KITGUM PEACE DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Since this is the first newsletter of the KPDC we will start with a quick introduction:

Who are we? The KPDC is a Ugandan documentation and memorialisation initiative of the Refugee Law Project and Kitgum Local Government in collaboration with Utrecht University.

What do we do? The KPDC is documenting, archiving, communicating and commemorating past human rights abuses, conflict-related events, and life histories, as well as contemporary issues and the ongoing legacies of violence.

Why do we do this? We are doing this because Uganda has a long history of cyclical violent conflicts whose legacies persist, posing a risk to ignite new conflict. We firmly believe in the importance of confronting the past in order to move forward.

What is our vision? The guiding vision of the KPDC is for Uganda to be a country which is united by its future, not divided by its past; a nation where people live and work together in harmony, prosperity and peace under a democratic, transparent and accountable government which respects the rule of law and upholds human rights.

How will our work contribute to reaching this vision? Through our documentation activities we offer war affected populations acknowledgement and a forum where they can voice their concerns and grievances. The KPDC will play a catalytic role in transitional justice processes by increasing transparency about what happened and who was accountable. The KPDC gives effect to the right of Ugandan citizens to holistic and unbiased information about their recent history. We set out to ignite a national dialogue which will enhance mutual understanding and solidarity between constituents across Uganda.

What activities will support these goals? The KPDC activities are clustered in three programmatic areas; documentation and archiving, community outreach, and memory and memorialization. We will highlight some of our activities in the remainder of this newsletter.
The KPDC Documentation and Archiving program is divided in several key activities; event documentation, life history interviews and documentation of ongoing legacies of a violent past. The goal of event documentation is to uncover conflict-related events in Uganda’s history. We will do this by focusing on one sub-county at a time and uncovering every single event that the communities themselves highlight as significant.

The goal of life-history interviews is not so much to uncover what happened, but rather how it was experienced, what effects it had on people’s lives, including their culture, their communities, their livelihood patterns, their social and mental well-being and so on.

The goal of documenting the ongoing legacies is to get a sense of what is happening now and to act as an early warning system for conflicts that might escalate, if not acknowledged in time.

Documentation consists of conducting interviews and focus group discussions and collecting written and audio-visual material. This information will be archived and put online. There will be both a physical archive based in Kitgum, and for safety purposes a back up will be stored in an archive abroad. At the moment, we are working on a website that will include a conflict map, and also provide access to all our data.

Wi-gweng massacre

This is an example of some of the things we are documenting. In August 1986, an interviewee reported that NRA troops were responsible for a large scale massacre which led to the deaths of 48 unarmed civilians. Here follows a short account of one of the survivors;

“It was 9 am when they started putting us on the truck. So one of them came to us, and I heard them say: “If the soldiers from Kitgum arrive here, these people will not be killed. Do it hurriedly….“.

“When I fell out of the truck, my leg failed to get a grip on the ground and my bone got broken. Nonetheless, I got up, held my heel and hopped, as they started firing at me. I fell behind a certain ant hill nearby. So they were like “Oo he is now dead,” and they went back killing injured people who couldn’t move. I stayed in the bush for seven days, without eating. There was a certain house where there was water. I stayed there for five days until I was found by a person who was looking for his goats. By that time my leg had already started rotting and I was struggling to keep the dogs away…..”

There were only very few survivors who live to tell about this massacre. When they die or when their memories fade, it is impossible to get a detailed account of what happened. Nobody was ever held accountable. It is vital to record these events, because the grievances still persist with the survivors, leading to bitterness to those perceived responsible.

Deo Komakech is conducting an interview at a massacre site in Kitgum District.

“All dead bodies rot there, you could see dogs there overwhelmed with the amount of human flesh. The dogs got mad. Even me with my injuries, dogs could come trying to bite me. I had stayed for 7 days with my wound which started to rot. So the dogs tried to eat my leg, but whenever I lifted my head, the dogs would run away, only to come back.”
While not the most accurate and surely not the most complete, newspapers tend to give a very good overview of what happened in a particular country at any particular time. Newspaper archives have a wealth of information which is publicly available, but in the context of Uganda, rarely consulted. KPDC is working on compiling all newspaper articles about the conflicts in northern Uganda since the early 80s. While this work is ongoing, based on the analysis of the newspapers that we have now, we have already identified 642 massacres that took place in northern Uganda from 1996 till the present day. However, these 642 reported massacres represent only a small number of actual events. This is clearly illustrated by the KPDC’s event scoping activities in Lagongo-Amida.

**EVENT SCOPING IN LABONGO AMIDA, KITGUM DISTRICT**

At the moment the KPDC is conducting an extensive documentation of war-related events that happened in Kitgum District. We are doing this one sub-county at a time. Currently we are in the process of documenting what happened in Labongo-Amida. So far we have uncovered **77 war-related events**. Out of the 77 events, there were **23 cases of abductions**, **7 cases of armed combat** between LRA and UPDF/NRA, **3 cases of large scale arrests** by the NRA, **4 cases of arson**, some resulting in death, **2 cases of large scale cattle raids**, **1 large scale case of forced displacement**, which affected all the inhabitants of the Labongo-Amida, **23 cases of killings and extra-judicial executions** of one or two people, **3 incidents with landmines**, **9 massacres** (the killing of three people or more in a single event), **1 case of reported mutilation** and **1 case of rape**. There were 88 fatal casualties reported, 44 reported abductions, and 32 cases of severe injuries. These statistics are only the tip of the iceberg, based on the memories of the community leaders. At this very moment, the community leaders are surveying community members for any events that they remember. All these events have a story and in the coming months we will collect these stories by interviewing witnesses.

**DOCUMENTATION, ADVOCACY AND PROVISION OF EARLY WARNING**

Besides documentation of historical events, KPDC also provides policy advice and early warning for contemporary issues which have a negative effect on the war-affected communities and conflicts which have the potential to escalate. If the fragile democracy in Uganda is to be made more sustainable, it is vital that communities can voice their concerns and that these concerns are taken seriously. This means that communities must have a platform through which their voices can be heard. In Uganda, this platform is largely lacking. The KPDC offers communities this platform and through outreach and advocacy activities, we make sure that these voices are being heard. We have identified several issues which need the immediate attention of governing agencies. Areas of concern include ongoing land conflicts across Uganda people with war-related wounds whose plight is forgotten and the future of the Amnesty act. Currently, we are following the lives of several women who have returned recently from LRA captivity and their current situation reinforces the continuous relevance of the amnesty act. At the same time, there are many land conflicts which have the potential to escalate into armed violence if they are not properly addressed.
One of the most pressing legacies of armed conflict in Uganda are disputes over land. During the meeting with community leaders of the relatively small sub-county of Labongo-Amida, 37 land disputes were identified which clearly emphasizes the scale of the problem. The majority of the land conflicts can be solved and reconciled by elders and community leaders. However, some have the potential to spiral out of control. One of these conflicts is the Apaa Land eviction on the border of Amuru and Adjumani.

The conflict started on the 12th of February, 2012, when the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the Uganda Police Force moved in armed personnel to evict Acholi people from their acclaimed ancestral lands. According to UWA, this was a legal act as it constituted a Cabinet directive and because this land was given to them by the communities in Adjumani in 2002 for the purpose of creating a game-reserve. The Acholi inhabitants of Apaa on the other hand claim that this is their ancestral land and they claim that they weren't consulted when the land was given to UWA because at that time they were in the IDP camps. What makes this land conflict particularly dangerous is that it is on the border between two ethnic groups, the Madi and the Acholi and the elites who are behind the conflict appear to be unafraid to use the ethnic card to rally support and possibly incite violence.

So far, this land conflict has led to at least 1 abduction and 1 death according to official records, or 9 deaths according to community accounts. This conflict is already spiraling out of control and it has every potential to escalate. KPDC calls upon the authorities to solve this conflict and reconcile the Madi and Acholi population involved, before more people loose their lives.

**THE APAA LAND EVICTION HAS SO FAR COST THE LIFE OF ONE PERSON ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL FIGURES, AND NINE ACCORDING TO COMMUNITY ACCOUNTS. ONE PERSON HAS BEEN ABDUCTED AND NOBODY KNOWS THE PERSONS WHEREABOUTS. THIS CONFLICT IS ALREADY SPIRALING OUT OF CONTROL AND IT HAS EVERY POTENTIAL TO ESCALATE. KPDC CALLS UPON THE AUTHORITIES TO SOLVE THIS CONFLICT AND RECONCILE THE MADI AND ACHOLI POPULATION INVOLVED, BEFORE MORE PEOPLE LOOSE THEIR LIVES.**
UNTREATED WOUNDS

Untreated wounds is a documentary produced by the KPDC to raise the plight of thousands of people in northern Uganda who have to deal with their war-related injuries on a daily basis. The documentary follows the daily movement of five people whose lives have been destroyed by wounds they sustained during the conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda.

Mr. Apwa Anthony from Atyak was shot back in 1986 during the onset of the conflict between the NRA and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). He claims to have been shot by the NRA during a battle that he was caught up in as a civilian. Because he was unable to get immediate medical care, his bullet wound became infected. Up to this day, Mr. Apwa is unable to urinate while holding his stool. He is unable to have intercourse with his wife. Every movement he makes, comes with excruciating pain, so he tries to move as little as possible. For the past 26 years, Mr. Apwa’s life has been a living hell, yet until our arrival, no one had ever asked him about his plight, and he was unable to reach out.

The five stories are all different, but the effects on the people’s well-being and mental and social state is similar. They are in pain, they have become social outcasts and their injuries do not allow them to process their trauma’s.

For advocacy purposes, this video was recently screened at the conference hosted by the UN office of Human Rights and UNWOMEN on the division and reparations for victims of conflict in northern Uganda.

PUBLIC OUTREACH ACTIVITIES; SCREENING OF THE KWGYOYO CASE

One of Uganda’s challenges in the democratization process is that the majority of Uganda’s citizenry is ill informed about matters that are of their direct concern, which leads to the spread of rumors and persistence of anxieties. The KPDC will be the central information hub regarding everything that is connected to civil conflicts in Uganda and their legacies. Being a central information hub means that we have to reach out and inform communities on issues which are of concern to them. Momentarily, one of the issues that communities are concerned about is the case of Thomas Kwoyelo. Thomas Kwoyelo, former middle-ranking Lord’s Resistance Army commander and allegedly captured in March 2009, was charged with war crimes. He became the first person to be committed to the International Crimes Division. The trial subsequently started on July 11, 2011 in the High Court at Gulu, northern Uganda, in the region where most of Kwoyelo’s alleged atrocities took place. As part of our International Crimes Division monitoring initiative, Refugee Law Project embarked on recording the proceedings related to Kwoyelo trial to which a video documentary was produced named ‘Witness to the Trial; Monitoring the Kwoyelo trial. So far we have conducted public screenings in six different places in Kitgum and Pader district. The average number of people that attended the screening was 150 per venue, meaning that we reached out to around 900 people directly, who will subsequently inform other community members. Reactions to the screening have so far been very positive and communities have expressed a relief in anxiety surrounding the case.
PROFILE OF A RETURNEE FROM THE DRC AND THE CONTINUOUS RELEVANCE OF THE AMNESTY ACT

The Amnesty Act will expire in May 2012, which has sparked a lot of conversation on whether the Act is still relevant, whether is should die a slow death, or whether it should be amended and prolonged. While amnesty has played an important role in securing peace and allowing the return of forcibly abducted children, an increasing number of voices argue that the Act cannot continue in its current form as it is affecting the implementation of meaningful justice for victims by undermining accountability mechanisms for international crimes. The case of Thomas Kwoyelo was a clear example of the friction between amnesty and the call for justice.

While there are many voices that argue that the amnesty act has lost its relevance and that it should die a slow death, the KPDC argues that amnesty hasn’t lost its relevance. Momentarily, the KPDC is following the lives of three girls who returned from LRA captivity as recent as October and November 2011. In the LRA, they have always be warned that they would be imprisoned if they would ever think of escaping and returning to Uganda. One of the girls was abducted on the 4th of October, 2003 as she stayed with the LRA for over 8 years. During her long period in the LRA she has committed crimes against humanity on several attempts. Like most others, she was forced to do this. She never choose to join the LRA. She was forcefully abducted at a very young age and pressured into committing the crime. She was also married out to a high commander and after suffering from continuous rape, she gave birth to two children.

While she did not surrender voluntarily (she was captured by the UPDF), she did receive amnesty and as a result she can now build up her life after 8 years of unimaginable hardship. This is not easy. She is still highly traumatized from her experiences and she received stigma from people in her community, who hold her responsible for LRA crimes. However, because of the Amnesty Act, she is at least free, which means that she now has to opportunity to go to vocational school and to be reunited with her family. Her story emphasized the continuous relevance of the Amnesty Act.

UPCOMING AND ONGOING ACTIVITIES

DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHIVING

We are continuing our analysis and archiving of newspaper articles on the conflict in northern Uganda.

We are going to conduct in-depth key-informant interviews to uncover the stories behind the events in Labongo-Amida.

We are continuing our event scoping activities in the remaining sub-counties in Kitgum district, starting with Labongo-Layamo.

We are continuing conducting life-history interviews with war-affected people who have extraordinary stories to tell.

We are keeping track of ongoing land and clan issues in northern Uganda.

COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

We are making several documentaries on various topics, including untreated wounds, gender and conflict, sexual violence and reintegration of girl soldiers.

We are going to screen the “Witness to the Trial: Monitoring the Kwoyelo trial” documentary in Nwoya district.

MEMORY AND MEMORIALISATION

Very soon we will start with the construction of the war-memorial museum in Kitgum. This war-memorial museum will shed light on various conflict in Uganda, and it will be a place where people can memorize and mourn the dead. Currently, we are collecting cultural artifacts, photos and conflict paraphernalia that can feature in the museum.

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