

LRA Captives Recount Ordeals

Author: [Julius Ocen](#)

Former child soldiers speak of their experiences at the hands of the rebels.

While many people in northern Uganda want the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague to drop charges against leaders of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, there are others, especially those who suffered directly at the rebels' hands, who want to see the top men in the dock.

Seventeen-year-old Atubu Pennina, taken prisoner by the LRA from her home village in October 2004, wants Joseph Kony, the LRA chief, and his top lieutenants to face trial in the Dutch capital. "They need to be tried because they wasted the lives of so many children in the bush," Atubu told IWPR.

Before she escaped at the end of last year, Atubu became the servant of a rebel commander. She was frequently beaten and said she witnessed executions.

Atubu is currently recovering from her traumatic experiences in the Belgian and Dutch-financed Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in the northern town of Lira, which is where IWPR spoke to her about her experiences.

Atubu, the daughter of a Christian pastor, Ongom Tom, and his wife Juliet Apio, was fourteen-years-old when the LRA attacked her village, Abunga, in Lira District, before dawn one morning.

Atubu had already heard rumours from her primary school teachers that a rebel force had attacked a neighbouring village and that its next target would be Abunga. "The teachers sent us home early to tell our parents that the rebels are coming," she said.

"When I reached home, it was about two o'clock, I found my mother washing clothes, but she did not believe me. She said a lot of people would be seen fleeing from other villages if the rumours were true.

"I could not argue with her. After I went to bed I heard the doors of nearby shops being smashed down at about four in the morning. My mother came to wake us up so we could run away. But when I opened the door the rebels were already there.

"I saw six of them in our compound, but there were so many others with guns breaking into places all around.

"My mother and my brother managed to escape, but I was dragged by my arms and put with other children who had been captured. They only wanted children."

Atubu's younger sisters, aged seven and nine, were left because they were too young to march long distances through the bush. Her 14-year-old brother, Bernard, realising that Atubu was missing, returned home to check. All four of the family's buildings were ablaze and the rebels were still looting the village. Bernard too was taken prisoner, but managed to escape a month later.

“We set off on a long march,” said Atabu. “None of the guerrillas told us the destination, but I recognised a river we crossed, the Pila. On the north bank, there were many other people who had been abducted, and there I witnessed a beating that was more brutal than anything I had seen before in my life.

“I don’t know who the girl was, but she was beaten nearly to death with heavy sticks and wire whips. The rebels told us the beating was to send a serious warning to anyone who was thinking of escape: they also would face the wrath of the sticks.”

During the march, the rebels took prisoner an elderly man. But he was drunk and could not keep up with the speed of the column. His execution was ordered by a commander. “We were all ordered to watch,” said Atabu. “They smashed him across the back of his neck with a log until he was dead.”

On arrival near a place called Omot, in Pader District in the far north of the country near the border with Sudan, the column joined up with another big group of rebel fighters. Now girls were separated from boys, and each child was allocated to a guerrilla battalion.

“I was taken to a battalion where the commander’s name was Bwone,” said Atabu. “The first problem I had was from his wife who said I should address him as ‘teacher’. I was the house servant and I could not understand why I had to call him teacher. His wife hated me and used to beat me with sticks.”

Atabu was transferred and became the “wife” of another LRA commander called Luwum.

One day, two girls escaped, and four other girls, including Atabu, were blamed. After a hearing, the four girls were told they would be subjected to beatings that would end only when one of them died.

“As the beatings went on, an officer said he had decided I was the one who was responsible for the escape and that I was the one who would die,” said Atabu. “A short muscular man who was told to kill me dragged me and ordered me to lie down. He picked up a heavy stick and hit me at the back of my neck. I felt paralysed, but some, I don’t know who, told him to stop and just hit me on the buttocks.”

Atabu said she understood a satellite phone call was made to Joseph Kony who halted the execution because she was a Lango. Kony and most of his followers are from the neighbouring Acholi ethnic group, and Atabu thinks she may have been saved because Kony wanted to woo the Langi.

Atabu’s battalion under Luwum tried to enter Sudan late last year, but their path was blocked by heavy detachments of Ugandan army troops. “Then Luwum heard on a local community radio station that the Uganda government was offering amnesty to any LRA fighters who voluntarily surrendered. Luwum had two wounds from the war. They had weakened him and he said he was tired of fighting and wanted to give himself up.

“He said there was no future in fighting the Ugandan government any more and he worried that he would end like the previous battalion commander who was shot dead in a battle with Ugandan soldiers.

“At first we did not take him seriously, we thought he was joking. But then he led seventeen of us he

thought he could trust towards Gulu (the biggest town in northern Uganda) to seek an amnesty. We had ten guns and six of us were girls.”

While most of the group sat by a road, Luwum sent two to report to the Ugandan army about the group and its willingness to surrender. Soldiers escorted them to a military barracks in Gulu and later on they were taken to a community radio station to make an appeal to other rebel fighters to take advantage of the amnesty.

From Gulu, Atabu was sent to Lira’s Rachele Rehabilitation Centre.

The centre was established and is run by Belgian journalist Els de Temmerman, who visited northern Uganda for the daily *De Morgen* and was appalled by the extent of child abductions by the LRA and the cruelties inflicted upon them.

She set about raising funds and was inspired by the story of Sister Rachele Fassera, vice principal of St Mary’s College, an elite Catholic boarding school for girls, nestled in the remote wilderness of Uganda’s far north. One night LRA fighters broke into the school and abducted 139 girls from the dormitories. With 28-year-old teacher John Ocen, Sister Rachele went into the night in search of the rebel group. Ocen and the nun found the guerrillas, and Sister Rachele went down on her knees to pray for the release of the girls, offering herself in their place. The commander agreed to release 109 girls, but kept thirty. Some have since escaped, but at least four are known to have been beaten to death.

Els de Temmerman decided her centre would be named after Sister Rachele and in honour of her courageous act - along with that of John Ocen - a decade ago.

An estimated 38,000 children have been abducted by the LRA since Uganda’s northern civil war began 21 years ago. Some 10,000 have managed to escape, but all return in a terrible state. Many have gun shot wounds. Girls return with venereal diseases, some of them with AIDS.

“Less visible and harder to heal are the inner scars: the distrust, anxiety, self-hatred, guilt, moral desperation and rage towards a society that could not protect them,” said de Temmerman. “Due to the fact that they could not go to school, they hardly have any chances on the labour market. Many of the girls come back with babies they cannot financially support. In their villages they are often called names, like ‘rebels’ or ‘Kony’s wives’.”

De Temmerman set out to raise money to educate such children. Beginning with 25 in 2000, today the Rachele Centre is paying for 3200 former child soldiers to go back to school. “But unfortunately we have to refuse thousands of them, because our resources are limited,” she said.

Like any good journalist, de Temmerman records the stories of individuals for posterity - stories such as those of Christine, who was abducted by the rebels when she was only twelve-years-old with her father and uncle. On the forced march of several hundred kilometres into Sudan, Christine’s father was beaten unconscious because he was falling behind. Christine was then forced to inflict the final blows that killed her own father.

In Sudan, she was given to a commander to be his “wife”. Trained as a fighter, she took part in raids back into Uganda and cut off the ears and lips of villagers. On one raid, she saw an opportunity to escape, but first had to shoot one of the guerrillas assigned to her as a minder. Another bodyguard returned fire and

she received a head wound.

Christine managed to reach a refugee camp where her injuries were attended to. She was then taken to the Rachele centre, where a nurse said she was pregnant. She tried to kill the baby and herself with an overdose of tablets. But the attempt failed. At the age of 15, Christine gave birth to a girl.

Since then, Christine has returned to school. The centre pays her fees and will in due course pay for her daughter's studies. Christine now says she is determined to become a doctor.

The stories of Atubu and Christine are just two among tens of thousands, as bad or worse, from northern Uganda's war.

Now, as Atubu recovers from her own traumatic experiences at the centre, she is preparing for the next stage of her rehabilitation. She is being sent to a boarding school in Lira, all fees paid for by the centre, together with her school uniforms, books and other scholastic materials. During holidays, she will be reunited with her parents in Abunga, the village from where she was seized three years ago.

Julius Ocen is an IWPR reporter in Uganda.

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