

No Mood for Forgiveness

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An IWPR journalist speaks of the misery the LRA inflicted on his family.

Unlike many of my fellow countrymen in northern Uganda, I am in no mood to forgive the Lord's Resistance Army, the rebel movement which launched a civil war more than twenty years ago that has taken tens of thousands of lives.

Two of my brothers were abducted in an attack by the LRA, and my uncle was executed and my village destroyed by the rebels.

The day that changed my life for ever was August 16, 1998. The LRA, whose leaders claim to live by the Old Testament's Ten Commandments, launched an attack for the sixth time on my village, Akuki - to the northwest of Lira, capital of the northern district of the same name.

On this occasion all our cattle were stolen and my family's few possessions were looted. My brothers Tonny Okello and Geoffrey Odongo, then aged 18 and 16, were abducted and I never saw them again. Nine other boys were abducted and twelve of my villagers were killed.

Even worse, the LRA guerrillas had earlier executed my 62-year-old uncle, Adupa Anek, and I was one of the many villagers forced to watch my relative's murder. That was in 1997.

Uncle Adupa had been asked by an LRA attack unit to show them the way to shopping precinct at a busy railway station. He refused. He was forced to kneel with his neck stretched across a fallen tree. Then the commander ordered a few young insurgents "to show the truth" to my relative. They took heavy rods and beat him on his head and neck until he was dead.

I don't know what happened to Geoffrey. He just disappeared. But we heard that Tonny was forced to become an LRA fighter. He fought with a unit in northern Uganda but died in 1999 of cholera in southern Sudan, where the LRA then had its bases. I cry every time I think about my lost brothers and my uncle.

People in Europe and other places do not understand why we have such different names. My own name, Oketch, means "hunger" because I was born in a time of hunger when our crops failed. Okello is a name given to a person who follows twins, and Odongo to someone who follows next. Altogether, I had seven brothers and nine sisters, although two sisters passed away when they were young.

When our village was destroyed and my father lost everything, it was difficult to start all over again. My elder brother, George Ojok, was a policeman who used to pay my school fees. But we have more than one war in Uganda. Another war is against HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that more than a million people are living with AIDS in my country, and more than 110,000 of these are children. George died in this war. He died from an AIDS-related illness in 1996.

After all these disasters, I left my home village and lived in Kampala, Uganda's capital city in the south of the country. I managed to survive there, completed my secondary school examinations and became a journalist. My old dad, whose name is David Livingstone Okwir, is now a 70-year-old widower and I help to

support him.

As you can imagine from his name, ours is a Christian family and prayer has been our main consolation since the LRA began its war in 1986. People still gather and remember what seems to have been the glorious time before war became the reality of our lives and people were forced into squalid refugee camps for safety. Their children have grown up traumatised, thinking that violence is life's reality.

While once our fields grew crops and our granaries were full, now we depend on the United Nations' World Food Programme to sustain our lives. We need so much emotional healing to become whole again.

Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA revolt, claims he has never abducted children to fight as guerrillas. But this is nonsense. My own brothers were kidnapped, and the best estimate is that 38,000 northern children have been abducted by the LRA to serve as fighters, sex slaves and porters.

There is so much hunger and pain and I suppose that for the sake of peace we will have to forgive Kony. But there are mixed feelings in the north about the idea of forgiving him and his top commanders. Some of us think that trying him and the others at the International Criminal Court in The Hague would send messages to other would-be perpetrators of human rights that there is no one above the law.

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