

26 June, 2007

Friends:

Here's an accounting written by Dave and (mostly) Rick of the day which can be sent widely.

We awoke before 5:30 and were on the road before 6AM. We wanted to beat Kampala traffic and we did. We met Fr Carlos and drove "convoy". Rick traveled with Carlos. The first 150km were potholes so we averaged 45km/hr; then the road improved and we could move quicker. Fr Carlos drives at a "priests" pace, so it took time anyways.

We stopped at Stella Matutina. Unfortunately, none of the Sisters I know were there so we just talked to one of the new ones. Though we didn't spend much time there, it appeared that there were a number of new buildings over what I remember. The Sister welcomed us with sodas.



Crossing the Nile River was interesting. We stopped and took a few photos before crossing the bridge.

Our next stop was Minakulu, at the Parish where Fr Carlos worked for a number of years. He showed us the Dispensary where he had invested heavily in terms of resource development so that they could build a better facility for the needs of the people.

Our first shoot of the trip was at a dispensary in Minakulu where more than a hundred people come daily from as far away as 30 kilometres. The locals took great pride in showing us the facilities, which included an examination room, a dispensary where medications were handed through a window to waiting clients, a vaccination area and a laboratory, which consisted of a single microscope, from what I could see.

In the old days, the L.R.A. used to raid the hospital and steal drugs, leaving local residents with no choice but to resort to traditional medicine, which often did more harm than good. Now though, security has improved dramatically and the dispensary is functioning well once again. It's a tiny but important sign of the improving security situation in the north.

Our next stop was Palengo, an "Internally Displaced Person" camp where 20,000 people were forced to live by the Ugandan government. At one point, the army gave residents a 48-hour ultimatum via radio: leave your land and go to the camp, or else. Though the government claimed it was so the army could better protect the people of the north by having them all in one place, Father Carlos believes the camps were established solely so the army could control the population. Since arriving here, I've heard stories of troops stationed in the IDP camp being unable to defend the people from L.R.A. raids because commanders had sold all their ammunition, leaving the troops helpless.



In the camp, four schools have a total of a thousand children. It seemed like all of them were following us as we went around the village gathering video. Andrew could hardly shoot as the kids crowded him or tried to get in the shot. Dave and I did our best to act as decoys with our smaller cameras, but it was still difficult for Andrew to escape his young entourage. Thankfully, Father Carlos took us to a high point in the camp from which we could look down at thatched huts without the kids getting in the way.

After getting some shots of a woman threshing beans, we moved on. The good news is, Palengo is starting to empty as more and more Acholi go back to their homes. After walking down a path with tall grass on either side, we found one such returnee. Mariano Okot had gone back to rebuild his house and plant his fields, but his wife and two boys were still in Gulu where the children were in school. This split-family scenario is quite common right now. To illustrate this part of the story, we got footage of Mariano cultivating his field.



When we got to Gulu, we found a bustling, crowded town filled with not only residents but aid organizations of every kind. The shops were full and there was a surprising vibrancy, to the point where it was difficult to imagine Gulu had suffered so much at the height of the L.R.A. onslaught.

Thanks to the extensive contacts of Father Carlos, we were able to meet with Moses Rubangangeyo (Rue-ban-GAY-oh), who was abducted by the L.R.A. in 1996 at the age of 16. After being stolen away from his boarding school, he was subjected to physical and psychological abuse by the rebels who introduced him to his new life by having him hack off the leg of a civilian whose only crime was riding a bicycle. The rebels had a standing order that anyone with a bike had to be mutilated because they might take information to the Ugandan army about L.R.A. movements.

For more than an hour, we talked to Moses about his past experiences, his current situation, and his hopes for the future. He told us that although he hadn't been subjected to any overt hostility, he knew that some people called him "killer", "barbarian" or "satanist" behind his back.



Concerned about others who are returning from the bush, Moses has started a support group for former child soldiers. He's also hoping to study Peace and Reconciliation at university, putting his personal experience to good use. "I have been transformed from child soldier to peace builder," he says.

As for the future, Moses has hope mingled with harsh reality. He says distrust between the L.R.A. and the Ugandan government is deeply rooted; that many people on both sides are profiting from the war and don't want peace; that — regardless — much more needs to be done to help reintegrate child soldiers into society; and that, if that doesn't happen, many will return to the bush and become thieves and thugs. Ours was a long but powerful interview.

When we were finished, we got supporting visuals of Moses getting water from the local pump, preparing a fire for the evening meal, talking to his mother, and chatting with his 11-year-old daughter, Nora, who was still in the womb when he was abducted. Tomorrow, Moses goes into the hospital to

have shrapnel removed from his body.

After once again trying to work around a horde of kids, we took Moses further into Gulu where Father Carlos introduced us to a Spanish television crew that was also wanting to interview Moses. We talked about arrangements for tomorrow then left for Lacor (La-CHORE) where we're booked for two days at the St. Mary's Hospital Guest House. En route, we wanted to get some sunset shots but, by the time we found a proper vantage point, the sun had sunk like a stone. Maybe tomorrow.

....the Bending Spears Team, Rick and Dave (Andrew, Tim)

PS On our Media passes we are each given a title: Rick is the Writer; Andrew the Videographer; Dave the Producer and Tim the Grip Assistant!!