

As
Long
As
You
Live
You
Will
Survive



THE OMOT MASSACRE

Field Note XI, February 2010
The Justice and Reconciliation Project

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Title: Quote from a survivor of the massacre, *Interview 22 July 2009*

Cover: Child's drawing of an LRA attack on a village. *Photo of drawing by Lara Rosenoff*



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Introduction

Twenty people were brutally killed and the corpses of the males were laid on the northern part of the road while that of the women laid on the south and a big pot containing human legs and a head was centrally placed in the middle of the road and set on fire. Eight people had been earlier killed and roasted in the home of Samuel¹ in Lalur Onyol, one kilometre north of the scene where people were cooked. When we reached the scene, the dead bodies of the eight people were lying roasted on stones that were meant to be supporting a granary.²

On October 23rd 2002, an estimated forty-four fighters of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) entered Omot Sub County from ParSamuelo Acak, near the river Agogo. They were given instruction by their LRA Commander, "*as soon as we cross the river, abduct whoever you come across until we reach Corner Gang pa Aculu in Opota Trading Centre.*"³ The team, consisting mostly of young soldiers, first moved North East, abducting twelve people in Lawal Ode, an additional eight people in Lalur Onyol and finally another twelve people were abducted from Latin Ling before they reached the point of slaughter. The Opota Trading Centre at Corner Gang Pa Aculu was the site where twenty-eight people lost their lives in the brutal and dehumanizing Omot massacre. People were murdered, cut into pieces and then placed in cooking pots in front of dozens of witnesses.

This report is the first systematic documentation of the massacre that took place in Omot. Eight years later, the community has far from achieved reconciliation and restitution. The people of Omot have been stripped of their right to justice; the wrongs committed against them unacknowledged by Government or LRA, no system of redress has been explored.

What is more, the community is divided. Victims of the massacre continue to resent the clan of 'Samuel', a young resident who was recruited by the LRA and then later ran away with a gun, leading ultimately to the Omot massacre as retaliation. The community does not feel they have been compensated by Samuel's family for the deaths that occurred as a result of his desertion. In Omot, it is important for support to be provided for community reconciliation.

As Long as You Live, You Will Survive recommends that the Government of Uganda:

- Formally acknowledge the Omot massacre of 2002 as well as all other massacres that have occurred in communities in Northern Uganda;
- Recognize and redress their failure to protect Ugandan citizens from the LRA attack;
- Hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes;
- Support local approaches to justice and reconciliation that will address tensions within;
- Provision of reparations;
- Provision of a memorial designed and constructed with victims.

¹ All names have been changed for confidentiality and in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

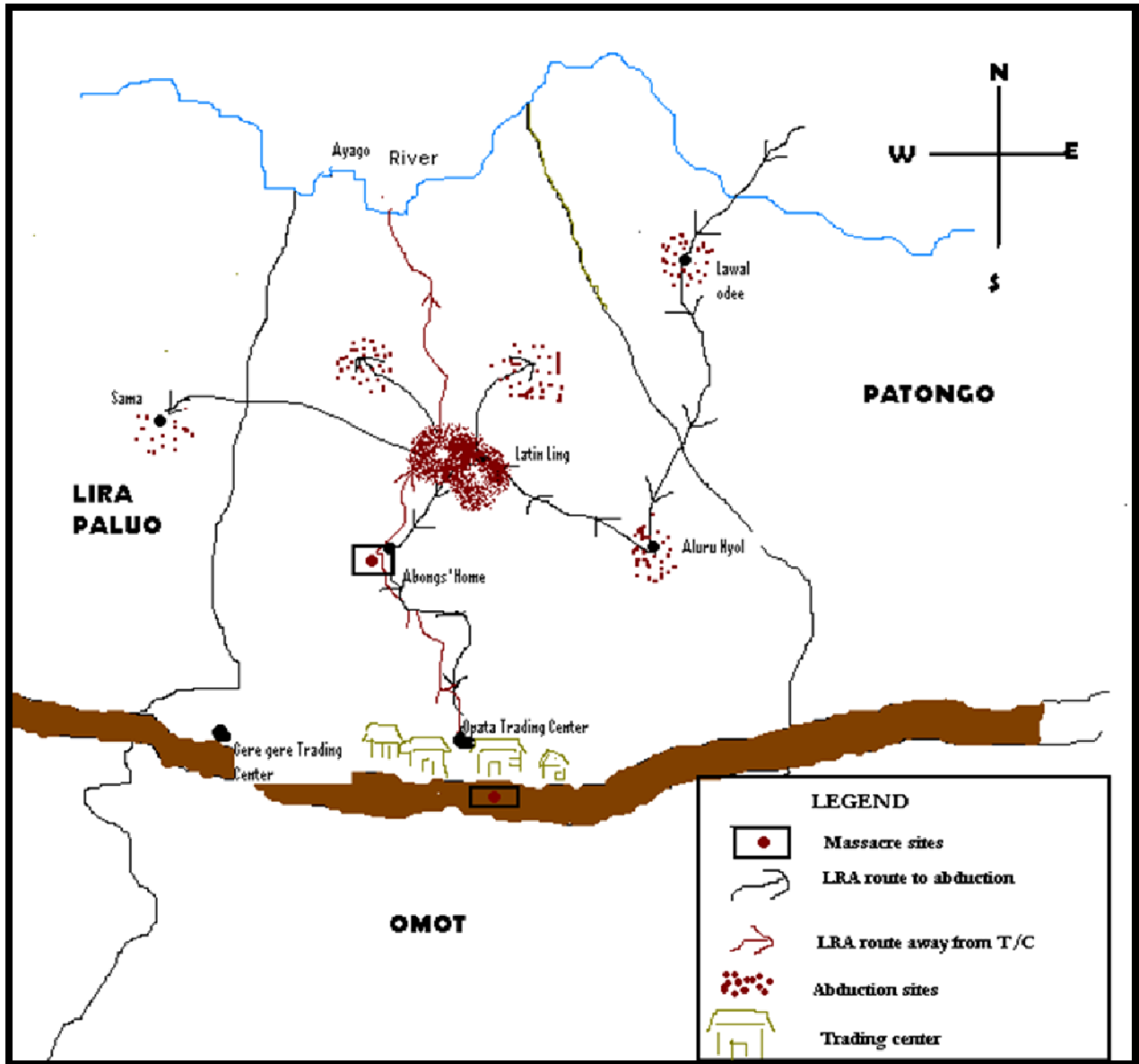
² Interview with a local witness, 22nd July 2009

³ As said to a local leader, Interview, 22 July 2009

Methods

The Omot massacre came to the attention of JRP researchers in November 2008 during the process of documenting the Barlonyo Massacre of 2004, in which 300 civilians lost their lives. Some of the respondents who were interviewed for the Barlonyo massacre informed the researchers that another massacre had occurred in Omot. Some local leaders and residents of Omot also specifically requested that JRP documents the Omot massacre following the completion of the Barlonyo massacre report. The Omot documentation was therefore a direct response by JRP to the request made by local leaders and survivors of the massacre. With the above in mind, JRP researchers travelled to Omot Sub County in April 2009 to conduct preliminary data collection. Three local leaders were interviewed and arrangements were made for further data collection. The main data collection was conducted between 22nd and 24th July 2009 in which 20 people were interviewed. Follow up was made on 25th August 2009 to clarify issues which remained unclear from data collection. Selection of the interviewees was done purposively through consultations with the local leaders. Interviews were carried out in Luo and then transcribed and typed out in an English translation by the research assistants. The data was then coded and analyzed and cross-checked by the research participants before producing a final objective report of the massacre and the events that surrounded it.

Figure 1. A Sketch map illustrating the events of the Omot massacre



Map of Omot massacre. Drawn by Komakec Emon

Setting a climate of fear

Unrest begins in Omot sub-county

*Previously we did not have any serious problems but in 1986 things started changing...*⁴

Omot sub-county is largely a subsistent farming community with homesteads scattered among the fields where agricultural activities take place. Relative peace was enjoyed in Acholiland until the political climate shifted. In 1986, Tito Okello Lutwa, Uganda's president at the time who was native to Acholiland, was overthrown by Museveni's National Resistance Army. The people of Omot Sub-county were among the communities in the North that were then pillaged and raped under the new regime. "When the government came into power", one respondent explained, "they abducted young boys and ex-soldiers."⁵ One elderly man recalls, "People's houses were burnt, cows and goats taken away as well as chicken and other property."⁶ One resident of Omot explains that at this time, the killings were not arbitrary: "On 1st July 1986, they came and killed a total of 11 men and afterwards they proceeded to Kalongo where they killed people and piled them in one hole. Those days, they only used to kill ex-soldiers."⁷

During this time, a spiritual leader, Alice Lakwena, emerged to fight a "Holy War" against the government. In 1988, she passed through Omot to recruit young men and boys for combat with her rebel army. Later that year, four of the abductees tried to escape back to their homes, but they were caught by the rebels, locked inside a hut and burned alive. These events began to set a climate of fear in Omot sub-county, but they were just the beginning of almost two decades of fright and terror in the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The LRA begins its attacks on civilians

A new era in Acholiland began when Joseph Kony emerged as a new rebel leader in 1989. In the initial months following the formation of the LRA, there was mostly 'looting of property and food from farms, but the next year, abductions were reported in Omot. One man who had been abducted by the LRA from Arum, then still a part of Omot sub-county, tricked his commander while bathing at a river and managed to escape. He ran back to his home and warned the people to 'leave the place', as the rebels would follow him. That very day, the rebels sought their revenge, abducting nine people and throwing them in a hut. As they set the hut ablaze, only one boy, now finishing Primary school, managed to escape.

1992 – 2002: A decade of fear

August 1992. About a decade before the massacre, on August 1st, 1992, LRA rebels entered through Lawal Ode, Lakwaa Parish (Patongo Sub-county) and abducted people on the way to a location near the Opota Trading Centre where in the evening, they were killed. A witness describes the rebel's advance on Omot, "As they moved on, they continued abducting people. They abducted about four more people ... they still continued and killed a teacher of a nearby primary school. After this incident, the LRA kept coming to carry out more attacks and abductions in Omot."⁸ One man recalls a murder carried out by the

⁴ Interview with a local leader, 23 July, 2009

⁵ Interview with survivor, 23 July, 2009

⁶ Interview with an elderly survivor, 23 July, 2009

⁷ Interview with a survivor, 23 July, 2009

⁸ *Ibid*

LRA saying “eight people lost their lives and later four people were again killed in the same spot.”⁹ His niece was among the twelve men, women and children who were slaughtered.

One woman remembers returning from her groundnut plantation at midday and seeing three rebels at Opota Trading Centre in Omot. “I immediately saw them and then took off with my child and hid in the thick sorghum plantation as one of the rebels pursued me towards the direction of where I was but he failed to get me,”¹⁰ she remembered. When she was sure that they had gone, she came out and realized massive deaths that had occurred and that three people had been killed in her home compound.

Between the brutal attack of 1992 and the massacre in 2002, the people of Omot Sub-county lived through a decade of terror and anxiety with only short periods of ‘quiet’ from the attacks. After this time, there were only instances of killings in small numbers of one or two in Omot Sub-County, but the abduction of young girls became more common. One woman describes her sister in laws son’s abduction later that year with two other men. They didn’t get far, she said, as they were “made to lie on their stomachs “by the rebels who then chopped off their heads using a panga”¹¹”¹².

Opota Centre is an inopportune location in that it is at a crossroads frequently used by the LRA. The people of Omot knew the real risk of rebels attacking or abducting at any moment. Taking precautions, even those that harmed them and their families, such as going without food for days, were necessary in order to increase one’s chance at survival. Local women recall the situation for the people of Omot,

In the year 2000, things became worse that we hardly went to collect water, dig in the gardens as well as freely move wherever we wanted to. The young boys and girls were hidden in the bush as well.¹³

Most people went for long without food and constant fear of likely LRA attack was high.¹⁴

Our children could no longer stay at home but in the bush so as to avoid being abducted.¹⁵

July 2002. Anxieties heightened in July of 2002, when the rebels descended on nearby Agogo IDP Camp located in Pader district on the 1st of the month, and killed over 104 people. They abducted and proceeded to kill four others in the neighbouring village of Agelec. The same month, massive killings were carried out in Patongo the nearest town for Omot residents. As rebel activity worsened, the fear of Omot’s people became all-consuming. “We constantly kept running into the bush,”¹⁶ described one young woman. The people of Omot rallied Local Government representatives for a camp to be set up at Opota Trading Centre so that they could be protected by the UPDF soldiers, however “it took long for the camp to be started... unfortunately until 2002, and Omot sub-county still did not have a camp.”¹⁷

⁹ Interview with a local leader, 22 July 2009

¹⁰ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

¹¹ *Panga* = local word for a machete

¹² Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Interview with a local leader, Representative of OMOT, 24 July 2009

¹⁵ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

¹⁶ Interview with a woman widowed by the massacre, 23 July 2009

¹⁷ Interview with a local leader, Representative of OMOT, 24 July 2009

Early Warning Signs: Abductions and escapes

Mother, the LRA told us that if anyone escapes with their gun, they shall follow that person up, reach his or her home, kill his mother and father. (Kenneth, former LRA abductee)¹⁸

October 2002. In October 2002, rebel threats and abductions were becoming more frequent in Omot. Dominic describes being abducted while eating supper at 5pm on the 8th of October, 2002. Nineteen at the time, he was told by the rebel leader that if one of the captives “dare run away... they have to be “killed immediately”¹⁹ However, after marching with the rebels for one day, Dominic was released to go back home. He learned later that month, that the rebels were capable of far worse in their retaliation of escapees.

A 13 year-old boy from Lalur Onyol, Kenneth, was abducted the same month and managed to escape from the LRA after 2 weeks. He returned home, but his parents immediately sent him to Patongo for safety. At the time, they had no idea of the magnitude of the brutal attack that was to come.

Two weeks before the massacre, some rebels came around the Trading Centre and asked if people had seen a boy named Samuel. The boy had apparently run away from the LRA with their gun. When people replied that they had not seen him, they urged the community to persuade Samuel to return their gun. The people at the trading centre were unaware that one woman had had an encounter with a hurried and distracted Samuel at 8:00am that morning on her way back from harvesting groundnuts. As he rushed to put on his gumboots and overall attire, he said to her “please Mama Eric just make sure you go out of this place.”²⁰ He then showed her the gun and a shorter weapon and hastily explained to her that he had escaped from Ogom with a gun belonging to the rebels and that the rebels “will by all means follow him up.”²¹ Samuel also had a chance to warn his family, who then fled the area.

The Massacre

October 22nd, 2002: The horrific night when the LRA sought vengeance for the wrong Samuel had committed. Deliberate, systematic and barbaric, the rebels carried out their mission on the people of Omot.

Abductions en route to Opota

Forty four fighters from the Sinia Brigade were released under the command of Commander Y and Junior Commander X to carry out their mission in Omot Sub-county. The team started their operations at ParSamuelo Acak, near river Agogo. One former LRA abductee in captivity at the time of the attack on Omot, reiterated the command given to the rebels; “*As soon as we cross the river, abduct whoever you come across until we reach Corner Gang pa Aculu in Opota trading centre.*”²² The rebel army then crossed the river and proceeded towards Adak where they begun to zealously follow this command.

9:00 pm

The rebels descended upon Lawal Ode village which is 2 ½ km from the Opota Trading Centre. One woman describes hearing footsteps at around 9:00 pm. The rebels broke into their home where, “they told

¹⁸ As said to the mother of Kenneth, former LRA abductee, in an interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

¹⁹ Interview with a former LRA abductee and survivor of the massacre – 24 July 2009

²⁰ Interview with a survivor – 24 July 2009

²¹ *Ibid*

²² As said to a local leader, Interview, 22 July 2009

my husband to take them to a place called Corner gang pa Aculu and he was tied up using his shirt.”²³ The rebels abducted 10 men and 2 women from Lawal Ode. They then headed to Lalur Onyol, where 12 people were abducted. From Lawal Onyol they headed westward where 7 males and 5 females were seized from Latin Ling village. With the men’s hands tied behind their backs, and women being forced to carry goods the rebels had stolen, the rebels headed toward Opota Trading Centre with their captives.

One woman of Lawal Ode recalls three rebels busting into their hut. She and four other women were inside, but only two of them were chosen to go with the rebels. They were forced to march to another home in the same village where they joined another 6 captives. They marched to Lalur Onyol and where they were locked in a hut. They remained in the hut until the rebels returned for them.

11:00 pm

Around 11pm, a group of rebels reached the home of Kenneth, abducted earlier that month, and demanded to know the whereabouts of the boy. “*Stop lying*”, yelled the LRA rebel who interrogated his mother inside her hut, “*because I am the one who came here last time and abducted Kenneth from this very compound.*”²⁴ Another rebel from outside then cried out “*if she is a breastfeeding mother then spare her and, let her daughter come with us to replace her mother in the task that we are about to go and execute.*”²⁵ Terrified, the woman fled into the bush where she remained until morning. Meanwhile, they seized her husband and 8 year old daughter.

Catherine, 13 years at the time of abduction from her home in Latin Ling, recalls being forced out of her home to join six men and two women being brought together. “There was one drunken man among the abducted,” she explained. She continued her memory,

It seems like the time had come for the rebels to start punishing abductees so they pierced the drunken man in the feet with a spear. Then they started tying the men; they tied them with their hands behind their backs leaving their chest wide and their heads bent backwards to their spinal cords. We left our compound and moved to the next compound with the rebels trying to abduct more people.²⁶

One woman shared that as they marched, “we were all frightened not sure of what our fate was.”²⁷ The rebels abducted 8 more people from Lalur Onyol and continued their march to meet the other groups of abductees and rebels from the other villages.

Killings at Opota

1:00 am

When it was nearing 1:00am the rebels opened up the hut where the captives from Lawal Ode captives had been locked up and told them, “*get out, we are going to corner gang pa Aculu.*”²⁸ They joined the other captives and continued to the main road in front of the Trading Centre at Opota. When the groups were nearing the site, Catherine, abducted from Latin Ling, was taken to a hut and forced to carry a pot and a jerry can of water. “I complained that the pot was heavy but a rebel soldier ordered me to put it on my head saying if I broke it they would kill me on the spot.”²⁹ The rebels then hand-picked eight men and put them aside from the crowd.

²³ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

²⁴ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

²⁵ NB: the rebels observe a set of taboos, rules and regulations when carrying out massacres; for example breast feeding mothers and disabled persons are usually not killed because they can bring a ‘curse’ upon the rebels

²⁶ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

²⁷ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

²⁸ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

²⁹ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

One woman called Deborah who was among the abductees explained that they were led to the main road near the trading centre.

There, they separated males from females while still encouraging us to stay calm and asked us to sit down on the ground. When we sat, they again started talking to us that “*mothers we are starting our work now but this will require that no one cries, and you all stay calm...*” and every one remained quiet. The commander then ordered the soldiers to shoot any lady who would cry.³⁰

The rebel soldiers then picked five men and one woman.

They then asked them to lay face downwards on the ground with their legs facing the west. After they lay down, the commander ordered the soldiers to beat. Each person was dealt a fatal blow on the back of the head, sending blood oozing out on their faces and chins as they lay there on the ground. I decided to run and risk being shot because death by a bullet would not be as gruesome as the one I had just witnessed.³¹

Deborah fled and escaped. Her daughter, however, who was deaf, also ran after her mother but was caught by one of the LRA soldiers. Her mother later explained that when her daughter was caught, “she was stabbed in the head several times” but spared from being killed because she was pregnant. “The next morning she was taken to hospital but because of the many injuries she sustained in her head and around her waist, her baby died before birth.”³²

Another woman, captured by the LRA at the time explained that after Deborah ran away the rebels “turned their wrath on a woman who was carrying a child. They picked the child and gave it to her grandmother and then they clubbed the woman to death.”³³

3:00 am

One woman who was abducted and among those witnessing the murders went on to describe the carnage of the next event:

They then picked one man and beat him to death and afterwards they asked us, “*What happens next when an animal is slaughtered in the home?*” We answered that “*It is cooked.*” After we had given that answer, they, instantly pointed at me and said “*woman, get up, go and carry a big pot and bring it to this place.*” They assigned one of the soldiers to go with me as an escort and we went and brought the pot. When I got back they ordered me to “*Light a fire.*” I gathered some stones, placed wood between them and lit a fire. Then they told me to “*Carry the pot and place it on the fire*” I did as they instructed. I then poured a jerry can full of water into the pot.³⁴

The rebels then picked a man from Lawal Ode, whom they chopped across the chest. One woman saw the next events take place and explained; “his body separated into two parts and they picked up the part that had the chest and the head and put it into the cooking pot. They cut off a thigh and a leg from the lower part of his body and placed it together with the head in the cooking pot.”³⁵ Another girl describes the scene, “A fire was lit as they told the rest of us to wait for ‘food’ to eat.”³⁶ Twenty people were killed at this site.

As told by a female survivor of the massacre:

As the head and the legs were cooking on fire, one of the fighters threatened us that “*Do not think you are still alive for nothing, you are left so that you can partake of the meal.*” The commander ... said “*do*

³⁰ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

³¹ *Ibid*

³² Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

³³ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

³⁶ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

not think we have spared your life for the better either. ...No one should be upset or annoyed with us, Samuel is the one to be blamed for the massacre because he escaped with our gun that we have not recovered up to now.” With these words, they made us leave the main road and they took us to the compound of Samuel.³⁷

At the home of Samuel

While the atrocities continued at the Opota Trading Centre, the Commander ordered the rebels to set “any huts they came across ablaze.”³⁸ While the rebels carried this out, several people, including the eight men who were earlier set aside, were taken to the home of Samuel. One lady was made to carry two basins of salt. When they reached there, the rebels untied the ropes that bound an elderly man. He recounts, “They turned to him and said ‘*Mzee*,³⁹ wait for a letter that we are going to give you, we want you to take it to its destination, we are coming to check on you after two weeks to see if you truly delivered it to the intended persons.”⁴⁰ One woman recollects the following words to the old man, “*tell those husbands or lovers of yours the UPDF that we are not afraid of them and to show that, we are coming back.*”⁴¹

The elderly man was released and witnessed the events that followed. He recounts, “An order was given for the ‘*askaris*⁴², *begin to work!*’” The rebels then untied the eight men. He continues, “They laid them down and picked up a *layeb*⁴³ and started hitting these men one by one on the head while saying ‘*Today we are going to have a taste of human flesh.*’”⁴⁴ One woman recounts her experience of this bloody event, saying, “their blood kept splashing all over my face and body ... some entered my mouth but ... I did not notice immediately due to shock at that time. One may have thought that I was hurt yet I was not.”⁴⁵

The rebels continued their barbaric actions. A female survivor recalls the gruesome and premeditated words of the rebels;

Then they asked us that “*What happens when an animal is killed and there is excess meat?*” We answered that “*It is smoked or roasted*” They went to the stones that were supporting the granary, pushed the granary away, leaving bare the stones, got some poles and used the grass and sticks of the granary to start a fire, and then started throwing the dead bodies of the men into the fire.⁴⁶

Arrival of the UPDF

5:00 am

Just then, they heard the sound of *mambas*⁴⁷ in the distance. This startled the rebels and they ordered the remaining five captives to leave that place by the same route that they had used from Latin Ling. They were given goats, chickens and one woman was forced to carry the liver of a man who had been killed. At this point, “most of the houses in the village had been burnt.”⁴⁸ One girl who was forced to accompany the rebels recounted, “After walking for about 3kms, gun shots started and the child we had with us started crying. Then one of the *askaris* suggested that we be let free. There we were released.”⁴⁹

³⁷ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

³⁸ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

³⁹ *Mzee* – word used for ‘old man’

⁴⁰ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁴¹ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁴² *Askaris* – word used for ‘soldiers’

⁴³ *Layeb* = a stick that is used for opening the granary

⁴⁴ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁴⁵ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁴⁶ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁴⁷ *Mambas* - Armored Personnel Carriers

⁴⁸ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

⁴⁹ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

6:00 am

The woman who was forced to carry the pot was among the captives released that morning. She expressed her feelings of ongoing torment and panic:

After the rebels left, the five of us who had been spared remained in terrible fear, and each one of us decided to seek a place to hide in the bush. I hid in the bush but I felt far from safe because my mind was glued to the gruesome scene I had witnessed; I recalled the brutal killings, the incident in which I was made to carry the pot, people who were roasted, huts that were set ablaze and my mind was thrown into a state of confusion. I did not know whether or not to blame myself for the killings because I was the one who carried the pot and this left me in great shock. I could not get out of the bush until 9:00 am when some people came to look for me because many thought I was dead. When these people came, asking one another whether I was still living or not, I recognized their voices and told them that I was still alive. Together with them, I got out of the bush but could not dare go back to Omot, leave alone witness the massacre scene so I immediately fled to Patongo.⁵⁰

Immediate aftermath: As the sun rose

Exodus from the bush

Many of the villagers were either hidden in the bush when the rebels arrived or fled there when theirs or nearby homes were attacked. They could hear shouting, screaming, gun shots and houses on fire. They heard the sound of the ‘mambas⁵¹’, an indication that the UPDF had arrived and they stayed there until there was silence in the morning hours. Between about 8:00 and 10:00 am, people started coming out of the bush to a reality far worse than imagined. Those who had not witnessed the events that occurred were told by others on their way back to their homesteads. Some people were terrified and left straight for Patongo, never reaching their homes to gather any belongings that may have remained.

Christine was among those who fled immediately to Patongo without looking back. At 8:00 am she came out of the bush where she was hiding with her four children. She recounted,

My brother in law ... came and said that since I had a very young child, I should not go to the scene of the massacre because anything can happen, leave alone the rebels returning for another attack, instead I should go to Patongo. So I never went to where my husband was killed but instead travelled to Patongo.⁵²

Some people lingered anxiously at their homesteads. Separated from their loved ones during the attack, they waited, hopeful that they would return alive. One such woman who had fled into the bush when the rebels attacked her home was fearful to find out the state of her daughter and husband who were abducted the previous night. She describes the reunion with her 18 year old daughter at her homestead:

She came back the next morning with the whole of her body full of stains in her dressI thought that she had probably been seriously beaten and I really cried but she told me of how she got stained with blood when she fell on her father while he was being tortured and killed because she wanted to die along with him.⁵³

A man from Lawal Ode was among those regularly spending nights hidden in the bush. He waited at his home in the early morning hours. His wife was pregnant and because of the risk of malaria from mosquito bites in the bush, she was unable to take cover with him. A few hours later, his wife finally appeared, and in haste they fled to the hospital. She had been abducted by the rebels the previous night and forced to

⁵⁰ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁵¹ *Mambas* – local term for the guns used by the UPDF

⁵² Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁵³ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

travel with them when they fled from the UPDF a few hours before. The woman later recounted the experience of her release in Latin Ling by the rebels that morning:

They told us to stay there until it was broad day light when we could go back to our respective homes. But one stubborn LRA again followed us inside the hut and started beating me with a baton until their commander intervened and pulled him away saying *“let’s be quick and get away from here.”* The soldier left and the commander stood by the door way, waited until the rest of the soldiers had started to move then he said *“get out and run or else a cruel one might come back and finish you off.”* We left the hut and hid in the bush. When I came out the following morning and reached my home, my husband rushed me to the hospital in Patongo because I was pregnant. I was treated from there and never came back to this place until 2006.⁵⁴

Those who returned to the scene at Opota Trading Centre witnessed dead bodies strewn about and the pot with body parts in the centre of the road. One woman was in disbelief when told by an eyewitness that her husband was among the victims:

I had to go to the trading centre... I wept ...and was the last woman to leave that place.⁵⁵

Burial at Opota

The UPDF soldiers mobilized the surviving men to carry out the burial of the dead. According to Acholi tradition, corpses of people who are innocently murdered in the bush are not normally carried home for burial, but left to decompose with the intention of leaving their spirits free to seek out their killers. A woman who watched the ‘burial’ process narrated, “they picked the bodies then hid them in the bushy areas with the intention of covering them using grass and very big stones to prevent wild animals from eating them.”⁵⁶

“My children were pushed under the tall spear grass at Samuel’s home where they had been killed from,”⁵⁷ an elderly woman lamented as she recalled the aftermath of the massacre.

Ultimatum declared

Local leaders in Patongo, who had jurisdiction over Omot Sub-county received news of the massacre at 6:00 am on the morning of the 23rd October 2002. “I immediately left Patongo for Corner Opota in Omot where the killing took place,” a local leader of Omot explained. He went on to explain that the next day, another delegation of leaders arrived:

On the 24th October 2002, a team from Pader Local Government headed by the then RDC Mr. Awongo- an Iteso by tribe came to this place and gave a one week ultimatum that starting from the 24th October 2002 to the 1st November 2002 no one should be sighted in any area within Omot Sub County. All people should go to any nearby camps that have UPDF soldiers. He went on that whoever would be got in the area after the said date would be shot dead on the spot since they would be taken as rebel collaborators. So people left the area.⁵⁸

As the UPDF were not stationed in Omot sub-county, the people all fled to safety in various protected areas. Most people went to Patongo, but others fled to Bweyale in Masindi and Lira Paluo to begin their lives as Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

⁵⁴ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁵⁵ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

⁵⁶ Interview with a Survivor – 22 July 2009

⁵⁷ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

⁵⁸ Interview with a local leader, 22 July 2009

The Journey of Internally Displaced People (IDPs)

2002: Life in Patongo begins

Those who survived the massacre in Omot were grateful to arrive in protected areas. Living conditions in the camps, however, were far from adequate. One woman describes the situation in the IDP Camp,

When I together with some of the civilians reached Patongo, we were crowded up in two Primary schools and after a month of miserable stay, the UPDF called the people and started to distribute plots in Patongo for us to construct small huts for ourselves but most people first constructed tents in which they lived in for one year before finally building huts.⁵⁹

Many survivors either lost their belongings when the LRA set their huts on fire or were unable to return to their homes after the massacre. A woman who lost her husband in the massacre was left with five children. She shared,

I stayed there in Patongo but taking care of the children became so hard. I did not even own a single cloth when I fled from Omot so a sympathizer gave me a wrapper that I would tie around myself.⁶⁰

With a poor food supply in the camps, some people attempted to leave the camp and go back to their farms to harvest their crops. In November 2002, a survivor of the Omot massacre left Patongo to go to his farm in Lalur Onyol. On his way back to the camp, however, he was attacked by the LRA and stabbed in the back of his head.

Though there were many problems with life in the IDP camps, the people had trouble accessing help from the government. The local representative of Omot and Arum sub-counties in the Pader District local government went to Patongo to see the people of Omot who had moved there. She grouped them so that they could access help from the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund. “Unfortunately,” she reported, “we wrongly filled out the application forms stating that we needed money, a monument, and other social services so our form was thrown out.”⁶¹

The people of Omot have demonstrated resilience and have resolved to move on as best they can to rebuild their lives. One woman, widowed by the massacre, shared about the aftermath for her family, “I lived a terrible life in Patongo, with only the clothing I wore.” She went on, articulating her words with courage, “but **as long as you live, you will survive.**”⁶²

2004: Move to Geregere and Latin Ling Satellite Camps

Geregere Satellite Camp was created in order to decongest Patongo camp. UPDF soldiers were taken there in 2004 to set up the camp. Many people shifted from Patongo to Geregere between 2005 and 2006 as it was less crowded. A satellite camp was also created in Latin Ling in 2006. The LRA were still active in the area, but the security provided by the UPDF soldiers meant that if there was a rebel attack, the people were not left defenceless. One man reported that in 2005 the LRA attacked Geregere camp, but the

⁵⁹ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁶⁰ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁶¹ Interview with a local leader, 24 July 2009

⁶² Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

attackers fled when three rebels were killed by the UPDF defending the camp, and “since then they did not come back anymore.”⁶³

Returning home

Relative calm has come to much of Northern Uganda since the July 2006 peace talks between the Government of Uganda and the LRA took place.⁶⁴ For Omot, this meant that people started to go home.

In 2007 and 2008, many of the people of Omot returned to their homes. In 2007, “houses were even being offered for free to whoever wanted to come and stay at the trading centre in Opota,”⁶⁵ one woman exclaimed. When asked why she finally returned home in 2008, one survivor explained that there was “massive home return” and that “so many people were leaving the camp for their respective homes, there was an aroma of relative peace that could be smelt and there were no attacks so we decided to come back home.”⁶⁶

“Why kill even innocent people just because of a gun?”⁶⁷

During the massacre on Omot, Samuel, 21 years at the time, was nowhere to be found. He was, however, sighted in the area by villagers who left Patongo to farm about two weeks after the massacre. Over the past few years, he was reported to be robbing and looting people’s property in Patongo and Lira district. In July, 2009, he was detained for three weeks in Patongo Police Station for robbing a shop of one million and three hundred thousand shillings.

Samuel’s mother and brother only returned to Omot in October 2008. One survivor drew the conclusion about the family that until then, “they stayed put in Patongo IDP camp due to fear that they may be hurt by the survivors and victims of the massacre.”⁶⁸

Though the LRA did carry out the massacre in order to ‘teach’ the people of Omot a lesson, the commander in charge was not actually given instructions to carry out the killings to the magnitude that his team did. One informant gave an account of what was believed to have occurred:

LRA Commander X⁶⁹ and his fighters were not sent to kill people to the magnitude that they did. He was instructed to come, search and recover the LRA gun and take it back. In an event that he fails to recover the gun, he was to only kill all the people in Samuel’s homestead. Unfortunately, Commander X did the contrary.” The informant went on to explain that Commander X was later questioned by his senior, Commander Y, who oversaw the Brigade of Sinia. Commander Y had already heard what had happened through LRA intelligence and questioned Commander X about the events. “What Commander Y did was to let Commander X to pay for his own sin by also killing him in Acak. He was killed and his body wrapped in a black polythene bag and dumped in the boundaries of some people’s garden as a caution for the other fighters that next time they are assigned a duty, the order should be followed and executed exactly the way they are instructed.”⁷⁰

⁶³ Interview with a local leader, 23 July 2009

⁶⁴ JRP, *Complicating Victims and Perpetrators in Uganda: On Dominic Ongwen*, Field Note VII, 2008.

⁶⁵ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁶⁶ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁶⁷ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

⁶⁸ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁶⁹ The names of the Commanders will remain confidential

⁷⁰ Interview with a local leader, 22 July 2009

Long-term impacts

*Orphans have been left. Widows and widowers remain with no one to support them. The orphans remain with no academic opportunities. They should be supported to help them forget.*⁷¹

Trauma

In the days and months that followed the massacre, survivors struggled to cope with ongoing trepidation and a sense of powerlessness. An elderly man expressed, “With a son lost, I felt completely helpless, I could not figure out the next step after that and above all I was terrified. I had so much fear.”⁷²

To this day, many survivors of the massacre experience deep fear and trauma from the events that occurred. One woman expressed, “I still experience terrible nightmares: I see flashlights and gunmen in my dreams and this has gone on for so long. I experienced this problem even at the time when I was still in the camp. Just last night, I had a terrible nightmare about the same thing. I have tried hard to keep it to myself but if there is somebody out there who can help me overcome it then it would be better.”⁷³ Another female survivor shared, “today I have lived to fear any combatant; I can’t stand the sight of a military uniform.”⁷⁴

The Acholi people believe that since cleansing ceremonies had not been conducted, the site of the massacres is to be completely avoided. “Everyone fears the spot where the people were cooked. That strip on the road was avoided. The children could not even play on it. Even vehicles found their way around it.”⁷⁵ One of the survivors shared that “some of us have tried as much as we can to forget what happened but it has failed... when I start to follow the road where the massacre took place, I am painfully reminded...I see the cooking pot and I remember everything.”⁷⁶

A woman who endured the captivity all night was asked how she now feels. She explained that she used to be haunted “but then I later made up my mind to forget about the past and also turned to God so as to ignore such thoughts.”⁷⁷

To deal with their memories and their fear, some people sought comfort as they went for prayers and words of the Bible. Animals were sacrificed at the site of killings to appease spirits.

Others simply tried to forget.

Orphans

There are reminders everywhere, however, and for some, forgetting is impossible. One man cares for three children, his brother left behind since he was clubbed to death during the massacre. “The memory comes back fresh whenever I look at the children he left behind and this gives me a lot of pain. I feel my burden is much because I am carrying it single handedly.”⁷⁸

⁷¹ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷² Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷³ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁷⁴ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷⁵ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷⁶ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷⁷ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁷⁸ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

The massacre left a wake of widows, widowers and orphans. One woman, widowed at 29 years was left in 2002 to care for her 11 year old and three children under the age of three. She shares, “I was left a widow at a young age. I missed my husband, I was bitter, life was meaningless and I had nowhere to start from.”... “Paying school fees for children in school is becoming a challenge, feeding is almost becoming impossible and single handedly, I feel I cannot manage.”⁷⁹ Another woman describes this burden of care made more difficult by the loss she experienced, “My husband left behind eight children and taking care of them is really a big problem, we used to collect grass for constructing grass thatched houses while we were still in Patongo.”⁸⁰

Pointing the finger

*I felt pain, I was bitter with Samuel because he caused all this by coming home with the LRA gun; it became very hard to forget my husband. ...slowly I am beginning to forget what happened.*⁸¹

The people in Omot acknowledge the responsibility of various players in causing the massacre. Survivors as well as current community leaders blame the government for failing to protect them before the massacre or to respond to the people’s plight after it occurred. A survivor expressed his frustration, interpreting the failure to offer protection and security as being directly opposed to what is “guaranteed by the constitution of Uganda.”⁸² This was supported by current local leaders who highlighted:

I strongly view it as a weakness from the government side because Councillors as Government representatives at the grass roots failed early enough to identify a camp. I strongly feel that if these local leaders had thought and acted earlier enough by identifying one place where the camp was to be established, such a killing would not have taken place.⁸³

People here, especially the survivors and others who lost their dear ones are unhappy with the Government of Uganda. They blame the Government for failing to grant them protection early enough and are also concerned that even after the massacre, Government response has been and is still very poor to their plight. Even when they organize the memorial prayer, the District does not respond and Government representatives are always absent.⁸⁴

Many people in Omot blame Samuel, since he ran away with the gun and caused the atrocities to occur, but there are some who do not feel it is him who is responsible. Others acknowledge the wrong that he did, but claim that the ultimate wrongdoing was by the rebels “because they are the ones who did all the killing.”⁸⁵ A woman who lost her son in the massacre shared how she felt, “that boy Samuel was always a thief from the time when he was still very young. It is for this reason that he escaped with those rebel’s gun therefore we do not blame him.”⁸⁶

Though some believe that Samuel was abducted by the LRA earlier that year, others have concluded quite emphatically that “he only joined the rebels intentionally.”⁸⁷ One woman explained, “Everyone here is

⁷⁹ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁸⁰ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁸¹ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁸² Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

⁸³ Interview with a local leader, 24 July 2009

⁸⁴ Interview with a local leader, 22 July 2009

⁸⁵ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

⁸⁶ Focus Group Discussion with female survivors, 23 July 2009

⁸⁷ Interview with a local leader, 23 July 2009

convinced that Samuel voluntarily gave himself to the rebels in disguise of just being abducted,”⁸⁸ Those who felt this way believe that he should be punished severely.

Some feel that “justice can only happen when Samuel is killed,”⁸⁹ as a widow of the massacre articulated. This feeling is shared by others who lost family members as well. A peer of Samuel’s, who was abducted and released in early October 2002, provided a softer solution, claiming that Samuel should be forgiven and made to confess what he did but added that he must “assure people that he will never do that again and if he does it then he will face death.”⁹⁰ It is also felt that the responsibility to discipline Samuel should lie on the elders of Samuel’s clan.

The grievances of the people in Omot against Samuel, the LRA and the Government still need to be dealt with, as justice has not occurred. Though a few attempts have been made to recognize the loss they suffered, the people do not yet feel that they have achieved reconciliation.

Justice and Reconciliation - Is enough being done?

Acknowledgement and assistance

With the exception of irregular food relief given to people in Patongo IDP Camp, there was little done to assist the people of Omot in the first two years of the aftermath of the massacre. One of the survivors expressed his disappointment, “the local Leaders came and registered the people who died, helped in burial, and that is how far they went.”⁹¹ It wasn’t until 2005, when most people were grouped in Geregere camp that some initiatives began to take place. The Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) came to organize a memorial prayer for the people who lost their lives. This first prayer ceremony was carried out October 22nd, 2005 and now occurs every year on the same day. ARLPI also constructed the monument at the Oputa Trading Centre. Twenty seven names are listed. Unfortunately, one victim, Ocii Martin, was left out.

That same year, those who lost family members in the Omot Massacre formed a group. The group, Wukony Too Ateda Widows and Widower Association, attempted to contact organizations to receive further assistance. In 2008, World Vision Taiwan responded and in collaboration with World Vision Uganda, they started up an initiative with the group and provided oxen, goats, hoes and spades to members of the households of victims. Unfortunately, this initiative helps only a selected group of people from the community. One woman, captured by the LRA during the massacre and witness to all the atrocity explained that “the beneficiaries are only those who lost their relatives in the massacre, we the real survivors have been left out.”⁹² Other survivors, whether they were part of the group or not, expressed a desire to receive more counselling and help to deal with the trauma. “We need psycho social support to enable us to come out of traumatic situation.”⁹³

Parents and guardians, particularly those caring for orphans from the massacre, came together to request for a Primary School. Wanglobo Memorial Primary School was built by World Vision Taiwan in memory of those who were killed in the massacre. Though this does help the children, the villagers still need more assistance to care for and support the children orphaned by the massacre.

⁸⁸ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁸⁹ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁹⁰ Interview with a former LRA abductee, 24 July 2009

⁹¹ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

⁹² Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

⁹³ *Ibid*

On June 14th, 2009, a ritual by traditional Leaders called ‘Moyo Cere’ was conducted. This was conducted by Rwot Odong Lira II of Lira Paluo in Omot Sub County with support from CARITAS Pader. “They tried to gather the bones of the people massacred by the LRA from the bushes surrounding Omot Sub County,” one man explained, but the people of Omot said that they preferred to wait until they could conduct a larger ceremony and provide coffins for the burial of bones “so that other people can occasionally come and view what happened in Corner Opota.”⁹⁴

However, the people of Omot still feel that more needs to be done to achieve true cleansing, justice and reconciliation.

Mato Oput⁹⁵

There is a strong desire for justice and reconciliation. A female elder in the community explained her thoughts, “there is a continuous sensitization against finger pointing because we all know that as Acholi people we in the past resolved that Kony⁹⁶ be forgiven and this cannot happen when we exclude the innocent people like Samuel.”⁹⁷ Forgiveness is a process and for the Acholi people, this must involve compensation from those responsible and cleansing. Since blame has been cast on Samuel as well as the government, the people are asking for reparation. A female survivor explained:

The Acholi people have a very rich culture that says when a person kills, his or her clan should pay death compensation... now that we have relative peace, there is urgent need for us to sit down and make Samuel’s clan pay death compensation for our dear ones and then have Mato Oput.⁹⁸

One elder of Omot lamented that they had not yet carried out the traditional healing and reconciliation ceremonies:

As victims, we needed Mato Oput to be conducted between us and the household of the person who caused this killing. Samuel and his clan should come up and take an active role here because it was due to his unbecoming act that the enemy came and attacked us here.⁹⁹

The people also acknowledge that it is difficult for the family to pay reparation to all of them, as they are poor as well and add that the government has a responsibility to pay what they cannot. The following explanation is from a woman who lost her husband and is left with her four children:

If this death had only occurred to one person, Samuel’s clan would be forced to pay the death compensation but here we have twenty eight people killed. Can the clan of Samuel manage to pay all their death compensation? So since Samuel is a citizen of the Republic of Uganda, the Government should take charge and pay for the death compensation of these people who perished so that both the victims and we their relatives can be appeased. In our history, people had never been cooked in pots before but Samuel made this happen. It is very terrible.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Interview with a local leader, 22 July 2009

⁹⁵ *Mato Oput* - The traditional Acholi process and ceremony undertaken only in the case of intentional or accidental killing of an individual. The ceremony involves two clans bringing together the perpetrator and the victim in a quest for restoring social harmony.

⁹⁶ Joseph Kony, leader of the LRA

⁹⁷ Interview with a survivor, 24 July 2009

⁹⁸ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

⁹⁹ Interview with a survivor, 22 July 2009

¹⁰⁰ Interview with a survivor, 23 July 2009

Recommendations

- a) **Acknowledgement and Accountability;** the Omot massacre is one of the many massacres that remain unacknowledged in the history of Uganda. Many people in northern Uganda strongly believe that the government failed in its obligation to offer them protection from the LRA. The government is also alleged to have participated in the commission of atrocities in northern Uganda. The government of Uganda therefore needs to come out and acknowledge the suffering of the people of northern Uganda, explain its alleged involvement in the perpetration of crimes, and hold perpetrators accountable for crimes they committed.
- b) **Develop policies and strategies to cater for reconciliation at the grassroots;** The government of Uganda is currently pursuing the development and implementation of a transitional justice framework for Uganda. This was characterised by the formation of the Justice and Law Order Sector (JLOS) Transitional Justice Working Group in 2008 to review and make recommendations for the adoption of appropriate justice and accountability mechanisms. The War Crimes Division of the High Court has been set up, and the government is making moves to domesticate the Rome Statute by passing the International Criminal Court bill in Uganda's parliament. However as government pursues justice and accountability policies at the national level, there is also need to develop and implement local strategies to cater for reconciliation at the grassroots. In Omot, it is of critical importance that Mato Oput Ceremonies are supported to be carried out. This cannot be achieved without the support and political will of the government.
- c) **Reparations;** Many victims and survivors of massacres in northern Uganda continue to live with painful memories of the experiences they underwent. The government of Uganda should therefore put in place a wide range of measures to cater for reparations for victims. Reparations can range from construction of rehabilitation centers to provide psychosocial support for trauma victims, construction of proper and meaningful memorials or monuments with lists of the dead engraved on them, micro economic income generating projects and other appropriate mechanisms to 'cool the hearts' of victims.

In Omot, reparations should be made in the form of:

- Psychosocial and counselling services to affected community members (this should include families of the deceased *and* other people who experience trauma due to violence or displacement);
- Material and psychosocial care for orphans of the massacre;
- Construction of a meaningful memorial;
- Developing and supporting strategies for income generation and food security.