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TERRORIZING THE INNOCENTS IN UGANDA: RELIGION PLAYS A ROLE IN DEADLY LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

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Thousands of his devoted supporters see Joseph Kony, rebel leader of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, as a prophet of God who is working to fight government injustice and preparing to usher in a golden age of peace under the rule of the Ten Commandments. Millions of other people in the African continent, as well as growing numbers of international aid workers, see Kony as a terrorist, a madman, or the Devil incarnate, who combines Christian apocalypticism with elements of animism, witchcraft, and voodoo to create a deadly blend of radicalism, violence, death, and destruction. No matter what one thinks about Kony, it is clear that during the past 18 years he has been leading a brutal rebellion against the Ugandan government.

The seeds of the present conflict in Uganda were planted in 1986 when the nation's current leader, Yoweri Museveni, took power by force. Those who had battled Museveni fled, many fearing they would be sought out and punished. In time, many of these rebels rallied around a spiritualist named Alice Lakewenyia who founded the 7,000-member Holy Spirit Battalion.

Battalion members were told that God would protect them even though they fought armed only with sticks, stones, and voodoo dolls. They were also told that Lakewenyia's "Holy Oil" would render the government soldiers' bullets harmless.

The Battalion marched on the capital of Kampala but was soundly defeated in 1987. Out of the ashes of this failure arose a new rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Lakewenyia's nephew, Joseph Kony.

An estimated 25,000 children have been forcibly enlisted in Kony's army as soldiers, porters, and sex slaves and forced to commit acts of horrifying brutality. More than 100,000 people have been killed, the vast majority of them civilians; and more than 1.5 million Ugandans have been displaced from their homes, leading both the United Nations and Doctors without Borders to declare the conflict in Uganda the world's most neglected humanitarian crisis.

Reading the many conflicting reports about Kony leaves the impression that he is a combination of Ché Guevara, Adolf Hitler, and Jim Jones. Some stories claim he is deranged or demon possessed. Other stories report that he has 60 wives and occasionally wears women's clothing. Kony does little to correct such impressions, for he knows that his fledgling movement thrives on publicity—the nastier the better.

In the West, the carnage in Uganda has gone virtually unnoticed. Greater attention has been given to the long-running crisis in Sudan, Uganda's northern neighbor, and to the AIDS crisis in Africa. Recently, however, dozens of reporters have written articles (some of which can be found on ReligionNewsBlog.com) documenting the horrors inflicted on innocent children in Uganda. Many of these articles detail how the LRA soldiers often kidnap new child recruits in sneak attacks on Ugandan villages during the dead of night. The ideal recruits are between the ages of 10 and 14, but children as young as 4 reportedly have been abducted.

During these attacks, parents and other adults are killed—many of them hacked to death with machetes—and their houses burned to the ground. Once captured, the children are marched for miles to LRA compounds, many of which are based in Sudan, which has its own long-running conflicts with the Ugandan government and offers support to Kony and his rebels.

Innocent Children in Captivity. The LRA operates as a fear-based authoritarian military cult, complete with elaborate religious rhetoric and symbols. Many children are formally inducted into the LRA with a mock-baptism service that mimics Christian rituals and presses home the point that Joseph Kony is their new spiritual ruler. Children eat (or often don't eat) as directed by their commanders. The children are subjected to violence until they conform to the ethos of the LRA, then routinely subjected to sexual abuse, with the most prized female victims serving as wives to Kony and his top commanders.

The LRA turns innocent children into brutal killers by forcing them to participate in violent acts that deaden their consciences. For many children, this initiation into Kony's cult of blood begins as soon as they are captured. During many village raids, captured children are forced at gunpoint to murder their own parents and relatives. These crimes also make it extremely difficult for children who escape the LRA to return home to their villages.

Daisy Asiimwe Byarugaba is a communications specialist with Compassion International, which works with more than 35,000 children in Uganda. "The biggest crisis concerning this war is that it is birthing a generation of traumatized people who are filled with hatred and feel that nothing was done to help them," says Byarugaba. "In this war the biggest victims are children, who are abducted, indoctrinated, maimed, tortured and even killed by both the rebels and the Ugandan army."

A July, 2003, report by BBC correspondent Hilary Andersson described the tactics LRA commanders use to indoctrinate their child conscripts: "A woman called Laweel was told that she and 10 others were to be made an example of as a way of warning the community not to fight the rebels. They were to be mutilated, and sent home alive." She continues, "They were lined up in front of their captors. Kidnapped children were told to sharpen the knives and machetes laid there, and one by one the women had their noses, lips and ears cut off. Then they were made to eat their own flesh."

Sudarsan Raghaven, a correspondent for the *Detroit Free Press*, reported on one child in October, 2004: "Five days after she was abducted in the night from her Catholic boarding school, Charlotte Awino learned how to kill. She was 14. The girl she killed, who was even younger than she was, had tried to escape from the [LRA]. The rebels ordered Charlotte and 29 other schoolgirls to execute her. They refused. The rebels beat them with guns and machetes, and gave the order again. This time, they obeyed."

"'They told us to gather stones and beat her to death,' Charlotte recalled, her voice quivering. 'If you wanted to live, you did it.'" Raghaven notes that Charlotte remained a captive soldier for the next eight years, until she escaped in July of 2004.

Religious Rebel in Charge. Kony's disciples and opponents agree that the former altar boy uses religion to enhance his image and strengthen his power, but they disagree over whether Kony's use of religious trappings is a sham or an expression of sincere devotion.

Kony has claimed to be a spirit medium who speaks with angels and was handpicked by God to lead a rebellion against Ugandan leaders who have turned their back on their people and the truth.

Originally Kony claimed to be working to defend his own Acholi tribal people, but when the Acholi rejected his bid for power, he turned on them with a vengeance, claiming that they should be killed for rejecting God's anointed leader. "If the Acholi don't support us, they must be finished," he allegedly told one child soldier.

Africans were shocked by the violence Kony unleashed against members of his own tribe, but he defended himself by quoting Old Testament passages depicting a wrathful, violent God to justify his soldiers severing the limbs of their victims.

Some stories have indicated that Kony may be adding an Islamic flavor to his theological mix, but he has neither confirmed nor denied these reports.

Britain's *Independent* newspaper reported that Kony directs his rebel forces through messages recorded by a team of scribes. The paper also reported that "the rebel leader prays within concentric circles drawn in ash or pebbles and has a choir of young girls, some dressed as nuns, to sing his praises. Soldiers are sometimes required to pray waist-deep in water, and observe arbitrary fast days. Anyone breaking the rules can be killed for bringing curses on the entire group."

The LRA's child soldiers are indoctrinated into Kony's apocalyptic worldview, which describes a "Silent World." In his view, modern guns will be silenced and those who fight with primitive weapons such as stones and spears will rule.

Children abducted by the LRA routinely escape, including some of Kony's former wives. One of these wives, Nighty Arac, gave an interview to Uganda's *New Vision* newspaper in August. "I did not see the spirits that were purportedly controlling him," she said. "I saw Kony operating normally, except for some military approaches he used to undertake which helped him to survive...attacks. This made people think he had spirits that guided him."

One Western diplomat told the *Independent* that "Kony is, by all accounts, able to convince people he has spiritual powers. I also assume that he has this force of personality that could make people believe that. He has a certain amount of military prowess, and he is obviously quite cunning."

Many Ugandan leaders, however, view Kony's spiritual claims with skepticism. "Sometimes, we wonder if Kony is the devil himself," said Akwero Betty Omuk of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, a multifaith organization that works with LRA victims. "But then I remember that this kind of thought merely strengthens the LRA. He is just a man, and we can deal with him as if he is just a man."

Kony's LRA has targeted some Americans, killing Warren and Donna Pett, a U.S. missionary couple from Wisconsin, in March, 2004, during an attack on an evangelical mission college in northwestern Uganda. The LRA also abducted 44 trainee priests in May, 2004, from St Mary's Seminary, a Catholic institution in Gulu, about 250 miles north of Kampala.

Most of the time, however, the LRA focuses its rage on innocent children. Simon Peter Esaku, a senior communications officer with World Vision Uganda, has spoken to many of the LRA's child victims, and to Christian workers who hope to help them heal at care centers throughout the country. Esaku notes that "the children have been tortured and forced to commit such atrocities as murdering, burning houses, looting food and property, and raping women and under-age girls. In captivity, they are threatened with their lives if they respond with any tenderness or compassion."

He relates the common effects he sees as a result of such abuse: "Symptoms of trauma include being withdrawn, poor appetite, and nightmares. They fear that they will never be forgiven for what they have been forced to do. In some cases, the children become so accustomed to life in captivity that they want to return to it." He adds, "Some have different ailments, mainly sexually transmitted diseases, skin diseases, respiratory infections, and diarrhea. Others have serious wounds as a result of torture and gunshots. Some come with their limbs or lips or ears or fingers cut off. Most children arrive severely malnourished with brown and sparse hair."

Christian workers closest to the carnage say there is much that American Christians and other believers in the West can do. "This is a spiritual battle that needs to be fought, first and foremost, on their knees," says Compassion's Daisy Asiimwe Byarugaba. "Anyone that deliberately sets out to harm, torture, and use children as instruments of war is used of the Devil....Please...pray for and with us for our people in the north." Byarugaba also says that there is a desperate need for trained counselors to work with the thousands of children who have been traumatized by the LRA. Concerned Westerners can also plead with their governments to intervene in the conflict, and to support the trial of LRA leaders by the international criminal court.

"The children abducted by the LRA are in a unique and dangerous position in terms of how they are perceived by the international community," says World Vision's Simon Peter Esaku. "As abductees, they are held against their will by a military force that claims political legitimacy. They are hostages and should be [viewed] as such."

Kony's rebels and Ugandan officials met for peace talks in late December, but prospects for peace remain slim. "We could kill you all now for nothing," rebel spokesman Sam Kolo told government officials and journalists, "but that's not our aim."

The Ugandan government has continually hounded Kony's rebels, but the fighters are elusive and enjoy at least some measure of local support. As for Kony, outsiders haven't seen him in years.

— Steve Rabey