

Child soldiers of Uganda's stolen army

By Fred Bridgland

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Spare pity for parents among the Acholi people of northern Uganda. They are living a real version of the fable of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, only many times worse.

Since the mid-1980s, an estimated 20,000 of their children have been snatched by a crazed visionary, Joseph Kony, who – in training camps in Sudan – has transformed the young people into Africa's most terrifying army and sent them home to kill their own parents and relatives.

Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has created such terror that 1.2 million Ugandans are now internal refugees, huddled into refugee camps across the north and centre of the country.

The LRA has stepped up its attacks so intensely in recent weeks that Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has instructed the country's armed forces to begin a massive new offensive to wipe out Kony's army, many as young as seven-years-old, once and for all.

The scale of the LRA's atrocities is grim. Lips, ears and legs of Acholi citizens have been cut off in attacks by Kony's young army. Human Rights Watch, in a lengthy investigation of the conflict, said child soldiers who refuse to follow orders are killed, typically, by other children who are forced to beat or hack the victim to death or be killed themselves.

The LRA is probably one of the least understood rebel movements in the world. It grew out of the Holy Spirit Movement, formed in 1986 by self-declared prophet, Alice Lakwena. She exploited traditional tensions between the Bantu tribes of the south, such as the Baganda, and the Nilotic and Sudanic tribes of the north, such as the Acholi and the Langi, whom the British had bound together in their Uganda colony. The British also chose soldiers for the King's African Rifles from the people of the north.

When Museveni, a southerner, took power in 1986 – after periods of horrific dictatorship by Idi Amin and Milton Obote – Lakwena persuaded her followers to stage an insurrection against Museveni, convincing them that if they anointed themselves with shea nut-butter

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oil, bullets would bounce off their chests.

Lakwena's revolt failed and she fled to Kenya. But her nephew, Kony, declared himself her spiritual heir and formed the LRA, which has become a sinister and successful cult armed by the government of Sudan.

Kony, who preaches the ten commandments as central to his ideology, has blended Catholic, Protestant and Islamic worship. Recruits are told that Kony's orders come from angels.

The LRA constantly abducts new "troops" from the villages of the Acholi dotted among the northern Ugandan grasslands. Well-documented accounts by Human Rights Watch, aid organisations and journalists, show that within hours of kidnapping a new group, LRA commanders select one child to be ritually killed. Under the threat of being killed themselves, the rest of the group must beat him or her to death.

So terrifying are the LRA attacks that, every day at sunset, tens of thousands of Acholi children move into protective camps in towns, schools or hospitals, returning home only at daybreak.

Reuters reported recently that an LRA unit forced 60 funeral-goers to eat the corpse they were carrying before gunning them down.

Patrick Ocaya, 17, escaped from the LRA after leading a unit of 11-year-olds into battle for five years. On being promoted to corporal, he was ordered to demonstrate his loyalty by clubbing seven child soldiers to death. "Sometimes one blow is enough," he told the British correspondent Rory Carroll. "You have to make sure the skull is crushed and the brains come out. I didn't have pity. They were my orders."

At first glance, it might be thought that the Acholi people would welcome Museveni's new-found determination to eliminate the movement that has terrorised and butchered them and made them refugees in their own homeland. But they face a dreadful dilemma. A military solution means the killing of their own children.

Philip Lutara, a coordinator of an Acholi organisation, the Concerned Parents Association (CPA), which works closely with the British charity Christian Aid, articulates the catch-22 predicament: "There is no local support for the Lord's Resistance Army. But you have to realise that 85% of the rebels are abducted children. They are our children. Just because we don't support military action doesn't mean we support the LRA."

Organisations like the CPA and the multi-denominational Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) are pleading with the government to find some way of negotiating with Kony rather than going to war.

This has made the CPA and the ARLPI suspect in the eyes of the Ugandan army which has, in turn, been accused by Human Rights Watch of committing its own atrocities against

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the Acholi people.

Ugandan soldiers have been accused by a Spanish missionary, Father Carlos Rodriguez, prominent in the ARLPI, of raping girls and setting huts ablaze in a recent search for suspected LRA collaborators in one of the refugee camps. Rodriguez, active for years in mediation efforts between the LRA and the Ugandan Army, has now been ordered from the country.

Museveni last week persuaded the International Criminal Court at The Hague to investigate LRA atrocities. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International endorsed the investigation. "But," said Richard Dicker, director of HRW's International Justice Programme, "the ICC prosecutor cannot also ignore alleged Ugandan army crimes."

Based in Johannesburg, Fred Bridgland is African correspondent for the Sunday Herald of Glasgow, Scotland's leading Sunday newspaper. Bridgland is the author of Katiza's Journey: Beneath the Surface of Africa's Shame; Jonas Savimbi, A Key to Africa; The War for Africa: and Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent.