



enough

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

Survivors

Stories of war and perseverance

The Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA—led by self-professed messiah Joseph Kony—first launched attacks in northern Uganda in 1986. For more than two decades since, the LRA has abducted children en masse and forced them to serve as soldiers and sex slaves, razed entire villages to the ground, and killed thousands of innocent civilians. During the war in the North, the Ugandan government forced millions of people into displaced camps, where insufficient protection and resources left them as easy fodder for LRA attacks as well as disease and starvation. More than half a million people still live in these camps. They are slowly returning home, because no attacks have occurred in northern Uganda since July 2006, but with little infrastructure and few basic services remaining in their abandoned home areas, the rebuilding process has been long, hard, and slow.



Below are the stories of several survivors of this brutal 23-year-long war in northern Uganda—from Gulu town where former wives of rebel leaders are trying to rebuild, from Paicho displaced camp where thousands of children were abducted, and from Barlonyo camp where the LRA executed one of its deadliest massacres. These stories are intended to give a few snapshots of what thousands of people have experienced at the hands of the LRA—while highlighting the perseverance and strength of these survivors—and the many challenges they continue to face.

This war is not over—not in northern Uganda where grievances remain unaddressed and people struggle daily to rebuild their lives, and not in neighboring countries in Central Africa where the LRA continues to prey on civilians with ruthless efficiency. Enough hopes the stories of these survivors will help demonstrate how the costs of war are not just a matter of numbers dead or displaced or money spent; in human, personal terms, they are far graver, far deeper, and far more challenging for communities to overcome. However, with strong leadership and commitment from the international community—working with and pushing hard on regional governments—this war can end.

Please note: The stories of LRA survivors profiled in this document were translated through an interpreter and transcribed by Enough's Uganda-based researcher Julia Spiegel.

Life in Gulu for two former rebel “wives”

Gulu is the largest town in northern Uganda, and is the hub for most NGOs and international aid agencies working in the North. War survivors trying to rebuild their lives frequently find their way to Gulu, and some are now more accustomed to city life than rural life. Many of the women who live in Gulu were abducted as young girls by the LRA and forced to become “wives” of rebel commanders as well as fighters. After escaping or being rescued, these women often settle in Gulu town. Although free from rebel captivity, they continue to carry the heavy baggage of war as they try to reintegrate into society and take care of the children they gave birth to in the bush. Several women interviewed by Enough said that they wish their government would provide community programs to assist people who are recovering from years of war. Those who are trying to reintegrate into their communities are frequently abandoned by their families and receive no government or aid agency attention once they have been resettled.

During the war, tens of thousands of children once commuted every night to town centers such as Gulu to escape possible LRA abduction in their home villages and in camps. Since the LRA moved out of northern Uganda in 2005-2006, the “night commuting” phenomenon has ended. Now, late into the night the streets of Gulu are dotted with people returning from errands or neighbors’ homes, or even from one of the town’s discothèques or bars. Women like Vicky and Rose, however, still face obstacles in their efforts to reintegrate into society after years spent in the bush as LRA “wives.”

Vicky, age 26

Vicky was captured by the LRA in 1995, very early in the morning. Her village, Kitgum Palabek, had been surrounded by LRA fighters. She was the only child taken from her father’s place, but four of her uncle’s children were taken as well. They moved a long distance when captured. Then they were all ordered to sit down and they began introducing themselves. The LRA rebels said they were government soldiers—they were in government uniforms they had seized during a previous ambush. They asked if they knew where the LRA were. Six children said yes and criticized the LRA for the horrible things it had done to people in the area. All six were taken away and immediately killed. The rest were tied with ropes and forced to walk in a straight line toward southern Sudan. Government troops ambushed them many times along the way.

After a little while, they stopped and the rebels asked the children how many of them were hungry and how many were thirsty. All of the children who said yes to being hungry or thirsty—four boys in total—were killed. They then continued their journey to Sudan. When they reached the border, a vehicle came and took them straight to an unknown destination. They then began a three-month long training to learn to fight. During that time, they only ate sim sim, or sesame seeds. One cup of seeds was split among five people to share. Some girls were given to LRA commanders as wives. Boys who had completed the training were integrated into the rebel ranks. Vicky was given to a commander. She stayed with him for eight years and bore three children—He had nine wives, and was a second lieutenant with two stars. His name was Michael Oringa, but he was killed a few years ago.

Vicky escaped with her three children in 2003. She was sick and pregnant with her last child when the LRA camp she was living in was attacked by the Ugandan army. There was serious fighting, with helicopters flying above, and some LRA surrendered. She didn’t surrender, but she ran by



People walking to work in Gulu town.

herself and moved on foot alone for one week while pregnant and with two young children—one on her back and the other one walking by her side. Vicky found water by looking underneath big rocks, and all she and her children ate for the week was soil so they could keep their stomachs full.

Vicky was fearful of coming out of the bush. In the LRA, propaganda was spread and she was told that if she returned to Uganda, she would be poisoned. But when she returned, nothing happened to her. She was taken to the reception center at Gulu Support the Children Organization, or GUSCO, for three months and then went back home. She found out that her father had been killed by the LRA but that her mother was still alive. She received some psycho-social support and was told not to keep talking about what had happened in the bush, since she might bring up someone else's family members who had been killed.

Now that Vicky is back, life is hard. Some people will interact with her, but others won't. Her uncle wasn't happy because he lost all four of his children—they were all killed in the bush. He thinks it is unfair that she is still alive, so she fears him and has no one she can go to for help. She was badly beaten in the bush—with sticks and machetes—and is having chest pain and can no longer do hard work. All she wants is for her children to be able to study.

At the moment, Vicky is staying alone. She's not happy. She even contemplated suicide. She has no friends and no relatives who want to be with her, and other people don't look at her with good eyes. She's all alone. She wants to find a home and a way to pay for school fees for her children. She also wants her government to follow up with former abductees and support reintegration.

Rose, age 26

In 1994, Rose was captured by the LRA while walking with a group of other children at night. Three of them were taken, two—Rose's brother and cousin— were killed. As they were moving along, they ran into a man who wanted to kill them, but they got away. The LRA they were forced to travel with burnt the whole village down.

They continued moving throughout the entire night. Then in the morning, the less attractive female girls were sent back home. The beautiful ones were kept and integrated with a group from Kitgum, and they went together to Sudan. When they reached Sudan, they were distributed to the men and began military training. They were taught how to assemble and reassemble guns, and they worked very long hours. But they weren't given any food. Some children died. They then proceeded even deeper into Sudan. When they reached where Kony was staying, they were given food and medicine, and life was a bit easier. But then they deployed to fight on the Sudanese government's side against southern Sudanese rebels. Rose was involved in many of the fights, and was given as a wife to Joseph Kony's chief escort. But as long as she didn't conceive, she had to continue to fight.

Rose came back to northern Uganda in July 2003. By the time the government began Operation Iron Fist, during which the Ugandan army went into Sudan and the LRA committed atrocities back in northern Uganda, Rose already had two children—ages one and four—who could now walk and she was pregnant again. Other women without children crossed back into Uganda quickly, but Rose traveled slowly and branched off by herself at night. She walked the whole night along the road. By morning she met a man, and explained her situation to him. The man

took her to his place, gave her food and clothes and then took her to an army outpost, where she was kept for four days for interviews. She was then taken to reception centers for former LRA fighters run by the organizations Caritas and GUSCO.

Now that Rose is back home, life is very hard, even harder than in the bush. Her parents were killed. Her grandparents sold her home. Now she is homeless. She can't get remarried, although she's tried several times—men will have children with her but then they abandon her afterward. She is trying to cope with life with her four children. Rose is learning to sew bags with the organization Invisible Children. She says she likes working there. She has hope for the future. But she needs a home.

Paicho displaced camp—an abduction hotspot

In 1999, as the war in northern Uganda continued to escalate, Paicho was reportedly the worst war-affected sub-county in Gulu district. Local leaders estimate that the LRA abducted some 2,400 children from Paicho during the war, although official figures from the Ugandan government put the number at around 600 children. Jennifer and Denis were both abducted by the LRA as young children, but have now returned home to Paicho.



A view from Paicho IDP camp.

Jennifer, age 24

Jennifer was abducted in 1997 and escaped in 2005. She was taken from Paicho camp when she was 12. She went from the camp and spent the night up on a nearby hill.

There were 150 LRA and 100 abducted children. The LRA fighters had received orders from Kony that all abductees should be taken to Sudan. As they were moving there, the government of Uganda received information that they were heading to Sudan, so helicopters came and started firing on them. She was wounded. It took them five days to cross from Uganda to Sudan.

Jennifer was in a great deal of pain when she reached Sudan. There was no food and a cholera outbreak killed her brother, but she was not allowed to cry. However, she could not help it and cried anyway. And so she was caned 150 times for crying, and they said she would be killed if she continued. She was told that Kony was going to overthrow Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and that Kony would become president, so they should not worry about home.

Within a month, she was given to a 30-year-old man—he was a major. She was with him for seven years. During the eighth year he received more wives, five in total. Jennifer gave birth to two children with that man. She was only 14 when she gave birth to the first child, and was 16 when she had the second.

Jennifer asked her husband if she could leave five days after birth of her second child because of health complications, and he threatened to kill her. She was crying all the time. So the man decided to remove her first born—he was three years old at the time. He gave the child to a relative back home. So she remained with only the younger child, which he kept so she wouldn't escape.



Jennifer discussing her abduction and life today.

The Ugandan army was following them, and the LRA received information that a government attack was coming. She decided to break away and go her own way with her child. The Ugandan foot soldiers and helicopters were shooting at them, and she was seeing people being killed everywhere. She entered Awadi and managed to break free. She was taken to World Vision in Gulu and stayed there for four months.

She sometimes couldn't sleep in Paicho. She wanted to stay alone and not with the rest of the community. She often cries alone. Her brother is gone and she only has her mother left. There is nothing but farming for her to do to make money. At times, she feels useless because she has not gone to school, is raising a child alone, and has no money for school fees.

Since she returned, the government has given nothing to her except some food from the United Nations World Food Program. And even that must be taken to a machine that Jennifer cannot afford before it can be consumed. She can't afford nursery school or uniforms. Maybe she could run her own business, but she would need training and capital.

If Kony is caught, Jennifer believes he should not be forgiven—he should be killed.

Denis, age 20

Denis was abducted on December 15, 2001 from Paicho camp. He was selected to go to Sudan but there were many challenges during the four month journey. He started moving in September and they reached Sudan in December. When they reached Sudan, there were many problems—no food and almost all the civilians had guns. If you moved around, they would kill you. He doesn't know what they were even eating. They only had bananas for awhile.

They stayed in a big camp where Kony was staying. When he reached the camp, there was a big fire and two of Kony's sons were killed. They were then taken to go retrieve hidden guns—they had gotten them by attacking a Dinka camp. They decided to raid Sudanese cattle—they needed food—so they slaughtered all of them. He was given a gun when leaving Uganda to go to Sudan. There were several government ambushes along the way and he was in the heat of many fights.

In Sudan, Dinkas came and attacked, so Kony ordered them to attack the Dinka; anything that moved would have to be killed. Therefore, when Denis came across an old woman he beat her to death with a stick. As he was doing it, he was saying to God that he should forgive him because he would have been killed had he refused to kill this old woman.

Denis was with Vincent Otti during this time and he escaped government attacks when the rebels he was with returned to Uganda. They were bombed heavily by airplanes on their way back. When coming back, Denis was looking for something to eat. He had made a fire but it caught a whole area on fire and a tin of bullets was destroyed. He was beaten seriously for that—150 strokes.

He entered a Ugandan army ambush in Atiak. It took one week to reach his destination. He snuck back to the camp and hid his gun, and then reported to UPDF barracks there. Fearing the UPDF would kill him; he split from the other two men he was with. He was carrying two machine guns.

When Denis returned, he was happy, but it saddened him to learn that his grandma had died. He was all alone. He does nothing but farm now. Before he was abducted, he liked to repair bicycles,



Denis describing his time with the LRA.

therefore he would like to go to technical school. There are many bicycles in the camps so it would be a good income-generating activity.

Denis believes Kony knows what he is doing, that he's a very clever man and is doing this all purposefully. He says that Kony will not come out unless the whole world pressures him to, either through fighting or peace talks. If just regional governments are involved, they will never finish Kony. They need the big powers to come in.

Learn more about the LRA's key commanders in Enough's "Wanted by the ICC: The LRA's leaders—who they are and what they've done"

Survivors of the Barlonyo massacre

In February 2004, the LRA executed one of its most gruesome massacres to date in Barlonyo. Out of the camp's population of nearly 12,000 people, the LRA killed and abducted around 700 people in one night, according to local sources. The people in the camp had expected the government to provide sufficient forces to protect them in this condensed area, but the Ugandan army didn't deploy and instead recruited local children to serve as local defense forces. Some were as young as 14 years old. On the day of the attack, less than 40 of these local defense forces were in the barracks. The camp was burned to the ground. LRA commander Okot Odhiambo, one of the three living LRA commanders wanted by the International Criminal Court, led this attack.

Barlonyo was most likely attacked because many young people lived in the camp and potentially could be abducted and trained to be rebel fighters. Local leaders explained that the biggest challenge in Barlonyo today is caring for children. There are large numbers of child-headed households, schools do not exist, and clean drinking water is nearly impossible to find.

Agnes, age 26

Agnes was about 21 years when Odhiambo came to Barlonyo. It was a Saturday, at around 5 p.m. She had just returned from the local market and all of a sudden she heard gunshots and people all over the camp started running around in alarm.

A lot of fire was exchanged—no one knew the rebels were coming. Even the soldiers in the town were unaware. Those soldiers who weren't in the barracks ran away; all the soldiers in the barracks were killed. Everyone in the town had been told to go into their houses if the rebels arrived so that the government soldiers could protect them. Therefore, Agnes ran into her hut as gunshots fired all around her.

The LRA started setting all of the houses ablaze. Agnes ran out of the house with her baby. She dropped to the ground and pretended to have been shot. Down on the ground, she crawled with her three-month old baby to a tree, and she stayed there for 20 or 30 minutes.

There were no soldiers left in the town. The rebels began checking to make sure all of the people on the ground were dead. They found her, and said she had to leave her baby and go. They said, "If you want to take your baby, I will shoot you now." So she left her baby.



Agnes reflecting at the memorial site for the Barlonyo massacre.

Odhiambo was waiting across the water where all the LRA rebels were taking the goods they had looted from everyone in the town. There was a big party with lots of music and beer. The LRA danced and partied almost all night. Agnes was given a chicken to pluck. She asked for water and they said there was no reason to waste it because she wasn't going to survive anyway.

Then a whistle blew to assemble everyone from neighboring camps. They would call people over, and then smash their heads. They were all told they had to look down because if you look in their eyes, it would be a bad omen. Agnes looked in the rebel fighter's eyes, and then was hit with a bayonet in the temple. She tumbled to the ground and blacked out.

Agnes spent a day lying on the ground unconscious. She was left for dead. Two days after the attack, soldiers came to the camp and did a follow-up. They walked around slapping the dead. They found 35 dead bodies in her area; she was the only one alive. Big black ants had crawled all over her. The soldiers brought her to a nearby military detachment and then to a hospital.

Agnes spent six months lying unconscious in the hospital, where her condition continued to worsen. Her parents couldn't afford to keep her in the hospital so they took her back home. During her recovery, she couldn't sit—her parents had to come and lift her. They had to move her around all the time, but after awhile she could hear things and they started feeding her soup, etc. Slowly she started regaining strength and was given crutches. She learned to walk again, and started to feed herself. She's always very dizzy when she walks, so she can only work while seated.

During that night, Agnes dislocated her joints and cannot dig now. Her baby, who she thought she would never see again, had been grabbed by someone and was given to her grandmother in law. She tried to breastfeed it, but the baby wouldn't accept her. Her child is now five years old, but doesn't realize that Agnes is her mother.

For now, all Agnes can do is make bread to sell, but no one is here to buy it, so she mostly does it to pass time. Her husband took her back, but he's never really around anymore. She feels she's been stigmatized, but she's working hard to be able to take care of her baby. Still, she has to beg just to get people to fetch water for her.

If Kony remains in the bush, Agnes says her baby is prone to suffer more than she has suffered. As for trying to rebuild her life, she says that the government hasn't done much. They didn't provide protection during the incident. Afterwards, President Yoweri Museveni came and made a promise to build a nursery school, provide water, and so on, but that was 2004 and nothing has happened so far.

Molly, age 28

On the night of the massacre, the LRA rebels entered Molly's home in Barlonyo and shot her mother, brother, and brother's son. Molly was shot four times and her baby was shot once. They were the only two in the family to survive.

The rebels thought everyone in the house was dead, so they set the house on fire. Molly was lying in the house unconscious, but awoke to realize the fire was burning her. She ran with her baby into a shelter, but the rebels followed her inside. They forced her to carry food for



Molly believes that if Okot Odhiambo and the other top LRA commanders are apprehended, then survivors of LRA violence in northern Uganda will be uplifted.

them, but she said she was too weak. Miraculously, the rebels left her inside and went to direct people who were hauling away foodstuffs. Eventually Ugandan soldiers arrived in Barlonyo and took Molly to a nearby hospital.

Molly is not married and she struggles to raise her children alone because she is very weak. It's hard for her to make money, although she gets some support from her sisters. Molly shares a dark joke with her child, who always asks, "How is your bullet paining you today?" They both laugh because their bullets pain them every day, and they feel it is a bond they share. Molly feels disliked by everyone and like an outsider in her own community.

Although the government created the Poverty, Recovery and Development Plan—known as PRDP—in 2007 to support development and reconstruction efforts in the North, Molly has not yet seen any of the results of this program. She wonders why the Ugandan government has not found a way to better support the victims of LRA violence. Molly believes that if Okot Odhiambo—the LRA commander who led the Barlonyo attack—is caught or killed, survivors and members of war-affected communities in northern Uganda would feel better, and that it would send a strong message to other LRA commanders and rebels.

Bringing an end to the LRA: What you can do

Visit Enough's website to learn more about the international humanitarian organizations helping northern Ugandans rebuild their communities and engaging in rehabilitation work throughout the region.

Call your representative and senators and urge them to co-sponsor the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009. This bill calls on the U.S. government to use its leverage with the government of Uganda to press for meaningful leadership in developing and reconstructing the North, and also compels President Barack Obama to craft a comprehensive strategy to help dismantle the LRA.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

