

Special Report

What would the future hold for a child, abducted brutally at the age of six and led into the jungles to become a rebel? A straight answer to this question has been hard to come by as PAUL AMORU writes from Lamuo:-

This is the tragic and devastating tale of thousands of innocent children who got abducted during the over two decade war in northern Uganda and against their will were conscripted into the rebel ranks.

Mr Morish Guma, 21, was abducted in 1987 in the cold night. At his tender age of 6, Morish trekked through the bush to unknown destination.

He watched other children die or cut with a machete and left to die. He was later to spend 15 years in captivity.

At 21 now, he struggles to remember his childhood days, as he was virtually bred and shaped to be a rebel.

Brainwashed

These children faced hostility and death; they were defiled, raped and brainwashed. While thousands died, others escaped or got rescued and returned home.

But it's believed thousands are still stuck in the bush in captivity. Most of them, though still alive, have had their lives permanently ruined, while others experience unprecedented levels of trauma.

In spite of all these, Mr Guma now a resident of Madi Opei parish, shares with *Sunday Monitor* how his life has

been turned around for the better.

"I escaped from Sudan in 2002 but lived at Madi Opei camp until 2008. I am now a total orphan as my father died while I was still in the bush and my mother died last year," the former child soldier reveals.

Over the last three years, a near complete normalcy has returned in the north and several recovery and resettlement efforts have taken off.

New life

But a new lease of life for Mr Guma has come through a joint effort by the Northern Uganda Transition Initiative (NUTI), under USAID programme and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

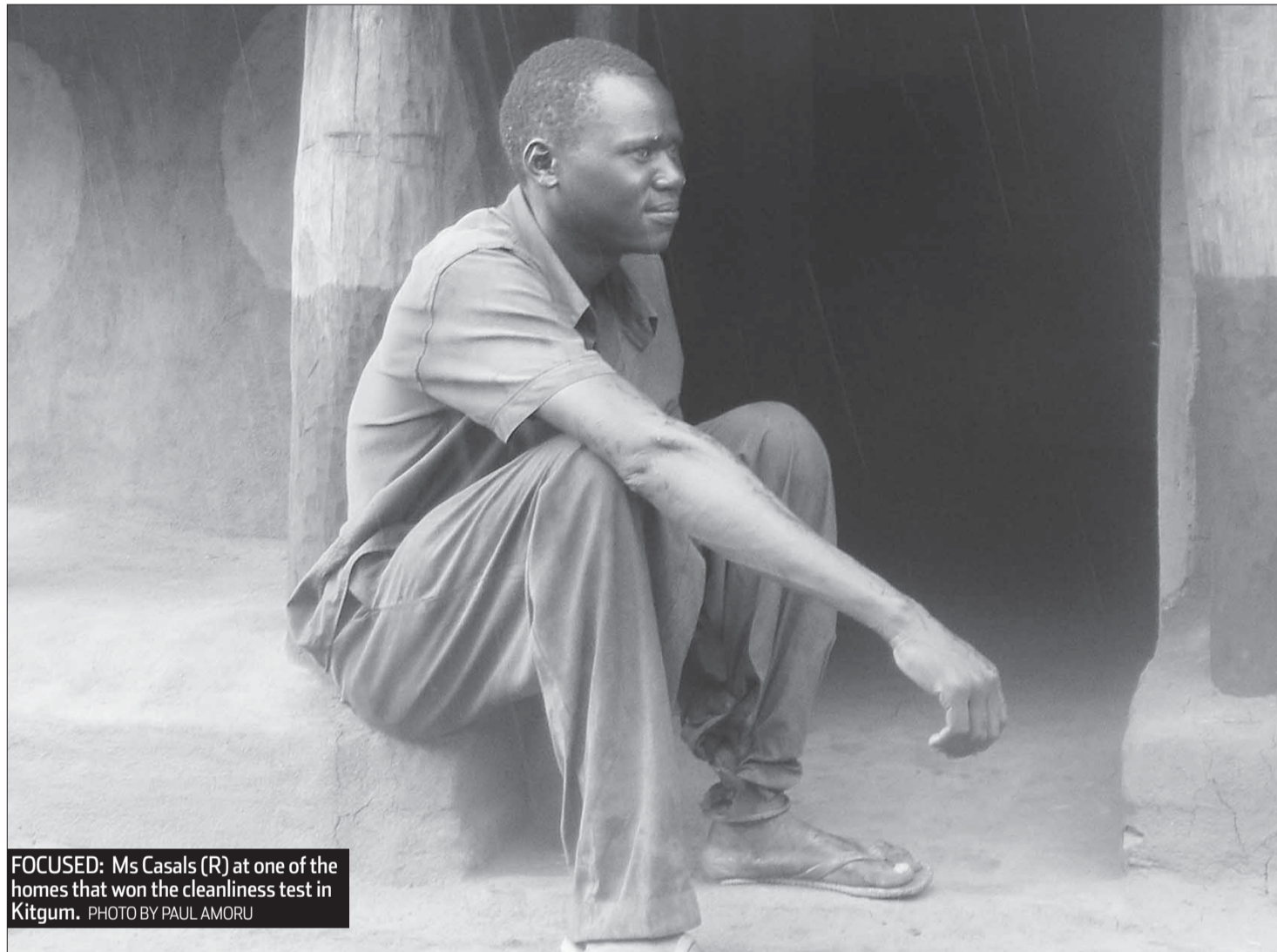
In 2008, NRC reached out to ex-child soldiers and other vulnerable children through the local council leaders where key life skills' training was offered to the selected youth.

"They (NRC) started training us how to live together and be united. We were trained to abandon the kind of life we lived in the bush," he recalls.

NRC implemented the training under their Youth Education Pact (YEP).

According to Mr Julius Tiboa, the NRC Head of Of-

There is life after



FOCUSED: Ms Casals (R) at one of the homes that won the cleanliness test in Kitgum. PHOTO BY PAUL AMORU

fice for Kitgum, Pader and Lamwo, YEP was designed to cater for youth aged 14-24 who missed the opportunity to go to school due the over two decade civil war in northern Uganda.

The courses in YEP centres include: carpentry and joinery, brick laying and concrete practice, tailoring, catering and agriculture.

"I chose BCP and received training for one year and that training has left

'I have gone through immense transformation, I can read and I have abandoned the rebel life'

Morish Guma
Former rebel

me transformed," adds Mr Guma.

After the training, Mr Guma and his colleagues formed Tic Ching Ber Youth Group, literally translated would mean vocational skills is the best.

"I am the chairman of this group and our hope is to reshape our future and be of great benefit to our communities," he says.

The group's members either trained in CJ or BCP where they hoped to find

work and building contracts to begin earning a living. It was at this point when NRC linked the group with NUTI and they were given a contract to build a community hall.

Getting employment

"We started building the community hall in November 2009 and completed it in March this year," he said.

The president of Casals and Associates, an American private company implementing the NUTI programme, Ms Beatriz Casals, was last week in Agoro Sub-county in Lamuo to commission the community hall.

The hall also has office space and a computer room.

According to Mr Guma, NUTI offered them over Shs14 million for their labour to build the community hall.

"Each of our members has so far earned Shs700,000 but about Shs4 million is yet to be paid to us by NUTI," he added. The youth group is comprised of 36 members.

This programme is the first of its kind in northern Uganda and the most successful intervention in the post conflict era.

"I have gone through immense transformation, I can read and I have abandoned the rebel life. I am also performing very well in my department. In the past few months I have managed to buy a cow,"



ACHIEVED: Mr Guma spent 15 years in the hands of LRA rebels. PHOTO BY PAUL AMORU

adds Mr Guma.

Ms Casals commended the youth for their effort and de-

termination to succeed and appealed for transparency among local leaders and gov-

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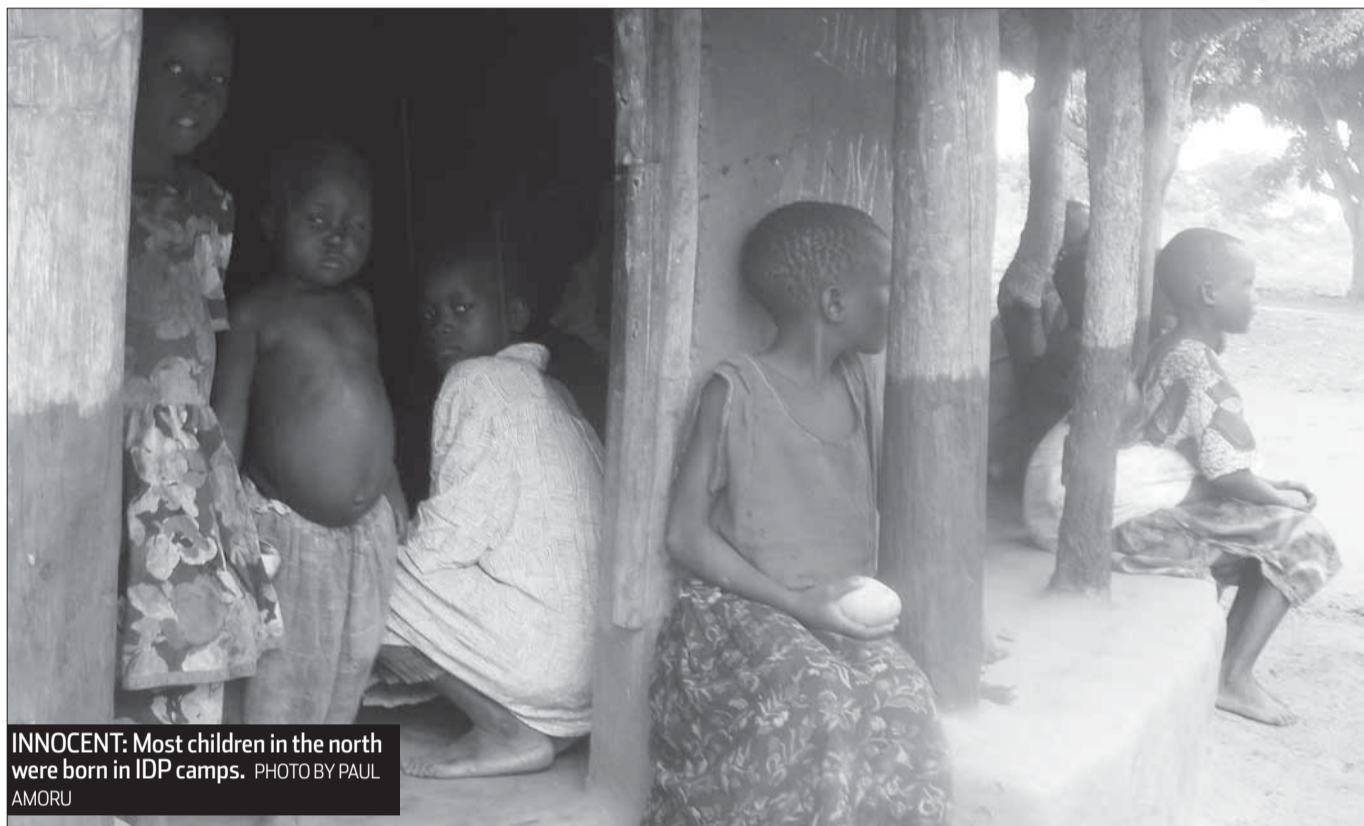
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years in the hands of Kony



INNOCENT: Most children in the north were born in IDP camps. PHOTO BY PAUL AMORU



HAPPY MOMENT: After years in an IDP camp, this lady can now blow her horn. PHOTO BY PAUL AMORU

country," she added.

NUTI chief of party in northern Uganda Amanda Willet reiterated that their work seeks to create community confidence in government work and aid the recovery projects.

"The idea is to send a message that some of these children who committed terrible crimes want to come back home and contribute back into their community and be accepted," Ms Willet observed.

She argues that NUTI is piloting the initiative in the hope that government or someone else will pick up the idea and also implement it.

NUTI under USAID received about Shs29 billion in May, 2008 to implement projects up to April 2010. All NUTI projects have been field driven with participation of all local leaders and stakeholders.

According to Ms Willet, NUTI had three specific objectives to pursue in northern Uganda.

Media focus

"We focused on media and information because the returning community needed accurate information. The second issue was to develop confidence in the local government and lastly to pursue truth and reconciliation activities like cleansing ceremonies descent burials for those who died at the peak of the work," she said.

USAID programmes have also invested heavily in infrastructural developments but Ms Willet says the biggest challenge is the maintenance of their projects since

NUTI is not a long term development partner.

Other recovery activities had been the promotion of household cleanliness where after several months of sensitisation a competition was launched in Mucwini sub-county to identify model homes.

The best homes in each parish received bicycles, followed by radios and the third best got mattresses.

Household were expected to have pit latrines, bath rooms, kitchen, sitting room, and bed room and rubbish pit among others.

The exercise is expected to help eradicate hygiene related illnesses like Hepatitis E which has been rampant in Kitgum District.

In spite of a lot of suffering and trauma in the war battered north, the story of Mr Guma is one that gives hope and strength to millions of children affected by war in the north.

The head of NRC says upon completion, youth like Mr Guma are supported with startup kits to practice the knowledge they gained from the centres.

"Linking them up to construct the community hall in Agoro and make school desks is one of the way to support the youth become self reliant," Mr Tiboa said.

NRC selected child headed houses, youth with disabilities, child mothers, single mothers and former child soldiers to benefit from the training.

If you have an interesting story to tell about former child soldiers email us on editorial@monitor.co.ug

Guma tells his story

I have no happy childhood experience to remember or talk about. Mine has been a sad story of pain, dejection and hopelessness.

I still struggle to choke back tears every time I remember the day LRA rebels raided our village and herded us into the jungles to become rebels.

It was 1987 but I cannot remember the particular day but all I remember is that it was a terrifying night.

I was later to spend 15 years in captivity, training to kill and loot for survival. Before my escape in 2002 from Sudan, I had climbed the rebel ranks to the level of 'Lafwony' (meaning teacher in literal translation).

The army helped me trace my village in Madi Opei but everyone was still living in the camp.

So I joined the camp life at Madi Opei from 2002 up to 2008. My hope for a better future or a new life from a rebel to a civilian was gone.

Rescue comes in

That is when the Norwegian Refugee Council in Kitgum came to our rescue.

They used the local council leadership in the camp to identify former child soldiers, child mothers and child headed families for training in life skills. So I was identified among this group.

NRC started training us how to unite and work as a team, how we should love the community and be discipline to aid our reintegration.

They asked us to abandon the kind of life we were used

to in the bush and after several months, they started teaching us vocational skills.

NRC had four training departments including building, tailoring, and carpentry and catering, and we were free to join any of them.

I joined building and received training for one year. After this as members of BCP and CJ we formed Tic Cing Ber Youth Group and we were so lucky that NRC connected us to NUTI which awarded us a contract to build a community hall at Madi Opei in November 2009.

We finished building the hall in March this year and our members are doing so well. They elected me their chairman. Each of our 36 members have so far got Shs700,000 from the project but we are still expecting Shs4 million balance yet to be paid by NUTI.

Literacy

This experience has completely transformed my life. I can now read, I have been accepted within my community and I recently bought a cow for myself.

This is my story, thought I still struggle with a lot of issues like the death of my father who died when I was still in captivity and also my mother whom I returned and found alive but unfortunately, she fell sick last year and died, leaving me a total orphan.

I wanted both of them to be around and witness my life transformation. But we are grateful to NRC and NUTI for giving us hope and a chance to live a gain productive life.

ernment officials in their recovery efforts.

"The last thing I want to tell

you is transparency. It helps development and growth of our communities and the