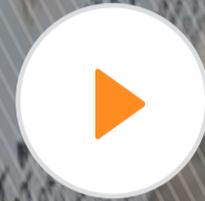




MAPPING UGANDA'S MASSACRES

George Bush Okello, the chief of Bolo village in northeastern Uganda, and his father, Ishmael Obol, attribute the strange occurrences that have taken place in their community to the spirits of those massacred by the LRA during a spate of attacks in 1991. Thirty-two residents are now buried in a mass grave, including nine of the two men's relations
[Marc Ellison]

One man is on a mission to bring peace to Uganda's living and its dead by recording the unreported atrocities of its 20-year war.



PLAY VIDEO

Once terrorised by the living, George Bush Okello is now plagued by the dead.

He believes the angry spirits of those killed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) now haunt the small rural community of Bolo in northeastern Uganda. Some of those who live in this part of Acholiland regularly fall sick for no reason; others find themselves wandering aimlessly in the farmlands they know so well.

The chief of Bolo has experienced these troubling fugue states firsthand.

“One afternoon I went to tend to my goats in the field,” says Okello. “I woke to the sound of a rooster in the early hours of the morning, and found myself sitting in the branches of a tree.”

“There was so much death here, and now the evil spirits are disturbing people.”



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Once terrorised by the living, George Bush Okello, the chief of Bolo village in northeastern Uganda, is now plagued by the dead. He believes the angry spirits of those killed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) now haunt the small rural community of Bolo. "There was so much death here, and now the evil spirits are disturbing people," he says [Marc Ellison]



In the shadow of the Lagoro hills, where the elders still perform a rain-making ritual in times of drought, lies the ground zero for these strange episodes: a mass grave.

Half obscured by thick grass, in faded and peeling paint, a cement monument marking the grave lists the names of the 32 residents massacred here by the LRA during a spate of attacks in 1991.

Okello says Bolo residents had been rounded up by government soldiers and forced to live in communal camps to deter LRA attacks. Unable to farm, or feed themselves, many risked returning to their homesteads to collect food from their granaries.





Bolo residents had been rounded up by government soldiers and forced to live in communal camps to deter LRA attacks. Unable to farm, many risked returning to their homesteads to collect food from their granaries. Under these circumstances nine of George Bush Okello's family members went missing; their bodies were later found littered around the family compound. Ishmael Obol, pictured, is George's father. He helped in the burial of the bodies on the day of the massacre and says he has since been haunted by the spirits of the dead [Marc Ellison]



It was under these circumstances that nine of Okello's family members went missing. After two days, Okello returned to the village to search for them.

"I found my brothers, sisters and uncles all dead, just littered around their family compound," says Okello softly. "It was so painful to see how they'd been killed."

Afraid that the LRA would return at any moment, Okello only had time to dig a shallow mass grave.

"I placed some branches on top because I was afraid dogs would come and pull out the bodies."

Mass burials are not customary in Acholi culture and Okello believes this is why the angry spirits of those massacred haunt the village.

But you won't have heard about Bolo's problems from newspapers or history books – and this is something Deo Komakech is seeking to remedy.





George Bush Okello and his father Ishmael stand in front of the mass grave where nine of their relatives are buried [Marc Ellison]



The Kitgum-based researcher from the Refugee Law Project is, for the first time, mapping the hundreds of mass atrocities that went unreported during the 20-year war between the LRA and the Ugandan government.

Komakech launched the mapping project in September 2010, and in the following months compiled a spreadsheet detailing over 4,500 LRA attacks and abductions from Ugandan newspaper reports. The staggering number of events prompted Komakech to invite all the northern chiefs to a meeting in May 2013, where he trained them to document localised atrocities.



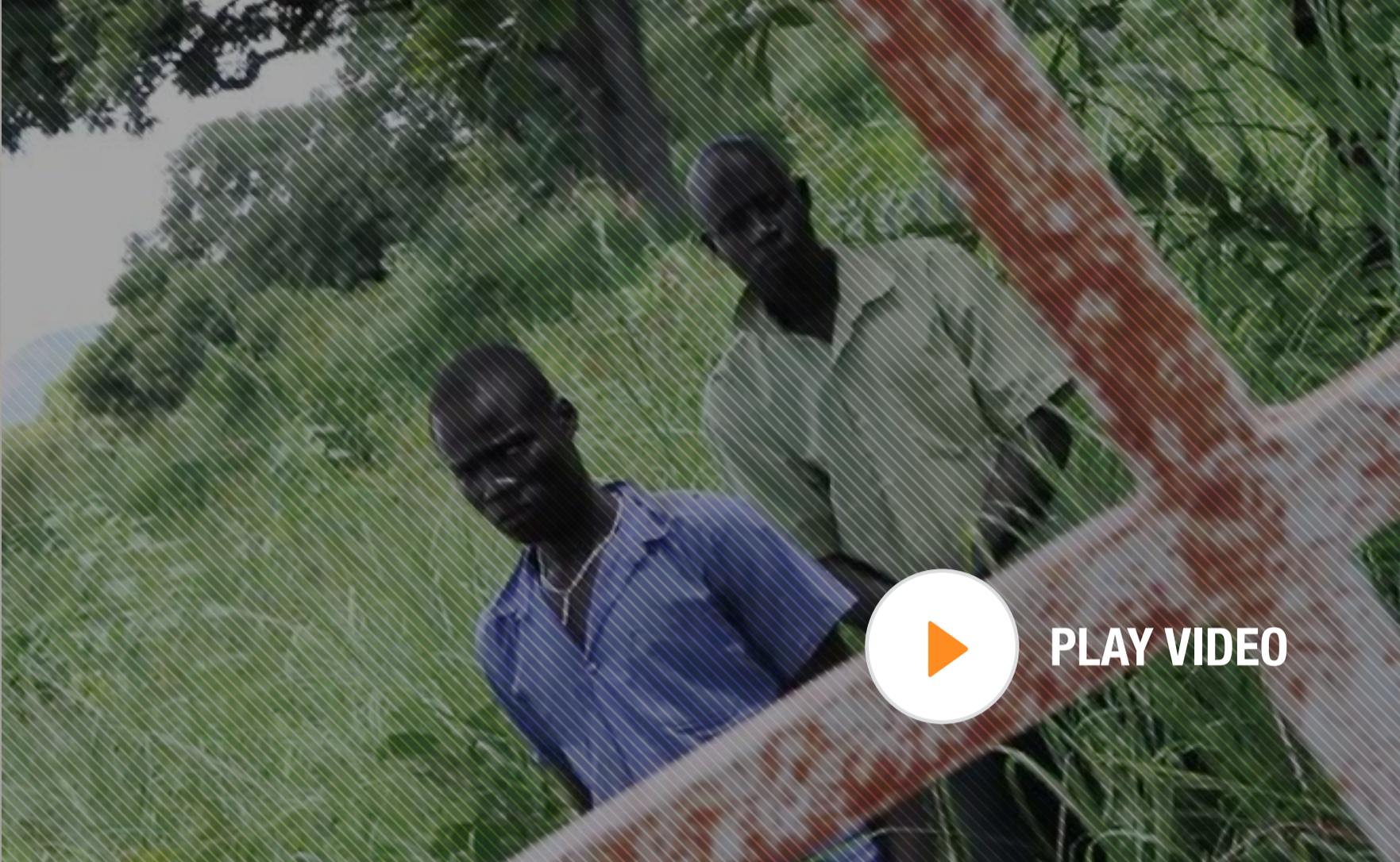
These meetings revealed an alarming disparity between reported atrocities and an additional 230 attacks recounted by the chiefs that had never been previously documented.

Komakech has since visited over 60 of these undocumented massacre sites. Many of these communities are hard to reach – particularly in the rainy season – and are only navigable by dirt-bike.

Each week, Komakech loads his video equipment on to his bike and sets out deep into the bush to document another community's story of untold horror and loss.

“This massacre scoping provides a platform for survivors to share their experiences and marks the beginning of the healing process,” says Komakech. “Documenting these atrocities can also inform the future generations and, who knows, it may help prevent the reoccurrence of these situations.”

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Furthermore, Komakech's work complicates the overly-simplistic narrative of the conflict in northern Uganda with which the international community has been indoctrinated: a war in which Joseph Kony's dreadlocked warriors are depicted as the sole perpetrators of atrocities, while the Ugandan army tirelessly defended its civilian population against their brutality.

A few miles south of Bolo, lies the village of Lobo Latek, where villagers endured not only the well-publicised brutality of the LRA, but the less documented atrocities perpetrated by soldiers of the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF).

Dario Obwona, a respected elder, recalls with bitterness an attack on his community that occurred in 2000. Some months before, the LRA had abducted several of the community's children to serve in the rebel army. The UPDF, suspecting that the people of Lobo Latek were supporting the rebels, raided the village early on the morning of May 1.



You won't have heard about Bolo's problems from newspapers or history books – and this is something Deo Komakech is seeking to remedy. The Kitgum-based researcher from the Refugee Law Project is mapping the hundreds of mass atrocities that went unreported during the 20-year war between the LRA and the Ugandan government. He had all of the northern chiefs fill out a form, like this one, logging the atrocities that took place in their region. He then cross-referenced these with newspaper reports to find which massacres had not been reported [Marc Ellison]



“They did not shoot anyone but instead they beat people with clubs and machetes,” says Obwona. “They used their bayonets to cut off people’s heads.”

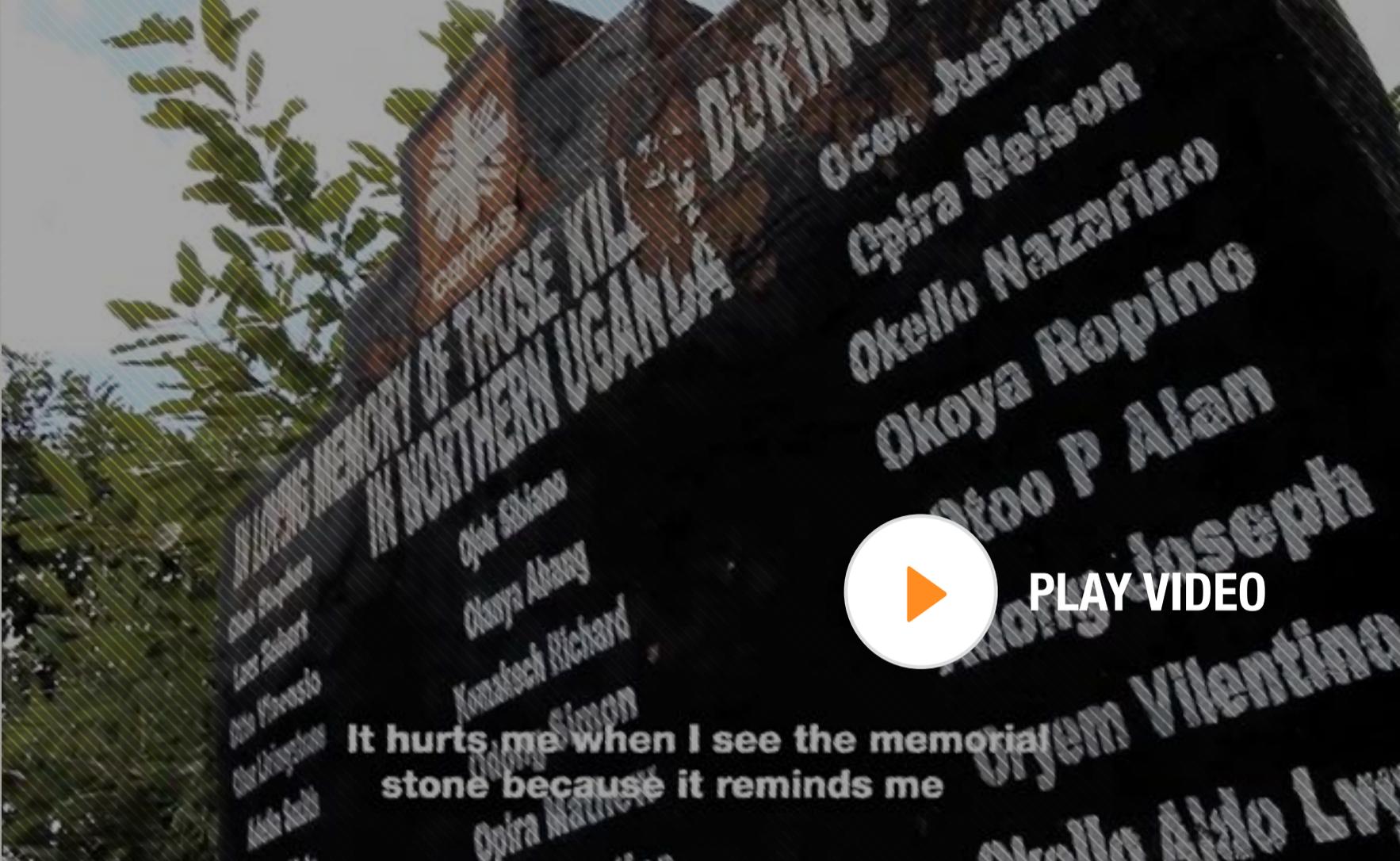
He tells Komakech that five of the victims were his relatives.

“The soldiers kept asking us where we’d hidden the LRA’s guns,” says Obwona. “But we were only farmers – we didn’t have any guns.”

Soon after the massacre the people of Lobo Latek also began to experience strange events.

“Everything that happened here after the killings were things that bring death,” says Obwona. “Vehicles began hitting and killing people on the road near the massacre site.”





The elder recalls one woman who says she heard a person crying in the nearby fields.

“She walked for many kilometres and never saw that person. The moment she reached where the person was crying, the voice would move further into the bush.”

Other villagers have recalled seeing a tall man engulfed in flames.

The community performed a series of cleansing rituals aimed at placating the angry spirits responsible for these unexplainable occurrences. Obwona says these measures have alleviated some of the post-war suffering endured by the people of Lobo Latek.

But controversy still surrounds the memorial monument at the mass grave commemorating the 2000 massacre, as it fails to acknowledge it was the UPDF, and not the LRA, that was responsible for the murders.



Geoffrey Okello was just 10 years old when he returned from school that day to find his parents and siblings lying butchered in the family compound.

“Now when I see the monument, it gives me a lot of pain because it reminds me of the people that I lost,” he says. “It even makes me angry, because they should have included the names of all the victims and those who were responsible.”

Formal acknowledgement of UPDF atrocities by the Ugandan government is a sensitive subject, however, and these are much more difficult to document.

Komakech finds people are more comfortable talking about LRA atrocities. When discussing UPDF ones, they became hesitant.

“They say ‘I can tell you this, but I am sure that nothing is going to be done, because those who did this to us are still in power’.”

But for the people of Bolo and Lobo Latek, smaller steps can be taken to promote social repair following the civil war.

In Bolo, people are seeking support to build a church on the site of the mass grave where they can worship and hold annual memorial services to remember their murdered loved ones.

In Lobo Latek, residents like Geoffrey Okello are looking for *culo kwo* - or reparations - from the government. After government soldiers killed his parents, he had to support himself and could no longer



“They say ‘I can tell you this, but I am sure that nothing is going to be done, because those who did this to us are still in power’.”



Mass burials are not customary in Acholi culture and Okello believes this is why the angry spirits of those massacred haunt the village. Ishmael, pictured, experienced an unexplained illness one day after picking Shea nuts from the tree in background. He blames it on angry spirits [Marc Ellison]



afford to go to school.

Komakech argues that it is important to respect the wishes of the people living in these communities when attempting to document and commemorate the atrocities that took place there during the war.

“If the government wanted to design a reparations programme, then they should understand what the victims of the war are demanding,” he says. “A reparations programme should be victim-driven.”

And by victim-driven, Komakech is not just referring to the needs of survivors of the massacres. The post-war experiences of George Okello, Dario Obwana, Geoffrey Okello, and the countless other people interviewed by Komakech highlight the need for a reparations programme that addresses the demands of the massacre victims as well. In Acholi culture, the worlds of the living and the worlds of the dead remain closely intertwined.

The living cannot enjoy peace, when the dead are unhappy.