

CHAPTER 4

CONSEQUENCES AS CAUSES: THE IMPACT OF THE LRA

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact the LRA conflict has had on the people living in northern Uganda. Indeed, there is substantial documentation describing the situation of those who have experienced the effects of the war most acutely: catalogues of human rights abuses or stories of atrocities are a prominent part of the public discourse on the war. What have been less well articulated, however, are the numerous complex dynamics that surround and sustain the conflict, in particular the different ways in which the conflict is understood and articulated both by those living in the midst of it, and those commenting on the war. These understandings form the focus for this section, which highlights different understandings and perceptions of the war. A clearer understanding of these dynamics is crucial, as this not only sheds light on the environment in which the war continues, but gives clear indicators of how people on the ground believe the war can be resolved. Indeed, if such dynamics are not taken into account it is unlikely that any resolution will lead to sustainable peace.

The devastating impact of the war is not only an effect: it also feeds the different understandings of the situation – something crucial in a protracted conflict situation. As a women’s peace activist in Gulu said, “It is very difficult to point out one cause or another. Now the consequences have become the causes.”¹²⁹ In other words, many on the ground, who blame either the LRA or the government for these negative effects, have come to see the consequences of the war as its causes. These “causes” then further sustain the cycles of violence, as the parties blame the population and become less willing to end the war. In particular, notions of political and economic marginalisation, which were strongly expressed by many of the informants, have been interpreted as ongoing causes of the conflict. Taking these different dynamics into account is vital when considering strategies for resolving the conflict; such perceptions are a real force in the lives of those involved and need to be treated as such.

Ethnic portrayals of the war and political marginalisation

Many people living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader referred to the fact that those from outside the region have explained the conflict in ethnic terms. They spoke of how politicians or other Ugandans equate Kony, as an Acholi, with all Acholi people, and the war has been seen not only as geographically specific to that area, but confined to one ethnic group. Many in the region, therefore, feel marginalised within the national context. Comments such as, “This war makes us feel that we are not being treated as Ugandans”,¹³⁰ “Most Acholis feel that other Ugandans don’t care about their plight”,¹³¹ and “This conflict is treated as an internal Acholi affair”,¹³² are very common and show the extent to which people living in northern Uganda feel isolated from the rest of the country. Although people living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader clearly viewed themselves as Acholi, and were proud of their cultural heritage, they were upset about the extent to which their Acholi identity was seen both as something negative, and as being somehow outside a wider national identity. A senior government official in Kampala echoed this feeling: “There is a national issue involved in this war, and yet people are not viewing the war as one.”¹³³

This ethnic labelling of the conflict has been translated into a feeling of political isolation. As one informant said, “In the last presidential elections, the issue of ending the war was brought up. But that time, Museveni didn’t have commitment to end the war because he was still seeing it as an Acholi thing.”¹³⁴ Or, as a teacher living in Gulu town commented, “The northerners are not in the good books of government.”¹³⁵ A woman IDP living under a tree in Kitgum town articulated such feelings of isolation: “Museveni hates the Acholis and does not care whether we are killed by Kony, abducted, or raped. It is none of his business.”¹³⁶ Or, as one camp leader said, “We would like Museveni to come here, just to spend one night with us.”¹³⁷ Numerous informants also expressed the belief that Museveni has deliberately isolated the conflict in order to keep the war hidden from the international community, a view reinforced by the recent Human Rights and Peace Centre (HURIPPEC) study.¹³⁸

The feeling of political marginalisation was supported by allegations that other conflicts within Uganda had been resolved because they were “closer” to the government. As one informant said, “We had conflict in Western Uganda with the ADF [Allied Democratic Forces] ... but it was put off quickly because of the proximity to the centre. The war here was analysed and thought not to pose a serious threat to the centre, therefore it was kept away.”¹³⁹ Another

informant said, "He has been sending soldiers to DRC, but he has not finished his own war here."¹⁴⁰ Alleged derogatory statements made by politicians and the government concerning the conflict further exemplify the perceived lack of political will to end the war. For instance, as one IDP said, "Museveni has said the Acholi are like grasshoppers in a bottle biting each other. So he says that there is no war because his area has no war. Even the food we get is not from the government, it is from the WFP."¹⁴¹ Further evidence of the ethnic labelling of the conflict is the way in which it has been increasingly articulated as a "national" issue within the public discourse since the LRA spread geographically into other areas, rather than as simply an "Acholi" problem. As one interviewee said, "There was a feeling that the war was of the Acholi, but now it has become a national issue because of abductions from other regions like the Teso and Lango."¹⁴² Indeed, informants in Soroti and Lira revealed how little they knew about the LRA conflict before it spread into their own districts.

Many civilians in northern Uganda feel that the government is marginalising them politically by portraying the war in ethnic terms. Public portrayals of the war, especially through media accounts and public statements made by politicians, have continually reinforced feelings of marginalisation and been interpreted as evidence of political isolation, resulting in accentuated divisions between those living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, and the rest of the country. As a result, the NRM's stated agenda of creating national unity within the country has been undermined by a conflict that has left people feeling politically marginalised and uncertain of their identity.¹⁴³ Such a sense of political isolation, in turn, has caused some in government to be half-hearted in finding a solution to the war. As a government insider noted, "There is a lack of cooperation from northerners in fighting the LRA. They are antagonistic and see the UPDF as an enemy, so the UPDF doesn't want to fight properly and end the conflict once and for all."¹⁴⁴ While it may be unfair to point a finger at who "caused" the problem, it is clear that these attitudes reinforce one another.

Displacement and economic marginalisation

The extent to which people living under the influence of the conflict feel politically marginalised is exacerbated by the current economic conditions in northern Uganda. While poverty in itself does not automatically lead to violence, and is not identified here as a root cause of the conflict, it is certainly a consequence of the war that, in turn, continues to feed people's perception of marginalisation. In particular, notions of political marginalisation have been

reinforced by the impact of displacement throughout the region. Widespread displacement is perhaps the most visible impact of the conflict and serves as a daily, physical reminder of the consequences of war on the everyday lives of thousands of civilians. More than 1,4 million people are currently displaced within the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Lira, Apac, Soroti, Katakwi, Kaberamaido and Adjumani.¹⁴⁵ While the conflict in general is seen to have been the cause of displacement, the majority of informants on the ground did not see the LRA attacks per se as the direct cause of flight. Instead, it has been the government policy of moving people into “protected villages” that was the most common explanation given for the widespread displacement. The justification given by the government for doing this was to enable the UPDF to protect the civilians more effectively and to assist the government’s military strategy by making rebels more visible. In the words of UPDF spokesperson, Maj. Shaban Bantariza, “The camps are a military strategy of the UPDF designed to deny the rebels manpower and other resources.”¹⁴⁶ A civilian population that has continued to be attacked by rebels even in the camps sees this as an inadequate explanation. The LRA is reported to have attacked 16 of the existing 35 IDP camps in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader between June and September 2002 alone¹⁴⁷ and continues to do so persistently. Indeed, the authors were unable to visit several IDP camps in Gulu and Kitgum because of continuing LRA incursions in these camps.

Not only are the camps inadequately protected, but living conditions there are also extremely poor. As a religious leader said, “The IDP camps are a death warrant to the people. There is hunger, disease, insecurity, malnutrition.”¹⁴⁸ According to the UN, global acute malnutrition rates for children under the age of five have reached approximately 31% and 18% in two IDP camps in Gulu, Anaka and Pabbo.¹⁴⁹ One woman in Kitgum town talked of how grateful she was not to be in a camp:

Myself I can say I am lucky. At least I don’t stay in the camp, and at least I have some money. Women in the camp are the ones that suffer the most. They do not have food, and they have to risk going to the farms every day to look for food to feed the children. Women are raped by both rebels and soldiers and sometimes by criminals. People are sick and hungry in the camps ... People are not safe in the camps. They are crowded and close together which makes it easy for the rebels to abduct them and steal food. When people were in their homes, they were far apart and could easily hide. When rebels attack they surround the camps and make it hard to run away. The army is here but the soldiers cannot do anything.¹⁵⁰

As a result, the majority of the displaced harbour considerable anger towards the government for forcing them out of their homes and then being unable to protect and provide for them. In the words of one informant: "The government, if they find you farming your lands, they beat you. But then they don't feed you."¹⁵¹ A woman living in Kitgum interpreted her predicament in this way: "I used to eat fresh food from my gardens but now I am being fed like a child ... My husband and children are dead. I am poor, helpless and waiting to die."¹⁵² No longer able to farm their land, displaced people are living in dire poverty and being forced to resort to the most desperate means to survive: "Prostitution is rife. Parents send their girl children to the lodges to be raped so that they get money to buy food."¹⁵³ As a hospital worker said, "They have nothing in the camps, so they just disappear into the bush because it is easier there. Instead of struggling in the camps, you can just loot. The government should not be asking why people do this."¹⁵⁴

However, the impact of displacement is not interpreted solely in economic terms: it is also seen to have eroded the very roots of Acholi culture. A social worker commented: "Community laws are no longer there. There are very many family break-ups. Poverty is very deep."¹⁵⁵ There was frequent reference to the fact that cultural taboos were being broken by families having to live close together, and that social support networks within the society were being eroded. As a local businessman commented, "We grew up with dignity. These children are not growing up as true Acholis. Our culture is being destroyed completely. The children won't know about seasons and agriculture."¹⁵⁶ A religious leader summarised the impression of humiliation that came through so tangibly in discussions about displacement:

This community is destroyed because the culture has gone. What is a community without a culture? There is no privacy, no morality in the camps. Children die very young. A young girl died yesterday giving birth. There were so many burials in this cemetery we had to take her elsewhere. The whole future of Acholi people is at stake, and this will also cause problems throughout the country. Even look at the night commuters. You are forced to let your children go each evening, but you don't know where to.¹⁵⁷

The dramatic increase in the number of "night commuters", referred to as another form of displacement in the previous quotation, has further highlighted the disruption within families and communities. Every night, as many as 25 000 people, mainly children, walk into towns to sleep on verandas out of fear of LRA attacks during the night.¹⁵⁸ As one informant commented: "

The future of the Acholi is very bleak – in the whole of the Acholi sub region. The culture of coming to town is a bad thing. If the commuters continue coming to town at night as the normal thing for the next three years, I don't know what will happen. It should be a concern for the whole nation."¹⁵⁹ A Catholic priest talked of the situation in his church, where many children were sleeping: "The children who are accommodated in the church use condoms. When I go to celebrate early mass I find a lot of condoms in my church."¹⁶⁰ Lack of adequate parental control over the situation is having a devastating impact. As a teacher said, "The students have no respect. A very small child can abuse you. There's no discipline. I found small children playing a game and one side played as rebels while the other as soldiers. Imagine! These are nursery children!"¹⁶¹

Displacement has also created generational tensions that are seen, in turn, to be potential sources of future conflict. Years of living under the threat of abduction have meant that children, who have known nothing but war and displacement, are becoming increasingly distanced from their familial and cultural roots. Indeed, while the issue of child abductions has been relatively well publicised – and is an undisputed reality with worrying consequences – less has been said about the everyday tragedies of the thousands of other children who are struggling to live in a harsh, broken environment.

Displacement, therefore, has not only reinforced feelings of economic and political marginalisation, but also put huge stress on relationships within the communities. The interviewees' explanations for the suffering differ widely from the government's "protected villages" rhetoric. There is a broadly held belief that the government has deliberately created displacement as a form of punishment for the Acholi people, as it has reduced them to dependency and helplessness. In the words of a religious leader, "The government said we should move off our land ... and now everybody has become a beggar."¹⁶²

Furthermore, many informants in the IDP camps and beyond suspect that there is a more sinister explanation: that the government wants people off their land in order to use it for its own purposes. One informant talked of a widely held fear that "the government has a long-term plan with the land of the Acholi and that is why they are putting people in camps, to free the land to be grabbed."¹⁶³ Another said, "There is such suspicion. When you go into the countryside where there is no human being, you find that's where the government programmes are happening. Acholi people are outward looking and they suspect that they're being kept in the camp because there is too much interest in the land. The land is very fertile."¹⁶⁴ In particular, Salim

Saleh's Security and Production Programme (SPP) was referred to as an indication of this process happening, as it has been widely interpreted as an indirect means of securing land in the region.¹⁶⁵ In light of this, many IDPs believe that they will no longer have ownership of their land once the war has ended, as external elements will have grabbed it.

Thus, the many negative consequences of displacement have led people to feel economically and politically disempowered. Such perceptions, in turn, have come to be seen as ongoing causes of the conflict. Indeed, it was with reference to the issue of displacement that many informants related their situation to the root causes of the war. As an IDP man said: "Kony says Museveni stood by as the Karamojong stole our cattle and now he wants to sell our Acholi land. That is why they are removing people and putting them in camps."¹⁶⁶ Kony may have a questionable political agenda, but the displacement issue has given him a new excuse to continue the war.

An imagined war economy

There is no significant war economy in northern Uganda on the level of Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where readily exportable resources such as diamonds or coltan provided the principal lifeline for globally connected rebel groups. However, interviews across the north reveal deep suspicions about smaller-scale war profiteering on the part of a number of different individuals or groups who are thought to be benefiting from the war. These accusations, in turn, reflect explanations for the conditions in which the war continues, as various actors are accused of benefiting financially from the war and actively encouraging it to continue. First, there was frequent reference to large sums of money budgeted for defence, which were not reflected in increased military capacity on the ground. In particular, there is a strong belief among civilians that senior army commanders were benefiting financially from the war, something that the recent ghost soldiers enquiry has confirmed: "The top military are the ones who are benefiting from this war. They are doing a lot of business."¹⁶⁷ Another informant described his understanding of the situation in the following words:

There are commanders doing cross-border trade openly. They collaborate with the SPLA and go into Sudan or use them to take the goods there.... If you try to take your own goods, they confiscate it and kill you or jail you and you never see the things again. Some others are destroying the vegetation and forests by cutting wood and

making timber and sending the timber in army trucks towards Kampala. The army and soldiers get war allowances but some soldiers say they don't get these allowances because the commanders eat it after collecting it for them. Just look at the houses being built in Kampala! There is a lot of corruption.¹⁶⁸

Additional comments such as, "Some local politicians want the war to continue",¹⁶⁹ and "The government sees that if war goes on, it is easy to fundraise in the name of the war. They call them terrorists so that even more money can come in because now even America is supporting Museveni,"¹⁷⁰ show the extent to which government and politicians more generally are suspected by many to be benefiting from the war. RLP could not verify these accusations independently. In December 2003, however, the "ghost soldiers" scandal revealed significant siphoning off of defence funds, with some combat units as much as 60% below their ration strength.¹⁷¹ As a senior official told RLP, "I brought a case to Museveni where there were supposed to be 1 000 soldiers on the ground, but in fact there were only 300 actually there."¹⁷²

In addition, there were accusations that civilians living in the area were benefiting from the war. One interviewee gave his opinion on the subject: "There are sympathisers, coordinators [in Gulu town]. Otti [a rebel leader] can talk to me for three hours on the phone. Where does he get the money for that? Looted money always bounces back. Even in the camps you find a man building."¹⁷³ Indeed, there were allegations that individuals and businesses were assisting rebels, for instance by getting hold of supplies and getting photos developed for them, and of buildings being erected with "rebel" money. Another informant told the story of a man whose rebel son gave him 5 million shillings and then returned to the bush: "He is now on bad terms with his neighbours who have lost their children at the hands of the rebels."¹⁷⁴ In the words of a social worker:

Your neighbour is the one who reports you to the rebels and they come to your house and steal money ... Sometimes the rebels come and they are even calling names of people they were given by abducted people. Most of those who were abducted say that since their future has been ruined, they too should ruin other people's future.¹⁷⁵

Although many accusations remain unsubstantiated, they are indicative of the extent to which the war has generated an atmosphere of intense suspicion between different actors, both internal and external. Clearly there are individuals and groups who are benefiting financially from the war. While it is

unlikely that such factors are sufficient in themselves to sustain the war, they are important secondary sources of the conflict, and need to be recognised as such.

What is perhaps more crucial is the level of suspicion the war has generated within communities, which has further contributed to its devastating impact. For example, perceptions that UPDF officers are corrupt reduce civilians' willingness to assist them with intelligence. UPDF commanders are then more reluctant to assist populations who are antagonistic towards them and are suspected of engaging in undercover business activities. These perceptions and suspicions have had important consequences for how the conflict has actually been waged on the ground. Although the overall impression among the communities was one of mutual support rather than antagonism, there was clearly a nagging undercurrent of suspicion among certain groups and individuals. Such misgivings highlight the chronic dilemmas that continually confront civilians who have been living with this conflict for nearly 18 years. While the recent "ghost soldiers" investigation is an important step in addressing one part of the "war economy", other sectors such as that of rebel collaborators remain. Identifying such elements will be important during the peace process, given that those who are, indeed, benefiting may work against peaceful resolution.

Physical security and ambiguities of allegiance

Feelings of political and economic marginalisation, coupled with the reality and the suspicion of war profiteering, are reinforced by the fact that people living in northern Uganda live in constant fear for their lives. As a senior government official said, "The top priority of people in their communities is security."¹⁷⁶ Indeed, many of the dynamics within the conflict revolve around people's perceptions of their physical security, and the way in which they view different actors. These perspectives reveal the extent to which complex allegiances and identities fail to fit the categories applied by those observing and commenting on the war from a distance, in particular through the media. Thus, the perspectives of those living in the midst of the conflict are being defined on a daily basis by issues concerning their physical security, while at the same time frequent accusations of LRA collaboration are being made against civilians. These explanations for the war have further exacerbated feelings of isolation within the community and created huge misunderstandings, which in turn feed into the ongoing causes of the war. In light of this, it is vital to understand the way in which civilians living in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader

view both the UPDF and the LRA. Such perceptions give an insight into understandings of the conflict and the climate in which the war continues. In particular, they show the extent to which there is a lack of trust and coordination between the UPDF and the local people in attempts to end the war.

Uganda People's Defence Forces

Perceptions of the UPDF on the ground were mixed. In the first instance, many civilians expressed fear of an army that was supposed to be defending them from the LRA but was instead seen as the aggressor. As one informant said, "People fear to report abuses because they will be made to lead the ill-trained army to the place of the abuse. It becomes a punishment for doing a lawful thing."¹⁷⁷ An abductee who described his escape from the LRA shared this opinion:

I had not had anything to eat or drink for so long, I was so weak. When I came to a deserted hut, I found some rotten meat and ate it because I was so hungry. Then I heard soldiers coming and I hid. I heard them speaking Kiswahili, so I knew it was the UPDF. But it's not easy to give yourself up to them or they'll kill you. They found my bag and the soldier cocked his gun. They were searching the area, and I was forced to speak, "It is me, I was abducted by some rebels but I ran away." The soldier came up to me and said, "How long have you been in the bush?" Then he told me, "You are a rebel, why should we waste our time with you? We will kill you." He was about to shoot me, but two Acholi soldiers came and said to leave me. They carried me to a hut, and then took me to the road. When a cyclist came along, they asked him to take me to a nearby place. I spent one night at the military detach[ment], then one month in Pader at the barracks.¹⁷⁸

Such accounts show the extent to which elements of the UPDF have generated fear among civilians, which is cause for serious concern. This perception is exacerbated by the fact that the UPDF are also seen as incompetent to provide protection. One local peace initiative claims that the UPDF intervened in only 33 out of 456 attacks by the LRA between June and December 2002,¹⁷⁹ a statistic substantiated by interviewees. Indeed, many accused the UPDF of arranging IDP camps with the army detachment in the centre surrounded by civilians, creating the impression of civilians protecting the UPDF. As a group of teachers commented: "When the rebels come, there is no defence. The government soldiers run away and tell you to 'protect yourself.'"¹⁸⁰ Or, as one

ex-abductee alleged, with reference to his time in the LRA, “the UPDF runs away when Kony comes. Even a small number of LRA fighters can overcome a very large UPDF force.”¹⁸¹ Such apparent negligence and incompetence, reinforced by stories of abuse against civilians, has created a climate of fear and distrust towards the UPDF. Furthermore, the UPDF is seen to represent the government on the ground, and their inability to protect the people from Kony’s attacks feeds existing feelings of political alienation. Each child abducted, each home looted, and every family member killed, is viewed by the communities as further proof that the government is not protecting them.

Operation Iron Fist (OIF) was often referred to as an example of the UPDF’s inability to adequately protect local communities from the LRA. Although security officials interviewed talked about some of the operational successes,¹⁸² on the ground it was seen to have made the situation considerably worse: “It was peaceful in Acholi for two years before OIF. People were settling and were already planting. Now they are paying back. The rebels came with a lot of anger, killing civilians because they were collaborators. OIF could only proceed when the Amnesty collapsed, and it has been a failure.”¹⁸³ Another informant referred to OIF as “waking up” the rebels from Sudan.¹⁸⁴ For many on the ground, it epitomised the worst case scenario: a “military strategy” that did not deliver protection and, instead, unleashed a massive terror operation. Ex-abductees spoke of how, before OIF, Kony had settled down: “They had nice houses, with lots of wealth [in Sudan] ... People were relaxed and didn’t have the idea of coming to war. Those private soldiers, the children who were new and didn’t have wealth, were beginning to escape back because there was no war.”⁴⁸⁵ The violence that has followed OIF has further destroyed confidence in the ability of the UPDF to protect civilians, and highlighted their lack of military capacity in the face of the LRA.

Much has been said about the alleged abuses committed by the UPDF and its inability to effectively protect the civilian population. However, our findings indicate that civilians have a more subtle understanding of the situation: while the UPDF as a whole is equated with the government, there is a clear understanding of the difference between the foot soldiers whose job it is to confront the LRA on a daily basis, and those in higher-ranking positions.

Thus informants, while condemning abuses by the UPDF and expressing genuine fear in some instances, also showed an awareness of their predicament. For instance, there was regular acknowledgement of the fact that many UPDF soldiers have been killed in confrontations with the LRA, and that they, too, have lost friends and colleagues to the war. In addition, there was frequent

reference to the conditions in which the foot soldiers were fighting. One informant talked of how UPDF soldiers were not getting their allowances and had to beg for food.¹⁸⁶ Another articulated the difference between foot soldiers and those in higher authority: "Those in the lower ranks are very resentful because they don't get anything, but it is their lives that are exposed every day. That is why they run when there is an attack. They see no reason to die while the big shots are getting rich alone. There is very low morale among the soldiers."¹⁸⁷ Others referred to the lack of adequate communications systems that constantly endanger the lives of soldiers¹⁸⁸ and the fact that "the soldiers don't even have torches, so when the rebels come, they just run away."¹⁸⁹ Such views were summarised by the statement, "We should strengthen the Ugandan army to protect its own people. They have torn uniforms and bad supplies."¹⁹⁰

Indeed, such frustration was expressed by the rank-and-file themselves: "Imagine when one of our trucks breaks down, it may take several months to repair it. Yet this is the same truck we need to transport our boys for operation ... Sometimes we even end up begging for food from the civilians."¹⁹¹ Or, as another interviewee argued,

The soldiers are tired and demoralised. They have no leave, so they want to go back home ... They have poor welfare. Their uniforms are rags. They don't even get all their salary because the bosses eat it ... Then there is the military code. The administration of military justice is harsh and not morale boosting. The junior officers really suffer.¹⁹²

There was also an acknowledgement of the fact that the UPDF is confronted with an impossible military dilemma in which the "enemy" is comprised primarily of abducted children. This has created a no-win situation for those who are supposed to be fighting a rebel army that is forcibly deploying children in its front-line military operations. Indeed, civilians referred to the fact that those killed during confrontations between the UPDF and LRA are referred to as "rebels", and those not killed are referred to as "rescued". The situation is complicated further with the inclusion of children who have been born in the bush, and are now deemed old enough to fight. As an interviewee in Kampala said with reference to this category: "For them, [rebellion] is a life. They are very daring. Government forces run away at the sight of them."¹⁹³ Furthermore, ex-abductees revealed that the rebels often wear UPDF uniforms, and soldiers themselves admitted that they sometimes did not know who was a rebel and who was a fellow soldier.

Thus, while civilians expressed grievances about the actions of individual soldiers and a more general distrust in their ability to defend adequately, they also recognised the dilemmas and difficulties facing them. While the latter does not in any way excuse the former, it shows a degree of comprehension towards the UPDF that has been less well documented within the literature. That said, there is a major crisis in public perceptions of the UPDF: while showing varying degrees of understanding, civilians are still left feeling unprotected by the army and, hence, unprotected by their own government. Their lack of belief in the UPDF to protect them and, at worst, the fear that they will be accused of collaborating with the enemy, ensures that there is limited trust and coordination between the UPDF and the civilians.

Rebels or children?

Nearly every one of the more than 900 people we interviewed unequivocally condemned Joseph Kony's LRA, particularly civilians living in the midst of the conflict. The group clearly does not receive popular support in northern Uganda, with the possible exception of a few alleged collaborators. However, civilians are also confronted with two dilemmas regarding their attitude towards the rebels. First, despite their hatred for the LRA, they know the civilian directed atrocities will increase dramatically if they actively confront the group. When the community defence "Bow and Arrow" groups were organised in 1991 and 1992, the result was a new LRA retaliation strategy to cut off people's lips, ears, mouths and limbs. As one local government official said, "The Arrow group started here in Acholi, and that is why we even have an orthopaedic workshop to make artificial limbs for injured civilians."¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, the self-defence units received very few guns from the government, and so most civilians in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have become highly cautious about actively resisting the LRA.

The second dilemma is the result of the LRA's deliberate use of child soldiers. On the one hand is the horrific brutality meted out by the LRA, and on the other is the knowledge that those atrocities have often been carried out by their own children, who have been forcibly recruited. As one rebel girl said, "We were all given guns. I was taught how to shoot by the rebels. I was so scared to begin with, looting and killing people."¹⁹⁵ In a war in which the LRA views 9 to 12-year-olds as the most desirable combatant age-group, and in which young girls run away leaving their children, fathered by rebel commanders, lying in the bush, there is little doubt in people's minds as to the level of brutal force being applied in making children

use violence. One nine-year-old boy who had recently escaped described this process graphically:

There is nothing that I liked there. They collect all the children together and make you beat someone to death. Once there were about seven who tried to escape, including two girls. The commander decided not to kill the girls. He picked one boy to be killed. He placed his head on a piece of wood. He told one of the girls to come and chop this boy into small pieces. She started trying to cut his head off, but was not doing a good job. The other boys were told to help. When they had almost taken the head off, they had to chop the body into small pieces. Then they were told to play with the dead person's head. The boys had to throw it in the air four times, and the girls three times. The girls were bare-chested. After that, they commanded the girls to smear blood of the dead boy on their chest. After that, they put the head of the boy in a central place, put clubs all over it covering the head, and informed us that anyone who tries to escape will have the same thing.¹⁹⁶

A young girl spoke of the horrific prevalence of rape: "My mother was raped. I was also beaten and defiled. The girls and sisters were raped. Some could not walk properly because of the wounds in their private parts." These comments show the brutality inflicted upon those who are abducted, many of whom become the same individuals who are then forced to carry out atrocities.

The shocking, brutal reality of this war is that those who have been forcibly recruited, and those who are killed, raped, or themselves abducted, all come from the same communities. It is the same actors being recycled by the non-abducted minority within the LRA who are carefully orchestrating a self-perpetuating conflict that enters people's homes at the most personal of levels. One informant expressed this dilemma: "The people like Kony as their son, but they don't like what he is doing. You can't reject what is yours, but we don't like what he is doing. He should not fight us because now there's nobody who is not affected by the war."¹⁹⁷

Thus while there is tangible horror at the activities of the LRA, the lack of distinction between the "rebels" and "abductees" generates intense confusion. As one informant said, "A 'rebel' who is killed in battle may have only just been abducted one hour ago. If you are killed you are a rebel, if you are abandoned or escaped you are an abductee."¹⁹⁸ Thus, while civilians clearly abhor

the actions of the LRA, they cannot simply wish for it to be obliterated militarily, as that would mean killing their own children.

Survival or collaboration?

Given this predicament, the communities are caught in an impasse. Not fully trusting the UPDF, yet knowing that the LRA is full of their own children, they cannot wholeheartedly support the UPDF in their counter-insurgency campaign. As a result, a common accusation against the communities is that they are not actively trying to repel Kony, and somehow support or collaborate with the LRA. UPDF and government informants continually expressed their frustration that the communities were not doing enough to assist them in repelling Kony. As one security official said, "That culture of thinking that it is the UPDF alone which must fight the LRA while the civilians watch is what has propelled this war. The citizens must contribute to pacification. Everybody must contribute ... But most of our people are only spectators."¹⁹⁹

This accusation has created intense anger among the communities: "The idea that local people support the war, I think it's a great insult. Even politicians have said it. And it really hurts, because these are the people who have had their children abducted. Who wants to support the person who abducts their child? People here mostly don't like Museveni, but that doesn't mean they support Kony."²⁰⁰ It has also created an atmosphere of fear. In the words of one opinion leader:

The government has failed to differentiate between the victims of the war, mediators for peace, collaborators to the rebels, and sympathisers. Those claiming to be mediators are arrested. Those who feel badly about their children in the bush are labelled collaborators and jailed. Others are forced to go to the shop to get supplies for the rebels, and then they're called collaborators.²⁰¹

History has taught civilians that arming themselves would be to risk incurring greater wrath from Kony. In addition, in undertaking such acts of self-defence, they would be potentially killing their own children. As an opinion leader in Gulu said, "If they go to the bush and discover the person they find is not Kony, it's their brothers who were abducted. When they kill it is very painful. The government cannot claim to be powerful by killing the people who should have been protected in the first place."²⁰²

Thus civilians are trapped in the middle of a war that is ostensibly between the government/UPDF and the LRA. Attacked from both sides, they are not sure where to turn. They are continually caught between accusations that they are colluding with the LRA, and LRA suspicion that they are colluding with the UPDF. As one informant said, "The rebels are killing us and the UPDF are killing us. Where should Acholis go?"²⁰³ Or, as a displaced man commented, "If you go to the farm and dig, Kony comes and kills you. If you start a business in the camp, the government soldiers come and take it."²⁰⁴ The war has created an environment in which there is little neutral territory, and in which the actions of civilians are constantly misinterpreted. There is inadequate understanding of the fact that harbouring or protecting a rebel is not a sign of support for Kony, but a reflection of civilians' fear of the rebels and distrust of the UPDF. The UPDF clearly needs to repair its image in northern Uganda as current levels of mistrust of it among civilians hinder the effectiveness of its operations. As one official acknowledged, "People run away from the LRA and don't talk to the government, which makes it very difficult for us. It denies the government intelligence. It's like finding a needle in a haystack."²⁰⁵

Thus, after nearly 18 years of fear, displacement, dislocation and disempowerment Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts represent a society in crisis. Although the resilience of people observed by RLP is clearly remarkable, the intense pressure of living in the midst of a conflict over such a sustained period of time has taken a massive toll, and the lived reality of the war has left a confusion of allegiances. Perceptions of the UPDF and LRA are highly complex, as are interpretations of the condition of displacement. The war is being played out right at the centre of people's lives, making it impossible for them to be mere observers to the conflict. Families have to make impossible choices and are constantly being forced to live with the shame of abduction, whether as abductees trying to come to terms with the guilt of atrocities they committed, or as families trying to reintegrate their ex-rebel children. At the same time, the consequences of the war have continued to perpetuate grievances that are, in turn, identified as the causes for the conflict. Both the war itself and the way in which the war has been portrayed have generated feelings of marginalisation that then serve to perpetuate the war. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that people have reached a point of near hopelessness. In the words of one informant, "This war has been going on for so long people don't know what is happening any more. It has become normal."²⁰⁶