Refugees Watching and Waiting

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The dirt road leading north from Lira in northern Uganda was quiet. This was December, the beginning of the dry season, and in the distance, burning dead grass sent white smoke billowing skyward.

For most of the past 20 years, such a trip would have been impossible. North of Lira was rebel country, the domain of the brutal Lord's Resistance Army, which has waged a chaotic and vicious war against the Ugandan government for reasons that have long been obscure.

With me in the car were two seasoned journalists who contribute regularly to IWPR: Joe Wacha and Julius Ocen. They knew well that this road had been the site of many deadly ambushes.

But if one was connected with the rebels, even remotely, explained Wacha, you could make the trip safely. The rebels recognised signals that told them not to shoot, such as hanging a few fish from the grille. It was simple enough, since the tilapia fish were easily caught from the nearby swamplands of the Nile River. Sometimes the signal was to hang a bright yellow plastic jerry can from the front of the car.

But today there were no such concerns. We were on our way to one of the 200 camps for the nearly 2 million people who have been displaced by the rebel war.

After a stop to refuel in Pader, a hard and dusty town on the fringe of Ugandan savannah, we forged north to a refugee camp of some 5,000 people. Ochen had been here before and had pressed for the trip.

The camp was located at the foot of a rocky, tree-covered ridge - a rebel stronghold, he said, and no-man’s land for outsiders.

But this place also had historical significance, Ochen explained. It was here that Arab slave traders had swept down from northern Africa in centuries past to collect their human caravans, he said, from among the Acholi and other east and central African tribes.

Our arrival was greeted by little fanfare, and soon we were discussing with camp leaders how reluctantly the camps were being vacated.

As we talked, a campfire burned hotly below a stack of scorched metal pots. It was a distillery, I was told, where a highly-prized local drink called “kava” was made. It had been a source of steady income for the distiller, a 50-year-old woman named Hellen Lalam, who had lived there since before the rebels came.

She had lost her first husband, she told me, to the precursor of the LRA - an army assembled by the rebel priestess Alice Lakwena and called the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces, which had also battled the Ugandan government in the mid-1980s.

Lalam’s son, now 16, had been abducted by the LRA rebels at the age of 10 and forced to carry a gun. But...
he was back now, and doing all right. Once again, I was confronted by the fact that everyone in northern Uganda had been touched deeply by the war.

What did she think of the peace talks underway in Juba, South Sudan? She dismissed the question with a wave of her hand. A peace deal, she said, signed by rebel leader Joseph Kony, was needed before anyone would believe that the decades-old war was really over.

Just a couple of kilometres away, a dozen new huts were in various stages of construction. Some with only support poles buried in the dry earth. Others already had the long bamboo poles that supported the conical roofs, and a few more with coverings of tightly tied thatch.

The leader here was Cisto Adongo, 35, who eagerly told me that he and his friends and relatives had decided to leave the confines of the refugee camp and start anew. They were confident the war was over, despite reports of a small band of rebels still lurking in the area.

“As long as I can live peacefully and till my land...that is the best,” he said with a wide smile. He shook his head when I asked if he was afraid of the rebels. “They’re all gone.”

The desire to forget the war and the massive loss of life and limb was strong. Others in this new community told me of their desire to grow cotton and millet for consumption and for sale.

It was not a vague and distant dream. On the way to the camp, I had seen field after field of new cotton, a testament to the resiliency of the Acholi in northern Uganda who needed only a growing season or two of peace to recover their lost lives.

Underscoring this, Wacha and Ochen had told me that the latest topic of conversation in the north was not the number of dead in rebel clashes, but the price of cotton. Given just this small chance, global economics had penetrated the region.

On the way back to Lira, we stopped at the Barlonyo camp, the site of the most vicious of all the LRA attacks. Some 300 people had been killed there in February 2004.

We drove down what was little more than a couple of ruts buried deep in the tall grass, arriving at a peaceful camp where a lively football game was well underway.

Nearby, a monument of white stone offered a mute testament to those who had died in the Barlonyo attack.

I spoke with Moses Ogwang, the camp leader, a modest man who explained to me that he had fled for his life the night of the attack, and returned the next morning to witness the horror of burned and mutilated bodies that littered camp.

Was he angry? I asked. He shook his head slowly and looked at the ground.
“We are survivors,” he said. “We want only peace.”

Peter Eichstaedt is IWPR’s Africa Editor.

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This feature allows our journalists to explain where they get the inspiration for their articles, why the subjects matter to them, and how they personally have felt affected by the often controversial issues they explore.

It also shows the difficulties writers can face as they try to get to the heart of a story.

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