

The stolen generation

Thousands of children in northern Uganda were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army. **Candida Beveridge** finds out what happens when they start going back home

Large beads of rain hang from the eaves of Celestino Okello's circular, rammed-earth hut. Trickles of water hit the sodden red Ugandan earth as he hurries out of his doorway clutching a small square of fraying yellow paper. He unfolds it gingerly, trying not to let it tear along the creases, and hands it over. It is the registration document he was given on 8 November 2004, the day his 15-year-old daughter Selina was abducted by Uganda's rebel army.

Okello's eyes are red-rimmed and tearful. "My daughter was abducted fetching water. Until now, she has not returned. Since she's been gone, I am nobody." A whiff of stale alcohol hangs in the air. "If she's alive," he pleads, "bring her back to me. I am just longing for her."

Selina is one of 25,000 children to have been abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a brutal guerrilla insurgency led by Joseph Kony. These rebel fighters terrorised the Acholi people of northern Uganda between 1987 and 2006, creeping into their villages at night and stealing their children.

Once captured, the children were forced to commit abominable atrocities. Some of them were made to kill their parents; others were compelled to drink the blood of their dead relatives. This was a conscious strategy on the part of the LRA to normalise murder and to rob a child of any hope of returning home to their family. Girls were also raped, tortured and often mutilated.

Grace Atieno was 12 when she was captured at midnight on 9 October 1996 from her school in Kitgum. She was taken to Sudan and forced to marry a guerrilla commander who already had 11 other wives. "I told him I was too young to go with him," she says, "but he came to me in the night with a pistol. He told me, 'Either you go inside or I shoot you here.' And of course I feared dying, so I had to go into his hut."

As well as enduring continuous rape and a resulting pregnancy, Grace was also coerced into killing a girl who had tried to escape. "They made us beat her until she died. It felt really bad, but you have to do it to save your own life."

Eight years later, with a child strapped to her back, Grace made her own escape. She went back to her parents and completed her education.

Her serene eyes and calm demeanour portray little of her eight-year ordeal as a child soldier. She says it has made her

a stronger person. "After going through a lot of problems and hardship, you really know how this world is and it helps you to cope with life." The war also created a special bond between her and her son. "I love him so much because I really suffered with him and we have both gone through a lot of hardship, yet God has made both of us alive."

Now Grace hopes to go to Makerere University in Kampala to study environmental science. She has been offered a place but can't afford the fees.

Very few girls returning from the war have managed to achieve as much as Grace has. For the majority of single mothers the process of reintegration has been difficult, especially for those who have returned to find their villages destroyed and their families either dead or living elsewhere.

Process of rebuilding

Before the war, the Acholi people were self-sufficient farmers who lived in extended family networks in small villages. When war broke out and entire villages were massacred, the Ugandan government moved 1.6 million people into several large Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Initially it was the best solution, but over time, people became reliant on food aid and stopped working. Alcoholism and domestic abuse became rife and family networks broke down. Now the war is over and food aid has been withdrawn, people are being urged to go back to their ancestral lands and rebuild their villages.

These vulnerable, often itinerant Acholi communities have found it hard to put their prejudices aside and accommodate a new generation of traumatised single mothers who have returned from captivity with children and no means to support them. "The community looks at these girls as outcasts," says local psychiatrist Dr Mary Grace Lanyero. "They see them as people who've done wrong and don't want to associate with them."

Miriam Abbo, 28, was abducted by the LRA three times. The first time she was forced to murder her own father. "They made me beat him with a log until he was dead." Showing no emotion, she stares blankly into the middle distance.

Miriam's dissociative behaviour is normal, says Dr Lanyero. "Initially when the girls come back, they have lost all human feeling, but later as they become part of the community they start to feel guilt and blame." For Irene, this process is just beginning. Every night she dreams she is being strangled. **6**



Grace Atieno was abducted and forced to marry a guerrilla commander. She did not escape for eight years Photography by: Guillaume Bonn

Mental health: 'Mental illness is rapidly on the increase'

A large queue forms outside the new psychiatric clinic run by Dr Mary Grace Lanyero. Opened on 24 July 2009, it is set to become one of the busiest clinics at St Joseph's Hospital in Kitgum, northern Uganda.

"Mental illness is rapidly on the increase post-conflict, and we are still waiting for the peak," says Lanyero. "During the war, people developed a resilience. They were able to share their problems. But since peace has been established and they have been encouraged to leave the IDP camps and go back to their villages, people are starting to break down."

A significant number of her patients are single mothers who have returned from captivity. "They are suffering from depression and anxiety and having nightmares related to the war. Many of them also try to commit suicide."

Lanyero employs a holistic approach with her patients, encouraging them to undergo cognitive behavioural therapy in conjunction with spiritual healing and traditional cleansing ceremonies. Some of her most successful work has been with traumatised children born in captivity. Using a set of coloured pens



A drawing from a former child soldier

and paints, she coaxes them to express their hidden emotions. "It is always very difficult to assess children when they come back. We ask them to draw whatever they feel. Through drawing, they are able to show us their deeper inner feelings and then the emotions come out. Sometimes a child will cry while they are drawing. It helps them to open up." **CB**

Rehabilitation: The Kicwa story

When the first casualties of the war started crowding Kitgum's hospitals in 1998, Rose Adoch knew she had to do something. "I went to visit some children who were wounded in hospital and I found that some of them didn't have relatives."

Adoch and six of her friends, all of them grandmothers, collected their cooking utensils and set up a makeshift kitchen under the shade of a shea tree. They took it in turns to cook food for the orphaned children. Little by little, they raised money to pay for a place for the children to stay in until a home could be found. They called themselves Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (Kicwa). Now Kicwa is an NGO that specialises in looking after children and young people when they first come back from captivity. "We give them physical support, like nutrition and medical treatment," says Kicwa's charismatic manager Christopher Arwai. "We also provide counselling and activities that promote healing of the mind."

With the help of its UK partner, International Childcare Trust, Kicwa also pays special attention to the needs



Rose Adoch, one of the founders of the Kitgum Concerned Women's Association

of formerly abducted single mothers. This vulnerable group of women often have no way of supporting their children, so Adoch and the team at Kicwa have developed several schemes to help them earn money. This year they have paid for six girls to take a tailoring course, three

of whom have subsequently been given a sewing machine and a roll of cloth to start their own business.

"I like this work," says Adoch, "because it eases the burden these child mothers have. They don't have any other support." **CB**