

## **1.0 Background:**

The war in Northern Uganda has dragged on for the last 20 years. Killings, massive displacement, abductions of innocent children and devastation of property and infrastructures have characterized it. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, many maimed permanently and others have suffered from mutilations of limbs, lips, noses, arms, ears, hands, legs and toes; at the hands of warring factions, especially the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels.

The LRA rebels led by Joseph Kony since 1994 to date have abducted more than 25,000 children. According to UNICEF over 10,000 children were abducted between the years 2002 and 2003 alone. The Acholi sub region covering the four districts of Gulu, Amuru, Pader and Kitgum have lost generations of children and without proper Education.

The war of insurgency in Northern Uganda has targeted mainly the civil population, the most vulnerable groups being children, women and the elderly. Children have suffered disproportionately through abductions, defilement, loss of their parents and being used as child soldiers and as sex slaves. Worst of all, children have suffered as killing machines against their own people in the community. The women have equally suffered from being subjected to acts of violence, human rights abuses, rape, losses of their dear ones (children and husbands) and homesteads. The women are now living with shame of stigma and dehumanization due to losses of their human dignity in the IDP camps.

Even though the guns have been relatively silent, since the signing of cessation of hostilities agreements, some time last year, the wounds and effects remain deep rooted.

### **1.1. IDP camp scenario**

The Acholi people in Northern Uganda have lived in a situation of desperation, fear, hopelessness, deaths and uncertainty for the last 20 years. In early 1997, World Food Programme relief was delivered to 110,000 people in 'protected' IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps. Two years later it went to over 400,000 and by mid 2002 to 522,000. The number then escalated dramatically as a consequence of the LRA incursions after the UPDF launched a major offensive code named, "Operation Iron Fist". New camps were established in neighboring districts. By 2003, more than 80% of the population of war-affected parts of Northern Uganda lived in over 200 camps. The rest lived in the main towns. The total number of people living in IDP camps then was estimated at over 1.5 million. (These figures are from WFP and UNOCHA sources and are quoted in Dolan, C (2005). *Understanding War and its Continuation: The case of Northern Uganda*. PhD. thesis. Development Studies Institute. London, London School of Economics, London University. (In a research on A Hard Homecoming lessons learned from the reception

centre process in Northern Uganda. An independent Study for Management systems International Corporate offices page 70)

The moral fiber of the community in the IDP camps is eroding drastically because of the nature of their settlement. According to the then UN Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Jan Egeland, “humanitarian situation in Northern and North Eastern Uganda has been the worst forgotten crisis in the world”. (News Paper report while he was on a humanitarian visit to Pader in Northern Uganda)

The majorities of the people, if not all, are traumatized, have too much worry and cannot sleep because of **painful memories** of what have happened to them individually and collectively. When one’s children have been abducted, spouses killed, home destroyed, then one finds one self in a terrible dilemma. For example, one woman had one of her daughters abducted in 1996 by the LRA and has heard nothing about her ever since. Later another daughter of hers was burnt to death in an ambush on the road in 1998. Now a poor woman of sorrows, she cries all the time because of her losses. Another woman lost five of her children through abduction in a single day and was left with one child. The poor mother died of heart failure soon after; she could not bear the pain of her bereavement. (A told in the Pader Camp)

IDPs have limited access to land and few opportunities to generate income. Services have largely collapsed; there is virtually no civilian policing, inadequate water supplies and sanitation facilities, limited access to health care, massively over-congested primary schools and limited access to secondary education in the camp setting. Camps are over crowded with huts space close together. All the social problems that exist in other parts of Uganda (high number of HIV/AIDS orphans, domestic violence and sexual abuse and exploitation) distress the war affected population, intensified by conflict, displacement and camp life. The highly visible war-related human rights abuses, abductions, night commuting<sup>1</sup>, sexual and gender based violence-are part of a much broader spectrum of serious human rights violations exacerbated by war. With each year spent in the IDP camps the residents become increasingly dependent on food relief and more despondent as they watch the familial and cultural fabric of their lives deteriorate.

## **1.2. Period of relative calm (2000-2002)**

For almost two years from 2000 to 2001, the people of Northern Uganda experienced a period of relative calm throughout the region. Most people thought that the war was gradually and surely coming to an end. This was also the time Uganda and Sudan normalized their diplomatic relations. The normalization of the diplomatic relations also led to the signing of the protocol agreement of the two governments. This relative lull of peace had the effect of having few cases of abduction registered, centers registered fewer numbers of children returning and the rebels were in Sudan tilling the land.

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<sup>1</sup> The number has drastically reduced as a result of relative peace following the Juba Peace Talks

### **1.3. Operation Iron Fist**

The Government of Uganda embarked on an intensive campaign against the LRA who had relocated to Sudan and were on cultivation as told by Formerly Abducted Children at the reception centers. In 2002, after the resumption of the good relationship between Uganda and Sudan, Uganda Peoples Defence Force, (UPDF) launched a major offensive, code named “Operation Iron Fist”, taking advantage of an agreement with Sudan that allowed it to operate within Sudan up to the so-called ‘Red Line’, about 100km into Southern Sudan.

Operation Iron Fist did not deliver peace. It destroyed LRA bases in Southern Sudan but did not destroy the LRA. The LRA was forced to find a base and the fighters crossed back into Uganda where they carried out a wave of violence of an intensity not seen since the mid-1990s. In mid 2003, LRA activities spread further south of Uganda into sub-regions of Lango, and Teso, bringing the number of IDPs directly living in the camps up to about 1.6

### **1.4. Ethnic tensions**

The LRA brutal attacks on the two ethnic groups of Langi and Iteso have generated very high levels of tribal sentiments against the Acholi people. The reasons for their crimes are that Kony is an Acholi. In Teso sub-region, for instance, tensions, intimidations and cases of harassments on Acholi and the Langi who are of the same ethnic grouping were reported. A government official in Soroti made a public statement that “any Acholi above 18 years old found within Teso sub-region must be killed.” (The Monitor News Paper late 2003)

Her is a true story of a teacher by profession who was abducted by the LRA from Pader but escaped from the LRA in Soroti. Unfortunately the community in Teso he ran to for rescue beat him up nearly to death. He lost his right leg, had a deep cut on his head and developed a paralyzed left hand

### **1.5. Night Commuting Phenomenon**

As the rebels’ activities intensified in the Acholi sub-region, many children fled into town centers for fear of abduction and death. These children trekked every evening from their homes to come and sleep in the Town centers. Some walked back and forth 12 kilometers from home to the town centers. These are the “Night Commuters.” The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) Core team members showed their solidarity of compassion with the suffering children of Northern Uganda concretely. They spent the cold nights with them on the streets of Gulu Municipality around June 2003.

The concrete solidarity of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) with the suffering children of Northern Uganda, attracted the attention of the International Community towards the humanitarian crisis in Northern Uganda. Western media and high-ranking foreign government officials and leaders of international agencies started to

pay visits to Northern Uganda from that time on. That is what contributed to the raising the profile of the humanitarian crisis in Northern and Eastern Uganda.

The *Night Commuter Children* are counted at the reception centers as they come. The number has now drastically reduced from the 10<sup>th</sup> of thousands to less than 674 children as reported by the Community Service Focal Person.

## **1.6. Child soldiering**

Child soldiering in Uganda, especially with the LRA, has been forceful recruitment of children through abductions. It's believed that young children can follow instructions, are fearful and obedient to their masters. The LRA also targeted children as main source of forced labor and sexual exploitation. Although exact numbers are unavailable, it has been estimated that more than 25,000 children have been abducted in Northern Uganda alone by the LRA since the beginning of the conflict (UNICEF, "Northern Uganda Humanitarian Situation Report" (October 2005). It is also estimated that over 10,000 abducted Children remain unaccounted for according to a report by the RDC Gulu to the Mission team of Uganda Parliamentary Forum for Children. The most recent data available indicates that 22% of males and 8.5% of female never returned. (J. Annan, C Blattman, R Horton, Survey of War affected youth (SWAY), April 2006 (as quoted in UPFC page 10). Press reports indicate Kony is now left with only hundreds of fighters mainly composed of formerly abducted children. Where are the other children? Have they all been killed in battle or died of starvation or have they been sold as slaves?

The Uganda Parliamentary Forum for Children (UPFC) visited Gulu and Northern Uganda in June 2006 and met with the 4th UPDF Division Commander in Gulu. UPFC raised the concerns about the presence of under aged children in the UPDF. They said reports indicated that 5000 children still belonged to the Ugandan army. The UN Special Representative for Children also recently visited Uganda and raised UN concerns about under aged children in the Ugandan Military. But her team was told there was no way a child could be recruited in the UPDF regular force since the recruitment is done in public. If cases of underage recruitment occurred and parents brought their complaints, the child is normally handed back to the community. According to the UPDF however, the biggest problem lies with verification of the ages of the children, especially when they look older than 18 years, mostly due to lack of birth certificates. However in a meeting with the local government administration, the UN Special Representative for Children and her team were told children are still physically seen in UPDF uniforms. But this was an impression the national security committee objected to. In meetings with the district authorities in Pader, the UN Special Representative for Children Team was told the number of children still found in the UPDF is not as many as it was a few years ago. (Uganda Parliamentary Forum for Children (UPFC) report on All Party Parliamentary Mission to the North page 12, June 2006)

## **2.0 Reparation dynamics in Uganda**

Reparation is the payment of damages: INDEMNIFICATION; *specifically*: compensation in money or materials payable by a defeated nation for damages to or expenditures sustained by another nation as a result of hostilities with the defeated nation (internet source). Therefore, reparation involves restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.

In the northern Ugandan context in case of the child soldiers or Formerly Abducted Persons reparation is geared towards healing of past wounds and building a future of hope, acceptance and self reliance. I take reparation as acts and processes aimed at restoring, repairing or to keep in repair. It is the act and process of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury, or something done or given as amends or satisfaction.

### **2.1 Role of Amnesty commission**

The parliament of Uganda enacted the Amnesty Act in 2000. The Act offers amnesty from prosecution for crimes committed in armed rebellion against the government since 1986. The Amnesty Act established the Commission to promote the amnesty law, grant amnesty, demobilize and disarm Formerly Abducted Persons and reintegrate and resettle FAPs to communities of choice. (In a research on A Hard Homecoming lessons learned from the reception centre process in Northern Uganda. An independent Study for Management systems International Corporate offices page 37)

According to the government, reparation is given as a way of resettling the former fighters and as an incentive for those still in the bush to come back home. The Government of Uganda and many donors view the Amnesty Act as a major incentive for combatants to leave the LRA. The task of the commission is to specifically issue amnesty cards and packages.

Benefited from the reparation was the former rebel group of West Nile Bank Front (WNRF 2) under Brig. Bamuze. This group comprised of former Idi Amin's soldiers who had been fighting for their survival. The Government of Uganda entered into a negotiation with the group and gave them Amnesty. The former fighters were rewarded with lots of Ugandan taxpayers' money from a World Bank loan that will have to be paid back some time in future.

The challenges of the amnesty commission include limited resources, lack of trained personnel, transport and insecurity. Hence the Commission has not been able to provide much assistance to those who have so far received the amnesty cards. The slow pace of granting legal amnesty has been more than matched by the slow pace of disbursement of promised materials and financial support. Even those equipped with packages find themselves resettled into devastating poverty. The 263,000/= Ugandan shillings they receive are often divided up in the family and do not support FAP as expected. (In a research on A Hard Homecoming lessons learned from the reception centre process in Northern Uganda. An independent Study for Management systems International Corporate offices page 39)

A further major limitation for the Amnesty Commission is its lack of a viable method of assessing those FAPs or child soldiers who fall outside the official systems. Though not a legal position, it has become a practice that FAP should first produce documentation of having passed through the reception centers. Yet there are those who came earlier prior to the inception of reception centers. There are also those who went quietly and settled bypassing the UPDF/CPU as indicated in the Hard Homecoming research.

However, there is much confusion amongst FAPs about what Amnesty actually means. For some it means receiving a package; others believe they have been granted amnesty if they have gone through a reconciliation ceremony. Others have lost faith in the amnesty because they have been turned away. Moreover, the probability of receiving an amnesty package is so low that many just do not bother claiming it. They do not realize that not applying for amnesty could have adverse legal consequences as pointed out in the Hard Homecoming research.

Information on Amnesty is not fully received by the children and other low ranking formerly abducted persons while in the bush with the LRA.

## **2.2 Role of reception centres**

Reception centers were set up to provide space for people returning from the LRA. They are supposed to provide a safe area, basic supplies and counseling to enable the FAPs return to their community. About 26,958 FAPs have passed through the 8 reception centers (as quoted in a table in a research on A Hard Homecoming lessons learned from the reception centre process in Northern Uganda: An independent Study for Management systems International Corporate offices page 40). Most of the centers have made efforts to establish best practices over time. There have also been some efforts made at coordination between them. All the FAPs felt that the packages of foodstuffs, commodities and money given to them on leaving the reception centers were helpful. But it turned out to be a cause of resentment to both FAPs and their neighbors and families, especially among those who had not been 'abducted'. The children did not understand why the different centers and agencies provided different things. Camp officials also highlighted the incomprehensible inconsistencies. Children complained that community leaders do not seem to care for them in the face of such difference especially where fees were paid or not paid.

According to "Hard Homecoming research", the most difficult times many children and formerly abducted persons have faced are the periods after their abduction and after return. During these times FAPs, child soldiers inclusive do not know what will happen to them and they may be in serious danger, or think that they are. Life becomes easier once rule of life has been established and complied with. For all their limitations, the reception centers have offered a secure place where FAPs can undergo such an adjustment.

The centers also perform other valuable functions. These include the provision of assistance to deal with physical wounds, family tracing, offering access to peer groups and the provision of advice and commodities which have made the transition from LRA

to the IDP camps somewhat easier. On the surface, most of the centers offer similar services: basic health provision, a safe space to sleep, food, ‘counseling’, and teaching, entertainment and game-playing. They usually encourage responsible behavior by transferring simple household duties to the Formerly Abducted Children.

However, for most Formerly Abducted Persons who passed through the center complain of waiting to be called back to the center to receive a package. Most of them have filled a form to receive training or tools, but never received anything. They have been told that, the future would be bright with an opportunity to go back to school and to be followed-up by the reception center staff to see how they were coping at home. All these promises were never fulfilled. Those trained are never given tools to put skills learnt in the center to work or being taught the wrong skills, effectively rendering the skills training as useless.

**Inadequate training of the community volunteers care giver/counselors (CVCs):**

One of the problems that arise from such training as pointed in the Hard Homecoming research is that it does not leave room for nuanced approaches. Most CVCs reported that one of the things that they had been trained in was to ‘sensitize’ the community by explaining to them that the returnees are traumatized and will be difficult to deal with. This has led to dangerous dynamics, as reception center staff pointed out: the children are told to expect stigmatization, and the community is told that they are receiving disturbed and dangerous individuals. Apprehension on both sides leads to tension and the conflict between the FACs and the community becomes a self-filling prophecy. The returnees are scared of the community, the community is scared of the returnees, and everybody is scared for their safety and worried about supplies. Working against this fear with limited resources is considered by most to be a battle they cannot win. *(As quoted in a Hard Homecoming Research)*

### **2.3 Role of Traditional and Cultural institution**

Within the displacement camps, cultural leaders and women have adapted rituals to welcome the returnee’s home and in some cases, to help remove ‘cen’ (spirit) that is believed to lead to dangerous or abnormal behaviour. For the majority of returnees, this has had a therapeutic effect, especially if they had a good understanding of the rituals involved.

Young mothers and orphaned returnees are a particularly vulnerable category among returnees. Culture tends to discriminate against young returning girls and mothers. The breakdown of culture has left many orphans to face challenges on their own. *(As quoted in ROCO WAT I Acholi, Restoring Relationship in Acholi-Land: traditional Approaches to Justice and Reintegration pg. 38)*

The Cultural leaders presently play no role in supporting the economic reintegration of returnees as the Ker Kwaro is institutionally weak and lacks resources. A number of concerns were raised regarding the communal cleansing ceremonies that will require

clarification by Ker-Kwaro. This includes clarifying the purpose of the ceremonies, and they will be followed up at the grassroots level in terms of restoration. There is lack of cooperation between the reparations agencies like the Ker-Kwaro and reception centres regarding the process of reintegration. In particular, religious leaders and cultural leaders need to clarify their approaches and relationship on the role of culture and religion.

#### **2.4 Government roles (Central and Local Government)**

*“By the Government launching the Joint Monitoring Committees (JMC) this week, the Government was issuing a Promissory Note to the children of Northern Uganda. A promise that: they will see peace, not in their lifetime, but in their childhood, like any other children”.* Martin Mogwanja, UNICEF Country Representative. (UPFA AGM 6/5/2006)

According to a Research on Hard Homecoming, Labora Farm has been put forward as an alternative to locating FAPs with their relatives. It is a large farm, which is supposed to be run on a commercial basis by former LRA combatants. It is an approach of supporting reintegration that has received support from the UPDF and Gulu District officials. It has been endorsed by senior government officials (said to be a brain child of Ministry of Defence) and has been funded under a scheme supported by the World Bank. It has however, been very controversial. But the reason for the concerns expressed about Labora Farm from aid agencies and human rights activities working in the region derive from the use of ‘child mothers’ as labourers and the fact that it was initially run under the auspices of Kenneth Banya. Banya is a former LRA Brigadier who had many young ‘wives’ himself while with the LRA and has sought to continue the unions after his capture and receipt of the Amnesty. For many agencies working Northern Uganda, it is impossible to support a scheme that is associated with such a man. Two years ago, when the farm was first being proposed, there was the suggestion that it would establish the model of the ‘reintegration’ of majority of LRA and their ‘wives’. This caused considerable dismay in some quarters, but the project has now become much less ambitious.

#### **2.5 Community participation and involvement in reintegration.**

The children on arrival to the reception centres are visited by their parents and other relatives as a way of building their confidence before they are reintegrated the community. Community have participated and supported the traditional cleansing ceremony. Efforts have also been put to support proper reintegration by community advocating against any kind of stigmatization of FAP or children in the community including ‘names calling for former abductees.

Although not in all circumstances, the community members have been very supportive in showing the land boundaries while others have also taken advantages of the vulnerable children.

### **3.0 Political commitment and willingness to support reparation**

The District Reconciliation Peace Team in Gulu is a body comprising of the elected local councillors, that have brought on board all the other peace agencies including the Traditional leaders and NGOs, have been working with the community in sensitising

them to fully accept and support the process of welcoming the Formerly Abducted Persons back home pointing on the issues of Reconciliation and forgiveness.

The DRPT have participated in dialogue with the neighbouring Districts in building solidarity in supporting proper reintegration of children and Formerly Abducted Persons who come back in the community. This was aimed at sensitising the communities to realise that, these children have been abducted against their own will.

The DRPT have also been on top of coordinating the International Peace day celebrations bringing in the surrounding districts for confidence building and giving children opportunity to air their voices on their plight regarding the 20 year old war. The body have also worked very closely with Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI) in the establishment of Acholi Peace Forum that have been working closely with Lango Peace Forum, Teso Peace Forum among others.

However even if the community have appreciated the good work done by these groups, its challenge has been the recurrent attacks by the LRA on these communities and limitation of resources to be conducting community dialogue on regular basis.

#### **4.0 Challenges in achieving reparation efforts**

##### **Economic:**

Poverty, poor health care, and limited access to humanitarian assistance pose significant challenges to the ability of IDPs to realize livelihoods. Returnees identified food security as a major problem when returning home. Breaking out of these conditions is extremely difficult, as there are very few options available.

The condition of camp life is very sad. If you go to the camp, you look at the distances between the huts, where the latrines are located, no play areas for children and time and again, they have suffered from out break of cholera, huts burning, and living on one meal a day from WFP ratio. Then when groups of these LRA are given some resettlement packages; the Community asked that, *must you first kill, and commit all kind of atrocities to be rewarded or resettled?* The community ability to produce for their own livelihood is very low and when they receive a FAC in their homes, they do not have the ability to make this child become self-reliant and the child ends up engaging in unsocial behavior.

The stigmatization comes out as a result of any package given. For example cloths, blankets or mattress become the source of their stigma because the community would not have any of the same. Worse still, the packages given are so inadequate that reparation becomes a burden when the child is looked at to shoulder all the responsibility in the family. Communities are always not prepared nor their capacities built to receive their children who may come back with limitation.

There are potential benefits associated with having a registered FAP in a household. Certain reception centers, notably Rachele, provide relatively generous packages for the families of abducted people, as well as paying fees for FAP. This certainly caused some resentment from those who passed through other reception centre who have complained of being treated unfairly. Families without members who have been through Reception

Centers have often been heard to complain, “*People are being rewarded for having been with the LRA.*” Nonetheless there is an eagerness for some people to claim they have been abducted to attract additional assistance from the humanitarian agencies.

Limited economic opportunities in the IDP camps and in the urban municipality makes it difficult for FAPs to get any kind of livelihood out of the technical skills they received at the Reception Center for reparation.

**Social:**

The community members have lost their original way of child up bringing where a child was communally brought up and boys are taught during the camp fire and girls taught by their mothers. The camp setting has hampered all these and children are growing on their own as the extended family support is dwindling down.

The communities have also taken their social lives to heavy drinking given as a consolation to their problems hence not giving time in supporting full reintegration of children.

**Blanket Amnesty:**

The Blanket Amnesty provides immunity to the formerly abducted or Reporters regardless of the nature of atrocities committed and locks out the community. Case in point is that, the community are not happy about the ‘rewards’ the LRA commanders are given and they end up with it to the very community they committed the atrocities against.

**5.0 Conclusion:**

In conclusion, Reparation and reintegration processes of children and Formerly Abducted Persons have had challenges in the reintegration process and reparation as majority of the community are still living in the camps with very difficult economic situation. Generally, there would be need for proper reintegration of children within the community and supporting the community economically to be able to support the children’s proper reintegration.

**6.0 Recommendation**

There is urgent need to urgently address the minds of the adult community concerning the importance of reintegrating the war victims into society. The adults need to be mobilized and sensitized that these victims (FAC) did wrong against their personal intuitive will.

The anguish and distress situation of the parents who have never seen their children returned should be properly addressed

The Government should stop providing limited support to the victims who are supposed to be fully reintegrated into normal community life. Sufficient financial support should be given to the Amnesty Commission so that they can be able to sufficiently meet the needs of the victims who have come back. In doing so, the members of the commission should

take it upon themselves to heavily mobilize and sensitize the general community so that that they appreciate the justification of the packages given to the victims.

Traditional/Cultural, religious and interfaith institutions in Acholi sub-region in particular, but Northern and Eastern Uganda as a whole, should be empowered, equipped and properly resourced by Government, Donor agencies and humanitarian organizations. They should also benefit from specialized training and capacity building to undertake basic and advanced research so as to integrate a multi-disciplinary post conflict coping and healing mechanisms. This should include a sensitive use of traditional cleansing ceremonies of reintegration, community mobilization and sensitization and leadership training for cross-reintegration of children into relatively normal community life. But this should also help a formerly displaced community to re-integrate into some aspects of what “used to be” a normal community before the war.

There should be deliberate and concerted attempts to provide advanced training of as many *Para-professionals*. These will help in counseling the children to heal the wounds. This needs an advanced training institutional set up located in Gulu, in Northern Uganda that is central for most parts of the war-ravaged region. Such an appropriate and uniquely competent training and capacity building institution can then be able to set up holistic, multidisciplinary and culturally relevant training, research and interventions in assessment of mental health, establish homegrown mechanisms of constant monitoring and follow up. It can provide such resources to agencies, central and local government, and faith community services that will play a pivotal role in supporting the work of other development partners operating in the war ravaged region. Such institution should also equip and train community as well as local and central government leadership operating in Northern Uganda to mobilize and sensitize local government and community agencies to come out with sensitive and appropriate by-laws for the protection of FACs and FAPs against stigmatization.

Such a Northern Uganda based training and capacity building institution will fill the big gap in the historical marginalization of Northern Uganda and provide holistic and relevant education and leadership development. This way it will be a resource to organizations, both private sector and public sector to come out with practical measures that can address the material needs of the victims and the war ravaged communities so that they could become self-reliant and start to earn and enjoy meaningful livelihood.

Reference:

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