



A GOSPEL OF INVOLVEMENT

U.S. Pastor Frees Abducted Child Soldiers in Sudan and Uganda

BY MARIA SLIWA

Forty-two-year-old Sam Childers cuts a figure worthy of a big-budget Hollywood adventure film—think Jean-Claude Van Dam—and possesses a life story worthy of the same. He’s hunted alligators in the Florida glades, dealt drugs, and ridden with a motorcycle gang called the Outlaws. Although he’s put his disreputable ways behind him, his life is no less dangerous now than it was in his 20s and early 30s. Nowadays Childers uses his muscular prowess and steely nerves to serve God, saving lives in Sudan and Uganda.

For while Childers is today a pastor, with a church and Christian camp in the peaceful mountains of Pennsylvania, he is also the only white commander in the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA is a rebel group that fights the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), another rebel paramilitary group operating in Uganda and Sudan, but one which has been designated a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department. For the past five years, the SPLA has been assisting the Ugandan government in fighting and capturing LRA soldiers. Their goal is to bring the LRA’s 20-year reign of terror to an end and to restore peace to Uganda.

COMBAT

“Sam is against violence, and as Christians we must try to avoid violence,” explains Lynn Childers, who never knows if her husband’s next trip will be his last, but who entrusts him into the Lord’s hands. “He tries to rescue the children without a fight, but there are times when he has to fight—he’s in a war zone. God has made it possible for him to save many

children without a fight, and other times God has protected him in the fighting. God raised up many good warriors in Bible times and he still does today. One of them is Pastor Sam, who fights for what is right and for righteousness’ sake.”

Childers preaches what he calls “a gospel of involvement.” He can be seen praying with a group of soldiers, many of whom are also pastors, before they go out to attack areas where the LRA are active.

On a recent morning in Nimule, South Sudan, Childers surveyed the orphanage he built on 36 acres of bush land that he cleared. The orphanage is a safe haven for children who are captured out of, or are lucky enough to escape from, the LRA. Here he makes sure the children are housed, fed, and educated and arranges for them to be reunited with their families whenever possible. He also stockpiles weapons here for SPLA soldiers. So far, the orphanage has remained untouched by the LRA.

Though Childers is gifted generously with courage, the horror that rages around the orphanage is so real and so terrifying that just thinking about it sends a cold shiver down his sturdy spine. Despite the exhilarating jolt of adrenaline he experiences while fighting the LRA, Childers knows that, if captured, he will suffer an excruciating death at the hands of his enemies, a possibility he has been warned of more than once by the LRA.

But what saddens him most is that the threat of slaughter, which he and his fellow soldiers face daily, will most likely be carried out by children. As pint-sized assassins—kidnapped,

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abused, brainwashed, and trained up by the LRA —the child soldiers of the LRA (some as young as 8) are capable of striking a human target like Childers with fatal precision.

Last March, a band of these small predators attacked a group of women who were collecting firewood near the border of southern Sudan, just a few miles from Childers' orphanage. The juvenile attackers managed effortlessly to hack off the lips and ears of seven of the victims and abduct several others.

The children of the LRA perform these acts at the bidding of their adult counterparts, and make up about 80 percent of the rebel group, according to the United Nations. According to UNICEF, approximately 20,000 children have been kidnapped by the LRA during the 20-year conflict, and today its captives constitute the largest army of child soldiers in Africa.

Joseph Kony, the LRA's founder and leader, is a Ugandan and former Catholic catechist whose ideology is based on distortions of Christianity combined with witchcraft. (It is believed that the Sudanese government first armed Kony's army and that factions of Sudan's military are still sending weapons to the LRA.) Billing himself as a modern-day prophet whose job is to enforce the Ten Commandments, Kony tells his followers that God has commanded him to punish anyone who works with the Ugandan government or refuses to obey his message. Though many of the adult soldiers willingly endorse Kony's campaign of violence, most abducted children do not understand why they are fighting.

"Thousands of children have been raped, brutalized, drugged, and forced to inflict unspeakable violence on others," wrote Jan Egeland, U.N. Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, in the foreword to *When the Sun Sets, We Start to Worry: An Account of Life in Northern Uganda* (published by the Integrated Regional Information Networks, a humanitarian news agency, in 2004).

But children are not the only victims. Since the LRA began attacking civilians in 1986, according to the U.N., they have forced some 1.6 million people in northern Uganda out of their villages into internal displacement camps. Disease is rampant in these camps, which lack proper food, sanitation, and medicine. Afraid to go back to their villages because of the constant fear of another LRA attack, most civilians choose to remain in the camps.

Last fall Childers and his soldiers went to Magwi, one of the most dangerous towns in southern Sudan due to its high occurrence of LRA violence. "Joseph Kony and his men were ambushing villages and butchering civilians, while we were there," says Childers.

Although unable to capture Kony, Childers says that he and his soldiers emerged from the fighting unharmed and brought 25 former child soldiers, aged 4 to 14, back to the orphanage in Nimule.

Despite his tough exterior, Childers can be surprisingly gentle. When he is at the orphanage, children often tag alongside him. He takes a personal interest in each one, calling them "my kids," and frequently nurses their wounds himself. Even the more traumatized children can't help but giggle when he jokes with them.

Built in 2001, the orphanage is managed by village women who cook, clean, and take care of the children and by his own soldiers who protect the compound and oversee other day-to-day operations. Childers has used his experience in construction to build dormitories that house 110 children. He has also built showers, outhouses, the beginnings of a school, a pen for four pigs and seven chickens, a cooking area, a church, storage rooms, two security posts, and a few guesthouses for short-term visitors who occasionally arrive from the U.S. He even installed a flushable toilet, something that is unheard of in the bush.

"Education is provided for the children every day," explains Lynn Childers. "The older ones attend school in the nearby village and for the younger ones we have a nursery school on our compound, which other local children are welcome to attend. We also have prayer and Bible study every morning and church services twice a week."

Childers and his staff also travel to surrounding villages to distribute food, clothing, and medicine. "We will go out and deworm the people, as their bellies get real extended from the worms," he says. "We give out medicines, especially when there are epidemics."

Although a variety of medicines is available for the children at the orphanage, the soldiers who work in the dispensary have no medical background and do not know how to administer these drugs properly. They also do not know how to prevent illnesses from occurring. Ringworm is contagious and tends to run rampant among the children. The bodies of some of the children are covered with ashen-colored circles from the infection.

"We desperately need a doctor or nurse on staff," Childers admits. "The problem is that whenever we hire a medical person, the conditions are so dangerous out here that they leave in a few months to get a better job."

Despite these problems, Childers says his kids are much better off in the orphanage than in the villages, because, unlike the villages, his orphanage provides safety, mosquito nets, and three meals a day.

CONVERSION

Childers' former life started to change in the '80s, when Clyde Carter, a cousin of former President Jimmy Carter, hired him to work on his house. He was living in Florida at the time,

earning a lucrative income working construction jobs and selling drugs.

“I was heavily into drugs then,” Childers says. “I was on heroin, cocaine, every kind of hard drug before meeting Clyde. He was one of the first ones to influence me to stop taking dope.”

But it took seven years for Childers to finally get clean. He says his drug dealing was wreaking havoc on his wife, Lynn, who turned her life over to Christ in 1986. Childers followed suit in 1991, and they were both ordained as ministers with the Full Gospel Assemblies in 1995. Today they are pastors at Shekinah Fellowship Church in Central City, Pa.

When Childers first heard, in 1998, about the child soldiers in southern Sudan and northern Uganda, he immediately began to find a way to rescue them. He believes that despite the atrocious acts these children are forced to perform as slave soldiers, they can live happy and productive lives once they are freed and placed in a better environment.

In 2004 the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands, invited Childers to testify against the LRA. Some observers fear that because the ICC has no enforcement capability, its move to highlight the LRA could fuel the war and disrupt the ongoing attempts for peace negotiations between the Ugandan government and the rebel group. But Childers disagrees: “Joseph Kony needs to be stopped no matter what Uganda or anyone else thinks. The U.S. and other countries need to step in and stop this guy immediately. He should never be negotiated with or given amnesty, because he needs to pay for his crimes, which are not against just adults but also against little children. I mean raping little children and chopping them up—this stuff is unreal.”

Childers agrees that the ICC has limitations and that sometimes it takes years for the ICC to do anything. But he reasons that in such desperate circumstances something is better than nothing.

As LRA violence continues to rage and appears unstop-

“THE LIVING GOD SUFFERS WITH US”

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO

The Rt. Rev. Macleord Baker Ochola, the retired Anglican Bishop of Kitgum in northern Uganda, traveled 7,500 miles to Chapel Hill, N.C., to ask for help.

The insurgent Lord’s Resistance Army continues to kidnap children, turning them into sex slaves and soldiers and forcing an estimated 1.6 million people into displacement camps where an average of a thousand people die each week due to disease and malnutrition.

Ochola, 69, lost his wife and daughter to the cycle of violence that has plagued the African nation since it gained independence from England in 1962. Now the Rev. Timothy Kimbrough is hoping Ochola’s five-month sabbatical at Chapel Hill’s Episcopal Church of the Holy Family will provide a time of real rest for the bishop, who, since his retirement in 2002, has dedicated himself to making peace in Uganda.

“No one, especially those in positions of leadership, has the opportunity to rest without watching one’s back,” said Kimbrough. “If you sleep, you sleep with one eye open.”

Ochola compared the situation to the genocide in western Sudan, where civil war has killed 400,000 and displaced 2.5 million people since 2003. Last year, the United Nations issued a statement calling northern Uganda “the world’s largest neglected humanitarian emergency.”

“I am appealing to the Americans to stand in solidarity with the suffering people of northern Uganda,” Ochola said. And in churches from here to Fort Myers, Fla., people are doing just that.

On December 3, the Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida passed a resolution to press the U.N. Security Council, President Bush, and southwest Florida’s congressional delegates to intervene and stop the genocide in northern Uganda. Bishop John Lipscomb invited Ochola to address the diocesan convention. The two met in 1998 in London.

On the same day that Ochola spoke to clergy in Fort Myers, seven children from Holy Family were among nearly 70 people who walked more than six miles through Chapel Hill and Carrboro to mimic Uganda’s “night commuters.” Some 40,000 children walk into the city of Gulu and other urban areas every night in order to avoid being kidnapped from their rural communities.

“I just want people to be aware that’s happening and try to think of something they could do,” said 11-year-old Molly McDonough, one of the Holy Family children who made the December 3 trek.

That’s just the sort of response Kimbrough anticipated when he invited Ochola to Chapel Hill. “We have hoped that he could show us, in the relatively protected world we inhab-

pable, some voices are being heard. Last April a number of high-profile people spoke out at a press conference in Washington, D.C. Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-Ill.), and actor John Amos (formerly of “The West Wing”), along with representatives of World Vision, condemned the LRA and called upon the international community, led by the Bush administration, to make the protection of the children a priority.

As he forges ahead in Uganda and Sudan, Childers says he wants to expand his work to other countries where children are being exploited. During his visits to the bush area of the Congo, Childers received numerous reports that Kony’s rebels were setting up LRA operations and abducting children in that country as well. Childers says he is preparing to build an orphanage in the Congo and will begin rescuing children there soon.

It is dinnertime back at the orphanage in Nimule. After a long day of freeing children from the LRA, Childers and his

soldiers rest their AK-47s against a gray concrete wall in the dining area, wash their hands in a nearby basin, and enjoy a meal of freshly caught fried fish, corn meal porridge, and red beans, which they wash down with a mixture of instant coffee, unprocessed sugar, and powdered milk.

“The things I have done in my past were really bad,” Childers tells his soldiers. “But, despite that, God protected me, and with his grace I will help the children in whatever way that I can.” ■

To learn more about the work of Sam Childers’ World Missions New Sudan, which is funded exclusively by donations from individuals and churches, go to boyerspond.com.

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it, how to walk with him and those who suffer in northern Uganda as fellow members of the Body of Christ,” said Kimbrough. “The children understand before most of us do.”

The two men met face-to-face last August, during Kimbrough’s own six-month sabbatical in which he traveled to Haiti, the Philippines, South Africa, and Uganda to learn how Christians use music for worship in those cultures. The two clergymen had been introduced via email by George Piwang-Jalobo, a doctoral student in religion at Duke University. Piwang-Jalobo is founder and director of the Center of Conflict Management and Peace at Gulu University.

“Sending a U.S. presidential envoy who is sensitive to religion or spirituality is the only way to bring about the dialogue that is needed to end this conflict,” Piwang-Jalobo told Duke University News Service in June.

“People hear about the LRA using Bible verses and cutting off children’s lips and think they are terrorists or apocalyptic fanatics who can’t be reasoned with, when in fact the movement began as a response to social chaos,” said Piwang-Jalobo. “[The rebels] used the only tool the people trusted—traditional African religion. Only later it was co-opted and turned against innocent civilians.”

Bishop Ochola said the Ugandan government has confronted the LRA in battle but neglected its suffering people. He likens the government response to a parent who chases down an arsonist while the children remain trapped in a burning building.

It’s a metaphor that comes from the heart, as the bishop has had to deal with his own thirst for justice. He buried many

of his parishioners under the violent dictatorship of Idi Amin in the 1970s. He lost his daughter to suicide in 1987 after she was kidnapped and raped, allegedly by the Uganda People’s Democratic Army, another group that rebelled against President Yoweri Museveni’s ruling National Resistance Army, still in power today. Ochola’s wife was killed by a land mine allegedly planted by LRA rebels in 1997.

“There’s nothing that can bring them back,” Ochola said. “Revenge is not going to pay my loss. We have to let go of what we think is ours. The living God suffers with us.”

The bishop said his scars remain, but the pain of the open wounds has subsided. He refuses to allow anger or sorrow for his family to become a mountain between him and God. Ochola’s faith and hope has inspired the Holy Family congregation.

“He doesn’t seem like he’s sad all of the time, and I know most people would be if they had that hard of a life,” said Molly McDonough.

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RESOURCE:

Invisible Children is a documentary, made by a trio of young Christians, about the plight of Uganda’s youth. Learn more about how you can use the film to educate yourself and others, and get more ideas of how to help the children, by going to invisiblechildren.com.