



When a Gunman Speaks, You Listen

Victims' Experiences and Memories of Conflict in Palabek Sub-County, Lamwo District

JRP Field Note XV, August 2012





WHEN A GUN MAN SPEAKS, YOU LISTEN:
Victims' Experiences and Memories of Conflict in Palabek Sub-County, Lamwo
District

JRP Field Note XV, August 2012

Cover

- **Front:** Two survivors of conflict in Ayuu Alali in front of the local primary school. Photo Credit: JRP, 2012
- **Back (left to right):** Remains of former houses burned down by the LRA in Ayuu Anaka parish; A survivor displays his wounds inflicted on him by the LRA; Two survivors in Ajoagala parish pointing at a hidden mass-grave, Photo Credit: JRP, 2012

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

A just and peaceful society

Mission

JRP empowers conflict affected communities to participate in processes of justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Acknowledgements

Authors: Emon Komakec and Philipp Schulz
Lead Researcher: Lino Owor Ogora, Team Leader, Community Documentation Department, ogoralino@gmail.com, +256772835076
Executive Researcher: Boniface Ojok, Program Coordinator
Field Researchers: Evelyn Akullo Otwilli, Ketty Anyeko, Lino Owor Ogora, Emon Komakec and Philipp Schulz.
Proofreading: Rhiannan Price

Appreciation to the JRP team for the useful input extended towards the completion of this report. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Norwegian Embassy in Kampala for our funding. For a copy of our research reports and more information on JRP, visit www.justiceandreconciliation.com or email info@justiceandreconciliation.com.

Contact

Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)

Plot 50 Lower Churchill Drive
P.O. Box 1216
Gulu, Uganda, East Africa
Tel: +256 (0) 471 433 008
Web: www.justiceandreconciliation.com
Email: info@justiceandreconciliation.com

Copyright © 2012 by Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP). All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

Table of Contents

Acronyms.....	4
Palabek at a Glance.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	6
Background Information	7
Suffering at the Hands of Supposed Protectors: Experiences of NRA Perpetrated Violence..	9
Ayyu Alali’s 1991 Attack.....	10
Victims’ Experiences in Ayyu Anaka	11
12 th April 1992: Killings of Suspected Rebel-Collaborators in Ajoagala	13
Continuous Civilian Suffering	13
Civilian Militarization: The Arrow Group.....	14
LRA Attacks in Palabek.....	15
19 th March 1995: The Mass Abduction of Ayyu Alali.....	15
Brutality at its Peak: The 1997 Retaliation Massacre, 7 th January 1997	16
Forced Displacement and Life in the Camp	18
Post-Conflict: The Challenges of Recovery, Justice and Reconciliation	18
Collecting the Pieces: Burials and Exhumations	19
Reparations and Accountability	19
Community-Based Reconciliation.....	21
Recommendations	21
Appendix A: Partial List of People Abducted by the LRA in Palabek Kal and Palabek Gem sub-counties until 2002	23

Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoU	Government of Uganda
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICD	International Crimes Division
IDP(s)	Internally Displaced Person(s)
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
LDU	Local Defense Unit
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NRA	National Resistance Army
NRM	National Resistance Movement
UNLA	Uganda National Liberation Army
UPDF	Uganda People's Defense Forces

Palabek at a Glance

- **Location:** Palabek Sub-County is located 36 kilometers north of Kitgum town in Lamwo District. By virtue of its location close to the border with Southern Sudan, it was very prone to LRA attacks. What used to be known as Palabek Division is now divided into the two separate sub-counties of Palabek Kal and Palabek Gem. Palabek Kal is comprised of four parishes and thirty-one villages.
- **Main perpetrators;** The 32nd Battalion of the NRA under the **command of one Captain Abiriga** is alleged to have operated in Palabek from 1991. This battalion is accused of committing various atrocities against civilians.
- **Jomo;** John Ongwec, a resident of Palabek more commonly known as Jomo, served as Captain Abiriga's right hand and assistant.
- **Main tactics;** The 32nd Battalion is said to have employed several brutal strategies including night village operations, forced conscription, sporadic killings as well as restricted movements, all brutally enforced by government soldiers under the command of Captain Abiriga. Residents recall a particularly brutal method of torture called '*three piece*' (*Kandoya*), a forceful and violent procedure where an individual's elbows are tied together behind his or her back. The LRA on the other hand hacked, clubbed or burnt their victims to death.
- **Main targets;** The 32nd Battalion's main targets were people suspected of being former rebels or rebel collaborators and ex-soldiers of the Tito Okello Lutwa Regime. The LRA indiscriminately targeted the entire civilian population.
- **Main atrocities by the NRA's 32nd Battalion under command of Captain Abiriga**
 - **1st February 1991, Ayuu Alali Village:** 6 civilians are allegedly killed at Ayuu Alali Primary School under orders of Captain Abiriga. They are, Oyoo Joseph, Oryem Santo, Orono Nelson, Luboyi Richard, Erija Ongee and Odur Nekonori. Two others, Marencio Arop and Ocan Ben, survived after they were set free.
 - **12th April 1992, Ayuu Anaka Village:** 7 people from the same family suspected of being rebel collaborators are allegedly killed by government soldiers on Captain Abiriga's orders. They are, Joseph Ogiki, Limoneka Matilde, Owit Ventorino Obol, Auma Alice, Maratina Layet, Karakwilo Oketayot Tonny and Agamaki. The killings which occurred on 12th April 1992 were reportedly investigated by the police in Kampala but no arrests were made. On the 17th April 2010, almost eighteen years after this killing, the remains of the seven victims were discovered by a group of hunters close to an anthill in Alimotiko Parish. These remains were exhumed and re-buried
 - **12th April 1992, Ajoagala Village:** Kidega Abwona, a resident of Palabek is allegedly executed at Owichi Hills at the orders of Captain Abiriga for failing to show the NRA soldiers the rebels' hiding place.
 - **12th – 14th April 1992, Palabek Kal Village:** 6 civilians are allegedly executed on the orders of Captain Abiriga. They are Adinya David, Nyero Felix, Ongany, Olar, Lyet and Joseph Akena Lukuk. Okello Julius, an elderly person, survived after he was released.
 - **Civilian militarization** was undertaken in Palabek between 1991 and 1992. In addition to assisting soldiers, civilian communities were increasingly coerced by the Ugandan military to guard their villages and homesteads themselves. On the orders of Captain Abiriga it was reported, all women were required to carry either a knife or stick, while every man had to carry a bow and arrow, or a spear and axe. This angered the LRA who increased their attacks against civilians.
 - The local civilian militia group in Palabek was led by John Ongwec, a.k.a Jomo, a resident of Palabek. Between 1991 and 1992, Jomo was the liaison between the community and the soldiers. However, Jomo was simultaneously involved in the execution and killing of innocent civilians at Ayuu Anaka.
- **Main atrocities committed by LRA**
 - 19th March 1995, Ayuu Alali Village, 400 people are allegedly abducted by the LRA as they celebrated a harvest festival. Most of these people are still missing to date. The operation was carried out by the Gilva Brigade under the command of Lt. Colonel Otim .
 - 7th January 1997: between 200 and 300 people were allegedly brutally killed by the LRA rebels in Palabek sub-county, while many others were abducted. Some were burnt in houses and others were slaughtered with knives. Residents specifically remember an entire family that was set ablaze inside a house in Kempolo.

Introduction

Northern Uganda is recovering from two decades of conflict waged between Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU). The conflict's overall impact has been devastating, encompassing the displacement of over 1.8 million people into internally displaced person (IDP) camps, loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and property, as well as the abduction of an estimated 38,000 children to serve as soldiers or sex slaves.¹

Located 36 kilometers north of Kitgum town in Lamwo District is the sub-county of Palabek. Despite its serene environment, Palabek is one of the sub-counties in Northern Uganda whose residents experienced significant violence and repeated violations and abuse of human rights by both the LRA and the GoU forces. The residents are still haunted by the name of 'Captain Abiriga'², the commander of the 32nd Battalion of the National Resistance Army (NRA) that operated in Palabek in the early 1990s. In fact the mere mention of the name 'Abiriga' evokes fear, hatred, and anger among the residents. In a similar light, crimes committed by the LRA are still fresh in the minds of the victims.

By virtue of its location at the border, Palabek endured an almost constant military and LRA presence, often turning its communities into battlegrounds. Beyond that, Palabek is an example of civilian militarization; throughout the course of the conflict, communities were coerced to arm themselves with bows and arrows to defend against the LRA, thus exposing them to further danger. Against the backdrop of this violence, life became increasingly difficult and oppressive for Palabek's residents. As documented in this report, the sub-county's residents revealed tremendous individual and collective memories of violence, torture, abduction, displacement and death that have yet to be acknowledged within the country's dialogue on reconciliation and transitional justice.

This report is a case study recounting personal experiences of conflict in Uganda's north using perspectives of victims in Palabek. The documentation was conducted with four main objectives: first, to respond to a request by residents of Palabek who wanted their stories documented; secondly to demonstrate how the community experienced both the LRA and the NRA atrocities; thirdly, to detail how the communities have been denied justice and reparations after losing their loved ones to government forces as well as rebels; third, to document the crimes perpetrated by government soldiers, particularly in the early 1990's; and finally to establish evidence of individual criminal responsibility at the hands of a former NRA commander.

Communities like Palabek experienced extreme violence for two decades and now face the challenge of attaining justice and reconciliation. The report will focus on Palabek's history and records from 1986 to the present based on victims' testimonies and in-person interviews. It also offers an in-depth description of the incidents of violence committed by both warring parties, the LRA and NRA, while focusing on key concerns frequently raised by respondents. This report highlights instances of torture and killing by the NRA as well as the LRA, including the impacts on the civilian population. This report concludes with concrete recommendations to the Government and local organizations, in accordance with the views and concerns expressed by Palabek's community members. Residents in Palabek sub-county call for public acknowledgement of their experiences, reparations and the administration of justice. Palabek serves as just one case study of the suffering that has been felt throughout Northern Uganda. Many war-affected people in the region share the views and opinions expressed by Palabek's residents, and also deserve the attention of stakeholders involved in post-conflict reconciliation.

Methodology

This report is a response to the community's request to have their conflict experiences documented, inter alia for purposes of public acknowledgement and memory preservation. Between 24th May and 26th May 2010, a preliminary field visit to Palabek Sub-county headquarters revealed several experiences of conflict as well as an urgent need to publicly document these records. After this initial

¹ Phuong Pham, Patrick Vinck & Eric Stover, "Abducted: The Lord's Resistance Army and Forced Conscription in Northern Uganda", June 2007

² Throughout the whole document, the name 'Captain Abiriga' the commander of the 32nd battalion does not explicitly refer to any particular personality.

meeting, follow-up visits included a variety of participatory and process-oriented methods of research, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to document oral histories and memories and to construct a time line of events. Between February and March 2012, another visit was conducted to verify existing information.

Our researchers spoke to 86 civilians, including local leaders, survivors, witnesses and relatives of victims. 65 respondents were male, and 21 were female. In addition to 19 individual in-depth and open-ended interviews, JRP's researchers conducted 8 separate focus group discussions with 67 participants. The interviews were conducted in Luo and later translated into English. Respondents were selected based on their various encounters with military and LRA forces. Each individual who participated in the study was either a survivor, or a formerly abducted person, local leader or relative of a victim. In addition to their testimonies, community residents helped to create a timeline of major occurrences during the conflict in Palabek.

Background Information

"[T]his place witnessed so many atrocities during the course of this conflict. That is why you see very few homesteads in this area. Most of our children were taken away by Kony and they never came back. They have remained there. Whether they are dead or not, we can't tell."³

Since 1986, Northern Uganda has suffered from armed conflict as a result of various rebel groups waging war on President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement led government. The LRA was by far the most brutal and active of these rebel groups, and years of conflict left Northern Uganda devastated. Millions of people were forced into IDP camps, where they lived without protection and under squalid conditions. Tens of thousands of people, many of whom were children below the age of fifteen, were abducted and forced to serve as child soldiers or wives to rebel commanders. The repeated human rights abuses by the National Resistance Army (NRA)⁴ as well as the Lord's Resistance Army have left the community members tormented by memories of abduction, torture, and brutal killings. These experiences are characteristic of what occurred in many other communities in Northern Uganda.

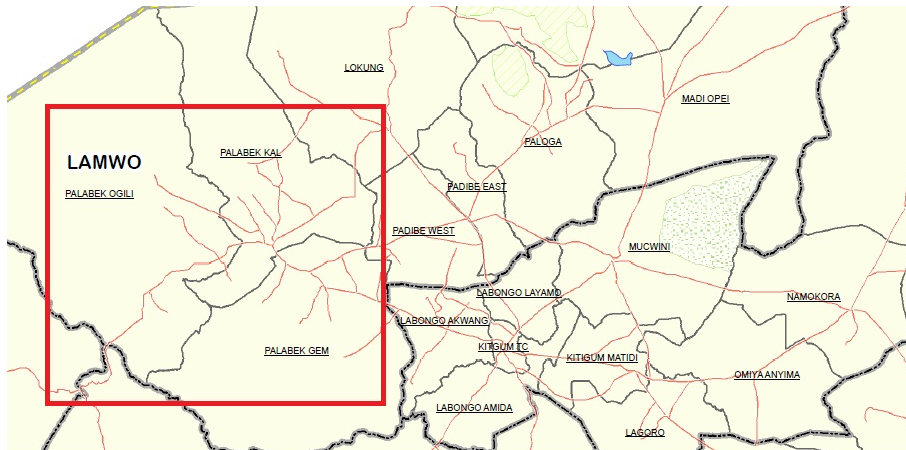
After such a prolonged conflict, Northern Uganda is slowly experiencing relative peace following the 2006-2008 Juba Peace Talks. However, in this time of peace building, there exist challenges concerning justice, accountability and reconciliation. Although the negotiations in Juba did not lead to the intended Final Peace Agreement (FPA), various key protocols were signed, including Agenda Item Three – the Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation, providing a framework for the implementation of transitional justice initiatives in Uganda. Through this protocol, the Ugandan Government declared its commitment of moving towards the development of a comprehensive transitional justice agenda. This included the creation of the International Crimes Division (ICD) of the High Court to investigate and try crimes related to the conflict in Northern Uganda. Despite these developments, factual investigations into crimes committed by both parties has not been consistent, despite numerous testimonies from victims. As such, community-focused transitional justice approaches are yet to be realized.

Palabek, in particular, is worth looking at more closely because of the intriguing dynamics of violations committed by both the government forces and the rebels. Its close location to the border with Southern Sudan exposed people in Palabek to intense violence and made the community even more vulnerable to attacks and abductions by the LRA. Like other communities throughout Northern Uganda, civilians located in close distance to the border were an easy target for rebel activities. Given that the LRA rebels continuously gained support from the Sudanese government in Khartoum and therefore enjoyed a safe haven in large parts of Southern Sudan, communities near the border became easy targets for looting, abductions and attacks. Moreover, Palabek's residents were continuously forced to flee their homes in the aftermath of various attacks and incidents. Over the years, these civilians suffered gross human rights violations. The rebels abducted individuals, recruited child soldiers, displaced communities and murdered civilians.

³ Individual interview with an elderly male respondent, Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

⁴ The National Resistance Army was renamed the Uganda People's Defense Force following the enactment of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda

In a similar light, the government army, the NRA, is also alleged to have committed crimes such as extrajudicial execution, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, sexual assault, exploitation. To this day, residents of Palabek are still haunted by the name of one 'Captain Abiriga' who is said to have commanded the 32nd battalion of the NRA and ordered executions and other violations against the civilian population. Other impacts of the conflict on residents of Palabek include forcible relocation of civilians and child recruitment.⁵ A significant consequence of the war, mass displacement in Northern Uganda began in 1996, when the government ordered civilians into camps as a more secure alternative to their homesteads. Palabek, mainly because of its insecure location at the Sudanese border, was no exception. By 2007, at least 90% of the populations in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts had been forced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with appalling living conditions and poor protection.⁶ Beyond that, some villages were commanded into displacement camps by government forces, while many more voluntarily moved due to increasing insecurity.



Palabek sub-county is located 36 kilometers north of Kitgum town in the newly created Lamwo District.⁷ Close to the border between Sudan and Uganda, Palabek is comprised of four parishes⁸ and thirty-one villages. What used to be known as Palabek Division is now divided into the two separate sub-counties of Palabek Kal and Palabek Gem.

Map showing the location of Palabek Sub-county in Lamwo District (encircled in red). Source: UNOCHA.

Prior to 1986, Palabek was considered a safe haven as people enjoyed relative peace in a stable economy. Palabek's communities were rich in cattle, animals and property, and education standards were improving. Soon after General Tito Okello's regime change in 1986, life changed in Palabek. At this time, residents feared a potential reprisal from Museveni's new National Resistance Army, seeking revenge against General Okello's former government, which largely consisted of northerners. Many people fled from their villages and sought refuge in Sudan. Together with the civilians, ex-soldiers of Okello's regime were forced to flee northwards as well. Palabek provided an easy escape route and corridor to and from Southern Sudan, which was considered a safer place at that time.

During this time, different rebel groups began to emerge. In addition to the 'Cilil'⁹ rebel group and Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army was the most active and most brutal. From 1988, the LRA carried out its first attacks in Northern Uganda and was most active in the sub-region of Acholiland. For more than two decades, the conflict ravaged the northern region and later spread beyond Acholiland. Palabek is one of the smaller sub-counties in Lamwo district affected by the conflict. Given the presence of two warring parties, life became increasingly oppressive and threatening for Palabek's communities.

⁵Human Rights First; see: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/cah/ij/regions/uganda/uganda.aspx>

⁶ Sarah Bailey, 2008. Perceptions of Corruption in Humanitarian Assistance Among Internally Displaced Persons in Northern Uganda, HPG Working Paper, Transparency International

⁷Uganda today has over one hundred districts. In 2010, Lamwo district was created out of Kitgum district in Northern Uganda.

⁸ Today's Palabek Kal sub-county consists of four parishes: Palabek Kal, Ayuu Alali, Lamwo and Labigirayang

⁹ The term 'Cilil' was a local nickname for rebel groups which sprung up in Northern Uganda after the LRA came to power. The name signaled the rebels' courage and readiness to fight the government army, often urging the population to inform of their presence

Suffering at the Hands of Supposed Protectors: Experiences of NRA Perpetrated Violence

According to community members, atrocities committed by government forces date as far back as 1986, when the NRA/NRM Government under the leadership of President Yoweri Museveni came to power. Among Northern Uganda's local population, a constant fear of vengeance prevailed as the NRA overthrew a government widely perceived as a regime of northerners. In Palabek sub-county, this fear was destructive to people's well being. While fleeing northwards to Sudan, the ousted soldiers of the Lutwa regime kept cautioning residents in Palabek not to trust the new government. The fleeing ex-soldiers told them: *'Don't stay, the Government that has ascended into power shall wipe out all of us'*.¹⁰ Additionally, those who crossed Palabek to flee towards Sudan uprooted and ravaged large amounts of crops such as cassava and other agricultural goods cultivated by and belonging to the population, ruining the livelihoods of many local people. The new government had already accused Palabek's residents of being LRA collaborators and of supporting the rebellion without providing any proof or evidence for that. For the local civilian population, this brought tensions within the community and generated widespread fear.



A survivor narrates his experiences during the conflict. Source: JRP

In addition to this instability, frequent cattle raids from Karamojong warriors¹¹ contributed to the culture of fear throughout the villages. Between 1987 and 1989 cattle rustling by Karamojong warriors - allegedly aided by the government soldiers - increased tremendously as the community claims. These attacks prompted even more residents to flee their homes.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, however, the community in Palabek adjusted to the situation of military presence. This relative peace lasted until the 32nd battalion under the command of Captain Abiriga arrived in Palabek in 1991. Since then, the mere mention of the name 'Abiriga' has invoked fear and anger among the residents of Palabek.

Various respondents recalled atrocities committed by this particular battalion. The battalion's tactics for intelligence gathering included the interrogation of civilians as a way to uncover potential *'rebel collaboration'* within the community and recover illegal arms. These strategies included night village operations, forced conscription, sporadic killings as well as restricted movements, all brutally enforced by government soldiers under the command of Captain Abiriga. According to community members, the army's operations in the early 1990s are considered some of the worst endured during the two decades of conflict. Instead of serving as protectors for the communities, soldiers of the Ugandan government terrorized civilians and are responsible for numerous violent deaths. Those suspected of being former rebels or rebel collaborators were often killed, sometimes brutally by hits on the back of their heads. Several witnesses remember that government soldiers killed ex-soldiers while accusing them of plotting counter-attacks to overthrow the new regime in Kampala. Beyond that, different respondents remember that as part of the operation, soldiers started setting huts on fire as well as tying people into *'three piece'* (*Kandoya*), a forceful and violent procedure where an individual's elbows are tied together behind his or her back. One of the interviewees recalls that: *"[I]n fact when I returned home, I found one of the victim of 'three piece' was still admitted in hospital, his arms were tied so hard that he could barely hold anything"*¹²

¹⁰ Male respondent during focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2012

¹¹ The Karamojong warriors originate from an Ethnic tribe of the Karamojong living in north-eastern Uganda.

¹² Female respondent during focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 04th May 2010

Ayuu Alali's 1991 Attack



Survivors of the attack indicate where the gathering at Ayuu Alali Primary School took place. Source: JRP

One particular horrific incident occurred at the primary school in Ayuu Alali parish, located about 15 kilometers south of Palabek Kal. In a focus group discussion, the event was narrated by various residents of the village. On 1st February 1991, soldiers from Captain Abiriga's 32nd Battalion gathered all the people in the village and escorted them to Ayuu Alali Primary School compound. Upon arrival, the government soldiers interrogated the people using coercive means such as indiscriminate beating, keeping the people in the hot sun for long periods of time, selecting people from the crowd and interrogating them separately, often singling out ex-soldiers. In total, eight community members were selected from the school ground. Seven of them were later killed by a nearby stream. These atrocities were

pre-meditated as a command had been issued to ensure that everyone else stayed in their homes during the attack.

"On the evening of that day we all received information that a command had been issued by the army commander prohibiting civilians from moving around. We were instructed to remain in the village and not go out to dig. This information was relayed to us by the 'Mukungu'¹³ who warned all of us to abide by the directive. Then, very early the following morning, the soldiers came, and they wasted no time in rounding up everyone in the village including myself. We were all taken to the primary school."¹⁴

In the school, community members were fearful due to the interrogation and harassment through the soldiers. In order to discover former rebels or rebel collaborators, soldiers selected three particular persons from the crowd and beat them severely. In addition to two men, an elderly woman was heavily caned by the soldiers. As recalled by one witness, the government soldiers said; *"if you cannot identify the rebels we are going to kill you as an example."¹⁵* To get relevant information, soldiers randomly beat the gathered people after separating the women from the men. After interrogating the men, soldiers beat those who were not providing satisfactory or sufficient information. Since none of the men offered information the NRA forces wanted to hear, the women were punished and beaten as well. Some of the women were mothers to children as young as three months, but the soldiers nevertheless were not deterred. Only two pregnant women were spared.¹⁶



A focus group discussion with survivors in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal Sub-County. Source: JRP

As a result of this harsh questioning and beating of civilians, the soldiers managed to compile a list of eight men, all ex-Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) soldiers. While publicly reading the list, the accused eight men were taken from the crowd and brought to a classroom block, which the NRA referred to as 'small office'. Inside, an intelligence officer waited to interrogate the suspects before taking the men to the nearby *Lamiya Wang* stream where six of them were brutally clubbed to death

¹³Parish chief

¹⁴Local leader during focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

¹⁵ Male respondent during focus group discussion, Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 28th February 2012

¹⁶Local leader during focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

and chopped into pieces. Only two survived, with one of the men running to escape across the stream with his hands tied behind his back.¹⁷ Residents of Ayuu Alali recalled that the second survivor had previously worked with the commander, and as a result, was set free in order to spread the information among the relatives of the victims. The victims of these killings were identified as Oyoo Joseph, Oryem Santo, Orono Nelson, Luboyi Richard, Erija Ongee and Odur Nekonori. Marencio Arap and Ocan Ben are the two who managed to survive on that day.¹⁸

In the aftermath of the killing, the corpses were carried by their relatives for a decent burial. On the following day, soldiers of the NRA's 32nd battalion returned to Palabek and detained another alleged rebel-collaborator called Augustine Lutoo Owere. Following the gathering of residents to identify other rebel sympathizers, soldiers ordered Owere and his cousins to lie down and fired several bullets at them, killing one with a shot to the back of the head. As the government forces made their way back to the military detach in Palabek Kal, the witnesses were ordered to bury the dead body. As a result of this incident, residents of Ayuu Alali parish lived in constant fear. Recalling the aftermath of the massacre at the school compound, one respondent recalls that *"on that night, people were left traumatized and feared that they would die if they stayed in Palabek. Therefore, most of them fled to Sudan while only a few stayed."*¹⁹ However, since the violence did not escalate further and those who fled suffered poor living conditions in Sudan, Palabek residents slowly started returning to Ayuu Alali from 1993 onwards.

To date, nothing has been done about the killing. There has never been a public acknowledgement nor were the offenders held accountable and brought to justice.

Victims' Experiences in Ayuu Anaka



Focus group discussions with family members of the victims in Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county. Source: JRP

Located in today's Palabek Gem sub-county, Ayuu Anaka parish was yet another place which suffered from the immense brutality of the NRA killings under the command of Captain Abiriga. On the 12th April 1992, government soldiers killed seven members of the same family, all suspected of being rebel collaborators, on Captain Abiriga's orders. Allegedly, an abducted boy called Lalobo, who was accused of coming home to collect money and supplies for the rebels, belonged to the victimized family.

During the evening of 11th April 1992, a village raid by the NRA forced several community members to seek refuge at the local military detach at the compound of the Resistance Councilor (RC)²⁰ Saveriyo Arwata. Survivors and witnesses of the attack recall how civilian community members from all over the

surrounding areas were arrested and gathered. The civilians were required to sleep at the gathering point until Captain Abiriga arrived in the morning to identify the reasons of Lalobo's stay with the community. Due to immense pressure by the soldiers, civilians among the crowd started to accuse each other, hoping to escape and protect themselves. As a result of this forceful interrogation, Captain Abiriga's men compiled a list of seven names, all from Lalobo's family, who were accused of rebel collaboration. Rounded up at the army detach, the seven members of Lalobo's family were selected out of the crowd while the rest of the people were released. One of the witnesses of the attack remembers how as soon as those seven were selected, Captain Abiriga stated that *"I will kill all these people, the rest of the crowd can go back now."*²¹

¹⁷Female respondent during focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

¹⁸As revealed by respondents during focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 28th February 2012

¹⁹Male respondent during focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, 28th February 2012

²⁰RCs are today's equivalent of Local Councilors (LCs)

²¹Male respondent during focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka parish, 04th August 2010

In the night, the selected suspects were taken to a place called Lagot Ocao, about 7 kilometers from the gathering point at the army detach, where all of them were lined up on the road and killed.²² The seven people who were killed on 12th April 1992 were: Joseph Ogiki, Limoneka Matilde, Owit Venterino Obol, Auma Alice, Maratina Layet, Karakwilo Oketayot Tonny and Agamaki.

After the killing, the soldiers left the scene and passed by one of the victim's homesteads, which they set ablaze. All of the houses of the relatives of those killed were later set on fire.

The details surrounding this gruesome killing still remain unclear. News of the deaths was not immediate. A majority of the survivors only learned of the atrocity after a group of policemen from Kampala arrived at the crime scene. Since relatives of the victims strongly believed that all of them were innocent, they wanted to find a way to get the government's attention.²³ Therefore, the surviving family members contacted the local government intelligence officer who inspected the ground and subsequently involved the police from Kampala. Nevertheless, some of the remaining soldiers under the command of Captain Abiriga were able to secretly bury the remains of the victims in an ant-hill, thus hiding any incriminating evidence.



Family members of the deceased pointing at the spot where the seven victims were brutally killed. Source: JRP

John Ongwec, a resident of Palabek more commonly known as Jomo, served as Captain Abiriga's right hand and assistant. Jomo was arrested by the police and taken to Palabek Kal and later to Kitgum Town. However, he was able to escape and fled to Sudan. According to numerous sources, he has not yet come back to Palabek since this particular incident. Throughout our consultation with survivors and witnesses of the attack, respondents on the ground frequently emphasized that the seven victims were Jomo's maternal relatives, something which causes a lot of frustration and resulted in the ongoing tension among these close family members.

Eighteen years after the attack, on the 17th April 2010, the remains of the seven residents of Ayuu Anaka village were discovered by a group of hunters close to an ant-hill in Alimotiko Parish. Prior to finding the corpses, the hunters were chasing an edible rat which tried to escape into an ant-hill. While searching for the rat, the hunters kept poking long sticks into visible holes on the ant-hill until deciding to dig it up. They first excavated some pieces of clothes and then pulled out the remains of a human being. Later, the hunters discovered that all of the bodies had been buried on the opposite side of the ant-hill. As much of the clothing on the remains was still intact, the relatives were able to identify their deceased loved ones. Prior to this, none of the families knew where the bodies of these seven victims had been hidden. After exhuming the corpses, it became evident that some of the victims were seriously beaten. Six of the skulls were partially cracked, and another was completely smashed. All the rest of the skeletons were either wrapped in clothes or put in polythene bags.²⁴ As a consequence of the discovery, it was finally possible to organize a burial for the dead bodies. Beyond that, relatives of the victims expressed that *"what compelled us to go and exhume those bodies was the fact that strange things had started happening to our children in our homesteads"*.²⁵ In line with traditional Acholi beliefs, the families feared that the children were possessed by *cen* (spirits of the

²²RC during a focused group discussion in Ayuu Anaka village, 04th August 2010

²³ As revealed during focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka Central village, Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem Sub-County, 29th February 2012

²⁴Close relative to the deceased who was involved in the burial arrangement. Response during a focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

²⁵ Male respondent during focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 04th August 2010

deceased). The corpses were removed from where they were hidden and brought home for decent burials in a mass-grave in close distance to the families' homesteads.

12th April 1992: Killings of Suspected Rebel-Collaborators in Ajoagala

Still on 12th April 1992, after killing the seven people, the NRA soldiers continued to Ajoagala village – about thirteen kilometers from Ayuu Anaka Central – where several other people were beaten, tortured and killed.

Upon arrival in Ajoagala village, residents were gathered at the home of the Chairperson of the School Management Committee of Berigoya Primary School, Mr. Ejariyo Layira. Captian Abiriga's group ordered the arrestees to expose any rebel collaborators. Under threats of further torture, various community members revealed that the son-in-law of a person called Kidega Abwona was a rebel and used to come and stay with him. Upon receiving this information, the government soldiers arrested Kidega and asked him to identify where the rebels stayed whenever they were in the area. He led the army representatives to Owichi Hills, a place where the LRA allegedly used to stay. When the soldiers discovered that no rebels could be sighted, they killed Kidega instantly and returned to the assembled crowd and continued to question them about the rebels' whereabouts. As the civilians did not provide sufficient information voluntarily, the government soldiers locked them in a hut and continued their harsh questioning. During the interrogation, parts of the hut were set on fire, scaring a few people into raising their hands and offering information about the rebels' whereabouts. A group of five civilians were made to move with the government soldiers towards the direction of Palabek Kal, about 23 kilometers away from Ajoagala. During the journey, the group reached the home of Joseph Akena Lukuk, the LC I Chairperson of that village, and the soldiers arrested him as well. Okello Julius, an elderly person, who was arrested with the group, later was released. He recalled that the government soldiers killed the other alleged rebel collaborators one at a time as they proceeded towards Palabek. Within the two days journey, six victims, Adinya David, Nyeru Felix, Ongany, Olar, Lyet and Joseph Akena Lukuk, were individually clubbed to death.



Okello Julius was one of those arrested and forced to move with the group of soldiers. He survived while others were killed. Source: JRP

In the aftermath of these killings, the NRA soldiers instituted a curfew whereby no movement was allowed between 4:00 PM and 10:00 AM the following day. No one was allowed to go into the nearby bush, and farming work was only allowed in a radius of three kilometers. The surrounding area was heavily guarded for almost a month. Anyone who dared go out for hunting was chased away with gunshots. For the community, these restricted movements made it impossible to harvest gardens and provide food and other necessities to survive. At the same time, Palabek's residents recall that many were punished for breaking the curfew law, and some were even killed.

Continuous Civilian Suffering

In addition to these atrocities, many other accounts of killings and torture occurred throughout Palabek sub-county during the early 1990's. Former soldiers and ex-combatants were the main targets of the NRA battalion. Their combat experience was considered a military threat to the new regime. Beyond that, ex-soldiers were accused of collaborating with rebels against the government. To control ex-combatants, NRA soldiers regularly demanded their help in fighting the rebels – although mostly against their will.



Former camp commandant recalls his experiences. Source: JRP

For a majority of Palabek's community members, the acts of the NRA soldiers were impossible to understand. Some people considered it revenge for the alleged atrocities committed by the previous UNLA government against other tribes in Uganda, particularly the West Nile population. In an attempt to explain the potential reasons for the waves of violence, respondents continuously referred to vengeance.

"In West Nile when the UNLA overthrew the Government, it was said that children were pounded using mortars and pestles, and it was that same act that was avenged in Palabek, despite the fact that UNLA was an army composed of people from all over Uganda. The blame was all mounted on the Acholi people.

That was why the Commander of the operation here hailed from West Nile. In my view, this was revenge, and they only used the prevailing conflict situation to make them commit their revenge and come out unnoticed."²⁶

Palabek Kal's former IDP camp commandant is one of many people in Palabek who shared the opinion that revenge was the motive for atrocities in Palabek. According to him, *"During the times of Amin, people from West Nile took revenge on the northerners. After Amin people from the north took revenge again. Now, it was time for people from West Nile to take revenge on the northern population again."²⁷*

Civilian Militarization: The Arrow Group

Palabek's communities suffered extensive human rights violations by the NRA in the early 1990's, including but not limited to extrajudicial killings, beatings, rape, torture and cattle rustling. Throughout these attacks, Palabek's civilians were forced against their will to ally with the NRA forces. Mainly, such cooperation was a necessary survival mechanism and one of the few options left to the civilians to escape attacks and avoid torture. If government soldiers learned that civilians did not inform the NRA about any LRA spotting, *'then it is your [the civilian's] life to pay for that. You are just closer to death.'*²⁸ In an attempt to engage civilians into supporting the soldiers the NRA ordered that *'if anyone came across any ammunition belonging to the LRA and reports the case to the soldiers or physically delivers the ammunition, then you will receive cash payment of five Hundred Thousand Shillings.'*²⁹ With the majority of civilians living in poverty, this was a tempting offer for many. Initially, community members rushed into the bushes to search for ammunitions, thereby provoking and angering the LRA rebels.

In addition to assisting soldiers, civilian communities were increasingly forced by the Ugandan military to guard their villages and homesteads themselves. Throughout the war-affected areas, it became a common phenomenon for communities to take up arms in self-defense. While consistently living in insecurity, Palabek civilians were conditioned to function as their own protectors. People were forced to mobilize and arm themselves with bows and arrows in self-defense. They were largely responsible for their own safety. According to respondents, the government soldiers instituted a resolution that required each and every individual civilian to be armed with bows and arrows as well as knives whenever they left the camp or when rebels passed their places – a phenomenon later referred to as *Arrow Groups*. The army used a drum, calling for civilians to mobilize and arm themselves for military operations against the LRA. As the military base was located in Palabek Kal, civilians were expected to travel there as fast as possible as soon as the drum began to sound,

²⁶ Male respondent during focus group discussion in Palabek Kal sub-county, 26th May 2010

²⁷ Individual interview with the former camp commandant of Palabek Kal IDP Camp, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, 1st March 2012

²⁸ Community member during a focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

²⁹ Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

“They ordered that during any operation, each and every woman carries a knife or stick and walks while every man had to carry a bow and arrow, and in case those were missing then he/she needed to carry a spear and axe in his hands.”³⁰

The local group in Palabek was led by Jomo. Between 1991 and 1992, Jomo was the liaison between the community and the soldiers. However, Jomo was simultaneously involved in the execution and killing of innocent civilians at Ayuu Anaka.

LRA Attacks in Palabek

Towards the end of 1992, the course of events began to change. As of early 1993, the scale of the killings by the government slowly reduced. But instead of peace, violence continued for the communities of Palabek. Attacks by the LRA increased, turning the rebel group into the primary perpetrators of violence in the area. Although the LRA had been actively abducting people in the years before, the number of deaths by the rebels accelerated in the early 1990’s. The rebels targeted the civilians because they believed the people were cooperating with the army against them. On several occasions, Palabek’s population suffered retaliation from the LRA because the NRA had mobilized the civilians in self-defense. According to focus group participants, the rebels *‘came with the aim that since the civilians had accepted to confront them with bows and arrows, they needed to give them a real taste so that they can see for themselves whether or not a bow and arrow can match a gun.’*³¹

19th March 1995: The Mass Abduction of Ayuu Alali

On 19th March 1995, Ayuu Alaali parish in Palabek Kal sub-county was once again subjected to violent insurgency, this time by the LRA. Hundreds of youth were abducted from Ayuu Alali and marched towards Palabek before eventually being taken into Sudan to an LRA training base. This attack coincided with the *Lak Kweri* ceremony which had gathered most of the village’s population to celebrate the annual harvest. The ceremony is considered as a time to rejoice and enjoy the fruits of garden work. In 1995, the *Lak Kweri* festivity turned into a tragedy when nearly 400 people were abducted by the LRA. In that year, twenty-six members from *Tii-ki-Cingi* farming group organized the celebration, inviting members from three neighboring farming groups who came with their spouses. Such a large number of people attended that it became difficult to discern potential security threats or strangers among the crowd. Some people believe that rebels were lingering in the area even the day before the celebration.



A few typical Acholi homesteads in the centre of Ayuu Alali where the mass abduction took place. Source: JRP

Some people believe that rebels were lingering in the area even the day before the celebration.

A group of rebels had, in fact, arrived in the area on Saturday, 18th March 1995 and camped at Otong Lawadpura while the community members continued to dance. Among the celebrants, several LRA combatants served as spies, pretending to be from neighboring areas. Not until the early hours of Sunday morning, while returning to their homes, did residents recognize the LRA’s presence. One respondent recalls that *“[a]t this point it [came] to our attention that the rebels were everywhere; they abducted people and went with them.”*³² Many people were abducted as they walked back home from the celebration. Another respondent remembers his experience:

“I was abducted when I was returning home to bathe, change and go back to the celebration venue. I met the rebels on the way. I spotted them from far and thought to myself that these

³⁰Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 04th August 2010

³¹Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 04th August 2010

³²Female respondent during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

uniformed men looked like government soldiers. When I approached them, I told them I was the RC of the area. They ordered me to sit down. I immediately spotted something on them that made me think twice and said no, these are not government soldiers but rebels! They had very small bottles tied with thin ropes around their necks and this made me immediately realize that they were not government soldiers. They reached for my new slippers and removed them and one of the rebels fastened it on his waist. I immediately realized it was a day of misfortune. I sat there quietly as I looked on. They began to remove my shirt as the number of abductees kept increasing. As they were doing this, I could still hear a faint sound of music at the festival venue. In fact, some of the rebels were still mixed with the people and dancing hard. On reaching there, we found they abducted these people and tied them with their shirts.³³



A survivor displays the injuries inflicted on him by the LRA. Source: JRP

Throughout the morning of 19th March 1995, the LRA kept gathering and capturing people who were on their way home from the celebrations. While the elders among the group of captives were released, as many as 119 people were abducted by the rebels within the first hours of the day. On the group's journey to Sudan, the hijacking of civilians in the area continued until the number of abductees increased to an estimated 410.³⁴

The factual motivation behind this abduction by the LRA still remains unclear to the community of Ayuu Alali village. Many believed that the rebels targeted and captured young boys to recruit them as soldiers. Others blamed themselves for having angered the rebels. The LRA had previously accused a group of hunters from the village of cooperating with the government forces, providing them with information about the location of LRA ammunition and weapons.³⁵ According to the few returned abductees and survivors, the operation was allegedly carried out by the Gilva Brigade under the command of Lt. Colonel Otim .

Although a few women managed to escape or were released after carrying goods for the rebels, the majority of Ayuu Alali's people still remain in captivity. Returnees and escapees reported that some of the youth died, but the location of most of the abductees has not yet been disclosed. For the family members of those in the bush, not knowing the fate of their loved ones still remains a huge psychological burden to date.

Brutality at its Peak: The 1997 Retaliation Massacre, 7th January 1997

"They killed every living thing, be it a cow, a chicken, a goat or a human being. They came with a brutal system of killing every living thing they came across."³⁶

Another attack occurred in January 1997 when government soldiers recruited various hunters to spy on the LRA on their behalf. While hunting, these men would look into some of the caves where the LRA allegedly kept their ammunition. Around the same time, the LRA brought ammunition from Sudan to hide it in the caves in the area. The hunters discovered about twenty tins of ammunition and carried them off for the government soldiers. This happened during a time when the LRA were not very active in the area. Nevertheless, the spying angered the rebels and triggered a brutal retaliation attack on Palabek on the 7th January 1997. According to the local population, whenever the LRA suffered any losses or casualties, the rebels took revenge on the civilian residents.

Only a couple weeks earlier, on 29th December 1996, a boy who escaped the LRA passed through the village and gave an early warning to the local population that the rebels planned an attack to be

³³Male survivor during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

³⁴As revealed by respondents during focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 28th February 2012

³⁵Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alaali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

³⁶Elderly man during focus group discussion in Ajoagala village, Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 29th February 2012

carried out on the 1st January 1997. According to the returnee, the planning commander announced that they would *“come and kill every living thing that they came across, be it a cow, goat or human being”*³⁷:

*“We waited, on the 1st but nothing happened. Perhaps a spy had reported that someone had leaked the information. We waited on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, nothing had yet happened. Then on the 7th January 1997, they arrived from the direction of Kempolo.”*³⁸

After fearfully waiting for six days for the attack to be carried out, people began doubting that the boy's story was true and slowly began to doubt that anything would happen. The whole week there was widespread uncertainty and anxiety among the local population. In fact, the rebels had camped in the nearby bushes, waiting for the perfect moment to unleash the attack.³⁹ On the 7th of January 1997, the rebels appeared in the morning hours and captured everyone who crossed their way. As part of a retaliation massacre in Palabek, respondents emphasized that between 200 and 300 people were brutally killed by the LRA rebels, while many others were abducted. Some were burnt in houses and others were slaughtered with knives. Residents specifically remember an entire family that was set ablaze inside a house. Those who witnessed the atrocities reiterated that an attack as terrible as this had not been carried out before. The gruesome manner of the killing and burning throughout the sub-county made it difficult to discern the exact number of victims of the attack.



The signpost of Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters – location of the former IDP camp which came into existence as a result of the LRA attack in 1997. Source: JRP

In Ayuu Alali, for example, survivors and witnesses of the massacre still live with vivid memories of that day. They recall how the rebels forcefully gathered community members and led them to a central meeting point. When the majority of civilians were gathered together, the LRA commander Lakota Masaya addressed the people, questioning whether anyone knows who the rebels were:

*“You do not know me. Let me introduce myself to you now and you get to know me since you all do not know me. My name is ‘DEATH’. From now onwards, get to know that I am real Death.”*⁴⁰

As consistently narrated by witnesses to the attack, the rebels separated the men from the women. The LRA commander then instructed his combatants to *‘come and greet the women.’*⁴¹ Following the command, the rebels picked up pestles, tools and weapons and began seriously beating the women, breaking their legs and clubbing their heads until blood flowed freely from their injuries. Next, the nearby men were forced to lie down in a long line to allow the soldiers to *‘greet the men’*,⁴² as well. Equipped with axes, the rebels hit the back heads of the men who were shrieking, jerking and shivering as they died. In Ayuu Alali alone, a total of 60 people were brutally killed.⁴³

³⁷ Elderly man during focus group discussion in Ajoagala village, Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 29th February 2012

³⁸ Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alaali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 05th August 2010

³⁹ See also: Robert Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a field-based Assessment of the civil conflicts in Northern Uganda”, Section I, Phase V, “Lokung/Palabek massacre”, August 1997, p. 42

⁴⁰ Male respondent during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Female respondent during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Alaali parish, Palabek Kal sub-county, 25th May 2010

Forced Displacement and Life in the Camp

Immediately after the attack, people fled their homes seeking refuge from possible abduction by the LRA. A large majority of the local community fled to Palabek Kal camp, leaving behind all food and personal belongings. At the peak of the conflict, the camp hosted more than 24,000 internally displaced persons. However, the overcrowded camp simply did not have the resources to sustain such a population. The former camp commandant, who was in charge of managing and organizing the camp, freshly recalls that:

“When we came here the soldiers were here, but there was nowhere to take shelter and nothing to eat and only two boreholes. No necessities for life such as food and water were accessible, and no one talked to us. On all the shop verandas here in town, people were sleeping and looking for shelter.”⁴⁴



A victim and former inhabitant of the IDP camp recalls his experiences of life in displacement. Source: JRP

Given the presence of a military base, the camp seemed to offer more adequate security and protection. The reality, however, proved otherwise as rebels continuously attacked the camp, abducted civilians and looted property. Beyond that, the abrupt migration to the camp left the civilian population even more vulnerable since many brought nothing with them. Living in squalid conditions with poor health facilities, the suffering and loss of lives in the camp was just as daunting as lives lost directly to the LRA. In the camp, people not only experienced continuous attacks by the LRA, but many also lost their lives to diseases such as cholera. As one respondent recalls, *“the number of people who died due to cholera alone, I would say outnumbered those killed by the LRA when people were not yet in the camp.”⁴⁵* Palabek Kal’s former camp commandant remembers that a serious cholera outbreak ravaged the population. According to his information, over twenty people would die of cholera in one day.⁴⁶ The suffering was immense: *“What we [the people] here underwent from that time to now can be equated to slavery. I am saying this because all the livestock that people had [have] was lost.”⁴⁷* Because of the horrendous living conditions and lack of actual safety, many displaced persons longed to return to their homesteads. Although it was

extremely risky, camp residents kept returning to their old homesteads to forage for food and other essentials. Although food was given out on a regular basis in the camps, the rations were inadequate. Most residents only began to return home in 2008 after enduring ten years of life in the camp.

Post-Conflict: The Challenges of Recovery, Justice and Reconciliation

Today, Northern Uganda enjoys relative peace. Following the failed Juba Peace Talks in 2008, the LRA relocated to the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern Sudan. In the meantime, most displaced persons have returned to their homes and resumed their lives as usual. However, despite this relative peace, people in rural areas of Palabek face new challenges. For one, there is an abundance of unexploded ordnances, such as bombs, grenades and landmines, which are still littered throughout the sub-county. Additionally, the process of post-conflict

⁴⁴ Individual interview with Palabek Kal’s former camp commandant, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, March 1st 2012

⁴⁵ Individual interview with community member in Palabek Kal Sub-county, 03rd August 2010

⁴⁶ As revealed during individual interview with Palabek Kal’s former IDP camp commandant, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, 01st March 2012

⁴⁷ Community member during a focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

recovery and rehabilitation is deterred by a largely divided society, overarching poverty and the absence of social services, all part of the conflict's aftermath. For victims, it is simply impossible to forget what happened, given the daunting memories and unending poverty. Moreover, the violence left many households devastated, and in many cases, both parents were killed, leaving children to survive alone. These challenges help to demonstrate how communities in post-conflict areas and regions like Palabek struggle to recover from horrific atrocities. At the same time, the documented experiences evoke questions about the potential contribution of other transitional justice mechanisms to support the civilians' justice and reconciliation needs.

Collecting the Pieces: Burials and Exhumations

Years after the conflict, the community of Palabek still faces difficulties in appropriately burying the bodies of their family members and loved ones. Few bodies have been found and identified. Of those, only a few have been buried in accordance to cultural norms. Acholi tradition mandates culturally appropriate, decent burials and treats the dead with honor. Such was the case with the massacre at Ayuu Anaka, where seven corpses were found in an anthill and later on exhumed. Ceremonial burials are important mechanisms for relatives of victims to cope with the past and relieve the pain of losing a loved one. In trying to understand and retrace the reasons for organizing the exhumation as well as a burial of Ayuu Anaka's particular victims, relatives and family members reiterated the need to appease the souls of the deceased ones and lay them to rest at home:



Relatives preparing to bury remains of their loved ones back at home. Source: Family members of the victims.

"What compelled us to go and exhume those bodies was the fact that strange things had started happening to the children in our homestead. Some of the children were being possessed by spirits of those relatives and they could speak through these children that they were being eaten by termites. This made us as a family sit down and get to the realization that these people had indeed stayed out there for long and as a result they were inflicting pain on so many people."⁴⁸

Reparations and Accountability

"I will be happy if we get compensation, or prosecutions take place."⁴⁹

In Palabek, the memories and impacts of violence still remain. The process of reconciliation is hindered by several issues. The diminished social status of those returning home after living in the camp for a decade as well as the lack of official acknowledgement of the atrocities has taken a huge toll on many victims. Perpetrators and their relatives live alongside victims, often causing further tension within the community. These grievances are exacerbated by a government that remains silent about the crimes committed by its own soldiers. Compensation for victims is another problematic issue. Like many others in North Uganda, victims of the conflict in Palabek struggle to cope with the long-term consequences of the conflict. Pervasive poverty has plagued victims trying to rebuild their lives. Many lost loved ones, property, land and cattle, and many of the victims want compensation or reparations from the government, although this has not been forthcoming. Many respondents feel entitled to receive compensation by the government: *"The government has to compensate us because we have been hearing on the radio that in other places where government forces committed atrocities, the people there are being compensated."⁵⁰* As our interaction with victims on the ground in Palabek reveals, compensation by the government for losses that occurred during the conflict

⁴⁸Close relative of the victims during focus group discussion in Alimotiko village, Palabek Kal sub-county, 06th August 2010

⁴⁹ Individual interview with male respondent, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, 01st March 2012

⁵⁰Community member during a focus group discussion in Ayuu Anaka parish, Palabek Gem sub-county, 04th August 2010

constitutes an integral and important mechanism for post-conflict reconciliation. However, many survivors, as well as relatives of victims, feel powerless to demand compensation.



Ruins of former homesteads which were burnt down by government soldiers in Ayuu Anaka parish. Source: JRP

Despite the widespread human rights abuses suffered by communities like Palabek, no government response has been undertaken so far. Individuals who experienced and witnessed atrocities during the conflict have been marginalized and are often further traumatized in their isolation. To date, most of the killings in Palabek and across the north have gone without any formal acknowledgment by the responsible parties. Victims expressed frustration and bewilderment about their immense suffering in the hands of government soldiers, who were supposed to ensure safety and protection from rebel attacks.

Furthermore, following the crimes and human rights violations, the commander in charge, Captain Abiriga, was quickly relocated to another, yet unknown location without being held responsible for his criminal actions. Palabek residents are frustrated by this lack of accountability, and many victims have asserted the importance of accountability for reconciliation. As articulated by a local leader, criminal accountability *“needs to happen so that the community knows that the law is fair and non-selective but functions with all and for everybody.”*⁵¹ Many residents particularly pointed out the need to hold Captain Abiriga personally accountable for the violations that he ordered against the civilian population.

There are several potential avenues for justice in this case. One avenue for criminal accountability to take its course is Uganda’s court-martial, which was created to handle judicial matters concerning the armed forces. However, although the case of Ayuu Anaka has been formally reported to the police and subjected to criminal investigations, the court-martial has not been adequately involved in the procedure. The court is also very removed from local processes, which could otherwise play a greater role in acknowledgement and reconciliation.

In Palabek sub-county, most of the crimes committed both by the LRA and NRA were prior to 2002. The International Criminal Court (ICC) only allows the Court to deal with crimes committed after 1st July 2002, and there are still concerns about the factual admissibility of cases in Palabek. Against this backdrop, the International Crimes Division (ICD) of the High Court – formed as a result of the negotiations between the Government of Uganda and the LRA for trying rebel leaders in Uganda – is an alternative.⁵² One challenge, however, remains; even if the Court will not investigate all crimes committed during the conflict and does not consider Captain Abiriga as most responsible, the community is still convinced of the commander’s culpability and demands justice to take its course.



Jomo’s father advocates for reconciliation between his son and family members of the victims in Ayuu Anaka. Source: JRP

⁵¹ Individual interview with male respondent, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, 01st March 2012

⁵² Outreach Strategy for War Crimes Division of the High Court. Find on: law.vanderbilt.edu/academics/academic-programs/.../download.aspx?id

Community-Based Reconciliation

Like many other communities across Northern Uganda, Palabek residents advocate for and desire reconciliation at the grassroots level. In a context like Northern Uganda, where conflict continued for two decades and affected almost all residents, it is not uncommon that perpetrators occasionally come from within the community. As a result, there is a serious need for community-based reconciliation. In Palabek, one of the most active and highly responsible perpetrators of crimes committed during the early 1990's is from the community. As the killing of alleged rebel-collaborators in Ayuu Anaka in April 1992 reveals, John Ongwec, better known as Jomo, was actively involved in the execution of community members. This case is particularly complicated. The seven victims of one family not only appear to be innocent civilians but were also maternal relatives of Jomo. In the aftermath of the killing, Jomo was forced to flee Palabek and seek refuge in Sudan, where he currently resides. Relatives of the victims in Ayuu Anaka are still deeply angered and disappointed. However, Jomo's paternal family and former acquaintances disclosed that Jomo fears returning, although he would like to be reunited with his family and community. However, as one of his relatives recalls, *"he still fears the issue of [Captain] Abiriga so if he comes back this issue will come up again."*⁵³ Given that Jomo's dispute and concern is not with the government but rather with his very own community, regional or national institutionalized mechanisms and avenues for reconciliation and rehabilitation, such as amnesty, may not be entirely appropriate. In addition therefore, community-based reconciliation initiatives should be carried out with the active involvement and commitment of community members. For this to happen successfully, family advocates for Jomo's reintegration insisted that Captain Abiriga has to be involved to help Jomo address their actions and reconcile with his community.

Recommendations

Following careful consultation with the people of Palabek and based on findings of research efforts in the communities, JRP recommends the following measures. We believe that a holistic approach involving various transitional justice mechanisms has potential to bring justice and reconciliation to the people of Palabek;

1. **Victims in Palabek require reparations, and in particular compensation from the Government of Uganda for losses suffered during the conflict.** Following two major waves of violence in Palabek Sub-county, civilians lost almost all their property and fled to live in IDP camps, without any means to sustain themselves. Throughout Northern Uganda, people lived in poverty and became completely dependent on aid. The Government has not taken any serious measures to acknowledge the abuses committed in Palabek, even for the most serious crimes. Referring to the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparations, the population in Palabek has a right to adequate, effective, prompt and appropriate remedies.⁵⁴ Therefore, the Government of Uganda should implement and ensure a transparent and inclusive reparations and compensation policy.
2. **Captain Abiriga and other perpetrators of crimes in Palabek need to be held accountable for their crimes.** For more than twenty years, people all over Northern Uganda have been victimized by both the LRA and the government soldiers. JRP's documentation of their experiences reveals that most of the torture, beatings, rapes, and killing by the NRA in Palabek in the early 1990's have occurred under the command of Captain Abiriga. Although the Rome Statute, the treaty governing the International Criminal Court, does not allow The Hague to investigate crimes committed before the 1st of July 2002, Uganda's newly established International Crimes Division (ICD) of the High Court, or other government bodies would be capable of dealing with those kinds of crimes. For the people of Palabek, it is imperative to see that individuals who caused extreme suffering do not go unpunished.
3. **Support locally-led community based reconciliation and healing initiatives.** Sustainable healing and reconciliation for war-affected communities can only be effective if the measures

⁵³ Individual interview with male respondent, Palabek Kal sub-county Headquarters, 28th February 2012

⁵⁴ UN Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy 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

undertaken are rooted within the communities itself, instead of being implemented by outside stakeholders. Therefore, community-based reconciliation initiatives must be supported throughout Palabek. As revealed during the course of this paper, the example of 'Jomo' – a Palabek native who committed crimes against his own community – requires community-based reconciliation initiatives.

4. **The Government of Uganda (GoU) needs to support Palabek's communities in searching for remains of deceased persons in order to facilitate decent burials.** As an important part of Acholi culture, proper burials must be afforded for all victims. Professional forensic investigators need to assist those who are still searching for the remains of lost friends and family members. Only when the full truth has been discovered and all bodies have been found and exhumed, will decent burials in accordance with the Acholi culture be possible.
5. **Numerous unexploded ordinances across Palabek need to be removed and secured.** All across the conflict-affected area of Palabek, numerous unexploded ordinances and landmines remain hidden in the ground. Even in the current post-conflict setting, these unexploded items cause continuous suffering for the community as explosions result in further deaths. Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult for Palabek's communities to fully harvest and cultivate gardens or access remote land as landmines are spread all over the area. Therefore, the Government of Uganda, other stakeholders, and experts on landmines need to help the community of Palabek in de-mining.

Appendix A: Partial List of People Abducted by the LRA in Palabek Kal and Palabek Gem sub-counties until 2002⁵⁵

Palabek Kal Sub-County:

Parish	Total Abduction	Alive	Missing	Dead
Ayuu Alali	242	120	60	62
Lamwo	143	75	40	28
Palabek Kal	82	53	17	12
Labigiryang	88	68	6	14
Paracelle	132	80	22	30
Lugwar	66	35	18	13
Total	753	431	163	159

Palabek Gem Sub-County:

Parish	Total Abduction	Alive	Missing	Dead
Palabek Gem	88	37	25	26
Patanga	66	27	36	3
Ayuu Anaka	63	20	24	19
Total	217	84	85	48

⁵⁵Source: Individual local community leader in Ayuu Alali, March 2012

Located in Lamwo District, Palabek is one of the sub-counties in Northern Uganda whose residents have experienced multiple incidences of violence and repeated abuses of human rights. By virtue of its location at the Uganda-South Sudan border, Palabek witnessed both consistent military presence as well as frequent crossing and movement by the LRA while the surrounding area systematically turned into a battlefield.

This report focuses on Palabek's history and records from 1986 to the present based on victims' testimonies and information provided by interviewees. It offers an in-depth description of the incidents of violence committed by the LRA and NRA, focusing on key concerns frequently raised by respondents. The report concentrates on instances of torture and killing by the warring parties, including the impact and consequences on the civilian population. It also reveals how Palabek's communities suffered mass displacement due to this violence.



Published by the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)
With support from the Royal Norwegian Embassy, Kampala

www.justiceandreconciliation.com