



# Kill Every Living Thing: The Barlonyo Massacre

FIELD NOTES  
No. 9, February 2009

## Kill Every Living Thing

The Barlonyo Massacre

 **Justice &  
Reconciliation  
Project**

*Working for justice & reconciliation with grassroots communities*





## INTRODUCTION

Twenty-six kilometres north of Lira town in northern Uganda, a quiet displaced person's camp called Barlonyo lies inconspicuously next to the River Moroto. The tranquil setting belies its horrible distinction as the location of one of the largest single massacres committed by the Lord's Resistance Army during its 23-year insurgency. In the space of less than three hours on the late afternoon of 21 February 2004, over 300 people were brutally murdered by LRA rebels and an unknown number were abducted.

Camp residents were burned alive inside their huts, hacked to death with machetes, stabbed with bayonets, clubbed with sticks and shot as they fled. The bellies of pregnant women were slit open, their not-yet-formed babies thrown into the fires. Others were abducted and marched north into Acholi-land. Many died in captivity of violence, sickness, or starvation. The ultimate fate of several abductees remains unknown.

This *Field Note* documents what happened in Barlonyo on that fateful day when LRA Commander Okot Odhiambo ordered his soldiers to "kill every living thing." The victims of Barlonyo beg for justice; not only for the unimaginable acts of the LRA, but the lack of protection afforded the civilian population that day, and in the absence of acknowledgment of what happened there. The Government of Uganda must forward a comprehensive justice strategy that addresses wrong doing and heals the wounds that continue to divide the country.

Central Recommendations include:

1. Accountability for the leadership of the LRA, particularly the commander in charge of the Barlonyo massacre, Okot Odhiambo;
2. Full investigation into the role of the Ugandan People's Defence Force and accountability of persons responsible for failing to protect the civilian population;
3. Reparations in the form of memorial schools, hospital and a bridge over the River Moroto;
4. A trust fund to support orphans of the massacre, particularly child and youth heads of household.

For a full list of recommendations see pages 19-21.

This issue of JRP *Field Notes* was researched and written by Boniface Ojok, Ketty Anyeko, Emon Komakech, Geoffrey Odong, Geoffrey Opobo, Evelyne Akullo, Letha Victor and Erin Baines, with the assistance of Lino Owor Ogora and Kyle McCleery. We would like to thank the people at Barlonyo for their generosity and patience, we hope we do your story justice. We would also like to thank the Liu Institute for Global Issues (UBC), the GDNF's Michael Otim and Geoffrey Okello, as well as Lira District Officials and our donors, Royal Embassy of the Netherlands and GuluWalk. All photos by JRP and A. Mao.

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## PRELUDE TO THE MASSACRE

*When we first attempted to enter Teso, the number of UPDF soldiers deployed there outnumbered us, and some people were killed. Odhiambo ordered us to retreat to get reinforcements. We raided Barlonyo to take people to train in Okung.<sup>1</sup>*

In late 2003 and early 2004, during the second launching of the UPDF's offensive Operation Iron Fist, large groups of LRA had moved south and east into Teso, where they were met with spirited resistance by UPDF troops and Arrow Groups.<sup>2</sup> The LRA suffered significant losses, including that of Commander Brig. Charles Tabuley. The battles embittered fighters on both sides and set the stage for revenge attacks on civilians by the angered LRA.<sup>3</sup>



Fields in Barlonyo

In nearby Lira district, Lango sub-region, the insecurity reached climactic heights. Frequent rebel sightings and looting raids terrified civilians, and residents were forced into displacement camps in massive numbers. By the end of 2003, the number of displaced persons in northern Uganda was a staggering 1.7 million.<sup>4</sup> Between September and November 2003, people began to spontaneously relocate to Barlonyo to be close to a small detach that had been established there. As rebel movements in the area became more frequent, and as the UPDF sought to gain control of the area, more civilians were told to relocate to Barlonyo. The UPDF held sensitization campaigns that reassured civilians they would be safer there.

One survivor recalled the circumstances of the camp's creation: "At that time, insecurity was at its peak; people fled their villages for town and left their crops in their gardens. So the district leaders encouraged people to come stay in a camp where they are protected by the UPDF and could harvest their crops."<sup>5</sup> By January 2004, approximately 5,000 people had based themselves next to the Barlonyo military detach.<sup>6</sup>

Surviving camp residents describe a positive relationship between the UPDF soldiers and the community. The UPDF commander gave lectures to the local population on what to do in the event of an attack. He advised civilians to dig holes in their huts to use for cover as anyone leaving their huts would risk getting caught in the cross fire between LRA and UPDF. While it was possible the commander never thought the civilians themselves would be targeted in an attack; mass killing was a strategy that had been used by the LRA in the past: around 50 people had been slaughtered just weeks prior in Abia, a nearby camp.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Arrow Groups in Teso were local militia formed by young men and some young women willing to fight to repel the LRA from the region.

<sup>3</sup> JRP, *Complicating Victims and Perpetrators in Uganda: On Dominic Ongwen*. FN VII, 2008, P. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a survivor, 3 June 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Because no official camp records were kept, this number is disputed. Some survivors claim the number was much higher and beyond 10,000 people.

In late January, the UPDF contingent in Barlonyo was ordered to withdraw troops, likely to reinforce the battles still taking place in nearby Teso district. They were replaced with local militia known as Amuka and LDUs (local defence units). One person explained the make-up of the militia: "Amukas were just locals and were just picked from local villages because they knew the area well and where the LRA could attack. LDUs were people brought from other areas of Lango, not specifically Barlonyo."<sup>7</sup>

Trained in a place called Aler for three months on AK-47 shooting, field craft and parade, the 70 men that had originally taken the place of the UPDF in Barlonyo were reduced to 47 less than one month after their arrival. Thirty people belonged to the Amuka force and the remaining 17 were LDU members. Up until the time of the attack, none of the Amuka soldiers had received their salaries, instead relying on locals to feed them. "That thing caused a low in morale," explained one former Amuka person, "because we even had to rely on locals to be fed. They gave us beans, maize, and somebody would take it to the grinding mill and then we would divide it amongst ourselves. Some just decided to return home to their villages and deserted."<sup>8</sup> As for the LDU soldiers, they reportedly received their first monthly salary of 60,000 shillings (approx. Cdn\$36) the day of the massacre and subsequently left the camp to shop at the local market.

In late January and early February, shortly after the withdrawal of the UPDF, two visits by mobile UPDF forces heightened the fears of locals. "They came here twice," recounted one woman. "Countless numbers came from the battlefield in Pader, and they came to rest in the camp. They just sat and kept quiet – we didn't know why they were here. They just sat with their guns for one hour. This first time was at the end of January 2003. The second time they came in early February, from the same direction, but they surrounded the camp. My hut was on the outskirts and they came right up to my door, but didn't say anything. We were very perplexed because we didn't understand their motives for coming,"<sup>9</sup> she said. The removal of the UPDF greatly worried the residents; many expressed that they felt abandoned by the army at a time insecurity was at its highest in the region.

## MASSACRE AT BARLONYO

*Odhiambo said we were going to leave Barlonyo to be a field where flies could feast and no living soul would be left.*<sup>10</sup>

It was around 5:00 in the afternoon when the rebels were first spotted making their way towards Barlonyo. Many heroic civilians attempted to warn the camp residents. An elderly man, 'Joseph', was watching over his cattle in a neighbouring field when he spotted the rebels. "Immediately I tried to run back to the camp to inform the people about the presence of the rebels. As I ran, I was shot in the arm...by the time I arrived it was too late, the rebels had already attacked the detach."

'Eric'<sup>11</sup> was grazing his cattle a short distance from the camp when he heard dogs barking on the next hill and saw a young boy making his way towards him, yelling that he had just seen soldiers running towards the camp through the sunflower fields. "As he pointed at the direction from which the soldiers were coming," 'Eric' remembered, "I immediately turned to see seven people dressed in army uniforms. They

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with a survivor, 5 June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>11</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

were running and they stopped approximately sixty metres from where I stood.”<sup>12</sup> He threw himself flat on the ground as they started shooting towards the camp.

‘James’, then a 10-year-old abductee, was among the force of rebels that stopped sixty metres from ‘Eric’. He described the instructions that were given by his commander, Okot Odhiambo: “In the LRA, normally when you attack a place you are given your role just as you are approaching. So we gathered under some trees when we came from the direction of Okwang” he recalled. “Odhiambo told us, “I have received the order from the high command of the LRA. You are to kill every living thing. Kill the old people, kill the adults, kill the government soldiers, and abduct all the young children and boys.””<sup>13</sup> The subordinates enacted his orders with murderous zeal. ‘Eric’ looked on and described what happened next:

They immediately blew a whistle and started firing towards the military detach in the camp. More soldiers kept coming as they ran in a horn shape, surrounding the camp. At that point I decided to run but after a short while something told me that I would be shot if I continued running. That made me to stop and I threw myself on the ground again. More gun shots continued for about five minutes before I heard two bombs shot towards the camp. When I heard these two bombs drop, I decided to twist round to check if the rebels were anywhere near where I was so that I could flee away. This time they were only about ten meters from me, but they still couldn’t see me. When I decided to crawl, they saw me and started firing at me. I crawled until I reached a big tree that had just been felled with all its branches intact. I threw myself behind this tree, which protected me from the gun shots that continued to follow after me.

I decided to stand up and run. I ran in a zigzag manner, trying to dodge the gun shots that kept coming after me. I knew I was risking to be shot but I could not risk being abducted. After running for a while, I felt some hot pain in my chest. This worried me, thinking that I had been shot in the chest, until when it eventually cooled. When I stopped to check if I had been shot, I found my chest clean of any shots. Instead when I glanced at my legs, I only noticed my trouser soaked with blood. I had been shot in the leg.<sup>14</sup>



Human remains found near Barlonyo

## The Militia is Defeated

In the Amuka/LDU detach, up to 30 soldiers and some of their family members were occupying the barracks. As the LDU soldiers had received their pay just that day, several had gone to the Saturday market day in nearby Onekaden to buy food and other supplies. Many of the Amuka, who had not yet received their salaries, had gone to search for water or get food from camp residents. “These people didn’t have enough food or access to food, so during the day they went looking for such,” explained an eyewitness. “So the LRA came before they could get back [to barracks].”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a survivor, 3 June 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a survivor, 3 June 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a survivor, 5 June 2008.



The LRA troops were given the order to split into three lines. The outward lines were instructed to surround the camp and the middle line had the task of attacking the Amuka detach first. 'James', the LRA child soldier, explained the order:

We had three long lines of our fighters. Odhiambo blew a whistle and we scattered. We surrounded the camp and the detach and started fighting and lighting things on fire. Out of the 340 people we had, 100 had guns, we had bombs, we had J2s, AK-47s in plenty, and the other 240 fighters left had clubs and sticks. But most of them were ululating and boosting morale, saying, "We have to capture them alive!"<sup>16</sup>

The military detach was immediately overwhelmed by the attackers. Their *adaks*<sup>17</sup> were set on fire and those people found inside were killed immediately. An Amuka commander soon realised that his forces were desperately outnumbered:



Human remains found on February 22, 2004. Photo by Ali Mao.

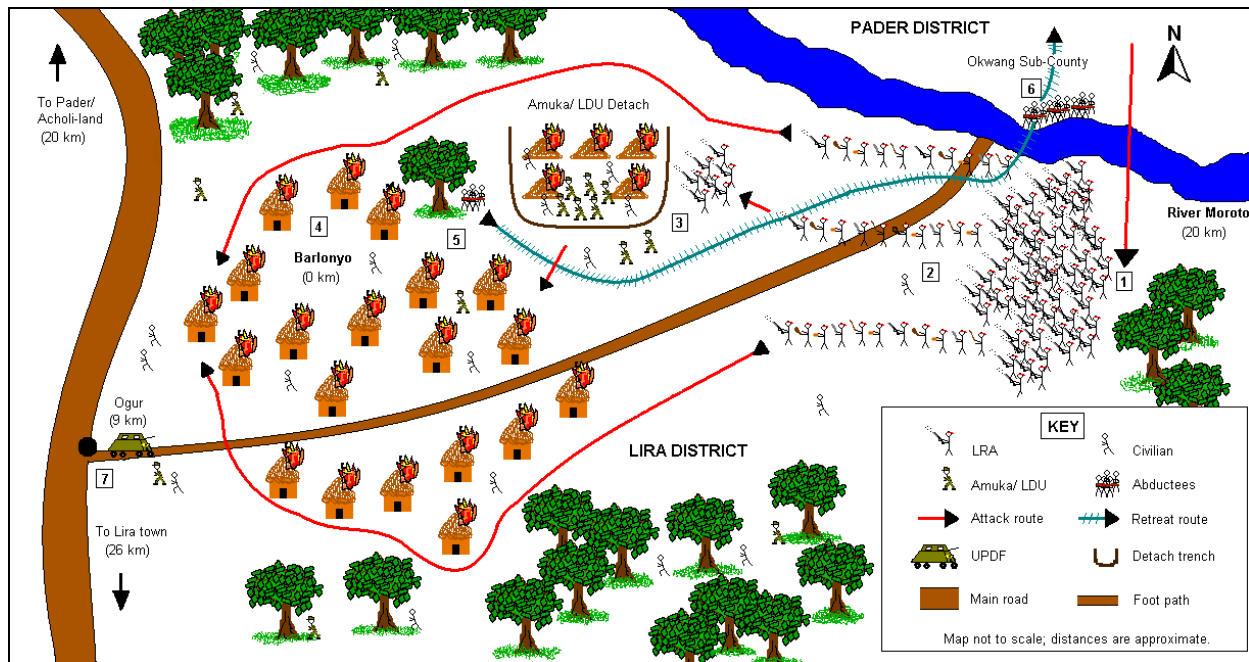
There were so many of them, I thought they could even be a whole battalion of 400 people— some were beating drums, some were ululating, and others were shooting. They were performing many tasks all at once. They sealed off all of the paths out of the camp. When I saw that I couldn't put up a spirited fight against them, I decided to flee. I shouted at people to run for their lives....The Amukas and their families died... Even my wife was killed. When we had just started fighting, I saw 4 killed in front of me (2 were LDUs, 2 were Amukas). They even arrested some, and then killed them in Okwang. They abducted 7 Amukas – 3 came back immediately in the morning, and 4 were killed.<sup>18</sup>

The LRA reportedly blew horns and whistles and ululated after conquering the military detach, perhaps as a sign of victory but perhaps also a signal to break into smaller groups to compete the second phase of attack on civilians. The Amuka/LDU had no radio communication with the Ugandan military and it would be three hours before the UPDF responded. By then, time the LRA had butchered over 300 people.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>17</sup> An *adak* is a subterranean building commonly used inside military detaches. The thatched-grass roofs lie above ground and so in this case could be ignited.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a survivor, 5 June 2008.



- 1 5:00pm: Three hundred LRA gather in the fields outside of Barlonyo to receive their attack instructions from Okot Odhiambo.
- 2 5-5:30pm: Several civilians spot the rebels and attempt to alert the camp. One is shot.
- 3 5:30pm: The LRA, headed by 7 fighters, splits into three groups. One group attacks the militia detach, killing those inside, and continues to the main camp.
- 4 5:30pm: The other two groups surround the main camp and begin massacring civilians and abducting others. A small gap of fighters on the western side of the camp allows some civilians, Amuka and LDU to escape. Some hide in the bushes and others run to Ogur.
- 5 7:30pm: The rebels gather under a tree and tie up abductees. They are given luggage to carry and are marched towards the River Moroto.
- 6 8:30pm: After crossing the river, abductees are beaten severely. Thirty are killed by the riverside. The group carries on into Okwang.
- 7 9:30pm: Alerted by those who escaped, three UPDF vehicles arrive to survey the damage and ferry the injured to nearby health centers.

### The Camp is Attacked

As the LRA drew near, the camp residents were unaware of the disaster beginning to unfold around them. Some were bathing, others were tending their cooking fires, and some were drinking and playing cards. ‘Susan’ was cooking supper outside of her hut when the rebels arrived:

At 5:30pm, I had sliced an onion and my co-wife had begun cooking sardines. All of the sudden I heard a “pow!” I asked my co-wife what it was, and we saw soldiers attacking from over there [points east], threatening the detach, and I fainted.<sup>19</sup>

Some LRA were dressed in UPDF uniforms and were able to convince some of the civilians that they were actually there to protect them. Civilians were told by the advancing LRA to get into their huts and

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008.

shut the doors. Seeing their uniforms and recalling the advice of the UPDF in earlier sensitization campaigns, many did as they were told, gathering their children and elders and quickly running into their huts. The LRA then began to set the huts ablaze.

'Susan' woke to see the ghastly scene:

When I regained consciousness, I saw that the detach was in smoke, there were huts on fire, and people were wailing everywhere. So with two co-wives I stayed in my house. The attackers kept moving through the camp, and as they were approaching my house I saw my neighbour running and decided to escape too. I don't think the attackers saw me, but we couldn't look behind – we couldn't see anybody because of all the smoke.<sup>20</sup>

Mass confusion arose as people mistook the LRA for the UPDF. 'Susan' realised that to stay in her house would bring death. In the confusion of the fires, she ran towards the dense bushes outside of the camp:

I ran alone. One of my co-wives also ran another way, but the other co-wife stayed in the house and was killed. As she was trying to escape, they caught her. They smashed her head with a club and also that of her daughter who was 3 years old. The child was pierced in the eardrum and the eardrum was brought out of the head.<sup>21</sup>

'Eric', struggling with the gunshot wound to his thigh, also ran to safety:

I could not get to the camp since the barracks were already on fire and it looked like the attackers had conquered the camp. I was only saved by a camp resident who had managed to flee. He came and held me and we ran to Ogur detach where there were soldiers. That was the point that I could tell that I would survive.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, it was mostly those who made the panicked decision to flee that survived. As one young man remembered of that night:

I was bathing in the stream when I heard gunshots in the camp...[I ran to the camp], the Amuka were shouting that locals should enter their huts....I rushed into my mother's hut. [But there I witnessed] a soldier beating a young woman with a piece of wood. I ran away to look for safety. On my way to the bush I passed another soldier beating women with an axe, on the left of me there were soldiers setting the huts ablaze. I could hear people crying in the houses, they were being burned alive.<sup>23</sup>

Another woman, 'Janet', recalls:

...I had just been fetching cooking oil to go and fry my sauce when heard a gunshot which sounded so close. I thought it was a joke but before I could reach the kitchen a bomb blast followed. Then I knew there was trouble...Immediately my neighbour came and told me that the rebels had defeated the local defence so we needed to run for our lives. I was torn between thoughts of running and remaining behind [in a hut] because there were bullets all over the place. We ran.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a survivor, 3 June 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008.



The LRA had sealed off all pathways leading from the camp, hiding in ambushes. Those caught trying to escape were shot or abducted. "There were some Amuka who hadn't given up and were yelling at people to run for their lives, so we blocked the escape routes. Still, some escaped, and some were injured,"<sup>25</sup> confirmed 'James'. 'Mary', who could not escape the rampage, still bears the physical and emotional scars:

They came when I had just been bathing, went straight to the barracks and then started burning houses. I was in my hut when it was set ablaze. I had my baby in my hands as our house caught fire and she got burnt. As I tried to run, fire caught my back. I ran with fire on my back! Then in the morning I came back and was taken to hospital together with other injured people. My baby was burnt by the fire. Her head got burnt, and after two weeks she died. There was no breast milk for her because my breast got burnt and the milk dried up. She was three months old.<sup>26</sup>



Mary Today

Many others were burned to death after following instructions to enter their homes issued by the LRA soldiers dressed in UPDF uniforms. Those who tried to escape were shot, mutilated with *pangas* (machetes), beaten to death with sticks, or pierced with bayonets. Most families suffered the loss of multiple loved ones in the most inhumane ways. 'Nancy' recalls:

I and my family were all in the same house. When we realized that the battle was intensifying, we thought it was good to run away before we were all killed in the house. We held on waiting for a short break of gun shots then took off on our heels. My husband was shot immediately....My two children were shot as we ran to the nearby bush.<sup>27</sup>

'Sylvie' recalls witnessing the brutal murder of her co-wives' children:

I ran and hid with my four children in the bush. My co-wife was too frightened to run, so she took her children and hid inside a hut. The rebels saw her enter and threw a bomb inside, killing them all...When I returned the next day I found them dead, the one year old baby's head had been smashed in with a club.<sup>28</sup>

'Joyce' tells us that "my three sisters and husband perished at the hands of the attackers." And for thirty year old 'Paska', "I am the only survivor in my entire household...two of my daughters, two of my co-wives and my neighbour were all killed." Finally 'Grace' recalled the events that night:

When they surrounded us that night, we ran into the hut with five other people. The hut had no door, the rebels opened fire on us. I was shot on my fingers, my right thumb was amputated, my upper left arm has a big scar left by bullets and my right shoulder was shot too....Two people were

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a survivor, 5 June 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a survivor, 3 June 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a survivor, 4 June 2008.

now lying dead just beneath my legs. One was my mother and the other a boy who had come to hide in our hut, I don't even know his identity.<sup>29</sup>

Some children ran and hid in trees, watching the chaos unfold beneath them. One boy, overwhelmed, was unable to hang onto the branches. His aunt recalls:

He was twelve years old. He was shot dead. When the rebels came, my nephew and his friend climbed on top of a mango tree....Before long, a person was captured by the attackers and he was brought at the base of the very tree where my nephew was. Once at the base, he was butchered; his neck slit open and left for dead. The sight was too much for my nephew. [He lost his] grip on the branch of the tree, fear took hold of him. He uncontrollably trembled then jumped from the tree and started to flee....Luck was no longer his companion, he was shot and killed instantly.<sup>30</sup>

Others were saved only because they had a structure with an iron roof and steel door to hide inside, one which could not be set on fire or easily broken into:

In my [iron-roofed] house, a number of about 7-10 people had taken refuge and we bolted the door. The rebels came, kicked at the door, told us to open it but the more they pled, the more we found energy to hold the door hard until they gave up. That is how our lives were spared. At my neighbours, the one I was only separated from by a mere wall and sharing the same building though with different doors, ten people were shot and mercilessly killed because they could not bolt the door in time.<sup>31</sup>

Some survivors recalled acts of humanity in this morass of killing. There were those who risked and lost their lives by fleeing to the camp ahead of the LRA to warn civilians of the imminent attack. There were a few soldiers amongst the LRA that helped people to hide or took steps to help people survive abduction. One woman, 'Cecilia' recalls that a young Langi soldier refused to allow others to kill her, ordering them instead to make her carry looted goods. Later on, the same soldier helped her to return home.

### Abduction and March to Okwang

After two and a half hours, the LRA retreated from their conquest. "After we had finished burning, shooting, and stabbing people, Odhiambo blew his whistle and we all gathered under a tree. We tied red headbands on our heads so that we were easily identifiable. We abducted many people from Barlonyo on that night, and we tied them up there,"<sup>32</sup> detailed James. One of the goals of the attack on Barlonyo was to collect food and abduct new recruits. Adults were generally forced to carry food and other goods, then later killed. Youth were taken to LRA encampments to be trained as soldiers.

According to the testimonies of survivors, the abductees moved with several different groups and were taken along different routes to a central meeting point. They crossed vast distances quickly. Anyone who tired or showed signs of wanting to escape was killed: "When we had moved a short distance from the camp...my brother was hesitant to move on. One of the soldiers ordered for him to be killed. I watched

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with a survivor, 21 November 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with an abducted woman from Barlonyo, returned after 2 days in captivity, 20 November 2007.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

them put him on the ground and club him to death on the head.<sup>33</sup> Others who tired were killed by clubs or were 'stepped on', repeatedly trampled on by a group of young LRA. One woman bitterly described her abductors. "They were mainly composed of young and terrible children. They were ...very strong. When they gang up on you, they can kill you within a second".<sup>34</sup>

One group was forced to carry foodstuffs and luggage to the River Moroto (20 kilometres away). Several people struggled to cross the deep river and were punished for their caution. One woman spilled millet as she stumbled, and was promptly chopped to death with a panga. "We killed many people along the way as well, but I didn't count the number," recounted 'James'. "Twenty people were killed at the River Moroto. Most of those people were killed by smashing their heads and stabbing them with bayonets."<sup>35</sup> One woman left for dead survived. Later rescued by UPDF, she spent close to a year in hospitals to recover.

As the group advanced, the LRA abducted more people along the way, according to witnesses interviewed. Those abducted were tortured mercilessly by the LRA:

[We] were really harassed, punished and beaten. For instance, one day the rebels tied both my hands behind my back and placed some rubbish on my neck, setting it ablaze. They did this after one of the abducted had escaped, and they tried to force me to admit I helped him.<sup>36</sup>

At one point, abducted adults were separated from the group and killed. Before their murder, Odhiambo assembled the captives and lectured them on why he had come to Barlonyo. One teenage witness gave his account of that night:



Hands of a survivor shot while she ran, trying to carry her baby to safety.

The rebels marched us to where Odhiambo was seated....All three groups arrived at the River Moroto, where all the young boys and girls were separated from the adults. Commander Okot Odhiambo started talking to us saying that the Langi at first were good but 'now you have changed, siding with the Government by sending your children to be recruited as home guards, now, has this helped you? As he was finished talking, 30 civilians were picked randomly and put aside; three of us were selected to kill all the abductees while the rest witnessed. I became afraid, but they told me the same would be done to me if I refused. I personally killed 15 people with a panga. Many cried out for help, but there was no other way...Later we moved to Okwang and Okot Odhiambo ordered three of us children to again kill 15 more people. I again killed five people, among them was my uncle and clan mate. We hanged some along the river Okwang to die. I remember [one woman's] cry for help, it haunts me seriously at night.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Interview with an abducted person from Barlonyo, 4 June 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with an abducted person from Barlonyo, 4 June 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with a former LRA abductee and part of the attacking force, 6 June 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a former abductee from Barlonyo, 5 June 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with a former abductee from Barlonyo, 3 June 2008.



This boy, along with thousands of others that year across northern and eastern Uganda, were initiated into the LRA and forced to become soldiers. 'Clara' said that when she was taken from Barlonyo that night, "My heart leapt away and I knew I was dead. Even when I was moving with the rebels I knew I had died long ago. It was my spirit moving along," she recalled. She stayed in captivity for one year, undergoing horrendous beatings and brutal indoctrination tactics. "I tried thinking of a way of escape but it was impossible. I lived for about one year without knowing anything around me,"<sup>38</sup> she lamented.

Less than a dozen of those abducted from Barlonyo are known to have escaped from captivity. There is no official record of the number or identities of the persons who were abducted. Eyewitnesses often escaped before merging with the larger group, others were quickly split up and given to other smaller units. Many family members of the disappeared perished that night in Barlonyo and so there is no one to report them missing.

### The UPDF Arrives

*"I went and took cover with them, but I was lifeless – I had survived gunshots – my body was being taken, but my soul wasn't with me."*<sup>39</sup>

Some who escaped abduction and death made their way to safety in Orit camp and in the town of Ogur (approximately 9 kilometres from the camp), while others hid in nearby trees and bushes. It was a long night of fear and sorrow for those survivors who could hear the keening of those clan-mates still alive, perishing slowly and painfully in the fires. 'Susan' cannot forget that long night:



The smouldering remains of Barlonyo on the morning of February 22, 2004. Photo by Ali Mao.

We were four in the bush - there were many taking cover. People were weeping, crying. At one moment you would console someone and once they calmed they would have to console you. Just imagine – sleeping was not something we considered doing. People were like mad men and women. We were worried and the fear was intensified when we saw mambas coming. I feel that the arrival of the mambas was a futile effort. They came to chase the wind – the massacre attackers had left by 8:00pm, and the mambas didn't come until 10:00pm. There were about four of them and a truck to ferry the injured to hospital in Lira.<sup>40</sup>

Between approximately 9:00 and 10:00pm, well after the LRA had left the area, three UPDF vehicles arrived (including armoured personnel carriers, also known as 'mambas'). One survivor recalled that as he heard the mambas passing by his hiding place, he decided to return to the camp:

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a survivor and former LRA abductee, 4 June 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a survivor, 4 June 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a survivor, 2 June 2008. Many survivors died of their wounds in hospital and it is thought that up to 40 were buried in a nearby gravesite.

When we came, we found huts that were blazing. We could hear people wailing inside, we could hear cries for help, and faint cries of people burning. We now saw the mambas. People were crying, especially those who were injured. So the soldiers decided that those injured should be taken to the hospital. I helped to carry people to the cars, but some people died before we could even get them in, so we laid them down where we were and got other injured people. They ferried people to the hospital, and I slept under a tree that night with some lightly-injured people. But it was a night full of fear; we never knew if another attack would happen.<sup>41</sup>

Another survivor who hid in the bush with two Amukas remembered that the “Amuka were afraid that they would be mistaken for rebels because they were in military uniforms, but they weren’t at the detach.”<sup>42</sup> It was difficult to distinguish a rebel from a civilian, a soldier from a militiaman, a victim from a perpetrator: there was no security for anyone that night.

As the morning broke, the news reached Lira town. Non-governmental organizations such as the International Rescue Committee, local politicians and members of parliament, relatives and friends of people living in Barlonyo, journalists and senior ranking UPDF all rushed to the scene. What they witnessed was a total nightmare of charred and mangled bodies, many being devoured by dogs. Still working to ensure the camp was secure, the UPDF at first denied entrance to everyone but members of the military, causing great anguish to relatives that looked on, eager to begin the search for their loved ones. IRC eventually gained entrance and directly began to aid survivors.

Over the course of the day, tension broke out between civilians and the UPDF. Relatives wanted to retrieve the corpses of their loved ones and give them a proper burial, but the UPDF forced survivors to improvise quick burials. Huts were collapsed on top of remains and bodies were buried in pit latrines. Shallow graves were hastily dug. None were sufficient. Relatives of the victims begged to be given their loved ones and in the end, the shallow graves soon exposed the bodies as the many dogs in Barlonyo – there originally to protect the population – dragged body parts out from under the dirt. The stench of decomposing flesh further added to the need to properly rebury the dead.



Bodies still burning in the wreckage the next morning. Photo by Ali Mao.

Under pressure of the population and local politicians, the UPDF (by now the fourth division commander had arrived) gave new orders to civilians to dig up the improvised graves, wrap the corpses in plastic sheeting and place them in the many *adak* surrounding the detach, a makeshift mass grave was created in this way. Relatives protested that this too was offensive to the dead. The insistence of the UPDF to create a mass grave deeply hurt those who were already grieving, while adding to the suspicion with which they viewed the army. Many believed the army’s haste in burying the dead was motivated more by the desire to cover up the number of dead than an interest in preserving their dignity.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a survivor, 4 June 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with a survivor, 4 June 2008.



## RESPONSE OF THE GOVERNMENT

*"The stick that once caned your co-wife must never be laughed at."*<sup>43</sup>

In March, the footpath connecting Barlonyo to the outside world was widened into a modest road in honour of a visit from the President of Uganda who presided over the official mass burial ceremony. President Museveni's visit had been welcomed by the survivors, who referred to him as their father, yet the ceremony proved controversial. First, the memorial stone at the mass grave indicated that only 121 persons had been killed in the massacre. According to all of the eyewitnesses interviewed, the correct number was over 300 people, if not substantially higher. It is difficult to determine the exact number because many were killed outside of the perimeters of the camp, others were burned beyond individual identification in their huts and still others had no family members remaining alive to report their death or disappearance. The immediate trauma of the aftermath meant that official body counts were not made, although a number of eyewitnesses helped local officials unofficially count up to 280 corpses at the immediate scene.

Lack of acknowledgement of the number of persons killed and the lack of effort made to discover the true number raised suspicions amongst the community that the Government of Uganda did not view those who perished as important enough to be counted. This resentment was compounded by the President's speech that day.

"He was given a warm welcome, but during his speech he made a mocking statement," one witness told us. Dozens of eyewitnesses testified that during his speech, President Museveni said: "*Lut ma opwodo kede neki ka pe ibolo i lum opwodi kuede*", or 'if you do not throw away the stick that was used to beat your co-wife, it will also be used to beat you,' or, 'what goes around comes around.'" Nearly every respondent's recollection of the burial ceremony focused on this statement, and all interpreted it as an insult. Survivors and witnesses interpreted the President's statement as intended to mean that the massacre was a fateful punishment for the murder of civilians in the Luwero Triangle, carried out primarily by northern Ugandans, in the early 1980's. The atrocities in Luwero were committed by anti-Museveni forces, led by then-President Milton Obote, himself a Langi. The survivors of Barlonyo were thus guilty by virtue of their identity as northern Ugandans.

The statement provoked tears and anger. Some survivors wondered if the Government tacitly or even overtly participated in the massacre of Barlonyo's residents. "Up to now I have never understood why he mentioned such a statement," one person stated. "I began to think that he must have had a hand in these killings."



The memorial stone unveiled by President Museveni.

<sup>43</sup> Interview respondent, 20 November 2007



"It was a tough situation as there were bones of the deceased scattered all over the place, and it was the first time some people saw the graves of their loved ones who were massacred brutally," a local NGO worker remembered. Lastly, the President attempted to appease the survivors present at the burial ceremony by pledging to provide Barlonyo with infrastructure in honour of those massacred, including a health centre, a technical school, a secondary school, and a bridge over the river Moroto, to be named 'Kaguta' in Museveni's honour. At the time of writing in 2009, none of these promises has been fulfilled.

## BARLONYO ON THE 5<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY



Half section of the Barlonyo mass grave, as seen from the West.

Today, only a few hundred persons have moved back to Barlonyo, largely in order to be closer to their land for cultivation. Remarkably, the majority of survivors we met stated that they had forgiven the LRA and the Government of Uganda. They still view each party as responsible, but expect little to nothing from either. Despite the promises of assistance from Museveni and a visit by an LRA Delegation who came to apologize during the peace talks, no reparations in the form of social institutions have been paid to the survivors of Barlonyo. Most live on assistance given by local NGOs and the kindness of Christian based groups. Although the monument exists, for many it is a reminder that they have been forgotten, rather than a symbol which 'cools their hearts.'<sup>44</sup>

At least a dozen of our eyewitnesses referred to the spiritual haunting of the area around the monument, of restless ghosts which appear in their dreams and possess their bodies demanding justice. Others suggest that this spirit possession is symbolic of the desire and effort of local persons to take control of the situation and seek out justice.<sup>45</sup>

Many talked about development as a form of justice. "When hunger strikes my family, it drives me insane. It reminds me of my land that I used to plow. All the people who died have been buried on my land and now I have nowhere to plow", claimed one woman.<sup>46</sup> Poverty continues to plague the community, with a particular impact on young female headed households. One informant observed that many young female

<sup>44</sup> Reconciliation is sometimes referred to as the 'cooling of hearts' in Luo.

<sup>45</sup> Igreja, Victor. 2008. "Gamba Spirits, Gender Relations, and Healing in Post-Civil War Gorongosa, Mozambique." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 14. Pp. 353-371; 2003. "Why Are There So Many Drums Playing until Dawn?" Exploring the Role of Gamba Spirits and Healers in the Post-War Recovery Period in Gorongosa, Central Mozambique." *Transcultural Psychiatry*. 40(4). Pp. 460-487.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with survivor, 20 November 2007.

headed households have resorted to prostitution or been vulnerable to exploitation such as food for sex. The following testimony of 'Nighty' illustrates how this might happen:

My name is 'Nighty' and I am 16 years old. On the night the rebels came, a collaborator had come to our house to ask for some water. He then told us we should run and hide. I begged my older brother Tony to run, but he refused, saying he wanted to finish eating first. So I fled with our four young brothers and sisters. My parents had left us in my older brother's care after they broke up. They didn't want us anymore. When I was in hiding I heard him cry out. The next morning I found him cut into pieces. The reasons as to why rebels killed him we did not know for sure. Tony was like our father after our parents had left us 3 years ago as if they were not the ones who gave birth to all of us. But when Tony was killed, my father came to help in his burial. After some few days he again left since he has another wife. I still remember Tony. He used to wake up early every morning to go to the garden before we could go to school to study. This was an act I will always remember, because he was behaving maturely like the father for the young children like us. All the suffering we had when both the father and mother had left, Tony the solution to our suffering despite his age. I am now paying four of my brothers and sisters in Corom Primary School. I get money from peasant farming and selling the proceeds. I am not studying because I am the one taking care of the children as inherited responsibilities. I need help, otherwise I will get married at this age. It is difficult to raise my fellow young ones.

One woman abandoned by her husband after being disfigured by the LRA after they had beaten her head with a bayonet and jumped on top of her, has to raise her children alone, unable to work because of her disability. When asked if she were angry at those who had done this, she remarked:

No I have already forgiven them. I forgave them a long time ago. There is a song that has lyrics which state 'luck is with my enemies'. Like for my case, my luck is with Odhimabo and Kony. Even if they return tomorrow, I will not do anything bad to them; I will welcome them to my home, give them water for bathing and even serve them.

This should not be viewed as a fatalistic view, but rather one that recognizes (and in a sense critiques) the acute dominance of either group in her life. While she lost all in the attack, she retains a moral high ground. During abduction, she had been denied water by the rebels, 'I wondered how inhumane these rebels were?' she asked us.



Prayer ceremony at Barlonyo camp, June 2008.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since 2005, when the International Criminal Court indicted five of the most senior LRA commanders accused of raping and mutilating civilians, enlisting child soldiers and massacring thousands, significant

attention has been directed towards perpetrators at the expense of the victims. This approach seems to narrow a broad range of discussions such as those raised by the victims of Barlonyo massacre. By this we also mean that the quest for justice solutions should be participatory, seeking views from those considered the citizens, those considered most disadvantaged and especially those who bear the brunt of the violence during the twenty three year old conflict in northern Uganda. Having their stories documented is an inclusive process through which victims can have their voices heard in the design of transitional justice mechanisms for Uganda.

The Juba peace negotiations involved the consultation of many stakeholders including the people of Barlonyo and it is important that these victims see results from their efforts over the past two years of negotiation. It is in this respect that the government should commit itself to continuous consultations that reflect a commitment to acknowledge the suffering caused by the conflict and preventing recurrence in the future.

In the process of documenting the massacre at Barlonyo, the survivors advanced the following set of recommendations to promote accountability and reconciliation:

**Truth telling:** This report has highlighted considerable controversy over the role of the Government of Uganda in failing to protect the civilian population in Barlonyo. A truth seeking process could provide valuable insights into events surrounding the Barlonyo massacre and could provide relief to victims by allowing them to know for certain the truth regarding these events. Victims and perpetrators should be brought together to testify so that there is a guarantee of non-repetition as well as the identification and possible punishment of those responsible.

**Reparation:** Like most massacres in northern Uganda, it is worth emphasising that from the standpoint of the victims of Barlonyo massacre, compensation plays an important role in the transition to peace. A considerable amount of the attention paid to the post-conflict situation by the government of Uganda has been directed towards the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for northern Uganda (PRDP), which does not provide for reparation. Yet reparations are an overwhelming demand of the survivors consulted in this report. Reparations were identified as both material and symbolic and could be linked with other transitional initiatives such as prosecutions or truth telling. When government programmes function without some form of justice, they are seen as constituting the tool with which the silence of victims are bought. Survivors requested that the Government of Uganda provide the following reparations:

- a) Construct a memorial school, nursery, bridge, hospital and church
- b) Build a fence around the present mass burial site and create a small fund to maintain the memorial.
- c) Create a fund for orphans of the massacre to provide for their future needs, targeting particularly child headed households.
- d) Create a fund to sponsor annual memorial prayers.
- e) Provide medical care to those with disabilities, including those with bullets and bullet fragments in their bodies. Provide counselling to those who continue to suffer psychological trauma.
- f) Intervene to end exploitation of child headed households and provide support to women reject by their husbands after becoming disabled.

**Meaningful and effective investigations into the massacre:** In Barlonyo, the anguish suffered as a result of death, disappearance and uncertainty about the fate of close relatives constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. It follows that the government should be compelled to take a lead in investigating the events of the Barlonyo massacre. Together with the support of other stakeholders, they



should investigate what happened to victims and inform their relatives of their fate because they have 'the right to know' what happened to their loved ones.

**Neglect and responsibility:** Officials who either directly or indirectly violated and neglected their duty to protect the displaced persons in Barlonyo camp should be held individually or institutionally responsible. In particular, Division commanders and senior ranking officials in charge of the security and military protection of the camp at the time of the massacre should be investigated. At this moment of transition, the government should consult the victims and declare its willingness and capacity to deal with the state and non-state actors responsible for the atrocities in Barlonyo.

**Memorials:** If recent attempts being advanced by government of Uganda's Justice, Law and Order Sector working group (JLOS)<sup>47</sup> along with members of civil society to address gross human rights violations across Uganda are to bear fruit to victims in northern Uganda, memorials must be considered as an option. Victims in Barlonyo unanimously welcomed president Museveni's offer to erect a monument to tell the rest of the country what happened on the afternoon of 21 February 2004 and start a conversation about the full story of the injustice that befell their close relatives and families. Unfortunately for the victims of Barlonyo massacre, this monument has failed in a number of respects to fully address their need to remember those lost:

- a) The number of persons identified on the memorial stone should be revised to more accurately reflect the number of persons killed.
- b) The remains of persons killed in the surrounding bush and along the river Moroto after abduction were never recovered and given proper burial. An effort to do so would assist in proper recognition and dignity to the dead.
- c) Survivors have also asked that the names of persons killed be identified in a public monument.
- d) Survivors have kept various items of the dead to honour their lives: photos, cloths, saucepans, favourite items. A small museum could be created at the burial site where such items could be housed and the story of Barlonyo preserved for future generations.

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<sup>47</sup> The Ugandan government has accorded JLOS the responsibility for devising the way forward in terms of transitional justice for the country.

## Annex I: METHODS

Researchers for the Justice and Reconciliation Project collected eye-witness testimonies during two research phases, the first in November 2007 and the second in June 2008. Fifty individual semi-structured interviews and 5 focus group discussions were held, for a total of 79 people consulted during the research phase. Respondents were identified through a combination of cluster and snowballing methods. Seventy respondents were eye-witnesses of the massacre and 11 respondents were former abductees of the LRA (some were both). The researchers also conducted interviews with local leaders and security personnel, several local journalists, NGO and CSO volunteers and employees who were present in Barlonyo and Lira town during the immediate aftermath of the massacre. In addition, researchers collected admittance records from local health facilities and consulted with local leaders in order to corroborate evidence acquired in eye-witness interviews.

Immediately following the massacre, survivors were evacuated to other nearby camps and town centres. Although approximately 150 residents have returned to Barlonyo since that time, survivors remain scattered throughout the region and are consequently difficult to find. Due to the relative peace that has settled over Lira district in the past two years, some survivors have also returned to their home villages.