

LRA to Get Hostile Reception in North

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Rebels face anger of people who still bear physical and mental scars of their brutality.

As negotiators for the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, make their way across northern Uganda as part of their reconciliation efforts, they are likely to find few friendly faces.

The LRA rebellion in northern Uganda has lasted two decades and resulted in at least 100,000 deaths and the displacement of 1.7 million people, confined in internal refugee camps.

Among those who may never be able to forget the brutality of the LRA fighters is Sophia Apio, a resident of Amuria village near Lira, whose ears and lips were cut off by the rebels.

Apio recalled the day in 2003 when she and her late husband, along with five other friends, were captured by rebels. She alone survived the encounter and is now disfigured for life.

It was late morning, she recalled, when the group left the Aloi refugee camp, intending to collect cassava from their gardens and return.

"We went in a group of seven people," she said. "As we started uprooting cassava, a colleague saw two people on a tree dressed in a military uniforms looking at us."

"When we saw them, we wanted to flee," Apio went on. But, instead, the rebels quickly grabbed them, and dragged them to their commander who was camped nearby.

The commander, who she said was called Adwong, ordered his soldiers to kill them, she said, prompting her to plea for her life.

"Don't kill me, I'm a saved person," Apio cried, hoping that the commander might respond to a religious appeal.

Adwong replied, "Do you also know that we are saved?" she said.

Adwong told Apio to sit beside him and forced her to witness the rebels hack her husband and the others to death with machetes and axes.

"I [was ill] watching how my colleagues were being hacked using axe and others beaten on their heads," she said. "I thought that after finishing they would turn against me."

“After the massacre, Adwong told me to stand up. The same people who carried out the execution were told to cut off my lips and ears. They slashed my ears and lips completely.”

Apio was told to return to the Aloi camp and report to the Ugandan military what happened.

“When I reached the camp, my body was [covered with] blood,” she said. “Above all, I could not explain to people what happened to me because I had no lips, and secondly I was in serious [pain].”

Apio was taken to a Lira hospital for treatment, then later to Mulago hospital in Kampala by the medical group, Medicine Sans Frontiere.

Many others, who have suffered and also lost friends and family in the war, are angry.

“[LRA leader Joseph] Kony has killed over 100,000, abducted young children and displaced nearly 1.7 million people in northern Uganda into camps,” said Juspanti Agweng, who lives in the Omoro refugee camp. “The only punishment he deserves is execution by hanging.”

Juspanti lost her husband to the LRA in 2003 when the insurgency advanced into the Lango and Teso regions.

“When I hear people talking about Kony, the only message that goes into my mind is my husband [and] how he was executed leaving five orphans,” she said.

Kony, his deputy Vincent Otti, and top commanders Domenic Ongwen and Okot Odiambo, have been indicted by the Hague-based International Criminal Court, ICC, on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murder, pillaging and enslavement.

“Kony cannot be forgiven as an ordinary man who murdered only one person. He should face judgment and be executed like Saddam Hussein,” said Patrick Okello, who formerly lived in the Aloi camp.

Some victims think that trying Kony at the ICC would send messages to other would-be perpetrators of human rights that there is no one above the law.

David Oyena, an ex-senior camp commandant at Aloi, dislikes the idea of reconciliation between the LRA and the government.

“We are not supportive [of] the idea. Our position is that Kony must be tried even if in future he would be reintegrated in the community,” he explained.

Others, however, are more willing to forgive the atrocities of the LRA.

Some want Kony to give up his fight so that peace will come, and end more than 20 years of suffering for northern Ugandans in camps and in the bush.

“Jesus said in His word that you must forgive someone, and I have already forgiven Kony,” said Robert Odyek of Ojwii refugee camp.

“[Kony] must come back, [repent] and stay with us because staying in the bush is hard.”

Like others in the north, Odyek is tired of impoverished camp life.

Having to be dependent on food and other services from the United Nations, he says, was embarrassing.

“This leaves a bad image of me before my wife and children,” said Odyek.

“In the camp they force you to do work you don’t want to do,” said an elder at Otwal refugee camp near Lira who spoke to IWPR on the condition of anonymity. “I can’t teach my children any values, culture and history.”

Weary of refugee camps and hopeful that the Juba peace talks will deliver a permanent peace settlement, many refugees are abandoning the camps and returning to their villages.

“There can never be an ideal situation for them to return home,” said Musa Ecweru, Uganda’s minister for disaster preparedness, as he knocked down a hut at Otwal.

“Let [refugees] resettle as we prepare for recovery,” he said while camp residents cheered. “Even if peace talks fail, we will make sure peace is achieved and is a reality.”

Abandoning the camps for the villages has been frustrating for some.

Alfred Okello, a refugee representative, said he was disappointed that the government has not fulfilled its promises to provide corrugated metal sheets for roofing, bedding, hoes, seeds, ox ploughs, and clean water, as well as giving land titles to refugees who abandoned their communal land during the insurgency.

Joan Pacuto, Lira Resident District Commissioner, explained that the demand for resettlement materials has far exceeded the supply.

In addition, the government has been accused of spending substantial amounts on substandard items such as pangas (machetes), hoes, axes and metal sheets.

Minister of Relief and Disaster Preparedness Prof Tarsis Kabwegyere and his deputy, Ecweru, are due to appear before parliament to explain their role in those procurements.

While other struggle to return to the land, resentment lingers across the north for the damage done by 20 years of war.

Gilbert Anek of the Otwal camp says that if the Juba talks are unsuccessful, he will fight the LRA rather than remain a refugee.

“If the peace talks fail and Kony comes back to haunt us, I swear I am not returning to this camp. I am going to join the army and fight,” said Anek.

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