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Reports

Uganda: reintegration of child soldiers requires expertise and commitment

For more than 20 years, northern Uganda has been the theatre for one of Africa's longest and most brutal conflicts. Ninety percent of the northern ethnic Acholi population was displaced by the atrocities committed by the [Lord's Resistance Army](#) (LRA).

An estimated 20,000 children were abducted and forced to become child soldiers or mistresses, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Even though the humanitarian situation has improved and displaced persons have returned to their home villages, many young children who managed to escape the LRA are confronted with a major challenge of reintegration into their communities. Forced to commit atrocities, too many are now faced to deal with their trauma alone.

Insufficient support

For the lucky ones, the reintegration process starts once children manage to escape or are rescued. They are first brought to the child protection unit where their former military engagement with the LRA is assessed. Later, they are transferred to one of the rehabilitation centres in the northern districts managed by different aid organisations. At the centres, they receive counselling services and therapy. The centre staff also help to trace relatives and reunite the children with their families.

The process for tracing a family can take time. In the interim, former child soldiers become accustomed to the support they receive in the centres. Once their families have been identified, they often find it difficult to adjust to the new and often harsh living conditions back home.

"Even if we are now at home we still have to cope with so many painful memories and flashbacks from the time we spent with the rebels. It helps to come together, to share and to support each other," says Pauline who was 13 years old when she was abducted.

Excluded

Upon arrival at the rehabilitation centres, the children are also referred to the Ugandan Amnesty Commission, as a means of promoting reconciliation, peace, security and tranquillity in Uganda. However, children under 13 years of age and those held in captivity for less than four months fall outside commission's mandate. Therefore, they are not entitled to financial, therapeutic or material support from the commission.

Without any support, the entire reintegration process becomes more difficult for them. These children require a lot of time and support to be able to reintegrate into their former communities. Unfortunately, communities do not understand the complexity of the process; they tend to think it will be quick and simple.

Many former child soldiers are not offered the support they need, instead,

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they are discriminated and stigmatised. After years of suffering, community members find it difficult to stop associating the children with the atrocities they were forced to commit while in LRA captivity.

Reintegration requires expertise and commitment of all involved to make it happen. In order to ease the process, some families organise thanksgiving prayers to welcome their children back home. Once a child has returned home, cultural cleansing rituals, such as the stepping on eggs or shrubs can help both sides to start anew. To undertake further education courses, such as vocational training, also helps former abductees to find their way back into normal life.

JRS has supported former abductees in various ways since 2006. Throughout 2008, a JRS community college provided skills training in carpentry and catering while strengthening life skills at the same time. JRS also offers counselling and therapy. At present, a group of ten boys and four girls meet twice a month with two JRS workers from the psychosocial department with whom they share their experiences.

John Paul Akera, JRS Peace Education Advisor



Story dated: 29/01/10

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Date: Tue, 02 Feb 2010 14:49:47 UTC