

The Other Voice



For a fair and just society

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Death in the camps

More people have taken to suicide in Gulu for fear of hopelessness



Internally Displaced Children in Aeket Camp, Amootom Parish, Obalanga Sub County, Kapelebyong County in Katakwi district clap hands in appreciation of World Food Program rations. For how long can this take place?

Bya Janneth Achieng

MORE than five people commit suicide each week in Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps in Northern Uganda.

Most of those who kill themselves are mostly women and old people

who's problems are so acute, but with less chance of a better life.

Most of the deaths have been reported in Awere, Koro-Abili and other camps in Gulu and a few others in Kitgum District.

Mr. John Okumu, a camp member in Awere says that

most victims suffer from HIV/Aids, others have lost the hope to go back home while some youths prefer to die because of lack of education or hope for a better future.

"Many young people were born in the camps. Each year Government tells

us that the war will end without coming good on their promise. That's why now people decide to commit suicide, Mr. Okumu says.

With peace talks between Government and LRA rebels underway, a solution is urgently needed.

Former LC V Chairman Gulu, Col. Walter Ochora says that the effects of war will live with the people of Acholiland for a long time to come. "What we need to do is pray that the peace process is speeded up," he says.

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The Other Voice

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Human trafficking alive and kicking in Uganda

HUMAN trafficking is alive and kicking in Uganda. Most of the people sold into 'slavery' in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia are young girls between 12-18 years.

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Opinion

Peace talks only hope for women and children in Northern Uganda

DESPITE getting off to a rocky start, peace talks to bring an end to the 20-year war in Northern Uganda are still the best chance in years to bring an end to the war. But the fractious first part of the talks has dampened hopes of an agreement before the September 12 deadline set by President Yoweri Museveni to bring peace to Northern Uganda.

In past peace talks, it had become clear to negotiators that Kony's primary concern was his personal safety. Now that this has been guaranteed, the LRA seems to be busy recasting itself as a politically motivated movement with legitimate grievances.

Every chance it gets, the LRA delegation emphasizes its struggle on behalf of marginalized people in Northern and Eastern Uganda. The LRA claims this constituency despite the suffering that has resulted from the conflict, with 1.7 million living in squalid displacement camps, and more than 20,000 Northern children abducted.

The government delegation led by Interior Minister Ruhakana Rugunda immediately rejected the cease-fire demand, saying that in the past cease-fires had been used by the LRA to regroup before launching more attacks and that no cease-fire could be agreed to until a comprehensive settlement was reached.

Despite the LRA's combative approach in the current talks, Government, it seems, is prepared to compromise. This therefore seems to be the only hope for peace to a region that has been decimated by war, for the last twenty years.

But for the talks to be fruitful, all Ugandans regardless of what political party, area of residence or gender need to encourage them. Give constructive advice instead of continuing to point fingers. This is the only way both delegations will appreciate the fact that Ugandans are united in one thought, seeing to it that peace returns to Northern Uganda.

The faces and stories of women and children in Northern Uganda are etched on our memories. Their suffering is unforgettable, and for a long time it seemed as if the armed conflict in which they are caught had been forgotten.

Hopefully the peace process will offer a solution to the impasse that has led to loss of a whole generation in Northern Uganda.

The Uganda Media Women's Association would therefore like to thank the Human Rights Fund for sponsoring this edition that seeks to ignite public awareness and debate about the suffering of especially women and children in Northern Uganda.

The quest for peace

Northern Uganda keeps her fingers crossed over the ongoing peace talks

REBECCA Birungi was part of a women's delegation to the war torn areas in Gulu, and Kitgum. The Gender Ministry supported mission was to establish women's specific needs for redress. She shares her reflections.

You remember this song?

Mr. Museveni, we are happy to see you in here Gulu.... There is no money in Gulu.... No sugar in Gulu.... There are no more virgins in Gulu.... immunization is poor.... but all the same we are happy to see you!

It was a song that greeted the president of Uganda, on one of his working visits in Acholi land seven years ago.

In 2006, the children in Gulu as young as three years old sing this: Children love reading Children love learning.... Children love going to school so that they can speak English.... and educate the future generation.

And the women ham this song: *Pe tye gin ma loyo lubang* meaning ... Nothing is impossible before God, Nothing is impossible before God.

The last song is a common 'hit' during women group meetings to establish women's needs in this troubled part of Uganda. But many times women breakdown when they remember or recall the very hard times, humiliation, torture, abductions, loss of lives etc, they have had to go through.

It is hair raising, one needs to be at the site and fully appreciate the situation, believe me, you can never be the same again..... Thousands are still crammed in camps though others have started relocating to their villages they left 20 years ago. There is peace, at last.....?!!!!

One woman breaks down into tears, "I have spent twenty years in the camp. This is too long for us. I lost seven sons. They were abducted by the rebels and never came back. I lost my husband who was killed by the LRA.

I am remaining with grand children and parts of my body are even paralyzed. There is no one to dig for me or the children. Getting food is a problem. Before 'camp life', we would plant our own food and there was



Acholi leaders led by their chief negotiator, Betty Bigombe (left) with LRA commanders in Pagak, Kitgum in 2003. Where are the women in the on going peace process?

no food shortage. Now I have no school fees, no medical treatment because I can't afford it. I have no money at all," sob sob.....

Another woman says, "Kony should have mercy, so that people can go home and rebuild their lives. Children are

very unruly simply because there are no elders to guide them in the proper way. We are expecting fruitful results from the peace talks but more women should be involved, as the conflict has affected children and women the most".

Yet another says, "The government should be serious. We are tired of the war. We have stayed in camps for a very long time".

Another says; "I highly support the peace talks. It will bring an end to the war, one of the women said optimistically.

The seventh woman, "I look at the peace talks with great hope. If you are in problems God can release you, no matter the situation".

But what is peace? Gender focal person dared to pose what would sound

an irritating question to the women in Gulu who had known no normal life and stayed in Poit camp for over 20 years!

The women were not irritated. They responded.

One said: "Peace is a situation where you have access to everything, education,

freedom of expression, medical facilities, moving freely without any fear".

Another said: "Peace means unity and love".

An old lady's interpretation of peace was in reference to God. She said: "I'm blind. I believe that where there is God there is peace. I know I am peaceful and surviving because God is with me, so peace means God is with us".

One Akello defined peace as where there is freedom of expression and development that necessitates human life, no misunderstanding in other words absence of conflicts; having good relations with your neighbours and God so that you live in harmony with one another.

Another says: "For me peace means going back home".

But there is this mother who brought yet another sad picture which, most of us coming from Southern Uganda reflected on and felt guilty.

She was holding her child using a tattered bed sheet. Both the child and cloth were particularly not clean; and the child was suckling and suddenly she began to pass urine that went straight to the ground but she seemed unbothered, she looked absent minded.

Susan Muwanga, Gender Officer, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, commented: "It was an agonizing moment for me to see the child and mother almost naked yet whenever appeals are made in churches and through the media, I have never taken the issue of donating clothes very serious. That incident changed my perception of giving out clothes to the needy,"

So what are some of the needs that women focused organizations like UNIFEM and the Gender Ministry and NGOs can help address?

REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE

Exiled in one's own country

'I saw my father killed, and for 20 years my life has taken a tumbling turn'

Jenneth Achieng is 25 years old but of these only four have been the happiest. All her life, she has either lived in Internally Displaced Camps, seen the most gruesome atrocities carried out by LRA rebels or been forced to consider what it would have been had there been peace in Acholiland in the last 20 years. Here's sad story.

I was born in 1981 in a small village called Koro- Abili in Northern Uganda, to a businessman called Mr. Okello Robinson and Mrs Okello Esther. Currently my home is the famous Koro Abili camp. I went to Koro-Abili primary school, which is only a stone throw away from what used to be my father's house.

Born at a time when the country was under going a political transformation, life was not easy. In 1986 when the NRM government came to power, I was 5 years old but remember vividly what took place. We had a very large home, being an extended family and our homestead was by the roadside. One hot sunny day, we heard guns shots all over the place and within no time the roads were covered by government trucks full of soldiers yelling at the top of their voices.

They ordered people to live the main roads and move 20kms into the villages. They were saying the tyrant rule of the Anyanya government had been over thrown and the Banyankole had taken over power.

I never understood what all that meant then, to a child, your only worry is what time mummy would give you food and take you to bed or cuddle you and tell you not to be afraid, that no harm would ever come to you.

Our journey deeper in the village started around 2pm on foot. I remember my mum with loads of stuff on her head, my father loaded a few things on his bicycle and we headed off to God knows where. I had no idea where we were going and am quite sure neither my parents knew where they were headed for but we had to move. We moved on and on until I could not go any further, we had been walking for eternity without any clear picture.

It was soon nightfall and we had to find where to sleep. There were no homes or people in sight, so we pitched camp in a forest. We slept hungry because we had

no ready food or water. By morning I could not stand on my feet. They were all ballooned up; I had this terrible headache and caught a cold. We obviously had not reached our destination so we had to move on. My mum now had extra load to lift-me, since I could not use my feet any more.

We moved until we came to a homestead that had long been abandoned, that was where we camped. It was a very big challenge starting life in a whole new place. The nearest water source was about 7kms away, the roof of the hut we were living in had long caved in, and that was to be our new home for the next nine months.

We stayed there and in the mean time, my parents had started some subsistence farming to help keep the food supply. The beans and millet my mum carried with her had to be grown while part of it served as food.

We finally moved back home but a lot had changed. Our home had been turned into an armoury. Loads of ammunition, guns, army boots and clothes had been piled rooftop in the house. To cut a long story short, a new chapter had begun in our lives and it had to be lived at all costs.

Immediately after our return, there was the rise of the rebel movement know as Lakwena (holy spirit) led by Alice Lakwena. She had a large following especially the young boys of Acholi land. When she was defeated, the Lord's Army Resistance movement led by Joseph Kony took over and that was the beginning of all the atrocities in the land.

Two years after the change of government, my mum was killed in a landmine blast on her way to Lacor Hospital. This was the time the rebel activities were becoming prominent as well. They would ambush vehicles, plant landmines, rape women, kill, abduct, sodomise, loot etc. When mum died, we were left with the responsibility of fending for ourselves. I am the only girl in my father's family together with two brothers. I was only seven years old and the last-born but had to take over my mother's responsibilities. I had to fetch water, collect firewood, cook and generally doing all the domestic work.

I had to sacrifice school for a while and take care of the home while my father carried on his business. My brothers on the other hand had to go to school for it was resolved;

the brothers would take care of me even if I didn't go much with books. It was very sad seeing other children go to school while you are seated at home, though occasionally I would sneak and go. I however I managed to go back to school after my father got another wife.

Things moved so fast, the rebel activities were intensifying at a great rate and four years after my mother's death, rebels also killed my father. They came one evening while we were having our supper and ordered us out. Then they put our father in the middle of the compound and told us to watch. He was then hacked to death while we watched, all his cries and pleas fell on deaf ears. We begged and pleaded with the rebels in vain, it only earned us beatings using butt of the gun.



LITTLE HOPE: Jenneth Achieng narrates a life full hopelessness, where people commit suicide for fear on the unknown.

After the rebels left, we ran and hid in the nearby bush just in case they changed their minds and came back for us. In the morning, neighbours and friends helped us bury him. We had no close relatives then coz after the over throw of the govern-

ment, everybody took off in different directions (I have never seen some of my relatives since then).we survived through handouts from well wishers and some of my father's business partners for a while until we moved to town to start a life of our

own.

Our parents' death is something I have never come to terms with to this day. They left us at a very crucial time in our lives- as children. Me especially being a girl, it has been very challenging. With no role model in form

of a mother to look up to, no parental love, guidance etc. I had the responsibility of learning things my own way through trial and era.

After the death of our parents, we had to leave our parental home and move to a relatively safer place and that was in Gulu town. Life was very difficult then because we couldn't afford to pay rent let alone buy food.

I started selling pancakes in the evenings after school in Gulu market, sometimes nobody would buy anything at all so that meant we had to throw away and yet some more had to be made, with or without money for the raw materials. It was the only affordable business. We couldn't sustain this life any longer so we moved back home again. This time we would only stay home during the day and go to sleep in the bushes at night for fear of abduction and killings.

By this time the abduction level had become so unbearable. The rebels were taking even children as young as five years of age, and

recruiting them in the army, girls were turned in to sex slaves for the rebels. The old people who could not walk for long were hacked to death, after being forced to carry heavy loads.

Pathetic situation for wo

To them the world's common basic needs a

The Other Voice set out to capture the voices of different people on the situation in war-torn Northern Uganda. Below are some of the impressions of women activists, journalists, policy makers and the populace, some of it gathered from the camps they visited.

Nyaradzai Gumbonzranda, UNIFEM Regional Director for East and Horn of Africa

The media has a role to play and should practice positive reporting that can promote the rights of women. The newspaper headline: "Kony's Wives" was very disturbing.

The women of Uganda want this peace process to continue, they want the parties to the negotiations, remain negotiating because there is no other way other than to negotiate.

Women's specific needs and rights must be integrated. Women must be part of the reconstruction, part of the healing but we also need a system through which they can access justice.

Signe Allimadi, UNIFEM Country Programme Manager for Uganda

You can never underestimate the way that war has affected women in all aspects of their lives because a woman is a mother, a daughter, a wife, carries all the suffering on her shoulder and that is what is happening in northern Uganda.

The ordinary woman that we spoke to was really focusing on what was near to her and no longer wants to stay in the camps. We asked the ordinary women what peace means to her and the clear answer was 'to me peace means going home'.

Women no longer want to stay in the camps. Many people are squeezed in a small hut, no intimacy with the husband without the watch of children, where she can't feed her children, where there is nothing to cover the children at night, etc, peace to the ordinary woman is going back home and it is up to the government of Uganda to secure its citizens.

We are at a very critical juncture, and if women are not involved in defining the peace right now, I do not see a sustainable post war situa-

tion. The guns may go silent but we are not going to build real peace without women's involvement.

Jane S. Mpagi, Director for Gender and Community Development, Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development.

Many visits have been taken to the north, situational analyses have been made in the north but many of these have focused on the people. Our mission to the north put emphasis on understanding the situation of women and what has come out clearly shows that all of us actors have enormous challenges to address. What we saw in Opiiti camp in Gulu district and in Abonga parish, Bari Sub County in Lira district shows that we all have challenges to address, all of us actors in government and private sector.

It is true that we have had legal framework in this country; we have had adequate policies addressing women. But the challenge is how do we translate these policies and legal frameworks so that they can benefit the women we saw in northern Uganda.

The women we saw do not demand a lot, they want their practical issues sorted out, many of them are either breast feeding or pregnant. They need to be assisted in their motherhood roles. Many of them need to be assisted to meet the food security needs of their families.

They need to be assisted so that their children particularly their daughters go to school. The challenge requires resources both human and financial, but I do believe that with our concerted efforts we can make a difference in the lives of these women.

Winfred Matsiko, Woman Member of Parliament for Rukungiri district and Chairperson of the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA)

This is an important time that we have to look at the desperate situation of women that is in Northern Uganda. UWOPA has developed a strategic plan and high on the agenda is the plight of women in northern Uganda.

We are developing different activities to address some of those problems and we are sure that together with civil society organizations and government, we shall try to

Northern war shames us all

Micheline Ravololonarisoa, United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Chief Africa Section

The objective of our visit was to listen, hear and learn about the condition and situation of women human rights in Northern Uganda. So at the conclusion of this visit, we have noted the very desperate situation of the women of Northern Uganda.

Uganda is a country that we have been looking up to in terms of the implementation of the affirmative action of women, upholding of women's human rights, protection to women in times of peace and in times of conflict.

But after our visit to Gulu and Lira, in particular the camps for the displaced and the people voluntarily resettling in Lira, we can say that the voice of the women we heard and what we saw on the condition of these women is simply unacceptable.

It's unacceptable that in the time when we have multiple international conventions and instruments estab-

lished to uphold the human rights of women, we still can see the kind of situation that women are going through in those camps in Gulu and Lira.

It is unacceptable from several perspectives; first of all from the perspective of universal human rights, women's human rights and from the point of view of democracy. So as UNIFEM, we are going to support each other in the implementation of the needs of women in the camps include being able to sleep with at least some kind of a blanket, be able to have their children's clothes washed, respond to their own biological needs as women and these are very important issues in terms of security of women. Not being able to respond to your own biological needs is absolutely disastrous. Those are the kind of things that have to be prioritized.



Ugandan government has already put in place to address the needs and concerns of the women of northern Uganda in a way that will enhance their capabilities, will enhance their economic empowerment, will enhance the expression of their human rights and will also enhance their participation in decision making.

The concrete needs of women in the camps include being able to sleep with at least some kind of a blanket, be able to have their children's clothes washed, respond to their own biological needs as women and these are very important issues in terms of security of women.

Not being able to respond to your own biological needs is absolutely disastrous. Those are the kind of things that have to be prioritized.

So as UNIFEM, we are going to support each other in the implementation of the

Uganda who are women and children.

The wish of the people of northern Uganda is that this process should not collapse, and we are appealing to government and LRA to stop making unrealistic demands that will make the process collapse. If this opportunity collapses, it's the women and children who will continue to bear the brunt of the impact of the war.

Theophane Nikyema, UNDP country resident representative to Uganda.

Experience has shown that progress is made when we include women in peace and conflict resolution; there is nothing better than finding a solution and putting everything in the hands of women to do everything, do the peace talks. We should do everything to make sure that people go back to their normal lives in northern Uganda.

Carol Bunga Idembe, Advocacy Officer, Uganda Women's Network

(UWONET)

Women organizations should be given an observer status at the ongoing peace talks in Southern Sudan as well as having female delegates on both sides of the negotiating teams.

We also demand that government gives us audience to make an input especially on the five areas of the peace-talks agenda. We also request the media to be sensitive in their reporting.

There is need for continued psychosocial support to women and children affected by the conflict in northern Uganda and systematic reintegration of these groups in the community. Rehabilitation programmes for the postwar situation should be made with the involvement of women to bring out gender issues that affect women.

Judy Luggya, Journalist with Daily Monitor Newspaper

What I saw in Lira and Gulu is just unfortunate. There is a lot of misery, peo-



Women and children from Ob... on Kapele



Betty Amongi

ple can't access the basic needs but rely on WFP supplies like salt or soap. In fact the international donor community is those people's only hope and if they moved out it would be catastrophic.

Like in all war situations women suffer most and in the case of northern Uganda women have to look for food, some have lost their husbands while for others husbands have run away because they can not withstand the pressure.

Many women have been widowed, and are seriously traumatized. All they want is peace and are hopeful of the ongoing peace process in Southern Sudan. They say they want to go home and live a normal life because what they are going through



Ruth

NORTHERN UGANDA

Women in Northern Uganda are the greatest luxuries - Ravololoparisoa



Women and children fleeing for safety after the LRA attack in Katakwi district last year.



Margaret Ssentamu



Winfred Matsiko



Ruth Ojiambo-Ochieng

quite inhumane. They are hopeful that at some time peace will return to the area and are appealing to the government and LRA to cease hostilities and bring a peaceful end to the conflict. Women have not been empowered to play a part in decision making and men have

tended to hijack the whole situation. Women need some kind of encouragement and empowerment to participate in the peace process for it to be successful enough.

Chris Kiwawulo, Journalist with the New Vision Newspaper

When I visited camps for the Displaced Persons in Gulu and Lira districts women wept and said they are simply tired of war. They said that if anything, they could be involved in the peace process; they actually expressed their wish to talk to Kony and tell him that they are tired of the war.

A woman could come and tell you how she lost a husband, children and even grand children, and if by God's mercy some are still alive, then she is taking care of them which is a very big burden. Children are sleeping in WFP food bags!

People there accuse some government officials of using bad language and branding them all sorts of names like killers, rebel collaborators,

which have only fueled the conflict.

Hon. Betty Ochan, Woman Member of Parliament for Gulu district

Women and children have suffered most in the war in northern Uganda. Many times, women do not decide whether there should be war or not but when it comes to suffering they are the ones to bear the brunt.

Women in the north have contracted diseases; the war has exposed us (women) to so many bad practices like changing sexual partners and so on which would not have been the case under peaceful circumstances.

The situation is such that it is the women who have to look for everything for the family even when the men are there. The war has dragged on for too long because there has been lack of confidence building, mistrust and suspicion.

For example the 1994 peace talks collapsed because of the 7 days ultimatum, there has been lack of humility on the part of government officials and the utterance of giving deadlines has always made things worse. I think that the ICC issue has also complicated matters.

I still have hope in the ongoing peace process despite the negative media reports that the LRA had pulled out of the talks.

There are lots of things to be done for postwar recovery especially for women; there is need for building women socially and economically.

There is need for promotion of productive activities like commercial farming to uplift the status and condition of women in northern Uganda.

Ruth Ojiambo-Ochieng, Director Isis-WICCE

Peace is only sustainable if survivors attain justice. Therefore the process must go beyond political peace building. We should make peace that will transform the affected communities especially women and children terms.

We should decide on the strategy to be used in ending war. Conflict resolution and peace building is a process, therefore, it should involve all levels of society especially women since they are in control of the lives of most of the households especially the

“Not being able to respond to your own biological needs is absolutely disastrous. Those are the kind of things that have to be prioritized...”

children who are lured in rebel activities.

Women play a crucial role in attitude change since they are mothers, sisters and wives of those involved in conflicts. It is important to build their skills in conflict resolution and reconciliation. The use of law and government policies which the affected communities were not part of alone will not succeed if the attitudes of the affected people are not changed.

There is need to ensure that psychosocial interventions are carried out in the conflict area to help the affected persons to come to terms and start a new life.

To end conflict, we must discuss it in relation to the global social, economic and political dynamics since we do not any more live in isolation.

Beyond silencing guns, the process of social reconstruction and peace building must consider economic, social and political transformation processes that have occurred during the conflict, it must consider and address the root causes of conflict which include democratization, rule of law, good governance and address the specific needs of women and men.

One woman says:

I prefer death by HIV than hunger: “I get shs. 1,000, which I use for three months to buy soap and salt. With this I cannot afford school fees and scholastic material for the children... hunger can kill me in a short time but with HIV/AIDS, I can live for a year and care for my children” of course by, thus engaging in sex for money.

A woman in Soroti district stressed the role of women in pacifying the region: “In Teso, women leaders mobilized each other and challenged the district leadership to take action.

As a result women started mobilizing boys and girls to join the arrow boys (militia

group) to fight the LRA and Karamojong warriors. Women decided they were not going to be raped and displaced again and demanded for protection”.

A study by Isis-WICCE notes:

“Men and young boys have resorted to alcoholism as well as drug abuse; as a result they end up abusing women. There is a very big social problem to address even when the war ends. Even the systems that are supposed to ensure that women's rights are upheld are the very ones who promote the abuse!.....”

Another woman says,

“We want to be given chance to speak to Joseph Kony and tell him that we are tired of war, being in the camps and not in our homes. We want to go home and start a new life in a peaceful environment that can enable us look after our children. Regardless of what happens, we want peace to return to our homes.

One of the reasons for continued violence against women in northern Uganda is corruption. “The LCs and

Police are too corrupt many perpetrators pay their way out”.

Betty Acantino, Chairperson Gulu Women For Peace and Reconciliation

Government should be in a compromising mood for the sake of peace. Government should accept the fact that people have suffered enough so it should be ready even if it means over comprising. Government should look at rebels as sensible people and reasoning capacity. If you look at rebels as animals, then you wont have trust in the talks and chances to flop are very high.

Government should stop demonizing the rebels despite the fact that they the rebels have dehumanized communities.

Women at the grassroots' level see the process as long over due. Women are very receptive of the peace talks because it is the starting point for us to return home.

We believe that the continued encampment in one way or another continues poverty. Therefore when the peace talks become successful, we will be able to go back home and earn a living rather than begging a thing we have done for the past 20 years”.

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Involve women - Karooro

Hon Mary Karooro-Okurut, Publicity Secretary/spokesperson, NRM party; Chairperson, Parliamentary Committee on Presidential Affairs and Woman Member of Parliament for Bushenyi district.



Mary Karooro Okurut

Women have a very important role to play in conflict management. They are natural peacemakers. Even in the family when there is a situation of conflict, it is the women who make peace. Because of their suffering in war; they have a very big role to play.

Why the government peace team has no woman on it. Yes, we have always questioned that but then you also remember that there was a time when they said that Kony at one time refused the peace moves because a woman was heading the team!

I don't know but you also

have to study the situation because there are some societies that may not like a woman heading a peace team. Am not saying that is the case in Acholi but there are some societies... so we would have to find out. But unless there is a cultural element, women should have been involved on the negotiation

Caught between LRA rebels and their UPDF persuers

From Page 3

SCHOOL became very expensive for us, so my brothers dropped out and resorted to subsistence farming to keep the food supply, part of which was sold to buy the basic necessities.

I would occasionally go to school and attend lessons, though it was very risky because the rebels would attack anytime and once they did, children were abducted and teachers killed. In some places, teachers were chopped and boiled in front of the pupils and the pupils made to eat them.

I managed to make it through primary education and went on to secondary school, but because my brothers could not afford to pay my school fees then, I was registered with a local charity under the Comboni Missionaries who paid my secondary education. A nun who knew my father then helped us get the sponsorship but this was short lived because when she got transferred, that was the end of it after only one year at Gulu High School.

I had to look for long lost relatives to help me through school. God willing, one of my paternal uncles took me up and started paying my school fees from senior two. I studied only for a term. In the second term, my uncle's wife refused to release my school fees saying I didn't not deserve all the treats my uncle was giving me. She claimed her husband was not a bank to just give out money like that to strangers. He listened to her and stopped paying so I stayed out of



A wounded boy sits in his hospital bed in Lira town after surviving an attack by rebels of the Lords's Resistance Army (LRA).

school a whole year.

My brothers worked hard and managed to raise me some money that enabled me to travel to Kampala. I couldn't give up on my uncle because he was the only source and I was determined to go to school and make it in life, I aspired to become a journalist, now am a development worker. When I got to my uncle's place in Kampala, it was bad news.

My uncle was not home so his wife threw me out of the house. I sat outside the gate and waited till about 10pm when he eventually came and invited me in, that night they had a fight with the wife over my being there.

My uncle later enrolled me in Kololo Senior Secondary School and I passed an interview to go to senior three. Every morning I would wake up at 4am and before I went

to school, I had to wash plates, clean the house, prepare tea for everybody, fetch six jerry cans of water and then go to school without having anything to eat. I had to walk from Luzira to Kololo, 14 kilometres every day! When I got back home in the evening, I had to start all over again. The house would be so dirty, no water, the plates all dirtied etc. sometimes I was denied food in

the house.

I had a very good friend from school, she introduced me to her family, so whenever it was time to go home, I would pass by her home in Kyambogo, have my supper, then go to sleep in Luzira.

So, my routine became sleeping in Luzira, studying in Kololo and eating in Kyambogo, till I completed my O'level. There after I had to go back to the camp life all over again.

In as much as life was so hard in Kampala, it was worse in the camp. I had gotten so used to the 'normal' life in Kampala where at least water was collected from an organised source (tap), there was food at least, a proper roof over your head, etc.

In the camp, water had to be collected from miles away from a very dirty source and the queues would be very long, there were no latrines, people used the nearby bushes, there was no food, the monthly rations, by World Food Programme was not enough and sometimes it would take three to four months before it came, people were over crowded, we shared a small hut of about the 5-6 ft with my brothers. This hut served as our bedroom, sitting and kitchen and literary there was no breathing space.

There were all kinds of sicknesses, the girls had to deal with all kinds of sexual advances and harassments from both the civilian men and soldiers.

The soldiers were worse because they used force. Once a girl/woman refused, she would be way laid and gang raped. Children were no longer going to school, because abductions had

intensified, parents were dying like flies leaving orphans to cater for themselves, some as young as five years of age having to head a household because the parents were dead.

When time for school came again, I had to leave the camp and go back to Kampala and continue, I had passed to go to A' Level and my uncle was pleased so he continued to pay for me. I went to St. Lawrence Citizen's high school where I completed from and continued on to Makerere University.

Unfortunately again, one of my brothers was killed in a motor accident on the same day I started my UACE exams so I had to go and bury him in Gulu and came back and finished my exams. It was a very trying moment but I made it to the university. Now am a graduate with a bachelor's degree in Development studies.

About the peace talks: as a young woman who is as old as the war in the Acholi sub region itself, my only request is that this time both parties concerned should take it seriously. The young women and children have suffered greatly for the past two decades, a whole generation lost, a lot of blood shed and many of us have been cheated of a very precious gift- parental love. It is very challenging for a child who has never known love to live in love. Unfortunately there is a way society stigmatises and judges you. You try as much as possible to live like a 'normal child' but occasionally your mind slips back to the past and you become so discouraged knowing that no one cares.

Uganda keeps fingers crossed over peace



SITUATION INHUMAN: Birungi

From Page 2

There are many and it is expected that stakeholders will have to liaise and draw out a coordinated strategy. Twenty years of destruction needs twenty or more years of reconstruction in all fields.

However, the women in the camps identified Reproductive Health, public health, HIV/AIDS related,

in addition to being provided with tangibles such as beddings, mattresses, scholastic materials, iron sheets, clothes, utensils among others, as well as a start up fund to help resettle them. Many will need support in erecting their shelters. Education on rights and obligations is another area, to address the now corrupted cultural norms and practices.

Foodstuffs will also have to be distributed for a long time before the people could harvest their own.

Ms. Joan Pacot, Lira District Resident Commissioner, also former District Education Commissioner says: "The girl child was highly affected by the war. Most of them had to go to the streets, many became prostitutes to survive. Others

are now child mothers. The number of girls enrolled in Universal Primary School (UPE) in 1997 for instance was 23,000 but significantly dropped by the end of 2003 to 6000 girls!

Children are suffering because the learning areas are not suitable for them. The learning materials and the structures were burned down. The environment is not conducive for them to

learn effectively.

We are really in a situation where we need people's blessings and help as much as possible. We should pray that the peace talks yield something good so people can resettle and plan accordingly. Right now people cannot even plan on other things when they still feel insecure". I wonder what song it will be when I return to Gulu next time!



UNDP representative , UNIFEM chief and others address a press conference after a visit to Gulu recently.

Pathetic situation for people in Northern Uganda

From Page 5

Marcelord Ochola, Retired Reverend Kitgum Diocese

The international community should be more involved in the talks. The government of southern Sudan, as a mediator, should be as independent and as free of harassment from both sides in order to bring the war to an end.

Okello Geoffrey Programme Officer for Gulu district NGO Forum

I support the talks because it is the only option that is left in this war, twenty years is too long. Peace talks is the only way to go. And ever since the war started civil society organizations have been advocating for talks.

John Opio a reporter with Choice FM

People are yearning for total peace. Government should allow women to take part effectively in the talks because women affairs should be handled equally with the rest of the country.

Bruno Otto, Programme Officer, (UNDP)

Leaders should speak one language of peace, unity, reconciliation and reconstruction of our country so that people can resettle.

Margaret Sentamu Masagazi, Director, Uganda Media Women's Association

The media is part of the problem and at the same time a solution to the conflict in the North. If we are all interested in bringing about peace, then the media should avoid using words or a language, which fuels the conflict further, or stigmatize any body. We should become sensitive, not judgmental and use a reconciliatory language that cries out for peace.

The argument that for us in Central Uganda suffered in the 1980s, and today it is the people in Northern Uganda to suffer should stop.



Nyaradzai

Suicide in the camps

Internally displaced people now end their lives to stop the suffering!

Bya Janneth Achieng

A few months ago I called a friend in Gulu, who told me how people were committing suicide in most IDP camps! Why?, I asked. She simply told me, hopelessness. This is the major reason that prompted my visit to Awere camp last week.

I arrived in Awere about 4 PM, a journey that took me two hours from Gulu town. On my arrival, I found five fresh graves clearly visible as you enter the main camp; these people had just been buried! When I asked the camp leader, he told me all had committed suicide.

As I took a walk around the camp, there were several other graves all victims of suicide. It is appalling what is happening in some of the camps at the moment. The war aside, there is a new virus that has struck the camps; people are dying as a result of hopelessness.

They have resigned and given up on life. To them death has become a necessary evil. Children are left to head households. When you see these kids, your heart bleeds because you just feel so helpless.

Mr. Okumu lost his family three months ago through suicide. "I had gone to have a drink (one of the best ways people try to deal with helplessness, because it's the only activity that temporarily boosts their morale)," he says. "When I he came home about 9 PM, I found my wife and four

children were in a critical condition. They were vomiting, bleeding and passing watery stool. Nothing much could be done, the nearest health centre is 20 kms away and given that time of the night, no one is allowed to leave the camp. In any case there was no transport to take them to the health centre. They all died an hour later!" Mr. Okumu tearfully remembers

Okumu says he is HIV+ and all their children had the virus as well. He says his wife had started withdrawing and was always talking about seeing no point of living. She poisoned her family!

Another woman I talked to also told me how she lost her son as a result of suicide. Her son had dropped out of school in P.7 due to lack of school fees.

"He then became very frustrated with life in the camps and started drinking. Whenever I ever attempted to talk to him, he would become so violent. He always told me how life was worthless. He had lost his father during the war, his four brothers and sisters were abducted and later we learn't that all had been killed. One morning I found him dead. He drank poison!", she narrates.

Another family set themselves on fire, apparently because every member of the household was HIV positive. They had no food, no land, no nothing. They felt they couldn't take it any more so the best was to take their own lives!

There are so many such



Benard Odongo with a deep cut on the head. LRA rebels hacked him with a panga .

deaths going on in the camps, nobody seems to realize them so they go unreported. Children are being left without parents, others are dying unjustly because of their parents' helplessness and hopelessness. Some are left with grand parents who cannot support them at all, so they have to fight and fend for themselves.

Just two days ago I was in Koro-Abili camp (my home). I met my aunt whom I hadn't seen for nearly two years since she transferred to another IDP camp. She had traveled 40kms to get food rations from where she had registered! She walked with one of her grand daughters-a 10 year old, and they had to go back the following day. She

lost her daughter in January 2006 and has been left with seven grand children to cater for.

My aunt herself has high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis. But she cannot sit and watch her grand children starve to death. She was lucky I had some little money.

Imagine how many such people go round without a penny. In most cases few people have the courage to continue suffering like this, so to them, the best way is to take one's own life.

There are so many non-governmental organizations operating in Northern Uganda, all doing a wonderful job. However there is an aspect that seems to beat us all.

In as much as a lot is

being done to ensure that lives in the camps improve, a lot still remains untouched. Most of the NGOs focus on advocacy, health communication, psychosocial support for the formerly abducted children, provision of food and others. Nothing seems to be done to directly deal with the inner person of some of these people.

There is need for direct intervention in dealing with the health conditions of these people. Because when critically examined, most of them are committing suicide because they feel they cannot go on living in pain and suffering all the time.

The peace process is on going, but even if the war ends tomorrow, there remains a lot to be done. A whole generation is fading away before our very own eyes.

Our parents, brothers and sisters, our children are all going down the drain. The biggest challenge now is HIV/AIDS. The rates are so high in the camps and most of our children are being born HIV+ despite the efforts being made to educate the parents.

The media seems to have let us down, because some of these things go unreported. Human rights groups have to take their responsibility and address these issues because there is gross abuse of human rights in this part of the country.

The biggest responsibility lies with us all. We all have to work together to bring this inhuman suffering to an end.

Richard
Tind

The Other Voice

For a fair and just society

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23 years in slavery

Nalubega narrates a long ago transaction that exiled her son in the Middle East

Have you every imagined how the mother of Joseph in the Bible felt when his son was sold into Egypt by his own brothers? Nalubega, a resident in Rakai district narrates how her son was sold into slavery. Christine Nabunnya analyses how this type of human rights violation is on the increase.

I was married to a one late Sengendo who used to work with the Coffee Marketing Board. In 1983 we had a child who we named Herman Mako Sebajju Kaggwa. Unfortunately in 1988 my husband passed away. My son was only 5 years old. In the bid to help, the relatives of my late husband took him on as I was constrained financially. In 1989, I was approached by my stepson, who told me he had secured Kaggwa a scholarship to study abroad.

For some time I demanded to know how my son was fairing but every time such a topic came up the stepson would either give a lame excuse or would immediately change the topic.

In 2003, when I seriously fell sick, I demanded for my son, but as usual he changed the topic. This is when I smelt a rat. "Was my son taken through dubious means? I have since sought help from whoever but in vain. I started with my area Member of Parliament Hon Pius Mujuzi who summoned my stepson. Whereas he agreed to see the Honourable Member of Parliament, he never turned up.

In pursuit of my son's case, I discovered that my in-laws were trying to stab



Former Kampala City Council Speaker Hajati Sarah Kanyike Ssebagala gives out biscuits to homeless children at Naggulu Reception Center. Parents should beware of the rampant child sacrifice and human traffick-

me by using my son to secure my late husband's gratuity since he was the rightful beneficiary. I was always told how my son called to speak to them (in-laws) but he had never called me. All I got from them were snaps of my 'son' in Dubai, which I can't ascertain if they were the ones of my son, Kaggwa. I last saw him at the age of 7 years!

It is 23 years now and the mental picture I have of my son is different from the one my stepson presents to me in photos. The 'son' I see in the pictures is donned like an Arab and I am told he only speaks Arabic.

This has made me even more worried because I am

sure my son will never know me as his mother and even if I had a chance to explain to him I would be limited by the language barrier.

Recently I asked a friend who was travelling to Dubai to help me trace him using the family photos and those that I had of him. To my dismay my friend told me that the good news was that he had seen my 'son' and the bad news was that he was afraid it would be difficult for my 'son' to come back to Uganda!

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, human trafficking has reached epidemic proportions across the world in the past decade. It is fuelled by economic dispar-

ity, high unemployment and the disruption of traditional livelihoods; traffickers face few risks and can earn huge profits.

While no official statistics on the crime, exist; experts say thousands of people have been smuggled out of Uganda. Women and children are particularly prone to the abuse. They often end up as domestic labourers or prostitutes. The common destination for the victims include countries like Italy, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, India the Netherlands and Lebanon, among others.

It is alleged that the main sources are Asia and Africa. Studies show that some victims to trafficking are women who sign contracts

to work as dancers in adult clubs or "artistes", only to find themselves coerced into working as prostitutes.

Apart from physical, sexual and psychological abuse, most of the victims have to endure long working days, seven days a week. Most times, their wages are withheld.

Many traffic victims find themselves in situations where they are at risk and their human rights are seriously compromised.

Hon Sarah Namusoke Kiyingi, former Woman MP Rakai district, who tried to help Nalubega trace and get her son back says, trafficking is a criminal case in Uganda. We need anti trafficking organisations in the country to help us curb this

monster.

But parents should be very careful in this era where people are so eager to go abroad and make money. People should be aware of unscrupulous people who form employment agencies to persuade young girls and traffic them into brothels.

Many young girls marry 'wazungus' who they know nothing about and are taken to Belgium, France or the Netherlands but end up becoming prostitutes whose wages they often don't get! Unfortunately the parents may not know. They think their children were taken to enjoy the luxurious life abroad.

She warns:

Be careful, when someone comes and tell you they are going to sponsor your child, take time to study the 'offer' but don't hurry to hand in your child. There are no free things in this world.

Research has indicated that trafficking of children often has the tacit collaboration of the victims' own families where it is seen not so much a criminal activity but as a way for a poor family to boost its income.

Trafficking is a complex issue with many causes. It can start as slavery where children and women are sold, but it also starts as a migration process where children want to move.

It is now more important for parents to plan for small families they can support socially, economically and morally given the current trends in Uganda.

Parents must keep their ears and eyes to the ground so that they don't fall victims of the game.

And government should get more and stop this "modern day slave trade and slavery".