

Last of abducted Aboke girls back home

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Entebbe

She was dressed in a light blue blouse with an orange striped skirt and red open shoes. She smiled as she spoke and held her baby boy. It was the first time she was away from the rebel camp, 13 years after she was captured.

Catherine Ajok was one of the 30 girls abducted by the LRA rebels in October 1996 from St. Mary's College Aboke,
She was the last to return home yesterday.



Army Spokesman Felix Kulayigye shares a light moment with Ajok yesterday. PHOTO BY MARTIN SSEBUYIRA

Ajok was brought back to Uganda in a Russian-made Antonov plane that landed at Entebbe Military base yesterday afternoon.

She was received by the Airbase Commander, Lt. Col. Ham Kaija, the Army spokesman Maj. Felix Kulayigye and Air force publicist Captain Tabaro Kiconco.

"I'm very happy that I have returned back home. Thanks to the government of Uganda most especially the UPDF," Ajok said.

"I can't say anything but I'm happy to be back home," she added in an interview that Maj. Kulayigye ended shortly, when he stopped journalists from asking many questions that he said would traumatise her.

One could almost say it was by a stroke of luck that Ajok got her freedom. She was pregnant, with Kony's child she says. When she gave birth, she was given to Col. Binangi group because at that

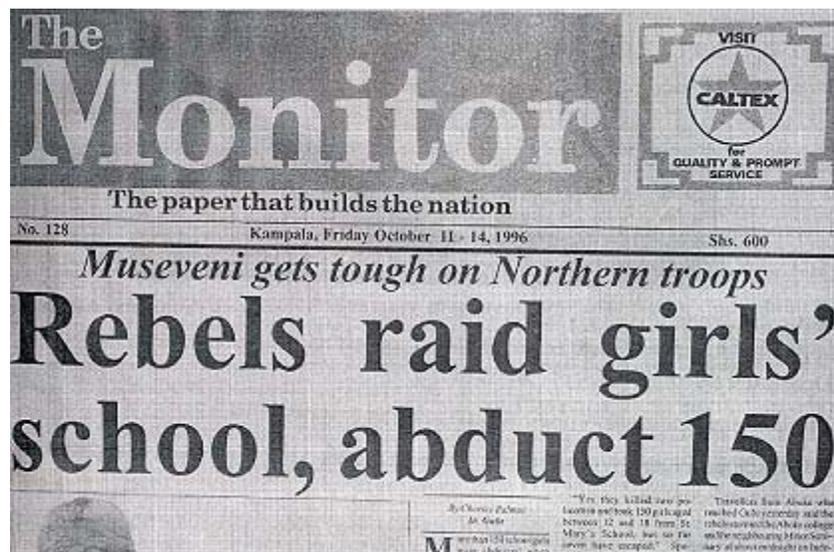
point, as a breast feeding mother with a child during battle, she had become a security threat to the rebel leader.

"I had spent three months without seeing Kony," she said at the time she was rescued. Ajok finally reached UPDF base after one month of wandering in the jungles of Congo since UPDF gunships bombarded the group. She was in the western part in Doruma. The group she says was led by "Col. Binangi Swoop".

Ajok, was found with her 21-month-old baby, Happy Odonga whom she said was fathered by Joseph Kony and whom she calls her husband. "We were over 30 wives of Kony. About 13 had given birth and the rest hadn't".

When she came face to face with the UPDF army, Ajok was happy at last to see people from Uganda who were not rebels. She was welcomed to the Ugandan base by Brig. Patrick Kankiriho, the Operations Commander.

She was the only remaining Aboke abducted student in the hands of Kony who had made all the Aboke students his wives.



A printout of a Daily Monitor page reporting the abduction in 1996.

Two of the Aboke girls died and she was the only one left. Rescued with her was a pregnant 15-year-old Julien Merci, a Congolese.

From the plane, Ajok and her baby Odonga, were whisked to an unidentified home in Kampala where she will get psychological treatment before being handed over to her parents. The 26-year-old is the daughter to Dr Alfred Alyai and Lucy Namataka of Aboke in Apac district.

The UPDF medical officer who travelled with Ajok, Captain Leonard Ddungu, said she and the child were examined and both were in a fairly healthy condition.

"We shall continue diagnosing her and prefer the necessary treatment," Captain Ddungu said. UPDF publicist Major Felix Kulayige said that the rescue of Ajok is a big achievement to government since the launch of operation lightning thunder because self-seeking politicians were blaming the army for bombing empty camps.

"This marks the history that we can't easily forget, for shameless Ugandans to subject such beautiful young girls to abject sufferings," Major Kulayige said.

"These are the fruits of our operations on the LRA. We are accounting for the tax payer's money," he added.

He said the army would yield bigger achievements when the operation continues if it has managed to yield utility in the short time it has been on.

Ajok's painful story begun on October 9, 1996, the night she was abducted. She was in senior two. At that time, her father was the acting District Medical officer of Apac District.

She, along with 149 girls, was abducted by the LRA rebels when the rebels attacked their school. The deputy head mistress of the college, Italian nun, Sister Rachele Fassera, went into the night in search of them.

The rebels agreed to release all but 30 girls. The nun pleaded and offered herself in the girls' place. But the rebels refused and went off with the 30 captives. The Aboke abductions and Fassera's dramatic actions drew unprecedented, to that point, international attention to the insurgency in northern Uganda.

Sr. Rachele and the parents of the remaining abducted children formed the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) to raise awareness of the abductions. In the course of their advocacy, the tale of the Aboke girls became one of the most widely known horror stories of the entire conflict.

Every year, the school holds a sombre ceremony on the anniversary of the raid. Students say prayers and walk silently, clutching candles, from the dorms to the memorial site.

A new crop of girls has since enrolled at St. Mary's. But the raid has not been forgotten among the younger generation. In fact, it is now part of the curriculum. Every evening, after class, students must pray for the girls stolen from their beds and never returned.

When their prayers are over, the St. Mary's students enter the very same dorms that were raided. They are locked inside the buildings, where the windows are sealed shut with concrete.

With Ajok's return, their prayers have been answered.



NEW HOPE: Catherine Ajok alights from a UPDF chartered plane at Entebbe yesterday. PHOTO BY MARTIN SSEBUYIRA