

## CHAPTER 2

# CHILD SOLDIERS IN NORTHERN UGANDA: EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY

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There are said to be three primary aspects to rebuilding war-ravaged societies: disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Disarmament entails the collection, storage and disposal of weapons, as well as the demobilisation, formal registration and release from duty of combatants (including provision of assistance to help them meet immediate needs and transport to their home communities).<sup>28</sup> Reintegration, the third step in this process, is defined as ... “the process of helping former combatants return to civilian life and readjust both socially and economically.”<sup>29</sup> Implicit in this definition is the assumption that that to which former combatants return is a stable, suitable and desirable form of society. It is worth reflecting upon the usefulness of this definition of reintegration, since it assumes among others, the following:

- That the process, if there is one, is a unified and effective one, able to achieve the goal of the child’s social and economic “readjustment”
- That “social readjustment” is possible and desirable; and
- That “economic readjustment” is possible.

It does not take into account the possibility that the identity of the returning individual may have been changed and changed through the violence experienced and through being identified with the group perpetuating violence on the host community. Reintegration has to involve reciprocal ‘readjustment’ by both the individual and community. This element of reintegration has generally been overlooked. In order to further the analysis being developed here, namely to attempt to understand the complex relationship between child abductees, the LRA and civil society, which comes together at the point of reintegration, a process account is outlined examining the implications for children and their communities from abduction through to reintegration.

## The Abduction: violence and trauma

On the walls of a classroom in the World Vision rehabilitation centre in Gulu is a series of murals, based on the common elements in children's own drawings that depict the 'story' of abducted children. The first picture is of a peaceful rural domestic scene, with a mother pounding grain outside the door of the family tukel (huts) and children playing in the compound. The next image is the arrival of the rebels in military uniform, terrified figures running in all directions, squawking chickens, and tukels on fire. The third is of a column of children and youth, against their will being marched into the bush, carrying the food stock of their own village on their heads, with heavy, sorrowful faces.

As returned children tell the account of their abduction, there is a striking similarity to their stories. This serves both to hide the way each child experienced their own fears and horrors, as well as to put children's experiences out in a public domain where they are accessible to the whole community. This must give children that have been through such an experience a sense of 'normality' of the abnormal that is common in war affected societies. It also becomes part of the imagination of the community, while children who have never been abducted can look at the murals, tell the story depicted and fear such a fate – which at some point might become theirs.

One 21-year-old youth who was abducted in 1995, when he was 14 told the following:

On the day I was abducted, it was about 8 am in the morning. I had gone to the field to cultivate. I was heading home in order to go to school. I heard a noise from the direction of \_\_\_\_\_. When I looked, I saw some men in military uniform. They were coming, as if they were passing by. They signalled to me, calling me to go to them. I didn't know who they were, I never knew they were LRA since they were dressed in that combat clothes, I thought they were Government soldiers, so that is how they abducted me, and forced me to join the captives.

Another youth spent one year in the LRA before escaping. He recounted his abduction as follows:

In my family, we were 6 brothers and 6 sisters. I was abducted when I was 17 years old. It was during nighttime. They came during nighttime when I was asleep with my brothers. They took three of us. Of

the three, I am the only one that escaped; the other two are still there.  
One is 7, one is now 11.

Other youth tell similar stories; of being abducted from school, from cultivating in the fields, from fetching water. One 22 year old gave the following account:

It was in 1996. I was still asleep. It was approaching 6 am in the morning. The rebels of the LRA stormed in and forced me out and forced me to join the captives. They were about 15 in number.

The details are imprinted in their memories as they recall, "It was a Saturday", or the exact hour of the day. The moment of abduction is a marker that signals the end of a life they previously knew.

One of the defining features of present day conflicts, in which civilians are the primary targets of violence, is the impact of such violence on the daily lives and routine of the community. Children's accounts demonstrate that there is neither place nor time of day that is safe. Abductions occur during the day or at night, in school, in the fields or at home -the familiar places in which daily life is conducted become infused with fear. There is no predictability to the abductions. The impact of child abduction on the social and cultural life of the community is profound, because fear of abduction disrupts normal routines and the daily transitions of the community.

In an interview with an adolescent returnee and his father in an IDP camp on the outskirts of Gulu town, the disruption of civil society caused by child abduction is evident. He gave an account of how he, together with six other youth from his village, was abducted. His brother had been abducted a year before him. Other children that had escaped came back and told the family he had been killed. The youth already knew his brother was dead before he himself was abducted. They told of the family's efforts to stay safe, while trying to retain normalcy and their economic independence.

Interviewer: How did your own life change after your brother was abducted?

Youth: We were too scared to stay in the home after that so we moved away to the camp.

Interviewer: So you were living in the camp when you were abducted?

Youth: I was living in the camp, but we still went to the village to cultivate. So I had gone to the fields to cultivate, and I was abducted there.

Interviewer: Did other members of the family still go to the fields to cultivate?

Youth: They continued to go after I was abducted, because there was no other way (to survive). But many times they heard rumours that these people are around.

Interviewer (to father): At any point, did you decide not to go to cultivate?

Father: The abductions continued so much during those years that it was difficult to do so, so we stopped going there, and we had to live by whatever means we could.

Violence has a corrosive impact on community's strategies to balance safety with survival, to retain daily routines and traditional agricultural practices. Attempting to do so is an expression of hope over helplessness. The power of the threat of child abduction is that it attacks at the heart of families and communities, in the case of this family forcing retreat. For the rebels, abduction a tool to assert control and punish whole communities.

Child abduction has also affected the power dynamics between children and others in communities as those in positions of authority over children, such as teachers, live with a constant awareness that this power balance could be reversed. In a focus group discussion, teachers discussed the impact of abductions on their relations with children in the classroom. There is awareness that if a child feels he or she has been treated badly by a teacher, if that child is abducted then "(that child) can have revenge on you, even kill you. Teachers definitely have that fear." They said they do not beat children as punishment, but instead give them some work to do, such as sweeping the compound. In serious cases, they may call the parent to school and abdicate the punishment to the parents "the parent now gives the kind of punishment that is fitting." Teachers also live with the fear that they themselves may be abducted.

I was a primary teacher at \_\_ primary school. I was abducted one the 3 January 1999 from the village during school holidays. It was night-time and I was sleeping. In my case, it was a bit different (to other abductions). When I was abducted, some of my school kids identified

me as a teacher. When they heard of that profession, they couldn't leave me behind so I suspect they took me because I was a school-teacher. Two of my sons were also abducted. One died. One is alive; he is still with the rebel group. I was 34 years old.

This teacher spent 9 months in captivity. During this time he was not trained as a soldier, but had to teach the children of the rebels. This was one way the LRA attempted to recreate some social structures in the camps.

Abduction is a key tool in military strategy. Kony's soldiers have abducted a child from almost every extended family in Acholi, and these children are then used as pawns to prevent their parents and extended family from supporting the government.<sup>30</sup> The fear generated by this strategy infiltrates every element of community life and in spite of efforts at normalisation, the possibility of abduction fills the imagination of the community, even those who have yet to experience abduction. As the above account clearly demonstrates, this ultimately results in displacement, fragmented social relations and the breakdown in agricultural practices and traditional ways of life.

### **Within the Lord's Resistance Army: powerlessness, contradiction and resistance**

This section attempts to explore the meaning of life within the LRA for children and youth. It will focus on the social structure they were forced to become a part of, their understanding of what the LRA represents, the conflict experienced when forced to fight as soldiers and their survival and escape. The reports are based on individual interviews with ten formerly abducted youth in addition to key informants close to the LRA. As such, it does not claim to be representative beyond these individual accounts, but instead serves to give some insight into the highly complex world in which children are forced to negotiate their survival – given that nearly half of abducted children have died or been killed. If youth are released or are successful in escaping, 'reintegration' begins from these experiences.

One of the characteristics of movements that abduct civilians to use as fighters is deliberate psychological brutalisation. The primary tool is fear against which individuals are forced to make impossible choices, or face retribution. Moreover, the isolation experienced by the youth, in the face of such brutalisation, forces them to become dependant on their abductors. Such strategies have been common in Liberia<sup>31</sup> and Sierra Leone<sup>32</sup> as well as northern

Uganda.<sup>33</sup> One youth recounted his experiences of the first hours of being abducted:

They tied me with a rope. They asked very difficult questions and expected me to answer. Who are the rich people here, who are the business people? Take me to their homes. I would tell them I don't know, there are no rich people around here, and then they would slap me.

Every moment of the first few days were lived in a paralysis of fear as he was beaten, witnessed 'them' killing other people and didn't know if he himself would be killed. Another participant recalled how in the first few weeks, "they gathered villagers and they killed them. The children were also forced to kill" but distanced himself from these actions by saying "I wasn't...", implying they had escaped killing, but experienced conflict about it. Another youth told how, following the abduction of six children from his village, they were called together by the commander and told that some of them were going to be killed. According to the commander those who were going to be killed were the younger children, below 12 years, because they were unable to carry heavy loads. After being subjected to this state of terror, all were caned 15 strokes each, although none were killed. These forms of psychological torture serve to render the abductees powerless.

The rebel social structure into which the children are socialised is highly militarised, with battalions and companies, although the camps are modelled on a village. The basic unit of the LRA 'family', consists of a soldier and his wife or wives, together with abducted children.<sup>34</sup> The younger children (below 13 years) are called 'siblings'. When asked about how abducted children become assigned to structures in the camp, one explained:

Whenever the LRA are sending soldiers to go abduct children, you will find they will pick children from different battalions, and whichever child has been abducted by a rebel soldier, he will keep that one as a position for his battalion. The child will be within that battalion.

Commanders are known as 'teachers'. Child abductees are often used for labour similar to the work they would have done in their home village, such as guarding goats (which have been captured) and taking them to graze. The only difference would be that they themselves are being guarded. For respondents this provided a sense of normalisation, which co-exists in this brutalising environment.

A former teacher asked whether they (the abductees) had seen young girls “given” to rebel officers as wives against their will in the same way as they would normally in the village. In response a participant replied, *“Of course, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t see any difference between wives from here and wives from the bush, the only difference is lack of certain commodities and proper homes.”* This statement, however, does not address the reality of the girls, who are forced into sexual slavery linked to reward systems in the power hierarchy of the LRA<sup>35</sup> but rather captures the process by which the abnormal becomes normal in the course of daily routines. One young woman, who was ‘given’ as a fifth ‘wife’ to a commander, was asked about living conditions. She maintained that “everything (was) like a normal village”. They had huts to live in, cook in, and “I used to keep mine very clean every day.” The latter statement she said with some pride. This posed no contradiction for her to the fact that she felt happy when she heard that her ‘husband’ had been killed in fighting after her escape.

## **Initiation Into the life of a ‘rebel soldier’**

Within a few weeks of abduction, children and youth reported their training as ‘soldiers’ began. New abductees are known as ‘recruits.’ A participant said he was trained for one month in how to assemble and use guns, marching, how to attack, ambush and to fight. One of the girls said a woman rebel taught her to assemble a gun and it was her duty to carry that soldier’s gun. She told how:

We were taught how to shoot a gun, to lay ambushes when you go to attack the army, and how to enter the detach of the army. When you lay ambushes, and when a motorcar comes, how even to shoot a motorcar.”

Learning how “to shoot a motorcar” is powerful, even overwhelming knowledge. Despite this powerful knowledge, LRA commanders can in a moment render ‘recruits’ totally powerless through random acts of violence and killings. A participant said, “There was a lot of killing of children. Whoever tries to escape will be killed, for walking ahead, you will be killed, and even for a minor mistake children will be severely tortured.”

Another participant explained, “Life was really horrible because there was a lot of fear in my heart because everyday you didn’t know if you would be killed. Everyday we see them killing other people.”

He said that it was during the training that he suffered the most: "They beat us all the time. Even when you tell them you are sick. They asked us to beat other children if they have done something wrong. Other children were asked to beat me."

In these accounts, there is still the existence of 'us', the abducted children and the 'they' of rebel commanders. However, any solidarity children may feel because they share the same plight or are from the same village is systematically and brutally broken down as children are forced into positions of extreme isolation. All former abductees interviewed felt they could not trust anyone while in the LRA. The teacher whose two sons were also abducted indicated that he could not trust his own sons. Mistrust, fear, isolation and the breakdown of personal allegiances within the group of new 'recruits,' are forcibly created and deliberately manipulated to reduce the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Simultaneously, the training in military techniques changes the perceived status of the children within the LRA from 'recruit' to 'soldier'.

Interviews with former abductees gave some insight into how they grappled with the identity of 'soldier' – an experience thrust upon them. One girl said she was given a uniform and a dress. She was afraid of the uniform, because it tied her to the identity of a soldier. She felt she would never get out of the bush and feared being killed in fighting – *"I felt I was a soldier and would go for war"*. She was then asked how this made her feel – happy or sad? She explained, *"for the first time, I was so sad and then if you stay for a long time, you become happy, a bit happy."* In a subsequent discussion it appeared that because she was a female with no children, she was not perceived as a mother, who could be exempt from fighting, but as a soldier.

Another former abductee spoke about his feelings towards getting a uniform. He responded as follows:

I didn't feel well because I didn't want to be a soldier. Before you are trained and given a gun, you are treated as a captive, and they are always beating them. But when I became a soldier and I had a gun in my hand, at least the level of mistreatment declined.

The military uniform serves as a powerful external symbol that also creates internal conflict for abductees. This is captured in the way the youth struggled to express the identity transition they had experienced: "I didn't want to be a soldier" is followed by "but when I became a soldier", and "I felt like a

soldier” with “they look at me as a soldier”. Resistance to this identity is conveyed through communicating that it is imposed. There are rewards to this identity transition – beatings and violence become less frequent and having a gun confers power in contrast to the complete powerlessness of the new abductee. This is the start of a process in which the new abductees have to individually negotiate this starting position of ‘them’ and ‘us’, and the complex issue of how, in order to survive, one must pass as ‘them’ while maintaining a representation of self as ‘not them’. One youth explained, “It’s very difficult to know if someone wants to come home or not, because no one talks about that. You have to pretend as if you don’t want to”. It is likely that for some abductees, their survival strategy is identification with the aggressor, as they become socialised and integrated in the rebel structure.

Interviewer: Who is a ‘rebel soldier’?

Youth: We were the coreta, the trainees to become full army man.

Interviewer: Do some children eventually become rebels?

Youth: A few become rebels. You become a rebel when you are already a soldier and you go and ...(raid) houses, you abduct children, you do the killing, you are already a rebel.

## The ‘ideology’ of the LRA

One of the most infamous aspects of the HSM, which was the forerunner of the LRA, is the spiritual or cult-like basis to the movement, mixed with a political aim of overthrowing the Government. Under Kony, the character of the movement changed substantially as the level of violence, abductions, punishment and personal vendettas on Acholi civil society increased. He continued to maintain a spiritual base to the movement, with a stated aim of the LRA being to destroy all forms of evil and promote the Ten Commandments. In the LRA, rituals and communication with spirits are tied in with initiation of new ‘recruits’, preparation for war, and the ‘cleansing’ of bad spirits or *cen* after war.

Behrand (1999) gives detailed accounts of the rituals initiated by Alice as part of the HSM. To a large extent these appropriated traditional Acholi beliefs and Christian symbolism. She describes examples of ceremonies for new initiates in which the initiates walked around in a circle, were sprinkled with water, prayed and sang. “Later they had to spit in the mouth of a pig that absorbed

all the evil onto itself, just as, in the New Testament, Jesus exorcised the evil spirits and diverted them into swine. The pig, usually a boar, was then killed and burned".<sup>36</sup> Initiates were then required to mould human figures of clay, which represented the *cen* or spirits of people killed by war. These clay figures were carried to a spot under a tree while the following prayer was said "Sir, here before you are your soldiers. Bless them so that all bad things in them remain under this big tree. Cast out all demons (*cen*) that may want to possess them".<sup>37</sup> The clay figures remained under the tree.

Kony claims to be possessed by an angel that speaks through him. Behrand lists the various spirits of Kony, including a female Sudanese spirit, Silli Silindi, who served as operations commander; a Korean spirit who controlled the bullets of the NRA; a spirit from the USA, King Bruce, who led the support unit; and others such as a trickster spirit who switched sides and fought with the NRA to punish Kony's soldiers for their transgressions.<sup>38</sup> She gives the following account of a typical encounter.

All these spirits spoke through Kony, their sole medium. When a spirit possessed him, he wore a white kanzu and a rosary round his neck – like Alice. Kony would sit in the yard on a metal chair holding a glass of water in his hand. He dipped his finger in the water and made the sign of the cross. Then he rose slowly, the expression on his face changed, and his eyes turned red. Then the spirit that had taken possession of him began speaking out of him. As under Alice, here too a chief clerk wrote down whatever the spirit had to say.<sup>39</sup>

Former abductees who were interviewed spoke about their experience of initiation rituals. It was difficult to ascertain what meaning, if any, children gave to these rituals and the impact on their sense of belonging to the LRA. The rituals were not carried out immediately after abduction, but once the group had arrived to a place of safety.

There is that ritual cleansing. When a child is abducted, he will not be allowed to eat together with the LRA rebels until that initiation ceremony is completed whereby they smear using the shea butter oil; that is cleansing oil. From time to time they would do it, especially when a group is being sent for a mission, there would be the smearing of oil and sprinkling of water.

The ceremony initiated by Alice was a means of cleansing and rehabilitating ex-soldiers of the impurities and bad spirits that haunted them as a result of

any violence they may have carried out. It is not clear what role these cleansing ceremonies play in the LRA with respect to the initiation of abducted children. Individually, youth had different perspectives on the spirit and ideological beliefs of the LRA. One girl, when asked if she believed Kony, responded

We believe everything he says. I saw him once. \_\_\_ (a friend) also saw him. He looks so different. We both thought he had great power. His face is very strange, strange eyes, so we avoided looking at him straight. And if he looks at you straight, you get scared.

She firmly believed that Kony was possessed with spirits and thought spirits also possessed others, but not in the same manner as Kony.

One of the youths, however, felt that Kony's spiritualism was a form of political propaganda.

There was that kind of propaganda where Kony himself would talk to the children, the captives – that the Acholi are no more, they are not there, they are already killed. That Joseph Kony would send some soldiers to wipe out the whole community of Acholi, because they are not supporting him so he will continue sending his soldiers to kill them. So for those captives who were there in Sudan, they will give birth in order to begin another generation of Acholi because those that are there will all be killed.

He believed this was a way of exerting control on the abductees and to dissuade them from attempting to escape. The message received was, "If I go back (to my village), Kony will send his soldiers to go and kill all (my family and villagers) .... And that will include me."

Political ideology can act as a powerful motivational force for youth in the contexts of conflict and can support psychological resilience and impact upon post-conflict reintegration.<sup>40</sup> The self-reports of former abductees here is consistent with claims that the LRA have no clearly articulated political ideology. One report notes how the rebel commanders said the recreation of 'family' kinship among 'recruits' was the only ideological input he had to make.<sup>41</sup> However, while the lack of a clearly stated political ideology, combined with its particular spiritual base, appears to distinguish the LRA from many groups involved in conflict and make it seem irrational, even schizophrenic, it is possibly not as unusual as it initially appears. Nordstrom, based on observations in Mozambique, argues violence is locally constituted, that it is immediate

and personal and “military process becomes infused with local level culture and individual motivation- in fact, political ideology and commitment can be lacking almost entirely among ground troops.”<sup>42</sup>

An overt political ideology did not emerge in youth’s accounts, while belief in the spirit base of the LRA was mixed, with some believing in Kony’s spirit possession, while others cynically viewing it as a propaganda tool for manipulation and control. It is evident from the interviews with youth that part of the purpose of what children are being told, is to recast the Acholi community itself as an enemy entity. Certainly abductees are told that the Acholi are the potential aggressors and that their communities will likely kill them, should they leave the LRA.

The conflict of being a ‘soldier’ as discussed above also mirrors a conflict with respect to who is the ‘enemy’. On Sudanese soil, what meaning did it have for abducted children to be part of the LRA? More complexly, once being part of an active unit on Ugandan soil, how did the abductee experience the crisis of being a child of their village, a member of the Acholi community, while simultaneously being identified as external to it – as the aggressor, the source of fear, the rebel soldier of the LRA? As the youth’s narratives unfolded, these issues emerged and the interviews could then explore the question of who the ‘enemy’ was? It is not possible to give a comprehensive analysis of these complex questions, based on our small sample that escaped from the LRA, but the discussions offer some reflections on these issues.

The individual accounts of children forcibly recruited as soldiers who later escaped had a shared theme: their primary task was to survive. Put simply, the enemy is anyone who threatens your survival. This can be within the LRA or externally in combat. Unlike many guerrilla movements, the ‘enemy’ is not defined on ideological grounds as part of achieving a political aim, but pragmatically in terms of survival.

One young woman, who was in the LRA for 2 years, gave the following account:

Youth: I fought against the SPLA when we were going for food.

Interviewer: Were you given bullets?

Youth: Yes. If you want to carry 10 magazines, you are free to. [And you?] Six. It depends on how long the fighting lasts. If it is long, then you use four or five magazines. In my case, I’d use three.

Interviewer: How did you feel going back to camp?

Youth: You feel happy, because you take things that can feed you.

Interviewer: Did you know who the SPLA were and what kinds of things they were doing?

Youth: No. We were just told to go and fight the SPLA.

Interviewer: What kind of things made you sad?

Youth: When you met the UPDF you were sad, because they are our enemy. When you do not shoot them, they shoot you. You shoot them in order to survive.

For her, fighting the SPLA did not create conflict in the same way as fighting the UPDF. An outcome of fighting the SPLA was getting food that could feed you. The UPDF is Ugandan, as she is Ugandan, and fighting the UPDF is a source of sadness, because they fought to kill the enemy – but in order to survive. Another interviewee expressed conflict as follows:

Youth: When fighting against the Ugandan Army, I felt partly as army, partly as civilian.

Interviewer: You used to steal food from Ugandan families. What did you feel when you steal food?

Youth: I feel very bad cause the food I am going to steal is my father or guardian, my brothers or sisters guardian.

Another interviewee highlighted the constant fear of being killed in combat: “It would be very good if they got food from the villagers but there was also fear you might be shot dead by people.”

For these youth, this dual role as ‘soldier’/abductee could not be resolved. One report told how, during an interview with ‘John’, an LRA rebel commander, he justified the looting of food from Acholi communities because he “had 200 mouths to feed every day” and that some of the food they were taking from families “was used to feed the families’ own abducted children anyway.”<sup>43</sup> This was one way of rationalizing the fact that violence and looting caused suffering in one’s own community.

There were some suggestions from discussions with members of civil society that some former abductees maintain sporadic contact with their families, and that the links between a minority of formerly abducted children and their family or community of origin is more fluid and more complex than is often recognised in the literature. The youth in our interviews identified their key task as survival in a world where daily life is permeated by violence, in which the religious and spiritual beliefs of their home communities had been hijacked as a form of political propaganda, fear instillation and control and their identity with home and community had been fundamentally compromised.

## Escape From the LRA

Escape offers the only chance for many abductees to leave the LRA. In these cases, the main opportunities for escape presented themselves once LRA units were operating within Ugandan territory. While a cross-border reception, return, rehabilitation and reintegration programme has been established in Sudan to receive Ugandan children who have escaped, fewer escapees than expected have been reintegrated through that route. One of our interviewees explained that “From there (Sudan) if you escape, it is a long way to here, it is difficult, you will be killed. Escaping from Sudan is very difficult”.

A new development arose just before this fieldwork was conducted. The LRA voluntarily released 100 individuals, mainly women and young children, with instructions that they were to be looked after by the community. The ‘release’ of abductees into the custody of the relief agencies had never occurred before. Possible reasons for this release of personnel were that the LRA were under military and political pressure as a result of Operation Iron Fist and the drying up of support from the Sudanese government. While the reasons behind the release are unclear, the release, with its message to the community, highlights again the complex relationship of the LRA viewing themselves as from the community and having an ultimate responsibility for its members.

We discussed with escaped respondents what escape meant and the details of their own escapes. Stories of the consequences of trying to escape if caught were well known. One youth escapee told us the following story:

Youth: My friend was beaten to death, stoned to death, after knowing he wanted to escape.

Interviewer: How did they find out he was trying to escape?

Youth: We had been talking – one among us had been talking – go and tell the secret to the army man; and they called the man. You, you want to escape, we want you to be an army man, we take the government but we have no prison to keep you here, the only thing is dying. You are going to die. And they called four or five and they stoned that man to death.

Knowledge of the thought of escaping is sufficient to merit the order of a death warrant. The choices laid out in this story are stark; ‘you want to escape, we want you to be an army man’. Again there is the dichotomy of ‘you are with us or against us’, which translates in this story into ‘we can let you live, or we can ensure you die’. In spite of this, the youth in this research, who were all escapees, continued to keep in mind the idea of escape. For some, however, the realisation that they were likely to die in the bush, whether they tried to escape or not, provided the impetus and then motivation to escape. All reported waiting for the right opportunity, as the following two accounts illustrate:

An abducted child will continue to persevere through all those kinds of problems, starvation, torture, sleeping in the rain, each time he will think of escape but due to the distance, (and) the security you wait for an opportunity. In my case, we had already crossed over to Uganda, and they sent us to the observation posts to watch the UPDF approaching, but we said ‘Since it is raining, can’t you give us a tent’, but they said no, that would make us almost equal to them, and it was raining so, so heavily, and it gave us an idea, that was our opportunity to escape.

Since we were already trained and given guns and then we were sent back to Uganda for a mission; one day I was shot on the leg and they took me and kept me until I recovered, and we continued. Another time, I was again shot. I thought, one day I will be killed in the (bush), I think it is time for me to escape so while we were in a certain sub-county there was a UPDF detachment, so bearing in mind the idea of escape was always in my heart, I thought, the time is now.

The accounts of survival are harrowing and give an indication of the experiences borne by those that have survived to tell them.

Interviewer: How did you escape?

Girl: Even when we were taken there, they let us even to go and get food from a Sudanese civilian, and from there we went on safari (journey), and there was no water, even the grasses are burnt already and the other is dried totally and we went there, and we got very many food, goats, peanuts, sorghum, many things, then when we collected all those things, then on the way coming back, people were about to die of thirst, even me, then we walked, walked, then when we were about to reach the camp, people were totally thirsty, others started drinking their urine, they would urinate and drink, urinate and drink, then they ran to those that were in the camp to bring water to those that were dying of thirst, then we started drinking that water, then others survived; others died-many people had died, young children what have you, and the big men also ..

There is also significant fear about how the Acholi communities will receive those that are out of the LRA, a fear stoked by the LRA itself as a form of control.

I asked about three poor people, civilians, 'where do I go? If they find me, will they kill me, what will the reception be like?'. The first person I reported to was the Local Counsellor and he took me to the army. I was so scared. They said, don't worry, we won't harm you and I began to relax.

## **Political amnesty and reception**

The Ugandan Government established an Amnesty Commission in 2000 based on the Amnesty Bill, which offers immunity from prosecution to those engaged in fighting the Government since 1986. Initial proposals for a limited amnesty, which would not apply to those who had engaged in serious crimes, was not supported by Ugandan communities and a ground-swell of opinion pushed for a blanket amnesty based on principles of reconciliation.<sup>44</sup> The Government acquiesced. The Amnesty Commission was established to deliver school fees, resettlement packages and Amnesty certificates to those who left rebel groups and came forward, known as "reporters".

The procedure for reporting is that the escapee or 'reporter' has to report to the UPDF or the LCs (local counsellors). 'Reporters' then had to spend some time in the UPDF barracks as part of a reception and debriefing process. More recently, the length of time spent in the barracks has decreased from a few

months to an average of 5 to 10 days. Most 'reporters' spend about a week in this reception programme. From there, the majority of 'reporters' are directed to one of the three major rehabilitation and reintegration psychosocial programmes. Some return directly to the community.

To April 2002, the Demobilisation and Resettlement Team of the Amnesty Commission of Gulu recorded a total of 372 'reporters' in the Acholi region.<sup>45</sup> Of these 'reporters', 243 were adults, many of whom were likely to have been children or youth on abduction and the remaining 129 were children. In a survey of 184 ex-LRA respondents who were part of the amnesty, 43% reported to the LC, 29% to the armed forces (UPDF, SPLA, or Sudanese Armed Forces), 15% to community leaders, and 15% to NGO's.<sup>46</sup> Only 4% did not report to any formal structures and returned directly home, indicating that reception is mainly experienced as formal, with structured referral to non-government rehabilitation programmes being a part of the process, before returning to community settings.