Remembering the Atiak Massacre
April 20th 1995

Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)

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THE JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION PROJECT: FIELD NOTES

Liu Institute for Global Issues and the
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All of us live as if our bodies do not have souls. If you think of the massacre and the children we have been left with, you feel so bad.[1]

INTRODUCTION

On April 20th 1995, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) entered the trading centre of Atiak and after an intense offensive, defeated the Ugandan army stationed there. Hundreds of men, women, students and young children were then rounded up by the LRA and marched a short distance into the bush until they reached a river. There, they were separated into two groups according to their sex and age. After being lectured for their alleged collaboration with the Government, the LRA commander in charge ordered his soldiers to open fire three times on a group of about 300 civilian men and boys as women and young children witnessed the horror. The LRA commander reportedly in charge – the now indicted second in command Vincent Otti – then turned to the women and children and told them to applaud the LRA's work. Before leaving, youth were selectively rounded up and forced to join the LRA to serve as the next generation of combatants and sexual slaves.

Twelve years later, the wounds of the massacre have far from healed. As the survivor's testimony at the beginning of this report puts it, "all of us live as if our bodies do not have souls." Despite the massacre being one of the largest and by reputation most notorious in the twenty-one year history of the conflict, no official record, investigation or acknowledgement of events exists. No excavation of the mass grave has been conducted and therefore the exact number of persons killed is not known. Survivors literally live with the remains of bullet fragments inside them. Although the massacre site is only a few kilometres from the trading centre, a proper burial of those slaughtered 12 years ago is not complete: as one survivor reminds us, "the bodies of some people were never brought back home, because there were no relatives to carry them home."

Failure to recognize and address the rights and needs of survivors has left them with the feeling of being abandoned, like rubbing salt into the open wounds in Atiak. The situation begs a transitional justice strategy. Although the perpetrators of the massacre are known, blame is apportioned to different parties such as collaborators, the Ugandan army and to the LRA. As this report notes, "the civilians themselves were divided and confused. There were those who had sons in the LRA, and those who had sons in the

[1] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 1 March 2007.

NRA [the National Resistance Army, the precursor to the present government army, the Ugandan People's Defence Forces or UPDF]. As a result, local loyalty and allegiance was divided, with some civilians helping government soldiers and others aiding the rebels." Motivations behind the massacre are not completely known. However, circumstances point to the fact that civilians were targets and pawns in the conflict between the LRA and the Government army: each seeking to destroy popular bases of support of the other.

This report seeks to provide the first known written record of events leading to the massacre based on the testimony of 41 survivors and witnesses, as well as prominent community members. It does not claim to be complete, but rather provides a partial record in hopes of prompting the Government to begin an investigation into the multiple massacres that have taken place in Uganda. Ideally, this will lead the Government to advance a transitional justice strategy, together with civil society, that will begin to heal the open wounds of Atiak. To this end, recommendations are advanced in the final sections of this report.

Following a narrative of the massacre, the report documents and analyzes attempts to keep the massacre in living memory, focusing on the annual commemoration in Atiak. Testimonies illustrate the powerful impact of the ceremony and how it provides a space in which to bring together diverse actors. However, some survivors note that politics and corruption have also crept into the process, discouraging people from attending. Indeed, only 600-1,000 persons attended the 2007 commemoration despite the fact the population in Atiak is in the tens of thousands, and is one in which every clan, family or individual lost someone of significance. Drawing on the findings of a recent JRP study on the potential role of truth-telling at the community level in northern Uganda, the report ends with a series of reflections on steps that could be taken to advance transitional justice, including acknowledgement, truth-telling and reparations.[2]

METHODS

Testimony was gathered in one-on-one interviews with 41 witnesses and survivors of the massacre and in five focus group discussions with witnesses, survivors and formerly abducted persons (group one, 10 male youths of ages 16-35; group two, 8 women of ages 27-80; group 3, 8 women of ages 34 – 75; group four, 10 females of ages 28 – 62; group five, 12 formerly abducted females of ages 12-28). Respondents were purposively selected based on the identification of victims, with the assistance of a local leader (elder, Local Councillor or clergy). This approach was then combined with a random technique of selection through cluster and snowballing methods. Qualitative data was then coded according to discernable patterns and themes, analyzed and cross-checked by research officers to determine an objective set of observations and conclusions. The report was then verified with a group of survivors in a follow-up meeting in June 2007. The report was produced out of a wider research project of JRP to examine the possibilities and role of truth-telling in local mechanisms in relation to atrocities committed over the course of the conflict in northern Uganda.[3] All photographs were taken and used with permission.

PRE-MASSACRE BACKGROUND

In 1986, the guerrilla movement known as the National Resistance Army (NRA, now called the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces or UPDF) seized power in Kampala.

[2] JRP. *The Cooling of Hearts: Truth Telling in Northern Uganda*. Liu Institute for Global Issues and Gulu District NGO Forum, Vancouver and Gulu, Uganda. July 2007.
[3] *Ibid.*

Remnants of the Ugandan Army (composed mainly of Acholi soldiers from the North) retreated north and formed rebel groups, including the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) and *Cilil*. When these rebel groups were defeated, spirit medium Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement lead resistance efforts in the North, only to be defeated in turn in the late 1980s on its advance to Kampala. A cousin of Lakwena's, Joseph Kony, then formed the Lord's Resistance Army which fought the Government until the current cessation of hostilities under the Juba peace talks.

Prior to the massacre, Atiak camp was a small trading centre, with most of the people living in homesteads in the outskirts. About 150 home guards protected the trading centre and the area surrounding it, with about forty government soldiers left to guard the centre itself.

Respondents argued that when the LRA came onto the scene in the late eighties and early nineties, its relationship with locals in Atiak was good. The LRA did not engage in forceful abduction, nor did it kill civilians. Instead, LRA soldiers asked local people for food and recruited youth from willing families.

The relationship between the local populace and the NRA soldiers, on the other hand, was reportedly poor. The NRA was accused by respondents of harassing civilians who came to the centre; asking them for information regarding the rebels. Civilians were divided and confused. There were those who had sons in the LRA, and those who had sons in the NRA. As a result, local loyalty and allegiance was divided, with some civilians helping government soldiers and others aiding the rebels.

When the LRA discovered that some people were collaborating with government soldiers by revealing information regarding rebel hideouts and the locations of weapons caches, the rebels' approach towards the civilian population changed dramatically. Indeed, they turned on the civilian population with a deep vengeance. As a result, most civilians moved closer to the trading centre in order to escape the wrath of the LRA. Others were harassed to move there by government soldiers. However, there were no clear geographical boundaries for Atiak camp at the time of the massacre, and most people settled as closely as they wished to the trading centre.

Survivors of the Atiak Massacre. These men were among the 300 persons shot *en masse* three times. They continue to live with bullets embedded in their bodies.

THE MASSACRE: 20 APRIL 1995, ATIAK, UGANDA

5:00am

An unknown number of LRA rebels entered the trading centre of Atiak, attacking Government soldiers and home guards. Civilian witnesses report that between the hours of five and ten in the morning there was an exchange of heavy gunfire and grenades before the military was eventually overrun by rebels. The LRA reportedly set fire to huts and began looting from local

shops. Individuals recalled that they sought out whatever hiding places they could find by fleeing to the bush, jumping into newly dug pit latrines, or by remaining in their huts. Despite efforts to protect themselves, many civilians were directly caught in the crossfire or specially targeted, with an unknown number of casualties.

At dawn, we started hearing gun shots. At about 8:00am the rates of the gun shots reduced. We came to learn that the rebels had entered the centre and were already abducting people, burning houses and killing people. Just as we were still trying to get refuge somewhere, the rebels got us and arrested us. They gathered us in one place and when we were still in the centre, we could see some dead bodies and wounded people lying about the centre.[4]

Another woman recalled the following:

When the battle had raged for sometime, the rebels headed for the barrack. On their way they fired randomly at the houses…One of my youngest children said to me, "Ma get my books so that we can run." I was so afraid and I had to restrain my kids. The boys in the other room got out, two of them ran away. It was only the elder boy who was too afraid to run because he was a formerly abducted boy.[5] *He entered the house where we were. The battle went all morning. When there was lull, we tried getting out and making a run for it. The [rebels] saw us and fired at us. So we had to take refuge in the house once again. Then I heard one of the soldiers saying that the house we were in should be set ablaze. I got afraid and got out with all the children.*

10:00am

Once the LRA had captured the trading centre, civilians were rounded up and forced to walk into the bush. Some were forced to carry looted goods:

The rebels told us not to run away. We were surrounded and taken to a shop. I was given a sack of sugar to carry, while my eldest by was given a sack of salt.[6]

Another witness recounted their terror on being forced to march into the bush:

They came and pointed a rifle at me. I dropped the child I was carrying and raised my hands. They asked me if all the children were mine. I told them they were my children. They told the children to go home, and told them their mother would follow later after carrying some loads. I refused to surrender the child I was carrying. They then told me to go with them. When we had walked for about a mile they ordered me to put down the child. I refused. They pierced me with a bayonet on the thigh. Then we went for another mile and I was pierced again on the thigh. We walked and when we had reached Ayugi, I was again pierced in the neck. I was now dripping with blood. Then we walked and met with the rest of the people who had been abducted.[7]

En route, military helicopters arrived on the scene. The LRA rebels instructed civilians to remove all light-coloured clothing and to take cover under the brush to avoid detection by the soldiers in the helicopters.

During this time, the LRA attempted to bomb the Atiak Secondary Technical School; the bombs narrowly missing the dorms. Raiding the dormitories, students were forced to join the group of civilians who were rounded up in the town centre and made to march into the bush. It is estimated

[4] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.
[5] It is common knowledge that persons who escaped or abandoned the LRA were often automatically killed if recaptured.
[6] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.
[7] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

that approximately 60 students, some also from Lango and Teso, and a few from the South of the country were among those later killed. As the present chairperson of the Atiak Students Survivor group recalled of his former classmates:

> *We used to read together, play and sleep together. In fact we grew up together in the same clan and homestead. Together we planned a bright future. Now they are gone. They left in the morning when we were awakened by the sounds of a bomb blast in our dormitory. It was meant to hit us. We were captured alive and were heading to unknown direction when a helicopter came and I escaped. My friends didn't. Two days later, I helped their parents identify them among over 300 dead bodies.*[8]

11:00am

The captured civilians arrived in a valley called Ayugi, where there is a stream called Kitang. There, able-bodied men and boys were separated from women, young children and the elderly.[9] Vincent Otti, second-in-command to LRA leader Joseph Kony, lectured the civilians, chastising them for siding with the Government. According to one witness:

> *Otti told us that we were undermining their power. He also said we people of Atiak were saying that LRA guns have rusted. He said he had come to show us that his guns were still functioning. For that matter he ordered us to see how his gun can still work. He then ordered his men to shoot at the civilians.*[10]

According to another eyewitness, Otti ordered his soldiers to kill "anything that breathed":

> *They then commanded children below eleven years and pregnant women and breast-feeding women to stand aside. I had a sizeable child I was carrying. I shifted with them to where they told us to stand. I could not reach my little boy who was seated with students of Atiak technical institute. The remaining group of people was then commanded to lie down. Then they were showered with bullets. Nobody got up to attempt running away. After the bullets were silent, the soldiers were ordered to fire a second time on the dead corpses, probably to make sure. Then they fired a third time to make sure all the people had been shot. Then they turned to us and asked us if we had seen what had happened. We accepted that we had seen. I was so scared because I had seen my boy being shot. I wept silently and my children told me not to cry…My boy had been shot in the leg and was still alive when the rebels came back. They finished him off with a bayonet.*[11]

Another survivor recounted:

> *They began by telling us mothers, pregnant women and children below 13 years to move aside. They told the rest of the people to lie down and for us to look straight at them - if you look at a different direction, they can shoot you dead. They fired at the people first and then again for the second time to ensure that they are all dead…My first-born child, mother-in-law, father-in-law and my husband were all killed as I watched them die. I returned with 4 children whom I am struggling to take care of now.*[12]

[8] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.
[9] It is interesting to note that the LRA they targeted men and boys only. This gender selective form of violence is repeated in other cases during the conflict and is subject to a forthcoming JRP Field Note.
[10] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.
[11] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.
[12] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

After the massacre, others were forced to go with the LRA to carry looted goods. As one survivor explained after showing us the scars on his face and back, many of those abducted did not survive:

> *They selected 10 of us to help them carry wounded soldiers. When we reached Kilak, they beat me up and pierced me with a bayonet. Of the 10 of us who were supposed to carry patients, 9 died; I am the only one who survived.*[13]

Others abducted that day were initiated into the LRA through brutal tactics and went on to fight or act as sexual slaves for senior commanders.

The total number of persons killed in the massacre varies from anywhere between 200 and 300 persons. Some people disappeared and their whereabouts are still unknown, and because in the post-massacre confusion it was not possible to identify all of the dead.

IMMEDIATE POST-MASSACRE

> *The bodies of some people were never brought back home, because there were no relatives to carry them home.*[14]

In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, Betty Bigombe (then Minister for the North) arrived by helicopter with 'many whites' who wanted to photograph the massacre site. Bigombe encouraged the people to go to pick up the bodies from Ayugi and ready them for burial. The process of recovering bodies took several days, and not all could be recovered.

An elderly woman stands next to the graves of some of the massacre victims.

Aid

Several organizations came in to provide help for the survivors. According to the camp authorities, about 2000 iron sheets were delivered by the Government for distribution to the surviving relatives of the victims. Five hundred iron sheets got lost in the process, and were suspected to have been misappropriated. The other 1500 sheets were distributed. Most of the sheets were sold by the recipients. Survivors report having also received blankets, maize and iron sheets from the Government and other organisations.

Survivors complained that although their names have been recorded on several occasions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they have not received material benefits. For orphaned children, for adults who inherited orphaned children, and for the disabled, poverty has been pervasive. Many continue to display signs of trauma, including reports of feeling haunted by the ghosts of the dead, or the inability to recover from feelings of loss and fear.

> *I have a problem that has entered me due to the massacre, I fear going under big trees because I see very many dead bodies lying there. This is because the people were killed under a very big tree. My children also have phobia for*

[13] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.
[14] Interview with Elder, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

thunderstorms due to the experience they had during killing. I keep imagining that it might one time happen again. I saw the killing with my own eyes; it has remained in my memory and my eyes forever. Even if I go to fetch firewood, I become energy-less because I have phobia for bushes.[15]

Restriction of Movement and Forced Military Recruitment

In 1996, a year after the massacre, the area's government-appointed Resident District Councillor (RDC) decided that for the safety of the camp, a boundary had to be created. He therefore gave the command for soldiers to knock down and burn any huts outside the approved boundary and to restrict all movement outside of it. Residents do not recall any major battles after the 1995 incident and claim that the camp was no longer prone to attacks.

Locals remember vividly, however, the forced recruitment of youth by the UPDF in order to boost the ranks of home guards for the camp. On the 20th of June, 1995 the UPDF forcefully recruited youth to join the home guards at a place called Okidi. Another forced recruitment followed a little later, on a market day. The UPDF reportedly swooped upon the unsuspecting shoppers and in the scuffle that followed they forcefully took youth.[16]

Motive and Responsibility for the Massacre

In 1995, one big thing happened here that beat the understanding of us elders. Our own son gave us a very big shame. A real shame to the extent that he killed his own mothers, fathers, brothers [and] sisters...[17]

A number of different theories exist among the local population as to why the LRA perpetrated such a heinous massacre. Some theories focus on the character of LRA General Vincent Otti, the alleged commander of the operation at the time. Otti is a 'son' of Atiak. His home village is situated a few miles out of Atiak camp, at a place called Pacilo. In 1990, he reportedly massacred 37 people – people who were his very own flesh and blood. People in Atiak have asked: if he could murder his very own people, what could stop him from murdering people who were not his relatives?

Other respondents believe the massacre was a form of retaliation for supposedly collaborating with the Ugandan army. At the time, the LRA relied on local food production to ensure their survival. The LRA may have been angered by the relocation of the population to camps, which led to food shortages. To further frustrate the rebels, the Government carried out a scorched-earth policy by cutting down many fruit trees the rebels depended on.

Another account pointed towards a disaffected former NRA soldier. According to the story, the soldier was stripped of his command and handed a lesser position. In anger, he joined the LRA and helped organize the attack.

A collaborator called Luka who was a shop attendant was also there at the scene. I believe he is the one who was behind the killing. The reason why I say this is that this man was so close to Otii Vincent that day. After people had been killed, he went with the rebels to the bush up to now he has not returned because he had already

[15] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

[16] These are unconfirmed incidents that warrant investigation. The JRP research team was unable to individually identify any UPDF soldier who had been forcefully recruited.

[17] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 26 February 2007.

exposed himself and people would hurt him if he had returned."[18]

Yet others believe Otti's main aim was to set an example and make the message clear that the LRA's business was 'to kill'. To set an example for his troops, Otti chose to massacre his own clansmen and village-mates.

Some respondents declined to theorize as to why the massacre took place. One woman who declined to respond told researchers that only Otti himself could answer this question.[19]

REMEMBERING THE MASSACRE: THE CEREMONY OF APRIL 20TH, 2007

The time of organizing the memorial prayer affects me for the entire week both before and after. I do not go to pray as it reminds me and brings sorrow and thoughts about it again as if it has just happened.[20]

Memorials

A memorial stone constructed in memory of the dead welcomes visitors to Atiak. It is a short square concrete pillar with a pointed top, and sits upon a platform raised in three levels. It bears the inscription:

In Loving Memory of our Sons
And Daughters Massacred In
Atiak On 20-4-1995
May Their Soul Rest
In Eternal Peace

The majority of persons interviewed by JRP indicated the importance of being able to bury the dead with dignity, providing last funeral rights. However, not all could with manage to do this, and as a result, look to the memorial stone and annual assembly to commemorate the dead as one means of reaching out to them.

With support from different NGOs and local camp leaders, an annual memorial prayer is organized by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) in commemoration of those killed. In past ceremonies, survivors have testified about the massacre.


Participants at the Atiak memorial ceremony.

The 2007 ceremony was held on the grounds of the local primary school, where there were plenty of huge trees to provide shade for the large number of people attending the gathering. A tent was set up to house the religious leaders who led the prayers and the other visitors who came from town. The rest of the camp folk took their seats under the shady trees. The ceremony was supposed to have started at nine o'clock, but due to the late arrival of guests, it commenced much later at around noon. The guests started trickling in at around ten o'clock.

There was a colourful mixture of guests, ranging from politicians and members of civil society organizations to the relatives of the dead who were living in Gulu Town or in other parts of the country. There were also foreign nationals. They cut an impressive figure among the local people as the arrived in their cars. Among the dignitaries was the Member of Parliament for Kilak County, Hon. Michael Ocula, and

[18] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.
[19] Comment by a local woman leader of Atiak IDP camp, Atiak Camp, 19 April 2007.
[20] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

the newly elected chairman of Amuru district, who also happened to be returning to Atiak for the first time since winning the elections in 2006. The importance of the occasion, both socially and politically, is hence evident. In total, there were between six hundred and one thousand people in attendance.

As the people waited for the guests to arrive and for the ceremony to begin, the two choirs from the Anglican and Catholic churches sang funeral songs, creating an atmosphere of mourning. The proceedings can be summarized as follows:

The opening

There was a procession as the religious leaders filed in to lead the prayers. They were representative of all the religious denominations in Atiak. There was a Catholic reverend, an Anglican catechist, a born-again pastor, and a Muslim imam. The prayers were led by the Catholic catechist. He led the people through an opening prayer and then announced that there would be a procession to the memorial stone for the second part of the occasion, which was the laying of wreaths. The procession to the memorial stone was led by students of Lwani Memorial College, followed by a choir, then the religious leaders who were followed by the VIPs, and finally the general public. It took about ten minutes for all members of the public to get to the stone. When everyone had gotten to the stone, the people encircled it with the religious leaders taking center stage at the front of the memorial, flanked by the VIPs and the choir.

Laying of wreaths

The laying of wreaths was perhaps the most solemn and most earnest part of the ceremony. After the religious leaders had uttered a few words of prayers, the memorial stone was sprinkled with holy water on all the four sides by each of the religious leaders, as the choir sang on in their sombre notes. Then a basket of wreaths was produced and laid by different categories people. They included the local camp leaders (The Local Councillors - or LCs - I, II and III, the camp commandant, the women councillor and a youth representative), a survivor of the massacre, a representative from one of the NGOs in Atiak, a traditional leader, the Amuru District Chairman, the guest of honour for the day (Hon. Michael Ochula), the religious leaders, and finally anyone from the general public who wanted to lay a wreath. The wreaths were made of banana fibre woven into a circle and covered by red flowers. About twenty wreaths were laid in total.

A district official lays a wreath at the Atiak memorial stone.

As the people stepped out to lay the wreaths, the choir accompanied them with songs. Most of the participants laying wreaths ceremoniously said a few words in memory of the victims. Perhaps the most touching words were those uttered by the traditional leader representing the elders of Ker Kwaro Acholi. He said, “I lay a wreath of flowers today as a symbol of the life that you lived and that we all live. Our lives are all like flowers. We bloom, and then one day we all wither away and die.”

He, like all the other people stepping out to lay wreaths then led the congregation in the funeral litany, “*Kuc me labinaka mi ki gin Rwot – Ki taa ma pe tum kalyel ki gin – Guywee ki Kuc – Amen”* (Eternal rest grant them, Lord – And the everlasting light shine

upon them – And their souls rest in peace – Amen).

This prayer, usually uttered at all funerals by the priest and mourners, was not new to many of the people gathered there. However, the solemnity of the moment and the people for whom the words were being uttered had a chilling effect on all the people gathered there. Each time a person stepped up to lay a wreath, the public tensed, with all eyes fixed on him or her.

Launch of Atiak Lwani Development Association (ALDA)

There was then the launch of the Atiak Lwani Development Association by the guest of honour, Hon. Michael Ochula. He planted a tree next to the memorial as a sign of the launch. According to the chairman of the Association, this organization has been created with the purpose of bringing development to Atiak and to tackle a wide range of developmental issues such as land disputes, environmental concerns and cooperative societies for farmers, and gender development. The Chairman had been one of the people behind the origin of Lwani Memorial College and was now starting ALDA, but ALDA was not in any way connected to the memorial.

Conclusion of prayers

The procession then marched back to the venue of the prayers, which were concluded after readings had been taken from the Bible and a sermon had been delivered by the Catholic catechist. Some of the participants dozed through it, while others paid no attention altogether. This was probably an indication that the most significant part of the prayers – at the memorial stone – was past for most of the people.

Speeches and Entertainment

Speeches were then delivered by selected people. There was a welcome by the area LC I Chairman. There then followed a speech by the Chairman of ALDA, who led a fundraising call for the new association. In total, 219,400 shillings (US$130) was raised in hard cash, with 100,000 (US$60) coming from the guest of honour. The Chairman of the district pledged 200,000 (US$120). One of the survivors of the massacre, Samuel Ocaya, then spoke, but his speech lasted not more that two minutes and it did not dwell much on the massacre, nor on the plight of victims. The representative of ARLPI (the event organizer) was also given a chance to speak. Other politicians who spoke included the woman councillor, the District Chairman, and the guest of honour. The speeches were punctuated by breaks in which entertainment was provided for the people by various drama groups which were present. After, there was refreshment and departure, and entertainment for those willing to stay.

HONOURING THE DEAD: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The significance of memorial prayers

> *The prayers help in many ways, and it does not only help the people of Atiak, but even people who are outside, because even strangers died in the massacre. Among the students of Atiak technical institute for example, there were people of other tribes. The prayers try to unburden sorrows of people who lost their loved ones because they get to see that other people also care about them and are united with them in mourning for their dead people.*[21]

The underlying question that needs to be answered here is whether memorials of the massacre that occurred in Atiak are of any significance to the people, and whether they are in any way helpful to survivors of the massacre and the relatives of those who were killed. Put simply, do the people of

[21] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.

Atiak want memorials to acknowledge the horrible killings that occurred in 1995 and to honour their dead loved ones?

Based on observations of the memorial ceremony and on prior interviews conducted in Atiak, the memorial prayers is of great significance to several people of Atiak, most especially the survivors and the people who lost their loved ones. Many of the victims, survivors and relatives of the dead who attended the function derived a great satisfaction from the ceremony. To this end, the efforts put in by the local leaders of ARLPI and a few community members in organizing the event is worth noting.[22]

People attended the prayers from places as far as Kampala, which further shows the significance of the prayers by bringing together people from places far and wide. The religious leaders who conducted the ceremony did so in solidarity with differences in theology set aside. The Muslim imam sat next to Catholic catechists and reverends, who in turn rubbed shoulders with the Anglican catechists as they prayed solemnly. In general, the day was successful and achieved its symbolic end - which was to remember those who had been massacred, a view to which the head boy of Lwani Memorial College agrees:

> *It is a good thing which should happen every year because it helps us to remember our colleagues who were killed and after whom this school was named.*[23]

The monument, which was constructed in memory of the dead, is a further testimony of the need for memorials. To most of the surviving relatives, this simple plain brick and concrete structure with inscriptions on a marble tile is the only benefit they have as a memory of their loved ones. Finally, Lwani Memorial College also serves a component in the commemoration of the Atiak massacres. The school continues to grow despite the financial constraints it is having, which have forced it continue being hosted in the buildings at Atiak primary school. Nevertheless, the students have increased in number, and a new classroom block has been put up at its new site on land donated by a well-wisher. All the above are signs that memorials are of significance to the people of Atiak.

The shortfalls

> *They serve tea and sodas for big people at the occasion. For us who survived we have been neglected, they have not given us anything. I, however, do not miss [attending] the prayers because it is God who saved my life. The only thing that hurts me most is that I did not get any help, yet I almost died. Even if it was something like 1 bar of soap, it would make me feel better. But the local leaders here in Atiak, when anything is given through them to support people, they sit on it. Usually during such prayers also they give something like soap to families whose*

[22] The ceremony itself was largely funded by community members through small contributions in cash or in kind. The majority of names on the contributions list for the ceremony were of the community members themselves, despite the fact that there were not more that 65 names on it. Furthermore, the community members organized themselves to provide voluntary labour for organizing the venue for the prayers, providing entertainment, and preparing the refreshment.

[23] Comment by head boy of Lwani Memorial College, Atiak Camp, 20 April 2007.

relatives were killed, but not us who are still alive.[24]

The annual memorial prayers themselves reduce in significance each passing year, partly due to social amnesia and partly due to the way in which the ceremony itself is organised - which has consequently led to a number of people boycotting the prayers, victims inclusive. The number of people who attended the memorial on the 20th of April was disproportionate to the population of Atiak Camp as a whole, which is populated by thousands of people. This is a population in which every clan, family or individual lost someone of significance. As this year's ceremony was taking place, business boomed as usual in the town centre; the mango sellers and food kiosk operators as busy as normal. It was like any other ordinary day in Atiak. Where one would have expected a holiday declared, shops closed, and the camps empty of people, it was exactly the opposite.

Insofar as the prayer ceremony itself was concerned, most of the speeches did not dwell long on the massacre and what happened. Most of the speakers, the majority of whom were politicians, made mere mentions of it and proceeded hastily to deliver their speeches concerning other topics. Even the survivor who spoke did not dwell long on the massacre - he did not tell his story as many people had hoped, and neither did he give a testimony. He only introduced himself, said that he was one of the survivors, asked people to continue commemorating the massacre and thanked all for listening to him. His speech lasted exactly two minutes, and those present suspected that he had been instructed by the master of ceremonies to save time. The names of victims were also not read as many people had hoped. An Italian national who attended the ceremony had this to say:

I was surprised by the way the ceremony was conducted because I expected that it would focus on remembering what happened here in the past. I felt the last part of the gathering was political. It is okay for politicians to make use of such gatherings to address their people and discuss their plans but they should not have focused too much on that. The importance of this ceremony is that the people gather and remember what happened. But today the focus was diverted.[25]

Furthermore, the ceremony was also poorly funded. The fact that meagre cash contributions were made by not more than a hundred people in a camp of thousands further deals a blow to the significance of the ceremony to the local camp folk.[26] In the beginning, the ceremony was probably funded by NGOs, but it has now lost priority for donors.[27]

The JRP representative spoke with one survivor of the massacre who lost six of his family members and now takes care of a large number of orphans. He was sceptical about the way the authorities organized the ceremony. In his view, it had become a fundraising event for associations such as ALDA, and had been hijacked by politicians who used it as an opportunity to get political support. According to him, many people were not happy about the way the memorial ceremony was being used to achieve other ends, which he considered selfish. Like many other survivors, he had boycotted the ceremony:

The memorial ceremony has lost meaning to us. There is usually fundraising at the

[24] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

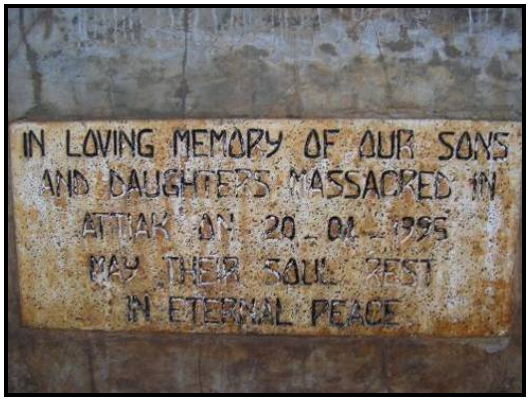
[25] Comment by a foreign national, Atiak Camp, 20 April 2007.

[26] In fact, much of the food was contributed in kind by the locals themselves.

[27] According to the local authorities, a figure of about 3.5 million shillings (US$ 2,100) would be required for a successful organization of the event.

event but we do not know where the money goes. We do not know to whose account it goes. I feel the money should have been deposited in a village account for victims. Even the school that was constructed is for business. The gathering in preparation for this memorial is always held in town. We victims have no knowledge of how much money is raised for it and how it is used. There is also a lot of politics involved in it.[28]

The memorial stone



The Atiak memorial plaque.

The monument is not well maintained at all. We asked the authorities to fence it but they have done nothing so far. As a result children are always playing on it. It is always dirty and sometimes human feces are littered around it. There are no flowers planted around to make it look attractive. This makes us very sad when we see how it is neglected. We lost children who were potential ministers, engineers and even doctors in the massacre. That monument is all we have left to remember them.[29]

Signs of neglect and lack of maintenance are evident. The site is unfenced; the concrete is beginning to wear away as humans and the weather take their toll around it; children are always playing around it; sometimes human waste is dumped next to it by residents who live nearest to it; the surface of the concrete itself is dirty; and there is always debris lying around or on the platform itself. When the JRP representative visited the stone on the eve of the memorial prayers, the bushes which had flourished around it – all year round it seems – had not yet been weeded. Three men and a woman, who were supposed to have been weeding the bushes and cleaning the stone, were found drinking local brew. They offered their assurances that the memorial would be clean the next morning. True to their word, the next day the platform had been swept clean, and the weeds around it had been cleared. Alas, they had forgotten to wipe the white marble surface bearing the inscription aforementioned. It seems someone noticed their blemish sometime during the course of the prayers at the stone, because on the day after the prayers it had been wiped clean at last. However, the concrete surface still remained dirty. The neglect of the stone by the local authorities is something which troubles some civilians greatly, most especially those who lost their loved ones. To them, the stone is much more than just a piece of concrete. It holds a dear place in their hearts because for most of them, it is the only tangible indicator that the world cares and remembers about their loved ones. It therefore breaks their hearts to see the stone poorly maintained.

Lwani Memorial College

Constructed in memory of the dead people, the college continues to flourish. The number of students has increased, and recently a classroom block was constructed on land donated by a well-wisher. It is the pride of Atiak, and most of the students are sponsored by the Government under the Universal Secondary Education program. The College, however, faces financial hardships, and some members of the community view it as a personal business for the man who was at the forefront of its founding.

[28] Comment by a survivor of the Atiak Massacre, Atiak Camp, 20 April 2007.
[29] Comment by a survivor of the Atiak Massacre, Atiak Camp, 20 April 2007.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REVAMPING THE EXISTING MEMORIAL STRATEGIES

By 2010, the number of the people attending the ceremony may dwindle down to one hundred if nothing is done.[30]

If the annual prayers are to continue having any significance at all, the flaws concerning how they are organized must be corrected. Although the lack of a guaranteed financier means that funding for a successful event is meagre, a lot can still be done by the local authorities concerning the way the ceremony itself is organised.

For one, the local authorities should ensure that the overall focus of the memorial ceremony is on the massacre that occurred. Apart from the laying of the wreaths and the preaching by the religious leaders, there was no other indication that the ceremony was in memory of the massacre which occurred. The organizers need to find a way of cutting down on the politics in the speeches of the politicians, and replace them with testimonies from surviving victims and relatives of those massacred. The authorities also need to make sure that the ceremony is attended by survivors, and the surviving relatives of the victims. There should also be other acts such as reading of the names of those massacred, and the fundraising should be directed at helping survivors and victims.

The monument needs to be properly maintained with the respect and dignity it deserves. Rather than waiting all year round for when the memorial ceremony is to be held and then rushing to clean up the memorial, the local authorities should ensure that it is constantly weeded, cleaned and free of waste. Then they need to ensure that it is fenced and, if possible, a few flowers planted around it. Most importantly, the local authorities should explore the option of inscribing the names of the victims onto the monument.

Lwani Memorial College also requires more funding; it has progressed quickly – as witnessed by the growing number of students and, most recently, the successful construction of a classroom block.

Transitional Justice

The three existing memorials, (the monument, the annual memorial prayers, and the construction of Lwani Memorial College), leave a lot to be desired. To date there has been no official acknowledgement of the massacre; there have been no attempts at establishing the truth about what happened; there has been no discussion of who should be held accountable; and most importantly there have been no attempts to make reparations to the survivors of the massacre or the surviving relatives of the people who died. The existing mechanisms, much as they have been helpful to some degree, therefore pale in comparison to the task which still remains to be done if justice is to be served for the people of Atiak. There must be:

a) **Acknowledgement;**

If Otti should ever return, then he must speak out. He should say "I was fighting against the Government, but I took people from here and killed them in the bush with my fighters." He must admit to this.[31]

According to Alex Boraine, Chairman of the International Center for Transitional Justice, "the process of reconciliation has often been hindered by the silence or denial of political leaders concerning their own responsibilities and the failure of the state. On the other hand, when leaders are prepared to speak honestly and generously about what their own involvement or at least, the involvement of their government was, then

[30] Comment by a survivor of the Atiak Massacre, Atiak Camp, 20 April 2007.

[31] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.

the door is open for the possibility of some reconciliation amongst the citizens."[32] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela elaborates that "public acknowledgement requires that perpetrators and those in whose name they committed the acts must account publicly. That is to say, beyond simply saying these are the things that happened. The accountability must be at the level of recognizing the hurt and the pain that was committed – recognizing that these deeds resulted in pain to another person. Once that happens, the perpetrator, the person who is acknowledging publicly that these things did happen, recognizes the pain of the victim."[33]

Inasmuch as the perpetrators are concerned, the victims and survivors we spoke with emphasized their desire that the LRA and its commanders acknowledge the atrocity and ask for forgiveness:

> *Otti should first ask for forgiveness on return. He should kneel down before the people of Atiak and ask them for pardon because he killed his own brothers and sisters. He should come and tell us why he killed people, what angered him to kill, he should also tell us why he went to the bush and came back to kill his own people.*[34]

There has never been a formal acknowledgement of responsibility by either the Government of Uganda or the LRA rebels for their part in the incident that resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives. While it is no secret that the attack was led by Vincent Otti, or that the command could have been issued by Joseph Kony, the LRA has yet to come out and publicly claim responsibility for the incident, or even acknowledge that it happened at all. The LRA either stands by its act or apologizes to the people of Atiak for the needless killings which resulted in the death of several hundred innocent civilians, and has left a population traumatized and affected by the after-effects of the killings.

The Government, on the other hand, needs to apologize for having played the role of bystanders in one way or another, because it was charged with the responsibility of protecting the people; a task it failed to perform. According to an ex-home guard soldier serving with the UPDF at the time of the attack, about only 40 soldiers were available to guard the local detach when the rebels pounced. These forty soldiers were easily outnumbered, not surprisingly, because they did not have enough guns to arm all of them at once.

Despite having delivered a little aid in the aftermath of the massacre, the bitter fact is that the Government has never publicly acknowledged its responsibility in the Atiak massacre. Other acts such as the construction of the memorial stone, the holding of memorial prayers and the construction of Lwani Memorial College reflect just a small percentage of the whole that must be done to publicly acknowledge what happened. Besides, as already noted, these existing mechanisms have certain problems that must be addressed.

Public acknowledgement on the part of the LRA will facilitate reconciliation, because it will be a sign that its ranks are penitent and ready to seek forgiveness from the victims. For the rank and file soldiers or those who 'simply obeyed orders,' it will be an indication that they are accepting responsibility for their acts and are sharing in the pain that they meted out to their victims, thus creating a change in the way

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[32] Alex Boraine, *"Transitional Justice"* in "Pieces of the Puzzle: Keywords on Reconciliation and Transitional Justice" Edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and Erik Doxtader. Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Compress, 2004. p 70

[33] Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *"The role of apology, acknowledement, and forgiveness"* in Alex Borraine and Sue Valentine Et al, "Transitional Justice and Human Security," Chapter 4: Reconciliation, Co–existence and the building trust. pp 79-82 International Center for Transitional Justice, Cape Town, 2006

[34] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 28 February 2007.

the victims feel about them. According to Gobodo-Madikizela, it makes "the perpetrator to appear to be the one who is wounded, who is begging to be re-admitted into the realm of humanity."[35]

b) **Truth-telling;**

> *To us the Acholi, if by some mistake you get involved in any crime then you have to get cleansed to see to it that the bad luck that might unfold after such has been committed does not. It's only after you have been able to bring out the truth that eventually then you can see for reconciliation unveil. The Acholi traditional practices allow for the truth to first be established through a voluntary means before the reconciliation process proceeds. Like for my case I would be more comfortable to reveal this kind of truth to my parents.*[36]

According to Alex Boraine, "from truth-telling, victims can obtain significant benefits that may include a sense of closure derived from knowing the fate of loved ones, and a sense of satisfaction of the acknowledgement of that fate."[37] In a 2007 quantitative study conducted by the JRP with 1,143 internally displaced persons, a resounding 97.5 percent of the persons responded "yes" to the question "should the truth about what happened in the conflict be known?" War-affected persons identified at least four main reasons why a truth-telling process should be implemented: 1) To understand the root causes of the conflict (in particular, why the LRA or the Government took the actions they did) in order to teach future generations and prevent future conflicts; 2) to learn what happened to loved ones who are still missing; 3) to be able to move towards reconciliation (*mato oput*). In this case, 'forgiveness' under the amnesty law is not viewed as an end, but a first step in a process that should lead to truth, acknowledgement, compensation and finally reconciliation; and 4) and to lay the spirits of the dead to rest and cleanse the region of future misfortunes.

For any crime, no matter the gravity, in Acholi culture the truth about what happened must first be established before reconciliation or a cleansing can take place. In the event that perpetrators of the Atiak massacre other than Vincent Otti can be identified, and the ceremony of *mato oput* carried out, the truth of what happened should therefore first be known. Apart from reconciliatory purposes, it is important that the truth is known in order to understand the motive behind the massacre.

> *I do not know why they killed very many people like this, we just conclude inside your heart but you cannot know the reasons.*[38]

Other questions that were posed to respondents concerned the dynamics of any potential truth-telling process, such as: Who should tell the truth? Should the process be voluntary or forced? Should it be in public or in private? What fears would the participants have about participating? Who would participants trust to be in charge of the process? Many of the respondents felt that perpetrators and victims should take a lead role in telling the truth, which should be a voluntary process held in public and spearheaded by local people (such as traditional leaders). Several fears were also cited, such as fear of retaliation from perpetrators.

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[35] *Ibid*

[36] Focus Group discussion with 8 male youths, Atiak Camp, 28th February 2007, comment by a 25 year old male

[37] Alex Boraine, *"Transitional Justice"* in "Pieces of the Puzzle: Keywords on Reconciliation and Transitional Justice." Edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and Erik Doxtader. Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Compress, 2004. p 71

[38] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

c) **Compensation**

> *Those who lost relatives were given iron sheets but the survivors got nothing...I never got any assistance from anywhere after all that occurred to me*.[39]

Alex Boraine argues that "in the absence of other positive and tangible manifestations, truth by itself can be considered an empty gesture – as cheap and inconsequential as talk."[40] In five days of research by the JRP in Atiak IDP Camp, one of the questions that was posed to the victims and survivors who were being interviewed was, "Is knowing the truth about what happened to your loved ones enough to bring you healing?" The majority of the respondents argued that the truth alone was not enough, and they went ahead to outline a variety of things that they thought could be done in addition to knowing the truth about what had happened to their loved ones. While some of the victims said they wanted the lives of their loved ones compensated and the ceremony of *mato oput* held, others called for community or collective reparations:

> *It is not possible for Otti to pay compensation for all the people who died; they killed very many people. Even me who lost someone, I cannot ask Otti to pay compensation, but he has to ask for forgiveness and he is forgiven.*[41]

In a 2005 study conducted by the JRP, several elders agreed that *mato oput* could not be pursued on a case-by-case basis because so many people had been killed and because the nature of the killings (such as ambushes) make it difficult to identify who killed whom or who should *mato oput* with whom. The same is the case in the Atiak massacre, where the name most often mentioned as the commander is that of Vincent Otti. Even if Otti were to admit responsibility for the killings, it is not in the least bit possible that he would be able to pay up for all the lives lost at the massacre - let alone accept to participate in the over five hundred ceremonies of *mato oput* which will be awaiting him.

> *The biggest problem we have here is there are very many orphans in the Camp. I wish these records could be forwarded to the Government so that we are assisted. Many parents were killed in this conflict leaving behind very many orphans to the extent that many have grown up into undisciplined children. I have photos of 5 girls who were defiled by the UPDF. This took place in January this year but the soldiers have been relocated to another place. Very many children have become thieves due to lack of guidance as their parents were killed in the war, especially the 1995 massacre. For us, the local leaders think these children are displaying anger, some of them even say they are useless - that is why they are neglected. If they grow up like this then we are in problems.*[42]

Some elders have therefore advocated for other measures, such as collective or community compensation in the form of having schools, hospitals, and other community amenities built as reparations for the people of Atiak. It must be remembered, however, that on a case-by-case basis, many people in Atiak have personal problems that may not be addressed by collective reparations. On a personal level, due to financial constraints, many of the people have never decently buried their dead because they do not have the resources to conduct the last funeral rights (which are

[39] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 26 February 2007.

[40] Alex Boraine, "Transitional Justice" in *Pieces of the Puzzle: Keywords on Reconciliation and Transitional Justice*. Edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and Erik Doxtader. Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Compress, 2004. p 71

[41] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 27 February 2007.

[42] Interview with Atiak massacre survivor, Atiak Camp, 26 February 2007.

elaborate and expensive ceremonies in Acholi; held as a final honour to the dead person).

There are also the children orphaned by the massacre and the women widowed by the loss of their husbands, who were in most cases the bread-winners for their families. In the former case, many of these children live with other relatives who may not care for them appropriately, while in the latter, many of the widows are rendered vulnerable and have to struggle by all means available to provide for their children. In general, victims and surviving relatives from the massacre continue to live in extreme poverty - and this just does not allow the ghosts of the past to go away. Compensation for the massacre, either individually on a case-by-case basis, or communally in form of better social services, is not an option, but a 'must' which will have to be considered by policy-makers. For many people, the truth has to be backed up by some form of tangible compensation, which they believe will make them feel better.

LAYING THE DEAD TO REST: THE WAY FORWARD IN ATIAK

While a dozen years have passed since the mass murder at Atiak Camp, the horrors of war are still part of the everyday reality in Atiak and northern Uganda. The local populace widely acknowledges Vincent Otti to have commanded the brutal massacre, but neither can it absolve the Government of its sins: the failure to protect its own citizens and its indifference in the face of their suffering. In the context of the ongoing peace talks in Juba and in particular agenda item 3, dedicated to accountability and reconciliation, stakeholders must recognize local-level atrocities and ensure that victims and survivors receive the support (material and moral) they deserve.

The Justice and Reconciliation project, through its interviews and dialogues with survivors, has identified a deep-seeded desire for government acknowledgement, a wider truth-telling process in northern Uganda and compensation to victims and survivors. In addition, the perpetrators – the active and the passive alike – must be held accountable. Only through the concerted effort of parties to the Juba peace talks can the people of Atiak lay the dead to rest and move forward with their lives.

Field Notes is a series of reports by the JRP. Each issue features a new theme related to Acholi cultural justice practices based on research carried out with war-affected persons in camps and special justice issues that arise during the course of JRP work. Drawing directly on the experiences and initiative of victims, Field Notes are intended to inform and improve local, national and international policies and programmes on justice and reconciliation. The JRP field office is hosted by the Gulu, District NGO Forum.

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Survivor of Atiak Massacre, 20 April 2007.

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