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Reflections on Kony 2012

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Shortly after I graduated from law school, I was commissioned by Human Rights Watch to do a report on Ugandan children abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army.

In spring 1997, few people outside Uganda had heard of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA arose in the late 1980s out of the ashes of Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement, and over the next decade, LRA raids killed thousands of villagers in Northern Uganda. Hundreds of thousands were displaced, and an estimated 10,000 children were forcibly abducted by the LRA and brutally coerced into becoming killers, sex slaves or both. But in the spring of 1997, the LRA had yet to make CNN.

Even at Human Rights Watch, an organization institutionally committed to championing the forgotten, most people knew nothing about the conflict: it was a low-intensity, low tech war of filth and grief and blood, and it was all happening in a distant and obscure corner of distant and strategically insignificant country. It didn’t map onto anything familiar. When a Human Rights Watch colleague and I arrived in the Ugandan town of Gulu in May 1997, we had only the vaguest understanding of the what we were getting into. We knew that “Christian fundamentalist” rebels were abducting children, but we had no notion of what this meant. We had received no special training on operating in a conflict zone, and no special training on working with severely traumatized children. We were about as unprepared as it is possible to be.

Nevertheless, I found myself, in May 1997, dropped off in a grass airfield in what turned out to be a war zone. The tiny, rattling plane that had delivered us promptly flew off again with its remaining cargo: one motorcycle, one nun, and several chickens. A solitary cow, grazing at the airfield’s edge, didn’t even look up as it wheezed overhead.

The town of Gulu is little more than a bleak, sprawling mess of thatch-roofed huts and crumbling cinderblock, huddled near Uganda’s northernmost tip. Everything in Gulu spoke of catastrophe: half the huts we saw had their roofs burned off, and the dingy hotel we were staying in had been burnt half to the ground a few days earlier. Our questions about how the fire had started (rebels? arson? a kitchen mishap?) met with indifferent shrugs from the remaining staff. Small bugs swam through the beans and rice offered up by the hotel kitchen. Just outside the
courtyard where we ate, a ragged woman nursed a baby with a painfully distended belly, occasionally holding the baby up in silent display.

Even with all these prognostications of misery, we were unprepared for what we encountered over the following days. And even fifteen years later, it’s difficult to write about it: any description seems hopelessly inadequate. So I won’t summarize – instead, I’ll quote one of the children we interviewed:

Me and my brothers and cousins were playing football. Five rebels came and took all six of us, my three brothers, two cousins and myself. They tied us with ropes around our waists and gave us heavy loads to carry. [They led us to a larger group.] There were about eighty rebels and fifty abductees in the group. At night, we stopped to rest, and they beat us—they used a bicycle chain to beat us. The next morning we came to the government soldiers when we were walking. They were firing at us. We ran with the luggage.

My eldest brother escaped but the rebels caught him and they killed him. They beat him on the back of the head with a club. I watched him being killed. His tipu (spirit) came to me and covered me and told me, "Today, I am dead."

      . . . . My other two brothers and I were allowed to stay together but we were told that if any of us escaped, one of us would be killed. ¹

Here’s another child’s account:

On the third day [after our abduction] a little girl tried to escape, and they made us kill her... they kicked her and jumped on her, and they made us each beat her at least once with the big pieces of wood. They said, "You must beat and beat and beat her." She was bleeding from the mouth. Then she died.

And here’s one more:

One boy tried to escape, but he was caught.... then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick... They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, "Why are you doing this?" I said I had no choice. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms.

Today, these stories from LRA victims are familiar—we’ve heard a lot of such stories lately. But for me-- an idealistic young American lawyer in 1997 –Gulu was a terrible shock. I had never had an up-close and personal view of brutality or war. My foreign travel had been

¹ This and other quotes from Ugandan children are taken from the report I wrote for Human Rights Watch, The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda (1997), available at http://www.hrw.org/reports97/uganda/. Quotes from Matthew Lukwena are also from that report, as is part of Sister Rachelle’s story.
largely limited to prosperous Western Europe. Like every American, I had learned about the Holocaust as a child, and in my early twenties, I had been shaken by headlines about Bosnia and Rwanda. But these places were far away, and the news touched me only superficially.

Gulu was different. It was one thing to scan grim black and white headlines over morning coffee; it was another thing altogether to watch a child weeping over the atrocities she had been forced to commit.

Back in the US after our field research in Uganda, my Human Rights Watch colleague and I hardly slept. How could we sleep, when in Uganda children were being forced to hack other children to death? I drafted our report in a mad rush, and could hardly bear the delay while it went through the internal editing process. We wrote press releases and lined up meetings with reporters, State department officials and congressional aides. We even did the unthinkable: we collaborated with a team of equally stunned Amnesty researchers – we had run into them over drinks in Kampala-- and agreed to jointly release both organizations’ reports. Professional rivalries, we all agreed, were trivial, All that mattered was getting the word out. People needed to know what was happening in Uganda. The LRA had to be stopped.

And we did get the word out. The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times ran long stories,\(^2\) and the New York Times published an editorial,\(^3\) all citing our report. CNN sent Christianne Amanpour to Uganda to interview children who had escaped from the LRA. On a follow-up advocacy trip to Uganda, we met with the American Ambassador, who cried as she read our report. In Washington, we met with John Prendergast—then a White House aide on the NSC staff. He seemed visibly moved, and vowed to do everything he could. Hillary Clinton, then the First Lady, wrote an op-ed about the LRA, and Secretary of State Madeline Albright travelled to Gulu,\(^4\) where she was photographed with tears on her cheeks, hugging a Ugandan child. Pretty much everyone who read our report cried.

It was all very gratifying. Remember, in those days the internet was still in its infancy. There was no facebook, no blogs and no twitter: even email was a relatively new-fangled innovation. By the standards of 1997, our advocacy campaign was a triumphant success.

There was only one problem. Nothing changed – nothing at all.

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I thought about all this last year, when “Kony 2012” made its rip-roaring way across the internet. The moral of both our 1997 efforts and Kony 2012, I suppose, is that even if you can get the Secretary of State to shed tears—or even if you can make a video go viral until every college student in America has watched it—you may not have accomplished much. Everyone will have a good cry, and then everyone will go onto something else. The Secretary of State will move along to the next crisis; the college kids will go out for a beer or decide to take a yoga class.

Over the course of my adult life, I’ve walked on picket lines and protest marches, written press releases and lobbied bureaucrats. I’ve written books, law review articles, and op-eds by the score. I’ve been a consultant for “elite” advocacy NGOs like Human Rights Watch and worked with membership organizations like Amnesty International. I’ve worked for foundations and given away rich people’s money, and I’ve been a fellow at think tanks and taken rich people’s money (both are actually pretty fun). I’ve been a government insider, with stints at both the State Department (1999-2000) and the Defense Department (2009-2011). In each job, I worked on atrocity prevention issues in one way or another. And at the end of it all, I still don’t know very much about what works and what doesn’t.

Every approach and every role presents its problems.

Social movements? Easily dismissed as a bunch of scruffy kids, noisy, sloppy, and careless with the facts. Idealism is cheap, and can be fit in between yoga class and parties. Nuances get lost. There’s no context. Sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Membership organizations like Amnesty? Same problems as above. Membership organizations can be hijacked by small groups of ill-informed members with too much time on their hands, often to the detriment of their professionalism (and sometimes their integrity). Lots of time screaming and doing the internet equivalent thereof; not much time building constructive solutions.

Elite NGOs and think tanks? You knock yourself out writing long, detailed and meticulously documented reports and then you hand them to your friends at the State Department, who won’t read them, because they’re too busy going to meetings and clearing memos.

Law review articles? Worse. Only about fifteen people are going to read this, and most of them are on the Journal’s staff. Okay, sixteen people: my mother will read this too. (Hi, Mom!) Maybe I exaggerate, but you understand the problem. In specialized academic journals, a small group of specialists speaks to each other, too often in language no non-specialist could hope to comprehend.

Op-eds? Flimsy bits of ephemera, here today, irrelevant tomorrow. They get more readers than think tank reports or law review articles, but most of those readers are skimming and will have forgotten what you said by lunchtime. If you write op eds and you get lucky and you don’t
mind making yourself available at a moment’s notice, you can go on TV, too, and get to make a twenty second statement.

   Government work? Unless you’re at cabinet level—and sometimes even then—it’s hard to make big changes to US policy. Working the bureaucracy is like swimming in molasses. Everything takes forever, and policy is sticky. Oh, yes, and you don’t have time to read those long reports your think tank and NGO friends keep giving you.

   All the same. When I’m feeling cynical, I often think of two people I met in Uganda, fifteen years ago: a Ugandan physician and an Italian nun. Let me tell you their stories.

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Matthew Lukwena

   Matthew Lukwena was a doctor who spent virtually all of his professional life at St. Mary’s Hospital in Gulu. He grew up poor in the neighboring district of Kitgum, went to school and studied hard. Against all the odds, he made it to medical school at Makerere University in Kampala. Then he returned to Gulu, a few miles from his boyhood home. In 1989, when LRA rebels tried to kidnap some nuns from the hospital, Matthew insisted they take him away instead. They did. They walked him through the bush for days, but eventually—inexplicably—they let him go.

   Most people with Matthew’s credentials and skills would have abandoned Gulu after that, but Matthew stayed on. He struggled to provide medical care to a population suffering from both poverty and war, and he turned St. Mary’s Hospital into a safe haven for “night commuters”: rural villagers who left their homes each evening to spend the night in the relative safety of Gulu, where LRA raids were less frequent. Each night, thousands of people would trudge quietly into the walled courtyard at St. Mary’s, hauling sleeping mats and food. Each night, Matthew would make the rounds of the courtyard, offering water and medical care.

   To the villagers, Matthew Lukwena was a hero, a man of courage and goodness. As he walked through the camp of the night commuters, people would reach out their arms to touch him, as if his presence could keep them safe.

   When I visited St. Mary’s in 1997, Matthew walked me around the overcrowded hospital, pointing out the patients sleeping on the floor and in the hallways, the nearly empty medicine stockrooms, the bodies waiting in the morgue. Finally, he offered me a chair in his bleak, cinderblock office—nothing in it but a desk, and a bookshelf, and a few folding chairs. He sat down, rested his elbows on his desk, and then slumped down with his head in his hands.

   “The problem,” he said tiredly, “is that we don’t see an end to the problem. When you have a problem and you think it’s coming to an end, then you say, let’s persevere. But I really don’t see how this is going to end. I foresee unlimited suffering.”
His eyes were wet. (I told you: Everyone cried. Whether you were a doctor in Gulu or the US Secretary of State, it seemed impossible to think about the LRA and not cry).

“The last two years have been the worst in ten years. We cannot do anything, we cannot go outside in the community, we cannot do our work. It has to stop, it must stop…. “ His voice trailed off. When he continued, he was almost angry. “When you are in the medical field, you are trained always to look for solutions. But I cannot see one here. There is no point to my work. I can do nothing.”

I listened and scribbled in my notebook, embarrassed to witness so much raw emotion from a stranger. It was late afternoon, and outside in the courtyard, the night commuters were lighting their cooking fires, preparing for darkness. Matthew kept talking, in a low monotone: He did not know how to keep his own children safe; he had to shuttle them from relative to relative to protect them from rebel abduction. There was no truly safe place in Northern Uganda. He wrung his hands, massaged his temples, fidgeted miserably with his pen. From time to time he blinked the tears from his eyes and looked up at me blankly.

Finally, a little ashamed, I asked him what seemed like the obvious question to ask an educated professional living in Gulu in 1997: “Have you ever thought of leaving?”

He looked startled. “Leave? Where would I go?”

The Lord’s Resistance Army made life in Gulu so hard that when Ebola broke out there a few years after my first visit, many locals counted it as a lucky break. True, Ebola took the lives of thirty-six people-- but the Ebola outbreak also brought the outside world to Gulu, in the form of an influx of unusually well-behaved Ugandan government troops, international aid organizations, journalists, and cable news crews. For a few weeks in the fall of 2000, Gulu made CNN nearly every day. During those same few weeks, there were no attacks on Gulu by LRA rebels.

For a short time—until the mobile medical units were packed up, the cable crews went home, and the rebels returned-- farmers could harvest crops, people could walk around at night, and children could sleep in their homes rather than in school and hospital compounds. Death by hemorrhagic fever was a risk— but to many, it was no worse than the risk of being hacked to pieces by machetes or clubbed to death with heavy sticks.

When Ebola came to Gulu in 2000, it was Matthew Lukwena who first identified the disease and reported it to national and then international authorities. Twelve of his nurses died helping Ebola patients, and others quit for fear of contracting the disease themselves, but Matthew Lukwena stayed and continued to tend his patients. The outbreak was slowly brought under control, thanks in large part to his efforts. In late November, he fell ill himself. On December 5, he died, the Ebola outbreak’s last victim.
Sister Rachelle

On the night of October 9, 1996, Sister Rachelle Fassera was fast asleep when she heard the screaming. As a teacher at a Catholic girls’ boarding school in the Ugandan town of Aboke, she had eaten with “her girls,” presided over their evening study period, and seen them safely off to bed. Now, hearing screams, she jumped up and ran for the door.

But the door had been blocked from the outside, and it took Sister Rachelle and several other nuns over an hour to escape. When they made it out, they ran to the dormitories, where some hysterical younger girls told them that the LRA rebels had come and taken away scores of girls in a mass abduction. The girls who remained were the fortunate ones: they had hidden in cupboards and under beds, avoiding the rebels’ notice.

At this point, Sister Rachelle’s fellow nuns proposed radioing the nearest Ugandan army post to ask for instructions, but Sister Rachelle would hear none of this: the Army, she feared (probably rightly, given its record) would either do nothing or, worse, would send out a unit that would end up killing the hostages alongside the rebels. “I’ll go get our girls myself,” she told her incredulous colleagues.

And she did. Along with John, the school handyman, she set out into the bush. The trail wasn’t hard to follow: like modern-day Hansels and Gretels, the girls had left a trail of discarded items: scraps of paper, candy wrappers, the contents of their pockets. She and John tramped through the bush, and finally, around sun-up, they caught up with the rebel party.

Sister Rachelle walked right up to the rebel commander, a young man in his twenties, and demanded that he release her girls immediately.

The commander was used to terrified, cringing villagers. Sister Rachelle was a birdlike little woman with thick glasses, her hair pulled severely back, and she seemed completely unabashed. Who was this nun?

Flummoxed, he said, “Sister, I cannot let these girls go. I must bring these girls back with me.”

But Sister Rachelle wouldn’t take no for an answer. Ignoring the dozens of armed rebels, she told the commander he should be ashamed of himself. A big strong man, kidnapping young girls who only wanted to go to school and get an education so they could make their country better!

The rebel commander could have killed her, but instead, he proposed a compromise.
“Sister, I will pick the prettiest, strongest girls and take them with me. You may take the others back.”

Sister Rachelle refused the deal, but by now the commander was growing irritated by the delay. “Sister, you can take back one hundred girls, but I will take the others with me. If you do not want to leave with a hundred girls, I will kill you, and take them all with me.”

Was there really a choice? The commander walked through the terrified ranks of schoolgirls, picking those he wanted to take back with him and pulling them aside. Then, shrugging magnanimously, he said, “Sister, you go now and take these girls back to their school.”

When Sister Rachelle told me about her trek into the bush to retrieve her kidnapped charges, she was animated, re-enacting the scene with Italian flair (like all the nuns at the school, she was from Italy.) But when she started to describe the moment she began to lead the hundred freed girls away from the rebels, something in her voice shifted. She still gesticulated dramatically, but all the energy was gone.

“Ah! So I kissed each of my girls who were going with the rebels, and they were crying.” Her voice cracked. “The commander was saying, ‘Sister, you must leave us now!’ and my girls, they were saying, ‘Sister, don’t leave me!’ ‘Sister, what about my asthma?’ ‘Sister, please stay with us, I am frightened!’ ‘Sister, my father will not survive this!’ ‘Sister, please, please take me with you!’”

By the end of her story, Sister Rachelle was sobbing. She looked up at me. “I dream each night of those girls, their voices begging me not to leave them. But I left them. I do not see how God can ever forgive me for this.”

I’m an atheist, the child and grandchild and great grandchild of atheists. My ancestors turned their backs on Catholicism, Judaism and Protestantism. If they had been Hindus or Muslims I’m sure they would have managed to reject those faiths, too. So I was probably about the worst person in the world to comfort a weeping nun.

I tried anyway, patting Sister Rachelle’s shoulder awkwardly. “Sister,” I said, “God knows no one could have done more than you did.”

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I don’t know why some things work and some things don’t, why mass movements sometimes leave lasting impressions and sometimes simply fade away. But whenever I’m tempted to just declare the lost causes lost for good, to buy a nice car and take a nice vacation and leave all the crying people behind, I think of Matthew Lukwena and Sister Rachelle. And a dozen other people, too: Angelina Atyam, whose daughter was abducted by the LRA but who turned her grief into activist energy, becoming a globally respected spokeswoman for the LRA’s
victims. Ponsiano Ochero, the unfailingly gentle Ugandan UNICEF worker who drove us everywhere and absorbed everyone else’s pain without complaint. (He later died of AIDS). And of course, I think of all those children who shared their stories with us, many of whom, against all the odds, retained the ability to laugh and to hope.

In the end, I don’t think there is any simple recipe for preventing or stopping atrocities. Atrocities don’t arise out of a vacuum; they are products of particular places and people with particular histories, particular motives, and particular incentives. The LRA is a paradigmatic example. It’s impossible to understand the LRA without knowing something about British colonial policy in Uganda and the role of the Acholi people in the bloody Ugandan civil wars of Milton Abote and Idi Amin, and without knowing something of indigenous Acholi religious beliefs and the Christian millenarian overlay given them by Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement. You also need to understand Yoweri Museveni’s regional ambitions and his relationship with the late South Sudanese rebel leader John Garang, and you need to understand Omar al Bashir’s government in Khartoum and its determination to bring the South Sudanese to heel.

Of course, even if you understand all these things, and a whole lot more, the atrocities of the Lord’s Resistance Army still won’t really make sense.

I’ve come to believe, however, that this is not so terrible. The producers of Kony 2012 undoubtedly oversimplified a complex problem, but everyone oversimplifies the LRA, government and NGOs alike, right along with the Kony 2012 producers. We oversimplify because otherwise we can make no sense of the conflict. If we didn’t oversimplify, we’d be paralyzed by confusion, and we wouldn’t do anything or demand that governments do anything.

And that would be unconscionable. The roots and long-term solutions to atrocity situations are complex, and every mental model we make to understand them inevitably comes up short, but atrocities themselves are simple. What could be simpler than slashing someone with a machete? -- and what could be simpler than demanding that the atrocities end?

I don’t know what works and what doesn’t, which set of oversimplifications leads to which responses. But in the case of the LRA, there has been some small progress over the years. It has been agonizingly, shamefully slow. Nonetheless, fifteen years of many different kinds of efforts from many different kinds of people has left LRA leaders fearful and on the run. Some experts believe that as few as thirty or forty active LRA fighters remain. They are hunted wherever they go: US Special Forces soldiers are working with the Ugandan military to capture

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5 See generally The Scars of Death, and see also Rosa Ehrenreich, The Stories We Must Tell: Ugandan Children and the Atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army, 45-1 AFRICA TODAY 79 (1998).
or kill Kony and his remaining adherents. If they’re captured, senior LRA fighters will go on trial at the Hague.

The LRA can still bring terror to isolated villagers, but it’s nothing like what it was fifteen years or even three years ago. Some of that is surely due to the combined efforts of all those thousands of people who have, over the years, been moved and horrified by what they’ve read and seen.

I’d like to think that even our failures sometimes lead us forward. The atrocities of the LRA are so egregious, and our collective failure to stop them so shaming, that they helped spark an unprecedented US government-wide effort to improve national atrocity prevention efforts. At the Defense Department, I helped launch an effort to integrate atrocity prevention into long-term military planning. At State and USAID, other colleagues launched similar efforts, and last spring they came together in the presidentially-mandated creation of an Atrocities Prevention Board. This won’t be anything close to a panacea, but it’s another small step.

I can’t think of any better way to close than by citing the words of another Ugandan child. Back in 1997, my Human Rights Watch colleague and I asked dozens of schoolchildren at St Mary’s School to write down anything they wanted to tell us—anything they wanted Human Rights Watch to know. Here’s a passage from one of those letters:

“From my experience since I was ten years old, I have a lot to tell about these rebels... [T]his is what I see with my own eyes... This is what the rebels have done:

- they burnt houses or whole villages
- abduct young children from 8 years onwards
- they killed people using the panga
- they cut your mouth with a knife or lock it with a padlock
- they destroyed people's crops and burnt them
- they cut people's ears
- they cut off your legs when they find you walking
- they killed the headmaster of a school and cooked him and made the pupils eat him
- they can pluck out your eyes
- they cut people's hands off. My uncle was found hiding and he was cut to pieces so much that you cannot think he is a person anymore.

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My village was completely destroyed and we stay in the town now. This kind of thing has been going on for over seven years... There are thousands of young children the rebels have taken from their parents ... There are many people without a place to sleep [or] anything to eat, but there is nothing being done for them. Many thousands of people die in the camps because of sorrow and anger.

I have failed to understand what the government has done to stop these things. I have failed to understand why innocent people like our girls and all the other captives should suffer so much....

So to anyone who [will] read this. My question is: what can we say and do for the thousands and thousands of young people, our 21 girls who are still suffering in the bush with Kony Joseph, and the hundreds of people who die there day and night?

My question remains to the one who reads this and meditates over it.