



PARLIAMENT OF UGANDA

The Plight of Female LRA Returnees in Northern Ugandan

Hon. Margaret Lamwaka, Member of Parliament, Uganda

Background History of the Conflicts in Northern Uganda

- Uganda has had very difficult history since independence, characterised by political instabilities which led to several changes in government through military means.
- The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in Northern Uganda in 1987 was a product of resistance against the current government of President Yoweri Museveni.
- The LRA majorly targeted the citizens it claimed to be fighting for, raiding villages for supplies and forcing children to carry goods into the bush, usually after raping their mothers and killing both parents before those very children and ultimately turning them into rebel wives and child rebels¹.
- This war is described as one of Africa's longest running and brutal conflicts, lasting for nearly 20 years and resulting in a humanitarian crisis. The rebels are accused by the ICC of widespread human rights violations of torture, rape, slavery, mutilation, abduction of civilians, use of child soldiers and massacres. By 2004, the LRA had estimatedly abducted more than 20,000 children².
- In the year 2000, Uganda enacted an amnesty law, giving LRA abductees the chance to return to their communities without prosecution for their crimes. Thousands have since returned home and have been received into re-integration programmes both by the Amnesty Commission and a number of NGOS.
- With the LRA defeated and chased out of Uganda, the war had come to an end in 2006. Since then, the number of NGOs operating in northern Uganda has dropped rapidly.

¹ Invisible children: <https://invisiblchildren.com/challenge/history>

² Conciliation Resources working together for peace: https://www.c.r.org/where_we_work/est_and.../istory_brds_resistance_army_conflict

Receipt and Resettlement upon return from captivity

- Kitgum Concerned Women’s Association (KICWA) was one of the largest reception centres handling women and children in Kitgum district. Upon entry into Uganda, the returnees would be received at the army barracks, then sent to KICWA where they would receive counselling, medical care, nutrition for children, and registration. Initially, they would stay there for one month. It is from there that Amnesty Commission would give them amnesty certificates and resettlement items (blanket, mattress, saucepan and a hoe)
 - At KICWA, the women would receive life skills in groups of thirties. These groups were then each lent one million shillings (around 270 USD) to borrow and return at a small interest rate.
 - Younger girls were placed in training institutions to attend courses such as welding, fabrication, carpentry, driving, and tailoring and start up kits, for instances sewing machines or driving permits, were given to them after graduating.
- By 2006, as the war ceased, funding from several NGOs were also cut down, while several challenges are still faced by the female returnees and their children until today.

Challenges currently being faced by the female returnees and their children

i. Rejected by local communities:

The returnees face enormous stigma from the local communities and in worst case from their families who accuse them of being rebel wives and bearing rebel fathered children.

ii. Lack of access to land:

- a. Upon return, most women were told to take their “rebel children” to their fathers or paternal relatives for land. While this connection with paternal relatives is hard to trace, making the children fatherless and landless.
- b. Women returned to find their parents dead and the land taken over by male relatives who had disowned them and cast them away as “rebel wives”. They have no permanent homes but to rent houses by themselves.

iii. Lack of access to education:

- a. As the mothers are the sole caretakers of the children born in captivity, they face challenges taking up the burden of paying school fees and buying school requirements for these children.
- b. The children also face stigma in schools that they attend. They are called “rebel children” and even when the mothers re-marry, the stepfather usually refuse to accept the children born in captivity. They are either cast out or their mothers have to find ways to take care of them solely or give them to their old maternal grandmothers who, if they accept the children, also have no means to adequately care for them.

iv. Health challenge:

- a. The returnees suffer from post war trauma, and lack of identity forcing many children to become street kids or to join the army.
- b. Child sexual abuses done by children are reported.
- c. Some of these returnees are committing suicide as a result of this immerse rejection, lack of identity and lack of survival means.

What has been done to improve the state of life of the returnees and their children?

- The government does not have any structures in place directly targeting these returnees, they only gave them the amnesty certificates and the household items upon return.
- There are projects that government has rolled out in the whole country to improve food security, nutrition, livelihoods, infrastructure and good, while they have no special component for the returnees, yet the state of life of these people is unique and therefore needs special attention.
- Any form of tangible assistance aimed directly at returnees has been from NGOs many of which have since closed after the war of guns ended in 2006. This has left a humanitarian gap that needs to be addressed and filled.

What can be done to elevate the state of life of the female returnees and their bush born children?

- i. Document and have actual numbers/statistics of female returnees and their children born in the bush
- ii. Establish a rehabilitation centre(s) to engage the returnees, their children and the local people in psychosocial and trauma counselling to minimise the stigma and encourage acceptance, unity, love and oneness amongst the communities
- iii. Put in place income generating activities as well as microloan and saving associations
- iv. Implement agricultural projects that can improve the status of life of the returnees
- v. Establish specialised post war trauma psycho-social support and counselling
- vi. Offer education scholarships to school-going returnee children to relieve the mothers of this burden of school fees and school requirements
- vii. Offer technical and vocational training such as carpentry and joinery, salon training, building, welding and fabrication, driving and tailoring to the returnee children
- viii. Identification and purchase of land for these returnees and establishment of housing facilities for most of them.