

Ugandan Seminarian Escapes Life as Child Soldier

Families Send Messages to Lost Children Via Radio

GULU, Uganda, JULY 20, 2010 (Zenit.org).- A young Ugandan who is now studying for the priesthood barely escaped after being abducted and forced to become a child soldier.

Aid to the Church in Need, which is actively working to help the estimated 30,000 child soldiers in Uganda return home, reported on the story of this seminarian, called "Stephen."

Stephen was 16 and studying at the minor seminary in the Gulu Archdiocese when he was abducted along with 40 other young men by the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army.

Around 20 rebels came to the seminary just after midnight, and broke into the area where the seminarians were sleeping.

Though two soldiers had been placed there by the government to guard the seminary, they fled as soon as the rebels appeared.

Stephen recalled, "We were abandoned; there was no one there to protect us."

He noted that there were at least 1,000 others who sought shelter in the seminary overnight, mostly local women and children, and he saw one 7-year-old boy shot dead by a rebel.

Captive

The seminarians were tied in groups of four and forced to march for hours through the night.

The young men were divided into smaller groups and taken to different locations. Their captors threatened them with death if they tried to flee or disobey.

Stephen watched some of his companions get beaten to death with clubs and rifle butts. Others, who were unable to keep up with the hours of marching due to wounds on their feet, were hacked to death with machetes.

The youths were taken to the bush and trained to kill, rape and torture others. The aid agency noted that the rebels paid particular attention to training the seminarians, precisely because they were seminarians.

Stephen, however, was spared from ever having to kill another person.

Prayer

He spoke to Aid to the Church in Need about how his faith and his religious vocation were strengthened during those weeks of captivity.

"I saw things that I thought I could never have born to see," he said.

"It would have been impossible, by human power alone, to have escaped all that," the seminarian affirmed. "But God can work miracles."

He continued: "I was left with literally nothing but prayer. This was my only hope.

"But we could not pray together, and so I prayed alone. On each of the long treks on foot I prayed the rosary, counting on my fingers, since I did not have any rosary beads. Prayer was all I had."

"There may be people who have not experienced God," Stephen said, "but I experienced him."

An opportunity

Two months after he was taken captive, Stephen and his group were attacked by Ugandan government troops. The young man took the opportunity to escape in the fray of battle.

He hid in the undergrowth, but one rebel noticed he was missing and began shouting threats and waving his gun. Stephen thought that he had been discovered, but then he noticed that the rebel was pointing his gun in the wrong direction, trying to scare the young man out of his hiding place.

As the rebel turned away, Stephen overheard him say to a companion, "In any case, he won't be returning to his village, he's already been with us for too long!"

The aid agency noted that this method is used by the rebels, who terrify the children into submission by breaking their wills so that they feel incapable of leaving the army. Many times, the children are forced to kill a family member or a villager before they are taken away, so that the youths feel too ashamed to return home.

The young boys, who are forced to become soldiers, and girls, who become sex slaves, are drugged, forced to commit heinous crimes, punished cruelly for minor offenses, tortured, and sometimes murdered. Those who survive are traumatized and deeply ashamed of the things they were forced to do.

Reaching out

Aid to the Church in Need is working with other Catholic organizations to reach out to these young people. In particular, it is helping fund a Catholic radio station in the Lira Diocese, which has a special program that allows families to send messages to the children, assuring them that they are loved and will be welcomed back with open arms.

As well, former child soldiers who have escaped go on the air to encourage their former companions to return home and to assure them that there is nothing to fear.

The rebels set fire to the radio transmitter, but they failed to take Radio Wa ("Our Radio") off the air.

In Stephen's case, the young man still had the strength to return home. Once he got away from the rebel army, the seminarian walked for days in the bush before seeing any signs of habitation.

He found an abandoned school where he fell asleep from exhaustion. When he awoke, a Ugandan soldier was standing before him.

Stephen revealed his identity, and the soldier told him, "You are lucky, you are safe now."

The soldier carried the young man back to the military camp. Stephen was then taken to a hospital, where the seminary rector visited him and took him home.

Vocation

The young man recalled that his parents and six siblings thought him dead: "They were already planning to ask a priest to say Mass for my soul."

The family was overjoyed, but expressed hesitation about letting him go back to the seminary.

Nonetheless, when Stephen went to the seminary to say goodbye to the people there, he had a

strong sense that he belonged there. He decided to return.

That was seven years ago, and today, 12 of the seminarians abducted in that group are still missing.

On May 11, the anniversary of the abduction, the seminary's rector, Monsignor Matthew Odong wrote a letter to the missing seminarians, knowing that they might never see it.

The letter, written on behalf of the seminary community, stated: "We entrust you to the protection and loving care of Jesus Christ, who had called you to become priests and to proclaim the love and mercy of God in the world.

"We love you, dear seminarians. May God protect you and bring you safely home. Our prayers are always with you."

Stephen is now studying in the Alokulum seminary. He said that he wants to be a priest to help heal the wounds of children who were abducted like he was, and to build peace in his country.

Aid to the Church in Need reported that since 1988, some 30,000 young people have been kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony.

The violent conflict between the rebels and the government has caused the displacement of some 2 million Ugandans who are seeking refuge from abductions and massacres.

The seminarian told the aid agency that he aims to bring the message of God's love to these people, and to show them that God can work miracles, as he himself has experienced.