

## **THEY TOLD HIM NOT TO SCREAM.**

The rebels tied my hands behind my back so tightly that I could barely move my fingers.

Then, telling me not to scream, they sliced off my ears. Then they pushed me down to the ground and cut off as much as they could of my lips.

"They were all over me, stamping, pushing, cutting. I could not move, I could barely breathe," Patrik's statement is a barely audible whisper from his hospital bed in the small impoverished northern Ugandan town of Kitgum .

Yet the child soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), one of Africa 's most-feared rebel groups, were far from finished. They pinned the boy's arms to the ground and took it in turns to hack off all his fingers and both thumbs.

They stuffed the body parts into his pockets, wrapped his severed ears around a letter and, after briefly parading him in front of a group of other terrified abducted children, told him to report to the Ugandan Army.

Another terrified child, snatched in the early morning rebel raid on the tiny hamlet of Mucwini outside Kitgum, had denounced Patrik, saying that he wanted to join government militias being formed to protect Uganda 's northern villages from a renewed and ferocious rebel onslaught that has brought the entire region to a standstill. But it was a lie, uttered in panic to deflect attention from himself.

Patrik was just a schoolboy from a poor family hoping to pass exams this summer so that he could move into what Ugandans call "secondary", the final years of school. His father is dead, his two sisters left home long ago. He looked after his elderly mother and was sweeping her compound when he was taken.

He showed the rebels his student ID card, but to no avail; many of them were abducted long ago or even were born into rebel captivity and cannot read or write. Even if they could, they would not have been interested: they needed a victim.

"This one we are going to kill," they told the group of about 20 other abductees. Instead, after an agonising four-hour wait, they decided to use him to deliver a macabre warning to government soldiers not to hunt them down.

Patrik has few possessions, but one of his most cherished is a notebook-sized transistor radio, lying on the table beside his hospital bed. "I wanted to be a car mechanic. Now, I have no hope. I cannot even turn the pages of my school book," he whispered through his disfigured mouth and stared helplessly at the radio's tuning knob, smaller than his swollen finger stumps.

One of the LRA's tactics is to terrify abducted children and then quickly to involve them in their atrocities. By so doing, they bind the children into the group and reduce the risk of them trying to escape.

"They feel guilt and fear, and then there is no way out. The commanders tell them they will be killed if they go back."

Verified reports abound of children being forced to kill other abductees who try to escape, of horrific mutilations, from castrations to boiling people alive. Some are even forced to cook and eat human flesh.

Joseph Kony, the LRA's messianic leader, has mixed traditional Acholi beliefs with smatterings of Christianity and even Islam to hold his followers in an evil vice. Both children and adult followers believe that he is imbued with spirits that allow him to see into your mind and predict the future.

"You take a terrified, traumatised 11-year-old child, you force them to kill and you brainwash them and you have a monster. This is one the reasons why the LRA Rebels are so brutal. There is a reward system and the children want to impress their peers.

Patrik's tale bears this out. He says that he was older than the children who have ruined his life, but remembers an older commander in the background.

His injuries are horrific, his experience unimaginable, but he is far from alone and, unlike many others, he is alive. The LRA, which claims to want to rule according to the Ten Commandments, has abducted thousands of children in the past year alone; some human rights groups put the figure as high as 8,000, others say 6,000. Civilians have been attacked and killed in ambushes on buses, villages and towns almost daily.

The result is a crisis in northern Uganda of biblical proportion, where the majority of the population is displaced and herded into camps protected by government forces where they live in dreadful conditions.

Villages are deserted, crops are withering in the fields, and food and medical supplies are inadequate to deal with the huge human influxes into the two main towns of Gulu and Kitgum. At night, Thousands of children (the night commuters) come into the centre of town from outlying districts, sleeping rough on verandahs and outside shop fronts.

Hundreds manage to escape in the immediate confusion surrounding rebel raids, but for the dozens that do not a nightmare awaits. Either they become killers themselves, or they are killed. Girls are taken as "wives" by commanders becoming pregnant and giving birth s young as 11-12 years of age. HIV and other STD's are common within the rebel group.

A 15-year-old girl, lies near Patrik. Her leg has been amputated just above the knee after bullet wounds suffered on an attack on the bus bringing her home from school. Her main fear is that she will not be able to go back school and study to be a nurse: "Who wants a nurse on crutches?"

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