

# Out of a nightmare ... hope

*Christine Atcheson tells how her charity is helping child survivors of Uganda's dirty war*

**By Matthew Taylor  
Chief Reporter**

**F**or many kids in Bermuda 'trauma' is viewed as not getting the sneakers you wanted.

For Ugandan children it is having your parents butchered in front of you and being forced to eat your classmates - or else be executed on the spot.

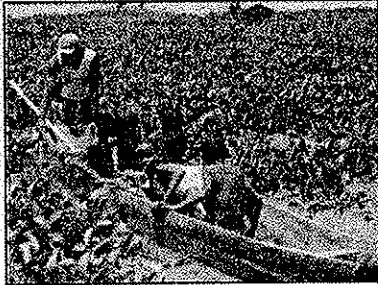
It sounds the stuff of ghoulish nightmares but it is the brutal reality for Northern Ugandans menaced for two decades by raiding thugs from the Lord's Resistance Army.

Nominally Christian, the LRA have been conducting their reign of terror on the Acholi tribe in one of Africa's longest running civil wars.

**Continued on Page 6**



**PHOTOS:**  
(top left)  
Homework  
by lantern



(bottom  
left) House  
of Hope  
children on  
their first  
boat ride

(top right)  
Children  
full of  
hope

(bottom  
right)  
Having a  
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RESTORERS OF HOPE

# Hope after the nightmare

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And with every war comes orphans. Huge numbers of them.

Which is why Bermudian Christine Atcheson is so keen to help. She has just come back from a three-week stint with members of her Cornerstone Church who have been instrumental in funding a home.

It can house 25 kids but only has ten because of the level of work involved in helping those severely damaged emotionally from the massacres in the north.

"Our kids are very traumatised when they come to us.

"One of our young girls, Becky, is from the north and told us the LRA soldiers had come to her village, killed some of her classmates, cooked them and tried to make the other kids eat their friends.

"She didn't eat them, she ran away, ran for days and days. All her legs swelled up - that's the kind of stuff our children have seen and heard. So when they come to us we don't want it to be about numbers.

"We can fill the house yesterday. It's not about numbers, it's about these children getting the physical, psychological and spiritual care they need to become whole people."

Often it is difficult to know how old the children are but she said Becky was probably only about ten when the soldiers came and changed her life forever. The Restorers of Hope home, eight kilometres outside the capital Kampala in Mutungo, had one little girl who was two when the LRA massacred her village with her parents likely to be among those who perished.

"An old lady found her under a bush and the old lady waited with her until the soldiers left." Unfortunately the parents did not return to claim her.

"The old lady had to carry this little girl to one of these displaced people camps - she lived there from two to six when we got her.

"She had no name, had never seen a book, or a pencil, or a spoon or a tea. Nothing. She had

"She was completely shut down emotionally - it was like nobody was home.

"To see her now - her name is Hadassah, she is like the scamp of the house. Always falling off things and climbing too high and running too fast and laughing."

Mrs. Atcheson, an experience counsellor who is now working on getting certification, continued: "These kids are very resilient - all children are all over the world.

"They laugh - but they don't make eye contact with you. They can't look you in the eye and they are afraid of you when they first meet you."

They will talk about everything - but not the trauma they faced. A trained social worker is there to help via art therapy. Children are asked to draw a picture of themselves or the family.

"Then you discuss with them why is this person sad - why are the colours all black, why is it raining - and then try to get to the point of how were you feeling that day. It is slow."

Prayer is another method, said Mrs. Atcheson. "I really want to emphasise that - we really believe God who made people can heal hearts.

"We can do so much but ultimately the one who created us has got to fix us. We also try to show the children an incredible amount of love and acceptance.

"I think we were very fortunate that our children were not actually taken into the army. Once they are taken into the army the little boys have to kill people straight away."

The little girls are used as prostitutes. "I have seen them as young as eight, nine and ten.

"So if you were dealing with children like that who have managed to escape you are dealing with a whole deeper level of stuff. I would like us to be able to help those kids but it's just trying to get them.

"People are forced to kill their own mothers and fathers. They will be killed if they don't kill. I don't think they can hold those people responsible before the in-



Sleep of the innocent: Joel sleeping safely.

"These kids are very resilient - all children are all over the world. They laugh - but they don't make eye contact with you. They can't look you in the eye and they are afraid of you when they first meet you."

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## RESTORERS OF HOPE

# A triumph of good will

Continued from Page 6

"They were doing something to save their lives."

She said soon the home would take in more children, when the first group is stabilised and can act as older siblings to the next group.

Children are taught to be self sufficient - or rather that habit is kept going.

"They are used to bringing up families - they can cook, they can wash clothes - to us that would seem almost cruel, these kids have got no parents. But no, that is part of their self-worth.

"We let them help with the cooking and laundry if they show an interest.

"It is just so beautiful to see the older girls walking through the compound with a big plastic bucket on their head. It's quite hilarious - we bought them a gas stove but they are still outside cooking on charcoal.

"We have beautiful bathrooms in the house and the kids still take plastic bowls outside under the tap - you just have to let them. Because that's what they are comfortable doing.

"We don't want to westernise them - we want to heal them, to keep their identity and be African."

The youngest child is four, the oldest is 12 and all are in school. First they are given a grounding in English and basic maths at a home school to allow them to enter an outside school.

"Our plan is to see these kids right through to whenever they finish their education - hopefully through to a degree."

But they are also given practical skills - sewing and crafts while the boys will learn carpentry.

"Carpentry is very big in Africa - making tables and chairs and beds - or ornate objects to sell to visitors.

"We reckon any of our boys could make a three-legged table or a stool - those will sell in the villages."

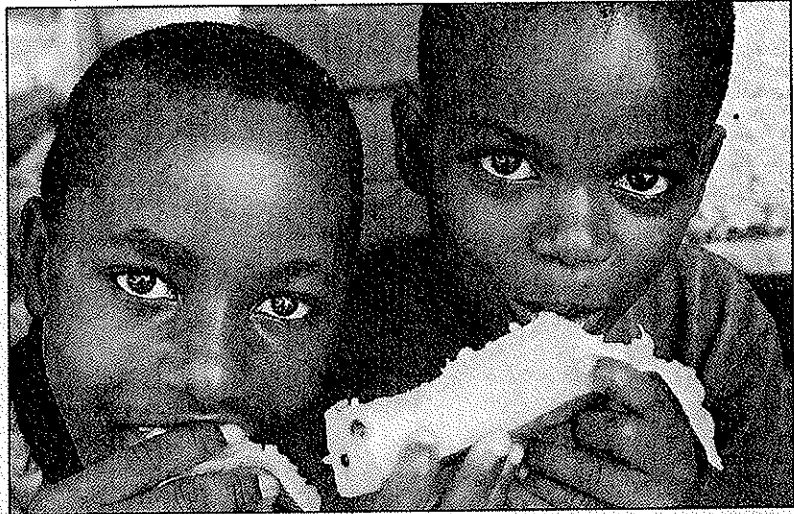
The bigger vision is to create a small village with workshops.

"We would educate our own children in crafts and skills but also open one evening a week to allow adults to get an education too - basic maths and english and other skills.

"We think what we are doing in Restorers of Hope should not be this isolated little island. It should be something that impacts the whole community."

The charity wants to raise \$60-70,000 to move out of their rented building into something permanent.

A tag day in Bermuda is planned for November while memory bracelets and a calendar of the children will be coming out later



Mmm... pretty tasty: David and Hallelujah.

this year. "It would be great if someone could come on board and help us with fundraising because I spend lots of my time in Africa."

Her church and a Bermuda couple who prefer to remain anonymous have been helping boost funds.

A 16-person crew from Cornerstone joined her on the recent trip.

"It was awesome. They did so much amazing stuff with the kids, from regularly playing with them, egg and spoon races."

Owning a framed picture of themselves was another novel experience for the children who made t-shirts with their names on.

Mrs. Atcheson brings back necklaces made by widows to sell in Bermuda.

"I take the money back to them and ask them to use half the money to start another small business - a cottage industry. Every one of the widows had started something else."

Some were making and selling food, another had bought a small fridge and was selling frozen lollies.

The murderous LRA are now holed up in the Congo as peace talks lumber on but there is still danger all around.

"When you are in Kampala the danger you deal with everyday is not necessarily the LRA - they are just not around.

"The dangers are everyday things - last time I got so sick. They thought I had malar-

ia, which for them is nothing, but for us can kill you in three days. It shuts down all your major organs."

Her temperature hit 104 but it turned out to be a serious virus. "It was scary. But I don't really think about those things when I am out there. I know God is going to take care of me and I am too busy to be thinking about myself every minute when there is so much suffering around."

"Just driving in the traffic is so dangerous out there - people get killed every other day on the roads. There are no ambulances, no one picks them up, they leave them on the side of the road."

HIV/AIDs is another killer, preying on some of the widows left behind after their husbands have been massacred by the LRA.

Long term the best hope is an enduring peace. But it's not easy negotiating with a virtual death cult.

"They call themselves the Lord's Resistance Army which would imply Christianity but they are so far removed from anything Christian. I have seen documentaries that shows the LRA's roots are in witchcraft.

"I am not a politician or an expert on these things but I cannot see how you can make a peace treaty and trust they will keep it when they have done all these atrocities.

"I really believe they need to be brought before the international court."

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## UGANDA'S DIRTY WAR

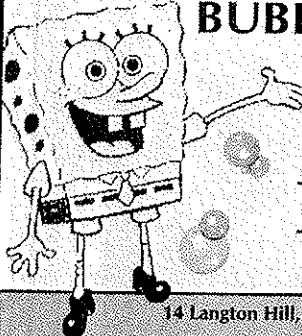
Sources: Wikipedia, Amnesty International

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was formed in 1987 as a rebel guerrilla army operating mainly in northern Uganda and parts of Sudan to fight the Ugandan government in what is now one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. It is led by Joseph Kony, who proclaims himself a spirit medium, and apparently wishes to establish a state based on the Ten Commandments and traditions of the Acholi tribe who it then turned on. The LRA is accused of widespread human rights violations, including mutilation, torture, rape, the abduction of civilians, the use of child soldiers and a number of massacres. The dirty war saw civilians mutilated with the cutting off ears, lips, nose), and 1994 saw the first mass abduction of children and youth. Children are forced to kill others or be killed. Often traumatized by what they have done and, believing that they are now outcasts, they become bound to the LRA.

The US government estimates that up to 12,000 people have been killed in the violence, with many more dying from disease and malnutrition as a direct result of the conflict. Nearly two million civilians have been forced to flee their homes, living in internally displaced person (IDP) camps

The group performs abductions primarily from the Acholi people, who have borne the brunt of the 18 year LRA campaign. The United Nations estimated in the mid-2000s that around 25,000 children have been kidnapped by the LRA since 1987. Later survey concluded that UN estimate was a significant underestimate. According to the survey, at least 66,000 youth between the ages of 13 and 30 have been abducted. One-third of all boys and one-sixth of all girls had been taken for at least one day. Of these, 66% of males were taken for longer than two weeks, while the equivalent number for females was 46%. If a female was gone for more than two weeks, there was a one in four chance that she had not returned.

Each night, children between the ages of 3 and 17, referred to as "Night Commuters" or "Night Dwellers" walk up to 20 kilometres (12 miles) from IDP camps to larger towns, especially Gulu, in search of safety.



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