

## Parents and youth build resistance to a little-known “children’s war”



Ugandan leader Angelina Atyam accepts the 2002 United Nations Prize for Human Rights from Kofi Annan.

After eight long years, Angelina Acheng Atyam is finally reunited with her daughter, Charlotte Awino, who was kidnapped by Africa’s most terrifying rebel army, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

It was in 1996 that Atyam came face to face with every Ugandan mother’s worst nightmare. Her daughter was abducted from her school along with 139 girls by the LRA. An Italian nun negotiated with the army, which freed 100 of the 139 kidnapped girls; but Awino was not one of them.

With the world’s eyes riveted nearby on the strife in the Sudan, the LRA rebel army has violently displaced over 90% of the population of northern Uganda in the last 18 years—over 1.6 million Ugandans, a number presently higher than the number of displaced in the Sudan.

It has been called “one of the greatest neglected crises in the world,” by Jan Egeland, the United Nations Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and “one of the worst for children.” Children comprise 80 % of the LRA army. UNICEF estimates that more than 28,000 children have been kidnapped and used as sex slaves and soldiers and forced to commit atrocities against each other and their communities. At least half of these children were kidnapped between 2001 and 2003.

It is an army with baffling motives. The LRA leadership claims to fight for the northern Ugandan Acholi tribe against the Ugandan government. However, it has few clear goals and little public support. Initially the LRA, which has been likened to a cult, indicated that they would like to replace the government with an administration based on the Biblical Ten Commandments.

“For us as parents, one child is like a drop in the ocean. We are so very thirsty. We want all our children to come home.”

— Angelina Atyam

Within a day of her daughter’s kidnapping, Atyam had managed to convince other parents that they needed to fight the terror sown by the rebel army and get back their children. With this aim, the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) was formed in 1996. Over the years, CPA has prepared a list of children who have been kidnapped by

the LRA. It educates villagers about the problem and encourages them to resist the LRA.

Using her skills of persuasion, Atyam, since 1996, has appealed to several world leaders including Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright. “There is no point in wailing and throwing tantrums. The world should know that a crime of this magnitude exists,” says this mother of six, who was a midwife before taking up the cause of child soldiers.

CPA has also raised its concerns with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and the Sudanese government (where LRA training camps are located). The Sudanese government has been known to back the LRA with weapons and training in the past.

In 2002, Atyam made a speech at the UN about her personal experience and about the plight of thousands of families whose children have been kidnapped. Her speech not only moved the UN delegates, it even evoked a response from the LRA. “The rebels sent an emissary to ask me to stop my campaign in exchange for my daughter,” she recalls.

“I said no. Because for us as parents, one child is like a drop in the ocean. We are so very thirsty. We want all our children to come home.”

In July 2004, her daughter managed to escape the LRA and returned home. “I thank God that

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I am back. I am happy to see my mother. I feared I would never see her again,” cried Awino when she met her mother. Atyam says she was ecstatic at the reunion: “I have never felt the joy I felt when I saw Awino and my two grandchildren.” (Awino was forced to “marry” an elderly man who was second-in-command in the LRA. She had two sons by him.)

Awino is still recovering from the trauma of being part of LRA. She goes for counseling at a center supported by the international agency, World Vision. Awino fears the rebels might return and kill her.

Although eager to study, Awino, now 22, dreads sitting with 14-year-olds in high school. Before she was kidnapped, she wanted to be a doctor. But now she is not sure what she wants to do.

However, Awino is proud that her mum is fighting for other children. “I don’t feel comfortable with the fact that my friends are still suffering.”

Atyam is concerned that the community is still not prepared to give the children a fair chance at rehabilitation. Child mothers, when they return to their villages after escaping from the LRA camps, are shunned by their families and the community. This forces many young girls to go back to the LRA camps.

Atyam believes that only a non-military solution can bring peace to her land. Jan Egeland concurs. In a situation where the majority of the combatants are abducted children, she stresses that “there is no military solution.”

Although due to pressure from the CPA and international agencies the Ugandan president Museveni granted amnesty to child soldiers in 2003, he is still looking for a military solution to the conflict. The government has also been accused of forcibly recruiting child soldiers.

However, thanks to Atyam and the CPA, the pressure on the government continues. Thousands of youth are returning home under the amnesty ruling.

USAID, which is poised to launch the Northern Uganda Peace Initiative, has already asked the government to drop the military option. International agencies also want a UN special envoy in Uganda and have recommended an arms embargo.

The CPA also wants the government to invest in reintegrating the children into the school system and drafting a sustainable family support system. With nearly all the schools in north Uganda destroyed in the war, this will be a formidable task.

Many youth have taken matters into their own hands and have formed scores of official and unofficial advocacy groups in response to the crisis. These groups promote young people’s well-being and health, and work for peace. They educate their peers on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, provide psycho-social support to formerly abducted children, and promote young people’s inclusion in peace dialogue.

“The youth feel great doing their work since they believe that they are one of the pillars for peace-building in Uganda,” says Geoffrey Oryema, Program Coordinator of the Acholi Youth Peace and Reconciliation Initiative. “The general population is very responsive to our peace programs.”

Emmanuel, co-founder of Gulu Youth for Action (GYFA), one of the first youth-run education and advocacy groups in northern Uganda, says that “for girls especially, having opportunities to speak to one another and discuss their concerns has been a major accomplishment. When young people have more self-confidence and opportunities to express our views, we will be able to protect ourselves and transform communities.”

In 2002, Atyam was awarded the United Nations Prize for Human Rights. She is relieved that her daughter is back but acknowledges that the road ahead is a long one. “We want peace for all Ugandans not only in the city or one part of the country, but national peace that we can share with our neighbours,” says Atyam. Only when this is achieved, she says, will she be able to sleep peacefully. ☺



Increasing attacks and abductions by the LRA army have given rise to a new phenomenon, so-called “night commuters.” Tens of thousands of northern Ugandans, mostly children and young people, leave their villages and camps at night for the safety of larger town centers, where they study and sleep in relative security.

## TAKE ACTION!

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. *No Safe Place to Call Home: “Night Commuters” in Northern Uganda Leave Home to Seek Safety.* August 2004.