



The Beasts at Burcoro

Recounting Atrocities by the NRA's 22nd Battalion in Burcoro Village in April 1991

JRP Field Note XVII, July 2013

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About the Justice and Reconciliation Project

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was established in 2010 as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Gulu, Uganda to understand and explain the interests, needs, concerns and views of communities affected by conflict and to promote sustainable peace through the active involvement of war-affected communities in research and advocacy.

Find out more about JRP at <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.com> or email info@justiceandreconciliation.com

All pictures in this publication are courtesy of JRP.

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Layout by Oryem Nyeko.

Cover photograph: A tree in Burcoro village, Awach sub-county, Gulu district where Kapere Alfoncio, who according to community members was falsely accused of being a rebel by the NRA soldiers, was chained and shot by a firing squad.

Back photographs, left to right: Burcoro primary school, the scene where members of the community were rounded up by the soldiers; The tree in Burcoro, village where Kapere Alfoncio was chained and shot; a woman shows scars on her back from the torture she suffered during the operation.

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Acronyms

GoU	Government of Uganda
HSM	Holy Spirit Movement
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NRA/M	National Resistance Army/Movement
UNLA	Uganda's National Liberation Army
UPDF	Uganda People's Defense Force

Introduction

Northern Uganda's troubled history since the start of its armed conflict in 1986 between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and a wide variety of armed groups, the most infamous being the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), has been characterized by its high level of violence and brutality toward the civilian population in the north. The abduction and killing of tens of thousands of civilians, as well as the displacement of the overwhelming majority of the Acholi population into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, have been the main characteristics of the over two decade-long conflict in the north.

Throughout the long and complex history of this war, a great number of actors have been involved in committing grave crimes and abuses against civilians. The LRA has traditionally been considered responsible for a significant number of the killings and abuses carried out in this region. However, as the situation in the north stabilized following the Juba Peace Accords in 2008, allegations of abuse, torture and extrajudicial killing of civilians directed towards the Ugandan military have become more prevalent as communities start speaking out about their experiences during the war.

Located 16 kilometers northeast of Gulu town, in the sub-county of Awach, Gulu District, lies the quiet village of Burcoro. Despite its apparent tranquility, a sinister past remains hidden behind the welcoming faces of its inhabitants. Between the 14th and the 18th of April 1991, Burcoro was the scene of a brutal operation carried out by the 22nd Battalion of the National Resistance Army (NRA) in which several hundred people were detained at Burcoro Primary School. They were released only after being interrogated, tortured, and sexually abused throughout the four days of the operation. In this instance alone, government soldiers committed crimes including: murder, rape, sexual violence, torture, cruel treatment, deprivation of liberty, outrages upon personal dignity, attacking civilians, pillaging and other inhumane acts.

In most discussions on the issue of killings and abuses perpetrated by state actors, Burcoro is often mentioned as one of the key examples of such activities. Despite the many rumors that surround the events that occurred in this place, surprisingly little has ever been documented regarding what actually took place and who was responsible for the suffering of this community.¹

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) is committed to documenting the full extent of the abuses perpetrated against the civilians in northern Uganda during the long conflict. The preservation of this community's experience is of vital importance for highlighting the complexities that surrounded this war. Through such documentation we gain insight into how this conflict has affected people and their current needs.



A JRP researcher interviews a victim in Burcoro village as part of research for this Field Note.

¹ Existing documentation of Burcoro includes: Amnesty International, "Uganda: Breaking the circle: Protecting human rights in the northern war zone," report, 16 March 1999, available at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/node/57747?page=8>; Amnesty International, "Uganda: Human rights violations by the National Resistance Army," AFR 59/20/91, 4 December 1991.

This report presents a detailed account of the events that took place on those fateful days in April 1991 based on individual interviews and focus group discussions with victims and survivors. It also explores the enduring challenges they face, including not knowing the whereabouts of relatives that were taken by the soldiers and chronic health issues arising from their ill treatment. We highlight the plight of men and women who were abducted, widowed or raped as part of the operation, and note the Government's responsibility and unfulfilled promise to properly compensate the victims and their relatives. Lastly, the report makes specific recommendations based on discussions with the affected community members which are directed at the GoU and relevant stakeholders in the region. These call for government to apologize, hold the perpetrators accountable, and provide compensation to victims, while civil society should support the community's desire to put in place a memorial and help meet their healthcare needs.

Methodology

This report came about in response to the community's desire for proper documentation of their experiences during the conflict. It was also triggered by a pledge from President Yoweri Museveni to compensate victims and survivors of the Burcoro incident. This pledge was made during the 2011 elections when Museveni campaigned in Awach sub-county where Burcoro is located. A preliminary fact finding mission to ascertain the scope of the operation was conducted by JRP researchers on March 28, 2012, and formal research was conducted through repeated field visits between August 2012 and March 2013.



JRP researchers conduct a focus group discussion in Burcoro. The group developed their own timeline of events in the community as part of this process.

Initial focus group discussions were carried out in order to explain the reason for JRP's presence and interest in Burcoro. This led to the first data collection phase from August 20-24, 2012. During this period, survivors and relatives of the victims were identified with the help of community mobilizers. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to establish the chronology and the facts of the events that took place in Burcoro. JRP researchers also managed to identify and photograph burial sites, as well as the school where the majority of the abuses were carried out.

A secondary data collection and follow-up process took place from September 25 to October 5, 2012. In-depth interviews were carried out to further clarify points of specific interest. In addition, the community was involved in fact-checking and clarifying JRP's findings through a number of focus group discussions. Other community members also came forward wanting their personal testimonies to be recorded and documented. In addition, community members worked together in writing a timeline that includes a historical account of those incidents that the community feels deeply impacted their lives. This was carried out with the intent of involving the people in writing and recording the history of their own community. JRP researchers then engaged in follow-up visits for consultations as the report was being drafted. JRP also consulted with other key informants, who had extensive knowledge of the events that took place in Burcoro. Final verification meetings were conducted to present the completed draft and ensure accuracy.

As a result of the research process a total of 41 people were interviewed, encompassing 13 female and 26 male respondents and 2 male key informants. In addition, JRP researchers organized five focus group discussions and several verification meetings with the community. Most of these respondents were identified with the assistance of local community leaders who

had knowledge of who could best assist the research process. Respondents gave informed consent for their interviews to be used in the creation of this field note. All interviews were conducted in either English or Luo, and were subsequently transcribed and translated by JRP researchers.

Background

With the National Resistance Movement's rise to power in 1986, northern Uganda saw the formation of a number of groups that would take up arms against the newly established government. Milton Obote and Tito Okello's Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), which was composed mostly of ethnic Acholis and Langis, had just fallen out of power and many former soldiers retreated north seeking protection from retribution by the mostly southern Bantu-speaking ethnic groups supporting the NRM. In Acholi sub-region, many of these disgruntled soldiers organized into a rebel group with several factions commonly referred to as the *Cilil*². Later on, others formed more autonomous and violent groups like Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and, then, Joseph Kony's infamous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). It would not be long before many of these groups would start targeting civilians to demand support for their struggle.

In order to counter these developments, the GoU engaged in a military campaign against the rebels. Civilians living in northern Uganda were presumed to be supporting the rebels and suffered as a result. This would mark the beginning of the intensification of the conflict and a state of war that would endure for the next two decades. The population in this region soon became trapped in the middle of a conflict that is now infamous for its levels of violence.

In addition to the numerous challenges posed by the presence of several rebel groups in the area, early in 1988 the community of Burcoro, like many others in different districts of northern Uganda, started to suffer from cattle rustling attacks by Karamojong warriors.³ These attacks proved particularly damaging as the Karamojong not only raided livestock, but also took belongings, burnt houses, and killed people in the process.

The first major military operation against the LRA was undertaken in early 1991. Under the command of then-Minister of State for Defense, Major General David Tinnyefunza, what later became known as 'Operation North' involved closing off the whole northern region of Uganda to aggressively hunt down alleged rebel supporters and cut off support to the LRA. Civilians were gathered and screened in villages across the region, from Ajulu (near Patiko and Lukome) to Acholi Bur in Pader to Alero, Pabo, Amuru, Purongo and Namukora in Kitgum. Operation North was characterized by a broader militarization of the conflict and the overwhelming use of



JRP researchers interview a victim of the events in Burcoro.

² The term *cilil* ('go and report') was a local nickname for the rebel group the Uganda People's Democratic Army which sprung up in northern Uganda after the NRM came to power. The name signaled the rebels' courage and readiness to fight the government army; they often urged the population to report their presence to the NRA.

³ The Karamojong warriors were feared cattle raiders from the Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda. They were particularly active in 1987 and 1988 in Teso sub-region and northern Uganda and are widely believed to have been armed and given tacit support by the Ugandan military.

heavy-handed tactics against civilians, including arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and abductions.⁴

The operation in Burcoro in April of this same year was among the first to take place. It was conducted by the NRA's 22nd Battalion under the command of Major Reuben Ikondere⁵ in accordance with Operation North. Burcoro became one of a long list of communities all over northern Uganda that would face the atrocious consequences of the scorched-earth policies instituted by the GoU in its fight against the LRA. Civilians in different parts of the country developed pseudonyms for the armed groups as a result of their gruesome acts. In Burcoro, the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion would come to be known as the 'Gung' ('bend for me') battalion in reference to their acts of male rape.

The 22nd Battalion Arrives in Burcoro

After years of dealing with the periodic rebel presence, as well as cattle raids by the Karamojong, most communities in the area had gotten used to living with the constant presence of armed groups and threat of violence. Most people decided to remain in their villages despite the periodic deterioration of security in the north and by mid-April 1991, they were busying themselves with the planting of crops that naturally comes with the start of the rainy season.

The presence of government soldiers was first noted by members of communities a few kilometers from Burcoro on Sunday, April 14, 1991. Some of the people that first came across the soldiers characterized their brief interactions as friendly and nonthreatening. One man noted that "some of the soldiers started moving among the homesteads and even bought some alcohol and cassava from within the community."⁶ Another respondent explained, "*During the time of the operation I was sick and I was staying at home with my grandmother. On that day I saw the soldiers pass by and they even bought a cock from us.*"⁷

Others, however, had a negative experience with the soldiers which proved to be a somber warning of what was to come. As one woman in Obyella village, neighboring Burcoro, remembered:

*We first noticed the presence of the soldiers on the evening of the day before the operation. When I came back from the garden with my husband I noticed that food had been spilled, granaries had been opened and someone had defecated inside. I was shocked. The children told us that some soldiers had come and done this. I asked myself what kind of soldiers are these that would do such a thing... We didn't think that they would be back again so we slept that night in the house.*⁸

It is widely believed that the soldiers had started their march from the village of Lukome, some kilometers away from Burcoro, and that they quickly spread out into smaller units as they made their way to Burcoro. Most people did not know what to make of the soldiers' presence at this time and preferred to exercise caution and remain in their homes for the night. Few could have anticipated the events that would unfold the next day.

April 15, 1991: The Operation Begins

Just before dawn on the morning of Monday, April 15, 1991, several people were awakened by loud knocks at their door. It was the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion ordering them to come out. As recalled by one woman:

4 Interview with male key informant in Gulu, 1 November 2012.

5 Major Ikondere was later killed on November 15, 1999. He was shot by Mai Mai fighters in a Hotel Room in the town of Beni while commanding Ugandan soldiers in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

6 Interview with a 40 year old man in Obyella, 23 August 2012.

7 Interview with a 39 year old man in Olano, 24 August 2012.

8 Interview with a 71 year old woman in Obyella, 23 August 2012.

We weren't even fully awake when the soldiers were already outside our house. They knocked on my door. My husband's other wife and I both came out. My daughter was there as well. The soldiers told my daughter to give them the money that my husband got from selling charcoal. My daughter said that she didn't know where her father's money was. One of the soldiers slapped her and she fell down. Then another soldier picked up an axed and tried to hit her with it, but she managed to move in time and ran away to another home.⁹

Other civilians were already in their gardens going about their day's work when they were confronted by the soldiers. Fear and apprehension quickly came over most of them. Since the rebels would sometimes disguise themselves as government soldiers and both forces traveled on foot, many respondents explained that it was only after seeing the soldiers' actions that one was able to properly identify who they were dealing with:

I was planting groundnuts with two of my girls in the family garden when at about 10:00am I saw soldiers advancing towards us. During that time it was hard to differentiate between the LRA and the Government soldiers, so as soon as I saw the soldiers I became very fearful and murmured to my children to stop farming and to remain firm and wait for them to approach.¹⁰

By now civilians were being rounded up by small mobile units that had extended to villages up to seven kilometers away from Burcoro. A man recalled running to the bush when he saw them, *"but the soldiers ran after me and when they caught me they started beating me. They said that I was running like a rebel, so they beat me seriously."¹¹* A woman also remembered being ordered *"to gather in one straight-line. Once this was done, some soldiers got to the front of the line while others stayed at the back and we were marched to Burcoro. Just like that we remained with no option but to follow their commands."¹²*



This woman was released at the start of the operation, but lost a number of relatives at Burcoro.

An unusual incident took place in nearby Olano village which conveys how difficult it was even for NRA soldiers to identify the different warring parties at that time. As people were being led to the primary school by several soldiers, they came across a group of men they mistook for rebels, but were actually members of a local self-defense militia also known as the Home Guard.¹³ An exchange of gunfire ensued and the situation became chaotic. A man who was among the people detained by the soldiers described:

When we got to the main road we came across the militia who were on their way to Gulu town from Paicho to receive food. They had their barracks in Paicho, but were required to restock their food from Gulu, and they were expected to carry their food all the way from Gulu to Paicho since the army never used vehicles due to fear of being ambushed by the rebels. So when the NRA soldiers saw the militias they mistook them for rebels and attacked them. A fight ensued and the captured civilians scattered in all directions... The soldiers then became very aggressive and asked to know why we had lied to them when we told them that there were no rebels in the area... They laid me down and got three soldiers to give me 25 five strokes with a cane while they demanded to know why I had lied to them.¹⁴

During this exchange a 15-year-old boy called Peter Ongaba was shot in the head by a stray bullet and died immediately from this injury.¹⁵ The gunfire alerted several villagers in the area:

9 Interview with a 55 year old woman in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

10 Interview with a 70 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

11 Interview with a 54 year old man in Olano, 22 August 2012.

12 Interview with a 38 year old woman in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

13 In order to combat LRA incursions, many communities mobilized men to act as a form of local defense against rebel attacks. Because they lacked fire arms many had to use spears or bows and arrows to defend themselves. As a result, they were referred to as Home Guard or Arrow Boys.

14 Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012

15 Interview with a 70 year old female in Olano, 22 August 2012.

While we were digging in the garden we heard gunshots coming from the direction of Arut, Kitgum road, Paicho and almost everywhere. I told the people who were in my garden that we should hide, but one of my wives was not in support of this idea. She said that if we decided to hide then our home would be destroyed when the rebels came. I listened to her and stayed put... Just as I was putting down my hoe I saw four soldiers approach my compound.¹⁶

Another respondent in Obyella also recalls being surprised when she saw the soldiers chase some people nearby and then approach her home:

They accused me of hiding rebels in the house and started beating and stepping on me... They beat me until I defecated on myself. My four-year-old son then started crying and one of the soldiers kicked him in the stomach. He fell down and started urinating on himself... Before long my husband came. His name was Albertino Kinyera, but he was commonly known as Lucoc. They accused him of being a rebel and beat him repeatedly until they broke one of his hands. They then forced us to follow them and we were taken to Burcoro Primary School.¹⁷

The arrests seem to have occurred all through the morning with more and more people questioned and detained in villages all around. Very soon hundreds of people were making their way at gun point to the primary school in Burcoro. Hardly anybody knew what to do but comply with the soldiers' commands and hope for the best.

Interrogation and Torture at Burcoro Primary School

It was not long before the rounded up civilians and their captors started arriving at Burcoro Primary School. The detainees first realized the scale of the operation when they recognized people from the surrounding villages among those gathered. People continued to be brought by the soldiers throughout the morning and as soon as they arrived they were forced to sit under the hot sun. Young children began to cry due to the intense heat and lack of water; the adults remained quiet for the most part due to fear and apprehension. As part of the operation, any movement of civilians on the road to Gulu town or further on to Awach was prohibited, and anybody who came across the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion was detained. No one was spared; every man, woman, and child was a suspect to be taken to Burcoro Primary School.

Once most of the people had been gathered in the school, the soldiers addressed them: *"The soldiers began to ask us whether we knew why they had brought us here. Everyone remained quiet... They went on to say that the reason they were here was in order to show us where the rebels were."¹⁸* According to another person present, *"Once in the school the soldiers began*



A sign leading to Burcoro Primary School where the operation took place.

¹⁶ Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

¹⁷ Interview with a 37 year old woman in Burcoro, 5 October 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

to ask us whether we knew what had happened in the Luwero Triangle. We said that we didn't. They then said that they would do to us what the rebels had done in Luwero."¹⁹

A woman interviewed described what happened next:

*The soldiers then ordered all of us to lie on the ground facing down. I tried to lift my head a bit to see where my two teenage girls were, but I received a hard kick on my ribs by one of the soldiers. Still I managed to grab the hand of one of my daughters and pulled her closer to me. As I struggled to pull her, another soldier yanked one of my thighs and pierced it with a bayonet sending a very sharp pain through my spine as he asked why I was taking away the young girl. Amidst the blood which was now oozing out of my thigh I replied that she was my daughter and that I was only telling her to put her head down.*²⁰

Some time during the early afternoon hours, the soldiers began a screening exercise in order to discover supposed rebel collaborators among the detainees. The soldiers ordered any women at least five months pregnant, as well as elderly people and school-going children to get up. They were told to return to their homesteads and to bring food the next day for their family members who would remain in the school.

The remaining community members were then told, "If you know that the rebels have ever cooked in your compound, or abducted you for even a mere reason like showing them the way, get up and come this way."²¹ It was of little importance whether you had been abducted for a long or short period recently or years ago; the soldiers wanted every person who had had the slightest contact with the rebels to come forward.

Many hesitated not knowing whether to stand up or not. By that point the Cilil and LRA had been present in the area for years and many of the men had previously been abducted for brief amounts of time.²² Most of these men felt that they might be called out and identified by other community members if they did not come forward and believed that it was better to volunteer their names willingly. As described by one of these men:

*The soldiers cautioned us that should somebody wait until he was named by another person then that would amount to an automatic death sentence. The people became very fearful. I was abducted by the rebels and I spent three weeks in captivity before returning home. So, when I saw the people who knew me get up, I got afraid and voluntarily stood up as well. Some people whom we knew had been abducted for a longer time were brave and never got up.*²³

Others were much more suspicious of the soldiers' intentions and preferred to exercise caution:

*Most people went, but I managed to save the life of one of my uncles who had previously been abducted by the rebels. His father was persuading him to get up, but I told him to wait a moment, to not get up because the motives were still unclear. He sat back in the crowd and never got up.*²⁴

Eventually 35 men either volunteered or were selected from the group. Unbeknownst to them, the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion considered them the principal rebel collaborators. Tension filled the air and people remained quiet in anticipation of what was to come. The 35 men were separated from the rest of the people and ordered to sit together as a group. The Intelligence Officer, whose name was Arach Ogwete, then began their interrogation:

*He began to ask us whether we knew the reason why they had brought us to the primary school. Everyone remained quiet... He went on and said that the reason we were here was so that we could show them where the rebels were. The people could not say anything. We feared them.*²⁵

19 Interview with a 52 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

20 Interview with a 70 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

21 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

22 Several male respondents admitted having previously been abducted by the LRA. It was common practice at the time for the LRA to abduct people to help with the transport of goods and cargo or to serve as local guides in order to evade army soldiers. All of the men characterized their abductions as relatively short, ranging from a week to a couple of months.

23 Interview with a 40 year old man in Obyella, 23 August 2012.

24 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

25 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

Soon after this, all the other men were separated from the women and ordered to lie down on their stomachs in several rows. Once the rows were properly formed the soldiers started to cane the men repeatedly as they walked on their backs. One of these men recalled his experience:

They started asking us where our rebel sons were. They then accused us of having recruited all of our sons into the rebel ranks, so we were told to lie down; then the beating started. They began giving us 5 strokes with the cane, then 10, then 20.... They would give you some time to rest and then later on they would come back again.²⁶

There was not much the others could do but watch their husbands, fathers and relatives being beaten in front of their eyes.²⁷ As the sun went down on that first day of the operation, the people were ordered to gather together as the soldiers used burnt oil to demarcate the area where the civilians would remain. According to one of the respondents, *"They marked the ground and no one was expected to go beyond. We were so squeezed that some people sat on the laps of their friends. There was no room for stretching your legs. If any part of your body got out of that demarcated space, they would beat you back."²⁸* Many had to sleep placing their back against one another because the reduced space made it impossible to lie down.

The women had been separated from the men earlier during the day and just before the sun set they were forced to gather around two bonfires. It would not be long before they would be selected by the soldiers, taken to their tents and raped. One group of women was set aside for the higher ranking soldiers and forced into a classroom where they would be kept until the end of the operation. One woman recalled her experience, *"We were just left at the mercy of the soldiers; we had no say over our bodies. The soldiers set up small tents within the school and it was in these tents and classrooms that the women were gang raped."²⁹* This would go on throughout the night and into the morning hours of the next day. It was horrendously clear for the rest of the people what was taking place. Community members recounted memories of sleepless nights because the women would scream all through the night as they were being raped one after the other.

Into the Pit

The first people to be detained were those whose homes were close to Burcoro Primary School. They were quickly interrogated and then a group of five men was singled out. As recalled by one of those men:

I think they selected us because we looked healthy and strong. They separated us from the crowd, took us to the school, and once there they ordered us to take our shirts off. We were given hoes and the Intelligence Officer then began to demarcate the ground. He said that the task he was going to give us was very tough and that we would be constantly stung by bees and wasps in the process... Little did we know that those bees and wasps were actually the soldiers that soon began to hit us with their canes as we dug.³⁰



Survivors show JRP researchers the location of the meter deep pit where 35 men were forced to spend a night in during the NRA operation in Burcoro village.

While some of the men were forced to dig, others sang funeral songs. When the pit had reached about one meter in depth they were ordered to stop and to begin gathering logs and grass to cover it. This was done under constant beating with sticks and canes, and threats of worse punishments if they did not comply quickly with the soldiers' commands. The

26 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 24 August 2012.

27 Interview with a 55 year old woman in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

28 Interview with a 61 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

29 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 of August, 2012.

30 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

construction of the pit lasted until the early hours of the afternoon. One man described the finished product, “[It] was covered with big logs of wood, and then mud was spread on top to help seal the space left between the logs. And finally dry grass was used to cover the top of the pit. A small hole was left for the entrance.”³¹ It was not long after the pit was finally covered and sealed that the 35 men who were previously selected as rebel collaborators were forced inside. One by one they entered through the small opening at one of the corners.

Very soon after the men were forced inside they became tense as they realized what awaited them. They were so squeezed together that they could barely move; they sat with their knees folded while their heads pushed against the roof of the pit. The air was hot and humid, making it increasingly hard to breathe. As time passed the heat inside the pit rose considerably and the walls and roof became so humid that moisture began to gather and drip down on the men who struggled to take off layers of clothes. The possibility of being buried alive was not far from their minds. They were largely disconnected from whatever was taking place outside. Only sounds that entered through the small opening could serve as an indicator, but even those had to compete with all the noise inside the pit. The men spent an agonizing night in the pit before they saw daylight again.

April 16, 1991: The Operation Continues

At sunrise on Tuesday the 16th the people were awakened after only a few hours of sleep. At around 8:00am the men were taken out of the pit one by one and forced to sit together under a tree. Most were weak and disoriented from lack of food and the time spent trapped. Those that still looked strong were assigned to go and construct latrines while the others were ordered to remain seated.

Up until this moment hardly any food or water had been distributed to the people detained in the school. Respondents described how the soldiers would only let people drink a bit of water that was passed in jerrycan lids and how they were only given raw mangoes to eat. Even these raw mangoes were not passed gently, but were thrown with great force by the soldiers.³² Some of the women were fed porridge so they could regain their energy and they were allowed to bathe in a nearby stream in order to clean themselves for the soldiers. Others were expected to dance for the soldiers as some men played Nanga.³³ The physical and emotional abuse was constant, as recounted by one respondent, “They were mocking us saying that we were rebels, that were all going to die and that this was just to show us what the Acholi had done at the Luwero triangle... They were speaking in Alur, Langi and other languages.”³⁴

It was not long before more people started to arrive. The soldiers had continued to raid villages they missed the day before and detained everybody they came across. As recalled by one man:

I was ordered to join the soldiers who dragged me up to Loyoboo village. As soon as Gung³⁵ got to Loyoboo village, they began to bomb the place and the captives started fleeing. I did not run but was brought back to Burcoro by the soldiers. When we reached the scene of a killing the soldiers assembled us there and began beating us before forcing us to move through River Abera. They kept beating us until we reached Burcoro.³⁶

The body they came across was that of a man called Lucoc who had been taken there and stabbed to death by the soldiers earlier that day.³⁷ The operation had now covered the villages of Olano, Unyama, Oding, Agung, Ngom Rom, Laciri, Obyella, Gwengdiya, Loyoboo and Burcoro. Several hundred people found themselves detained in Burcoro Primary School and no one knew what the soldiers’ next move would be. More women had been detained during this day, some were as young as 16 years old. However, the soldiers did not repeat the screening exercise for pregnant women done the day before.

31 Interview with a 59 year old man in Obyella, 22 January 2013.

32 Focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

33 *Nanga* is a traditional music style common among the Acholi populations of northern Uganda.

34 Interview with a 44 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

35 The community members always refer to the soldiers that took part in the operation as Gung, which comes from the Acholi phrase *tekgungu* or ‘bend over’ as ordered during an act of rape. It became widely used among the community because of the numerous cases of male rape attributed to the soldiers.

36 Interview with a 52 year old female in Olano, 22 August 2012.

37 Interview with a 40 year old man in Burcoro, 23 August 2012.

No one would be released this time.

The battalion's commander, Major Ikondere, then approached the people who were gathered in the school compound and ordered a group of soldiers to begin to pinpoint the RCs³⁸ and other local and traditional leaders who were among them. These local leaders were then given a notebook and told to write the names of all the parents whose children were in the bush. As described by one of the RCs:

The commander came and called all of us to attention. We turned to him and he said that he wanted each of us to give him the names of 10 parents of rebels. Out of over 25 of us, only one local leader stood up and gave the name of five people he suspected to be rebels. He was taken away from us. I reflected a bit and became hesitant because my own son was abducted by the rebels and had not yet returned... I refused to move anywhere and refused to touch their book or pen.³⁹

Several of the other RCs and local leaders were also hesitant to collaborate with the soldiers and preferred to keep silent. This reluctance angered Major Ikondere who called for a platoon of soldiers to come with sufficient sticks. As soon as they arrived they were ordered to repeatedly cane all the leaders assembled there who had refused to cooperate. Another of the RCs described what happened:

We were made to lie down and they began to beat us. We were beaten in all the possible ways from 10:30am to 2:00pm. It reached a moment when people failed to cry and were just looking on as the soldiers beat us. There was nowhere to hide and some people even collapsed during the beatings. Some people were bleeding through their nose because each time the beatings became more intense and when they lifted their heads the soldiers gave them hard kicks on the head. At one point I decided to stand up, but this did not go on well with one of the short soldiers who hit the back of my head. At one point I wrestled the soldier down because I was so angry. I was ready to die. I was pulled away from the soldier and made to go back to my colleagues, but the soldier came and hit my lower waist with a log and pierced me with his bayonet. When I got up I was bleeding; fortunately one of the commanders ordered them to take me away from there.⁴⁰

The rest of the crowd watched powerless as this abuse went on and on. The soldiers were highly unpredictable and no one knew what could take place next or what would happen if they protested in any way. One of the religious leaders described his own experience, "Being a religious leader, I was beaten until I could not bear the pain anymore. As I tried to shield myself from the canes using my hand, it got beaten and wounded very badly. The beatings went on until one of the commanders showed up and talked to their



Survivors leading JRP researchers to the burial site of Lucoc, one of the victims who was shot and stabbed along Abera river.



Lucoc's mother points out the place where her son was buried.

38 Resistance Councils or RCs refer to a local government position which existed at district level in Uganda at the time. Since 1996, RCs have been renamed Local Councils and councilors are referred to as LCs.

39 Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

40 Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

*leader.*⁴¹

The situation was now becoming increasingly desperate for all those detained by the soldiers. Most people had been given hardly anything to eat and little water since they had been forced out of their homes the day before. Many of the women who had been released the day before had come back very early in the morning hours with cooked food for their husbands and family members – just as they had been instructed. To their dismay, the soldiers refused to let them deliver this food telling the women to leave it at the side of the road and to return home while they began distributing it among themselves. Those that protested or pleaded for compassion were beaten and threatened by the soldiers.⁴² As recalled by a female respondent:

*A soldier then accused us of sheltering rebels and told us to remember the things that happened in Luwero... He said that if we knew what had happened in Luwero, then we wouldn't be asking for water or cool shelter for the children, because in Luwero the children were pounded with mortars.*⁴³

At around 5:00pm, a 40-year-old man from Unyama was brought by the soldiers to Burcoro Primary School. His name was Kapere Alfoncio and he had been detained by the soldiers earlier that day. Community members described how the soldiers continued patrolling the surrounding villages and detaining people. They described how the soldiers had found a pair of gumboots and two pairs of military uniforms in his home and that was enough to raise their suspicions. However, community members all agree that those uniforms did not belong to Kapere. As explained by one respondent:

*Kapere had a brother who was a government soldier. His brother had fallen very ill and was sent home to receive some medication. On the day of the operation, this brother had gone to Lacor hospital but left his uniform back home. When the soldiers came, they found the uniform in that home and accused Kapere of being a rebel.*⁴⁴

According to Kapere's nephew, "I believe my uncle was afraid that if the soldiers found those uniforms then they would accuse us of being rebel soldiers, so he tried to hide them."⁴⁵ His attempt to conceal the uniforms was not successful and the soldiers interpreted his actions as proof of rebel collaboration. As soon as they reached Burcoro Primary School Kapere was presented to Major Ikondere, who questioned him for some time and later issued an order for Kapere to be placed with the 35 men who had been labeled rebel collaborators the day before.

Once the sun started to go down it became clear to the people that their pain and suffering



The tree from which the soldiers threw raw mangoes at the captive civilians.

- 41 Interview with a 61 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.
 42 Interview with a 55 year old woman in Obyella, 22 August 2012.
 43 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.
 44 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.
 45 Interview with a 39 year old man in Olano, 24 August 2012.

would extend for another day. The 35 men who had already endured a terrible night in the pit were forced back inside just before the sun started to set. By now they were very weak from the constant beatings and the lack of food and water. They could hardly keep track of time or follow what was taking place outside. It was only through the sounds that reached their ears that they could imagine the suffering that others were undergoing. They could hear the screams of people being beaten and the cries of women being raped. As described by one of the men trapped inside the pit:

The soldiers guarding us brought the wife of one man and raped her in turns at the entrance of the pit; we could hear her moan. It was such a disgusting thing. Hearing how this woman was fighting these soldiers saddened me and I felt that it could have been even worse for the rest of the other women. We could hear the constant strangling and slaps she was receiving from the soldiers.⁴⁶

Hardly any woman was spared. One lucky survivor explained, "Those women that put up any resistance were beaten. I only survived from being taken because I had my baby with me and I clutched it strongly in my arms. I was the only woman that had a child at that moment. Almost all the other women were taken."⁴⁷

Other girls were also lucky: "I only survived because the women were so scared of being taken that they gathered together and they would fall on top of each other. I managed to survive because they fell on me while I was down and covered me."⁴⁸ Another horrendous night befell all those unfortunate enough to have been detained by the Gung Battalion.

April 17, 1991: Suffocation and Death

As Wednesday the 17th dawned, the situation had become desperate for the people detained in the school compound. The passage of time had become almost irrelevant to the people and what mattered to them was simply staying alive. The ongoing torture had taken a severe toll on the detainees who were by now extremely weak and disoriented. It was not long before the soldiers began repeating the previous day's routine:

Very early in the morning the soldiers removed me and three other men from the pit and they started beating us while we moved. The beating was so brutal that I thought they would kill us there, so I told the other men to pretend to be dead so we fell to the ground. Once we fell the soldiers began to kick us and step over us.⁴⁹

It was impossible to know whether this would finally be the day of their release. For those women that were being kept in a classroom the situation had become almost unbearable:

We urinated there, defecated there, and that was the same place from where the soldiers always picked you up to be taken and raped. We were not allowed to eat any food. We were



A man that was a local leader at the time of the operation told JRP researchers: "We laid down and they began to beat us. Oh, we were beaten in all the possible ways from 10:30am to 2pm."



A pit survivor narrating his story to a JRP researcher.

46 Interview with a 46 year old man in Burcoro, 21 August 2012.

47 Interview with a 46 year old woman in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

48 Interview with a 37 year old woman in Obyella, 5 October 2012.

49 Interview with a 46 year old man in Odinga, 23 August 2012.

legs with grass and set the grass on fire to punish him. The situation was desperate for the 35 men tightly squeezed together fighting to get any fresh air:

"I stayed next to the entrance of the hole, so when I felt hot I would lift my head up towards the entrance in order to breathe fresh air, but when the soldiers saw your head up they would beat you. My head has a lot of scars as a result of those beatings."⁵⁶

This torture went on for three hours until the soldiers decided to stop blowing the smoke and let the fire die out. The men would remain in the pit until the morning hours; not all would survive the night.⁵⁷



A survivor of the pit being interviewed by a JRP researcher in Burcoro.

April 18, 1991: The Final Day

During the early hours of the morning of Thursday the 18th the soldiers finally allowed the men out of the pit for good. Those that were still alive slowly crawled out. They were incredibly weak and frightened; many had removed most of their clothes due to the intense heat they had endured the previous night. As witnessed by one of the RCs, *"Most of the survivors were out of their minds... They were too frail to do anything."*⁵⁸ The majority of the men that had been forced inside the pit survived the previous night's horrendous ordeal. However, the bodies of Okema Rodento, Opwonya Opige, Okot Ogoo, and Ojabu remained at the bottom of the pit; they had suffocated to death. Once the men were out, the soldiers quickly collapsed the logs to cover the pit and conceal the bodies that remained inside. One of the survivors from the pit described what happened next:

One of the soldiers asked us whether we wanted to live or die, then another asked what had prompted us to join the rebellion. Hearing that last question sent my brain berserk and I replied that we were not rebels, that rebels do not have homes and that I had been captured in my garden. A soldier shouted back at me and then he stabbed me in the chest with a bayonet. His colleague came and grabbed the gun away from him. The man went on to verbally insult me and say that that no farmer could look as healthy as I did. He then ordered us to get out of his sight."⁵⁹

Not long after, a car arrived and stopped right next to the primary school. A man dressed in civilian clothes stepped out and approached some of the commanding officers. This is one of the most mysterious incidents of the whole operation since few people were able to comprehend what was taking place and hardly anyone was able to hear what was being discussed. Despite the confusion

⁵⁶ Interview with a 41 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

⁵⁷ A similar incident took place in Mukura, Teso sub-region, in July 1989. In this case over a hundred civilians accused of being rebel collaborators were forced by NRA soldiers into a train wagon with many suffocating inside before finally being released. For more information, see: Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP). "The Mukura Massacre of 1989." Field Note XII, March 2011. Available at: <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2011/03/the-mukura-massacre-of-1989-fn-xii/>.

⁵⁸ Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

⁵⁹ Interview with a 46 year old man in Burcoro, 21 August 2012.

surrounding this incident, the majority of those present strongly believe that Betty Bigombe, a member of the Uganda Parliament and the State Minister for Northern Uganda at the time,⁶⁰ was one of the occupants of the vehicle and that it is thanks to her intervention that the operation was suddenly stopped.

The community widely believes that Ms. Bigombe was in the area when she got news of the operation in Burcoro. However, much confusion still remains with regard to whether she was actually one of occupants of the vehicle and on the role that she played that day. As recalled by a female respondent that claims to have witnessed this incident, *"I saw Bigombe come, but she did not get out of the vehicle... She then proceeded towards Awach."*⁶¹ This visit seems to have taken no more than a couple of minutes and few witnesses could be traced.

Not long after the car's departure, the soldiers ordered the people to gather together at the side of the road that ran opposite the primary school.

The Murder of Kapere

As the pit was being collapsed Kapere had been bound and blindfolded then locked in one of the classrooms. A few minutes after the visitors departed, Kapere was escorted to where the people were gathered by approximately a dozen soldiers who had camouflaged themselves with leaves. Kapere was paraded before the crowd for a few minutes before being tied to the trunk of a tree across the road from the school. Ogwete, the Intelligence Officer, then addressed the people telling them how they had been warned about the dangers of keeping a rebel amongst them and that this would serve as an example for all other rebel collaborators.

The soldiers then brutally shot Kapere until they had emptied their magazines. By the time the shooting stopped, Kapere's body was so badly maimed that skin had peeled off from some parts. Ogwete ordered the women to ululate⁶² while he turned to the men who had been in the pit and selected the ones who still looked strong to dig a grave for Kapere:

*As we were digging the grave, the hoes given to us were very useless, but if they found you struggling with the hoe they would tell you to use your hands to dig the grave. Time and again they told our colleagues to stop work and then they would beat them brutally.*⁶³

Those that were selected had to make use of whatever strength they had left after being trapped in the pit for days. One man who was scooping out sand from the grave with his hands collapsed from exhaustion, he recounted his narrow brush with death, *"The soldiers began to force [my colleague] to hack me to death, but my colleagues defied their orders and said 'if this is what you want to do to him ... then better kill us all' They pulled me out and continued digging the grave."*⁶⁴ To date the community fears the place where Kapere was executed



The tree in Burcoro where Kapere Alfonso, a man who according to community members was falsely accused of being a rebel by the NRA soldiers, was chained and shot by a firing squad.

60 Betty Bigombe is a politician from northern Uganda who has been widely recognized for her experience as a mediator and peace broker in the long conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan Government. She is the current State Minister for Water Resources.

61 Female respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

62 Interview with a 38 year old woman in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

63 Interview with a 44 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

64 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

and buried. People avoid passing that tree because they believe the place is haunted by his spirit and requires a traditional cleansing ceremony.

The 22nd Battalion Departs

Soon after the burial of Kapere the soldiers released the remaining civilians. One man described the end of the operation:



This man was stabbed with a bayonet in the leg by the soldiers at Burcoro.

The soldiers turned to the rest of us and told us to go back to our homes, to resume normal life and to report any rebel presence in the area. They said that they didn't want to round us up and bring us to Burcoro Primary School a second time. In response the people started saying thank you [to the soldiers] as they clapped... And just like that people began to return home.⁶⁵

The soldiers then began caning people to disperse them faster. Those that still had strength fled quickly without looking back, but many were incredibly weak from the long days of torture and lack of food and they could not move fast enough to escape the soldiers' final blows.

Many of the people that were released preferred to head for the bush as soon as they could and spend the night in hiding. Even traveling on the main road was seen as quite dangerous because of the possibility of running into the soldiers again: *"We would flee at the sight of any human being, we were so scared and traumatized."⁶⁶* This prevented many people from seeking much needed medical attention.

When Friday the 19th of April arrived, the people woke up deeply frightened because of what they had experienced. They had no idea whether the soldiers were still present in the area and nobody dared to approach the primary school to verify. Only those that needed urgent medical attention risked venturing out to the main road in order to make the long walk to Gulu town. As recalled by a female respondent who had been raped repeatedly, *"The day after we were released we tried to make our way to the hospital in Gulu town, but I could not even walk because of what had happened to me. It took us the whole day to get there."⁶⁷*

Despite the fear of running into the NRA soldiers, at around midday a number of people made their way to the school in order to attempt to retrieve the bodies of those that had been killed. Acholi traditional beliefs hold that special treatment must be given to the bodies of those killed in order to appease the spirits of the dead. This generally involves showing respect by covering as much of the body as possible, as well as organizing a proper burial service in the family's homestead. Failure to do this would be considered *kiir*, or a transgression of traditional values, and is believed to lead to *cen*, a spiritual affliction that would torment and inflict ill on those responsible for violating traditional Acholi values governing the treatment of the dead.⁶⁸ However, rumors of sightings of the soldiers around the area drove the people back to the bush and prevented them from approaching the school. It was not until the next day that the community members dared to reach Burcoro Primary School and finally retrieve the bodies of those found within the collapsed pit and surrounding areas.

It was around this time that some community members began to realize that not everybody had been released by the soldiers after the execution of Kapere. The soldiers of the Gung Battalion had decided to take with them many of the women that had been held in one of the classrooms throughout the operation, as well as three

65 Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

66 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

67 Interview with a 37 year old woman in Obyella, 5 October 2012.

68 For more information on traditional Acholi belief systems see: Liu Institute for Global Issues and Gulu District NGO Forum, with assistance of Ker Kwaro Acholi. "RocoWat I Acoli: Restoring Relationships in Acholi-land: Traditional Approaches to Justice and Reintegration." September 2005. Available at: <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2005/09/roco-wat-i-acoli-restoring-traditional-approaches-to-justice-and-reconciliation/>.

of the men who had been forced inside the pit and who the soldiers allegedly believed to be genuine rebel collaborators. These people would be taken to Lukome and then spread farther afield.

The Fate of Suspected Rebel Collaborators

Three men suspected of being rebel collaborators were transported to the army barracks in Lukome where they spent one night inside an uncovered pit. The next morning the three men were put in a military vehicle and taken to the Fourth Division barracks in Gulu town. As one remembered:

When we reached the division barracks we were taken to the army prison, but it was terrible in that prison. Each day different people died because the prison cells were really small and people struggled to get space to survive. By this time several captives from other places were brought here as well. You had to fight to get space for yourself in the prison cell.⁶⁹

His friend also recalled his ordeal:

Once there, they started questioning and investigating us more. We were beaten, tortured and asked to confess the location of rebel soldiers. They even put their guns in our mouths and threatened to kill us if we didn't tell them where the rebels were. Every single day that they brought us for questioning we never changed our statements. I think that is why they released me after two weeks.⁷⁰

While this man was released after a few weeks, the others were not as fortunate. They were eventually taken to Lira and then to Luzira Prison in Kampala. One man remained in Luzira for one year:

I don't even know how I was eventually released. This was strange because initially they had told us that we the convicts from Lira would take some time. As a point of caution, I was told that if I was disciplined enough then I would serve my sentence for five years, and if I was undisciplined then I will serve my sentence for ten years.... Then one day we were just told to leave our white [prison] uniforms and come out... When I returned back home everything was a mess. My father had died, my wife also left and went away, and my child also died. There was nothing left.⁷¹

The third man spent some time in Luzira and was then sent to work at a prison farm in Mbarara. He spent over a year in detention simply for being suspected of rebel collaboration. His story, as shared with JRP researchers, is captured below.



After the operation in Burcoro, this man was detained by the government soldiers and taken to Luzira prison in Kampala.

69 Interview with a 41 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

70 Interview with a 46 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

71 Interview with a 41 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

They Accused Us of Being Rebels *One Man's Experience of Illegal Detention*⁷²

We spent several days at Burcoro Primary School after the operation uprooting grass and building the soldiers a temporary barracks. When it was time to depart, the soldiers marched us to Lukome. On the way, I was given an accumulator battery to carry, but as we crossed the river in Burcoro I fell and the battery hit my chest. This affected my chest and I still experience a lot of pain.

We spent only one night in Lukome before we were made to board an army vehicle which took us to the Fourth Division barracks in Gulu. At the barracks we were forced to slash grass from morning to evening as the soldiers beat us. Within that time, perhaps there was some intense war going on somewhere, because they would come and take us to carry dead bodies from the military mortuary. It was our work to pick up these dead bodies, clean them, dress them and pack them in the waiting coffins. We stayed there for one week then we were transferred to Gulu Central Prison where we spent another five days. The next day at 2:00pm, some vehicles came and transported us to Lira. All this while our numbers kept on growing, we were 1,400 by the time we reached Luzira Prison.

We spent one week in Lira without food or water at the barracks. They kept us in a small field, and because of our great number, we squeezed into each other's space. Most of us squatted and we were expected to stay that way from morning to evening. We had no food or privacy. If you wanted to urinate or defecate, you had to do it right where you squatted. Fortunately, because most people were starving, they didn't litter the area with feces. That was our life for five days.

One evening at the end of the week we were ordered to board lorries which had been brought to take us to prison. As we boarded the soldiers said, "You have been jailed for five years. If you maintain high discipline then you may not finish all those five years. But if you don't then you will stay there." In our hearts, we believed we were going to be thrown into Karuma Falls to die on the way. This, however, did not happen. We successfully crossed Karuma to Luwero and continued to Makindye.

When we reached Makindye, due to our large number, we were referred to Luzira Prison. For two months we were at Luzira before some of us were distributed to go to the different prison farms in Uganda. I was among the 100 men who were taken to Kivura Farm in Mbarara. Some people went to farms in Jinja and Mubuku Farm in Kasese. I stayed there for one year and four months. Our only work at the farm was digging and harvesting crops. At some point the Red Cross visited us at the farm and that was when we were brought back to Luzira Prison.

We had not been back in Luzira for long before we were surprised one morning by the news that we were being set free. Immediately we left Luzira and came back home. In total, I would say we were away from home for one year and six months just because the soldiers at Burcoro suspected us of being rebel collaborators.

⁷² Interview with a 40 year old man in Agung, 23 January 2013.

The Fate of the Abducted Girls

The majority of the girls that were locked in the classroom throughout the operation were never released; they were taken by the soldiers as they departed from Burcoro. One man recalled, "One of those girls abducted was from my village of Olano. She left a son behind... She never came back."⁷³ It is presumed by most of their relatives that these women were taken as wives by the officers. As described by the mother of one of these girls:

In the school, my two girls were taken away by the soldiers as I remained with a group of women. Both of them were raped by the soldiers and one was actually taken by them. Her name was Akello Agnes. She was only fourteen years old and her breasts were just beginning to form. Unfortunately, she became part of the girls who were taken away from here by the soldiers. Maybe one of the soldiers took her for a wife. A few of these girls have returned, others have died, while others like mine cannot be traced. Whether she is still alive or not, I can't tell... My daughter has been missing for over twenty years. It is impossible to forget her; this is my problem. It is my destiny from God and I can't escape from it.⁷⁴

The few clues to what happened to these women came from the testimony of one living returnee and those few mothers whose daughters returned years later but have since passed away. As recalled by one of these mothers:

My daughter was also taken by the soldiers, her name was Adiyi Ajulina. She says that she was taken to Kampala where she lived for some years. She was mistreated there until she decided to escape. She returned three years later. By then she was infected with HIV/AIDS.⁷⁵

Another mother claimed that her daughter had been taken all the way to the southwestern region of Uganda. It was only after five or six years that she managed to escape and return to her community. She was HIV positive when she came back and died sometime after.⁷⁶

It is estimated that between 30 and 50 women were taken by the soldiers when they left Burcoro.⁷⁷ One woman explained that they were taken to Pakwach from Lukome and then on to Koch Goma Barracks where she stayed with her new 'husband' (it is unclear where the remainder of the women were taken).⁷⁸ This woman shared her story of living away from home as a wife to this soldier for eight years before he passed away.



A victim of the events in Burcoro village speaks to a JRP researcher.

⁷³ Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

⁷⁴ Interview with a 70 year old female in Olano, 22 August 2012.

⁷⁵ Female respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

⁷⁶ Female respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

⁷⁷ Interview with a 40 year old man in Agung, 23 January 2013; Interview with 39 year old woman in Koc Lii, 5 March 2013.

⁷⁸ Interview with a 39 year old woman in Koc Lii, 5 March 2013.

My Time is Already Wasted *One Woman's Story of Abduction and Forced Marriage*⁷⁹

The majority of us were picked during the operation. So many horrible things happened during the four days that we were camped with the soldiers in Burcoro Primary School.

We were kept in makeshift barracks within the school. All of the girls who were at the school were repeatedly raped by the soldiers. A lot of girls contracted HIV, but I can't tell whether I have it or not, I have never been tested. We were quite many. Over thirty girls remained with the soldiers in Burcoro Primary School [after they released the other people]. They said we were now their wives. I was 17 years old and the others were around 14, 15 and 17 years old. One of them was my cousin Jennifer. I also remember Auma, Alum, Agnes, and Anneta (the daughter of Odori). All these were girls from my own home area of Burcoro. There were very many other girls, but I did not know them.

We left Burcoro with the soldiers in shifts. The girls I knew and I were the first to leave Burcoro and we went with the soldiers first to Lukome and then to Pakwach where we stayed for a while before relocating to Koch Gomah barracks. I stayed in Koch Goma with my captor-turned-husband until he left the army.

After he left the army he took me to his home in Patongo where we stayed until he passed on. I lived with him for eight years and gave birth to two boys and one girl. The girl and one of the boys passed on. Life wasn't by any means easy. I stayed for all those years without visiting my home or my relatives. Each time I brought up the topic of visiting my home people he would turn violent and say the day I set my foot out of our home I would cease to be with him. I lived in fear and never visited home until he died in 1998.

After his death, I spent two full years with his family because I hadn't yet figured out how I should leave. His people grabbed everything they could lay their hands when he died saying it belonged to their son. They said I should remain there because returning to my home meant I had plans to hide their brother's children. When I finally left in 2001 I was empty handed.

On my return home, my relatives laid down Opobo and an egg for me to step on (a traditional Acholi cleansing ceremony performed for those who have been away from home for a long period of time to ward off evil spirits). I stayed home from 2001 until 2005 when I met the man I am living with now. I have two children with him and he has taken my son as his own. My son is now 20 years old. We have had a difficult relationship. When he was growing up I would tell him again and again, "You came in my life simply because your father raped me. Had he not raped me I wouldn't have had you." We fought frequently when his father was still alive, but now that his father is dead, I am not very much bothered about it.

My time is already wasted. I can't undo what happened to me. The only thing the government can do for me right now is to pay for the education of my children and compensate me for the years of my life which have been wasted.

⁷⁹ Interview with 39 year old woman in Koc Lii, 5 March 2013.

Sexual Violence: The Hallmark of the ‘Gung’ Battalion

The unfortunate hallmark of the Burcoro operation was the high level of sexual violence which took place. The majority of women and many of the men in the community suffered some form of sexual violation at the hands of the soldiers. As noted above, for four nights the women detained at Burcoro Primary School were repeatedly raped by the soldiers: “A soldier would take you to his tent, rape you and kick you out to return to the crowd. As you walked back to the crowd, another soldier would pick you up immediately for another round of rape.”⁸⁰ There was nothing anyone could do to stop the rapes.

An elderly woman who was a women’s leader at that time painfully recalled her helplessness, “I was told to sit under a tree and to take care of those young girls. I sat with them until the evening when the soldiers started coming and picking up the girls and taking them to be raped. I had to sit there watching as they were taken away.”⁸¹

One woman, who was 18 years old at that time, was held in the classroom and repeatedly raped:

*From [the classroom] any soldier that wanted to take you would just pick you up, take you to the bush and rape you. [The rape] was in shifts. The morning soldiers would come and rape us, then in the afternoon another group of soldiers would come and rape us again. Then in the evening another group of soldiers would come and rape us. I even have a scar on the side of my stomach from when I was thrown against the ground on one occasion by a soldier that was going to rape me and a small stick cut me.*⁸²

Emotional abuse was as prevalent as physical abuse, and often whenever a woman was dragged away to be raped the soldiers would mock the others left behind. As remembered by one woman in a focus group discussion, “They would tell us that we Acholi say that we are very strong, but can we now show that strength that we say we have? They said that what we were going to witness right now was what happened in Luwero. That we were all going to be wiped out like insects.”⁸³

The sexual abuse was not limited to the mass rape of the majority of women detained during the operation, but also extended to some of the men. Community members recalled numerous cases of male rape or ‘tekgungu’ – male sodomy, as it is commonly called within the community – which took place throughout the operation.

Tekgungu was much less conspicuous than the sexual abuse perpetrated against the women because of the shame and stigma attached to male rape in Ugandan culture. The men were generally raped by small groups of two to four soldiers in the bushes or even in the men’s own homesteads. The soldiers would tell their victims ‘Mzee, gung agunga’ or ‘bend over for me.’ This phrase would yield the nickname ‘Gung’ that survivors use to refer to the battalion.

Because of the high level of shame attached to male rape it was difficult to find many survivors willing to tell their stories. One brave man came forward with his experience:

*I am not going to fear anybody, I will tell my story... At the time that the soldiers took Lucoc to be killed I was there as well. This was in Abera River. After he was stabbed they turned to me and took me to some rocks nearby. They then told me to bend over. There were four soldiers. They told me to hold with both hands to the trunk of a tree while bending over. Then they told me to put my head down. One of them undressed himself and then undressed me while another soldier was holding me. Then it happened... It was finally stopped when a soldier that was not part of the group came and addressed the group of soldiers abusing me.*⁸⁴

80 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

81 Interview with a 75 year old woman in Burcoro, 23 August 2012.

82 Interview with a 39 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

83 Female respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

84 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

This abuse took place out of sight from the rest of the community members who only found out what had happened to these men much later. It seems that not even the elderly men were spared from being raped:

In this village alone we came across three incidences of old men who were raped. Most of them were found in their homesteads by the soldiers, who later abandoned them after they were sodomized. Most of these men are dead by now. Some died when we were in the IDP camp.⁸⁵

These allegations seem to support the perception held by many community members that the sexual abuse of men was utilized as a way to further humiliate the people of Burcoro by stripping the men of dignity. In northern Uganda, rape is generally considered a very shameful act. It is rarely discussed in public and men who have been raped are considered to have lost their status as men. As described by one local leader:

I was not in Burcoro during the operation, but when I returned to the area for a visit sometime after I talked to an elderly man there. He asked me whether I was a real man, because 'we don't have many around here' he said. He then admitted to me that a lot of the men in this area had been 'slept with' during the operation.⁸⁶

For most men, the shame they felt as a result of this abuse forced them to remain quiet about their experience and cope with the aftermath of this abuse alone. One man lamented:

I thought I would forget the incident. I even went back home and resumed normal life. But it turned out to be something that I will never forget. I have never told anyone about it. I do not know where I got the courage to keep this secret for all these years. Most people who had a similar experience keep it a secret until this day.⁸⁷

As a result of the silence that surrounds the majority of these male victims, it remains impossible to determine the number of men that were abused and the consequences that this has had on their families after more than two decades. At least one man in the community now suffers from serious health complications arising from the abuse he was subjected to. His story is told on page 25.

85 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

86 Interview with male key informant in Gulu, 1 November 2012.

87 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

I Used to be a Strong Man

*One Man's Story of Sexual Violence and Shame*⁸⁸

I used to be a strong man compared to today. I was fat and healthy. But after my experience with the soldiers in 1991, my life changed. I am always weak and sickly these days.

The day the operation began the soldiers found me at home. They arrested me and took me with them to Burcoro Primary School where all the arrested civilians had been assembled. I was called forward by one of their leaders, Ogwete, along with ten other men. He told us that he wanted to give us an important task to perform and that task was to dig a hole for him. He gave us three hoes; others had to use their hands. We began digging the hole but as we were digging the soldiers who were supervising us kept on beating us. Ogwete ordered some of the men to sing funeral songs. I think it was a form of humor for them. We changed roles frequently. As some men sung, others dug. When the hole was as wide and deep as Ogwete wanted it to be, we were ordered to go and cut some logs and grass. I was among the men taken to a nearby home which was surrounded by trees so that we could get some logs for covering the hole.

As we were cutting the logs I was suddenly called by two of the soldiers. They told me I was a 'lanywar' (insolent person). I think they felt I was being stubborn or that I was not giving them enough respect or that I was not working as hard and as fast as they wanted me to.

They took me away from my colleagues and led me into a nearby clump of trees where they ordered me to remove my trousers. I could not resist because they had their guns pointed at me. I undid my trousers and let them fall to the ground. Then they told me to bend over and kneel down. I obeyed and knelt down although I did not know what they were going to do. One of the soldiers then went behind me as the other stood in front and kept the barrel of his gun pointed at my head. Up to this point I did not know what they were up to. Then suddenly I just felt "*lyeto pa coo*" (the heat of a man) penetrating my rectum. I then realized that I was being sodomized. I was too shocked to do anything. I just kept kneeling there until he finished. I was also frightened because I had the barrel of a gun pointed at my head. When he had finished, he changed places with his colleague, who also came and sodomized me.

After that I was told to get up and was escorted back to rejoin my colleagues who were still cutting logs. I was quickly ordered to get back to work. Everything happened so fast that I had no time to recover. I simply rejoined my colleagues and resumed work as though nothing had happened. I think I was not myself at that moment.

That is what happened to me on that day. It is an incident I will never forget. I have never told anyone about it, not even my wife. I do not know where I got the courage to keep this secret for all these years.

I thought I would forget the incident. I even went back home and resumed normal relations with my wife. However, after six months a strange growth developed in my rectum. It continued to grow until it caused me complications. I cannot eat hard foods such as millet and dry meat, and last year the growth grew so big that I could not pass stool easily.

My wife does not know the cause of my condition. She thinks it is a natural cause. I cannot tell her the truth. For a long time I have not had the courage to talk to anyone about my experience. I have not even talked to any NGO representative.

Most people who had a similar experience keep it a secret. It is only my uncle who confided in me that he had also been raped. There is another individual whom I suspect also had a similar incident but he does not talk about it. This experience is generally difficult to talk about.

⁸⁸ Interview with a 58 year old man in Burcoro, 5 October 2012.

Mass Infection with HIV/AIDS

The terrible consequence of the prevalence of sexual violence in Burcoro seems to be mass infection with HIV/AIDS. It was not long after the end of the operation that reports of HIV/AIDS infections within the community became more prevalent. The people attribute this rise in infection rates directly to the mass rape by the Gung Battalion during the 1991 operation. One man voiced the opinion of many in the community when he said that *"these soldiers came knowing very well that they are sick of HIV/AIDS and yet they decided to rape women and men."*⁸⁹ A female respondent explained:

Nearly every household in this place is affected by this scourge. If a registration book was opened here for people to register so that we determine HIV/AIDS prevalence, you will realize that only very few people will survive... Most people in this place are moving corpses who are just surviving at the mercy of ARVs.⁹⁰ In the absence of ARVs the majority of the people you are seeing here could have died a long time ago.⁹¹

Despite the fact that the community was generally aware of the mass rape that took place, a culture of silence prevailed. Some women were able to tell their husbands what happened to them, while others felt they had to keep silent. (Male rape victims overwhelmingly kept quiet.) As explained by one female respondent, *"To whom can you tell what happened? We kept quiet. We don't even have a platform where you can freely talk about these things. We resolved to keep quiet and only told ourselves that if the soldiers infected us, then that was that."*⁹²

According to a local NGO worker, *"There was a conspiracy of silence here. You know those things that have to do with sexuality people don't talk about openly... The people know that sex was used as a weapon and so the HIV/AIDS rates are so high here."*⁹³

Gender relations were greatly affected by the rapes. Some husbands blamed their wives for being infected, despite the fact that they were raped, and divorced them.⁹⁴ Others took back their wives, understanding that the rape was not their fault, and in turn exposed themselves to HIV/AIDS:

I saw when my wives were being raped by the soldiers. Even after I returned home, they did not hide away anything from me but narrated to me what transpired. The only disadvantage we had at that time was that we could not easily access medical care like these days. There was no provision to test these women for any infections after the rape. You just had to persevere and live with your wife even if she was infected by the soldiers.⁹⁵

The community widely believes that the spread of HIV/AIDS first occurred in those families where the men took back their wives: *"Most of the women were infected... Later on the men realized that most of them caught HIV/AIDS from their women. Had we known, we would have encouraged our women to be transparent and not infect us. The women should also be given ARVs."*⁹⁶ HIV/AIDS was also passed on to children born to the infected women which has contributed to the high infection rate in the Burcoro community.

It is impossible to know exactly when people contracted HIV/AIDS as most community members neither sought nor had easy access to medical attention immediately after their ordeal, and testing for HIV/AIDS was not readily available in northern Uganda at that time. It is also important to note that the majority of the community was eventually displaced to camps which had a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and where a breakdown of traditional values saw an increase in promiscuity. However, the fact that the infection seems to have affected mainly those in their 30s and 40s, as well as children born to women victims, strongly indicates that most of these people were infected before their displacement.

Despite the lack of certainty surrounding the original source, the perception of the community is that the widespread infection of civilians with HIV/AIDS was a deliberate act orchestrated by the commanders of the operation to further punish the population. Some respondents believe that even if those soldiers that engaged in the mass rape were identified they would have likely already succumbed to this disease themselves.⁹⁷

89 Interview with a 66 year old man in Oding, 23 January 2013.

90 Antiretrovirals, commonly known as ARVs, are a combination of medications typically used to combat HIV infections.

91 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

92 Interview with a 70 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

93 Interview with male key informant in Gulu, 26 September 2012.

94 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

95 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

96 Interview with a 55 year old man in Olano, 23 August 2012.

97 Focus group discussion in Burcoro, 4 October 2012.

The Ghosts of Luwero Triangle: A Motive for the Violence?

Throughout the years many of the victims have come to see the operation that took place in Burcoro as part of a broader strategy implemented by the NRM Government to target the Acholi population of northern Uganda for their links to the LRA and other rebel movements. Nevertheless, the direct motives why Burcoro and the communities that surround it were specifically targeted remain as uncertain as the names of the soldiers involved. Great confusion still surrounds the ultimate objectives of the 22nd Battalion in Burcoro. What is clear is that these activities were widespread and systematic as a part of Operation North.

Many victims saw this operation as just one more in a long series of cases of mass abuse and repression of the Acholi population. However, a more obscure motivation may offer possible clues to the reason behind the particular brutality with which the soldiers acted during the operation. Many of the survivors reported that soldiers made repeated references to the Luwero Triangle, especially while physical abuse was taking place. As recalled by one respondent, *"The soldiers began to say that we knew about the suffering that the Luwero people had undergone and yet we were demanding water for our children... We should have smashed all of your children, they said... As for me, I had no idea of anything that had occurred in Luwero."*⁹⁸

The reference to the events that took place in Luwero dates back to the early 1980s, when not long after the overthrow of Idi Amin's regime, former president Milton Obote was reelected after the contested general elections in December 1980. This sudden return to power was also attributed to the support he enjoyed from the UNLA. Nevertheless, dissatisfied opposition groups led by Yoweri Museveni quickly took up arms against the newly established government and managed to gather enough support to form what eventually became known as the NRA. A guerrilla war quickly ensued and it escalated to the point where the region of central Uganda known as the Luwero Triangle was targeted by Obote's UNLA forces as a measure to suppress civilian support for Museveni's insurgent group which used this region as a staging area for its newly established rebellion.

The controversy surrounding what took place in Luwero originates in great part from the belief that a significant number of the soldiers that comprised the UNLA were ethnic Acholis and Langis from northern Uganda, whereas the majority of the civilians targeted in the Luwero Triangle were ethnic Baganda. Despite the fact that there are numerous reports of both NRA and UNLA troops being involved in the destruction of property, looting, and mass killings of civilians, the ethnic component of this divide and the eventual rise to power by Museveni's NRM gave birth to the myth that the massacres in the Luwero Triangle had been perpetrated almost exclusively by northerners. The incidents in Luwero and the conflict between the UNLA and the NRA would greatly contribute to the formation of a wider north-south divide in Uganda.

The details of what took place in the Luwero Triangle seem to have been unknown to the great majority of the people abducted by the soldiers during the operation in Burcoro. As described by one woman, *"I am not sure if I even know where this place is located."*⁹⁹ Nonetheless, it appears that the memory of the Luwero Triangle massacres remained relevant to the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion, especially considering that the majority of the Battalion's soldiers were not ethnic Acholis. A desire for some sort of revenge against the Acholi population of northern Uganda thus appears to have played a role in the extreme level of brutality and violence with which this operation was carried out. In addition, it could also serve to highlight the level of deep-rooted ethnic tensions and hostilities very much present in the country at that time.

It remains impossible to know the extent to which the history of Luwero could have contributed to the level of violence with which the operation in Burcoro was carried out. However, many community members believe strongly in the link between the brutality employed in Burcoro and what occurred in Luwero. As summarized by a male respondent:

*I believe that this operation took place because of a desire for revenge by the soldiers. When they were here they kept telling us that the Acholis killed a lot of people in Luwero Triangle and that the same thing that happened in Luwero is what they were going to do here.*¹⁰⁰

Government Responsibility and Unfulfilled Promises

Interviews with key informants and previous documentation carried out by JRP indicate that what happened in Burcoro was not an isolated case of an undisciplined battalion acting out of control, but rather forms part of a broader pattern of operations conducted by the Ugandan military in communities all over the north throughout

98 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

99 Female respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 24 August 2012.

100 Interview with a 57 year old man in Burcoro, 23 August 2012.

the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰¹ While not all operations were as brutal as the one in Burcoro, descriptions of Operation North by key informants show that many of these violations were widespread and systematic. The 22nd Battalion's behavior in Burcoro amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity, which include: murder, rape, sexual violence, torture, cruel treatment, deprivation of liberty, outrages upon personal dignity, attacking civilians, pillaging and other inhumane acts. These are crimes which know no statute of limitations under international law and the GoU is responsible for holding the perpetrators accountable despite the decades that have passed.¹⁰² While the government has condemned what took place and made promises of compensation for victims in Burcoro, no steps have been taken to identify the perpetrators and promises of compensation remain unfulfilled.

In January 2011, as part of the 2011 presidential campaign, President Museveni held a rally at the Awach Central Primary School where he is reported to have condemned what took place in Burcoro and promised compensation for the victims. He explained that what happened was because the soldiers during those days were undisciplined, but that now the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) is a professional force. According to people present during that event, Museveni then asked for LCs of Burcoro and other villages affected to compile a list of victims and promised compensation for their families.¹⁰³

As recalled by a person approached by a government official sometime after, *"He asked me to tell him what happened in Burcoro. I told him that it was a very long story and that I would need a long time to narrate it. I told him that I was not the only one affected by this operation, and that my other colleagues were not there so and I couldn't speak without them."*¹⁰⁴ As a result, some months afterwards, several government officials arrived in Burcoro and started compiling a list of victims. However, this process took place with great haste and failed to reach the broader community. Most victims only found out about the officials' presence after their departure and were not included in the list of names that was compiled.

Those few whose names were on the victims' list were summoned to a meeting with government representatives at the Acholi Inn in Gulu town on April 10, 2011. Those that attended had little idea of what to expect; two decades had passed since the operation and few knew what to make of the government's sudden interest in Burcoro. Certainly the choice of location and people present did not make community members comfortable. As described by one of the attendees, *"Going there felt like we were being taken to an isolated place in the forest. When we arrived we began to see commanders and men in uniform and that was again traumatizing... If you weren't strong hearted you would even fail to make your confession."*¹⁰⁵

The people were asked to swear on the Bible and give their testimony to the government lawyers. The meeting was meant to last one day, but because of the number of people and the length of their testimonies the proceedings were extended into a second day. Though all the victims were allowed to give their testimonies, by the end of the hearing no concrete agreements were made on compensation or prosecution of those responsible. The victims that attended were left with few clues as to whether anything would result from the meeting, *"We felt betrayed because we had trusted the Government. At that moment what the government should have done was to act as a parent that admits the wrongs committed by his sons and apologize to us. The government owes us an apology for the sufferings we went through in Burcoro."*¹⁰⁶

This short meeting, which most attendees felt resembled a trial in a courtroom, has been the only attempt by the GoU to investigate the events surrounding the Burcoro operation. This disappointing experience left many community members convinced that the Government's sudden interest in Burcoro was simply an election-year ploy, rather than a genuine expression of concern for the community. Victims see the event at Acholi Inn as a disingenuous effort to fulfill a vague campaign promise. Certainly the timing of President Museveni's promise for compensation, the fact that no steps have been taken to identify and prosecute those responsible, and the failure to initiate a compensation process for those affected seems to confirm this opinion.

101 For more information, see: Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP), "When a Gunman Speaks You Listen, Victims' Experiences and Memories of Conflict in Palabek Sub-County, Lamwo District," Field Note XV, August 2012. Available at: <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2012/09/when-a-gunman-speaks-you-listen-fn-xv/>.

102 Uganda has ratified a number of international legal treaties which prohibit crimes such as those committed in Burcoro, see for example: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 287, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Treaty.xsp?documentId=AE2D398352C5B028C12563CD002D6B5C&action=openDocument> (ratified 18 May 1964); ICRC, *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts* (Protocol II), 8 June 1977, 1125 UNTS 609, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Treaty.xsp?documentId=AA0C5BCBAB5C4A85C12563CD002D6D09&action=openDocument> (ratified 13 March 1991); *UN General Assembly, Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, 10 December 1984, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1465, p. 85, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3a94.html> (accessed to 3 November 1986).

103 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 5 October 2012.

104 Interview with a 44 year old man in Oding, 23 August 2012.

105 Male respondent in focus group discussion in Burcoro, 5 October 2012.

106 Interview with a 46 year old man in Obyella, 21 August 2012.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The operation had brutal consequences on the lives of the people of Burcoro and its surrounding communities long after the soldiers had gone and physical wounds had begun to heal. Many had to rebuild their lives with whatever they had left. Some of the survivors described how they returned to empty homes; soldiers had looted their food and few possessions. Others had to cope with painful physical wounds and injuries which often prevented them from working in their fields or engaging in physical labor. In addition, the frustration and bitterness towards the Government which quickly followed the operation would remain in the community for decades and would deeply affect the lives of future generations. As illustrated by a young man whose father died as a result of injuries he received during the operation:

About two years after my father's death my mother was working in the garden and accidentally stepped on a land mine which blew her leg off. My mother survived, but she was so saddened by the situation she now found herself in that she eventually committed suicide. My sister and I became orphans and we went to live with my grandmother in Lacor, but she eventually died. After her death we went to live with one of my aunts... I grew up practically without a father or mother; I don't think that the government can really compensate me for what happened or give me the help that my father would have given me.¹⁰⁷

The constant abuse and torture the men and women were subjected to had severe consequences on their bodies. Men continue to live with the shame of having been raped or disabled. One man explained, *"I got disabled in government hands. I cannot do anything much on my own. My women are the ones doing the active work for me. I am only left with my mouth."¹⁰⁸*

One of the women who had to be taken to the hospital described her experience, *"Once in the hospital the medical staff began removing the semen from my body. A lot of blood was also pouring out of my body. I didn't know whether I would survive. I stayed in the hospital for one month before they discharged me."¹⁰⁹*

A woman who had given birth not long before the operation also recalled her injuries:

As soon as I got home, complications with my stomach started; it swelled and I had intense pain. The pain in my stomach intensified and I went to the hospital for medical attention. In fact, when I reached the hospital, my stomach had swollen so much that most people thought I was carrying another pregnancy. In the hospital, the doctors said that my uterus was not yet fit for any sexual intercourse and that as a result it was badly damaged because of the rape. They noted that the situation was further complicated by the fact that I was raped by many soldiers. They operated on me and removed my uterus; I would not be able to bear another child after that... I regretted not having come out among the pregnant women during the screening. Maybe if I had done that I would have survived the rape.¹¹⁰

However, perhaps the biggest challenge for most families would be the difficulty of dealing with the loss of family members, in some cases fathers and husbands who were the head of the family. An elderly woman's account of her experience gives a glimpse into how deeply people were affected by this operation:

My son was killed during the start of the operation, he was still very young. He was shot in the head by a stray bullet as the soldiers exchanged gun shots with the militia in Olano village. When I attempted to cry I was kicked hard on the chest by a soldier who demanded to know why I was crying. I was only rescued by his colleague who was an Acholi. This injury affected my chest so badly that I cannot dig now... I was eventually ordered to return home and to prepare some food for my husband. On my way home with another woman we met two soldiers and they raped us in the bushes nearby... My brother Ogoo was one of the men that died in the pit... My husband was severely beaten by the soldiers, which left him very weak and soon died of another ailment... Both of my daughters were raped, one was actually abducted by the soldiers and is still missing.¹¹¹

It is important to recognize that the current grievances felt by the victims of the Burcoro operation cannot be exclusively attributed to the 22nd Battalion's actions over two decades ago. Many actors and events have contributed to the suffering of this community throughout the long conflict in northern Uganda. Nonetheless, as evidenced by this field note, the GoU has played a clear role in contributing to the suffering of this community. The Government's acceptance of responsibility for the Burcoro operation is thus long overdue.

Even though the victims feel a strong sense of entitlement to proper compensation, it must be noted that any

107 Interview with a 24 year old man in Olano Lakwal, 24 August 2012.

108 Interview with a 50 year old man in Obyella, 22 August 2012.

109 Interview with a 39 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

110 Interview with a 52 year old woman in Olano, 22 August 2012.

111 Interview with a 70 year old female in Olano, 22 August 2012.

conversation which attempts to address this issue is not without its challenges. The survivors of this operation have been struggling with its aftermath for over two decades, in which time hardly anything more than a brief mention of Burcoro by the Ugandan President has taken place. It is understandable then that much confusion exists within this community regarding the specific form that proper compensation and reparation by the government should take. In addition, the deep sense of loss that many people feel as a result of the physical injuries they were left with or the loss of a family member remains hard to quantify.

Despite these challenges, the following recommendations seek to build on the current needs and perceptions of those affected by the operation in Burcoro.

To the Government of Uganda

The Ugandan Government needs to assume responsibility for the operation and formally apologize to the victims and their families. Despite President Museveni's brief condemnation of the NRA actions in Burcoro during the 2011 presidential campaign, the overwhelming majority of the community members feel that this gesture falls significantly short of constituting a genuine apology to the victims. There is still need for formal acknowledgment of responsibility by the Ugandan Government for the suffering that many of these people went through. This lack of formal recognition contributes to the feelings of mistrust and bitterness that many community members have towards the Government.

Proper compensation needs to be given to the victims and their families as a result of their suffering. As evidenced by the victims' accounts, the significant aftermath of this military operation has deeply affected their lives for decades after. A desire for proper compensation and reparation by the Ugandan Government for the suffering and damages caused by the military operation remains highly relevant. Any reparations scheme should go beyond merely monetary payments to survivors, and should seek to address a whole set of social needs existing within the community as part of the legacy of this operation. However, before any type of payment for compensation or reparations can take place, consultations need to be carried out with community members. There are mixed opinions with regards to what counts as proper reparations, thus community-wide discussions need to be carried out to come to a consensus.

Assistance must be given to the families of those women abducted by the government soldiers in order to clarify the whereabouts of their loved ones. The abduction and disappearance of these women remains an open wound for those family members who keep the memory of their love ones alive. The Ugandan Government has a responsibility to investigate the possible whereabouts of the women abducted by the soldiers of the 22nd Battalion, as well as to clarify circumstances surrounding their abduction. The lack of information with regards to this incident remains an impediment to the healing process for many families still grieving the disappearance of their family members.

To Civil Society Organizations and GoU

There is a clear and present need for the proper memorialization of the Burcoro operation to take place. It is widely believed by the community members that despite the length of time that has passed since the operation took place, a monument should be erected on the location of Burcoro Primary School so that the events that occurred in this place are properly remembered and recognized. This monument would also represent a symbolic gathering place where yearly memorial prayers could be held during the anniversary of the operation. Community members have acknowledged their desire for this monument to incorporate not only the names of those killed and still missing, but also short testimonies and brief accounts of the operation.

Support must be given to the formation of community based victim support groups. The multiple discussions which informed this field note proved to be significant for many community members. These meetings contributed to the formation of a public space in which the community members were able to share their own individual accounts and talk about how the aftermath of this operation has affected their lives. There currently exists a women's group by the name of Wupar Pi Anyim composed mostly of widows and women infected with HIV/AIDS, which acts as a local support group. Stakeholders should support such initiatives which play a key role in the psychosocial recovery of many victims still coping with the haunting memories of their ordeal.

Government and civil society need to address the health consequences of this operation and support the community with accessible and affordable health care. Virtually every person we interviewed suffered from ongoing health issues resulting from this operation. The most serious issues relate to the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war against this community. HIV/AIDS infection rates are high and interviews indicate that many people are living with physical as well as psychological damage resulting from the rapes.

Appendix 1: List of Those Killed During the Operation

	Name	Village
01	Okot Ogoo	Olano
02	Ojabu	Obyella
03	Opwonya Opige	Labongo-Oyuru
04	Okema Rodento	Atede
05	Kapere Alfonso	Labongo-Oyuru
06	Albertino Kinyera	Obyella
07	Peter Ongaba	Obyella

Appendix 2: Partial List of the Women Abducted by the 22nd Battalion

	Name	Village
01	Ajen	Olano
02	Oroma Filda	Olano
03	Abalo Betrease	Oding
04	Pica	Burcoro
05	Abur Christine	Burcoro
06	Adiyo Ajulina	Agung
07	Abwoyo Mangrate	Agung
08	Aryemo Florence	Olano
09	Agik	Agung
10	Akello Agnes	Olano
11	Acan Evelyn	--

Located 16 kilometers northeast of Gulu town, in the sub-county of Awach, Gulu District, lies the quiet village of Burcoro. Despite its apparent tranquility, a sinister past remains hidden behind the welcoming faces of its inhabitants. Between the 14th and the 18th of April 1991, Burcoro was the scene of a brutal operation carried out by the 22nd Battalion of the National Resistance Army (NRA) in which several hundred people were detained at Burcoro Primary School. They were released only after being interrogated, tortured, and sexually abused throughout the four days of the operation.

This report presents a detailed account of the events that took place on those fateful days in April 1991 based on individual interviews and focus group discussions with victims and survivors. It also explores the enduring challenges they face, including not knowing the whereabouts of relatives that were taken by the soldiers and chronic health issues arising from their ill treatment. We highlight the plight of men and women who were abducted, widowed or raped as part of the operation, and note the Government's responsibility and unfulfilled promise to properly compensate the victims and their relatives.

Lastly, the report makes specific recommendations based on discussions with the affected community members which are directed at the GoU and relevant stakeholders in the region. These call for government to apologize, hold the perpetrators accountable, and provide compensation to victims, while civil society should support the community's desire to put in place a memorial and help meet their healthcare needs.



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