



Julius Okwera:

A Survivor's journey through pain, despair and hope!

There is nothing more powerful in life than a resilient human spirit and resolve, and Mzee Julius Okwera's story demonstrates how Okwera a male survivor of rape from Northern Uganda was a victim of the infamous “tek-gungu” or “bend over” a term used by the locals in northern Uganda to describe the rape of men by soldiers of the then National Resistance Army (NRA), current Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF) in the early 1990s.

Okwera is one of the many victims/survivors supported by the Refugee Law Project (RLP), under its Conflict, Transitional Justice & Governance (CTJG) programme. The CTJG programme aims to facilitate individual and community repair and social healing through a range of interventions including provision of medical and psychosocial support initiatives.

In the last two years of engaging with RLP, Julius Okwera has showed a remarkable transformation. When RLP first met Julius three years ago, he described himself as a “dead man walking”. Today, he fondly calls himself a “boy” and is referred to by his peers as “kijana mzee”. Eunice Ouko, a Programme Assistant with the Refugee Law Project caught up with Julius to reflect upon his life and intriguing journey and recounts Julius Okwera's journey through pain, despair and hope.

Born in 1938 in Bwobo Manam, Alero Sub County, Nwoya County, Nwoya district, Julius Okwera was the only child of Mr. Alphonse Agwok and Mrs. Alveria Abalo. He went to Nwoya Kamgoro primary

school for his preparatory and primary level studies, which he completed in 1956, and later travelled to Kenya for a junior leaders' course. Okwera came back to Uganda in 1957 when his father had retired from the army. He managed to finish his Junior Eight in 1958 at St. Marys junior secondary school Anaka. Later he studied agriculture at Ngeta District Farming Institute (NDFI) where he was on a job training and officially got a certificate in agriculture in 1964.

In April 1964, Okwera joined the Agriculture department in Gulu and was posted to Arua as a field extension worker on Mechanization at Pokwero group farm. He was later promoted to an assistant farm manager, a position he held until 1987. In early 1966 he got married to his long-time girlfriend Rose Nyawino, of Alur descent. The couple stayed together for a short time before he was posted to Agwigiri group farm in Lira, Lango. He went alone leaving his wife behind because he was not familiar with the region. In February 1967 Okwera and Rose were blessed with their first child, and the family soon united at the group farm where they stayed for 8 years.

In 1971 when Idi Amin took over power, Okwera

Gulu in early 1987, Okwera fled to his village in Alero. The NRA had orchestrated a retributive campaign targeting families and former soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), majority of whom hailed from northern Uganda and in particular Acholi sub-region. The UNLA had retreated back to northern Uganda with NRA in hot pursuit. Upon entering northern Uganda, the NRA raided cattle, arrested people in masses and committed several atrocities to revenge atrocities allegedly committed by UNLA forces in central and western Uganda during the "bush" struggle. In response, remnants of the UNLA re-grouped to form the Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA) within Acholi (locally known as cilil -literally meaning go and report us).

"When the NRA forces took power, they came after the Acholi people, majority of whom were in the UNLA. They spared no body suspected of having been a soldier, mounted road blocks, tied people in three piece and harassed civilians, just like it was done during Amin's time." Said Julius, he added that, "the UPDA then launched a rebellion because they had seen the torture and killing of the Acholi people by the NRA. The first rebel group was called 'cilil' (meaning go tell them that we are here), it was mainly formed

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The 'cilil' begun to confront the government troops but there was a division in the group, and as a result, a new group, The Holy Spirit Movement by Alice Lakwena was formed. It was believed

was still in Lira. He was later transferred to Gulu to implement the Ox-mechanization piloting scheme where his work entailed training farmers on the modern animal traction where only two oxen were used. He was in charge of Purongo Sub County. He is passionate about his work, which he still practices to date. The ox-plough mechanism today is widespread and transforming small to medium scale agricultural productivity, an accomplishment Okwera is proud of. Northern Uganda was largely peaceful in this period despite the fact that Amin's reign had initially targeted educated and prominent acholi army officials, many of whom disappeared and were never seen again.

to be under protection of a spirit and assumed to be more powerful than the 'cilil'. While some of the 'cilil' senior soldiers joined the Holy Spirit Movement that fought against the government troops, others joined the NRA and as a result 'cilil' became weak and collapsed. This led to the birth of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

Several other rebel groups emerged in Teso and West Nile sub-regions to defend their people and repel the NRA. To end the insurgency and make peace, the NRA government offered amnesty to all former UNLA members and agreed to a peace talk with the 'Cilil'.

When the National Resistant Army (NRA) entered

In 1988 a peace agreement was signed at Pece stadium in Gulu district that ended the Cilil. The disarmament and demobilization that followed was suspicious as many top Cilil commanders were arrested and disappeared. Some former Cilil denounced the peace process and launched new rebel movements citing continuing arrest and harassment by NRA forces. These included the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena, Lords Salvation Army of Severino Lukoya and then Lords Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony.

In order to counter these developments, the Government of Uganda engaged in a protracted military campaign against the rebels to which many civilians fell victim. Civilians living in northern Uganda were presumed to be supporting the rebels and became subject of routine attacks and violations. The rebel groups equally targeted civilians for allegedly cooperating with government forces. This would mark the beginning of the intensification of the conflict and a state of war that would endure for

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"The group that had gone to the next homestead returned. They found what their colleagues were doing to us and were angered. They ordered the soldier sodomising me to stop and they wanted to shoot him, that is how I was rescued and my ordeal ended." He adds that, "the other group herded away my cattle and goats. In total, I lost about 350 herds of cattle and over 35 goats. A lot of evil acts accompanied the humiliations. Some were defecating in our cooking pots; others urinated in the mouths of my goats and cattle. Some of the animals were slaughtered while saying they will see what I will use to feed the rebels with."

the next two decades. The population in this region soon became trapped in the middle of a conflict, unwilling to support both the government and LRA as none was acting in their best interest.

The first major military operation against the LRA was undertaken in early 1991, 'Operation North'.

Under the command of then-Minister of State for Defense, Major General David Tinnyefunza, 'Operation North' involved closing off the whole northern region of Uganda to aggressively hunt down alleged rebel supporters and cut off support to the LRA.

One morning in April 1987, the LRA fighters camped at Julius Okwera's homestead against his will. His children and family members had all run away, only he and his pregnant wife remained at home. The NRA forces got a tip off from someone about this. The following morning at around 4 am, Okwera woke up on to the footmarks of the soldiers at his doorstep and immediately alerted his dear wife who was still asleep. He stood up hastily preparing to go out into hiding but the soldiers had already surrounded the homestead.

Then there was a loud knock on the door with an order "fungua mlango, toka nje" meaning open the door and come out. Fear and apprehension immediately engulfed both of them but he slowly opened the door. Four armed men forced their way in and started looting while others stood guard outside the door. With a gun pressed against his back, Okwera was dragged outside behind his kitchen hut while his wife remained inside the hut with a number of the soldiers.

They accused him of being a father to the rebels and interrogated him on the whereabouts of his cattle. Okwera responded that being a dry season, the cattle were out grazing in the bush. Some soldiers proceeded to look for the cattle kraal, others continued to the next homestead, but some remained behind. "They ordered me to lie down, and bend over. My hesitation earned me a kick "kwara" and a bayonet pointed in my back. Not knowing what to do, I complied. They removed my trouser and each penetrated me in turn. I could tell that those who penetrated me were three in number because each of them would do in turn and then leave. Inside the house, my wife was also raped. I don't know by how many but I found her crying. Her pregnancy was due." Julius said in a low

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The soldiers only communicated in Kiswahili, and he understood that they were the 55th battalion.

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Three weeks after this ordeal, Okwera's wife suffered a still-birth of dead twins and she died thirty minutes later after delivery. “It was a very traumatizing moment for the whole family”. Okwera recalls, he blames the death of his wife and twins on the rape of his wife.

“It was the most painful experience ever. I kept it to myself and the children never got to know what happened.

It was not easy for them either, especially after the loss of their mother and they kept weeping. It was a dark moment, we lost everything and my wife, the most important figure in the family, but nothing could be done. We couldn't even report to the authorities because they were the same people in power and we didn't have any voice,” He said.

Life was never the same for Okwera's family. All that they were left with were scars and the feeling of betrayal dominated their thoughts. The gun, which was meant to protect Uganda as a nation, was being used against fellow citizens to subdue, loot property, dehumanize and dominate.

“It was a hopeless situation, Okwera said. Tek-gungu was widespread, people knew about it (tek-gungu or male rape) but never talked about it nor pointed fingers at the soldiers, except in a local song”.

He would hear people lamenting the new war of

tek-gungu but he never shared his own experience, it was shameful and dehumanizing. Two years after the violations, Julius started experiencing itching in his anus, which later turned into a swelling and his anus begun protruding outward. He went to Lacor Hospital and the doctor recommended an operation. The operation was successfully done and it cost about fifty thousand Uganda shillings, a very substantial amount at the time.

“In September 1998, we were forced out of our villages into a “protected camp” at Anaka Sub-County headquarter. In the camp, life was hard, people were crowded and rumors kept going around of whom else was a victim of tek-gungu and other similar humiliations,” Said Okwera.

He immediately knew he was not alone. He talked to a few survivors and convinced a colleague that they should report the matter to the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) office in Gulu. In 1999 when he reported the matter, UHRC turned him away arguing that the violations occurred before their mandate.

Even during encampment, rape continued and this time the victims were mainly women. Many men lost their wives to the UPDF soldiers deployed to protect the camps. Men were not allowed to leave the camps without escorts. They became poor and unable to provide for their families. The soldiers on the other hand were better off-earning regular salaries with which they used to lure women into their andaki (make shift shelters for soldiers).

When the region regained stability, the civilians went back to their villages and struggled to put the past behind them and resume normal lives, but the wounds, scars and skulls were all over. The affected communities are yet to open up and speak out publicly about the atrocities committed. Many victims remain highly stigmatised.

“My children increasingly became suspicious of my own experiences. Even though they were very young when the violations happened, some people who knew our fate shared the stories and it got back to our neighbors. Their peers while playing at school sometimes bullied them because of my experience. They became very inquisitive and would approach

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me demanding to know what happened to me and what killed their mother. I became deeply troubled and had nightmares about that experience. I was very frustrated, I never thought of marrying another wife to take care of my children because I feared that the children would not understand me and that the woman might come and try to divert my attention from my children and create division in the family so I decided to stay without a wife." he said.

To cope he joined a church group and regularly attended counseling sessions and community events. It was during one of these community meetings that he first met RLP in 2008. "I sat and listened carefully to what RLP was saying and what they do. When I learnt that they were part of Makerere University and not an NGO, I decided to share my story because many NGOs had already disappointed us and were not trust worthy. I spoke freely and everyone listened carefully. I could see the RLP staff writing down my testimonies and I knew it would be taken up to Kampala and Makerere for the first time," Said Okwera

Not everyone was happy at first when he shared his painful story as some people feared retribution, in case the government got to learn of it. With time, the people understood he could not be blamed for what happened and even local leaders became sympathetic with him. They knew this had happened in a large scale and that the victim/survivors were

silent due to fear. Eventually, fellow victims started coming out to share their experiences, talking freely about tek-gungu and encouraging victims of other violations to tell their stories and support one another. Julius had several visits from RLP team and soon his home became the meeting place for other survivors who came and told their stories and received counseling services. That's how the documentary "They Slept with Me" was developed and a support group Men of Courage emerged. see (<http://www.refugeelawproject.org/resources/video-documentaries/video/latest/they-slept-with-me.html> a link to a short documentary that shares the testimonies of several male survivors, and raises critical questions about the search for justice for conflict-related sexual violence)

Today, Okwera is a leading advocate for justice for male victims of sexual and gender based violence during armed conflict and his experience has richly informed RLPs advocacy for combating Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Persecution (SGBVP) in armed conflict. He coordinates the Men of Courage support group based in Nwoya district in northern Uganda. The group has about 35 members and continues to grow.

In his advocacy roles, Okwera has articulated SGBV survivors' justice needs in different foras. He participated in the first ever South –South Institute for Sexual Violence against Men in Armed Conflicts held in Kampala in April 2012,



Mzee Julius Okwera addressing the audience during the South to South Institute at Serena Hotel, Kampala

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attended a strategy meeting on public interest litigation at the Lake Victoria Serena Hotel, Kigo, and recently represented his fellow survivors at a national Victims Conference held in Lira.

“What we need is to open up, share our stories and create awareness. We must reach out to all powers that be-for everyone can be a victim of SGBV.” Okwera said.

He has interacted with several high profile persons including medical and legal students and other local, regional and international justice advocates and practitioners. Okwera is grateful to his family and community for supporting him.

“Their support is my motivating factor,” said Okwera. “I am also grateful to the RLP for their support and encouragements. I cannot thank Dr. Chris Dolan (Director RLP) enough; he inspired me to do this work by making me believe that justice is still possible. I want to be a martyr for justice for other victims of sexual violence;

“What we need is to open up, share our stories and create awareness. We must reach out to all powers that be-for everyone can be a victim of SGBV. I want to leave a legacy on creating awareness about male experiences of SGBV in armed conflict,” Said Okwera



Mzee Julius Okwera attending the South to South Institute held in Kampala, Uganda

Recently, the United Kingdom (UK) government hosted the first Global Summit to combat sexual and gender based violence in armed conflicts in London from June 10th -13th, 2014 during which the prevalence of sexual violence against both men and women in armed conflict was condemned. Okwera believes that, with the recent remarks by the President, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni acknowledging atrocities committed by some NRA soldiers during its 28th Anniversary in Mayuge, justice is still possible for male victims of sexual violence within northern Uganda. RLP is deeply grateful to Julius Okwera courage for sharing his experience which has deeply enriched RLPs understanding and work on SGBV in conflict situations and has also been shared with the UN Secretary Generals Special Representative on Sexual and Gender Based Violence, African Union, African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to inform their best practice manual for the investigation and prosecution of SGBV in conflict situations.

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