



# COMMUNITY VOICES NEWSLETTER

*"Helping to restore victims' lives through giving them a voice"*

Volume 2, Issue 1

**COMMUNITY VOICES IS A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER**

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**IN THE NEXT ISSUE**

We ask victims to discuss their understanding on transitional justice, plus a series of stories from victims are lined up for you.

**We encourage victims and survivors to send in their individual or group stories.**

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## I Want to Know What Has Happened to My Son

By Norah Fathum



*"I cannot give up hope; I also can't keep my hopes too high. To me, we still need to face the fact that other people are not yet back. We should not say it's over when our children, brothers are still there..."*

Nevil Washibra, Norah's missing son (Photo Credit: Norah Fathum)

The conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) has lasted for more than twenty years. Statistics from the reception centres in northern Uganda indicate that as of 2006, 22,759 people have returned as former abductees. Yet it is estimated that over 60,000 people

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## Foreword

This newsletter is a beginning of a series of brief and simple narratives from victims of conflict in northern Uganda. As we set out meeting new communities in West Nile, we came across some remarkable individuals who on their own volition demonstrate resilience in their day-to-day lives. Yet, what lies behind them is trauma, stigma and a sense of abandonment. Their stories are a testament to what defines post-conflict transformation in West Nile. As one respondent I met remarked, *"We have been abandoned as all the attention is being shifted to the Acholi and Lango as though we have not suffered from conflict..."*

In order to ensure that such stories are shared with a wider audience, this newsletter and others to come, simply explore on-the-ground challenges facing communities in transition. In this edition we share with our readers the lives of two women, not so different from others you might have come across in northern Uganda. Their stories are an indication of how narra-

tive of this kind can transform the lives of victims who most often desire space for discourse. We view the West Nile chapter as a complex and unresolved issue in the quest for transitional justice mechanisms for Uganda, given the diversity of conflict in the region compared to that of the LRA-affected areas elsewhere.

During a consultative meeting organised by JRP for victims in West Nile, my attention was drawn to 51 year-old Fathum Norah, a very vocal and active participant during the group discussions and general sessions. However, Norah's jolly mood was regularly interrupted by moments of sadness and sometimes tears rolling freely down her cheeks, which drew me close to hear her story. Hers is a story of a mother who has lived for almost nine years wondering what has happened to her son.

Norah's story led one of my colleagues to another woman at the same workshop named Jane

Jatoo. Jane was visibly shy, mostly quiet and occasionally smiling with other participants, however, she spent more time attending to her child than participating in the workshop with the other victims. Little did we know at the time, Jane and Norah's son were both victims of the same incident.

On September 19, 2002, the LRA attacked a Nile Coach bus travelling northwest from Karuma. Norah's son, Nevil Washibra, was abducted by the LRA and has not been heard from since. Jane survived death during the same incident and now lives with a scar of bullet fragments, an amputated arm and loss of sight in her left eye. Norah and Jane's stories are told in their own words.

I hope you enjoy reading this newsletter.

**Sylvia Opinia**  
Team Leader, Community Mobilisation

## In Addition to My Disability, I Am HIV+

By Jane Jatoo

*"The bus swerved off the road and came to a halt. The driver had been shot."*

I never used to ride on buses, but on the morning of September 19, 2002, I was in Karuma waiting to board one. A fishmonger by trade, I had arrived the previous day too late to catch a vehicle to Pakwach, where I planned to buy more fish to sell in Gulu.

During those days, as soon as the bus had left, no other vehicle would be allowed to travel afterwards. This was because the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was active in the area at that time. I, however, made

the most of my night in Karuma, buying some 150 kilograms of posho and 100 kilograms of beans from some UPDF soldiers, which I planned to resell in Arua, and the next morning I was there waiting for the bus.

While waiting, I met a fellow vendor who wanted me to take her along to Pakwach, so she could learn where to buy fish that she might bring back to Karuma and sell at a profit. "Not a problem," I said, "we could go together."

The vendor from Karuma liked to do things differently. First, she insisted we board a bus,

yet I always hitched rides in the backs of pickup trucks or lorries. But the woman claimed a bus would be faster. Six months pregnant with my second husband's child, I really did not want to, but the woman was insistent. She accused me of not really wanting to help her. So finally I relented, saying we should board the first bus. Yet the woman did not want to board the first bus. She wanted to board the second bus. I told her that first buses always survived the ambushes laid by the rebels, while the second buses and others were always the target, so we should take the

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**"I told her that first buses always survived the ambushes laid by the rebels, while the second buses and others were always the target, so we should take the first bus."**

## The Tale of a Young Mother

By Sylvia Opinia

Young people in Uganda face particularly acute problems, given that more than 50% of the population is under 18 years of age and youth services are overstretched. In the north the situation is even more severe because of the chronic insecurity that has affected the region since 1986. The depredations of the LRA have generated violence and insecurity which young people in particular have suffered from.

I was in very good spirits while going to attend the first community performance for JRPs' theatre programme which was pioneered with a group of young mothers in Lukodi in Gulu district. The Acholi people are very artistic and it is their way of life as evidenced by the vivid variety of cultural dances within the sub-region. Festivities and gatherings such as this com-

munity performance celebrate and recognize the importance of arts in the Acholi culture. The youth have the chance to explore the arts of the past and the present to develop their own creation for the future. The elderly and youth unite and share this experience together.

JRPs' community theatre programme engages victims' groups through creative ways to promote healing and facilitate reconciliation within communities. The approach is personal and interactive, allowing community members to directly participate (by acting, painting, role-playing, singing, dancing, and discussing) in enhancing the debate on justice and promoting community-led reconciliation initiatives.

This play was initiated and per-

formed by the young mothers in the ChildVoice International centre in Lukodi on May 25, 2011. It portrayed how early pregnancies are one of the numerous challenges facing young people, especially young women, during the conflict. Using forum theatre, the young mothers engaged the community on the issue of early motherhood, showing the challenges families encountered during the conflict.

While the current debates on transitional justice pay little attention to such issues, this play brings light to the vulnerabilities that expose young women to take on parental roles at an early age. While bringing humour to the issue, the girls explored this problem from the perspective of conflict and located it in the current

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## (cont.) I Want to Know What Has Happened to My Son

were abducted by the LRA,<sup>1</sup> meaning many thousands are still unaccounted for. Besides being a mystery, the fate of these abductees is a continual source of stress and sorrow for their families and friends left behind.

I have heard nothing of my oldest son in more than eight years. Nevil Washibra was a responsible child. Since the death of his father when he was a Senior Two student, he had helped me run the household by budgeting and taking care of his three siblings. Then, in 2002, two weeks after his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was abducted while returning home to Arua to gather things for his first semester at Makerere University.

I want to know what has happened to my son. I want to know if he is there or if he is dead. It's strange but I live a life of someone who is either there or not there, that's my situation. The lack of answers has kept me from gaining any sort of closure.

My story, the story of a mother who has lived for almost nine years wondering what has become of my son, sheds light on how the people of West Nile have suffered during the LRA conflict because of ambushes on buses, lorries, and other vehicles en-route to the region, a fact which is not widely known within the national or international communities.

### The Incident

*"That was the turning point in my life. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of September, 2002, my son was coming home from Kampala to pick a few things so that he could go to the university."*

On September 19, 2002, LRA fighters attacked a Nile Coach bus travelling north along Karuma-Pakwach Road. The burned-out bus was later found with the remains of some passengers still inside. Many of the other passengers were abducted and some of these were later killed. According to a woman who was released from the LRA camp, eight male passengers, including her husband, were made to remove their shirts and then hacked to death with machetes.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next few days, several survivors returned and the bodies of those killed were identified. Yet Washibra remained unaccounted for. I was left to wonder. From the onset of this abduction, I kept waiting at least for some three days because other people were escaping and arriving. When [the authorities] made a sweeping statement giving the numbers and names of those who were killed and then gave a statement that the rest were okay, on knowing that I had not seen mine, I took the effort and went to the Resident District Commissioner's office, reported the incidence of my missing son and demanded to know where he was. They said

the people who were killed in this ambush were 'this,' and the rest were safe, but I had not seen mine. They recorded what I was telling them, that mine was missing, and that was it.

At first, it felt as if all of Arua was focused on the repercussions of the LRA attack. Everyone seemed as concerned as I was. You see, the town was very livid and concerned that something bad had happened, but at the end of the day you, the victim, remain alone. Here in Arua there was no organization or any other efforts that could try to help anybody who was making inquiries. You would even be suspicious about people coming to you because the people who would come to you only ask questions like, "I heard your child has been abducted. Can you give me his name?" But for what?

### The Aftermath

*"I am living a life of a lie. I run away from my shadows because if I'm not busy, I find my life filled with emotions. So I always have to look for something to make myself busy."*

After losing my husband, I wanted to live life for my four children. This made Washibra's abduction especially difficult for me, because not only was I preoccupied by the incident, but my missing son had helped to look after his siblings. I do believe that the distress following my son's abduction contributed to the death of my youngest child. I

**"I want to know what has happened to my son. I want to know if he is there or if he is dead."**

1. Pham, Phuong, Vinck, Patrick, & Stover, Eric. "Abducted: The Lord's Resistance Army and Forced Conscription in Northern Uganda." Berkeley-Tulane Initiative on Vulnerable Populations. June 2007.

2. "Eight West Nile Bus Travellers Killed." *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*. Financial Times Intelligence Ltd. 2002.

## (cont.) I Want to Know What Has Happened to My Son

found myself caring for what I could not hold. I could not get any answer from anyone. So it took all of my time, and by the



Fathum Norah in April 2011 (Photo Credit: JRP)

inadvertently saved up some money. But then I asked myself, what am I keeping these monies for? I decided that a good way to keep busy would be to enrol for a Bachelor's degree in social work and social administration at Uganda Christian University. Yet after graduation, I still found myself haunted by memories of my son. I again enrolled at the School of Public Health at Makerere University to pursue a Master's degree in health research. Nearly finished with this program, I have started wondering how I will keep myself busy now.

leadership of Concerned Parents Association even rang me and said someone with the description of your son has been seen in Sudan, and they asked for the photo of the boy. If there was space, probably he would have called. There would have been a message that would have come, but I have not heard anything. I cannot also give up hope. I also can't keep my hopes too high because I really don't know. But eight years in the dark is not a short time.

### Debate on justice and reconciliation

*"Right now it looks like much of the debate is focusing on compensation. How about a person who was abducted and has never returned? What kind of compensation are we going to talk about? I would have loved to see that the discussion on truth, justice, compensation go hand in hand with trying to make an effort to find out about those who have not returned. When talking about those who are back with injuries, we should not forget that the person whose child is not yet back has a lot of injuries, because you're traumatized, you're not yourself...."*

The Juba Peace Talks offered what I considered to be some light at the end of the tunnel. I thought they might finally give me an opportunity to discover whether my son was still alive as I followed the talks through the media. Yet all my hopes were crushed when LRA leader Joseph Kony refused to sign

Among the people of West Nile, when loved ones die away from home and it is impossible for the dead body to be brought to the ancestral home for burial, the clan and the family perform a ritual to symbolically lay the soul of the deceased person to rest. Yet I do not know whether my son is alive or dead, so I have been denied this closure.

I have been forced to deal with conflicting and generally unverifiable messages about what has happened to my son. There have been messages from the initial stage. For example, somebody came and said, "Oh, that boy whose mother is in Arua was chopped on spot." Then I said, if he was chopped, they have picked all dead bodies of those who were killed. Why have I not seen his? So on all of the messages, you can either hear one that will lead you to your grave or have it give you false hope. One time, someone among the

time I realized that my daughter was sick, the girl was virtually dying. When I went to the doctor; he could not do much. It was finished. So it has been a nightmare and it's still a nightmare.

In the wake of the abduction, I lacked support. As a principal health inspector by profession, I worked as an environmental health staff of Arua Municipal Council, but my job could not distract me from what had happened, and I had trouble sleeping. I tried so hard to keep myself busy so I would not dwell on my missing son. From the time the incident happened, I was treated as if I was a mental case to restore some sanity and to give me back some sleep in the night. Since that time, I have tried to stay busy always. Of course, I would love to be busy in search for an answer. Where is he? Is he there? I tried to cope by denying myself any happiness, and in doing this, I had

**"I cannot also give up hope. I also can't keep my hopes too high because I really don't know. But eight years in the dark is not a short time."**

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## (cont.) I Want to Know What Has Happened to My Son

the Final Peace Agreement (FPA). I blame the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other stakeholders who did not pay attention to Kony's concerns about his own safety upon return for the dissolution of the talks. I think it's within our powers if the man says, "I want to come back but I need to be safe," to ensure that safety. For me as a mother who has lost a child whom I don't know whether he is alive or not, I say please, you forgive Kony, and let him come back.

Even without the signed FPA, the GoU has committed itself to implement the agreements reached in Juba. The implementation of the Peace Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) is ongoing and the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS) has been mandated to develop a national transitional justice framework comprised

of criminal prosecutions, informal or traditional justice mechanisms, and a quasi-judicial truth and reconciliation process. While such initiatives are good, I feel a better first step would be to identify the categories of people who are affected by the conflict. This will ensure that the strategies being developed take into consideration the interests of all affected people. The current debate only focuses on compensation, and I believe more questions need to be posed. We may only be looking at compensating people, but how about those who are not yet back? Is there any effort being made to follow them up? And if anything is being done, who are they answerable to? Do they know who is still having missing persons? If they are doing something or taking steps, are they consulting with this category of people? Are

they being updated? So to me, we still need to face the fact that other people are not yet back. We should not say 'it's over' when our children, brothers are still there.

Recent reports indicate that the LRA continues to abduct people in DRC, Sudan, and CAR to fill its ranks. As abductions continue, parents in these countries continue to feel the pain. In all of those places, I'm sure the parents are feeling the pinch I am feeling today. Whether it was for one day or twenty years, the pain is terrible. Those are terrible nightmares. To me these confrontations of words, the hide and seek, and all the games I see are to our disadvantage.

*As told by Fathum Norah to Sylvia Opinia. Additional information provided by Shane Noecker.*

**"A number of the passengers seated around me were already dead. Though I had not yet noticed, I had already been shot in the hand."**

## (cont.) In Addition to My Disability, I Am HIV+

first bus.

But the woman still would not heed, and I gave up trying to change her mind. Early that morning, we boarded the second bus to come through Karuma. There was little room on the bus. I had to stand, though the other vendor managed to get a seat near the back. I was on edge as the bus began moving,



Jane Jatoo in February 2011 (Photo Credit: JRP)

as recalled a news item about a Gateway Bus that had plunged into the Nile River near Karuma Falls earlier that year. As the bus raced down the hill out of Karuma, I feared our bus might do the same, but we crossed the bridge safely.

I was sitting in the aisle on my things, but as they passed through a thickly wooded area and began climbing a

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## (cont.) In Addition to My Disability, I Am HIV+

hill, I stood up and held onto the rail. Soon after standing, I heard a loud bang behind me and bullets began flying into the bus.

A number of the passengers seated around me were already dead. Though I had not yet noticed, I had already been shot in the hand. The vendor from Karuma, at the back of the bus, was holding on to her own intestines.

I could not see the LRA fighters firing from the forest. I tried exiting through the front door, but the way was blocked by many frantic people fighting to get out. As I retreated to my previous position, I heard bullets hitting the side of the bus.

The bus swerved off the road and came to a halt. The driver had been shot. I stood on a seat and banged against a window, trying to get out. In the attempt, my other hand was shot. I tried using my head to go through the window and heard a tiny noise. I had been shot through the eye. At this point, I still managed to jump down, held onto my hanging left hand and crawled into the bushes nearby.

### The Response

*"I laid in the bush until midday when Government soldiers who were on patrol appeared at the scene. They came, carried me and threw me in their army vehicle like a dead body."*

I passed out soon after crawling into the bushes. Four hours later, UPDF soldiers found me. They came, carried

me, and threw me in their army vehicle like a dead body. There was no decency involved at all.

When the vehicle began moving, I lost consciousness. I would start to wake whenever they stopped. At Bobi, thirty kilometers south of Gulu, a soldier bandaged my bleeding head and my shattered left hand. I cried from the pain. "Don't cry, Ma'am," the soldier told me. We arrived at Lacor Hospital in Gulu at two in the afternoon.

Once there, I had to wait for treatment as there was no relative there to sign the form that would allow me to be admitted into the operating theatre. I needed to have surgery on my wounds. My family had not yet been notified, and I imagined that I would have to continue waiting. But then, some nurses recognized me. As a fishmonger, I had many customers, and these nurses were among them. One nurse convinced the doctor to allow them to take my thumb, dip it in ink, and stamp it on the admission form.

In the operating theatre, my left hand was amputated and twelve stitches were put into my right arm. I also lost my left eye. I regained consciousness the next day. Men from the Nile Coach Bus Company took down my details and began to notify my relatives. I left the hospital one month later.

### Life after the Attack

*"Even at home where I was living, I was put in a leaking*

*hut. Looking at me now, there is no physical work that I can manage these days. I can't dig. Most times I rely on help from kind-hearted individuals."*

Whom do I hold responsible for the attack? Both the Government and LRA. I know I wasn't the only injured person, nor the one who suffered most in this conflict. My bus was the fourth bus to be attacked on that road.

My life was altered that day. Immediately upon my return, the neighbourhood children would run away from and avoid going near the house where I lived. I could not work as I used to and worried about having enough to eat and enough money to keep my children in school.

I find life very difficult. There are times when I feel that now that life is getting very challenging and complicated for me, I should commit suicide. My life was complicated in practically every sense by the attack that left me with only one hand and one eye. Just look at me—a person who cannot afford to dig, has to sit and wait until someone feels pity and hands me something. I find encouragement in stories from the Bible and the counselling I received from nurses. says he will grant.

**"My life was altered that day. Immediately upon my return, the neighbourhood children would run away from and avoid going near the house where I lived."**

***“There it was mandatory that all pregnant mothers test for HIV/AIDS, and that was how I ended up being tested.”***

After the attack, my co-wife began to try to turn my husband against me. She asked why I was allowed to continue living with them if I did not contribute to the family. My husband told his first wife, “I cannot leave Jane because I did not get her when she was disabled. Besides, she sustained the injury when she was already carrying my pregnancy as my wife. Instead of abandoning Jane, I should abandon you. Do you know what the future holds?” He then gave her a stern warning not to repeat such a statement.

#### **Life with HIV**

*“There it was mandatory that all pregnant mothers test for HIV/AIDS, and that was how I ended up being tested.”*

In addition to my disability, I am faced with the difficulty of living with HIV. I learned about having the disease after going for antenatal care. Over and over again I would tell myself that in addition to my disability, I am HIV positive. How shall I manage? How many disabilities do I have on me in total now?

For a while, I wondered if I had been infected by my first husband, who had passed away from a sudden illness. But my second husband is a driver and admitted to having had extramarital affairs.

My blood sample was taken and tested, and the result came out that I was positive. I got that result and took it to Gulu (where he lives) and showed him. He did not deny it. Instead, he told me that he had already known of his status as being HIV positive, but chose not to tell me because in the past he had heard me casually speak that in future if I ever test and find

that I am HIV positive then I will commit suicide. So just like that, he and his first wife tested and found that they were positive, but he chose to conceal this fact away from me. When I confronted him to know why he did that and concealed such an information from me, he said he never wanted to kill me. I became distraught and isolated myself in a room for a month.

The child I was pregnant with at the time of the attack bruised my nipples while suckling, and I had to discontinue breastfeeding and give the child cow's milk. My husband says I will need to breastfeed the child I have now for six months, as there isn't money for milk. I want to get a tubal ligation so that I will not become pregnant again. The hospital requires me to get my husband's approval, which heMy relationship with my husband is strained.

He helps me out financially only when one of our children is sick, and so I have to rely on my brothers for help. He (my husband) does not take me seriously and often treats me as a strangebecause we don't live together. I stay at his parents' home in Pakwach. This is partly because my husband requires me to wash and iron his clothes when I am with him, tasks which are difficult with my disability. The men of these days get fed up with you if all you do is sit and wait.

***As told by Jane Jatoo to Evelyn Akullo. Additional information provided by Shane Noecker.***

## Working for justice and reconciliation with grassroots communities

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) in Gulu, northern Uganda, 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 conflict. We aim to promote sustainable peace through the active involvement of war-affected communities in research and advocacy. In addition, our work seeks to provide tools to empower other victims and survivors of conflict in Africa's Great Lakes region also in situations of conflict. This newsletter is a quarterly publication of JRP. For comments or questions, please contact [info@justiceandreconciliation.com](mailto:info@justiceandreconciliation.com).

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### (cont.) The Tale of a Young Mother

situation in northern Uganda. They portrayed it as a challenge that continues to face families, hence the need for all stakeholders to address it.

This play is based on personal experiences of the girls, contributing to open dialogue as part of the process of healing and reconciliation. *The Tale of a Young Mother* is a story about the past through the eyes of a young female generation who is victim to conflict and perhaps too young to understand the frustrations their parents and other adults were going through. All of them have a story, and in sharing them through drama, someone is there, the community, to listen to them.

*The Tale of a Young Mother* is of great importance to society because it not only allows the door of awareness to open up regarding the past, but it also illustrates the current state of the



community, and the vulnerabilities and challenges that expose young girls to early, unwanted, unplanned pregnancies. While ChildVoice International (CVI), an organisation that works closely with JRP, has come to the rescue of these women by giving them

skills training, the women challenged the community members to develop strategies at family levels to solve this and similar challenges facing the young people.

*Written by Sylvia Opinia.*



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