

PUBLIC ANNEX B

Tall Grass

Stories of Suffering and
Peace in Northern Uganda



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However, some of the rebels had been abducted several years earlier and we realised that the parents, too, needed some serious counselling. In many respects nothing could have prepared them to receive a son or daughter who had come back after undergoing such an experience. The young boy with rough manners, who was absent-minded and deeply traumatised was very different from the joyful and polite kid who had been snatched from them some years earlier.

One day, when they were about to leave Payule and go back to their respective homes, two of them pointed at Fr. Raffaele's tomb. Slowly and smoothly the words came out. They had taken part in the lethal ambush that had taken the life of the old missionary one year earlier.

"Our commander gave us orders to lay hidden by the side of the road, and to shoot at the first vehicle that would pass and burn it. When we saw a white man we were surprised".

A couple of months later, some relatives of Fr. Raffaele in Italy sent us money they collected to help former child rebels with their schooling. We did advertise it, but we had little doubt about using that money to pay for the education of the ones who shot him and burnt him to death on the lonesome road to Payule.

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Joseph Kony and the Spirit's War

"We are no ordinary soldiers like the ones of any other army," said Colonel Santo Alit in Acholi. "We are God's army and we are fighting for the Ten Commandments."

He was a short man well in to his fifties. I was rather uncomfortably seated on the ground next to a rock, taking notes as fast as I could, and at the same time interpreting in a low voice, in English, for two foreign diplomats who were seated next to me, the first secretary of the Embassy of Netherlands and a lady who held the same post in the Norwegian diplomatic mission.

"Joseph Kony is like Jesus Christ, who came to save us from our sins. Just as Judas Iscariot sold Jesus for thirty silver coins, many have tried to betray Kony, God's messenger, but they have failed because God always sends his angels to protect him."

With that firm conviction, Brig. Sam Kolo, the LRA's number three in command, explained their beliefs further. I scribbled in my notebook as I interpreted for the diplomats. The Dutch man seemed somehow bewildered when he asked:

"Excuse me, father, what are you saying about Jesus Christ?"

I felt like laughing out loudly, but the serious faces of the young armed rebels surrounding us instantly discouraged me from such behaviour.

"Excuse me, sir, I am just translating," I said to the Dutch man.

We were attending a meeting with seven rebel commanders in Paloda, a remote forest in the northern part of Kitgum district. It was 28th December 2004 and as far as I could remember it was my fifth time to meet with Kony's men. This time there were more than thirty people in our group including religious leaders, members of parliament, local political leaders and, for the first time, foreign diplomats and journalists.

The mediator who had made it possible to have this meeting, Betty Bigombe, had told us at the beginning that we would have no time to translate everything from Acholi to English and she had requested those who did not know the African language to sit next to someone who could interpret for them. This is how I came to play that role of impromptu interpreter of those strange, solemn sermons about the Ten Commandments, Jesus Christ the Saviour and his angels from heaven. Maybe the Dutch diplomat thought that I was taking advantage of the occasion to catechise him, but I made it clear that the words I was interpreting were not mine.

At the beginning of that meeting, the chief catechist and Kony's main religious advisor, Col. Jenaro Bongomin, had raised his hands to heaven, closed his eyes and with a mystical expression on his face started a long opening prayer that he lead as though he was in a trance. To the rest of the LRA he was known as "Pope Jenaro" and he was the one in charge of their religious affairs.

As I watched those men wearing combat fatigues and rosaries around their necks, and as I heard them talk about God and his angels, I could not help recalling one of the worst and most repugnant massacres perpetrated by the LRA in a village near Patongo, in Pader district, in November 2002. After murdering 20 people, the commander of the group gave an order to dismember two of the dead bodies, put the bloody parts in a big cooking pot and boil them in the presence of the

terrified survivors. Such an act, an example of the horrible mutilations, child abductions and cruel massacres by the LRA, combined with the pseudo-religious prayers and biblical symbols, provoked in any normal person the most absolute rejection of the group and their beliefs. The endless accumulation of absurd, illogical, grotesque and macabre features could easily make anyone conclude that the LRA war in Northern Uganda was but one of many wild outbursts of meaningless violence which unfortunately matched the stereotypes of an African continent condemned to sink with such a succession of killings.

There have been rebel movements that have made some efforts at winning the sympathy of the people in the areas they controlled and publicising their cause abroad, but this has never been the case with the LRA. Instead, the LRA is structured according to a pattern of the "warlords" who seem to have converted the violence they inflict into a way of life that gives them power they are not ready to abandon, even if maintaining this violence means subjecting millions of people to the most miserable of livelihoods. Also, the LRA have never controlled any town or area in Northern Uganda. Their forces usually split into very small units, sometimes of groups as small as five or ten people that are highly mobile and unpredictable. They follow routes in the bush and leave behind them a trail of absolute terror among the population, killing in the most brutal ways, abducting children, maiming women and ambushing and burning vehicles and their passengers. The LRA's top commanders have been elusive. Kony has rarely made any public statements and they have not made the slightest effort to attract the sympathy of the people of Northern Uganda, let alone the international community. All this, combined with their religious rituals, confirms them as a dangerous and mysterious force that resembles more an armed cult than a rebel movement with political aims.

Even more than the LRA's capability to inflict violence, a greater source of much fear and mystery about the group stems from their religious beliefs and associations. Their ceremonies, rituals and beliefs melted into a cauldron of syncretism that staggers the imagination. They refer to the Bible, and in his sermons, which can last for several hours, Kony indoctrinates his followers, telling them that as God purified the sinful people of Israel with wars and calamities, so did he with the damned Acholi race who, by accepting Museveni, fell into a corrupt state. Kony sees himself as a new messiah chosen to create a new people, and he implements this task by eliminating all negative elements in his way and by begetting a new Acholi offspring, pure and uncontaminated, in the form of the children born inside the rebel movement. This objective – a new race – has justified the massive abduction of girls who have been forced to become sexual slaves. These girls are usually given to the different commanders as wives and mere chattels. It has been said that Kony himself has had over sixty wives, not much for him since he has been quick to point out that King Solomon had more than 600.

The LRA has also used elements of Islamic faith, most likely taken from the group's Sudanese patrons. The LRA has often threatened the population with harsh punishments should they break any of their regulations, which have included abstaining from work on Friday, from drinking alcohol and from rearing pigs. Also, there has been no doubt that Kony's peculiar creed includes a host of practices and beliefs from the Acholi traditional religion, particularly with respect to the belief in spirit possession. Kony considers himself to be the medium of the Holy Spirit and of various other spirits who advised him on his military actions. The more important of those ghosts or spirits is said to have the curious name of "Who are you?". This spiritual character has been of great importance in holding his followers faithful to him,

The abducted children who have grown into adolescence under the shadow of his wings have lived an existence of total submission to him; he has controlled them with a dark combination of instilling feelings of terror and fascination. Abductees are convinced that Kony knows even their most inner thoughts and intentions and where they are every moment.

All this, could mislead people into thinking that Kony and his LRA rebels were just a manifestation of Africa's wild character, sunk in the mud of superstition and irrationality. Even the Ugandan government has been fond of presenting the LRA problem as a form of the "backwardness" they are on a mission to fight against. But all that is a part of a history much more complex and difficult to understand.

As is the case in many African countries, there are big cultural differences between the ethnic groups of the south and the ones of the north of Uganda. That said, if one studies the cultures in depth, one might find that the different traditional communities have more in common than one may think. But during colonial times the British used their "divide and rule" tactics to stress the differences between Northerners and Southerners, particularly by creating a model for the division of labour according to tribes. Ever since, different conflicts over ethnic, religious and political character have undermined time and again the project of building a single national entity.

The war in Northern Uganda, involving the LRA, started in 1986, although its roots can be traced to the times of the British protectorate, when the colonisers' indirect rule favoured the Baganda and some of the other Bantu ethnic groups from the south. These southern communities were given more opportunities for education and development, for example, than the people from the Nilotic ethnic groups of the north. The latter became a cheap and available reserve of manual labour and a source of recruitment into the army, the police

and the prison service. The myth of the "martial races", developed by the British, provided the ideological base to support this policy, for which Ugandans were to pay a heavy price after gaining independence from Britain in 1962.

When the new Ugandan flag replaced the Union Jack, King Edward Mutesa II of the Baganda became Uganda's first president. Four years later, in 1966, his prime minister, Milton Obote, a Lango from the North, executed a coup d'état with the help of the army. "Kabaka" Mutesa fled into exile in Britain. Obote's coup started a pattern by which political power in Uganda is gained and maintained by the use of violence. In January 1971, while Obote attended a Commonwealth summit in Singapore, his army commander Idi Amin overthrew him and opened a bloody period in the country in which at least 300,000 people were assassinated. Amin, a Kakwa from Koboko in West Nile, purged the army of officers and soldiers whom he regarded as enemies, particularly those from the Acholi and Lango tribes. He did the same with politicians and intellectuals coming from these sub-regions, as well as from the south. One of the most prominent personalities murdered by Idi Amin was the chief justice, Benedict Kiwanuka, who refused to compromise the independence of the judiciary and bend to the dictator's power. The Church of Uganda archbishop, Janani Luwum, who had spoken out against Amin's atrocities, also became his victim.

Idi Amin was overthrown in April 1979, when Tanzanian soldiers supported by several thousand Ugandan insurgents, invaded the country by crossing the southern border into Uganda at the River Kagera. After a quick succession of three presidents, elections were held in December 1980 and won by former president Obote and his party, the Uganda People's Congress (UPC).

Yoweri Museveni, who had been a presidential candidate under a minority party known as Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM), accused Obote of having rigged the elections. In February 1981, Museveni launched a bush guerrilla war against the government, a war that was to have a high death toll. Different human rights organisations have put the number of dead at 300,000, more or less the same as the number of the dead during Amin's dictatorship. Most of the victims during the war were civilians killed during the brutal repression launched by the UNLA (Uganda National Liberation Army), particularly in war zones like Luweero and in West Nile, where the army engaged in widespread revenge since it was Amin's home region. During the years of war between Museveni and Obote many of the army's troops were from Acholi (although most officers were Lango and Teso), which resulted in the Acholi being fairly or unfairly blamed for the killings and widespread atrocities committed in the infamous "Luweero Triangle" and other areas of Uganda.

In July 1985, Obote was overthrown by his own army, or more specifically by a group of disgruntled Acholi officers who were discontented and exhausted by a war that seemed to have reached an impasse and in which they were the ones dying. In addition to these concerns, the Acholi officers had complained for a long time of being sidelined every time promotions were given out in the UNLA. These promotions seemed to favour the Lango, Obote's tribe.

Although the main leader of the coup that overthrew Obote was *Bigo Bazilio Okello*, it was General Tito Okello (no relation to Bazilio), an Acholi from Namukora, in Kitgum district, who was sworn in as president. Some other groups who had fought Obote, FEDEMU and Andrew Kayunga's Uganda Freedom Movement in the south and Uganda National Rescue Front and Former Uganda National Army in West Nile, joined the new military junta. However, Yoweri Museveni's

National Resistance Army (NRA) was going to prove a much harder nut to crack. Under the mediation of Kenya's president, Daniel Arap Moi, peace talks (often dubbed as "peace jokes") between the NRA and the government of Uganda started in Nairobi. The negotiations continued until December 1985 when, under a lot of pressure, both sides signed a peace agreement.

But the accord between Okello's government and Museveni's NRA was not to last more than one month. Under the pretext that the army of the new regime was no different from Obote's as it allegedly continued to perpetrate serious human rights violations against the civilian population, Museveni (who during the talks had managed to cut off much of the south and west from the rest of the country) stormed Kampala. After three days of fighting the city fell to the NRA on 25th January 1986. Two months later the whole country came under NRA control and Okello's soldiers either surrendered or escaped to areas of South of Sudan. Many others simply hid their weapons and returned to their homes in the north, awaiting events.

After a six-month period of relative peace things took a turn for the worse. While searching for arms of former soldiers, some units of the new army, Museveni's NRA, started committing atrocities against villagers in the north. These acts only confirmed people's fears that the new soldiers from the south were coming to mete out revenge on the northerners for the atrocities allegedly committed by the Acholi soldiers in Luweero. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that those weeks of tension triggered the beginning of the rebellion. Some of Okello's former officers returned from Sudan, where they had re-grouped, and this is how the war of Northern Uganda started in August 1986. At that time a good part of the population supported the rebellion. As it so often happens, the discontent of groups that have nothing to lose and much to fear feed insurgencies. That first rebel group was

called Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA), and was lead by former UNLA officers like Kilama, Odwar, Ojuku, Fearless Obwoya and Odong Latek. The rebellion quickly spread to other parts of the north, particularly to Lango and Teso, although it subsided in these sub-regions a few years later, partly because their leaders were sensible enough to ask their youth not to continue with an adventure that could only destroy their society while they gained nothing.

Towards the end of 1986, a young woman from Gulu called Alice Lakwena, who presented herself as a medium who could communicate with a variety of spirits, took control of most of the UPDA, which she transformed into the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). Lakwena preached that the people of Acholi had been perverted and had turned away from God and they needed purification if they were to defeat Museveni. From then on, the rebellion in the north always had a religious dimension. The HSM had rules and beliefs as bizarre as the following: the prohibition to take cover during combat, the use of stones treated with oil in rituals, which were hurled at the army in the belief that the stones would turn into grenades and explode, and the use of blessings with water by senior rebel officers known as "controllers". (One of their more curious rules went something like this: "thou shalt have two testicles, neither less nor more". All this would simply be cause for a laugh were it not for the fact that thousands of the youth who joined Lakwena's movement died like flies in front of the NRA. The new army was bewildered to see attacks being launched by bare-chested youth who advanced decisively singing religious hymns and carrying stones in their hands. Over one thousand people, mostly Lakwena's followers, are said to have died in a fierce battle held over three days at Karamoja. The NRA used artillery and helicopter gunships against thousands of young rebels, who met with easy deaths.

Lakwena maintained leadership of the rebellion until the end of 1987 when, after a massive campaign that led her Holy Spirit army through much of Eastern Uganda, her advance was halted a few kilometres outside of Jinja. Getting inspiration from the Old Testament book of Judges, she foretold that only 300 of her fighters would reach Kampala to take power. Before that, they would cross River Nile in the same way that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea when it parted in front of them. It is difficult to determine whether these predictions would have come true, because the NRA struck a fatal blow against the HSM before it reached Jinja. Alice Lakwena fled to Kenya, where she died in a refugee camp in January 2007.

While Lakwena's army fled in disarray back to the north, the countryside of Kitgum district became a prime gathering place for gangs of thousands of well-armed Karimojong herdsman. During the next couple of months this group swept through the Acholi villages, searching for cattle, goats, sheep and anything else they could find. In most cases the NRA did not intervene and simply watched with pleasure as "those stubborn northerners" lost the backbone of their economy. In a very short time an entire society was deprived of one of their more important means of livelihood, cattle. The Acholi were being raided not only by the Karimojong, but also by the rebels and government soldiers alike, who took every opportunity to steal cattle and other domestic animals from the common people.

Around 1987, the first formal attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement were made, although as early as October 1986 three Acholi elders (Tiberio Okeny, Leander Komakech and Peter Odok) led a "goodwill mission" that established contact with the rebels and made some recommendations to the president for a peaceful end to the war. After several months of meetings between UPDA officers who were not under Lakwena's control and NRA top military men, a

Peace accord was signed in Pece Stadium (Gulu) in June 1988. Many of the UPDA fighters were incorporated into the NRA. However, the signed agreement did not signal the end of the war, which has always alternated between periods of widespread violence and periods of lull, even of near peace. Also, for different reasons, peace initiatives that normally lasted several months ended up collapsing and giving way to new waves of fighting.

After signing the Pece Peace Agreement in 1988, the remnants of Lakwena's forces regrouped under two leaders: in Kitgum district under Lakwena's father, an elder called Severino Lokoya, who called himself "Rubanga Won" (God the Father), and in Gulu under Joseph Kony, a young man in his twenties who had joined a Cwero UPDA in 1987. Kony was from Odek village, in Gulu district, and was said to be related to Alice Lakwena. Eventually, Kony took control of all rebel units, especially after Severino Lokoya was arrested by the NRA.

During the three years following the war, there was a phase of migration, with frequent abuses against the population committed by both sides. Violence became the order of the day and people had no choice but to live with that insecurity both day and night. In rural areas people often went to sleep in the bush, where they hid from the marauding rebels, who at that time called themselves Uganda Christian Democratic Army, although ordinary villagers continued to call them simply the "Holy".

In 1991, the NRA launched a very tough military offensive known as "Operation Simsim". Under the command of Gen. David Tinyeftuza, the operation isolated the north by cutting off radio communications with humanitarian organisations, including the churches. Many civilians were shot dead when they were unable to produce any identification and opposition politicians, among them Tiberio Okeny, were detained, charged with treason and ill-treated. As part of their counter-insurgency

strategy, the government forced people living in rural areas to move around carrying traditional weapons like axes, spears and arrows to join in the hunt for Kony's guerrillas. This only angered the rebels further and they resorted to carrying out horrific mutilations on people suspected of cooperating with the government. In August 1991, the government announced that Kony had been defeated. Many thought that the nightmare was over, especially because from that time the north of Uganda was generally peaceful until the end of 1993. It seemed that at last Acholiand was beginning to enjoy a period of peace. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Gulu in February 1993 was an event of great significance that cheered many spirits. In Teso, where people had been put in concentration camps, the rebellion led by the Uganda People's Army (UPA) ended after a series of successful negotiations brokered by traditional, local and religious leaders. Some of their leaders, like Musa Ecuweru and Max Omeda joined the government while their top commander Hitler Eregu fled to Kenya where he was later killed.

But peace has not lasted in Northern Uganda. During the second half of 1993, Kony's rebels, who now called themselves the Lord's Resistance Army or LRA, had re-grouped in areas of South Sudan, where they started receiving military support from the Khartoum government, as a tit-for-tat for Museveni's help to John Garang's rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). In this way the war in Northern Uganda became a part of the complex picture of a regional conflict that pitted Uganda against Sudan. Behind the scenes, and to complicate things further, the United States supported the SPLA in its effort to stop Khartoum's Islamic expansion.

When Kony's rebels resumed their attacks in Northern Uganda a new initiative was started by Betty Bigombe, Minister of State for the north of the North. After several months of discreet contacts, LRA commanders met in the bush several times with NRA

officers like Toolit and John Mugume. An agreement was reached for a ceasefire, which was generally respected by both sides and, for the first time in many years, people could enjoy a peaceful Christmas. When it seemed that everything was about to end well and everybody thought that a peace agreement could be signed in a few days, Kony asked for six months to have time to gather all the LRA forces and prepare them for disarmament. On 6th February 1994, Museveni gave the rebels a seven-day ultimatum to surrender, which signalled the end of the peace talks and the resumption of hostilities. Many people still discuss what the reason was for the failure of the peace talks. Some say that a few politicians were envious of a woman receiving credit for bringing peace to the north. The government of Uganda has always reassured the public that they had reliable information that the LRA had started receiving great military support from Sudan and that they were simply using the peace talks to gain time to reorganise themselves, as indeed seemed to be the case.

With the failure of this initiative and Sudan's full support of the LRA, a new period that brought more terror on the population, started. Trapped in a cycle of violence, civilians have not been victims caught by chance in the crossfire, but real targets deliberately chosen as part of an evil strategy that seeks to control, humiliate and if - need be - destroy them, their lives and their culture. They have become human waste.

The LRA and their predecessors have always resorted to the abduction of civilians to beef up their forces, especially in moments of numerical weakness. In 1994 the massive kidnapping of boys and girls became endemic. Although different figures have been considered, I think it puts the number of children who have passed through this systematic abduction experience at 30,000. For many years the same pattern has been repeated: several hundred LRA rebels infiltrate

Northern Uganda through the border with Sudan and, after splitting into many small groups that sweep through the countryside, they systematically abduct hundreds of boys and girls, who are tied up with ropes and led to the LRA's training camps in Sudan. Those who are too weak to walk are killed mercilessly. Girls, in addition to being forced to engage in combat, have to bear the humiliation of becoming sexual slaves for the LRA's commanders. The government of Sudan has greatly benefited from this endless reserve of child soldiers who have been sent to the frontline to fight against the SPLA. This tactic has spared losses among Sudan's own armed forces. Once abducted children have been trained they are brought back to Uganda to fight and to commit atrocities against their own communities. In this way they are instilled with fear. They are too afraid to escape since they think that they have nowhere to go. Different organisations that work with these children's rehabilitation estimate that roughly more than half of them have managed to run away. The children come back psychologically destroyed, heavily traumatised, often with serious gunshot wounds and incurable diseases that cause them extreme pain for many years. Thousands of parents in Northern Uganda have fallen into the most absolute desperation and grief. Some of them have seen all their children abducted in a single night, and the few parents who were courageous enough to follow the children into the bush have been killed, often by their own children who are forced to execute them.

Although the LRA has always attacked military targets, the group has shown a preference for what is euphemistically known as "soft targets" or "collateral damage", that is the civilian population, over whom they have maintained control with sustained levels of terror. Travelling on the roads of Northern Uganda has been a most scary experience for many years as passengers always risk falling into deadly ambushes. When the LRA ambushes a vehicle, they shoot to kill,

bringing the vehicle to a complete standstill, then loot everything and burn the vehicle, regardless of any wounded passengers inside. They will abduct any survivors, some of whom will invariably be killed. Not even cars belonging to NGOs, humanitarian organisations or church groups have been spared.

In addition to these attacks on roads, the LRA has repeatedly attacked villages and suburbs of the main towns like Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Lira and Kalongo. These assaults usually take place at night, and each time dozens or even hundreds of huts are burnt to the ground. Sleeping in the bush for fear of rebel attacks has become routine for ordinary people.

Among the worst atrocities committed by the LRA are the massacres that have been carried out to instill as much terror as possible. The list is endless. The first of these took place in April 1995 at Atyak, when more than 200 people were lined up on the bank of a river and shot in cold blood. The orchestrator of that killing was Vincent Oti, who was born in Atyak. After this mass murder, Uganda broke off diplomatic relations with Sudan (these were only restored in 2000). In July 1996, some 150 Sudanese refugees were killed in a succession of attacks in Acholi camp. During the first week of January 1997, four hundred people were clubbed or hacked to death in villages of Lamwo county. In July 2002, the LRA killed 90 people, most of them children, in Pajong village in Mucwini (Kitgum district), and 120 people in Anyel in October that year. In February 2004, they attacked Horiwo displaced camp, in Lira, where they killed over 300 civilians, most of whom were burned to death in their huts. All these incidents have been extensively reported in the Ugandan press, but not so much in the international media. A detail that has often been overlooked is that in most of these massacres the UPDF has invariably arrived long after the LRA has disappeared. This has even happened in cases when

the massacres took place over several days (this was the case in Acoppii and in Lamwo).*

Since 1994, the government of Sudan has provided the LRA with anti-tank and anti-personnel landmines, which have added a new dimension to the suffering of the civilian population. One day in 1999, as I was travelling from Gulu to Kitgum in a small Suzuki Samurai vehicle, I was stopped by some unfortunate villagers who asked me to take a young man who had just stepped on a landmine to the nearest hospital. I quickly removed, from the vehicle, several boxes of books that I had bought that morning and accommodated the man in the best way I could. He was bleeding profusely and screaming in pain. Despite the fact that the road was rough and the vehicle was old, I maintained a speed of 100 km per hour until we reached the mission hospital, where doctors managed to save his life but had to amputate both of his legs. While the number of landmine victims in Acholi has not been high - hundreds rather than thousands - the psychological impact it has had on the population has added to their trauma. Also, in several visits to the north of Lamwo district, I have heard stories from villagers from the nearby camps of Agoro, Paluga and Potika of how, in 1999, they saw the UPDF planting landmines in areas close to the border, making it impossible for the villagers to return to their homes.

What is clear from this list of atrocities is that the LRA is much more than a handful of crazy armed men and abducted children who are led by an irrational, savage Kony. Behind their extraordinary brutality is a well structured organisation, united under an unopposed leader who is believed to be endowed with supernatural powers. In fact, the LRA is divided into five brigades, each with its own name: Gulu, Gulu, Trinkle, Stocktree and Control Altar, with the latter under the direct command of Kony. In the LRA there are officers in charge

of tasks such as coordination of strategies, finance, medical services, intelligence, political affairs, religious affairs, training and more.

In 1999, Northern Uganda enjoyed another long period of quiet that lasted eleven months. During that time the LRA stayed in their camps of Arua and Jelelein, near Juba. It was rumoured then that the Sudan government would soon suspend support for the rebels and that there was internal fighting among the rebel ranks. Part of those rumours were true, because in November that year Kony executed his second-in-command Oti Lagony (not related to Vincent Oti) after he learned of Lagony's plan to come to Uganda to negotiate a peaceful surrender with the government. At that time, the Carter Center was also carrying out intense diplomatic mediation between the Ugandan and Sudanese governments and in December 1999 a peace agreement was signed in Nairobi. One day later, the Parliament of Uganda passed the Amnesty Bill, which granted a blanket pardon for all fighters who agreed to lay down their arms, no matter how many atrocities they had committed. Nevertheless, despite efforts by the Carter Center to involve the rebel leaders in the negotiations, the LRA seems to have perceived this accord as a threat to their own safety, and two days before Christmas Day in 1999, when people were beginning to think that the war was approaching its end, a group of rebels led by commander Charles Tabuley invaded Acholi once again. The usual spiral of violence resumed through ambushes, killings, night attacks, abduction of children, etcetera. As if this was not enough, a few months later an outbreak of Ebola occurred in Gulu and for the following four months Northern Uganda was more isolated and helpless than ever.

This is the way things were in 2001 when we started some of our first contacts with the rebels and when commander Onekomon and his boys left the bush.

3

Iron Fist

The sun descended softly towards the horizon, sending its last rays over the giant golden statue that represents a fish at the Olympic harbour in Barcelona, and as night approached, a great calm came to rest on the shoreline. The pedestrian avenues filled with people who walked in a relaxed way, enjoying the cool evening breeze.

I had been in Spain for a little more than one month, and I was planning to spend at least one and a half more. After two years in Northern Uganda without any holiday, bearing the pressure of an ever increasing workload and undergoing some tense moments in Gulu, including the months of the Ebola epidemic, I was beginning to notice the benefits of this period of rest in the company of my family and friends in Spain. I had gone out for supper with my sister Carmen and Florentino, an old novitiate classmate with whom I enjoyed the deep charm of his Soria villages on so many occasions. Next to us, the sea gently rocked the many boats and ships anchored in its deep waters. The quiet talk at the restaurant, the grilled fish and the glasses of cool beer were divine gifts for our senses.

I must acknowledge that I have always dragged my feet when it comes to paying bills, maybe because I seem to always wear trousers with torn-out pockets in which money does not last long. When the bill came and Florentino took out his wallet I did not rush to tell him "No, come on, man, let me pick up the bill..." or "Let me foot half of it". The pleasant environment invited us to prolong our enjoyment of the beautiful night and so, when we passed by an Irish pub, I said:

"You know, I have never tasted a glass of Johnnie Walker Black Label, and I would not like to leave this world without having ever tasted one... Let's go in."

I felt that I should be the one to pay for the next round. We stayed at the pub for some time, chatting and enjoying the music before returning home. This time my sister paid for the drinks, and I thought that definitely I ought to be ashamed of myself.

It was nearly two in the morning when we reached the house of the Comboni Missionaries, in the upper part of Barcelona. I know that being in such a state is not always the best way to go back to a religious house, but I had only been doing this once every two or three years. In my case, as a friend of mine from Andalusia is fond of saying:

"Catholicism is the best religion, because it allows you to do almost everything, and if you ever commit some kind of excess you can still be forgiven."

I walked into my room and I was surprised to find a handwritten note on my desk that said: "Fr. Giulio wants to talk to you urgently. Call him as soon as you arrive, no matter how late."

Giulio Albanese, an Italian Comboni missionary from Rome, was one of those close friends that one keeps for life. We had been classmates during my first years in Uganda, in 1984 and 1985 and we had both followed courses of journalism soon after finishing our theological studies. In 1998 he founded the MISNA (Missionary Service News Agency), a Rome-based media initiative which gathered information from countries in the southern hemisphere. The agency's "correspondents" were mainly missionaries who were "on the ground" and who knew what was going on since they could provide the point of view of the people who suffered most. MISNA's philosophy was to "be the voice of the voiceless" and was one of the very few international