feel isolated and abandoned. Kony's dedicated band of followers reject and ignore internationally accepted rules of conduct governing the relationship of the officer to the soldier: treatment of the wounded; custody of prisoners and the protection of non-combatants. At the core of their impunity lies the use and abuse of children as slaves, either for soldiering, transporting or sexual gratification. This is yet another characteristic of warlordism. Therefore there is a complex identity between the Acholi civil society and the LRA, which is assumed to be mainly composed of abducted children and youth of its communities. These dynamics are arguably central to the issue of reintegration.

Methodology

Fieldwork was carried out over a two-month period in June-July, 2002. Narrative interviews were undertaken with ten formerly abducted youth, seven males and three females, who were invited to participate in the research by staff of GUSCO or World Vision centres. These were youth that had previously gone through their programmes and were now living back in the community for a period of two years or more. The objective of the

research, namely to understand the lives of formerly abducted children after they had been reintegrated into their respective communities, was explained to each participant. Participants were encouraged to ask questions of the researchers. In nearly all cases, their questions related to what would the research be used for. We explained it was commissioned by the AU and was to be part of a report for African governments on youth, conflict and reintegration. Only one youth decided not to be part of the study. At the start of each interview, each participant was told they were to indicate if there was any question they wished not to answer, or if they wanted to withdraw from the interview at any point. Interviews were loosely structured around the participant's life before abduction, social structures in the LRA, and experiences on reception and reintegration. The rest of the interview was governed by an individual's story.

Focus group discussions were carried out with teachers, local authorities and parents. In identifying parents for focus group discussions, we initially thought that, for ethical reasons, it would be best to run separate groups for parents of formerly abducted children who were returned from the bush, and for parents whose children were still in captivity. In practice, the reality was more complex as many parents have experienced the abduction of more than one child, one of who may have returned while one or more were still in the bush, unaccounted for or dead. Key informant interviews were conducted with staff in Gusco and World Vision reintegration centres, with local authorities, an IDP camp worker, and a traditional healer.