

PRESENTATION REMARKS

VICTORIA NYANJURA

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

I am Victoria Nyanjura. I am 33-years-old and was abducted on the 9th October 1996 at the age of 14-years-old while in senior two at St. Mary’s College Aboke in northern Uganda. I escaped on the 28th May 2004 after nearly eight years in captivity of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebels. I was forced to be with a man with whom I bore two children. I grew up from a peaceful home not knowing what would behold me. I recall the day I left home happy to go back to school only to realize on the fateful night I was abducted.

That night of my abduction was calm, the stars so bright. I woke up with the sound of noise, hearing strange voices of the rebels as they broke glasses of our windows to pave their way through. Immediately they entered, we were tied on the waist in a number of eight to prevent us from running away and marched through the gate to start a new life. Of the 139 girls abducted, 109 were released the day after being abducted, and 30 of us were retained. We were beaten seriously on the 10th for crying until when we could not cry anymore and were helpless. They smeared us that night with shea nut oil to initiate us into the rebel group.

Life was so hard while in captivity. I had to serve as a wife at a tender age to a man who was older than me. Being forced to leave your parents to go and serve the interest of the rebels is something so painful. We were made to carry heavy language, yet we had to walk long distances on foot. We were distributed to men who defiled, raped and forced us to become their wives, with each having more than one woman. I cried for help but nobody could come to my help and only prayed to God to take away my life, so that I could rest in peace instead of going through pain.

In January 1997, we left Uganda for southern Sudan, trekking on foot for two days in a journey that can be covered in a week. Once you failed to walk, you would be made to rest by being killed. We should know that the LRA mainly captured those who were young especially between the ages of 9-18. Many died because of hunger and thirst, and those who tried to escape were killed.

Life in southern Sudan was so hard, being a dry place. The LRA depended on food from Juba that was supplied by the Arabs. Southern Sudan was the main base of the LRA at that time. The young people abducted were trained from there and forcefully given guns to fight. About 1-5%

of the women participated in fighting but the majority were there for sexual slavery, providing labor in the home like farming, cooking, and bearing children.

There are many days that I will never forget from my time in captivity. I will never forget when I was given to a man to be his wife. I will never forget the day I was beaten with 50 strokes of a cane, where my whole bum was swollen, and I could not sit, which took me weeks to heal. I will never forget the day I gave birth without a doctor to attend to me, and when we had no food and had to go and collect from civilians who were living on the mountain slopes. I will never forget how hundreds of people died there as a result of thirst because we didn't have enough water for our two long days of walking to southern Sudan. I survived narrowly just because someone gave me porridge that made me to gain and start walking again until I reached the rebel camp.

I was subjected to inhumane treatment, undergoing all sorts of torture, being denied basic human needs such as access to education, health care, shelter, food and being forced to behave like soldiers. This has made me, along with the many others out there that also survived this ordeal highly traumatized. That still haunts me until tomorrow.

I never lost hope of going back to school while in captivity, and that is why I had to go back to school when I returned home. The beginning was not easy since I had to sit among teenage students who knew little about my background but would stigmatize me because of age. It was also challenging to leave my children with my aged parents. I would sit in a classroom and keep on getting flashbacks of what happened to me while in captivity. This affected my studies, but I struggled until I joined the university, where I decided to do a course that would enable me go back to the communities affected by the war and work for the people I suffered with.

Today, I have a Bachelor's degree in development studies from Kyambogo University, and I work as the project assistant at the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP), a Ugandan organization that works for justice and reconciliation with war-affected communities. I am a member and coordinator of the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) at JRP—a forum where war-affected women come together to advocate for justice, acknowledgement and accountability for gender-based violations inflicted on them during war in northern Uganda. I played a large role in organizing a recent petition for redress signed by more than 1,000 war-affected women that resulted in the Parliament of Uganda unanimously passing a resolution to remedy the plight of victims of northern Uganda's conflicts.

Under the WAN, we carry out several activities, such as leadership, advocacy and conflict resolution training for the more than 500 conflict-affected women who are members of the

network. We believe that empowering a woman is like empowering the whole nation because it enables members to carry out advocacy to be able to resolve conflicts among themselves and in the community. We carry out advocacy and lobbying through use of the media where members are able to talk to the community through outreaches and radio talk shows. We also coordinate networking with other groups to share experiences and learn and form linkages for advocacy, peer support and storytelling. This builds confidence among members, so that they are able to speak up for their justice needs. It also helps us to heal because, when I say what I went through, the others will do the same, and in the end, we realize that there are others who suffered but have moved on. It is during the storytelling that members provide counseling services to one another and, in case of any conflict among members, we help in conflict resolution.

The challenges that we continue to face as a result of the war are many. Some have gynecological problems as a result of rape and forced marriage that led to giving birth at a tender age. Other challenges include: lost opportunities to go to school, stigma, and trauma. Our children that we born in captivity also face challenges. For instance, for many, they don't know the identity of their paternal clan. This is a big threat for the future because if they do not have a sense of belonging, then they can become a threat. Trauma can make them do anything. Women and their children who returned often have no access to land, since many people tend to ignore us. We cannot afford to provide education to our children. We are economically vulnerable since we spent our productive time in captivity and returned to no homes. All of this makes life more complicated to us.

So in summary, I feel my state failed to protect me as its citizen by letting the rebels walk away with me, yet it would have protected me and many out there by defeating the rebels at an earlier stage. As a survivor of conflict, I would like to take this opportunity to share my recommendations for increasing peace and security in Uganda and around the world.

One, the rebels should stop using the youth as their weapons of war by abducting them and forcefully conscripting them into the rebel activities. I call upon all of us to join hands and find a lasting solution to end rebel activities all over the world, since it deprives one of his or her right to peace and security.

Two, perpetrators should be held accountable for their actions. I call upon states and international bodies to avoid giving support to rebels. Instead, I suggest you mediate to end conflicts in an area or state and create lasting peace. I also support criminal trials for top-level perpetrators who joined the rebellion and committed atrocities willingly, to serve as a deterrent for the future. For those forced to commit atrocities by the rebels, certain

considerations should be made. Amnesty motivates people to come back, but it should go hand-in-hand with other components of transitional justice, and shouldn't be blanketed in nature. If amnesty is available, it should be accompanied by truth-telling so people can know what happened to their loved ones, and they can heal.

Three, there is need to also address the challenges that women, men and children go through in conflict-affected areas, so as to avoid future war and insecurity. If the root causes and consequence of violence are not addressed in the aftermath, this can also be another threat to security for next generations. Specifically, I call for psychosocial support, livelihoods, health and education for victims.

At this point, allow me thank all that contributed towards my education, the organizers of this programme, and my organization for having allowed me to attend this conference. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my experience with you, and I hope this is just beginning of our conversations on how to better meet the human security needs of youth.

Thank you.

Only the speech as made may be considered authentic.