

CHAPTER 4

A POLITICO- ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

This paper has documented how children and youth are at the epicentre of the conflict involving the Lords Resistance Army, the Ugandan government and the Acholi civilian population. As a result of abduction and forced participation in war and atrocities, children are the direct victims of the conflict. Their abduction tears at the hearts of parents, families and society as a whole, while the fear of possible abduction remains a constant threat to all. The defilement and rape of abducted girls serves as violation of families and the entire community, a transgression or act of pollution that distances abducted girls from their community of origin. Simultaneously, while adult fighters are thought to comprise a small core of the LRA, the bulk of the LRA is comprised of these abducted youth who are forced to perpetuate atrocities on their own communities.⁶⁵ The implications of these dynamics form one of the central cruxes of this complex conflict.

By late 2002, the Acholi have not only experienced the breakdown of their agricultural and economic base, but have also been systematically stripped of their cultural and traditional values. Furthermore, as a direct result of the LRA created instability and the Government's response through the creation of "protected settlements", the majority of the Acholi population are now internally displaced and also politically disenfranchised.

This issue of the centrality of children's experiences to the conflict in northern Uganda raises a very uncomfortable question-what is the function of children's stories in this conflict? More fundamentally, are the experiences and horrors perpetuated against children being manipulated-wittingly or unwittingly-by vested interests in this conflict?

As outlined above, the roots of this conflict lie in political disenfranchisement and the cultural breakdown of the Acholi people. The traditional agricultural economic base has been systematically undermined as a result of the LRA created instability and the Government's response through the creation of protected settlements, so that now 90% of the Acholi population are internally displaced. Yet the plight of children as abductees has become the local and

international symbol of the horrors of this conflict. In reading different accounts of the violence experienced by children, they take on a mind-numbing similarity. To a large extent, economic and political discourse has been put to one side as human rights and child protection voices dominate. The brutalisation of children by the LRA places the organisation beyond the moral pale. This sense of the LRA as a movement operating beyond the bounds of rationality is further supported by its spirit beliefs, its strange behavioural impositions on the population, and its recent branding as a 'terrorist' organisation, which has paved the way for the Government's response, 'Operation Iron Fist'. Arguably, the focus on 'children' as a symbol of this conflict serves to act as a smokescreen which deflects pressure from addressing the underlying political and economic roots of this conflict, the factors maintaining conflict such as the protected settlements, and the needs of special interest groups which profit from the war's continuance.

It has been suggested that the LRA are not interested in peace, political stability or the reconstruction of a shattered country. In spite of the existence of a political amnesty, it is quietly recognised that amnesty is unlikely to apply to the LRA leadership thus offering little real incentive to key LRA members for disarmament and disbandment. However it is possible that the amnesty would not be an incentive in itself to a group that matches more profile of warlordism than that of a political rebel group, as it continues to benefit from the pillage and destruction of Acholi society for its own continuity. However at a government and military level, this has frequently resulted in a lack of distinction between the rebels and Acholi society, which is evident in the continued political, social and economic marginality of the region while the rest of Uganda has developed and prospered. It has also been evident in the lack of political development or integration of other Acholi groups that could act as a political forum for the Acholi people. Further, it has often been alluded that "no rebel force could exist in that area if the civilians did not want them there".⁶⁶ The Ugandan government has sometimes referred to the northern Uganda conflict as "Acholi killing themselves", implying that the government has lacked serious motivation to engage in finding a solution to the conflict, and as a result, to the development of the Acholi region.⁶⁷

Cyclically, the Ugandan government has sought a military solution to the crisis, which does not seem to be reaching any successful ending. 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. Currently, there are no signs of LRA-abducted children emerging, even as prisoners of war, with Ugandan troops, instead, the UDFP

has conceded that children were being killed rather than rescued. 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. Instead of promoting movement to peace, it has deepened the destruction of Acholi society by forcing even more of the resident population in Gulu into IDP camps, where they have still not been safe from LRA attacks. Furthermore, it is claimed that UPDF soldiers have subjected them to arbitrary arrests, torture including rape, and other abuses. There would seem to be no end to this and as late as October 2002, with the renewed LRA offensive, the UPDF continued to order civilians in Acholi districts to leave their homes and move closer to these IDP camps. One argument put forward is that the conflict enables the UPDF to continue securing ongoing high levels of military funding.⁶⁸ However, given Uganda's recent involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the fact that Museveni himself came from the military, it is unlikely that this conflict would make much difference to military budget. One hypothesis is that locally based Government military units may have vested power and economic interests in the continuance of the conflict and there is anecdotal evidence that the local military has scuppered locally based peace initiatives by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace initiative, thus dragging out and prolonging the conflict.⁶⁹

The third group that would seek to benefit from an extended conflict of this nature are the business warlords who use the chaos both for illegal activities, money laundering, raw material exploitation, ammunitions trading and human trafficking. Once again, the economy of the area lacks the sophisticated mechanisms necessary for money laundering and there are no known mining or wildlife reserves, as in Sierra Leone. The gun trade is almost insignificant for there is a sufficient pool of weapons in the region that would totally undermine any commercialisation of the trade, and as such there is no evidence of human trafficking. This group may be profiting from the ongoing conflict but are unlikely to have major influence over any political outcome.

This research did not seek to investigate these issues and they are raised in the context of understanding the function of children's stories and experiences within the overall context of the conflict. The tendency of child-oriented programming is to depoliticise the position of children and call for a focus on child rights and welfare. However our conclusion is that, in this conflict, where abducted children are central to the dynamics of the conflict, it is useful to examine the political place of children in the discourse. Our conclusion is that the focus on the death, torture and brutality experienced by children has allowed a vacuum to emerge in which issues of political, regional, and

social development have been allowed to be sidestepped and the political development of groups that could be central to the peace process and the development of Acholi society ignored. A lack of differentiation between Acholi society and the LRA has justified a military campaign, which has turned the entire region into a large displacement camp that is economically, culturally and politically bereft. What is true is that Acholi society has been destroyed and that today Acholis in Gulu can be said to comprise a socially bankrupt, economically under-developed and politically alienated grouping of internally displaced peoples. The answer to one of the questions raised at the beginning of the research was “reintegration into what?” This is addressed in the concluding chapter.