



The Launch of the Research Report

**“Alone and Frightened: The Experiential Stories of Former
Child Soldiers of Northern Uganda.”**

Joint Partnership between Arigatou International, GNRC and Goldin Institute

September, 2015

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Acronyms

ACRL— R/P : African Council of Religious Leaders — *Religions for Peace*

AIN : Arigatou International- Nairobi

AI : Arigatou International

CEO : Chief Executive Officer

CHA : Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

DDR : Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration

FCS : Former Child Soldier

GI : Goldin Institute

GNRC : Global Network of Religions for Children

IRCU : Interreligious Council of Uganda

LRA : Lord’s Resistance Army

SG : Secretary General

SUPKEM : Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims

1.0 Introduction

The Goldin Institute (GI) and Arigatou International (AI) partnered with the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), the African Council of Religious Leaders — Religions for Peace (ACRL— R/P) and the Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU) to conduct a research in Northern Uganda on reintegration of former child soldiers under the theme “Alone and Frightened: The Experiential Stories of Former Child Soldiers of Northern Uganda.”

The overall purpose of the research was to document and analyze the experiences and challenges of the former child soldiers (FCS) with regard to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) agenda of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement-CHA (2006). Focus was on investigating their reintegration within the families and communities to identify gaps that GI-AI partnership would prioritize at program implementation.

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide a platform for FCS to share their experiences.
- To establish family and community perceptions and attitude towards FCS.
- To identify gaps in reintegration interventions for former child soldiers under the DDR Program.
- To establish coping mechanism devised by FCS.
- To make relevant recommendations for effective reintegration.

The final report was published in 2014 and officially launched on September 30, 2015 at the Sarova Panafric Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, in a ceremony attended by more than 40 people. The participants were representatives of different groups and organizations including child rights and other non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, national security and anti-terrorism units, diplomatic missions, media, high level government officials, GI and AI officials and staff, and representatives of FCS from Gulu, Northern Uganda.

2.0 Proceedings of the Launch

Welcome Remarks

Mr. Edmund Mudibo, the moderator of the event, welcomed and thanked every guest for attending the forum despite their busy schedules. This was followed by a silent moment of prayer.

Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali, the Secretary General (SG), GNRC and also the CEO of AIN gave the welcoming remarks and provided a brief on GNRC as an organization noting that GNRC is active in over forty two (42) countries across the globe. Dr. Mustafa made a call to everyone present to join the struggle of building a stable world for children. He further explained that the impact of child soldiering as a form of violent extremism is disastrous and as each day progresses, thousands of children get exposed to the menace. He stressed that everyone is a stakeholder in fighting violent extremism. Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali concluded his remarks by acknowledging the efforts of GI and AI in addressing the issue of child soldiers.

Video Projection

Mr. Mudibo played a video documentary which highlighted the situation of the FCS, their plight and struggles, their dreams and ambitions and the interventions so far undertaken to reintegrate them.

The event moderator deeply appreciated the resolve of FCS saying he saluted them for taking the courage to live again. He hoped that such injustices would never be repeated again in Uganda nor anywhere in the world.

Speech presentations

Main speeches were made by Prof. Abdulhafur Elbusaidy, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) and Board Chairman of Arigatou International –Nairobi, and Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, the Advisor to Kenya’s President on Peace, Cohesion and Conflict Resolution

Prof. Elbusaidy highlighted statistics reflecting the great suffering of children in armed conflict situations in the world today, noting that 6 million children have been severely injured in civil wars, 3 million displaced, more than 300,000 exploited, and many more lost or their whereabouts, unknown.

He decried the continuing dehumanizing violations against children today including recruitment, rape, killing, abduction, physical attack and denial of their child rights. The SUPKEM chairman pointed out that due to the injustices that children are exposed to at a very tender age, many tend to suffer long term trauma and other psychological damage. He concluded by reminding everyone of their duty to stop all forms of torture and exploitation of children, urging the participants to strive to rid the society of violent extremism.

Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia started off his presentation by acknowledging the realization by the community of the need to come up with possible solutions to child rights abuses. He said that the modern day world has taught mankind to strive to be the ultimate survivor; that includes minimising risks and problems and regaining lost strengths.

Dr. Kobia emphasized the need for the community to be at the forefront of forgiveness and reconciliation processes. He elaborated that forgiveness should be two-pronged; the community learning to forgive the child soldiers and accepting them back and also forgiving the perpetrators of civil war who caused them torment and suffering including killing their loved ones. The President’s advisor further advised that citizens should have the willingness to progress and initiate their own peace processes. He noted that communities and faith based organisations were best placed to initiate peace, development and forgiveness processes.

Dr. Kobia concluded by urging everyone to have faith in God because faith provides an avenue of hope through which tremendous strides can be made in empowering FCS and war affected communities. He also commended GI and AI’s effort in pioneering peace and development.

Remarks by Goldin Institute Officials

The Executive Director of the GI, Mr. Travis Rejman expressed his utmost gratitude to the guests for availing themselves for the launch, noting that it motivates him to fight more for the children’s welfare.

Mr. Rejman explained that their program and struggle to build peaceful societies, dates back to the Colombian war period, when gang wars in the streets became the order of the day, becoming a serious issue of concern. It was then that the Goldin Institute decided to initiate programs to help youth who were being recruited into modern day violence and extremism. While the journey towards liberating Colombians hasn’t been an easy one, Mr Rejman lauded the

unrelenting efforts by GI that have effectively succeeded in directing the youth in the right direction over the years.

Mr. Rejman pointed out that GI majorly concentrates its activities in violent' stricken areas or in third world countries. He stressed that their initiatives wouldn't be successful without the efforts of the local communities, being the ones to help conduct research, diagnose the problem and come up with strategic solutions. He highlighted the efforts of GI and AI that have been pivotal in supporting reintegration of former child soldiers, and urged every participant to join in supporting the program.

Ms. Diane Goldin the Founder and Board Chair of Goldin Institute, thanked all the guests for their support towards the launch. She noted that the struggle towards liberating and empowering returnees and FCS as a whole is not an easy task. Ms. Goldin revealed that her encounter with child soldiers, has shaped her life and thinking in significant ways especially the realization that there are many people out there who do not live the life they deserve and desire because of the situation they are born in. She underscored the importance of ensuring peace and harmony through our daily practices noting that everyone had a duty to fight menaces that hinder children's progress.

Testimonies from former child soldiers

Mr. Charles Okello a victim of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) child abduction, and a beneficiary of the education scholarship initiated by AI and GI narrated his chilling five years' experience in the hands of LRA.

Charles was abducted during Christmas Eve as he was going to visit his grandmother. He spoke of the continuous relocation occasioned by fear of retaliation from government forces and other militia groups. He noted that survival was only for the able and fit, and if one weren't able to 'game up' then being killed became the other option. Competition for scarce resources and power in the camps led to frequent killings and threats.

The painful reminder of the past was so painful to Charles that at some point he broke down in tears. He expressed remorse for his evil actions and those of others noting that former child soldiers acted against their own will just to survive. Charles wished that those actions they committed such as killing, looting, rape, harassing, stealing and plotting murders of high in the government officials could be reversed. To this day Charles has not been able to fully forgive himself from his past. Charles pleaded for forgiveness from the community in Uganda saying he was ready to face any form punishment if need be.

Charles remains grateful to his sponsors for changing his life and more importantly for the peace initiatives running on the ground. He said he was currently trying to reintegrate himself and live a normal life as he and others continue to advocate for community acceptance of all returnees and former child soldiers.

Mr. Geoffrey Omony also a former child soldier and currently a beneficiary of GI-AI education scholarship started by thanking Mr. Travis Rejman, Ms. Dianne Goldin, Dr. Dorcas Kiplagat and Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali for giving him a chance to repair his life that was broken. Geoffrey said he remembers the ordeals in captivity as if it were yesterday. One brutal event that has stuck in Geoffrey's memory is the attack they meted on a school, killed one teacher, cooked his remains and forced the school members to feed on it. This was a way to discourage any efforts towards education during the war period.

Like Charles, Geoffrey underwent a lot of torture and suffering only escaping during a clash between government forces and the LRA militia. Geoffrey decried the continued victimization and stigmatization of FCS by a community who in his view should understand better and empathize with the situation of former child soldiers in northern Uganda.

Ms. Janet Arach was the only female victim of LRA abduction who managed to attend the launch. As a young girl in lower secondary school, she was confident of a bright future until the fateful day when she was abducted. Janet remains thankful to God for being the only survivor of the gunfire exchange between the LRA and the government's forces that followed her abduction. She suffered sexual and physical abuse in addition to deprivation of food and other basic requirements while in captivity.

In the bush Janet was one of 56 'wives' of a senior LRA commander with whom she got two children who are still alive today. She is most grateful to her family for encouraging, even persuading her to go back to school. Janet is a graduate of Gulu University in Northern Uganda and she currently runs an organization whose goal is to assist children born in captivity.

Brief presentation of the Research Findings

A brief presentation of the research findings was made by Dr. Dorcas Kiplagat, who at the time of the study was the coordinator. Given that each participant was going to receive a copy of the research report, the presentation did not delve deep into the findings. The study objectives, methodology and recommendations made were briefly highlighted.

Official Launch and Closing

The meeting ended with the launch of the research report by Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia. He together with the invited guests and the former child soldiers cut the ribbon to symbolize the report launch. The meeting was deemed successful with a promise to do even more to cultivate peace in our respective nations.

3.0 Way forward

Of the recommendations made, AI and GI have responded by implementing a Forgiveness and Reconciliation Project in Northern Uganda in collaboration with the Foundation for Reconciliation based in Bogota, Colombia; the focus being to reach all those most affected in northern Uganda with messages of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Of great importance is to help the community to be more accepting of the FCS.

Secondly, plans to expand education scholarships for FCS as well as skilling for livelihoods among the youth is being considered by the partners.