

The Monitor (Kampala), October 26, 2004

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## LRA Child Soldiers' Tales

More than 7,000 formerly abducted children have passed through this rehabilitation centre

Onen Isaac, 18 is sitting on a bench under a mango tree. He is looking at his plastered foot wondering when he will ever be able to walk again. For now, he still uses two wooden crutches to support him as he walks around the little compound of Gulu Support Children's Organisation (GUSCO).

Onen is no ordinary teenager. He is a battle hardened youth who for two years carried out ambushes and burnt villages with the Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance army.

He shivers as he narrates the atrocities he committed and all of a sudden becomes speechless.

The youth did not join the LRA rebels willingly and he is one of the thousands that have been abducted by the rebels during the 18 years of the northern Uganda insurgency. He is only lucky to have been rescued.

"I was studying at Atiak Technical School doing carpentry and joinery," he recalls.

"After setting our huts ablaze and hacking many people to death, the rebels took some boys and girls with them," he says.

"We walked all the way to Kitgum and there they taught us how to fight," he recalls.

In his combat days, Onen says he saw the rebel leader Joseph Kony only once.

"He instructed us to go and disorganise the IDP camps, carry out ambushes, loot and kill people," he recalls.

It is the plastered leg that saved Onen from LRA rebels. The UPDF shot him several times in the leg before they rescued him.

He spent the next five months in Lacor hospital and has so far spent two months at this rehabilitation centre popularly known by its acronym GUSCO.

Ms Arach Beatrice is the Programme Officer of GUSCO. All child soldiers who have been rescued from the LRA by the UPDF pass through this centre for rehabilitation before they are sent back to the community.

"We started in 1997 from the barracks but after sometime we moved to this place so that the children could be in a good environment and hence revive faster," she says.

"We first leave them with the UPDF for some little time and they teach them who the real enemy is. You see in captivity they are brainwashed and their mindset has to be changed first if they are to accept and respond to our rehabilitation," she explains.

Arach says that they usually get youths, teenage mothers and even some girls who are pregnant.

From the time the centre started, more than 7,000 children have passed here. Currently they have over 120 children with more than 50 child mothers and about 20 unaccompanied babies

the youngest being only two months.

"They usually come here very weak and malnourished and some have severe injuries," Arach says.

"They often have nightmares of their time during the bush and tactile hallucination during the day. Many of them often feel guilty of what they did while serving the LRA and they want to commit suicide," she adds.

In the girl's dormitory, there are about 80 double decker beds all complete with mosquito nets. In one corner is a girl of about 16 breastfeeding her baby. She does not want to speak about her experience and instead breaks down into tears when she is asked about her time in captivity.

"Many girls are traumatized. Some of them have been raped several times and when they get pregnant, some of them pass on this hatred for the rebels to their babies, we have to teach them that the children are innocent," Arach says.

Joseph Okot, 17 is on the road to recovery, he is so anxious to return home to his community. He has been here for nine months but finally he can walk on his feet after his fracture has healed.

"When I was captured, we walked all the way to Sudan lifting several foodstuffs that the rebels had looted," he said.

Soon he was to become familiar with trekking from Uganda to Sudan after the rebels had carried out ambushes.

Though he was in Sudan, Okot has never set eyes on rebel leader Joseph Kony.

"He used to meet only with top commanders," he speaks of Kony. They were not given food while in Kony's camps and they had to fend for themselves.

Now he is waiting for the opportunity to be allowed back into the community so that he can go back to school.

He wants to be a teacher.

"Teachers are respectable and they know what is right. Besides all the people need education, that is why I want to become a teacher," Okot sums it up.

Arach says that each child spends different period of time in GUSCO and they do not have a particular time frame when someone should leave.

"Some of them are fit to go back to the community after two months and others could take even nine months," she says.

Arach also observes that some people are not willing to accept the ex rebels back into the community.

"In some cases family members don't want them back, but that is rare. Usually their families readily accept them back but it's the community which alienates them, so we have a lot of sensitisation to do even in the communities," she says.

Parents and relatives usually visit them to check on their progress as they await their return home.

An elderly woman in her early 70s is cuddling a baby of about six months.

"I like him very much, I have named him Moses Oloya," the elderly Emma Lapora speaks of her grandson. She comes regularly to see her grandson and cannot wait for the day they will go home.

"I am so excited to see that my daughter has returned. We didn't think that we could ever see her again," Lapora adds.

15-year-old Ochan Ronald was captured in 1999 when he was only nine years. From the day he was captured, he always wanted to escape but he gave up when he was taken all the way to Sudan. During the battles, he fractured his leg twice and this has inspired him into wanting to become a doctor.

Currently Ms Oroma Joyce one of the two nurses a GUSCO treats his wounds.

"Many of them come here with respiratory problems, fractures, malaria and diarrhea," Oroma says.

"Sometimes the cases are severe and they need plastic surgery we have to refer them to Lacor Hospital," she says.

When the time comes for them to return to the community, they always take with them items they have been using like the mattresses and mosquito nets.

Henry H. Ssali, Gulu