

About to retire?

Request our NEW jargon free, Beginner's Guide to Annuities

Call 0800 038 0747 to get your FREE copy of the guide and see how you can get the best pension income.



Annuity income levels depend upon individual circumstances. Trinity Mirror PLC is an Introducer Appointed Representative for Better Retirement Group Ltd who is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. FCA number 153420. Registered office: 3rd Floor, 40 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RQ. Registered in England number 2688895

TRAGEDY OF UGANDA'S KIDNAPPED CHILD SOLDIERS

EXCLUSIVE
BY TOM PARRY
in Gulu, Uganda
t.parry@mirror.co.uk

AT 12 years old, Charles Akallo should have been kicking a football – instead he was handed a gun.

Abducted by the savage Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda he had a simple choice: kill or be killed.

Like more than 30,000 other children brainwashed by notorious militia leader Joseph Kony he was transformed into a bloodthirsty assassin eager to commit atrocities.

Charles' confessed crimes are truly grotesque. Once he tied eight people together, poured petrol over them and burned them alive.

Another time the 27-year-old cut out his victim's brain and ate it.

As recently as January he wiped out six innocent civilians in a hail of bullets without any provocation.

I meet Charles – now maimed by a bullet that shattered his left leg – on the day he is being returned to his remote home village for the first time in 15 years.

We are travelling from a rehabilitation centre for child soldiers back to the grass-roofed clay hut he was abducted from.

The last time he saw his mum, he was an angelic schoolboy.

Today he is a hardened killer responsible for at least 100 murders.

Never letting slip his cold executioner's stare, Charles provides a shocking description of the indoctrination rituals child soldiers were forced to go through.

"For training we would raid a village," he tells me. "Each of us had to shoot two people through the head. It took me too long to kill someone, they said, so I had 50 strokes of the cane."

"Children showing nervousness would be shot. Kony's commanders would force us to lick the blood of the people we shot. We had to cut their skulls open to remove some of the brain which we had to eat in front of them."

"After this indoctrination our orders were to kill the first person we met as we walked to the next camp."

BLOODY

"Being like this became normal. We would gouge out the eyes of some people. We cut off their ears if they didn't listen. This was what Kony demanded."

Forced to take part in the bloodiest guerrilla war of recent times, Charles had his youth snatched away.

And now the ex-child soldier – who was Kony's aide-de-camp – hobbles on crutches into the minibus. Metal pins have been screwed into his splintered thigh.

The journey from Gulu, six hours north of the capital Kampala, is a spine-juddering five-hour ride down potholed tracks made impassable by rain. But Charles never complains.

His gaze is unflinching as he speaks of being force-marched into Sudan after his kidnapping.

"I was badly beaten and threatened with a gun," he says. "For weeks we walked and along the way they abducted other children. They tied us together with rope."

"We walked day and night with few chances to drink or eat – some children became too weak."

"One man would point his gun at

whoever was complaining and pull the trigger. More than 10 children were killed along the way."

"When we got to Sudan we met Joseph Kony for the first time. He said everyone there had been kidnapped from Uganda. He

said he had been abducted by God and if any of us tried to escape we would be killed."

"Right then, he pulled one boy out of the line and told his commander to shoot him dead in front of us."

In January Charles was shot in the leg in a battle

Charles was only 12 when he was forced to shoot a man and eat his brain.. after years of killing, he just wants a normal life with his mum



CAMPAIGN
George Clooney nervousness would be shot. Kony's commanders would force us to lick the blood of the people we shot. We had to cut their skulls open to remove some of the brain which we had to eat in front of them.

"After this indoctrination our orders were to kill the first person we met as we walked to the next camp."

BLOODY

"Being like this became normal. We would gouge out the eyes of some people. We cut off their ears if they didn't listen. This was what Kony demanded."

Forced to take part in the bloodiest guerrilla war of recent times, Charles had his youth snatched away.

And now the ex-child soldier – who was Kony's aide-de-camp – hobbles on crutches into the minibus. Metal pins have been screwed into his splintered thigh.

The journey from Gulu, six hours north of the capital Kampala, is a spine-juddering five-hour ride down potholed tracks made impassable by rain. But Charles never complains.

His gaze is unflinching as he speaks of being force-marched into Sudan after his kidnapping.

"I was badly beaten and threatened with a gun," he says. "For weeks we walked and along the way they abducted other children. They tied us together with rope."

"We walked day and night with few chances to drink or eat – some children became too weak."

"One man would point his gun at

whoever was complaining and pull the trigger. More than 10 children were killed along the way."

"When we got to Sudan we met Joseph Kony for the first time. He said everyone there had been kidnapped from Uganda. He

said he had been abducted by God and if any of us tried to escape we would be killed."

"Right then, he pulled one boy out of the line and told his commander to shoot him dead in front of us."

In January Charles was shot in the leg in a battle

with Ugandan government forces. Airlifted to hospital by his captors, he was finally free of Kony.

Back then Charles wore camouflage fatigues with epaulettes. Now he wears a handed-down grey polo shirt, ill-fitting football shorts and a pair of red flip-flops – and dreams of a simple life back home with his mother.

But when we finally reach the village, having had to abandon one vehicle in the quagmire, there is no immediate joy on his face.

His mentors from British charity World Vision advise me it is normal for brutalised child soldiers to be apprehensive.

It takes a while before he is confident enough to sit down with his joyous mother Auma. But there is another reason he doesn't smile.

A few years ago Kony cut out two of Charles' front teeth as a public punishment

for laughing too much. "Kony said he would teach me a lesson," Charles explains. "He grabbed a knife and, before I could react, cut two teeth out of my mouth. The pain was unbelievable, like nothing I have ever felt before."

"But then he told me to carry on laughing. This was the worst time."

"I accept guilt for what I did. But I just could not consider running away."

"If I had disobeyed orders I would be dead."

Kony fooled his young troops by claiming a holy spirit entitled him to seize power in Uganda. The rag-tag LRA looted villages, topping up its numbers by kidnapping new young victims. Children slept rough on the streets of Gulu to escape its roving soldiers. But

eight months after his rescue Charles still seems to be in awe of Kony – who remains at large despite being among the world's most wanted men.

At the height of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan army nearly two million people in the north fled their homes.

Most lived in refugee camps and are only now returning to villages.

Kony was last photographed at peace talks in South Sudan in 2006. He shook hands with senior UN officials but refused to sign a peace deal.

Spurred on by the breakdown in negotiations, Kony and the LRA went on an offensive, carrying out a massacre on Christmas Day 2008. Last year a global campaign spearheaded by actor George Clooney brought

51-year-old Kony's atrocities to global attention. He and three of his generals are wanted in The Hague for war crimes. However, an amnesty has been declared for abducted child soldiers.

World Vision counsellor Charles Onekalit has helped hundreds of ex-LRA soldiers return to civilian lives.

Nearly 16,000 have passed through the rehab hostel in Gulu.

TORTURE

The majority were kidnapped before their 10th birthday and are unable to read or write. Their only means of describing their ordeal is through drawing.

One former soldier created a 20-foot long painting to portray his suffering.

Many ex-child soldiers have recounted stories of torture carried out on those unable to keep up with adult LRA troops as they marched into the bush.

One girl remembers the rebels telling

two boys to hack a friend to pieces with machetes because he tried to escape. Girls were tied to trees and beaten to death.

Mr Onekalit says: "A lot of the young people we receive have participated in atrocities. When you ask how many they have killed they usually say hundreds."

"They have lost everything and have no self-esteem. All are traumatised."

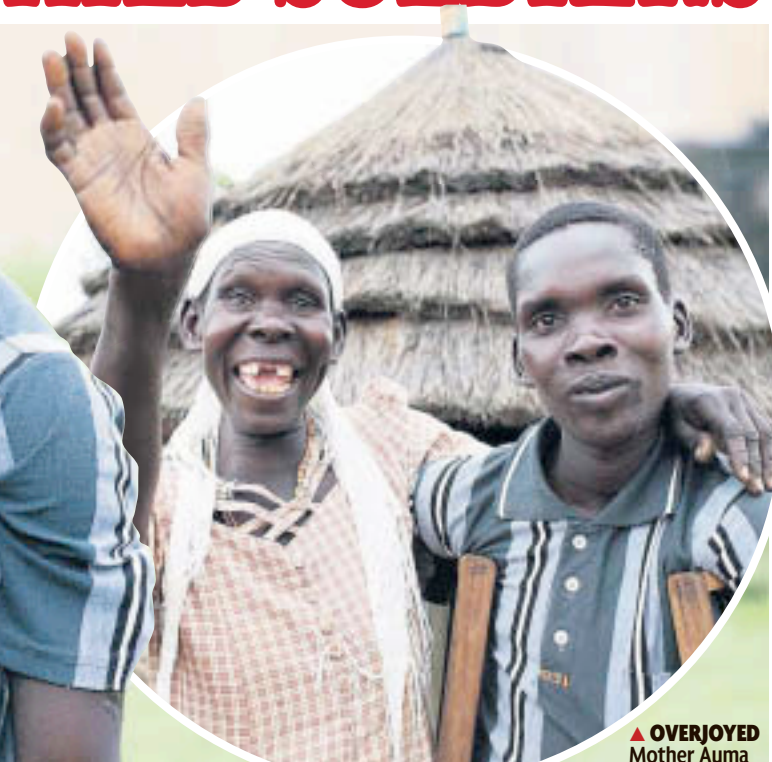
Leaving Charles in the village where the bleating of skinny goats is the only sound, it is not hard to fear for his future.

Hearing the ululating wails of his overjoyed mum, locals wander over to greet him. Charles, however, seems distant.

He has been given a mattress, blankets and a basin by the rehab centre. But there is no psychiatric or medical help.

The nightmare of being turned into a monster by the twisted leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army will never go away.

► To make a donation, go to www.world-vision.org.uk or call 01908 841000.



▲ OVERJOYED Mother Auma



▲ MONSTER Warlord Kony



▲ LIFELINE Charles, left, at Brit-backed rehab centre



► BABE IN ARMS Child soldier with Kalashnikov

new ideas

Men's Padded Gilet
• With warm padding, 2 inner pockets and an elongated back
• Water- and stain-repellent BIONIC FINISH™ ECO
• Available in navy or brown
• Sizes: M - XL
9.99 Each

Men's Casual Shirt
• Made from soft, pure cotton
• Slim cut, with classic Kent style collar
• Sizes: M - XL
3.99 Each

Men's T-Shirt
• Stylish and modern t-shirts with printed slogan motif
• Made from soft, pure cotton
• Sizes: M - XL
3.99 Each

Men's Cargo Trousers
• Made from hard-wearing, pure cotton
• With belt loops and various practical pockets
• Available in navy blue or camel
• Sizes: 34" - 38"
8.99 Each

Men's Casual Shoes
• Contemporary style
• Easy care, hard-wearing upper
• Lightweight, flexible sole
• Available in brown or black
• Sizes: 8 - 11
11.99 Per Pair

Men's Sports Socks
10 pairs 5.99 Per pack

Men's Socks
3 pairs 3.49 Per pack

Men's Boxer Briefs
2 pack 3.99 Per pack

Men's Leather Belt
4.99 Each

Monday Madness
From Monday 16th September

Discover more products in-store & online... www.lidl.co.uk

All offers subject to availability. Excludes N.I. & R.O.I. Prices correct at time of going to print & valid for a limited period only. Packaging & measurements may vary.