

Poverty, Bitterness and Heartache Blight North

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Development agencies do their best to turn things around in the north of the country, but they face an uphill struggle.

A young girl in the Barlonyo refugee camp climbs on the top of the grave and tries to wake up her father, brutally killed by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, on February 21, 2004.

"Father, are you still sleeping?" the four-year-old girl asks. "Wake up. Go and buy me some clothes for Christmas. What is wrong with you daddy?"

Her elder sister, Evelyn Ejang, 8, remembers the day when rebels raided the camp.

Evelyn and her younger sister are among the hundreds of northern Ugandan youngsters whose parents were massacred when the LRA attacked the Barlonyo refugee camp, about 22 kilometres from Lira. More than 300 refugees lost their lives in the attack.

The girl's mother, Sarah Apio, 28, looked on as tears rolled down her face. "Who tells you that when a person dies, he or she can come back to life again?" she asked her daughter.

As Christmas draws near, thousands of mentally-scarred youngsters in northern Uganda have little hope of a festive holiday, given the poverty that grips the region.

The holiday spirit of celebration will likely do little to help many in the north to forgive or forget.

"I want the government to punish those who killed my father," said Ejang. "If my father was alive, I would be putting on good clothes during Christmas."

Evelyn says she is bitter because her uncle, who is supposed to be her guardian, has done little to help his nieces and nephews. He suffers from a drinking problem, she says, and does not deny it.

"I drink myself mad," said their uncle, Patrick Okello. "I want to forget about my lost brother. One day I did not sleep because I was sober. I thought the LRA would come that night and finish me just like him."

The girls' mother says providing for the family has become her primary concern.

"Sometimes we eat only one meal a day because I don't do anything productive to support my family," said the widow. "But what pains me is the love my husband had for me when he was still alive."

“This war, this killing, I can’t forget. I hear my colleagues, war victims, say we should forgive Joseph Kony, but I don’t think I will forgive the rebel leader for the destruction he caused my family.”

Apio said non-governmental organisations working in the area have done little or nothing to help her. “I don’t see what some NGOs are doing here. They have been using our names for their own personal gains,” she complained, suggesting that aid intended for war victims often doesn’t reach them.

“They come here and register our names. But what do we get after registration? People have turned this war into a bloody project. But when war ends, there will be no business for those who are still using our names for their personal gains.”

Despite the complaints, some see reconstruction programmes in the north as a remedy for their psychological trauma.

“Even if I think about my lost children, they will not come back to life,” said Tom Omara, 56, who lost his wife and four children to the LRA during the Barlonyo raid. “We need schools and health centres if we are to recover from the LRA war.”

An official from the local council, who wanted to remain anonymous, said he was frustrated by the lack of work by the Ugandan government to help rebuild life in the north. “The government has abandoned us,” he said.

Lira Resident District Commissioner Joan Pacoto disagreed.

“For someone to say the government has done nothing to help war victims is nonsense,” said Pacoto. “We have distributed corrugated metal sheets and farm implements to help former internally displaced persons start all over again.”

Some aid groups say they are doing all they can to help rebuild the north. Lenta Hall, the president of the aid group Missions with Africa, said northern Uganda needs special attention if people are to recover.

The group has begun the construction of nursery, primary and vocational schools to provide affordable education to children orphaned by the LRA conflict.

The project director, Reverend Lawnsome Atum, said he had to reassure some war victims that no rebels would come back to kill them.

“We have a very big challenge here,” he said. “This place was not on the development map even under passed governments.”

He promised to establish a village for those children who have nowhere else to go.

“After constructing learning centres and health centres, we shall [build a] village for children who have no parents,” he said. “After that we shall go and start self-help project for widows and youths.”

The Flames International, a UK-based organisation, recently held a six-day healing workshop for war victims.

“As our people abandon the refugee camps and go back to their respective homes, we need to go back, follow them up, and give them messages of hope and encouragement,” said Reverend Canon Jacky Otto Olima, Mission Coordinator of Lango Diocese.

“We need to [help] them understand that God is still present,” he said.

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