



WHO IS A CHILD SOLDIER?

2. A CHILD SOLDIER'S WORLD

*They abducted me when I was in the garden, weeding...
I was on my way to school...
We were sleeping in a house with friends...
I had just finished getting water...
I had my schoolbooks with me...*

Children who were abducted by the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda like to begin their stories with descriptions of their activities just before they were captured. They talk about daily chores and routines as if to emphasize how normal their lives had been. Maybe it is also a way of making connections to their former life – a very hard return journey.

Punishment or death for trying to escape, drug dependencies and the complete submersion inside the combatant's world are just some of the forces and fears they must overcome before making that decision to leave.

If and when they escape – what then? How will their communities react to their return? Will their families accept them back? Will they always have to remain in hiding?

Approximately 12,000 children and youth have been abducted by the LRA. Once captured, these young people experience and participate in many violent acts. And the sad truth is that this situation, however terrible, is not unique. Several hundred thousand young people are serving with rebel armies, paramilitary groups and government troops throughout the world. They have been abducted, forcibly recruited or volunteered inside worlds with few other alternatives. These boys and girls survive as best they can. Many wait for that one chance to escape, to be able to turn back the clock and reconcile with their families and communities.

To be honest, this is more a dream than a real possibility. The odds are heavily stacked against them. Punishment or death for trying to escape, drug dependencies and the complete submersion inside the combatant's world are just some of the forces and fears they must overcome before making that decision to leave. If and when they escape – what then? How will their communities react to their return? Will their families accept them back? Will they always have to remain in hiding?

Confronted by these issues, it might seem that a child soldier's life is a dead-end street. This does not have to be the case. Yes, the difficulties are immense. But many have had the courage to recover themselves and the lives they once had. This is painful, lonely work.

As child rights workers, we need to find ways to support this process to reduce the burden of re-entry that falls so heavily on their shoulders. To do this effectively we need to understand exactly what it means to be a child soldier. In the following pages, this portrait is provided by young people who were captured and have served with the Lords Resistance Army. We are grateful for their honesty.



THE LRA



CAP/World Vision Play : Home Life

LIFE IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Northern Uganda has always been one of the poorest areas of the country. But decades of civil war have turned a hard life into a harsh one. Many families have resigned themselves to living inside displaced people's camps, places of wretched existence whose only redeeming feature is safety against the LRA raids. This war has worn away at the population, creating feelings of bitterness against the government, tensions inside families and suspicion amongst former friends.

Children growing up in Northern Uganda are well aware of the rebels. They are constantly being warned by parents to be alert and cautious in all their activities. This is a complicated world, one filled with anxiety but where people continue to function inside the routines of rural Ugandan life.

Children are expected to honour their elders and ancestors, to respect their parents, family and neighbours. Education is prized and young people show a strong sense of belonging to their schools. Their days are structured around a regular pattern of chores, obligations, friends, work and school. Young people's skills and ways of interacting with others are a product of this upbringing.

IN THE BUSH WITH THE REBELS

The LRA operates under a completely different set of norms. The Lords Resistance Army is dedicated to the destruction, not the protection of life. An initiation into this world goes through several steps.

Step #1: All ties to their community are severed.

At the point of abduction, children recognize that their lives are in the hands of the rebels:

"The rebels came to the door and ordered me to come out. I said, "No, I won't." They said they would shoot me if I didn't. So I went with them.

They made me lead the way. After a while, they asked, "Would you like to go back home?" I said, "Yes, yes I would." They said, "Okay, then you can go." So I started to walk away, just slowly like that.

But then they yelled at me and pointed their guns at me. They said, "We've changed our minds, you have to come back." They beat me with sticks for not wanting to be a soldier. Then one of them put his gun barrel on my stomach. He ordered me to pull the trigger. I was the most scared. But the commander said, "No stop, stop, we will keep him, he will become our soldier."

Typically the LRA forces new recruits to participate in raids near their home village. These attacks serve two objectives: 1) the capture of more children and 2) confirmation that these children belong to the rebels. The LRA makes it simple: Kill, loot and capture or be killed yourself. New recruits often receive their first initiation into violence by killing those who refuse to participate.



Drawing: The Day I was abducted



CAP/World Vision Play : Life of a Child Soldier

Former child soldiers don't like to talk about the battles. But most clearly remember those first raids. They express strong feelings of remorse and shame about these times. To choose to kill others to save your own life is an understandable but terrible choice. They know that their family will hear of their actions. They know other community members will hate them for what they have done.

Many describe a door shutting down, sealing them off from their former life:

"We were always being told that if we escaped we would be killed. They said that they would follow us in our home and kill all our people. So eventually I decided to stay in the bush. So I was very sad and yet there was no way out."

Step #2: They are indoctrinated into the ways of a LRA soldier.

By the time children arrive at the headquarters, they have begun to resign themselves to being with the LRA. Of course, few young people have the skills, stamina or mindset to fill this role. In the next few months, this trial by fire takes place:

"The training begins at 7:30 in the morning and then up to 2:00 pm. each day. They trained us how to assemble the guns, how to use the guns, how to plan ambushes, how to catch civilians, and how to shoot at targets."

A major part of this training is to test recruits' capacity for self preservation. Children are not fed during the training – they must find food and water on their own, after the day's sessions. The mountains in southern Sudan, where the training normally takes place, are very cold at night. No blankets are available. Many die from exposure or hunger. Those who make it through often grow long hair on their bodies – an instinctive survival mechanism. These physical demands continue once recruits are pushed into raids and military operations:

"We walked and walked and walked and walked. I was really scared. Because my leg started to swell. I knew that if they saw it I would be killed. Because that is what they did to children whose legs swelled. Because they couldn't march so well."

We walked for a little time. Then a soldier looked at me and saw my leg. He said to me, "You need a rest, you look so tired. Don't you want a rest?" I got even more scared because I knew this meant that they were going to kill me, because when they asked you to rest, that's when they kill you. I said, "No, no, I am happy to walk. I want to go further." So he let me go on."

The LRA makes no allowance for weakness. If you don't keep up, you are eliminated. Many former child soldiers still have bullets in their bodies.

LRA officers don't necessarily subject themselves to this tough code. Most have several "wives" to cater to their every demand. Boys describe long treks in the southern Sudan heat to collect bath water for their commanders. Many remember drinking their own urine because they were so badly dehydrated.

LRA soldiers kill people – that is what they are trained for and expected to do. Even inside this command, there are some horribly bizarre twists. Periodically Kony, the LRA leader, requires that his troops perform atrocities. Rural people with a radio or those riding a bicycle are frequent victims of these orgies of violence.

Killing with machetes or knives is common, making it more gruesome and direct. As time goes on, child soldiers learn to function in a semi-detached, almost businesslike way:

"You're supposed to go and fight. There's no refusing; if you refuse they're going to punish you severely. Sometimes they will put you under the ground in a prison if you refuse to fight."

Those who demonstrate the slightest acts of disobedience are severely punished. Both boys and girls report how they were whipped for taking too long with an errand. The LRA will often require friends to carry out these punishments on each other.



CAP/World Vision Play: *Life with the Rebels*



DOORS OF MY LIFE:

“The first door, with the heart, shows my feelings when I was in the bush with the rebels. I felt that I could not stay alive. There were so many hard things like walking long distances with heavy loads, suffering from hunger and also I got injured. The second door shows brighter colours - this is when I escaped and was at the rehabilitation centre. I was so happy because they were giving me food and clothing also some counselling to help me forget. The last door is quite a bright colour, even brighter than before. This is because now things are starting to be better for me. I am doing some skill training and hope to be able to support myself soon.”



DOORS OF MY LIFE:

“Here you see the doors of my life. The first one is red with black. I was abducted on 4th June, 1996. I suffered so much. We walked all the time bearing loads, carrying a lot of luggage for the rebels. I was OK before I was abducted. The second door is for when I came back. I was so grateful to people then, grateful that they helped me. And now, I feel very lucky. Although I still sometimes feel an unhappiness, I’m lucky because I just got a tool which I can use for cutting. Perhaps I will get some work with it. If I am lucky.”



Child's Drawing: Life with the Rebels

LRA child soldiers think in terms of survival inside a hostile, unforgiving world.



Child's Drawing: Life with the Rebels

Step #3: Living the Life of a LRA Soldier

LRA child soldiers think in terms of survival inside a hostile, unforgiving world. They are very tough physically and can endure long marches through jungles with little sustenance. In combat, they are aggressive and unfeeling of others' pain. They understand that to keep their lives they must sacrifice the lives of others. They can't afford to have or show weaknesses. Instead of respect, they give obedience.

Their world is understood in terms of opportunities, power and enemies. Others are evaluated in terms of the control they possess. While child soldiers may have friends, they are conditioned to be as self-reliant as possible. It is a world of calculation, of alliances formed and broken. A child soldier does not think - he acts:

"I trained myself not to think, that made it easier. If I started to think, I became sad and that could get me in trouble. It might be possible to escape but there's one thing very funny. Sometimes when you are in Kony's place, you don't really feel as if you belong anywhere else."

While most children only pray for the day when they can escape, for some this world completely inhabits their being. They become indoctrinated into its ways and the power of a gun. They grow to relish the fact that civilians fear them and cower at their every command. They see the world in terms of weak and strong and will brutally take what they want with little or no consideration for others. They learn to give and take orders, to live by a perverse warrior code. In the play created by the CAP youth group, one actor is reluctant to hand over his gun, protesting, "I promised myself that I would kill 20."

This is the rare situation. Most children are only hoping that somehow they will escape or be rescued by the Ugandan troops:

"Even now I sometimes can't believe that I was able to get out. I was so happy that I was able to escape because I saw so many other children being killed when they tried to escape. So when I realized that I had really done it, that I had got away from them, I was so happy, so happy."



Former Child soldier, Uganda

RETURNING HOME

Reading these stories it is hard to see how the divide between a child soldier's life and his former world can be crossed. These lives have little, if anything, in common. What communication is possible between people with such different experiences and knowledge of the world? What vocabulary does a child soldier use to make others understand this other way of being?

When children describe their arrival home, they focus on that moment when they were reunited with their family. This is filled with emotion for everyone. It is a time when all is possible – compared to escape from the LRA, resettlement into community life seems easy.

But problems frequently do emerge. Both sides have changed and been marked by the war. A child soldier has two pasts, two identities. His friends and families know only one and would prefer to forget the other. But his skills and ways of operating are instinctively from that other world. In fact, to have survived he has probably adapted himself to the point that he possesses few, if any, habits from his first life.

Counsellors note that these children have transition problems. They instinctively march in single file. They are reluctant to talk openly and can be quite aggressive and distrustful of others. The older ones have a tendency to bark orders at younger boys and can be overly indignant with small misunderstandings. Counsellors explain it this way:

“It is complicated. We don't know if the thinking or somehow the heart of a child soldier changes, so that his whole way of seeing the world is altered. Some people say, “What has happened to this boy? Did they inject him with the urine of a lion?”

A child also looks at his home with surprise as the reality is inevitably different than his memory. War has taken its toll here. Parents may have been killed or died. Many families have moved from their villages to the drab, crowded life of the protected camps. If a family's loyalty is firm, a child's community may have other feelings. Long hours of boredom in the protected camps are fertile ground for hostility against those who have participated in the fighting, however unwillingly.

Former child soldiers express their feelings carefully. But inside their statements there is a strong current of disappointment:

“When I returned home I was hoping so much to see my parents. And when I arrived home I found that my Daddy had died while I was in the bush. And my home, where my home was, is all bushy because they moved into the camp. So life is not so easy.”

“I don't feel as happy as I thought I would. They call me a wild man behind my back. People don't want to be with me, they don't trust me.”

Both sides have forgiveness to give and receive. No child chooses to destroy himself and others. This is a choice foisted upon him, whether he is abducted or volunteers.

With each new child recruit, the local, national and international community chalks up another failure in its contract to protect and nurture the world's young people.

Two painful solitudes. But for child soldiers, there is bitterness as they feel that the responsibility for reconciliation lies on their shoulders. They sense that they are constantly being watched and will be criticized for the slightest misdemeanour. They feel vulnerable to others' views of who and what they are because they were with the rebels:

"I know I should never show anger, that I always need to be calm. But sometimes I don't feel this way. I feel sad and also angry that I am being treated this way."

"When I'm provoked or let's say I'm nervous I know it is important for me to just sit quietly and not show any anger. Because if you do people start to worry about you."

These young people are going through a huge process of transition. Most describe a zigzag of feelings where they are not sure from one day to the next where they truly belong:

"I was in the bush for one year. When I came out I wasn't feeling so well. I was happy to be away from the rebels but my head was confused."

"Even after I escaped I still had fear. I didn't want to sit with other people. I kept remembering times in the bush. I would worry about my friends who were still there."

Both sides have forgiveness to give and receive. No child chooses to destroy himself and others. This is a choice foisted upon him, whether he is abducted or volunteers. With each new child recruit, the local, national and international community chalks up another failure in its contract to protect and nurture the world's young people. This must be acknowledged as part of any reconciliation process – the burden of guilt must be shared.

The form this reconciliation takes, will, of course, depend on a culture's notions of justice, the weighing of wrongs and the re-establishment of harmony between an individual and his or her world. Traditional African forms of conflict resolution, where both sides tell their stories and an agreement based on a joint sense of responsibility is a good place to start.

In a CAP workshop with former child soldiers we had lengthy discussions about their resettlement. Some had just returned from the bush; others had left years or months before. They laughed and joked with each other as they compared experiences, teasing each other for being "wild men". All talked of being outsiders, that they continued to feel a level of separation from others. Sometimes this was self-imposed; other times it was wished upon them.

At one point a 15-year-old boy described his goal: "I would like to be OK, to be like any other person." There was an awkward silence. Perhaps because many felt this was an impossible dream. Or maybe it was also their wish.

IN CAMBODIA WE HAVE A LIST OF RULES FOR GIRLS WHICH WE LEARN FROM THE TIME WE ARE YOUNG:

*“Speak properly and be polite
Know how to respect all people
Greet old people and invite them to come to your home
Get up early in the morning
Have the house clean and breakfast ready by the time the sun rises
Work hard, don’t waste time
Be thankful to parents and follow their suggestions
Show gratitude by marrying a good man
Don’t disobey your parents.”*

“The dignity of the family is more with the girl. If she marries well and doesn’t disobey her parents they will be proud of her. For a boy it is different. A boy can go to the pagoda to be a monk for a year. He can study there. To be at the pagoda is like saving the family. If a boy becomes a monk he is the diamond of the family.

In Cambodia we have a saying that the girl is white cloth and the boy is gold. If white cloth becomes dirty it cannot be changed. So if a girl falls in the mud – loses her virginity or becomes pregnant – she will never be the same. The dirt goes into the white cloth and can never be removed. For boys it is different. They are of the gold cloth so the mud can always be washed off, it doesn’t stay on them.”



Cambodian girls in CAMP/CYP workshop