

Wednesday June 27th

Breakfast in the Guest House dining room consisted of bananas, toast with red plum jam, and strong Ugandan coffee, then we piled into the Padjero to meet Father Carlos in Gulu at the home of Janette Oyelo.



In 1997, she was kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army at the age of 13. After a month of "training," she was given to a wife to the right hand man of L.R.A. leader Joseph Kony. Sometime later, her husband attempted secret peace negotiations with the government but Kony found out and executed him. Janette was given to another commander, a one-legged man old enough to be her grandfather.

Now 23, Janette says she's sad and angry that some of her best years were stolen from her, a reality that hits her especially hard when she sees former classmates who are educated, happily married and prospering in satisfying jobs. In stark contrast, Janette lives alone in a mud and grass amid the squalor of a Gulu slum, abandoned by the father of her two children, three-year-old Ochora and 14-month-old Geoffrey. Both were born after her release.

That release happened in 2002 when Father Carlos negotiated the return of 35 women and children. Janette was the L.R.A. commander supervising their delivery and, when they were turned over to Father Carlos, she joined them. After receiving medical care and counselling, she went to live in Gulu near her sister. Today, she barely ekes out a living doing some sewing, but she dreams of one day designing her own line of clothing.

As remote a possibility as that may seem, she's already had a taste of it. Earlier this year, Father Carlos wrote a profile of a fashion show by one of Africa's leading designers and contrasted the glitz and glamour with the stark realities faced by Janette who had just finished a course in fashion design. When the designer saw the article, she was so moved she offered Janette a five-week internship in her fashion house. It was the experience of a lifetime, but a far cry from the life of poverty Janette has returned to.



And she's not alone. North of Gulu is Pagak (Pa-GAK), a camp where 15,000 Acholi people went either voluntarily or were forced to move by the Ugandan army, which told them it would be easier to protect them if they were all together in the camp instead of spread throughout the countryside. Though there was some truth in that, Pagak was not spared by the Lord's Resistance Army.

Over the years, many young people were abducted in a series of raids. At first, distraught mothers and fathers would follow the rebels, pleading for the return of their children. But the L.R.A. commanders

routinely murdered the parents, often ordering their own children to kill them. That chilling tactic proved an effective deterrent and later abductions were met with agonizing resignation. Though many mothers and fathers talk of suicide when all their children are stolen away, they somehow find enough solace in God and their community to carry on, hoping against hope their loved ones will escape or be released.



But no one under-estimates the heart-heartedness of Joseph Kony and his vicious commanders. In 2004, the worst raid on Pagak took place after a group of about 30 rebels deserted the L.R.A. and returned to the camp where residents welcomed them joyously with clapping and singing. But the celebration was short lived. When word of the return reached Vincent Oti (Oh-TEE), the second most powerful man in the L.R.A., he led a retaliation raid on Pagak, killing almost 40 people. The attack was so brutal and premeditated that it prompted the International Criminal Court to indict Oti for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

During the raid, Oti found the hut of Camp Leader Dennis Lemoti (Le-MO-tea) and destroyed it with a rocket-propelled grenade. Dennis wasn't inside and, when Oti discovered his target was alive, he used a phone number supplied by a collaborator to reach Dennis and threaten his life. From that time, the camp leader and his family lived in constant fear but refused to run from their responsibilities.

Though things have improved dramatically since the height of the hostilities a few years ago, few people in Pagak have left the relative security of the camp to return home. Despite the peace talks, they don't trust the L.R.A. and remain skeptical that Joseph Kony will honour an agreement, even if one is signed.

As for forgiveness, Dennis says people will offer it only out of fear and hopes of ending the war, not out of a genuine desire to extend grace. He believes true reconciliation will only take place when the rebels return to accept responsibility for their crimes, ask forgiveness and offer compensation. Otherwise, he says, there will be revenge and retaliation, especially against L.R.A. officers. Just last month, one who returned home was attacked in the middle of the night and beaten almost to death.



Regina Akumu understands the seething rage behind that attack. She hasn't seen her son, Oringa, for eleven years. In 1996, the 15 year old was stolen away by the L.R.A. Today, his mother doesn't even know if he's still alive. As a sign of good will during the peace talks, she thinks the rebels should allow each captive to write a letter home, telling their families they've survived and are coming home.



If and when the child soldiers do return, it will be largely because of the tireless work of the Acholi Religious Leaders Program, a coalition of Anglican, Catholic and Muslim clerics who've been the voice of the voiceless, advocating for peace and national reconciliation. We met this morning with Sheik Musa Khalil (Shake Muss-ah Ka-LEEL) who told us Muslims need to be involved in the process, both to counter the negative impression of Islam around the world, and also to help bring together the country's diverse faiths. Though Muslims make up less than ten percent of the population, they're key to the prospects for peace, especially since the Islamic government of Sudan has been offering guns and refuge to the L.R.A.

After interviewing the Sheik and getting pictures of him walking the street and talking to people, we had an Acholi lunch at one of Gulu's many restaurants. We had beef or tender chicken in gravy, rice, melle and local vegetables, washed down by Stoney soda. Each of our meals cost the equivalent of \$2 Canadian.

Once we were fortified by lunch, we set out to find Moses Rubangangoyo (Rew-bang-GAY-oh), the former child soldier we interviewed yesterday. He underwent surgery today to have shrapnel removed from his chest. In a 2003 surprise attack by the Ugandan army, Moses was hit by four pieces of flying metal. One hit him in the right eye, one lodged in his groin, and two tore into his chest.

After the explosion, the young lieutenant quickly realized all his fellow soldiers had been killed or chased away. Believing the army would kill him instantly because he was a rebel commander, he decided to lie still until the soldiers came near, shoot them, then kill himself. But he passed out and, when he came to, the army had evidently thought he was dead because there was no one in sight.



Weak and bleeding, Moses dragged himself through the bush for three days without food or water and eventually found a rebel unit. They nursed him back to health as best they could. But even after his escape from the L.R.A., his wounds were painful, preventing him from breathing all the way out, or from eating more than once a day. The effects of the shrapnel were a nagging, never-ending reminder of wasted years and wanton violence.

During today's surgery, doctors discovered they could remove a small piece of shrapnel, but a larger fragment was inoperable. Moses will bear the scars of the visible wounds for the rest of his life, not to mention the invisible ones on his heart and mind.

Thursday June 28

Once our two vehicles were loaded, we went due north from Lachor, taking the road to Sudan.

Until ten months ago, you could only take the road with a military escort. A convoy left daily at 11:00. If you missed it, the army wouldn't let you travel the road because of the grave danger posed by ambushes and landmines.

As we set out, all you could see was tall grass and an unending expanse of green bushland interrupted by occasional fields of cassava, corn and ground nuts. In the distance, purple hills shrouded in mist were once a rebel stronghold and still could be, for all we knew. We saw two-man military patrols every few kilometres but, on this day, the greatest danger seemed to be the potholes that lay in wait for us, threatening to disable our vehicle. For the first 100 kilometres, the roads were cratered and crumbling, as if they'd been intentionally marred to make them impassable.

We saw several boys on bicycles. At the height of hostilities, the L.R.A. would've stopped them and cut off a leg for fear the cyclist might disclose rebel positions to the army. Villagers who reported the L.R.A. often had holes cut in their top and bottom lips and a lock inserted.

By 10:30, we reached the Sudanese border, two-thirds of the way to Juba. On the Ugandan side of the crossing was a collection of buildings, including offices for Customs and Immigration. There were a few soldiers but not much of a military presence, just some local residents, a few goats scavenging for food and a cow or two. When we filled out a form and showed our passports, they told us we were missing an essential form — one nobody in Kampala told us about — but the administrator gave us permission to cross without it.



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