

## Tuesday July 3rd

We went to breakfast a little later this morning so we wouldn't wake up the serving staff. After a leisurely meal that mirrored yesterday's, we relaxed and did laundry while Dave added photos to the summary I wrote early this morning.

After meeting up with Oketta and fellow-priest Nicholas Odong Piny (Pee-ne), we sat drinking sodas while discussing a draft of the Accountability and Reconciliation agreement signed in Juba while we were there last Friday. The principles are broad and lofty but everyone agrees the devil will be in the details, especially because the agreement threatens to swamp Uganda's legal system and strain the Treasury beyond the breaking point, without outside assistance. Still, it's a good start.



William Oketta, our friend, interpreter and guide

All six of us piled into the Padjero and set off for Palebek Ogili (PAL-ee-beck Oh-GEE-lee) west of Kitgum. En route, we saw several women carrying heavy loads on their heads. Nicholas told us that, in the old days, he used to carry 100-pound sacks of cotton on his head for five hours, just to reach the market, a journey that took three hours. When the men had to reach distant markets, they'd walk up to five days with the crushing loads, for very little money.

When we got to the village, we started with a walk-around so Andrew could get some video: oxen that have been reintroduced to the area by Oxfam, gardens under construction and the construction of new huts.



To make the traditional *ot*, or hut, they mark out the radius using a centre pole and, at the end of a rope, another stick that acts as a compass. After drawing the circumference, the rope is shortened and another circle is laid out in precisely the width of the mud bricks which are four inches high, five inches across and six inches long. The end

result is a perfectly-shaped, uniform circle.



Once the brick walls are laid, long, bamboo poles for roof support are nailed to the top of the pole in the centre of the hut and fastened at the bottom to a wooden frame that runs the circumference of the structure so thick thatching can be laid upon them. The design is simple and efficient, making the Acholi huts cool and durable for up to 20 years — the length of the war.

During the height of hostilities, villagers couldn't keep animals or grow crops, except for a cramped space a mile around the camp, because the rebels would plunder anything they wanted and kill anyone who got in their way. Though lots of building took place in cities like Gulu, there was little construction

in rural areas where life was too uncertain.

Right now there are 12,000 people in this three-year-old “decongestion camp” which is designed to get villagers out of the mammoth, dehumanising settlement of 30,000 where they first lived after being forced off their farms, either by the rebels or the Ugandan army. Those 30,000 were squeezed into just one square mile where the spirit and culture of the Acholi were slowly suffocated.

Even the smaller camp is too cramped for comfort, so the government is establishing five smaller centres within nine miles. Some families are skipping that intermediate stage in the return home and moving back to their land immediately, a sure sign of the new confidence in the north.



When it was time for the interviews, 46 former child soldiers were ready to relate their experiences. We had them choose some representatives from among themselves, and the first up was Michael Ogenwod (Oh-GEN-wad) who was kidnapped at 12 and spent ten years in the bush, many of them as the personal



escort of L.R.A. second-in-command, Vincent Oti. Since Michael had been a second lieutenant, we had high hopes he would offer some unique insight.

But after a long, trivia-laden testimony that amounted to little more than a chronology, he told us he'd never harmed a civilian during the entire decade he was with the rebels, a claim no one familiar with the workings of the L.R.A. could believe. Even when I asked his feelings about Oti — one of the most arrogant, ruthless and dictatorial terrorists in the world — Michael described his former mentor as “a humble, quiet man whose motives are hard to understand.”

Whether out of brainwashing, fear or shame, each of the young returnees chosen to speak refused to admit involvement in atrocities. We ended the session feeling deceived and discouraged, even though we could understand the reluctance.

Determined to do better, we backtracked to Palebek Kal (Pal-ee-beck Call,) the huge camp of 30,000. We arrived to find much of the usual activity suspended because of the funeral of a prominent resident, so we took some pictures of a typical Grade 3 class then moved on to Palebek Gem (pronounced with a G sound, like “get.” not a J sound, like the jewel.)

This place was the middle-sized camp where 17,000 made their home. Here, too, community leaders had arranged for us to hear from former child soldiers and the women abducted as sex slaves. About 30 of them sat waiting patiently, the men on wooden benches and the women and children segregated on blankets to their side.



To abbreviate the process, I asked questions of the group at large, letting anyone

answer at will. This led to much more spontaneity and dialogue as people built on each other's answers. But once again, not a single former soldier would acknowledge the mutilation or murder of an innocent person, despite my repeated efforts to open the door. Everyone said they killed only the Ugandan soldiers who were trying to kill them.

Still, there was a good exchange about the same issues we've been dealing with in other places the past few days. Some said they had forgiven L.R.A. commanders, including Joseph Kony himself, but others passionately rejected such a notion. The two things everyone agreed on was the desperate need for lasting peace, and the tragic, deep-seated effects of war: death and deprivation, lagging development, the decimation of Acholi culture, the decline of morality, and the destruction of potential that, without the war, could've made Uganda the envy of Africa.

To capsule the comments, I did a series of quick interviews as the wind rose dramatically then faded as quickly as it had come. Next, we gathered additional supporting video, including shots of workers grading and drying tobacco, and women pumping water at a nearby well. While I was waiting for Andrew to finish up, I was approached by three young women who wanted to find a "pen friend" in Canada (pen pals.) I took their names and addresses and said I'd see what I could do.

As we left for Kitgum, we were in a steady drizzle that had an almost immediate and negative effect on the condition of the roads, making them muddy and turning the many potholes into puddles. We drove directly to the home of Gladys who had invited us to supper for the second night in a row.

As persistent rain pounded down on the tin roof, we enjoyed a meal that included most Acholi staples, with the addition of regular spuds, which the people here call "Irish potatoes." Dessert was delectable, freshly-picked pineapple. Throughout the meal, we discussed the stories we heard and debated



whether the heart of Joseph Kony was experiencing genuine guilt and transformation. Gladys and Bishop Ochola argued it was but I said I saw no evidence of that in his recent words or actions. Only God knows.

After Bishop Ochola told an African parable about the cost of unforgiveness. we went our separate ways at 9:00, ending the evening with prayer. We drove through the rain to drop off the Bishop and were grateful to be “home” after another tiring but fruitful day.