

A BILLION LIVES

AN EYEWITNESS REPORT FROM
THE FRONTLINES OF HUMANITY



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9.

Uganda's Twenty Thousand Kidnapped Children

“I AM CAPTAIN Sunday of the Lord's Resistance Army,” says the man in the olive-green uniform leaning into our vehicle and flicking his eyes over the flak jackets, helmets, and water bottles covering the floor of our car. “No white faces can carry guns from here. We don't trust them—we only trust black faces.”

I had never thought of Wellington boots as sinister but I do now when I meet Captain Sunday and his crew of guerrilla fighters. We had caught sight of him as our car rounded a corner on the narrow track we were following through the Sudanese jungle. He was standing by a tree lying across our path. He looks about twenty-five, with a Kalashnikov slung across his chest and a cascade of dreadlocks scraping the collar of his uniform. The rubber boots on his feet would have lent his guerrilla-issue outfit a somewhat comical air had it not been for a group of heavily armed teenagers lounging nearby. The only piece of attire most of them have in common are Wellington boots, worn to protect against water, snakes, and bugs by members of one of the most sinister and ruthless guerrilla forces in Africa.

Marcus Culley, a New Zealander in charge of UN security in southern Sudan who is traveling ahead of us with five colleagues and was stopped seconds earlier, walks back to our car looking grim.

“I’m sorry but I think you should hand over your guns,” he tells my Romanian bodyguards. “It is not worth spoiling the whole mission over three guns.” We only have a few more hours before we have to return to the UN helicopters to reach our base in Juba, Sudan, by sunset. Automatically I check my watch and look for the tropical sun, which has already passed its zenith as it filters through the jungle trees. It is just past 1 p.m. on Saturday, November 12, 2006, and we are on the first UN mission to meet the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader, Joseph Kony.

“Do you agree with this?” asks the bodyguard sitting next to me incredulously. I feel sorry for him. He and his colleagues have flown from Khartoum to protect our mission and have been watching over me for the last forty-eight hours. They sit outside my tent at night, and during the day guard the door of the container that doubles as our meeting room in Juba, where we planned this controversial meeting with the LRA and its leaders.

Now, when there is a real and very visible security risk, they are ordered to hand over their guns. I just nod and ask them to be quick. Too much is at stake.

The LRA has kidnapped more than twenty-thousand children from northern Uganda and southern Sudan in two decades of fighting. The kidnapped children have been brutalized, tortured, and raped while being forced to join this self-styled army and attack their own villages and families in a forgotten war. Some of the abducted boys and girls are probably among the underage, impassive guerrilla fighters who surround us here at the Sudan-Congo border. Nearly two million men, women, and children, the majority of the proud Acholi people, have been driven from their ancestral lands in northern Uganda to live in the miserable overcrowded camps that I know only too well from previous visits.

I have taken a huge risk on behalf of the UN in grabbing a rare opportunity to speak directly to the reclusive Kony. I am hoping that it may help prolong the most promising cease-fire in the course

of twenty years of strife and untold suffering. We should be willing to take big risks for that.

“I feel naked,” says my bodyguard anxiously. “How do we defend you now if there is a fight? By running behind you as you try to flee?” After a late start from Juba, on a journey of nearly two hours by helicopter and then twenty minutes by car through jungle and head-high grass to this roadblock, we have lost a lot of time. UN security rules state that we must be back in Juba before nightfall. We have no more time to argue. One of our Toyota Land Cruisers is driven back to the three waiting Russian-made Mi-18 helicopters along with the handguns, bulletproof vests, and helmets that Captain Sunday is refusing to allow the “white faces” to keep. I feel as vulnerable and suspect as an African at a European border control. It makes no sense that they should be threatened by our standard UN protection gear, but the LRA leadership is among the world’s most paranoid. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued warrants in 2005 for the arrest of five commanders, including Kony and his deputy Vincent Otti, with whom I have been negotiating. The charges are of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The LRA leaders fear we might try to arrest them on behalf of the court.

During my last visit to northern Uganda, seven months earlier, the situation had improved to the extent that even the overprotective UN security officials let me stay overnight in a camp; I slept in one of the small mud huts that the displaced have shared for half a generation. I had been deeply moved by the experience of talking with families about their hopes for peace, security, and a better future when they could return to rebuild their homes, their farms, and their herds. We swapped stories and talked about their dreams over a *wang-ho*, a traditional Acholi bonfire, late into the night. At one point an old lady began to weep quietly. “It is fifteen years since I could happily enjoy a *wang-ho*,” she said. “I was then a young mother. Now I have nothing. My children have been stolen by the rebels. The government has done nothing for me. Happy memories of bonfires

with my murdered husband and my missing children are coming back.”

I remember the poignancy of that night as I watch the LRA fighters who have caused such misery, and who may well include some of those same kidnapped children, lifting the tree blocking our path. They wave us on and we plunge down the barely visible track which has narrowed to a point where we are driving through tall grass while jungle foliage smashes against our windows. At one point the track turns into a deep pool of mud, water, and rotting leaves, which causes our driver to stop. Gripping the steering wheel and muttering to himself, he guns the engine and plunges in at full speed. Just as the bow wave threatens to drown the engine we start to climb out of what has become a swamp to emerge in a clearing. According to the Cessation of Hostilities agreement, this is the assembly point for LRA fighters scattered throughout western Sudan and Congo.

I am in a place as remote from my office in Manhattan or my home in Oslo as it is possible to imagine. Ri-Kwamba is an abandoned, destroyed village on the border between southwestern Sudan and northeastern Congo. Our party, including Vice President Riek Machar of the new South Sudan government and twenty of his armed guards, have flown in three helicopters from an airstrip in Juba, the main town in South Sudan. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), protecting Machar and his entourage, have been allowed to keep their weapons after an extended yelling match between their commander and Captain Sunday. The SPLA, having “more trustworthy” black soldiers with a long history of guerilla warfare, are in a somewhat more persuasive position than our UN bodyguards. Our convoy of ten Land Cruisers also includes a team of mediators, UN colleagues, Ugandan government officials, LRA negotiators, and a dozen foreign journalists. The journey from Juba to the remote village of Ri-Kwamba—and, we hope, back on the same day—is a massive logistics operation involving the movement

of sixty people through some of the most inaccessible and dangerous territory in Africa.

My journey to this place had started more than three years earlier when, in September 2003, as the new undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, I asked a group of the most experienced OCHA field officers in our Geneva headquarters to identify “the most forgotten and neglected humanitarian crisis in the world.” Most of the twenty-member group had more than ten years of experience in humanitarian fieldwork. It was a question they had not expected. After an extended pause, Ayo Fowler, an African colleague, raised his hand: “I think it must be the war of northern Uganda,” he ventured. “Nowhere else are so many people terrorized, brutalized, and displaced with so little attention, so little assistance, and so little protection. Nobody seems to care that a whole generation of children is perishing . . .” I decided then and there to go to Uganda on my first field mission as emergency relief coordinator.

It took two months before I reached northern Uganda, since the UN’s attention was diverted to Iraq following the bombing of our offices in Baghdad. When I finally arrived in Kampala it was early November. Our very experienced OCHA head of field office, Elaine Detroit, wisely suggested that I ask the heads of all UN agencies in Uganda to accompany me to the war-torn north, an area with which some of them were strangely unfamiliar.

What I saw around the towns of Kitgum and Gulu was an outrage. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children lived in appalling conditions in overcrowded, filthy camps. With the exception of the UN World Food Programme and a handful of courageous Ugandan and international nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian workers were absent in the midst of the misery. The contrast with the empty refugee camps and well-stocked warehouses that I had just visited in Iraq and on its borders was stark. Why had no one in the international community woken up to the carnage of northern Uganda? Where had I been while in charge of

the Norwegian Red Cross and during many years of humanitarian, human rights, and peace work? It was incomprehensible. The capital, Kampala, was bursting with UN and other aid officials since Uganda was one of the darlings of Western governments and development agencies. Few, it appeared, had looked far beyond the horizon at the outrage being visited on the children of the north.

The scene in Kitgum, the heart of the area experiencing the worst LRA terror and Ugandan government neglect was one of the most profoundly disturbing I have experienced in all my years of humanitarian work. Daylight was fading as we arrived at the village school that doubled as a health post. As the sun set over the hills the first of more than a thousand children, some as young two or three, accompanied by their mothers, began to shuffle into the grounds to spend the night lying huddled together in rooms and corridors and on the pavement outside. They were just a small proportion of the estimated forty thousand children, so-called “night commuters,” who gather every evening at several impromptu “safe” meeting points in local towns and villages. They hope to avoid being kidnapped by LRA press gangs that for nearly two decades have been pillaging and raping their way through the countryside for provisions and “recruits.” As dawn breaks the children begin their journeys back to their scattered huts and shelters, only to return that same evening.

All the children told similar stories of living in continuous fear of attacks on their settlements while being utterly neglected by the Ugandan government and the international community. Some blankets are passed around by NGOs and church groups but there is no food, no medicine, no counseling, no registration, and no journalists—only sadness and lost childhoods. My African colleague was right when he said this was perhaps our “number one forgotten failure”.

The next morning I asked my UN colleagues to meet me on the veranda of our guest house. I was angry and still reeling from the

desperately sad scenes of the day before. Some of those I was addressing had worked in Uganda for months, even years, but had never bothered to make the daylong journey north. "I hope you all agree we cannot continue like this," I told a group of nodding heads. "We have failed utterly here. You and your organizations have to step up action dramatically and I will do all I can to wake up donors and headquarters." They were rightly embarrassed.

Now, three years later, as I come to the last few weeks of my time as undersecretary for humanitarian affairs at the UN, I return to the issue that became my first priority. "Welcome!" says Vincent Otti, Kony's deputy, striding toward us. A tall, elderly man in camouflage uniform with elaborate Soviet-made red epaulettes, he has taken the title of lieutenant general. He is waiting to greet us at the assembly point in Ri-Kwamba together with a dozen silent LRA officials. A huge UNICEF canvas tent that is to be our "meeting room" stands in the middle of a large open grass field. An advance UN team has prepared the site in recent days. Otti presents the rest of the LRA "high command" as we sit down on red plastic chairs in the tent, its side flaps rolled up to allow some air.

My group consists of Vice President Riek Machar; Martin Mogwanja and David Gressly, the UN's humanitarian coordinators in Uganda and South Sudan; and Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, my chief of staff from New York. It is an unprecedented meeting. No ranking UN official has ever met the LRA leadership the twenty years they have been in hiding.

Machar is at ease. He chats and jokes with some of the LRA commanders whom he has met several times before. His old contacts from the shifting alliances of the southern Sudan liberation struggle helped him set up historic peace talks that began in July 2006 and led to the current cease-fire. I neither smile nor chat. The night before and that morning I had a yelling match with Otti on the satellite phone during which I threatened to cancel today's meeting. Otti had reneged on a verbal agreement that our meeting

would conclude with the announcement that the sick and wounded in LRA hands would be handed over for care in our hospitals, that LRA children would be identified so they could attend schools organized by the UN, and that women and other noncombatants would be separated and receive special assistance when they arrived at assembly points under the cease-fire. My team and the LRA negotiations team had even agreed on a draft text in Juba the previous afternoon. But Otti had backtracked when the final text was read to him at 9 p.m. that night. “You have no credibility with anyone now. Do something good for once and we might start trusting your word!” I shouted at him on the phone this morning. “You just demand and press us—we get nothing!” Otti screamed back before the satellite link was cut.

“Where is Kony?” I ask Otti as we settle down to talk. “We have little time.” “The chairman has empowered me to do the negotiations on behalf of the LRA,” Otti says, so quietly that I can hardly hear him. “What?” I exclaim. “I travel across the world from New York to this place to meet Kony after your people tell the BBC that he wants to see me. And now you tell me he stays away!” It is an intensely uncomfortable moment. I have talked on the phone numerous times with Otti. I can call him by satellite at any time. How do I convince them that Kony has to be present without wasting more time quarreling? It appears that he is somewhere close by in the jungle, within an hour’s walking distance. One of the LRA’s greatest strengths in avoiding capture or defeat has been their instance on never using vehicles. Vehicles can be tracked.

After a quick exchange with Machar, I tell Otti, “We will not start without Kony. Tell him the next chance for such a meeting may be in twenty years. In two hours we will have to leave.”

“But he is far away. It is not safe for him here,” answers Otti. “You should not have your guns in this place,” he says to the South Sudanese vice president. It is obvious they are still deeply concerned that we might try to catch Kony and bring him to the ICC.

“How can you still fear us after being my guest here in South Sudan for months,” exclaims Machar. “You know my soldiers by now. But, if it makes you happy let us remove our men, both of us, one hundred paces from the tent. OK? And now, tell Kony to start walking”.

Otti responds by getting up and walking off. He is not amused. He had probably tried to get Kony to come this morning and had given up in the face of his leader’s intense paranoia. Now he has also failed to convince us that he would be an acceptable counterpart. He goes to a hut some hundred yards away and begins to call Kony on his satellite phone.

I feel uncomfortable in my plastic chair chatting with Machar, who tries to convince me that I can “relax” and that Kony will come. But my UN team reminds me the clock is ticking. We have only two more hours before we have to leave to reach the helicopters at 4:30 and Juba before sunset.

By the time Otti returns, the SPLA fighters have withdrawn, but he has done nothing about ordering the withdrawal of his own heavily armed LRA teenagers who surround the tent. “The chairman is on his way. But he is far away and does not know whether he will make it in time. He asks us to start the talks.”

I am inclined to accept. We will at least have half of the LRA high command present as I try to convince them of the necessity to respect the cessation of hostilities; demand the release of women and children; and warn that we are watching them for any signs of a return to abuse of the civilian population. But Machar puts his hand on my shoulder. “Tell the chairman to hurry up because we are not starting without him.” Otti gets up again to walk to the hut as Machar whispers that he is convinced Kony will not appear if we start with the others. “Trust me, he says,” sitting back in his chair with a smile.

Another hour passes. My chief of staff, Strohmeyer, and some journalists who have been allowed to record the event try unsuc-

cessfully to engage Captain Sunday and his armed boys and girls in conversation. With only half an hour to go before we have to leave I decide to ignore Machar's advice and agree to start the meeting on "humanitarian matters" with Otti and his commanders. At least we can hope that they will pass on my message to the rest of the leadership.

Just as I have finished listing our concerns and demands, we see Kony approaching in his Wellingtons at the head of a group of some twenty-five soldiers. At exactly 3:56, he hesitantly extends his arm for a handshake. The journalists plunge forward to record the meeting. I do not smile. Many of the LRA victims will see the photo and I am fearful of sending out the wrong signals. My first impression is of a more reserved, quiet, indecisive, and boyish-looking man than I had expected. "Can you leave us now?" I shout to reporters, soldiers, and bystanders, and look at my watch, hoping our security officers will give us some space. We have already passed the "absolute time limit for returning."

"Thank you for coming," says Kony.

"We have been waiting. There are a number of things to discuss and time is short," I answer.

Kony asks to speak in Acholi and one of the educated LRA negotiators from Juba comes forward to translate. I expect him immediately to bring up the ICC, but his ten-minute speech is devoted to describing how the LRA feels chased by the Ugandan army, how disappointed they are that the other side still attacks them, that there is no security for them in southern Sudan, where they are supposed to assemble under the cease-fire agreement, and that their own respect for the cease-fire is not being reciprocated. "We are seriously engaged in trying to end the war and find a just and peaceful settlement. But even the day before yesterday some of our people were attacked by the Ugandan army," he concludes.

I am relieved by what I hear. These are security issues that can be

dealt with in the talks. Some of his charges may actually be true. The Ugandan Army is indeed in southern Sudan. The difficult and time-consuming issues of constitutional reform, a referendum, and a federal structure for northern Uganda that had been brought to the negotiations table in Juba by the LRA have thankfully not been raised. Kony has not even raised the ICC indictments.

When he is finished I take the opportunity to address him without interruption for ten minutes in English, which he understands. He listens and, as I always do in these kinds of meetings with men of power on questions of life and death, I try to keep continuous eye contact. I need to be sure that our message sinks in. My sole purpose is to get him to understand how much is at stake.

“If you continue to respect the cessation of hostilities and assemble your forces as prescribed, we will help ensure that you will get food and other supplies at all assembly points. We will continue to work to make the talks more effective and will get international support for a peaceful settlement of the conflict and reintegration of the LRA fighters in northern Uganda. We will also monitor the cessation of hostilities. But if the cease-fire collapses and you return to your old ways of attacking the population, there will be a war that will be worse than ever. That will be terrible for all, including you in the LRA!” I warn.

I end with an appeal for our right to care for children and women as they assemble and demand the immediate release of those recently abducted in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. I decide not to hand over a list of about twenty boys and girls we know have been kidnapped by the LRA from neighboring South Sudanese communities following village-to-village investigations by UN officials. I have been warned by one of our team that the list may backfire and threaten the lives of the abducted. If the LRA continues to deny attacks on civilians they could simply kill anyone whose name appears on the list. I do, however, end with a direct question

to Kony that I have planned in advance: "What do I tell the weeping mothers in northern Uganda and southern Sudan who have asked me to bring back their beloved children?"

Unfortunately, Otti interjects before Kony can answer. He repeats what he has already told me twice on the satellite phone in recent days: "We have no women or children here in Ri-Kwamba, only our wives, our own children, and combatants. But I will speak to Commander Cesar Achello on the Sudanese-Ugandan border as he assembles later in the month. If he has weak children or wounded people with him, we will hand them over to you." I look at Kony, who only nods.

I then offer to send Ugandan UN teams to the bush to present our demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration package as the LRA soldiers assemble. The whole purpose of our new efforts to bring supplies, people, and mediators to the assembly points is to get the leadership in the field to engage and make decisions on how to end the senseless conflict. While Kony agrees to future contact, voices are hissing in my ear: "We really, really have to leave."

As I gather my papers Otti suddenly raises the one issue that has been a sticking point in all discussions with the LRA and over which I have no say. "The ICC indictment will not make it possible for us to give up our arms. What can you do to stop them?" Kony stares at me as I tell him that the ICC is a totally independent body. "I cannot influence them. But you can influence how the world regards you. Make peace, stop all attacks, release the abducted, and influence your case positively. Then we will see how justice can be served." I rise and approach Kony and Otti while holding up a sheet of graph paper on which every single attack, kidnapping, and armed clash they have been responsible for in recent years is recorded. I want them to feel that they are being watched continuously, that we will know if they return to terror and that we will hold them accountable in the future. At this point the journalists burst through the

LRA security cordon screaming questions about what has been discussed.

“The peace process in Juba,” answers Kony in cautious English. “Did you agree to release women and children?” asks a BBC reporter. “There are no women and children in the LRA, only combatants,” replies Kony in the monotone of a pilot trying to reassure passengers that nothing is amiss as they plummet through turbulence. It is the last message I hear before we scramble for the cars. “Get everybody to mount,” I yell, jumping into a vehicle. As we drive off I see journalists running for the cars while Machar takes an additional minute with the LRA leadership.

When we reach the helicopters, an hour and a half late, the Russian UN pilots are clearly impatient. The journalists want a statement before leaving the area. “I think it was an important meeting,” I say. “For the first time ever we could impress on the LRA leadership that they must keep to the cessation of hostilities and never again start abusing civilians. There is only a negotiated end to this long and brutal war. We made progress in being able to do this today by building trust through face-to-face meetings with the leadership, an essential step in any negotiation process.”

As we fly back to Juba the sun is setting and we are again struck by the immense size and beauty of Africa. I reflect on the events of the past three days as I gaze out the helicopter’s window. It has been worthwhile, of that I am convinced. The BBC will predictably portray the lack of agreement on release of some of the kidnapped as a setback and here I acknowledge that I should have presented the meeting differently to the media. Instead of saying that I would only meet Kony if it led to the release of the kidnapped women and children, the precondition of our meeting should have been to discuss their condition and their release. The LRA leadership is not a rational negotiating group and, living as outlaws for the last twenty years, it does not react well to unenforceable deadlines. However, by say-

ing that I would only meet with Kony if they released some of the abducted I had managed to get their attention away from something I could not and would not give: support in lifting the ICC indictments. At the same time we focused the minds of the leadership on the fact that they are being watched and pursued as long as they keep the many kidnapped.

To have the abducted released had been an obsession of mine ever since I met some of the kidnapped children who had escaped. In November 2003, I visited the World Vision center for former LRA child soldiers in Gulu, northern Uganda. A 16-year-old girl, her eyes cast to the floor, had told me in a quiet, unemotional voice how she was abducted one night from her family's hut and brutally driven into the bush. "We were several children from ten to fourteen years. One girl could not keep pace. At gunpoint a boy and I were ordered to club her to death. A month later another girl, a small one, tried to flee. This time all of us were forced by our commanders to kill her by biting her to death. It took a long time . . ." As she finished talking she raised her head to gaze at me with blank, sad old eyes. I felt as though I was going to be sick. How does one respond to such pure evil, to such terror?

One of the other girls at the center, who had been given to one of the commanders as an additional "wife," gave birth that morning. The care center leader asked me the first name of my wife. "Anne Kristin," I said. "According to our tradition we always name a newborn after a prominent visitor. We will call her Anna Christina. The mother will be very happy."

As we land in Juba I wonder how Yoweri Museveni, the Ugandan president, will react to the LRA meeting. Before I left New York for Africa, the Ugandan ambassador to the UN had come to my office to protest about the proposed meeting with the "criminal" Joseph Kony. I managed to speak to the president by phone the same day and got him to take a neutral stance on my mission. I would only know whether Museveni was going to attack me again

when I arrived in Kampala in two days. In 2004 Museveni sneeringly called me “Mr. England” in an Independence Day speech to the diplomatic community, accusing me of distorting the situation in Uganda to the world’s media.

However, I get the president’s views sooner than expected. After landing at Uganda’s Entebbe airport we are whisked through the VIP lounge to waiting UN cars. With blue lights flashing and sirens blaring, two police cars lead us at breakneck speed into Kampala, defying all traffic laws, frequently using the wrong side of the road. We reached Kampala in thirty-five minutes instead of the usual two hours or more.

For the first time that my UN colleagues can remember, we do not have to wait for hours in hotels and waiting rooms before being received by Museveni, but rather are taken straight through a back door in the Parliament Building. The president has clearly been waiting for us as he sits at the end of a long table, his key advisers to his left. He grimly takes my hand and I sit down at his right, facing the foreign minister; chief government negotiator, Minister Ruhakana Rugunda; and several other senior ministers.

Skipping the courtesies, president begins on an ominous note: “You were just wasting your time in the bush with them. I told you so.”

“No, I think it was useful to meet them. It was good for peace and therefore to your benefit,” I reply.

“No, those talks were not to our benefit. Let me be categorical—there will only be a military solution to this problem.”

“But we have, for the first time, an absence of fighting and terror due to the peace process!”

“No, that is only due to the efforts of our army!”

I draw a breath and look at the president. The ministers watch nervously, but Museveni appears to be enjoying the disagreement. I know him from several similar exchanges. He is one of the most significant elder statesmen in Africa, a warrior who ended the hor-

rors of the Idi Amin regime, which were followed by a long and cruel civil war. Once we had sat for three hours talking under a tree at his large cattle farm. Another time he insisted that I take his helicopter to see the skulls of the tens of thousands among his own people who died in the 1970s to “get perspective” on my criticism of the government’s policies in northern Uganda. He is an impressive leader, but he has become increasingly authoritarian and has so far failed in northern Uganda, where the Acholi people feel alienated and where neither civilian nor military authorities have managed to avoid some twenty years of horrors. The LRA has not been the only bloody rebellion in the north.

I explain at some length why the international community now supports the Juba-based peace process: why six nations now give funding to the South Sudanese—mediated talks through OCHA; and why the UN Security Council, after my many briefings, has for the first time come up with a presidential statement of support for the talks. Six months of negotiations have done more to provide peace and quiet than half a generation of military offensives.

“I don’t mind peace talks as long as pressure is maintained. But the talks cannot go on forever as a business for the negotiators,” says Museveni. The meeting continues for another two hours and more common ground is established between us. We agree that the talks must produce tangible agreements that can lead to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the LRA and that a true process of reconciliation and rebuilding must follow the peace process. Museveni, who had asked the ICC to indict the LRA leaders, was of the opinion that he could stop the international judicial process if a good agreement to end the war was reached. I try to tell him, as the chief ICC prosecutor had asked me to stress, that the decision was no longer in the hands of the Ugandans. The court would itself have to assess what would serve the cause of both peace and justice.

Museveni seems pleased with the tough and direct exchange. He clearly enjoys the verbal jousting. Within his own government no-

body dares to argue with him. Not once in three hours do any of his ministers interrupt. The president even agrees to withdraw the Ugandan army from two bases close to the eastern assembly point; the army currently blocking access for LRA fighters who should gather there according to the ceasefire agreement. During the last two hours of our meeting he is only angry once, when I bring up our growing concern with widespread violence in the eastern Karamoja area, where civilians are being killed in battles between cattle rustlers, tribal militias, and army units. “Do not lecture me on how to disarm illegal armed groups and cattle rustlers. On that I am an expert,” he says forcefully.

The next day I hold a press conference with the archbishop of Gulu and the Catholic relief organization Caritas, attended by the Ugandan media and international stringers based in Kampala. We want to give positive recognition to the Catholic and Anglican churches, which have shown immense courage in defending the rights of the people of northern Uganda. Only Caritas had the guts to help when I asked the UN and nongovernmental organizations to provide food, water, and sanitation to encourage the LRA to congregate at the two assembly points in southern Sudan.

The press conference goes well. “I leave Uganda after my final mission as UN emergency relief coordinator more optimistic than at any previous point. I think we see the beginning of the end to the abject suffering of the children of northern Uganda.” The archbishop of Gulu agrees: “Thank you for bringing the suffering of northern Uganda to the attention, for the first time, of the international community. As you return to your family in Norway we, the people of the north, want to thank you and the United Nations for speaking up when we needed it the most.” It is the best thing anyone could have said to me.

More than at any other place, I feel that what my colleagues in OCHA and I have done for northern Uganda has had an impact. The peace talks will almost certainly go through crises and break-

downs, but the people of the north have already voted with their feet. The “night commuters” have all but stopped and hundreds of thousands of displaced have returned or are planning to return and rebuild their ancestral land.

I am deeply moved when, later in the week, I am asked to support preschool for little Anna Christina, the child born to the LRA girl during my 2003 visit and named after my wife. Nothing could better symbolize the renewed hopes for northern Uganda.