

The Mukura Massacre of 1989



Justice &
Reconciliation
Project

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Front cover: The railway tracks at Okungulo Railway Station on which the train wagon used for suffocating the victims of the Mukura massacre was situated. *Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora.*

About JRP

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) has played a key role in transitional justice (TJ) in Uganda since 2005 through seeking to understand and explain the interests, needs, concerns and views of communities affected by the LRA conflict. JRP promotes locally sensitive and sustainable peace in Africa's Great Lakes region by focusing on the active involvement of grassroots communities in local-level transitional justice.

Vision

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) will pioneer new understandings of how transitional justice can be designed and implemented at a local level to maximise its impact in terms of reconciliation, peace-building and accountability.

Mission

To empower conflict affected communities by preserving memory, acknowledging loss, and promoting healing through participatory research, capacity-building, advocacy and documentation.

Motto

Working for justice and reconciliation with grassroots communities.

Objectives

- To document the experiences of communities related to war;
- To advocate on behalf of conflict-affected communities;
- To build the capacity of communities to undertake documentation and advocacy;
- To conduct research on local-level transitional justice issues crucial to emerging national debates and policies;
- To create a centre of excellence in relation to local-level transitional justice.

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Acronyms

FDC	Forum for Democratic Change
FOBA	Force Obote Back Again
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
KUNEDO	Kumi Network for Development Organisations
LC	Local Councillor
MP	Member of Parliament
NRA/M	National Resistance Army/Movement
RC	Resistance Councillor
RIP	Rest in Peace
TJ	Transitional Justice
UNLA	Uganda National Liberation Army
UPA	Uganda People's Army
UPC	Uganda People's Congress

Summary

On July 11, 1989, the 106th battalion of the National Resistance Army (NRA)¹ allegedly rounded up 300 men from Mukura and other surrounding areas and incarcerated some of them in train wagon number C521083. These men were suspected of being rebel collaborators against the NRA regime, but there is little evidence to suggest that most of them were anything other than innocent civilians. Trapped in the crowded train wagon, trying not to trample on one another, the men struggled to breathe, and by the time they were released after more than four hours, 69 of them had suffocated to death, while 47 of them survived.

Twenty two years after the occurrence of this massacre, the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) reconstructs an account of what took place, using narratives from survivors, in order to bring the concerns of victims to the attention of the Government and other stakeholders. Through our interactions with survivors of the massacre, we learnt that besides constructing a memorial mass grave in which the dead were buried, the Government also supported the construction of the Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School and a public library in memory of those who lost their lives.

His Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni (the President of Uganda at the time of the incident to date) visited Mukura in 1989 and promised compensation for each deceased person. A military court martial was also convened in Mbale to try the perpetrators of the massacre. However, after the government delivered part of the promised compensation in 1994, constructed the mass grave and completed the construction of Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School in 2001, the victims were left in a nearly 15-year-long period of silence and suspense regarding their promised balance of compensation.² A building next to the mass grave—intended to be a public library—was left incomplete and overgrown by weeds. The mass grave fell into a state of disrepair and was colonized by wasps, lizards and ants. The findings of the military court martial were never released. Some survivors from the train wagon felt they were completely ignored, as many of them did not benefit in any way from the compensation packages that were being given to relatives of the deceased, despite the fact that some of them became physically incapacitated as a result of the suffering they underwent in the wagon.

Then, in June 2010, Uganda's Finance Minister suddenly broke the silence by announcing that a budgetary allocation of 200 million Ugandan shillings had been made for the victims of the Mukura massacre. A few months later in October 2010, President Museveni paid an impromptu visit to Mukura and delivered the 200 million shillings in cash to the woman Member of Parliament (MP) for Kumi in public view during a political rally. The incomplete structure next to the mass grave was quickly completed and roofed, and the mass grave itself was given a face lift.

This report aims at providing a narrative of key events leading up to the massacre, based on the testimonies of survivors, and explores the major initiatives which were used by the incumbent Government to promote accountability, healing and reconciliation for the families of the Mukura victims and the survivors from the train wagon. A central finding of this report is that most of these initiatives to provide reparation—though likely well intentioned—were implemented in an untimely manner, with little involvement and consultation of the victims and in times of increased political incentive for Government. As such, the people do not attach much significance and ownership to structures such as the mass grave and Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School. The report concludes with lessons learnt and recommendations aimed at improving the implementation of future post-conflict transitional justice (TJ) initiatives which the government may undertake in other parts of the country, such as northern Uganda which has recently emerged from conflict.

Methodology

The Mukura massacre first came to the attention of JRP researchers through an announcement made by Uganda's Minister for Finance, Hon. Syda Bbumba, on June 10, 2010,³ that a budgetary allocation of 200 million Ugandan shillings had been set aside for families of the victims of the 1989 Mukura massacre in Teso. While JRP applauded the Government's move to compensate victims of the massacre, the announcement raised several questions that required answers. For example, what had prompted this abrupt announcement by the Government after more than 15 years⁴ of silence? Did the Government consult with the families of those who died and the survivors of the massacre prior to making this announcement? How did the

¹ The National Resistance Army (NRA) under the leadership of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni fought a guerrilla war against various regimes in the central part of Uganda from 1980-1986. They captured power through a coup against the military government led by Gen. Tito Okello Lutwa who was the president at the time, and formed the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government which has ruled Uganda since 1986.

² The partial compensation to victims was made in 1994.

³ The announcement was made at the reading of the Ugandan National Budget for the financial year 2010/2011. See the *New Vision* newspaper from June 11, 2010.

⁴ The first payment to relatives of the victims was made in 1994.

Government arrive at the figure of 200 million shillings? How would the money be channelled to the beneficiaries in a transparent manner?

With those questions in mind, JRP paid a preliminary visit to Kumi district and the village of Mukura on June 21, 2010, and interacted with officials from the Kumi Network for Development Organizations (KUNEDO), who provided more insight into the massacre. On this occasion, we interviewed one eyewitness of the massacre, as well. Data collection was then conducted from the September 6-10, 2010, and involved two in-depth interviews with three officials from Kumi and Ngora District Local Governments, one focus group discussion with relatives of people who perished in the massacre, one focus group discussion with survivors of the Mukura massacre, and 12 in-depth interviews with 12 survivors of the massacre. Respondents were purposively selected with the help of a community mobilizer who was present at the time of the massacre. They were chosen based on their knowledge and experience of the massacre, and also based on availability. The survivors of the massacre who participated were drawn from the sub-counties of Mukura, Kapir and Ngora. All interviews were conducted in English with the help of Ateso translators, where applicable, and then typed up and edited by JRP researchers for analysis and report writing.



Map of Ngora district showing the location of Mukura. Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Introduction

The Mukura massacre started when the NRA was conducting operations in Teso. As a result, the NRA soldiers gathered suspected rebels in the surrounding areas of Mukura. In this case, the strategy they used was to lock people in a train wagon and suffocate them alive, so that other people would get the message that rebellion was bad. The people they suffocated were suspected of being collaborators of the rebels.⁵

Located 11 kilometres from Kumi town along the Soroti-Mbale highway lies the tranquil trading centre of Mukura. In July 1989, it was the scene of a brutal massacre of approximately 69 civilians⁶ accused of rebelling against the new NRM (National Resistance Movement)⁷ government which had just taken over the country three years earlier through a military coup led by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. This coup ended several years of

guerrilla war waged mainly in the central part of Uganda against various regimes, culminating in the overthrow of Gen. Tito Okello Lutwa who was the president at the time.

What followed after Museveni's seizure of power was an outbreak of open rebellion by different rebel groups formed out of factions of the defeated soldiers of Gen. Tito Okello Lutwa's regime. Most of these soldiers fled to the north and northeastern parts of the country, where they reorganized themselves to resist the government of President Museveni. To date, twenty two known groups have taken up arms to fight the government since Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) came into power in 1986.⁸ As the NRA strove to get the country under control and restore the rule of law, the country suffered through a period of instability in which many civilians lost their lives and property because of violence perpetrated by both the NRA and rebel soldiers.

Two significant factors—ethnicity and political affiliation—can be said to have provided the catalysts that fuelled rebellion against the NRA in the Teso region. The NRA was predominantly composed of ethnic tribes from the western parts of Uganda, whereas most of soldiers serving in the Lutwa regime hailed from the north and northeastern parts of the country. After the fall of Kampala, most of these soldiers fled to their home districts, where they could count on the support of the local populace. It was easier for them to spread propaganda aimed at instilling hatred against the NRA soldiers from their own communities, in addition to mobilizing the people to rebel against the NRA soldiers.

For their part, the NRA soldiers seemed to have had the difficult task of differentiating rebel collaborators from civilians living in the villages. As one respondent noted:

The Mukura massacre came about in an attempt by the Government to crush the rebellion in Teso. Many rebels were living in the sub county of Mukura. The question which the NRA government was trying to solve was how to sort out the rebellion.

⁵ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

⁶ This number is highly disputed and has varied between 47 and 89 in past reports by different journalists and researchers.

⁷ Following the capture of power in 1986, the National Resistance Army (NRA) formed a government called the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Both terms are synonymously used to refer to the government led by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni

⁸ See Refugee Law Project, "Whose Justice: Perceptions Of Uganda's Amnesty Act 2000: The Potential for Conflict Resolution and Long-Term Reconciliation," Working paper number 15, February 2005. Available online at www.refugeelawproject.org.

*NRA soldiers went about rounding up people in Mukura sub county in order to sort out the rebels. But at the end of the day after they had gathered a big number of people, the screening was done poorly. Many innocent people died as a result.*⁹

Politically, eastern Uganda—like most of northern Uganda at the time—was still largely loyal to the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), under the leadership of the late President Apollo Milton Obote, who was overthrown in a military coup in 1985. As one respondent said, "*Politically, the region was predominantly composed of people who supported the Uganda People's Congress. So when the NRA government took over power, the region simply went up in rebellion.*"¹⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the groups that took up arms to fight the NRA government in eastern Uganda was named Force Obote Back Again (FOBA), which operated in the nearby district of Mbale during late 1980s.

In Teso sub-region, one of the most notable groups that took up arms to fight the NRA government was the Uganda People's Army (UPA), which sprung up in the late 1980s. The UPA was a rebel group recruited primarily from the Iteso people of Uganda and was active between 1987 to 1992. Under the leadership of Otai Peter, the UPA was composed mostly of former soldiers in the special forces of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) and opposed the NRA government.¹¹

The response of the NRA, as was the case in many other parts of the country such as northern Uganda, was to pursue an aggressive policy of disarmament aimed at wiping out rebellion in the Teso sub-region. The 106th battalion of the NRA, also locally referred to as the *Pili-Pili*¹² battalion by the people of Mukura, was one of the units that operated in Teso sub-region, and in Kumi district in particular. They had the task to identify rebel soldiers or suspects and collaborators and to disable them from continuing with rebellion. In the process of pursuing this assignment, the 106th battalion locked up some men suspected of being rebel soldiers or collaborators in a train wagon on the July 11, 1989, which resulted in the death of approximately 69 people.

*The battalion was commanded by a man of Rwandese origin who was serving in the NRA. His name was Bunyenyezi. The battalion he commanded had many Rwandese serving in their ranks. For example, rumour has it that the information officer was also Rwandese. Even the war in the north was led by Rwandese. Many of them were serving in the NRA until they had regrouped and went to fight the government in Rwanda.*¹³

This battalion, like many other NRA battalions that were commissioned to pacify northern and northeastern Uganda, is generally believed to have been composed of soldiers from western Uganda and soldiers of Rwandese origin. The *Pili-Pili* battalion set up their main headquarters in Kumi town, where they also had a large prison for holding suspected rebel collaborators. Many other smaller detachments were set up in the surrounding parishes and sub-counties. One of these small detachments was set up at Okungulo Railway Station, located in the small trading centre of Mukura. This was later to be the scene of the massacre of the 69 civilians.

The Massacre

*Prior to the operation, which started on the 8th of July, soldiers arrived in Mukura on the 7th of July and camped at Ajeluk. Then on the 8th, which was a Saturday, the operation started.*¹⁴

After setting up their detach at Okungulo Railway Station, soldiers of the *Pili-Pili* battalion embarked on an operation to round up suspected rebels and rebel collaborators. The operation was planned to cover villages and parishes in the sub counties of Kapingiri, Mukura and Ngora (all located in Ngora county¹⁵) in which rebels were believed to be hiding. The date chosen for the main operation was July 8, 1989. According to survivors and other eyewitnesses, the operation by the *Pili-Pili*



A focus group discussion with the survivors of the Massacre. Mukura, 9th September 2010. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

⁹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

¹⁰ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

¹¹ See http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Uganda_People's_Army

¹² '*Pili-Pili*' is the Kiswahili word for '*red pepper*.' It was probably the nickname of the 106th battalion to demonstrate how fierce the battalion was.

¹³ Key Respondent Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

¹⁴ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

¹⁵ Ngora county gained district status in July 2010.

battalion of the NRA started a few days prior to the massacre with the arrival of many soldiers to back up those already stationed at Okungulo Railway Station in Mukura trading centre. The soldiers were then divided up into several units and sent to different locations to begin rounding up suspected rebel collaborators.

6th July: The First Arrests are Made

One team started from Kopege [near Lake Kyoga]. The other group started from Akeit village along the Soroti-Mbale road. Ajeluk Primary School was the collection centre where all the suspects were later taken for screening.¹⁶

Although the main operation and the bulk of the arrests started on the 8th of July, respondents testified that some arrests began as early as the 6th of July in several villages. One of these was Kopege, near the shores of Lake Kyoga. The aim of the soldiers was to drive the suspects inland from the shores of the lake. In Kopege, one of the survivors who was arrested on the 6th recalled that, “*The soldiers rounded up people and took them to the home of Okwalinga,¹⁷ where they stayed for the whole day. The soldiers spent the night in Okwalinga’s home with their captives.*”¹⁸

As the soldiers carried out their operation, they kept on questioning the local residents to reveal where the rebels were hiding. The soldiers mostly spoke Kiswahili, which the local people did not understand. To them, the language sounded harsh and intimidating.

Whenever they asked the people where the rebels were, they responded ‘mama ajeni,’ meaning, ‘I don’t know,’ in Ateso. This created problems for many of them because the soldiers concluded that there was a big lady called Mama Ajeni who was the commander of the rebels.¹⁹

Early the next morning on the 7th of July, as we were told by one survivor, the soldiers and their captives—approximately 60 people—moved on to Agirigiroi Primary School. There, they found another group of captives who had been rounded up by a unit of soldiers from the surrounding area of Agirigiroi. The two groups joined up. As one of the captives narrated, “*The soldiers made people uproot cassava from a nearby garden and that is what we were given to eat in its raw form. We spent the night there.*”²⁰

8th July: The Main Operation Begins

The soldiers started by arresting people on Saturday, the 8th of July, 1989. Some people were rounded up at night and others in the morning. Other people were arrested during the day depending on where the soldiers found you.²¹

On the 8th of July, the operation kicked off in many other villages. As the prisoners who had been arrested from Kopege were being marched on to Ajeluk Primary School—the central location which had been chosen by the soldiers for all army units to converge with the suspects they had rounded up—civilians in other villages woke up to their daily routines, only to find themselves surrounded by NRA soldiers. While some of the residents were in their gardens digging and others were on their way to the market, many of them were still asleep in their huts when they heard pounding at their doors.

In Akeit village, one of the respondents was asleep when the soldiers came. He recalls:

As I slept, I suddenly heard a loud pounding at the door. It was still very early in the morning because the cock had just crowed. I realised that something was wrong. I came out of the house, and I was immediately arrested by the soldiers. I was ordered to join other prisoners, whom the soldiers had already captured. Then, we were all taken to Akeit Primary School. We were beaten as we went.²²

Meanwhile, in one of the neighbouring compounds, another arrest was taking place:

I had come out to ease myself, and it was dark outside. But when I went back inside, I heard some sound outside. When I peeped out, I saw they were soldiers making noise and all of them were in uniforms. They called me and my wife and children to come out. They grabbed me and tied my hands behind my back with my own shirt. We moved to one of the homes here in Akeit and the soldiers wanted to kill me. They beat me very badly. We passed through a village called Ajamaka, where we met another group of captives. I was still tied up, but when one of their commanders saw how I was tied, he became sympathetic and came and untied my hands.²³

¹⁶ Key Respondent Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

¹⁷ A local resident of Kopege village

¹⁸ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

¹⁹ Key Respondent Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

²⁰ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Kumi Town, 8th November 2010

²¹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

²² Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

²³ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

Some of the residents had already woken up and were going about their daily routines when the soldiers arrested them:

It was a market day, and I was preparing to go to the market at around 8am. As I rolled my gadi-gadi²⁴ on the way to the market, I suddenly came across the soldiers who ordered me to stop. So I stopped. Then, they told me to join the line of people they had just captured. They made me to move with them to a place called Akeit.²⁵

Others were engaged in their domestic chores when they were arrested:

On that day when the soldiers started gathering people together, I was in my garden cultivating cassava. It was around 8am when the soldiers came to my home and found me in the garden. The soldiers had with them a large number of people whom they had captured. I recognised my neighbour Apedel who was already among the people captured. I was ordered by the soldiers to join the line of people, which I did. The soldiers made us to move with them to Akeit Primary School. As we entered the compound of the primary school, I saw that other groups of soldiers were bringing people from other places. We were all assembled in the school compounds where we stayed for some time.²⁶

In a similar manner, the soldiers rounded up residents from several surrounding villages and parishes. The arrests began early at dawn and went on until around noon. The people who were arrested from the villages were taken to nearby primary schools, where they were held by the soldiers. In Mukura sub county, most of the people were taken to either Akeit Primary School or to Mukura Primary School, depending on which was nearest to them. In addition, the soldiers are said to have looted food and other valuable goods from the gardens and homes of local residents as they rounded them up. These goods were given to the captives to carry, as they were marched along by the soldiers.

Screening at Ajeluk Primary School

At Akeit we were joined by many other prisoners who had been captured by the soldiers from other places. They continued to bring in people from the outlying areas up to 12pm. When they had gathered very many people at Akeit, they made us to start moving at around 12pm, and they took us to Ajeluk Primary School where they were gathering all the people.²⁷

At approximately noon on 8th July, most of the army units had completed rounding up civilians from the villages. The captives were then marched to Ajeluk Primary School, a central location where the commander was believed to have been waiting. It was here that the screening was to be conducted, before the captives were transferred to Okungulo Railway Station. As one respondent recalled, *“About five groups of people were collected and they were all taken to Ajeluk Primary School, where they were all assembled. I think the commander [of the battalion] was in Ajeluk Primary School.”²⁸*

The soldiers then began to carry out a screening exercise in order to separate those believed to be rebels from the crowd of people they had detained. Their difficulty in successfully differentiating between rebels and civilians was seen by some respondents as one of the causes of the massacre:

The Mukura massacre came about in an attempt by the Government to crush the rebellion in Teso. Many rebels were living in the county of Mukura. The question which the NRA government was trying to solve was how to sort out the rebellion. NRA soldiers went about rounding up people in Mukura county in order to sort out the rebels. But at the end of the day after they had gathered a big number of people, the screening was done poorly. Many innocent people died as a result.²⁹

Various screening methods were used by the soldiers:

The soldiers had their own system of identifying rebels. They would tell people to remove their trousers and shirts, and examine their legs to see if there were any marks imprinted on them due to long periods of wearing gumboots, and they would also examine the shoulders to see if any marks had been left as a result of carrying a rifle.³⁰

Anyone with gumboot marks imprinted on his legs or rifle sling marks on his shoulders was assumed to be a rebel and was immediately arrested. However, this method alone was not deemed sufficient to enable the soldiers to adequately identify the rebels. In some instances, they resorted to interrogating the captives.

²⁴ A locally-made wooden wheelbarrow.

²⁵ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

²⁶ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

²⁷ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

²⁸ Key Respondent Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

²⁹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

³⁰ Key Respondent Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

They were trying to ask us if we could identify foreign people because by then they thought rebels had come here especially from northern Uganda. The method they used for screening included calling one person at random, and then asking him to identify his fellow rebels from among the crowd.³¹

At Ajeluk, the captives were tortured, beaten and made to sing for the amusement of the soldiers. According to one respondent, *“The soldiers made us sing and dance and clap our hands for them. From time to time, the soldiers would randomly beat us up.”³²*

Between 4pm and 5pm on that same day, the soldiers felt they had not made a break-through in identifying rebel soldiers and collaborators. They decided to release the women, children and the elderly men to go home. However, according to one witness, *“Some of the stronger ones were detained to carry goods for the soldiers such as fire wood and food.”³³* These detained people, consisting mostly of able-bodied young men, were then ordered to march to Okungulo Railway Station where more screening was to be carried out.



The signpost to Okungulo Railway Station at Mukura trading centre. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

The March to Okungulo Railway Station

I was made to carry a big saucepan full of cassava on my head. I had to carry it because the soldier who forced me to do so threatened to kill me. But later on, when we reached a place called Ongaro, one of the soldiers was sympathetic and allowed me to throw the saucepan into the bush.³⁴

Okungulo Railway Station is located approximately 4 kilometres from Ajeluk Primary School. It took the weary captives over one hour to walk there. *[The captives] arrived at Okungulo Railway Station at about 6pm after setting off from Ajeluk Primary School. [They] were about 300 people in number. That night [they] slept in the railway platform which was popularly referred to as Goods-Shed.³⁵*

On arrival at Okungulo Railway Station, the captives found other groups of people who had been gathered and detained from the surrounding areas. They were forced to join these people as the soldiers continued screening for rebels. Even at Okungulo Railway Station, the soldiers would still not allow the captives to rest. They had to continue singing, clapping and dancing as they entertained the soldiers. Occasionally they would also be beaten at the whim of the soldiers. Night was falling, so the soldiers had to find where to keep the prisoners to prevent them from escaping.

We were all assembled under a mango tree, as they discussed where to put us. There were two wagons, so they put one group in one wagon and another group in the second wagon, but still some people remained outside. The number was big. So when they saw that the wagons could not accommodate all of us, they again picked us from the wagons and took us to the Goods-Shed where we slept.³⁶

That night was a night that many of the captives would not forget, full of fear and no food. Early at dawn on the morning of Sunday the 9th, the captives were woken up by the soldiers who ordered all of them to come out of the Goods-Shed. They were all made to sit on the wet grass in the cold morning dew. The soldiers once again resumed the screening routine.

We were asked to identify more rebels. They used a tactic whereby they would select Resistance Councillors (RCs)³⁷ from among us and question them separately. Then, when they came to us, they would encourage us to reveal names of rebels including the RCs. They succeeded in causing confusion between the RCs and civilians. All this was done in the morning hours of 9th July. Using this method, they picked 40 people suspected of being rebels.³⁸

Alternatively, the soldiers questioned the captives at length in order to identify the rebels.

³¹ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

³² Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

³³ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

³⁴ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

³⁵ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

³⁶ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

³⁷ Resistance Councillors were instituted by the NRA in all villages throughout the country. They were administrative village heads and the equivalent of today's village local councillors (LCs).

³⁸ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

At the railway station, they used a system of questioning, where if one admitted he was a rebel, they would give him a piece of paper and tell him to write the names of other people who were his friends. So, they went on questioning and making people write names. Many people wrote names they did not know out of fear.³⁹

In this way, they ended up with a good number of people whom they deemed to be rebels or rebel collaborators. The soldiers also continued to examine the shoulders and legs of the suspects to see if any marks had been imprinted there by rifle slings or gum-boots.

Those who looked like rebels [approximately 35-40 men] or who were suspected of being rebels were sorted out of the group and taken to Kumi where the main army barracks were. The rest remained there [at the railway station] but were given nothing to eat and were made to continue singing and dancing for the whole day.⁴⁰

The soldiers made them sing several songs ranging from traditional folk songs to military songs while they beat them up. Many of the captives had had very little to eat for two days as the soldiers had not offered them food or drink. They were tired, thirsty and hungry. When nightfall came, they were herded back into the Goods-Shed to spend the night. According to some respondents, about four to five people were picked by the soldiers and taken away to a location they did not know. This was another night of fear and uncertainty. It rained that night, bringing relief from the heat to the victims who were crowded within. In addition, as one survivor recounted, *“Many of us were able to drink the rainwater and that is how we survived for an extra day.”⁴¹*



A resident of Mukura shows a JRP researcher the building at the railway which was also known as the Goods-Shed. It is in this building that the captives were imprisoned. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

Monday 10th July dawned, without the captives knowing whether they would be released or not. They were awoken to more torture by the soldiers:

Early in the morning, each soldier came with a stick and as a method of counting our number, each of them would move around and hit our heads with their sticks as they counted, ‘One, two, three...’ They would then pretend to have lost count and begin all over. This was all intended to torture and punish us. They mainly beat us and also denied us food and water.⁴²

The captives were detained for the rest of the day at the railway station, again without anything to drink or eat. A few of them managed to get some food and water from soldiers whenever they were sent to perform small assignments such as cutting the grass around the railway station. The hunger was so intense that in the words of one survivor, *“You would only survive on your saliva.”⁴³* Another survivor later recounted that, *“I fainted because of hunger and thirst and I had to be carried out of the Goods-Shed.”⁴⁴* Another survivor further stated that, *“We were made to sing and clap all the time and that was our food.”⁴⁵*

Into the Train Wagon

Tuesday, 11th July dawned bright and clear. None of the prisoners within the Goods-Shed knew whether they would be released or not. Unknown to them, it was the day on which many of the victims would breathe their last. The soldiers were not in a hurry that morning to get them out of the Goods-Shed. Many of them were exhausted from the fatigue and the heat, which seemed to be getting worse by the hour. After what seemed like an interminable waiting period, the soldiers suddenly came and asked them who wanted to drink water. Approximately 120 men⁴⁶ out of the captives being kept in the Goods-Shed were among those who wanted to drink water. They were asked to come out of the Goods-Shed and follow the soldiers to the place where they

³⁹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁰ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010. It is not known what happened to these men while they were held at the barracks.

⁴¹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴² Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴³ Focus Group Discussion with survivors of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁴ Focus Group Discussion with survivors of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁵ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁶ The number of people who were actually pushed into the train wagon is highly disputed. Many of the survivors we talked to admitted they were too confused to count or take note of the actual numbers. Many reports, including an article written by JRP, have put the number of people pushed into the wagon as high as 300. However, by talking to the survivors we were able to establish that the train wagon could not have held 300 people. We were able to verify and confirm that there were approximately 47 to 50 survivors from the train wagon.

would be given water to drink. Instead they were herded into train wagon number C521083. Two of the survivors described the scene:

On coming out of the Goods-Shed, a person would find a long line outside facing the wagon, and he would be made to join the line. The soldiers guarded the line from both sides and we couldn't run away from it.⁴⁷

The soldiers made sure that they squeezed the people into the train wagon, until it was full to capacity. The soldiers put us into the train wagon because they wanted us to reveal the names of the rebels who had lived in our communities. To the soldiers we were all suspects, and they needed to teach us a lesson.⁴⁸

The door was then clanged shut behind them. The men struggled to breathe in the hot, stale air. It was an experience that many of them would never forget:

Less than 30 minutes after the entrance to the wagon was shut, the people inside started shouting, crying and banging on the walls of the train wagon. It was hot. There was not enough fresh air, so people sweated and cried out. One man lost his mind and started punching and kicking anyone near him.⁴⁹

Due to heat and lack of oxygen, we started crying and yelling. The little air in the wagon was like hot oxygen.⁵⁰

All the people inside the train wagon were confused and frightened. Many people started crying aloud. Others decided to sing their funeral dirges. Others prayed to God to help them.⁵¹

The soldiers opened the door when they heard the people shouting. Then they asked us, 'Why are you crying? Show us the rebels.' We thought we would be released if we confessed so we said, 'We think all of us are rebels.' But the soldiers just locked the door for the last time.⁵²

Packed tightly together with little fresh air to breathe, some of the victims began to give up the fight:

Within a very short time people started falling down. My brothers near me all died. Someone would fall down, then start to kick as though fighting something unseen and that was the end of it. Other people were drinking their own urine. I clung to a very tiny hole and I was just crying to my God, 'Jesus I am going to die, but save my soul.' The atmosphere was tense and people started sweating. Some people sweated so much that they appeared as though water had just been poured down their bodies.⁵³

When I fell down, I felt like a heavy log had been placed on me, and I knew for sure that I would die.⁵⁴

People started falling down on the floor of the wagon. That created space for others who were left standing. From then on, every time we tried to move our legs around we stepped on the body of one of the people who had collapsed. The floor was also covered with the urine, faeces and vomit of some of the prisoners.⁵⁵

When you fell down that was the end of you because others would trample on you. I had a brother who survived. He said he got a place near a hole where he put his nose to get fresh air. His survival depended on struggling to remain near that hole by not allowing anybody to push him away from it. One by one, several people kept on collapsing and many of them died.⁵⁶



Train Wagon Number C521083 where the captives were locked and suffocated. Photo Credit: Etop Newspaper, 16th April 1993

⁴⁷ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁸ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁴⁹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁰ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵¹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵² Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵³ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁴ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁵ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁶ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

The urine they drank from the floor was eventually a source of survival for some of the captives, as one man later recalled, *"I survived by drinking the urine of one of my colleagues."*⁵⁷ Others survived simply because they had the strength to outlast their fellow captives:

*When many people had suffocated and fallen down, some space was created and air was able to circulate in the train wagon. At that moment also the sun was covered by a cloud and the heat reduced.*⁵⁸

*Another reason, which I think could also have saved our lives, is that after some people fell down a little fresh air entered into the wagon and the rest of us were able to breathe. I was among the people who fell down, but somehow I survived. I do not remember exactly where I was in the wagon, whether at the front or at the back. But what I know is that I survived.*⁵⁹

Trapped in the wagon, the captives who remained alive continued to hang on despite the heat and stench. Sometime in the late afternoon, they felt a cool breeze engulfing the wagon from outside. After close to five hours in the train wagon, the door was finally opened. The soldiers were probably compelled to open the doors because the captives within had fallen silent for a long period of time. As two survivors recall:

*Most of us crawled out because we were too weak to walk. I did not even realise that I was outside the train wagon until after some time. I looked around for my brother with whom we had been arrested, but I could not see him. He died in the wagon. I do not remember what time I recovered after coming out of the wagon because I fainted shortly afterwards.*⁶⁰

*Many of us were blinded by the daylight which streamed into the wagon because we had been in darkness for a long time. Many of us were just terrified and did not know what to do next. Then, the soldiers entered and started pulling out those who were alive and pushing them back to the Goods-Shed.*⁶¹



View of the Okungulo Railway Station. In the foreground is the Goods-Shed, while in the background is the building which used to house the station offices. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

Many of them were too weak to walk on their feet and had to crawl out on all fours. The captives were then herded back into the Goods-Shed. The soldiers then carried the dead out of the wagon. Some of the captives who had collapsed in the wagon were still alive, but were presumed to be dead by the soldiers. Several survivors believed that the lives of these men could have been saved if they had been pulled out of the train wagon and given fresh air and first aid.

Meanwhile, the dead were hastily buried by the soldiers.

*In the railway station there was a pit which I think had been used for excavating murrum.*⁶² *This was the pit where they threw the dead bodies and faintly poured some sand over them.*⁶³

*We saw this through the Goods-Shed because its wall was made of iron sheets and in some places the sheets were not intact. So we could see the movement of soldiers up and down as they took these bodies to the pit.*⁶⁴

The following day, Wednesday the 12th, the soldiers released all the prisoners and ordered them to go home. Many of them were too weak and tired to walk and had to rest several times before they reached their homes.

*After we were released, we started walking slowly home. Those who were still strong enough would support the others who were too weak to walk. Even when we reached home, we did not have the strength to sit up or even to eat. Most of us simply collapsed and remained lying down until our strength had returned. I could not even drink the porridge that my wife had prepared for me. My whole body was aching with pain. My body has never been the same again after that experience.*⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁸ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁵⁹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶⁰ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶¹ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶² Soil used for constructing feeder roads.

⁶³ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

⁶⁴ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶⁵ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

Some of the survivors returned home only to learn that their relatives with whom they had been arrested were among those who had died at the railway station.

When I came out of the train wagon, I discovered that my brother was not among the people who had come out. I was very confused and even went home and waited for him thinking that he would come back. When he did not return, it was the other survivors who came and told me that my brother was one of the people lying dead in the wagon. There was nothing I could do at that particular moment but to comfort his wife and children and calm them down because they were crying.⁶⁶



A resident of Mukura Trading Centre reads the names of victims who perished in the massacre. Photo credit: Lino Owor Ogora

The Aftermath

I tried to go along with other people who had lost their relatives to go and get the bodies of our loved ones. But the soldiers would not allow us to get access to the railway wagon. The dead bodies were buried by the soldiers. None of us attended the burial. Then later on when the bodies were exhumed, we were allowed to attend the second burial.⁶⁷

The story of what had happened at Okungulo Railway Station spread like wildfire through the trading centre of Mukura and other parishes. Many people came looking for their missing relatives upon hearing that the prisoners had been released, but the soldiers denied them entrance to the station. Later on, however, a general outcry from the families of the victims prompted the Kumi district authorities to exhume the rotting corpses and rebury them in a different location within Okungulo Railway Station.

When the issue reached our leaders such as the [district chairman] and others, they got concerned and it was discovered that some people had died and their bodies were heaped somewhere. On this discovery, pressure started building up and questions began to be asked.⁶⁸

So when the soldiers left [Okungulo Railway Station] and the authorities in Kumi learnt of what had happened, they came and removed the bodies and took them to a larger area for burial. This was because the government took time [to respond], and we could not leave these bodies exposed.⁶⁹



A bank passbook belonging to one of the participants who received the compensation in 1994. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

President Yoweri Museveni visited Mukura a few months after the massacre.⁷⁰ Eyewitnesses testified that he addressed the crowd in full military fatigues. He apologized for what had happened and promised a decent burial for the dead plus compensation for the families of the people who had died. He also promised to construct a secondary school in memory of the victims and promised accountability for the soldiers who perpetrated the massacre. According to respondents:

He addressed the people at a rally. He was dressed in his military attire. He apologised and said the Government was prepared and ready to give the dead a decent burial.⁷¹

... then he said action would be taken against those who [committed the massacre] and that decent burials for the dead would be organized. He promised compensation for the families [of the dead] and asked our MP [for Kumi], Fiona Egunyu, to follow up the issue.⁷²

⁶⁶ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶⁷ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁶⁸ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

⁶⁹ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

⁷⁰ Unfortunately, we could not accurately determine the exact date of his visit in 1989. According to the eyewitnesses, it took place a few months after the massacre.

⁷¹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

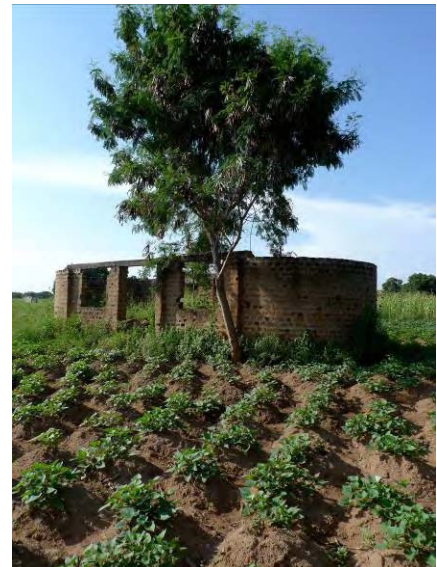
⁷² Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

Shortly after the President's visit, the bodies of the dead were exhumed for the second time for reburial in a mass grave, which had been constructed by the Government.

After the visit of the President in 1989, the Government committed itself to giving the dead a decent burial, which in fact they did. A monument was built where the people were buried. What they meant by decent was building a house, and then digging a hole, and burying the people in it and plastering the mass grave with cement. The dead bodies were wrapped in polythene bags and interred individually into the grave. Most of the bodies were old and decomposed, and that is why they were put in polythene bags before lowering them into the grave.⁷³

In addition, the construction of a building allegedly to be used as a chapel or a public library⁷⁴ was started, but was not completed until 2010 when the President visited Mukura again. The construction of Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School was also started, as promised by the President, and commissioned in 2001.

The Government felt that it was one way of appeasing the people of this area and said they wanted the school to be a memorial school. Initially, it was referred to as Mukura Secondary School and it had about three classroom blocks. Later it was turned into Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School in memory of those who lost their lives.⁷⁵



A building supposed to house a public library was left incomplete and was not finished until 2010. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

The army also set up a military commission of enquiry in Mbale town to establish the facts of the massacre. Four respondents we spoke to told us that they had been invited to this military court martial to give testimony about what had happened in the Mukura massacre.

Sometime after the massacre had occurred, I was taken to the court martial, which had been convened by the high command of the NRA to investigate the Mukura massacre. The court martial wanted to confirm if people had died during this massacre. I was asked many questions at the court martial. They wanted to know why an operation had been carried out in Mukura. They wanted to know if Mukura was an area where rebels had been operating.⁷⁶



Mukura Memorial School was constructed by the government and commissioned in 2001. Residents of Mukura however say they cannot afford to pay the tuition fees charged by the school despite the fact that it was constructed in memory of the dead. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

However, the proceedings and the findings of this commission have never been released to the public. Neither have the army officers who commanded the massacre been held accountable for their actions.

As promised by the President, compensation for the relatives of the dead was also undertaken, by the Office of the Prime Minister. The government began by making partial payments of approximately 750,000⁷⁷ Ugandan shillings to the families of each deceased person, which was half of the full amount which had been promised. This compensation was made in May 1994.

I think the Government decided to compensate the people of Mukura because it was common knowledge that it was government soldiers who killed the victims in Mukura. The incident was widely covered by the press. Hence the government

⁷³ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁷⁴ Respondents we talked to were divided in their opinions regarding whether this building was supposed to be a chapel or a public library.

⁷⁵ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁷⁶ Focus Group Discussion with survivors of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁷⁷ At an exchange rate of 2,300 Ugandan Shillings to one USD.

*could not get away without doing anything.*⁷⁸

*The Government issued guidelines that when the beneficiaries received this money, each family was to buy two oxen for ploughing, one bicycle to facilitate movement and then an ox plough, while the rest of the money could be used by the families according to their priorities. In fact, this guideline was followed. All families got oxen, bicycles, and ox-ploughs.*⁷⁹

The survivors from the train wagon, approximately 47 in number, claim that they too had been promised compensation by the President, which was never delivered. One survivor said:

*We did not get even a single cent of the money that was given to the families of the people who died. The Government had promised to compensate the survivors of the massacre. We were supposed to get half of what the families of the victims who died were getting.*⁸⁰

After delivering part of the promised compensation, constructing the mass grave and completing the construction of Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School, the victims were left in silence and suspense for over 15 years,⁸¹ as they appealed to the Government to pay the balance of the promised compensation and finish construction on the memorial.

*After that partial compensation was made, things went silent for a long time, but we went on putting pressure on the Government to pay the balance of compensation. At one time, I was among a delegation that went to State House to represent the beneficiaries because I was a local councillor in Mukura. We went up to the President's home in State House in Entebbe. We discussed with the President about this compensation, and he promised that Government would pay the balance.*⁸²

The following sections of the report will now endeavour to analyse the above initiatives and the long-term impact they have had on bringing healing and reconciliation to the victims of the Mukura massacre.

An Analysis of the Government's Response since 1989

The *UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations* calls upon states to make available adequate, effective, prompt and appropriate remedies.⁸³ This is intended to promote justice by redressing gross violations of international human rights law or serious violations of international humanitarian law. In Teso sub-region, the Mukura massacre is one of the issues that continues to dominate political discourses. It is continuously referred to when reference is being made to crimes perpetrated by the NRM regime. It is also frequently exploited by opposition political parties in their bid to score political points off the Government. As a result, many of the Government's programs for Mukura are often interpreted as a political gambit to keep opposition political parties at bay. As one respondent remarked:

*The Government is reacting as a result of multi-party democracy, which has forced it to correct some areas where it has been lagging behind. When people in the opposition parties get an opportunity to come to this area, for example when Besigye⁸⁴ comes around, people always mention the Mukura incident and use it against the Government.*⁸⁵

Politics aside, the NRM government has since 1989 implemented various initiatives in an attempt to put the matter to rest, and to promote healing and reconciliation for the victims. As seen in the previous section, these initiatives range from the construction of the monument and compensation of relatives of the dead, to the construction of Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School. While the goodwill of the Government in implementing these mechanisms may not be doubted, the stark reality is that the Mukura incident and issues surrounding it have simply refused to fade away, and have frequently returned to haunt the Government.

The question that needs to be answered, therefore, is why victims of the Mukura massacre have failed to put the past behind them, despite the programs implemented by the government. Our interaction with survivors of the massacre points to two things. On the one hand, there has been lack of involvement and consultation with the victims. This in effect led to the implementation of many of the initiatives in a haphazard manner which was often mired by political intentions. This, in the long run, has adversely affected significance, satisfaction and ownership of initiatives implemented by the Government. On the other hand, according to respondents,

⁷⁸ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

⁷⁹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁸⁰ Interview with a male survivor of the massacre, Mukura Village, 9th September 2010

⁸¹ The first compensation was made in 1994.

⁸² Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁸³ *UN Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations on International Humanitarian Law*, UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/60/147, Clause 15, 21st March 2006

⁸⁴ The most prominent outspoken opposition political party leader in Uganda. He is currently the leader of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC).

⁸⁵ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

many victims have failed to find satisfaction with statements and gestures of apology extended to them by the Government. This is exacerbated by the fact that the Government has not pursued any meaningful accountability for the perpetrators of the massacre. To elaborate on these two points, our analysis will look back at the main initiatives employed by the Government since 1989.

Apology and Acknowledgement

*The people want the government to come and apologize in public, which is more healing than the money. To say sorry does not cost much. The money can come later.*⁸⁶

According to UN guidelines, public apology should include an acknowledgement of the full facts surrounding an incident and acceptance of responsibility. As mentioned above, President Museveni visited Mukura a few months after the massacre and apologised for what had happened. He did not, however, provide any facts or overarching motives surrounding the incident, which he blamed on junior commanders within the NRA. More than 20 years later, President Museveni visited Mukura again on October 12, 2010, and made yet another apology. This time he described the Mukura massacre as, “*The acts of a young and inexperienced commanding officer whose negligence caused the death of innocent people.*”⁸⁷

It appears, however, that the President’s apologies, on both occasions, were not well received by the people. As one of the survivors remarked:

*The President’s apology was just to appease us, but it was not from the bottom of his heart. This is a man who came with armoured vehicles, a full uniform [of army fatigues] and started talking to us civilians. What could a civilian say in return? We kept quiet throughout. He came in that military attire with his [bodyguards]. So psychologically the civilians kept quiet, and then he started talking and said that “I am sorry for this.” But people just kept quiet. And when he promised compensation for the victims some people faintly clapped, but nobody knew what was going on in the civilians’ hearts and whether they had really accepted that apology. And then he drove off. That was when people began to murmur among each other and that meant there was already a discontent.*⁸⁸

While President Museveni’s attempts to reach out to the victims of the Mukura massacre in both 1989 and 2010 should be applauded, the manner and nature in which they were delivered left a lot to be desired. On both occasions, the appearance of the President was intimidating as he wore military fatigues and was accompanied by hundreds of severe looking bodyguards. Secondly, the apology of the President seemed to come from him as an individual rather than from the Government because there was no accompanying official letter from the Government to the families of victims who died, or to the survivors. Thirdly, the timing for the 2010 address coincided with campaigns for the 2011 presidential elections. Hence, the visit could be interpreted as a political manoeuvre intended to gain the votes of the victims. Consequently, the apologies tendered by the President have not attained their desired impact. From the perspectives of the victims, they were far from being satisfactory, convincing or appeasing.



The Mass Grave (blue roof) and the Public Librabry (red roof) were renovated in October 2010 when president Yoweri Museveni was due to visit. Victims felt the renovations were undertaken because of the president’s visit. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

Decent Burials and Memorials for the Dead

After the visit of the President in 1989, the Government constructed a mass grave at Okungulo Railway Station in which the remains of the victims were interred. The construction of another building allegedly intended to house either a public library or a chapel was also started, but was not completed until

the President visited again in October 2010. While this was a further indication of goodwill from the government, the manner in which it was handled, with minimum consultation and involvement

of victims, again left much to be desired. As one respondent sarcastically described the process:

⁸⁶ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 8th September 2010

⁸⁷ As reported in the *New Vision* newspaper, 14th October 2010. Available online at: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/17/735093>.

⁸⁸ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura, 8th September 2010

The whole event [the burial] was handled by the Government in a manner of “I [Government] am saying and you should listen and accept it to be done the way I have planned it to be.” The people were just there to witness what was taking place. None of the victims even knew what the true budget for this burial was⁸⁹

While the Government considered it a decent burial, many survivors and relatives of the dead thought otherwise:

During the so-called decent burial, they just brought sacks, spread them and took the bones [of the dead], assembled and wrapped them in the bags and officially lowered them down into the grave. The place remains special to us, but the way in which the bodies were buried was not decent.⁹⁰

Furthermore, in Teso culture, like in many African cultural traditions, the practice is to bury the remains of loved ones in ancestral grounds, alongside graves of predecessors who died before them. This practice was ignored by the Government at the time the burials were conducted. According to one respondent, “People wanted to take the bodies of their loved ones home but the Government was not interested.”⁹¹

Another respondent bitterly said:

If it was a decent burial at home here with the ancestors, we would call it a decent one. But how do you assemble all of the dead bodies and put them in one sack and then call that decent? You can’t pack people like potatoes. In our culture, to be buried [at] home is an identity; your father’s grave is an identity. Nobody can remove the land where your father is buried. If [the grave] is cemented you just send them [people disputing ownership of the land] to read the names [on the grave]. I did not see it as decent to put all the 69 bodies in three bags and then bury them in one grave. In our culture, this is not good, and we cannot call it decent. Decent to us does not mind whether or not you use cement. It means putting some one in the right place where his children and elders can know that this is our father or brother.⁹²

As a result of little involvement and consultation, the monument in Mukura has not been able to achieve its long term impact of bringing healing to the people who lost their loved ones.

The monument has no ownership because those who constructed it came to conduct their business and went away. The people say they have no connection to the monument because it contributes nothing to their life.⁹³

Many of the victims in Mukura do not identify themselves with the monument and the memorial. We do not know where the idea for the construction of this monument came from. People in Mukura were shocked to simply discover that the monument and the memorial were being constructed.⁹⁴

As a manifestation of the above, when JRP visited Mukura in July 2010, the memorial and the public library had fallen into a state of disrepair, having been overrun by natural vegetation and ants. Furthermore, the building which was reportedly supposed to house a public library lay incomplete. Both the mass grave and the public library/chapel were only renovated when the President visited on October 12, 2010. Many victims and relatives of the dead stated that while the monument and public library were significant because they are located on the resting place of their loved ones, they admitted that they rarely visited the site. Others said that the site brought them bad memories and they could not summon the courage to visit it on their own.

In addition to the above, Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School was also constructed by the Government in memory of the people who died. The school was commissioned in 2001 by President Museveni. Many victims, however, claimed that they were not benefitting from the school because their children were not allowed to get free education there. Many claim that in 1989 the President promised free education for the orphaned children of those who died in the massacre. This promise, they claimed, has never been fulfilled.

It is a community school and victims try to identify with it. But the school was also built in a similar manner like the monument. It was just erected without consulting the people.⁹⁵

The memorial school was meant for us the young generation, but we are not the people benefiting from that school. Instead, we are also expected to pay school fees and yet we have no money.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁹⁰ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

⁹¹ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁹² Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

⁹³ Key Informant Interviews, Kumi Town, 8th September 2010

⁹⁴ Key Informant Interviews, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

⁹⁵ Key Informant Interviews, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

⁹⁶ Focus Group Discussion with relatives of the deceased, Mukura Village, 8th September 2010

Furthermore, a visit to the memorial school and a discussion with the headmistress revealed that the school lacked connectedness to the massacre, albeit the fact that it was constructed in memory of the dead. An anonymous staff member told us frankly that no memorialisation events were held in the school because they did not want to remind the community of what had happened. One respondent said:

People wanted this monument to be built inside the memorial school, which the Government had constructed. The people wanted a chapel and the monument to be built inside this school so that anybody who was interested in the case of Mukura would come and see the school, the chapel, and the monument and pay their respects, recite a small prayer and then [remember] what had taken place.⁹⁷



The administration block at Mukura Memorial Senior Secondary School. A visit to the School revealed that it lacks connectedness to the memorialisation needs of the community in Mukura. Photo Credit: Lino Owor Ogora

The above are indications that memorialisation initiatives by the Government, such as the construction of mass graves and monuments, as well intended as they were, were not done in consultation with victims for whom they were intended. As a result, the initiatives not only lack significance and importance to the victims, but worse still, the victims have no ownership of the existing structures.

Truth Seeking and Accountability for Perpetrators

We as the people of Teso shall not blame the government 100% for what happened, but we are asking to know that since it happened, what made it to happen? We need to know which direction to take. We need to know whoever was involved by then and who was commanding the battalion of soldiers because it seemed to us that the battalion was composed mainly of [western Ugandans] who were the commanders by then. If [the Government] continues giving money and [the issue of accountability and reconciliation] is not reflected in it, then I think we shall be continuing to have the wounds inside us, because it was a painful experience. Sometimes when I interact with the community I tell them that [NRA soldiers] did not intend to do [the massacre] but that they were probably trying to gain a victory against the rebels.⁹⁸

The *UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations* spells out in Clause 4 that, “In cases of gross violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law constituting crimes under international law, States have the duty to investigate and, if there is sufficient evidence, the duty to submit to prosecution the person allegedly responsible for the violations and, if found guilty, the duty to punish her or him.”⁹⁹ In line with this, the Government is said to have held a military court martial in Mbale town to make an inquiry into the occurrences of the Mukura massacre. What has become of the findings of the military commission which was held in 1989 and whose report has never been published? What has become of the commanders in charge of the 106th battalion? The 106th battalion of the NRA was said to have been commanded by Lieutenant Bunyenyezi, but were others involved? Were any of them ever disciplined by the NRA? Were they acting on their own initiative or on “orders from above”? If so, then who is the most responsible in the chain of command? Unless these questions are officially answered by the Government, victims and other interested parties will continue to speculate. As one respondent remarked:

I am told that as soon as that incident occurred, they arrested [the battalion commander], and he was taken to a court martial. From there nobody got to know what happened and that question is still there. What happened to those people who led the battalion? If they are there then can they apologise? This is what the Government doesn't want to do.¹⁰⁰

If the victims of the Mukura massacre are to put the past behind them, then the Government must release the findings of the military commission held in the wake of the massacre. If this report remains unreleased, the Mukura massacre and events surrounding it will continue to be shrouded in mystery.

Compensation

Also worth examining is the manner in which the Government has handled compensation for the families of the Mukura massacre. Respondents we spoke to testified that on his visit to Mukura in 1989, President

⁹⁷ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁹⁸ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

⁹⁹ *UN Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations on International Humanitarian Law*, UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/60/147, Clause 4, 21st March 2006

¹⁰⁰ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 21st July 2010

Museveni promised a compensation package of approximately 1,500,000 Ugandan shillings¹⁰¹ for each deceased person. This money was to be paid to their families. The President also allegedly promised to pay compensation to survivors¹⁰² from the train wagon.

This promise was partially fulfilled in May 1994, when the Government paid half of this figure, and promised to pay the balance at a later date. After that, however, the families of the deceased waited in vain for 15 years for the rest of their money. Then, during the reading of the 2010/2011 national budget on June 10, 2010, Uganda's Finance Minister, Hon. Syda Bbumba, suddenly announced that 200 million Ugandan shillings had been set aside for families of the victims of the 1989 Mukura massacre in Teso.¹⁰³ The Minister announced that the payment would be made through the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs. It was not known how this figure of 200 million shillings was derived nor how it would finally be channelled to the beneficiaries.

Four months later, on October 12, 2010, President Museveni paid a sudden visit to Mukura. He was supposedly invited by Hon. Agnes Akiror, the Woman MP for Kumi district. While there, he commissioned the newly renovated mass grave and the completed public library/chapel. Then, in the presence of everyone, he pulled out huge bundles of cash, which he handed over to Hon. Akiror, who allegedly deposited the money into an unknown bank account in Soroti town. Three days later, Hon. Akiror summoned the beneficiaries to her house in Kumi town and asked them to open bank accounts. A few days later, the beneficiaries, mainly families of the deceased, were pleased to find that money had been deposited into their accounts.

Through a mini-survey conducted by a JRP research assistant,¹⁰⁴ we were able to identify and verify 45 family members of the dead who had been paid a total of 3,000,000 Ugandan shillings each. However, JRP researchers also received complaints of two surviving relatives of the deceased who had missed out on the compensation package. Furthermore, JRP was able to establish that only six survivors from the train wagon, out of the known 47, had been paid a figure of 3,000,000 Ugandan shillings each. This contradicts an article in the *Daily Monitor* on January 31, 2011, which claimed that a total of 88 families had been paid an overall figure of 209 million Uganda shillings.¹⁰⁵

In general, compensation for the survivors of the Mukura massacre was poorly and unprofessionally handled. In the first place, the compensation took too long to get to the victims, violating the right to prompt compensation as spelt out by the *UN Basic Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations*.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, a Government program for reparations should be handled by government departments instead of individuals in order to ensure transparency and equality. In his speech to the crowd on the October 12, 2010, the President is quoted to have, instructed the Attorney General to assess the damage caused by the incident and ensure full compensation to the victims and their families of the deceased. What then was the role of Hon. Akiror in the process? Why did the President have to carry a huge sum of cash with him after instructing the Attorney General to handle the payment process? Thirdly, there was no proper verification of beneficiaries and as a result some victims missed out on the compensation. The survivors of the massacre also continue to assert their right to compensation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

*We need to reach the concerned [victims] so that they give us their views. The Government has tried to give them a school, given the dead a decent burial, and partially compensated relatives of the dead, but does that answer the people's needs? So it needs deeper consultation.*¹⁰⁷

More than 20 years have gone by since the occurrence of the Mukura massacre in 1989, and yet the incident continues to raise fresh concern among actors and stakeholders in different arenas. Despite several Government attempts to mitigate the impacts of the massacre, "loose ends" have always remained after each initiative and kept haunting the survivors and the Government alike. Important lessons can therefore be drawn from these initiatives to ensure that other reparations programs in other areas of Uganda do not suffer the same setbacks.

With regard to memorialisation and honouring of the dead, the actions taken after the Mukura massacre leave much to be desired. Not only were relatives of the victims ignored with regard to their ideas about how their

¹⁰¹ Approximately 652 USD at an average exchange rate of 2,300UGX=1USD.

¹⁰² JRP was able to verify that approximately 47 people came out alive from the train wagon, while 69 died.

¹⁰³ See the *New Vision*, 10th June 2010

¹⁰⁴ The survey was conducted by a JRP research assistant in Kumi during the month of November 2010. The research assistant is a resident of Mukura and is familiar with most of the victims and survivors of the massacre.

¹⁰⁵ See the *Daily Monitor* newspaper, 31st January 2011

¹⁰⁶ *UN Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law*, UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/60/147, Clause 4, 21st March 2006

¹⁰⁷ Key Informant Interview, Kumi Town, 7th September 2010

loved ones should be buried, but they were also not involved in the remainder of the process. The memorials constructed by the Government were left in a dilapidated state without any maintenance or regular commemoration events. Unfortunately, the case of Mukura reflects what is happening in many other massacre sites in Uganda. In northern Uganda for example, many massacre sites lack monuments and memorials to honour the dead. The few that exist are in the form of a wooden or metallic cross, a concrete brick structure, or, in some cases, simply a pile of stones. And, as in the case of Mukura, there is a lack of connection between the memorials and the victims in those communities.¹⁰⁸ The appropriateness of these memorials is also questionable in many circumstances, because victims would have preferred other alternatives to the existing ones. In this regard, this report recommends that:

- a) **There is need for consultation and involvement of all stakeholders before the implementation of any reparations programs.** This is necessary to ensure that the initiatives are not only appropriate, but are owned by the communities in question. Consultation in this case could involve a meeting between a Government representative and the victims to build consensus on what the victims want and agree on an implementation schedule.
- b) As demonstrated by the case of Mukura, **the Government should allocate funding and other resources to enable monuments and memorials to be maintained on a regular basis.** Funding should also be availed to enable victims and relatives of the deceased to properly commemorate days of remembrance and anniversaries on which their loved ones died.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by the case of Mukura, Uganda's history since independence has been tainted with atrocities, many committed by NRA soldiers since they came to power in 1986. Many questions are left unanswered. What is the extent to which the perpetrators of these crimes have been held accountable? In the case of Mukura, who is the commander who perpetrated the massacre and how has he been punished by the government? Our recommendations in this regard are as follows:

- a) **The Government should carry out a proper acknowledgement of the Mukura massacre and apologize to victims.** Such a process could involve inviting all survivors and relatives of the massacre to a special occasion and issuing an official statement of apology to them.
- b) **The respective authorities are urged to release the findings of the military court martial/commission of inquiry, which was held in the wake of the Mukura massacre.** Victims in Mukura expressed a strong desire to know the truth behind the occurrence of the massacre. This, they reasoned, would help them to put the past behind them and to cope with their memories.
- c) **Government should assign individual responsibility for the Mukura massacre to individuals who led the 106th battalion and ensure that they are held accountable for their crimes in accordance with the law.** This will ensure that individuals in authority do not abuse their powers and that the culture of impunity is eradicated.

The victims in Mukura had to wait for many long years before the compensation, which had been promised to them, was delivered. Even then, the compensation was given without proper verification of beneficiaries and outside of proper Government channels. In a similar manner, many victims in other areas of the country, such as northern Uganda, are already looking forward to the implementation of reparations packages. These victims are becoming more and more frustrated the longer this process takes and the less transparent and inclusive it is. In Acholi-land and West Nile, for example, individuals are already engaged in the registration and verification of victims, supposedly at the instructions of the President. However, the question of whether this will lead to any substantive support is still unanswered. The President has been known to hand over cash to be distributed by individuals, rather than making use of Government departments, and the amounts victims occasionally receive vary significantly. In different districts, officials hand out different sums of money, while some victims end up getting nothing at all. As the case of Mukura shows, some of the funds the central Government allocates to the lower districts never reach the victims. When funding does reach its intended recipients, the process is flawed and lacks transparency. In this regard, the report recommends that:

- d) **The Government needs to finalize the long-awaited policy on reparations to provide clear, fair guidelines for all victims of past atrocities in Uganda in order to ensure that reparations schemes are implemented within a policy framework.** Such a policy would ensure that reparations are handled by Government departments, line ministries and other relevant authorities, and not by

¹⁰⁸ An example of this can be derived from JRP's research report on memorialisation, "We Can't Be Sure Who Killed Us: Memory and Memorialisation in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda," Justice and Reconciliation Project and the International Centre for Transitional Justice. March 2010.

individuals as was the case in Mukura. It would also ensure that there are clear procedures for handling reparations.

- e) **Proper verification of victims should be conducted before reparations packages such as compensation are handed out to them.** This verification should be conducted in consultation with community leaders, victims' representatives, local government representatives, civil society representatives and all other stakeholders. This is to ensure that the right beneficiaries receive the packages in the right quantities.
- f) **Reparations schemes should be designed to holistically address the range of needs of victims of mass atrocities, and not merely end at monetary compensation.** In the wake of such atrocities, victims have physical needs such as need for rehabilitation, in addition to psychosocial and material needs. In addition to monetary compensation, therefore, the Government should carry out an assessment of victims' needs and aim at addressing these additional needs as well.



JRP researchers pose with a cross-section of the survivors of the massacre in Mukura. Photo Credit: JRP

Appendix 1: List of Victims



Appendix 2: List of Survivors¹⁰⁹

SN	NAME	VILLAGE	PARISH	SUB COUNTY
1	Onyait James Ocecem	Ajeluk	Akubui	Mukura
2	Otim Micheal	Mukura	Mukura	Mukura
3	Ogira Chrales	Akeit	Akeit	Mukura
4	Osujo Honrad	Obur	Akeit	Mukura
5	Opio Sebastian	Obur	Akeit	Mukura
6	Teko John	Obur	Akeit	Mukura
7	Obaet John	Akeit	Akeit	Mukura
8	Apedel John	Obur	Akeit	Mukura
9	Olupot Okiring (RIP)	Mukura	Mukura	Mukura
10	Emorut Joseph (RIP)	Mukura	Mukura	Mukura
11	Ekadit Gelasio	Kumel	Kumel	Mukura
12	Ecugio John	Kumel	Kumel	Mukura
13	Oluka Valentino	Abatai	Orisai	Kapir
14	Eswapu Vincent	Kokung	Kokung	Kapir
15	Onyait Peter	Mukura	Mukura	Mukura
16	Odeke Basil	Obur	Akeit	Mukura
17	Ocecem Stephen	Ajeluk	Ajeluk	Mukura
18	Ocom Faustino	Kokung	Kokung	Kapir
19	Ejobi William	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
20	Ochela Asiku John	Ajamaka	Mukura	Mukura
21	Omwala James	Obatai	Orisai	Kapir
22	Emugenyait Peter	Orisai	Orisai	Kapir

¹⁰⁹ Missing from this list is name of the 47th survivor whom we were not able to verify

23	Odong John	Orisai	Orisai	Kapir
24	Ebuu Micheal	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
25	Adoa John William	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
26	Akotu Rafeal (RIP)	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
27	Oluka Martin	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
28	Okiria Zakaria	Odwarat	Odwarat	Ngora
29	Omoding Gabriel	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
30	Oumo Stephen	Kopege	Kopege	Ngora
31	Orion Micheal	Odwarat	Odwarat	Ngora
32	Adangai Faustino	Agirigiroi	Agirigiroi	Kapir
33	Eyamu Micheal	Abatai	Orisai	Kapir
34	Omoding Alfario	Abatai	Orisai	Kapir
35	Opio Silver	Orisai	Orisai	Kapir
36	Oluka James	Obatai	Orisai	Kapir
37	Eyatu John	Obatai	Orisai	Kapir
38	Ojula Eusebio	Kokung	Kokung	Kapir
39	Apachu Sidorio	Kopege	Kokung	Ngora
40	Onyait Joseph	Ajeluk	Ajeluk	Mukura
41	Okiring Gilbert (RIP)	Ajeluk	Ajeluk	Mukura
42	Teko Palasko	Mukura	Mukura	Mukura
43	Ongole Eria	Akeit	Akeit	Mukura
44	Opio Cypriano	Akeit	Akeit	Mukura
45	Okolong Micheal	Odwarat	Odwarat	Ngora
46	Erau Christopher	Odwarat	Odwarat	Ngora
47				