

CHILD SOLDIERS: UGANDA

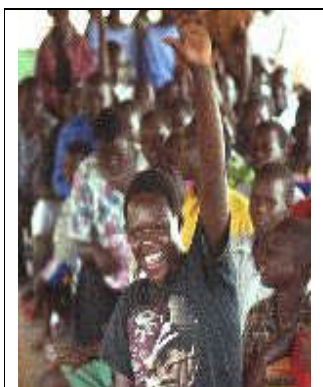
Case Study: Uganda

In the last 20 years, 1.5 million northern Ugandans have fled to refugee camps to avoid the conflict between the Ugandan Government and the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). It's not clear what the LRA want, but their means of warfare are horrendous. The LRA have abducted over 30,000 children – some as young as eight - and forced them to become soldiers, weapon carriers or sex slaves.

The LRA like to use children because scared and hungry children are more likely to follow orders. Small arms are light, cheap and easy for children to use, so making them use weapons is not physically difficult. However, the way they are trained to use them is brutal – threatening children with death to make them kill members of their community, or their own family, so that they can't return home, even if they do escape.

This is why many Ugandan children don't stay with their families overnight. The children become 'night commuters' – they walk to schools, hospitals, churches or any other safe place to stay the night, so that they are not in their village if the LRA comes to find them.

Grace



Years of abuse by the LRA have not taken away Grace's confidence or hopes for the future.

World Vision operates two projects in northern Uganda, designed specifically to help as many child soldiers as possible. The first is called Noah's Ark, a shelter for night commuters who are fed, given warm blankets and clothing and a chance to play or receive lessons. It is a safe place for children to spend the night and not fear being abducted by the LRA.

The second is the Gulu Child Soldier Repatriation Centre. Here, children who have been rescued from the LRA) are given counselling, peer and community support, and skills training for their future.

Grace is one of more than 20,000 children abducted in Uganda by rebel soldiers and forced to become child soldiers or slaves. These children are ordered to steal, fight and kill. Many of them have died. Grace is one of the lucky ones.

Grace is a former child soldier who spent several horrific years with the rebel army group, as a child 'bride'. Grace was given over as a wife to a man in the army and she was treated harshly. She was too frightened to even run away. Finally she'd had enough and pretended to be dead after a battle. Luckily she was found by government soldiers and brought to the safety of the Gulu centre.

Although Grace has some terrible memories, she's gradually regaining her confidence and optimism. Recently she was voted by her peers as a 'head girl', and she takes responsibility for settling in new arrivals to the centre.

"I feel safe now," she says with a smile. "I feel I can do something with my life – maybe even become President of Uganda!"

Beatrice

The last time Beatrice saw her mother, she was being forcibly dragged away by rebel soldiers while her mother was screaming in distress, helpless and frightened for her life. That was the day nine years ago when Beatrice was abducted. She was only 10.

Joining other abducted children, Beatrice became a slave, looking after babies and carrying heavy loads as the rebel army moved around the area. She endured brutal beatings for every little mistake she made and witnessed other children being tortured and killed. Every day was lived in fear.



Beatrice, with her baby girl, is now looking forward to the future.

Like Grace, Beatrice was later given over as a wife to a man in the army who already had 10 wives. Beatrice always thought of escaping but she feared the deadly consequences if she was caught.

Finally, her chance came one day as they were near the border of Sudan. Beatrice fell behind and slowly drifted away from the large group until she could hide herself.

Beatrice found her way to a refugee camp and finally, after nine years of terror, returned home to her family. By that time, Beatrice had given birth to a baby girl, but it wasn't safe to remain in the village as her father had just been killed by the rebel army.

Beatrice's mother sent her to a town called Gulu to live with her uncle. In Gulu, Beatrice learned about World Vision's Children of War Centre where former child soldiers receive counselling,

rehabilitation and assistance. She registered herself and started on a skills training course to learn baking. Beatrice hopes that the new skills will help improve her life. "When I go back home," she says, "I will set up my own bakery to earn money to raise my child."

At the same time, Beatrice also longs to return to school to catch up on her primary education. "I would love to go back to school. I know if my future is to be good, I have to work hard."

For you to do

- Read the Convention on the Rights of the Child at www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf and identify which articles were breached in the lives of these child soldiers from Uganda.
- Imagine you have been asked to interview Grace or Beatrice about their experiences. Prepare 4-5 questions you will ask and write the answers you imagine they would give. With a partner, role play the interview in front of the class.