

Face to face with Joseph Kony's child soldiers

In 2003, Guardian reporter Rory Carroll met child soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army at a rehabilitation centre in Uganda

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Lord's Resistance Army soldiers in Sudan. Photograph: James Akena/Reuters

He wore tattered trousers, muddy wellington boots, a grubby anorak and avoided eye contact. The voice was soft. "Sometimes one blow is enough. You have to make sure the skull is crushed and the brains come out."

He was 17, still dressed in what passed for his Lord's Resistance Army uniform and still getting used to the idea he was no longer Ambush, his nom-de-guerre, but Patrick Ocaya.

For five years he had served as a corporal in [Joseph Kony](#)'s ranks, tasked with leading groups of 11-year-olds in attacks on vehicles and, on occasion, clubbing prisoners to death.

Asked if he had felt sorry for those he abducted and killed, Ocaya's eyes flicked from the azure sky to the red, baked earth of a ramshackle rehabilitation centre. He shrugged. "I didn't have pity. They were my orders."

It was June 2003 and I was reporting for the Guardian from Kitgum, a beleaguered town of dirt roads and one-storey buildings in northern [Uganda](#) in the midst of a new LRA offensive.

On the walls of the Kitgum's Concerned Parents' Association, which counselled ex-combatants, were their drawings: a woman suspended by her ankle from a tree while a figure beat her with a cane and another lit a fire beneath her head; severed limbs and a prostrate man bleeding from the mouth. Richard Kinyera, the association's chairman, said those incidents actually happened. New escapees arrived daily with more stories.

It was disorientating to interview a child such as Wanok Constant, a scrawny 13-year-old with round, brown eyes, who was both perpetrator and victim. He had been abducted, like thousands of

others in surrounding villages, and forced to take part in beating to death another boy who had tried to escape. He whispered the details and at the end, relieved, gave a shy smile.

There were documented cases of recruits forced to kill relatives, march over spilled brains and cook and eat human flesh. The savagery had purpose: once implicated, many children considered themselves outcasts who could never return home.

"They become too afraid to flee because they've been made to commit atrocities," says Pietro Galli of the Italian charity AVSI. Younger children were the most trigger-happy. "To impress their peers they become very efficient killers."

The terror made for a macabre hide-and-seek in Kitgum, which was under the Ugandan army's nominal, queasy protection: at bedtime thousands of small figures emerged from grass huts and tramped into town to sleep outside the locked doors of the general hospital. It was cold, and in the dark easy to tread on a sleeping body, but nobody complained. Out in the bush, unseen, the seekers were armed with AK-47s, clubs and knives.

A swaggering army lieutenant promised to crush the guerrillas with recently acquired helicopter gunships. The parents of Kitgum and nearby villages, destitute and unable to till their fields, craved peace and security but balked at a military solution. They said it was a euphemism for killing their abducted children.