

From child soldier to fighter for human rights

Agnes Ocitti's harrowing experience inspired her to help others, writes **Hanna Ingber Win**

AGNES OCITTI was 13 when she was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army to serve as a child soldier in northern Uganda. During her first week, a small girl about 10 years old tried to escape. The rebel army, seizing the opportunity to make an example out of the child, forced Agnes and her friends to kill her.

"We were told to club her," Agnes says, her usually steady, confident voice becoming weak and shaky. "We clubbed her. All of us."

Agnes says she felt horrible, but she had no option.

"I never imagined myself doing such a thing, and there I was doing it. I still pray for her up to now."

Agnes, now 26 and a beautiful, articulate human rights lawyer, was in Cape Town last weekend to introduce a photo exhibition on LRA soldiers and share her experience as a child soldier.

A World Development Report estimates that Agnes is one of 66 000 children and youth under the age of 18 who have been abducted by the LRA in the last two decades.

The LRA, a Christian guerrilla army formed in 1987, is led by Joseph Kony, who says he wants to rule Uganda according to the Ten Commandments. The LRA has been at war against the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) for two decades, and is accused of gross human rights violations, including the killing, mutilation, torture, rape, sexual slavery and abduction of tens of thousands of people.

In 2003, UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, Jan Egeland, told the BBC: "I cannot find any other part of the world that is having an emergency on the scale of Uganda, that is getting such little international attention."

The UPDF has also been accused of arbitrary detention, rape and torture.

Agnes grew up in Kitgum, in northern Uganda. Her father is a teacher and her mother a housewife. One of nine children, she says she comes from a strong family with a deep religious faith. Agnes attended St Mary's College, a Catholic boarding school in Aboke.

In November 1996, LRA rebels attacked the school in the middle of the night and kidnapped 139 girls.

The next morning Sister Rachele and a teacher attempted to make a rare rescue. They followed the trace of the girls, found them and then tried to plead with the soldiers to have them released.

The rebels agreed to release 109 girls and keep 30. One by one, the LRA picked who could return with Sister Rachele and who must stay.

"They sat all of us together, and they just pointed - 'You, what is your name? Where do you come from? Get up and go to this side!'," Agnes explains.

Agnes and the 29 others eventually realised they were being chosen to stay.

"Most of us broke down crying and pleading for Sister to do something, but she couldn't do anything," Agnes says. "She was also crying and continuing to plead. The rebel

commander became so harsh and told her: 'If you don't want to leave with the 109, we are going to keep all of them.' So Sister had to leave."

Agnes spent three months as a child soldier, witnessing killings and being beaten many times.

Her group moved from village to village every day to avoid the UPDF. The rebels would come into a village to loot the homes for food and clothing, and the people would flee.

"If they get you, they kill you. If they get you, they rape you, if you are a woman, abduct you, things like that," Agnes says. "If you hear that the rebels are coming, you have to run for your life."

Agnes says she saw herself as a captive, but the villagers saw her as a rebel.

Children were trained how to use guns in Sudan. Agnes was not with the LRA long enough to be taken to Sudan. She therefore did not receive official training in shooting, but she was taught by a guard how to use a gun. She mostly acted as a porter, carrying supplies for the group.

Unicef defines a child soldier as any child under the age of 18 who is part of any kind of armed group in any capacity, including children "recruited for forced sexual purposes" and "cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members".

At night, Agnes slept in a tent with four other girls from St Mary's and two guards, Margaret, who was a year older than Agnes, and Lucy, who was in her 20s. Agnes says she would chat with the guards and showed them respect "because I had no option".

When Agnes speaks about her experience, she does not reveal a hint of self-pity. She says she was one of the lucky ones. She never stepped on a landmine and lost a limb. She was never forced to kill her family members. Unlike most of her friends, she was never raped.

Agnes says she was also lucky because she did not believe the propaganda of the rebel leaders. The rebels performed rituals on the young captives and told them that a spirit guided Kony, Agnes says. The rebels told the girls that if they tried to escape, the spirit would lead them around in a circle, and they would end up back with the group.

"I never believed in what the rebels say," Agnes says. "I knew one day I would escape. I would find my way back home."

She attributes her resistance to manipulation to her Christian upbringing and strong family.

Most of the children did not try to escape, she says, because they believed in the spirit. They also feared that if they escaped the rebels would kill them and their family.

Other children did not escape because the rebels had already forced them to kill their family or community members, and they knew they would not be accepted at home if they returned, Agnes says.

"For me, I was privileged that I was abducted from a school," she says. The rebels did not know where her family lived.

On January 6, 1997, one of the



rebels told Agnes that she was to be given to a man the following day to be his wife.

"I knew this was going to destroy me as Agnes and destroy me as a woman," she says. "It gave me the guts to sacrifice life."

The next day Agnes and her friend Ester hid together during a UPDF helicopter attack. After it left, they decided to flee. They escaped the rebels by travelling about 10 kilometres to a military detachment, where they found safety.

Agnes returned to her family and her school, where she received counselling. She says she was able to overcome the trauma of being abducted because of the love of her family and her faith.

She looks at her experience as a point of transformation in her life as it inspired her to work for others.

"I developed a desire to work for humanity," she says. "It was painful what I went through - the after generation should not experience what

I went through."

She decided she wanted to help others by becoming a lawyer. She followed through on her dream and graduated from Makerere University with a law degree in 2005.

Agnes completed an internship at the International Criminal Court at The Hague in March.

She now works as a senior protection officer at the Association of Volunteers in International Service (Avsi), an Italian-funded non-governmental organisation that works in northern Uganda to monitor human rights issues.

The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in 2005 against Kony and four other rebel leaders. They are charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes, including murder, sexual enslavement and conscripting child soldiers.

The LRA and Ugandan government signed a truce in August 2006 and are currently engaged in peace

talks. Children remain missing, but the abductions have stopped. As they negotiate, 1.3 million Ugandans live in internally displaced person camps in northern Uganda, according to Human Rights Watch.

Agnes says almost every family is directly affected by the conflict. In her family, she, her brother and step-brother were all abducted and escaped. Her step-brother was later caught and killed.

With Avsi, Agnes works to improve the lives of people living in the camps. The protected areas were started in 1996 to provide a safe haven for people fleeing the rebels.

Because they cannot maintain their agricultural lifestyle, they have become dependent on foreign aid and are living in abject poverty, Agnes says. She says they cannot afford to send their children to school, buy food or get medical care.

When apartheid ended and other countries opened their doors to South Africans, photographer Eric



UNVEILING THE TRUTH: A Lord's Resistance Army soldier, far left. Agnes Ocitti, left, who was abducted by the LRA when she was 13, but managed to escape and is now a human rights lawyer. Ugandan children on their nightly walk to try to find places of safety to avoid being kidnapped by the LRA, above. These pictures were taken by Eric Miller, right, the South African photographer who travelled to Uganda in 1997 to learn first-hand about the country. His photographic exhibition, *Rebel Chic*, runs until July 31 at the new ART Gallery in the Colosseum.



Miller decided to travel around Africa to learn firsthand about the continent and find stories to tell. In 1997, he travelled to Uganda to meet Sister Rachele.

There he found gold: Agnes. "I'm inspired by people who are able to do extraordinary things despite what they've gone through," he says. "Agnes was a prime example of exactly that kind of person."

Eric photographed Agnes and Sister Rachele and, with another journalist, Jesper Strudsholm, documented their story in *Reality Bites: An African Decade*, a collection of essays about inspirational people in Africa that was published in 2004.

Eric has been back to Uganda and southern Sudan about eight times over the past 10 years.

He has done stories on the IDP camps and on the so-called night children, who used to walk up to 20km each night to find safety in towns. Now that the peace process is under way, there is no longer a need

for the nightly hikes. "Hundreds of children hiking for hours a day, in and out of safe zones to avoid being kidnapped, to avoid being abducted into Sudan," Eric explains. "It was indicative of the level of fear that had been instilled in the region."

Last November, Eric was in Sudan and had the opportunity to join Egeland and a UN delegation when they went to a UN-appointed safe zone for the LRA to meet with Kony.

It was a chance to finally see the man and his infamous soldiers who had dominated so many of Eric's stories, he says. "To see them was quite a powerful experience - to see and put faces to this army which has terrorised so many people."

There were a group of LRA soldiers and a group of Sudanese soldiers, who were there to protect and support the UN delegation. The two groups stood around, waiting for Kony to arrive. Eric and the UN delegation had to leave by 4pm.

They waited and waited. Kony was concerned about the ICC warrants and worried he might be arrested, Eric says, so he was reluctant to make an appearance.

Finally, Kony swept in and had a rushed meeting with Egeland. The media had two minutes to ask him questions and photograph him.

A BBC journalist asked Kony about the abducted children and injured people he had with him, who were forced against their will, Eric explains. Kony responded that everyone was there voluntarily.

"He blankly denied it," Eric says. While Eric was waiting for the rebel leader to arrive, he watched the soldiers.

"I spent the time photographing the soldiers standing around waiting, and at a point it struck me how weird and eerie the whole scenario was with the way they were dressed and the way they behaved," he says.

The soldiers, notorious for their brutality, refused to talk or engage

with the journalists. Yet interspersed with their camouflage uniforms and bandoliers of bullets were brightly coloured accessories and hints of fashion.

Eric created an exhibition, called *Rebel Chic*, out of those photographs. It opened at the new ART Gallery in the Colosseum in Cape Town on Saturday. The photographs will be on display until July 31.

The exhibition juxtaposes the photographs of the soldiers, dressed in uniform with hints of colour and style, with captions describing the LRA and its brutality. The captions contextualise the photographs, Eric says. "So you don't look at the picture and think, 'What a lovely looking bunch of guys' and not understand exactly what they have done."

Burma has the world's highest number of child soldiers with as many as 70 000 children serving in the national army, according to Human Rights Watch, which has documented the widespread recruitment of young boys. Representatives from 58 countries met in Paris in February to show their political and legal commitment to ending the recruitment of child soldiers.

At the conference, Unicef announced the Paris Principles, guidelines for ending the use of child soldiers and protecting children from being conscripted, according to a press statement from the event.

The conference also established that political and legal efforts must co-exist with social programmes that tackle the root causes of recruitment, it stated.

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Unicef bid to stop use of child soldiers

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THERE are currently about 300 000 children and youth under the age of 18 serving as child soldiers in 30 countries around the world, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef).

They serve as combatants, cooks, messengers, porters and sex slaves.

"The situation is still dire. Hundreds of thousands of children are still living in misery due to association with armed groups and forces," Save the Children wrote in a statement in February.

In some cases children are abducted and forced to serve against their will.

In other instances, they voluntarily enlist in an attempt to escape poverty and secure food and survival.

Conflict may also disrupt education, closing schools and leaving children vulnerable to armed groups, according to human rights organisations.

"Children who are used as soldiers are robbed of their childhood and are often subjected to extreme brutality.

"Stories abound of children who are drugged before being sent out to fight and forced to commit atrocities against their own families as a way to destroy family and communal ties," states the Guide to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, produced by Unicef and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

Hot spots in the recruitment of child soldiers are Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda, according to Save the Children.

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