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## Traumas of armed conflict: a case study of child soldiers in Uganda

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### ABSTRACT

*Children are the most endangered victims of the intractable conflicts. Wherein almost 50 million children have been victim to forced displacement from their families and homes and are subjected to exploitation, forced labour as well as recruitment in the armed forces. The deployment of children as soldiers in armed conflict to commit the act of violence is the grave violation of Human Rights. Mostly these Children are recruited to wage battles and to carry out acts of violence. While the rest of them are engaged as cooks, messengers, porters, spies and sexual slaves. It was in the year 2017 that the 'List of Shame' published by the UN Secretary General include Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen whereby the state forces are involved in the recruitment of child soldiers. While in countries like Democratic Republic of Congo and Myanmar non state actors such as Mai Mai Naytura and Kachin Independence Army recruit children as soldiers respectively. According to United Nations List of Shame almost 43 state forces train and recruit Child Soldiers and almost 56 non state actors are involved in the recruitment child soldiers. Over a span of last five decades Uganda has undergone one of the deadliest civil wars in human history within the African continent. In this context what needs to be noted is the fact that the Northern Uganda has witnessed civil war at the dawn of 1980 marked by the displacement of almost 4,00,000 people from their homes. With the establishment of Lord's Republican Army by Joseph Kony in the year 1987 there was an unprecedented increase in the acts of violence marked by, series of bombing taking place in Kampala. Most of the Children fell prey to this civil unrest serving either as porters or fighters to Lord's Republican Army and Allied Democratic forces. Thus, this paper seeks to examine psychological impact and the reintegration process of Child Soldiers of Uganda.*

**Keywords:** Child Soldiers, Uganda, Armed Conflict, Reconciliation and Reintegration

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The extremely troublesome aspect of the armed conflict is the growing deployment of young children as soldiers. According to a report by Swedish Save the Children Fund, around a quarter of the million children, not above seven years were deployed as soldiers in thirty three intractable conflicts in the year 1995-96 solely. They served as cooks, porters, and messengers or deployed in the on-going warfare as assassins, executioners, informers and spies. In spite of whatever task these child soldiers are allotted to accomplish they are deployed in the close contiguity to the armed conflict. History has been suggestive of the fact that children have been engaged in the wars as drummer boys, foot soldiers and as ship boys but they didn't combat at the cost of their lives. The terrifying trend in the contemporary times is the fact that children are primarily deployed as soldiers throughout the entire period of Civil Wars.

According to a report published by The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, approximately over 3,00,000 children are being recruited as soldiers out of which 1,20,000 are from Africa. In this regard it needs to be argued that the most afflicted countries include Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Rwanda, Angola, Algeria, Burundi etc. As far as Uganda is concerned it needs to be argued that the civil war in the Northern Uganda out broke during early 80's wherein hundreds of people had lost their lives and about 4,00,000 people were displaced marked by the destruction of Uganda's economic base i.e. agriculture. What lies at the centre of early uprising was the apprehension of the national marginalization by the government as well as the acts of brutality incurred by the National Resistance Movement. The Northern conflict entered a completely new epoch with the formation of Lord's Republican Army. With the establishment of Lord's Republican Army by Joseph Kony in the year 1987 there was an unprecedented increase in the acts of violence marked by series of bombing taking place in Kampala. Many people of the districts

of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have been victimized by LRA. Most of the Children fell prey to this civil unrest serving either as porters or fighters to Lord's Republican Army and Allied Democratic forces. Thus, this paper seeks to examine psychological impact and the reintegration process of Child Soldiers of Uganda.

## **2. REASONS OF RECRUITMENT**

In the turmoil of the Ugandan armed conflict, mostly young children were parted from their families, village as well as communities. In this context it needs to be argued that children are more susceptible to all sorts of atrocities and maltreatment along with the deployment in the military forces, militias and rebellion groups. At this juncture it becomes imperative to note that that child soldiers are. According to Child Soldier's International Child Soldiers are individuals who are not beyond the age of eighteen years and are employed for fighting a cause. Some of them are deployed as combatants and carry out acts of vehemence while others are recruited as cooks, informers, messengers, porters, spies as well as sexual slaves. The question that needs to be pondered upon is that why as children are recruited. In this context it needs to be noted that, there are various reasons why LRA recruited Child Soldiers who possessed lesser physical strength as well as ignorance and immaturity as compared to adults. In this regard it is to be noted that most of these children were submissive and compliant as well as they grumbled less. Thus they are emotionally more docile as compared to adults, thus it becomes uncomplicated to influence their character and temperament. As a result of which these children are considered as dispensable, replaceable as well as not very expensive to maintain. Secondly, these younger children are not afraid of being killed as they do not possess the sense of fright, therefore they undertake many of the treacherous tasks easily given by the LRA, since they do not analyse its dreadful consequences. Thirdly the extensive international proliferation of small arms specifically AK-47 rifles which can be tackled easily by children makes the case of increasing recruitment of children as soldiers in Uganda. In order to comprehend the recruitment of child soldiers it is important to study forced recruitment practices conducted by armed forces in the northern Uganda.

## **3. FORCED RECRUITMENT**

As far as forced recruitment of child soldiers is concerned seizure or abduction are the most frequent practices adopted by LRA and other armed forces in northern Uganda. As far as Child Soldiers in Uganda are concerned many of these children of Northern Uganda are being kidnapped in large numbers by LRA. According to an estimate by Human Rights Watch since the outbreak of the civil war in northern Uganda around 20,000 children were being abducted by Lord's Republican Army. These abducted children have gone through grave atrocities committed by LRA. The children who were abducted and had come through death and disease during the civil war were subjected to major obscenity and were compelled to discharge their duties as conscripts sex slaves, labours as well as soldiers and were enforced to execute crimes. Following LRA's withdrawal from South Sudan after the attack by Ebola virus in the Gulu district during the late 2000's, there was a considerable decline in the abductions committed by LRA, although this was short lived. However, it needs to be pondered upon that there was a massive rise in during the mid-2002, wherein LRA surfaced again at Uganda, since then there has been abductions taking place on a massive scale ever. Approximately, 8,400 children have undergone abduction during the year 2002-03 which witnessed a massive elevation from the past year in 2001 wherein below than one hundred children were kidnapped. According to the reports released by UNICEF during the year 2002 almost 3,927 children in the age group of five to seventeen years were taken away by force in Pader only. Since Children are more susceptible to be abducted at night, LRA conducted most of its operations at that particular time through executing raids at villages and camps. In fact LRA's abduction activities also included attacks at schools and other educational institutions for instance the one that was carried out at Rwala Girls Secondary School..

The children who were being kidnapped by LRA were regularly abused, beaten up and were enforced to conduct burglary, raids, put houses of local people on fire, to strike and to assassinate non-combatants. These child soldiers were enforced to transmit hefty freight across far off places and provided their services for lengthier time period as bond slave. Most of them were provided guidance and instruction about small arms, while few of them used to battle Ugandan Army and Ugandan People's Defence Force. The Children who attempted to get away from LRA were subjected to dehumanization wherein their hands, toes, limbs were being impaired. In fact LRA resorted to violent course of action in order to command compliance from the child soldiers. These Child Soldiers were compelled to hit other child soldiers and infringe them to death if they tried to flee away from the LRA camps. According to scholars like Becker most of the children in the northern Uganda breathe terror and fright as they are aware of that fact that if they were kidnapped they will be subjected all kinds of atrocities and abuses by LRA forces. These seizures and abductions left an appalling effect upon the children who were not subjected to abduction. As a consequence of which thousands of children traverse to towns such as Gulu, Kitgum and Pader at night from the nearby areas and used to doze down at verandas, church grounds, bus parks, local factories. In this context it needs to be noted that these children are called as "night commuters".<sup>1</sup> It was in year 2003 wherein over a thousand children were spending each night at Gulu district and by May the number has extended to 13,400 children. According to Human Rights Watch Ugandan government also deploy children in the state armed forces as home guards. The child soldiers who somehow are successful to flee away from LRA camps were forced to serve in Ugandan People's Defence Force or UPDF.

## **4. GIRL CHILD SOLDIERS**

The struggles and experiences of Girl Child Soldiers during the civil unrest in Northern Uganda are terribly intricate. In this context what needs to be noted is the fact that in the societal world structure girl children are be it in the most advanced states or the least developed countries all-time low. In this context it needs to be argued that girls constituted twenty to thirty per cent of the child soldiers deployed and kidnapped by LRA in the Northern Uganda. The ones who were abducted by LRA had undergone all sorts of intimidation and exploitation mostly behind the battleground. Nevertheless, some of the girl child soldiers were compelled to

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<sup>1</sup> Night Commuters refer to the children in northern Uganda who use to travel in night in order to avoid abductions from LRA forces.

battle against the Ugandan armed forces or to provide some assistance in the seizure and abduction of other children. The junior ones more or less served as the servants to LRA and were labelled as “ting –ting”. These girls were subjected to carry out most arduous jobs in domestic ability each day. In this context it needs to be argued that the girls who have attained fourteen or fifteen years of age are compelled to become wives of LRA’s soldiers, wherein they undergo danger of being raped, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. In fact, a few girls are of the opinion that while serving as wives of LRA’s commanders they were subjected to heinous sexual maltreatment and victimization. Moreover, if these wives were somehow liberated by Lord’s Republican Army or by the government soldiers they witness major cultural biases and boycott specifically from their families, communities as well as from their villages as these girls have been considered as polluted, by their communities. In fact most those Girl Child Soldiers who manage to escape from LRA they are abducted again by LRA’s commanders. Eventually, there has been rapid rise in the cases of prostitution which have multiplied manifold during the period of civil unrest in Northern Uganda. This is apparently due to the fact that since these girl child soldiers were abandoned by their communities when they are abducted and left with not any measure to sustain them. This issue pinpoints at the strong patriarchal system of Ugandan society.

## **5. RECONCILIATION AND REINTEGRATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS**

During the Reconciliation and Reintegration procedure in Northern Uganda for Child Soldiers plenty of diverse local as well as non-governmental agents have acquired the centre stage. In this context it needs to be argued that native community members as well as various nongovernmental organizations are amid others. In this context it needs to be evaluated that what are the underlying facets of the reconciliation and the reintegration process of the Ugandan Child Soldiers.

### **Reconciliation**

The idea of reconciliation is wide ranging and perhaps contemplated from diverse perspectives. The outlook of international community concerning justice varies from, local standpoint over this idea. In this context it becomes important to refer to Lederach’s conceptualization of Reconciliation process. According to Lederach Reconciliation refers to a continuing process linking constituents of mercy, truth, justice and peace. Most of the child soldiers who have escaped from the captivities of LRA in Northern Uganda, they attempt to come back to their own community which is not easy choice to make. Mostly since these Child soldiers were compelled by the LRA commanders to execute the murder of their own community members. Thus many a times there is some sort of resentment on the part of the community members to trust and accept them. In this context it needs to be argued that the girl child soldiers return back with unwanted pregnancies and as a consequence of this they more or less experience resentment on the part of their community. Thus when these Child Soldiers come back to their villages and communities plenty of things have been transformed. Firstly, the brutal incidents and exploitation which they were subjected to by LRA forces have changed them completely. Also, they were compelled to indulge in the acts of vehemence against their own relatives, family members, members of their own community etc. exercises an everlasting influence upon their entire lives. Moreover as a consequence of the civil unrest the community itself has undergone some sort of change as most of the members of the community have lost their lives in the armed conflict or are deployed in some armed forces. Thus the social fabric of the community is also disturbed.

As far as reconciliation process is concerned one could look at the traditional reconciliatory mechanisms. In this context it needs to be noted that the traditional reconciliatory measures of the Acholi community is to focus on restore and mending of relations rather than penalizing or punishing the perpetrator<sup>2</sup>. In fact Acholi community attempted to reconcile with the former child soldiers from their threatening activity throughout their time in LRA forces. What is remarkable in this context is fact that not only child soldiers engage in this process but also the commanders of LRA also partake in this reconciliatory process. According to the people of Acholi community Child soldiers can be reconciled through ‘Mato Oput’ meaning swallowing the bitter root during which each native of the community permitted to communicate their perspectives. In this context it needs to be argued that this reconciliation process involves few steps:- Firstly the offender admits for the cruelty he or she has committed in the presence of council of adults. Secondly the offender has to exhibit authentically remorse for the action. Thirdly Victims are requested to grant forgiveness to the offender and to some mercy to the offender. Finally, the reconciliatory process concludes through performing various indigenous rituals and ceremonies such as drinking of a bitter root of the tree and the two sides eat jointly with each other signifying companionship again. Another indigenous ritual practiced by Acholi community includes Nyono Tong Gweno, this is also referred to as walking on the egg. According to the people of the Acholi community stepping on the egg is represents a strong ideology, which is directed at safeguarding purity and stability of their community. This ritual is exercised to greet and accept the members of the community who have been apart from their place of residence. Other ritual includes Moyo Kum or purification of body and Moyo Piny which refers to cleansing of an area. Both these rituals have also been adopted in the reintegration of the erstwhile child soldiers. In this context it needs to be argued that the ritual of Mato Oput is predominantly used in the cases of heinous crimes such as murder. Thus, what can be argued as far as traditional reconciliation methods are concerned not many child soldiers are aware of them for instance in the northern Uganda only 12,000 abducted children have experienced stepping the egg ritual. What can also be questioned is the fact that weathers these rituals and ceremonies are sufficient enough to heal the wounds.

### **Reintegration**

The idea of reintegration refers to amalgamate afresh within the community in order to reinstate the societal bond as adequate as possible and adapt and pay homage to every member of the community in the recently shaped society. The reintegration process of child soldiers focuses upon Education and Training facilities to aid and assist the former child soldiers in becoming self-supporting. In this manner these former child soldiers have motivation in their lives afresh. It also focuses upon the atmosphere when children return back to their homes from the captives of Lord’s Republican Army through organizations to aid and assist in their integration process and welcome and adoption by their families, communities and villages. In this context one could refer to various laws formulated by the international community regarding child soldiers. In this context one could refer to United Nations

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<sup>2</sup> Acholi is an ethnic group from eastern part of South Sudan and Northern Uganda from an area commonly called Acoliland.

Convention on the Rights of the child or CFC which came into force during the year 1989 which defined each child as every individual not beyond the age of 18 years, until the law relevant to the child maturity is attained earlier. While article 38 of the convention conveys the idea that all the states must abstain from deploying any individual who has not reached the age of fifteen years in the violent armed forces. Thus according to this individuals who have acquired the age of 15 years but have not acquired the age of 18 years the state forces should provide preference to the older ones. Therefore there is incongruity in this article wherein it generates an opening for 15-18 year old children to be recruited as child soldiers. According to CRC a child is any individual who has not attained 18 years of age but various cultures perceives children diversely for instance when a girl gets married discontinued to be regarded as child in various African communities.

## **6. NUREP**

The NUREP refers to Northern Uganda Rehabilitation Program sponsored by European Union to reinforce its Peace, Recovery and Development Program in Northern Uganda which was initiated in the year 2006. The NUREP Program had reinforced the rehabilitation and integration procedures of Child Soldiers through various actions such as income creating schemes, vocational training as well as supporting primary schools wherein some ex child soldiers wherein some ex child soldiers were registered. In fact NUREP and Acholi community worked in tandem with each other. Since environment and atmosphere are key facets for the reintegration process therefore NUREP initiated various Peace building initiatives which in turn strengthen acceptance and trust between ex child soldiers and their families and communities. Secondly, it directed its efforts to make child soldiers and their communities to become self-sufficient by organizing various workshops and supporting primary schools.

## **7. IRC**

IRC refers to International Rescue Committee which has directed its efforts to bring about welfare of girl child soldiers in Northern Uganda, through providing facilities such as healthcare, education and economic aid to these individuals. According to IRC, when child soldiers are rescued they are generally traumatized and in the condition of stress and they require urgent medical and psychological assistance. In this context it becomes imperative focus on the contrasting approach of Acholi community and International Rescue Committee. If one looks at the approaches and methods adopted by Acholi community they did not give recognition or took into account the mental and psychological issues affecting the child soldiers. In fact IRC functions in tandem with local communities, district governments as well as NGO's in order to encourage culturally beneficial cleansing rituals. The IRC programme focussing on the following aspects. It is concentrating upon the requirements of the local communities and traditions and make reintegration process beneficial for the former child soldiers particularly girl child soldiers.

## **8. WVI**

World Vision International has established Children of War Rehabilitation Centre in Gulu wherein that aim to furnish awareness about HIV and AIDS to the child soldiers, as well as with food, medical cure and care, safe drinking water, clothing, bedding, psychological advise, vocational training as well as spiritual nurture. Simultaneously, the centre aims at giving the probability of a superior reconciliation with their families. In fact it was from the year 1995 to 2012 they have rescued and rehabilitated around 14 thousand former child soldiers. In this context it is important to take note of the fact that since world vision is a christen initiative it has resorted to employ various christen healing methods such as forgiveness and begin every day with a morning worship, and prayers at the rehabilitation Centre.

## **9. GUSCO**

The Gulu Support Child Organization is a native NGO based at Uganda which is promoted by Save the Children. Their rehabilitation and reintegration efforts are premised largely upon indigenous Acholi measures. Along with World Vision International they are considered to be the principle initiatives for integration process of the former child soldiers in the Northern Uganda. World Vision International concentrates its attention upon small stays approximately from three to six weeks while GUSCO concentrated upon extensive stays as well as offering deep rooted and continual assistance. This organization premised majorly upon two fundamental ideas which have acquired the forefront. The first principle focuses its attention on the fact that it did not consider former child soldiers as causality but as survivors. Secondly, plenty of the former child soldiers rescued by the organization would undergo healing treatment. Moreover GUSCO a also permits ex child soldiers to par take in the decision making process since the organization concentrates its attention upon the mechanisms adopted by the native community members as well as on the local customs. Additionally, they also aim to accord psychological treatment of these child soldiers in order to rebuild their self-esteem. In fact GUSCO has also established various Advocacy and Research and Information centre to enlighten the families, communities and parents of the child soldiers regarding the requirements of psychological requirements of the ex-child soldiers. It paid key notice to provide increasing support to the women and girl child soldier by initiating small scale businesses and thereby make them self-sufficient.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

The repercussions of violent armed conflict upon children are dreadful and dire. Ugandan civilians have witnessed innumerable threats as a consequence of violent armed conflict. The civil war in northern Uganda has resulted into massive and horrendous abuses of human rights specifically atrocities and exploitation of the children of that particular region. In this context it needs to be argued that it becomes imperative to accumulate concentration upon accentuating challenges undergone by child soldiers of this region including both boys and girls by intensifying the description of child soldiers. Also Girl Child Soldiers are supposed to be provided safeguards by any specific declaration in some international agreement or convention. Thus the reintegration measures must focus on both community reintegration and by International support. In a nut shell Psychological reintegration must be taken into consideration.

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