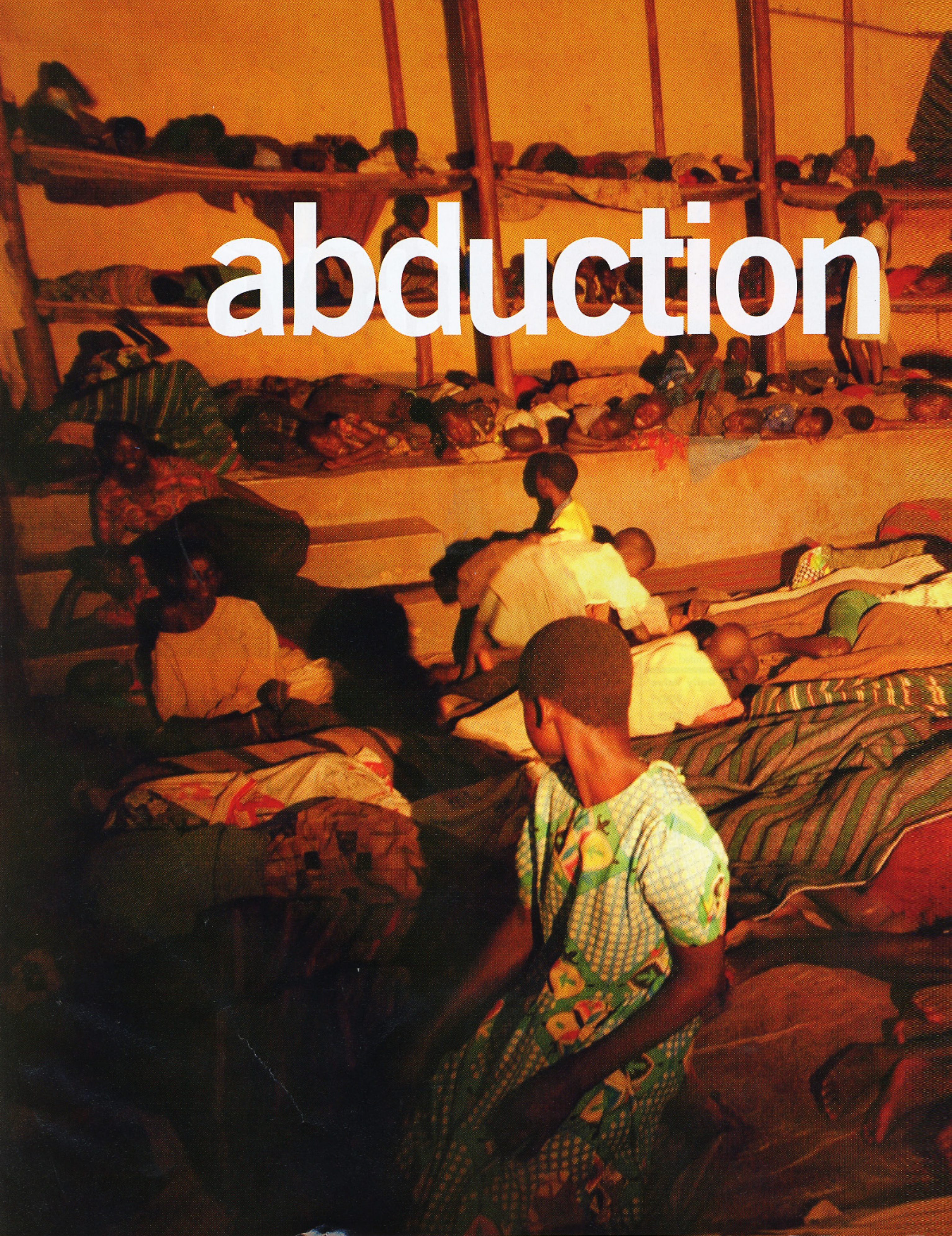

abduction

# of innocents

In conflict-torn areas in East Africa, children are stolen in the night and forced into slavery in rebel camps. In the second of our series, a girl who escaped the rebels in northern Uganda recalls her months in captivity and the hard road back

The children come at dusk. Some of them have walked for hours. They arrive barefoot, in clothes dusty and torn. At first there are only a few of them gathered in the field, waiting to be dispatched to giant tents where they will spend the night. But as the sky grows darker, the trickle of children entering through the gate becomes a torrent. Soon there are hundreds. By nightfall the crowd has swelled to more than five thousand. The children, called night commuters, sleep on the ground, huddled side by side. For now, this field in the town center of Gulu, a district in northern Uganda, is the safest place for them to be. To remain in their villages is to risk being stolen in the night.

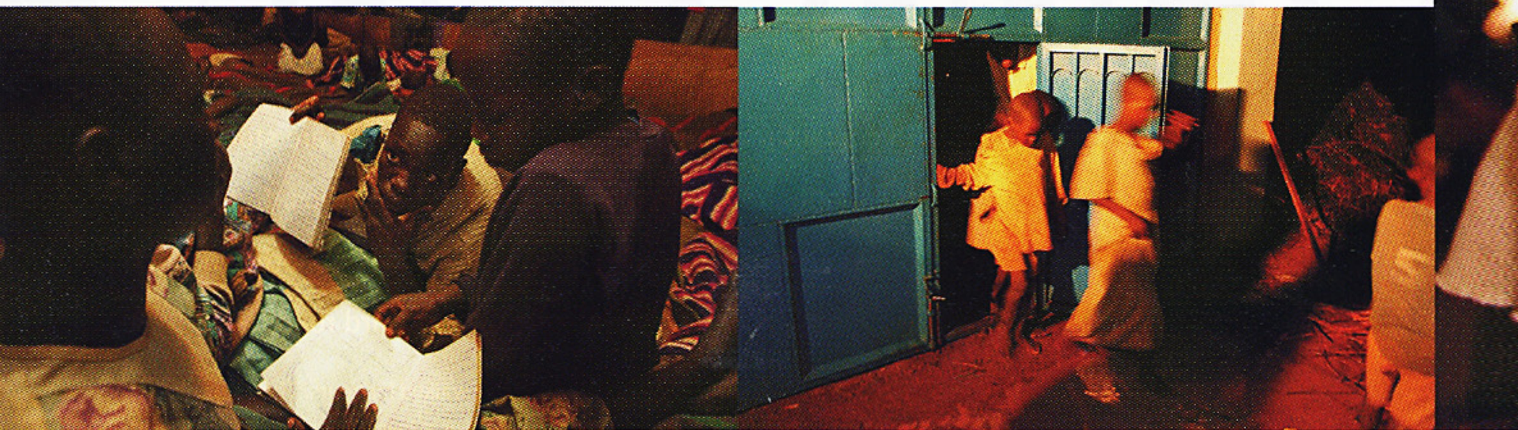
In northern Uganda, tens of thousands of children have lived their entire lives under the threat of being abducted by a violent band of warriors who attack their villages and terrorize their communities. The rebels, who call themselves the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), have kidnapped an estimated 30,000 children, systematically brutalizing and brainwashing them, then using them as soldiers, laborers or sex slaves. The threat of abduction is so much a part of daily life for children of this region that each night some ▷

WRITTEN BY JEANNINE AMBER PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA VICK

At Noah's Ark, one of several overnight shelters in the Gulu district, children refuse to turn out the lights because so many of them have nightmares.

50,000 of them leave their homes in remote villages and walk to town centers in Pader, Kitgum and Gulu districts. Before the tents were erected two and a half years ago, the children slept in bus terminals and on porches. Anywhere was safer than home.

"The scope of this is unbelievable," says Rebecca Symington, the UNICEF child-protection project officer for the region. "The fear is that the situation is causing the disintegration of the entire culture. That time around dinner, when families would tell stories and pass on traditions and values to the children, is lost. Now children leave school, go home very briefly, then walk for two or three hours to the shelter. So the family no longer has authority over the children." But as difficult as it is for them to send their children away, parents know that the alternative is worse. To understand the terror these families face, you must hear the story of a child who was taken.



Above, left to right: Night commuters in Gulu do homework before bedtime; the stream of commuters arrives late into the night; Agnes sleeps in the child-mothers' tent at the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project; children at Noah's Ark spread blankets to dry after a rainstorm.

The Abduction of Agnes

Agnes Abalo's parents, both schoolteachers, sent their daughter to a mission boarding school, where they thought she would get a good education. Agnes enjoyed the boarding school, which was not far from her home in Pajule. "I especially liked singing," she says, "and playing netball and talking with my friends." But then her father developed ulcers and needed to be hospitalized, and Agnes came home to be with the family.

October 9, 2003, was Independence Day. Agnes, 14, had visited her father at the hospital, then gone with friends to church. She remembers that she wore her favorite blue dress with white flowers and returned late to a neighbor's house, where she was to spend the night. She was so tired that she fell asleep still wearing her good dress.

At six the next morning, she awoke to gunshots and men yelling outside the window. She knew right away what was happening. Like all children in northern Uganda, she had grown up in constant fear of LRA attacks. She knew that if children were taken, they rarely escaped. She knew that the rebels did unspeakable things to girls. She knew that she should run.

But the men were already banging on the door and threatening to kill whoever was inside. Agnes ran to the door and pushed her weight against it as her neighbor scrambled to hide the family's food—beans, millet and oil, provisions that the rebels were sure to steal. The neighbor's two small children, ages 2 and 9, crouched against a wall, crying and holding each other. The rebels kicked and hollered, then rammed an axe through the door. Agnes backed away and half a dozen men rushed in.

Shirtless, their torsos gleaming with shea oil, which they believed would repel bullets, the rebels wore army-fatigue pants and black rubber boots and brandished submachine guns. They ransacked the house, grabbing sacks of food, clothes and tools. They barked at the children to lie on the floor as they dragged Agnes and her neighbor outside. Almost 300 villagers had already been forced from their homes and herded in the semidarkness. Among them were Agnes's brothers, 8 and 19, both of whom had been sleeping that night at other huts in the village. (Agnes's parents and her sister escaped capture.) The soldiers, about 200 in all, quickly distributed the loot they had pillaged among the captives, then ordered them at gunpoint to march into the bush.

Agnes, now 15, tells me the story of her abduction while sitting in the front office of the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project in Gulu, one of the districts hardest hit by LRA attacks. It has been only a few weeks since she escaped from the rebels. She is one of 300 children at the rehabilitation center, brought here for intensive counseling before returning home. With us in the small office are Michael Oruni, coordinator of the center, and Florence Lakor, whose own daughter was abducted from a boarding school in 1996 and held captive for eight years. Now a counselor at the center, Lakor helps Oruni translate for Agnes, gently prodding the child to confront the details of her experience. As Agnes haltingly recalls her abduction and the months spent in the bush with the rebels, she sinks deep into her chair. Her voice falls almost to a whisper as she clasps her hands in her lap, below a belly swollen by five months of pregnancy.

For most of us, children like Agnes are among the most shocking victims of war. We see them on the news, their faces pinched, their eyes hollow. Compared with our own young ones, so boisterous and loud, demanding our attention, these quiet, traumatized children seem barely real, their circumstances too complicated to grasp, their plight too overwhelming to address. But our apathy and sense of helplessness only compound the problem.

word. "The psychology of the situation is horrifically straightforward," says Michael Wessells to explain the silent retreat of the adults. "The parents have lived with the threat of the LRA for nearly two decades, and they have played out these scenarios in their minds. They know if they start to cry, their child might start to cry and then the child will be killed. So they harden themselves and do what they can to increase the children's chance to live."

Of all those captured, girls like Agnes are most prized by the rebels; they can read and write and are old enough to bear children. The rebels ordered all the schoolgirls to stand apart

"The global community has allowed this crisis to continue," says Rory Anderson, Africa policy adviser for World Vision, a Christian relief and development organization that serves children in the area. "There has been no sustained international interest in ending the conflict in northern Uganda. Most people don't even know what's going on."

Child-Wives of the Commander

Agnes and the other villagers were forced to march from daybreak until afternoon, never resting, never slowing down. "We walked at a terrible speed," she recalls of that first day. "It was more like running." She remembers an old man with heavy bags: "The soldiers said he was wasting everyone's time, so they beat him to death. They told us this is what will happen if you don't walk fast." Agnes, struggling under the weight of the cooking oil and beans she was carrying, pushed through the tall grass, her chest heaving, her feet swollen and bloody. "Once a child is abducted, everything about their survival is bound by the rules of the LRA," says Michael Wessells, Ph.D., a senior child-protection specialist with the Christian Children's Fund. "You don't falter. You don't disobey. Any show of weakness and you're killed." The children also know that death at the hands of the LRA will be slow and brutal. "The soldiers don't waste bullets on civilians," explains Rory Anderson. "They're more inclined to hack people to death."

With the midday sun beating down, the villagers marched until they came to a clearing where senior commanders waited. The villagers were instructed to unload their bags, then the men and women were ordered to find their way home. More than 100 children, including Agnes and her two brothers, were told to stay. None of the adults made eye contact with the children. No one said a

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as, one by one, the commanders selected "wives" from among them. Jimmy, a 45-year-old with long dreadlocks and a deep scowl, pointed to Agnes. "You will be my second wife," he said. He chose Grace, another girl from Agnes's village, to be his third. "I didn't want to go with him," Agnes says softly. "He was so old."

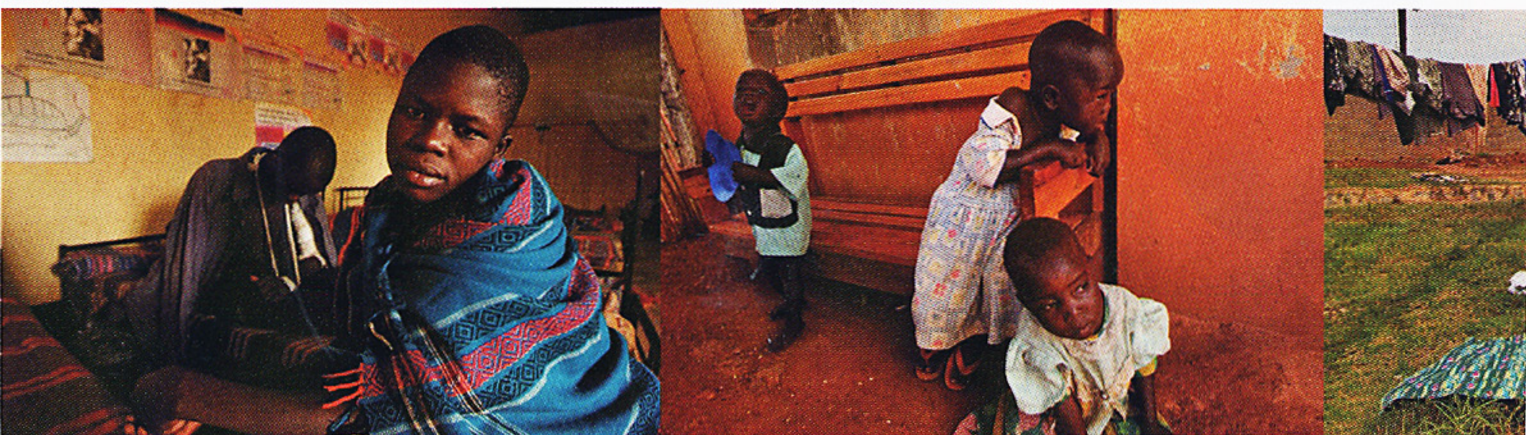
As Jimmy's wife, Agnes was to carry his bedding from camp to camp and cook his food. But there was never enough time. She would scramble to find firewood, strike a fire, grind and cook the millet, clean the utensils, and then pack the bags, all in less than half an hour. If she took too long, she was beaten; if the dishes weren't clean enough, she was beaten. Every day the first wife or the commander's guards would have a new reason to pummel her with rocks and sticks. Agnes dared not cry. She worried endlessly about her brothers, whom she had not seen since the day of their abduction. She longed to go home.

Rebels With No Cause

Northern Uganda, home of the Acholi tribe, features some of the most fertile land in the country. "Before the war, this was a peaceful area," says Michael Oruni, who has lived in the region all his life. "The people here were farmers, pro- [CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

ducing food not only for themselves, but also for the whole country." At the hands of the LRA, though, peace has given way to chaos. Open a Ugandan newspaper on almost any day of the week, and you'll find an account of the latest carnage committed by the LRA: villages burned to the ground, children kidnapped, civilians murdered or mutilated. But while the LRA continues its reign of terror in northern Uganda, it is distinguished from other insurgent groups in that it has no clear political agenda. While the rebels claim they want to rule Uganda according to the Bible's Ten Commandments, their espoused beliefs are a cocktail of fundamentalism, spiritualism and blood lust.

Their leader, Joseph Kony, a former altar boy and a self-proclaimed prophet who is believed to be about 40, founded the LRA



"The children, abducted as innocents, themselves become tools of terror. Their survival in the bush depends on it."

in the tumultuous years after the coup that brought current Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986. Kony believed that Museveni, who was from southern Uganda, was hostile to northerners, and Kony intended for the LRA to overthrow the government and take over leadership of the country. But the movement eventually lost steam, and Kony became enraged at his own people for abandoning the cause. "Instead of fighting Museveni, which was the original mission, Kony began to see himself as a divine tool of correction against his own people," explains Rory Anderson. "He felt the people of the north had turned their back on his movement, and now he was going to punish them."

Kony's rebels have received much of their support from the government of neighboring Sudan, which in 1994 began supplying them with weapons, training, military uniforms and a safe haven across the border from Uganda. In return, the LRA has frequently attacked insurgent groups who oppose the Sudanese government. But by far the greater destruction has been inflicted on Kony's own people. LRA forces have created such turmoil in northern Uganda that 70 percent of schools in Pader district have been shut down, and 80 percent of the region's inhabitants have fled their homes and relocated to displaced persons' camps. Most of these camps have sprung up on the periphery of Ugandan military barracks in Pader, Kitgum and Gulu. But the military provides them with no real protection. In fact, the camps are routinely attacked and set on fire by the rebels, who then flee to safety in the bush.

When I ask him about the possibility of ending the conflict with the LRA, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni expresses nothing but optimism: "We had a problem in the past in that Sudan was supporting the LRA, and my government was spending too little on defense," he says. "So northern Uganda was quite wild. Now the situation is that many of the bandits have been killed or have surrendered. We are getting them one by one."

But Adotei Akwei, Africa advocacy director at Amnesty International, USA, sees the situation differently. "Our analysis is that the Ugandan government has not been fully committed to putting down the LRA, in part due to corruption in its own military," he says. While the U.S. Congress last summer passed the Northern Uganda Crisis Response Act, putting Museveni on notice that the conflict was of concern to U.S. policy makers, Akwei and others believe that such symbolic gestures are not enough. "Congress needs to exert pressure on Museveni to end this crisis," says Anderson. "Without the leadership of the United States, no one will care."

"I Will Die in This Place"

For three weeks, Agnes marched with the rebels toward their camps in Sudan. One soldier walked ahead, clearing a path through the bush with his machete. But the underbrush was thick and the elephant grass sharp and high, rising well above Agnes's head and slicing her bare arms and neck. An ugly rash spread between her fingers, and her feet became so swollen that she had to jab them with pins to help them drain. When it rained, they kept walking. And it rained often. "There were many butterflies," Agnes tells me suddenly, "yellow and blue."

Along the way the rebels raided villages for food and new "recruits." Like many cults, the LRA relies on initiation rites to bind its captives to the group. New recruits are made to kill adults, drink blood, or sleep next to dead bodies. Agnes, who looked on in horror as the rebels beheaded an old man, was then ordered to carry the man's head. "They said it would make us strong," she says, her eyes locked on the floor. "I held it up-

side down so the blood wouldn't drip on my dress. But it was all over my hands. Even after I passed the head to the next girl, the rebels wouldn't let me wash it off."

Wessells, who is currently working on a book about child soldiers, says the LRA's tactics are more sophisticated than brainwashing: "This kind of violence signals to the child, 'You have to make a break from the past. The old rules don't apply. There is no sanctity of life. The only thing that applies here is violence and following orders.'" Adding to the children's terror, says Wessells, is the constant stream of messages from their captors that the LRA is now the only safe place for them. "They tell the children, 'If you escape, the Ugandan army will murder you; your family will murder you. If you even *think* of escape, Kony himself will sense it and kill you.'"

But Agnes was desperate. All she could think of was escape. She raised the possibility with Grace. The girls whispered plans in the night and saw their opportunity a few days later. "The first wife sent us to uproot cassava from a garden," Agnes remembers. "We looked around and everyone was paying attention to digging." Seizing their chance, the girls ran, hunched low so their heads would be covered by the tall grass. They heard the rebels coming after them and hid under a bush, hoping the men would run past. When Agnes opened her eyes, she could see the black boots of soldiers inches from her face. They dragged the girls back to camp where Agnes was pushed to the ground and whipped 130 times on her back and buttocks. As usual, she forced herself not to cry. But Grace, who screamed out in pain, was punished more severely.

In Sudan, the captives were brought to a large camp called Twinkle, complete with schools, trenches and sleeping quarters to accommodate two hundred soldiers, guards, wives, commanders and the young children who had been born at the camp. For five months Agnes lived at Twinkle with the rebels. She quickly learned what was expected of her. "If you were quiet, the rebels would say you were thinking of home and planning to escape," she says. "You would be punished." So the girls would talk cheerfully and sing Christian songs while doing their chores. At night, the commander would call for one of his wives to fetch him water. "If the man calls, you must go," Agnes says.

One night the commander called for Agnes. Then he raped her. He called for her many times after that. Agnes stopped getting her period. She cooked and cleaned and felt her belly grow. Still the beatings continued. She sang and danced, pretending she was happy. The beatings continued. She ached to see her mother. She worried about her brothers. The beatings continued. Agnes thought, *I will die in this place.*

She was almost five months pregnant and traveling with a group of rebels across Atiak-Moyo, a wide road near the Sudanese border, when she found her second chance to escape. "The food had run out, and we were going to another district to loot cooking oil, beans and cows," she says. A convoy of Ugandan army vehicles intersected their route. The commander told the group to spread out and cross the road at intervals. Agnes suddenly found herself alone. She turned and fled. Her heart pounding, she ran for more than an hour, crouched down in the grass by the side of the road, until she came upon some civilians selling coal and begged them for help. Her dress was torn and filthy. Her swollen feet were wrapped in rags. Hearing her story, the civilians took her to the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project in Gulu.

Opposite page, left to right: At the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project, Agnes visits her brother in sick bay; children born in captivity play at the center; girls recently escaped from the rebels do laundry; Agnes's counselor, Florence Lakor; Agnes, in orange dress, lines up for dinner.

Agnes's Homecoming

For years no one knew what to do with children who escaped from the rebels. Nobody wanted them. "In the beginning, the community would respond in anger," says Michael Oruni, who has worked with child soldiers since 1992. "Sometimes they would kill them because they had helped ravish their village. They had been traumatized in the bush, and now they were traumatized if they came home. There was no safe place."

Since the mid-1990's, local and international organizations have begun to address the needs of former abductees by providing them with extensive trauma counseling at one of seven centers in the region. The children typically stay at the centers for four to six weeks. "But we are not fixed on those dates," says Oruni, whose center, funded by World Vi- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 218]

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sion, has treated more than 9,000 children since 1995. "Instead, we look for signs that the child is healed."

When new abductees arrive, a bell rings at the rehabilitation center. Hundreds of children rush to the reception area to greet them. A truck pulls into the gate and a handful of abductees, fresh from captivity, pile out. They are given a basin with toiletries and fresh clothes to wear. "The clothes they have when they arrive were stolen during raids," explains counselor Florence Lakor. "They are part of life in the bush, so we burn them." The gesture is more than symbolic, she says. "The children cannot go back into their communities wearing stolen clothes."

Then the healing begins. "It is part of our culture to talk and confess," says Oruni. "That is how we help each other." And so, in addition to receiving art therapy and group therapy and taking part in soccer and traditional dance and music, the children are encouraged to talk. "People don't know how deeply hurt these children are," says Lakor. "Some have told me terrible stories of how the rebels would tie the arms and legs of a child and then force other children to beat him until his bones were exposed. One boy was made to bite another child to death." Sometimes a child at the center will recognize the child who abducted him. "We have to help them understand the other child's point of view, that the abductor was also abducted," Lakor says. "We teach them forgiveness and reconciliation. We help them to see that from here they have to have a new life."

Occasionally the children are so altered by their experience that they insist they want to go back to life in the bush. "They say they miss the killing," Lakor says quietly. This is the cruelest sin of their captivity: The children, abducted as innocents, themselves become tools of terror. Their survival depends on it. "To show they are good soldiers, the boys are expected to exhibit joy at killing," explains Wessells. "They get promoted up the ranks of the army, they get approval and eventually they can get a 'wife.' It's a process meant to create for these children a world in which killing is rewarded and weakness means death. Over time this can redefine their entire identity."

But there are other children who, like Agnes, risk their lives to leave the horrors of the bush behind them. As Agnes finishes the story of her escape, Oruni cheers her on. "Agnes, you are a strong woman!" he says, throwing his hands in the air. "Ah ha!" he says, praising the girl's courage. "You have not been broken down!"

But for all the strength Agnes mustered to run from the LRA, she now faces a new set of fears. "I am afraid my friends will mock me," she whispers. "I fear they will say, 'What a stupid girl, she got pregnant in the bush.' I am not happy about the baby in my womb. I don't know how I will care for it. I am having a baby without a father."

In the rehabilitation center, Agnes sleeps in a long dormitory-style tent with 20 other "child-mothers," girls who became pregnant or bore children in captivity. "Many of the child-mothers are so bitter about what has happened to them that they don't want to know the names of their children's fathers," says Lakor. Sometimes, she says, the girls even mistreat the children or refuse to have anything to do with them. "Many of these girls can't go home because their families fear that the rebels will come searching for them," she says. "So we have to spend a lot of time with these girls, giving them the skills to earn a living and to take care of their children, because without them, the children will have no one."

But Agnes has the support that many child-mothers don't have. A little more than a week after she arrived at the center, she was walking across the yard to get dinner when a car drove through the gate. Through the window Agnes saw a woman who looked like her mother. "But she was so small," says Agnes, so much thinner than she remembered. Agnes kept staring. The woman caught her eye. Agnes dropped her plate and ran to the car. Her mother jumped out. The two collapsed into each other's arms.

Agnes's mother had come to the center because she had heard that her eldest son was in the sick bay recovering from a gunshot wound. Agnes's father and sister were back home in Pajule, waiting for news. The mother did not know Agnes was also at the center. It was a miracle: Two of her three children had been rescued.

Agnes dragged her sleeping mat out of the child-mothers' tent and into a small traditional hut reserved for guests. She and her mother talked all night. And for the first time since she had been captured, Agnes allowed herself to weep.

"My mother said don't worry about the pregnancy," Agnes says now. "She said she will take care of the baby so I can go back to school. She was so encouraging. She put a new light in my life." Across the room, Oruni beams. "One word from the mother is worth one thousand words from the counselor," he says. "That is the original love." Agnes looks up at him and smiles.

Evening comes and the sky grows dark. At the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project, Michael Oruni closes up his office and prepares to go home. Agnes has left to visit her brother in sick bay, and then to rejoin the other child-mothers for the night. Outside, some boys are playing soccer in the twilight and giggling loudly, and a few young girls are singing. As I listen to these children engaged in the business of being children, I remember that they are the fortunate ones; despite their ordeal, they've made it back from the rebel camps alive. But thousands of others are still held captive in the bush. And not far from here, thousands more are marching toward shelters, searching for a safe place to sleep. □

Jeannine Amber is a contributing writer to this magazine.

For more information on the crisis in northern Uganda and to find out how you can help, contact any of these relief organizations: World Vision, (202) 572-6499, worldvision.org; Amnesty International, (800) AMNESTY, amnestyusa.org; Christian Children's Fund, (800) 776-6767, christianchildrensfund.org; UNICEF, (800) 4UNICEF, unicefusa.org.