

## **LRA Victims Confront Rebel Peace Team**

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Relatives of victims and former abductees vent their bitterness and anger.

The Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, peace team stood speechless as wailing and mourning victims confronted them at the Barlonyo internal refugee camp near Lira this past weekend.

The camp was the site of one of the worst mass killings committed by the vicious rebel army which left nearly 400 people dead on February 21, 2004.

The attackers were reportedly led by Okot Odhiambo, who with LRA leader Joseph Kony and two others are sought by the International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

As one of the most brutal of all the attacks during the 20-year war, it surprised some that the LRA peace team stopped at the camp as they tour northern Uganda meeting with victims about reconciliation.

Their greeting, however, was not a surprise.

After the attack, what remained at Barlonyo camp was ashes. The dead were buried in mass graves.

Bitter residents confronted peace team member and Kampala lawyer Chrispus Ayena over the LRA atrocities against innocent civilians. At one point, local officials had to intervene.

The confrontation was the latest in a series of incidents that have raised questions about the LRA's legitimacy in the wake of growing defections, including the disappearance of LRA deputy commander Vincent Otti. It also raised doubts about the team's role in the peace process.

Despite the heated emotions that boiled over at the camp, it could have been worse, said local officials. Out of 5,655 people in Orit parish where the camp is located, only about 230 people, many of them children, attended.

"People are still bitter about this attack," said George Olot, a local official. "We mobilised people for these consultations, [but] many of them have refused to come, saying it is a waste of time as their relatives who were killed will not come back.

"This incident has traumatised many people. Some have not come back to their normal senses. For us to achieve peace, we need to forgive."

Reflecting the views of many locals, one resident, who preferred not to be identified, said, "Why should we attend the consultations? We are still wondering what we did that made LRA rebels to come and kill our people."

It was an emotional moment for many women. Some of those who'd been abducted broke into a song that described how they suffered in captivity, and how they were raped and mutilated.

"Why did you come to kill us the innocent people?" asked Betty Owich. "Kony, let this be the last suffering. All what we need from you is peace."

"Our people were killed. Are you going to compensate them?" Patrick Ogwang Alum asked the LRA delegation.

Susan Okango, who lost seven relatives in the attack, cried, "We are deeply hurt. My parents, brothers and sisters were killed in the attack. We have only two [left]. We pray God forgives Kony."

Kennedy Odongo wondered what caused the LRA to attack the camp. "Is Kony possessed or a normal human being? If he was normal, he could not give us to suffer like this," he said.

As tears rolled down her cheeks, Prossy Akello, said, "I am now suffering with seven children. I do not have stable income to feed and educate the children. We tired and fed up of this rebellion. Kony, abandon the rebellion and come back home."

"Kony, we can't shoot you," said Magie Akello. "We cannot spear you. All what we want is peace. Please release my two children you abducted."

Some camp residents are still worried that Kony's fighters may return.

"If Kony attempts to come back, we shall destroy all our crops before taking off so that they go back empty handed," said Yuventino Atum.

For some residents, such as Susan Arayo, her dreams of getting an education were dashed by the LRA. She was abducted from a nearby secondary school in 2003 and her parents were killed in the Barlonyo attack.

Despite it all, Arayo said she is prepared to put the past behind her, "For all what LRA did to me and my family, I have forgiven them."

But people like William Ogwal typified those who confronted the LRA peace team.

"I come from a clan where many people were killed in this attack," said Ogwal. "Can you imagine, we were suffering here, yet you people [the LRA delegation] were supporting and giving assistance to Kony?"

"We want an apology from you and Acholi elders who allegedly blessed Kony rebellion."

The LRA peace team appeared to be deeply affected by the appeals.

Outspoken team member Dr James Obita found it hard to face what had been done in Barlonyo.

“I am ashamed of what I have seen here. Not even a fellow animal could do this to a fellow animal,” he said.

Ayena added, “There was no Langi [the local tribe] who was not hurt as a result of this attack. We pray the almighty rests their souls in eternal peace.”

Despite their conciliatory remarks, some victims demanded to meet Kony face to face.

“The people who have suffered must be the ones to go and talk to Kony. We want to talk to Kony face to face about our suffering,” said Lucy Apiyo.

“Why are the peace talks taking [so] long? We are tired of this war. Let them pick us, the victims, and we go to talk to Kony directly,” said Richard Okello.

Ayena granted the victims their wish, saying that ten survivors of the massacre would be included in the team of 450 slated to meet with Kony in December in Ri-Kwangba.

Meanwhile, Kony also sent his apology for the Barlonyo massacre and other killings in the area, said Obita. Kony was also committed to the peace process, he said.

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Also see **Story Behind the Story**, published in ACR Issue 144, 4-Mar-08.

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