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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
The Continuing Human Rights Crisis in LRA-Affected Areas

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Topic: Sharing personal experiences of my work with the community of LRA victims

I would like to focus on three main points:

1. How the LRA conflict affects the population of Dungu, DRC
2. Reintegration: Feelings of children and women during and after reintegration
3. Personal impressions of working with the survivors and the problems encountered.

1. How the LRA conflict affects the population of Dungu

Dungu is a small town in North-Eastern Congo not far from South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The population of Dungu has suffered terrible experiences which it will not forget during the LRA conflict – mass killings, abductions, mutilations, rapes, and the destruction of homes, churches, schools and clinics. Children and adults alike will bear the scars of the violence caused by the LRA all of their lives. Because of their trauma, the refugees and child survivors refuse to go back home as long as Joseph Kony is out in the bush and as long as the war is not over. They prefer to die of hunger than to return to their homes and die in the LRA war.

2. Reintegration: Feelings of children and women during and after reintegration

I am the Coordinator of Mama Bongisa Center for Reintegration & Development (CRAD), in Dungu, Democratic Republic of Congo. I came to Dungu in 2003 as part of my mission as a catholic nun, and assisted some of the first women displaced by the LRA and young girls who escaped the LRA in the area. Through Moma Bongisa, I promote reintegration and reconciliation by encouraging communities to welcome the return of escapees. I also provide a wide range of vocational training programs and income-generation activities to promote the economic and social reintegration of abductees. For example, I run four centres that provide sewing and cutting courses to four hundred women. I also oversee a micro-credit program that helps graduates of the vocational training courses start small businesses, and run basic literacy classes in Lingala. There is significant demand for the trainings – many people in the community seek them out and we have had some great successes in reintegrating deeply traumatized former abductees into the community despite the enormous challenges.

For example, I worked with one 14-year old girl who was abducted by the LRA. She had contracted sexually transmitted diseases and had a child after being raped by the LRA. As a result, her family would not accept her into the home because of her illegitimate child. She was

trying to support herself by selling goods in the street but was making no profit. Her child was malnourished. When I first spoke to her, she was so desperate that she said even being a captive in the LRA was not this bad. I took them both to the hospital for medical treatment, and provided them with food. I then enrolled her in vocational training courses at Mama Bongisa, where she learned how to bake and how to sew. She now supports herself and her child by selling bread and selling clothes she makes using one of our organization's sewing machines. She is grateful for the help but she still faces many challenges reintegrating – for example, her mother rejects the baby as it was a product of the LRA. She always leaves her baby with me when she goes out of the house because she doesn't trust the baby with her mother. She has introduced me to other child victims so that I can help them, but we have very few resources to assist people to rebuild their lives.

Most of the women in Dungeni displaced by the LRA violence are rural and illiterate. Many are from rural areas and were forced to marry and have children very early. As a result, they didn't have the opportunity to go to school. Some of the LRA escapees living in Dungeni do not speak the local language, Lingala, which makes it difficult for them to integrate. Thanks to the literacy courses that I provide, these women and girls have learned how to read and write. Thanks to the courses, their interest in education has been kindled. Now they want their training to go beyond literacy. They want a school to be opened to enable them to obtain minimum levels of education and to secure a state diploma.

It is always these women and child survivors who push me to start activities to meet the needs in the community. Even though we do not have enough resources, we do everything we can to relieve them of their trauma and share the burden of their suffering.

3. Personal impressions from working with LRA survivors

In 2008, prior to the arrival of international humanitarian NGOs, I began to help those men, women and children displaced by the LRA, by reintegrating them into society. After this initial experience, I became, for many victims, a person that they would come to for support and I served as an intermediary between them and the humanitarian NGOs.

As a result, LRA survivors now place great trust in me. Many LRA survivors have family disputes after escaping from the LRA. I visit many of them in remote, vulnerable villages far from Dungeni. They are apart from relatives and without any material possessions. I am able to listen to their problems and provide them with psychosocial counselling and relief. Their families trust me and know that they are in good hands when I mediate between them to resolve conflicts.

I have also worked on developing emergency relief projects to protect women and children, and received training from international NGOs to provide psychosocial support to women and girl survivors of sexual violence.

4. Problems Encountered in Working with LRA survivors

As I mentioned earlier we provide literacy and sewing courses to LRA survivors. It is an extremely challenging environment as we work in a refugee camp. There is no infrastructure

such as tables, chairs, blackboards, or notebooks. We sit down on the ground under the trees to learn how to read and write and sew. I have only 27 sewing machines for the sewing and cutting courses for four hundred women. Yet in spite of the lack of resources and the poor conditions in which we learn, the women continue to come to the courses. There is a great demand.

I also try to take care of children whose parents have been killed by the LRA. There is no formal orphanage in Dungu, and I try to link families with orphans to take care of them, and even take some in myself, but there is only so much we can do without more resources. We are in great need of an orphanage but there is no accommodation, no food suitable for babies, no medical care or clothing, and no money to hire people. I often find myself working alone as most people cannot afford to volunteer because they don't have any source of income.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, my community remains deeply scarred by LRA attacks. Reintegrating those abducted by the LRA into society is extremely important and providing basic education, training and psycho-social counselling to those affected by the LRA is vital. There are many success stories to prove the value of these efforts. However, resourcing for these activities remains woefully low. Unless we successfully heal the wounds of LRA victims, we will never be able to truly defeat the LRA.