

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The presence and participation of children in war, as casualties and soldiers, is not a new phenomenon. Between 1998 and 2001 children were being used as soldiers in at least 87 out of 178 countries – including both conflict and non-conflict situations¹. In Uganda, forced conscription of children into conflict as soldiers and combatants first gained prominence during 1980, when Museveni's resistance force had recruited an estimated 3,000 kadogos. Uganda was chosen as a case study because of the continued abduction of children by rebel forces and the ongoing prevalence of violence against ordinary people, resulting in an increasing incidence of refugees and mass internal forced displacements. The presence of Ugandan Government military forces in Sudan is an added dimension to the regionalisation of the conflict.

In the mid- to late 80s, two successive armed opposition movements picked up the remains of decommissioned Acholi fighters from Museveni's resistance movement. Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement was succeeded by a breakaway-armed group led by Joseph Kony, which emerged as the focus of military opposition to the government in the Gulu District. Like Lakwena, Kony claimed to be possessed by religious 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.

Although estimates vary, most would suggest that by the end of 2000, over 15,500 children have been abducted since the beginning of the war. Less than 6,000 of these children had managed to escape or have been liberated from captivity.²

According to the testimonies of escapees, extreme violence was used as a tool to coerce civilians into providing support and as punishment for not obeying the laws set 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.³

Psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for youth who have escaped or were released from the LRA have been established since 1994 and are reasonably well integrated locally, both with communities and as part of the Government's overall demobilisation and amnesty programme. While some former abductees return directly to communities, the majority pass through one of several non-governmental rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

In spite of the culture of peace and discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation within recipient communities, there are real tensions around reintegration and reconciliation surrounding the return of ex-abductees. Experiences within the LRA may have fundamentally altered the manner in which ex-abductees function as members within a family or as constituents within a community. Community members have concerns that this may be negative, and that ex-abductees may be aggressive or violent as a result of the violence they themselves were exposed to. Teachers and community leaders noted another side to this story. Some of the children who returned were stronger and more confident than children who were never abducted and their experiences in the bush coupled with the success of escaping gave them a new-found confidence from which leadership qualities have grown.

Reintegration occurs in the context of family relationships that are conducted under a state of uncertainty and emergency. Few social services and infrastructure, no matter how rudimentary these may be, could be considered as functional. Schools have ceased to function in many areas, water supplies are constantly disrupted and transport networks are contingent on the security situation and thus unreliable. The economies have been shattered and linkages to the greater region highly disrupted, if not completely severed. Subsistence agriculture has come under pressure as people have been squeezed into ever decreasing geographical spaces as a result of voluntary or forced relocation to IDP camps or into towns. Where remnants of 'normality' exist, they operate under conditions of extreme stress. This monograph highlights the process of reintegration of LRA abductees in this context: it may hold the seeds of future conflict or contribute to future peace.