

SISTER THE REBELS ARE HERE

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english (full version)

- **THE STORY**

Don't look for Aboke town in the atlas: you'll not find it. Aboke is located not far away from the equator, in Northern direction, in the district of Lira about in the center of Uganda.

The climate and the vegetation are not typically equatorial, because Uganda is a big tableland at more than 1000 mt over the sea level. The weather is always hot especially in the central hours of the day, but the climate is surely nice and the demonstration is given by the luxuriant vegetation that is present everywhere in this state.

These explications, even if due ones, must not let forget the dramatic event that we want to remind here and that happened, or better began, on October 10, 1996.

Yes, "began", because Aboke's girls are still today treated as slaves.

Just now, while you're reading these few lines, some of them are still there, in the hands of the rebels of L.R.A. (Lord Resistant Army) with their leader Joseph Kony; they've their base in South Sudan and are active in North Uganda.

What these girls are obliged to do days and nights and how they're obliged to live days and nights, you can find later; the description in its whole cruelty has been made just by the ones that could escape from that hell and come back home.

In addition to the girls of St. Mary's College we want here to remember and to keep alive the tragedy of thousands other girls that, in the similar way, have been kidnapped and obliged to slavery, as well as the thousands boys, kidnapped and obliged to become soldiers.

The numbers are purely indicative. They neither reduce nor increase the tragedy: anyway in the Uganda's district of Gulu and Kitgum the total number of kidnapped young people is swiveling between 22,000 and 24,000. Nobody must forget that these facts are happening also in many other African countries: but the relevant Governments do not mention them, on the contrary in the most cases they try to hinder all facts.

We must surely acknowledge to the Uganda's Government the fact that it doesn't try to hide this problem.

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We wish to point out that names of escaped and returned back home girls have been intentionally changed because, even if these girls are now in their houses, they risk to get retaliations by their kidnapers or by supporters of the latter ones.

We also want to point out that this is not the official site of any person or organization involved in this story, but only the flash of one meeting we had with these people in the month of May 2000 and the evidence we collect.

We want to let know these dramatic news that are happening since years, not having in mind to blame somebody but with the firm intention to keep alive, clear and updated the thought towards the people that are still in this dramatic situation; in addition, we want to inform all people that still know nothing or only few things about it.

The decision to show you, right now and here below, the pictures of the girls that are still in the hands of the rebels, has the purpose to give a true face, the real one, of the people whom we're talking about.

And then here they are:

Janet ABER	Grace ACAN	Palma ACEN	Catherine AJOK	Janet AKELLO
Miriam AKELLO	Sylvia ALABA	Jacqueline ALOBO	Jeska ANGU	Caroline ANYAGO
Angela ATIM	Brenda ATO	Charlotte AWINO	Susan ENJANG	Rebecca KIA
Agatha LONGORIA	Louiza NAMAHELE	Victoria NYANJURA	Jackline WEGESA	

And when, in the story, you'll hear telling about Judith, please think to this face: it's hers, of JUDITH ENANG, killed in Sudan in the year 1997.

• WHAT HAD HAPPENED BEFORE

In the 1990's years the rebels of L.R.A. of Alice Laquena find in Joseph Kony her heir. They believe to be directly led by the Holy Spirit and consequently each one of their actions, even also the most barbaric one, is legitimated by the divine will.

So they devastate, sack, plunder and shut at 360° around in the conviction (it's only a way of talking) that their bombs and their bullets are driven by the hand of the Holy Spirit and therefore only the people will be injured, that must be effectively killed.

The rebels believe that the bullets are becoming water if they should hit somebody that isn't guilty. The same rebels are also convinced to stay under a supernatural protection; the militants of L.R.A. in fact must be and remain pure and to hold the mouth closed during their war's actions, so if they kill, slaughter, steal or rape, the victims will be only people that were deserved to be killed, slaughtered, robbed or raped.

And if some rebel is killed during the fire clashes, it's only because he had the mouth open or even only half-open. Therefore all is allowed and made legal by the divine directories, that the leaders are requiring before starting every new action.

In these last years the rebels have been present much more in the territory of Northern Uganda, with raids also in the districts of Central Uganda.

The St. Mary's College is well protected thanks to the presence of soldiers.

But things begin to change when soldiers must leave and are replaced by men of L.D.U. (Local Defence Unit), i.e. squads of reservists that are organized in formations as local police.

Often people are advised about raids of the L.R.A.'s rebels and the "tam-tam" is telling also of the St. Mary's College in Aboke as one of the targets of Kony's men.

Sister Alba makes more than her best to get again a military protection that would allow the school to go on in a rather quiet situation, and who knows Sister Alba is well informed about her resolution in obtaining what is due to her.

But in September 1996 the local military responsible in Aboke advises the Sisters: "We must move to Ikeme to change our uniforms."

The situation isn't quiet and the Sisters try in every way to get an alternative cover, even if temporary, but there's nothing to do.

After soldiers left, the voices of rebels' presence are becoming more and more frequent. Sister Rachele leaves to Ikeme to press the coming back of the army. She negotiates with an officer and gets to obtain only a night-presence, which is anyway a big result. After the agreement she turns back the pick-up and drives again to Aboke; but she brings with her 19 soldiers.

As per agreement, the soldiers have to be driven back to Ikeme each morning by the Sisters.

But the voices about presence of rebels in the vicinity are becoming bigger and bigger, as well as the fear.

Sister Alba, the Mother Superior, sends Sister Rachele to press again the army: "We know to be in the foresight of the rebels. If you don't give us 50 soldiers, we'll close the school."

The government's officer makes Sister Rachele quiet; this time she has done the 16 Kilometers by bike and therefore she may not bring immediately soldiers with her.

Anyway the officer reassures her again: "Sister, if there's danger, I send you also a message."

• THE HOURS BEFORE THE CRIME

It's evening, but at 20.15 the soldiers are not yet arrived. The Sisters of St. Mary's College have a meeting to decide what to do in such a difficult time.

One hour to decide: to let go the girls to bed.

But it's already dark outside and therefore it's a risk to move the girls out of the school.

Sister Alba, the Mother Superior, remains in the chapel to pray till 23.30 o' clock.

These ones, and further crucial moments of this story, where the decisions to be taken are full of tragedy and where the reader can also not agree with the taken choices, show also the whole humanity of this story and all dramas the involved people had to face, even if not willing.

Therefore, if it's true (and it is) that men may make a mistake, this even is demonstrating this fallibility in its whole entirety. The "fallibility" of the rebels is evident, as well as the one of their leaders, of their decisions, of their daily life, of their crimes.

During her meeting with the L.R.A.'s rebels, Sister Rachele could also find some humanity's points with these people, one reading-key that on the opposite for us is much more difficult to understand.

The mistakes, that the same sisters or even more the girls can have done, are the most true and crude testimony that we're not in front of "heroines" working on one cinema's set, but in front of true people.

People that have lived through terrible experiences that they never would wanted to test, but that they have faced in their whole pain, dramas that have marked their life for ever.

People, some of whom - the most lucky ones, in a certain way - have brought home this drama; others, unfortunately (and we must not forget it) are still living through this tragedy, also in this right moment: every

day, as soon as they wake up, and every night, when they go to bed.

The only one that is out of this dimension is the only Judith, that from Sudan did not come back and never will.

• THE KIDNAPPING

On October 10, 1996 at 2.30 a.m. the guardian knocks at the room of Sister Rachele and brings the sad advise: "Sister, the rebels are here".

"I immediately woke up and dressed to go and advise Sister Alba " – is telling Sister Rachele – "Alba, there are the rebels".

The sisters run out, turn around the convent to reach the entry 's gate. There's wasn't yet the actual big door, there was only one net and the entry was floodlit through the torches of the rebels.

Immediately the sisters think to let escape the girls from the rear side and therefore they go towards the four dorms where there are about 50 girls in each building.

But, just arrived we noted that there were torches' lights also around the dorms."

The sisters are now between two fires and in a second's fraction they had to decide whether to go outdoors or to hide in the grass waiting for rebels' leaving.

After the dramatic experience of the year 1989, the dorms' doors had been strongly reinforced and the windows protected by iron shutters.

When then rebels had been here in earlier times –the sisters are telling – they had immediately addressed to the convent."

It means that they knew where to go. And also this time they know it: but the convent is not their goal, so as the money isn't: this time they are looking for the girls.

The guerrillas of L.R.A. enter the garden of St. Mary and immediately go to the left side, directly to the dorms.

The two sisters note almost immediately that it's already late to try to let escape the girls.

Together with Alba, we went back.

If they see us – we told to us – they'll oblige us with the force to open the dorms, that are on the opposite protected by iron doors and windows.

We ran to wake the old sister and all together we went to the stock house."

The sisters throw themselves in the grass, behind one hedge. They pray for their girls. At a certain time they suddenly hear repeating shots; deep noises, not as rifle-noises.

"We never heard the voice of even one of our daughters crying "Help" or calling us."

This is telling Sister Rachele and this lets them hope that the guerrillas (that remain in the school garden for more than three hours) couldn't get in entering the students' buildings.

On the opposite, at a certain time the noises are becoming nearer; the rebels are moving to the convent. But there are only noises, no voices.

At a certain point Matilde notes that somebody is opening the door of her room. Few minutes after a white, pungent smoke is going up from the convent's yard. It's the car that two days before Sister Rachele had used to come back from Kampala.

Therefore we knew where they were. But never we heard voices of the girls."

"It was beginning the day, when all was being to be silent, then we heard the bells of the church. They are gone to the Fathers – we thought."

The rebels are maybe retiring or anyway they're moving and leaving the St. Mary's College.

At about 6.30, in the first light-blue light of the morning, Sister Alba sees one group young girls.

In front of them there was Claudia, that at that time was in the 2nd class.

"Are you OK? we immediately asked." The little one has two huge tears falling down the cheeks." Sister- she says - they brought all us away."

The sisters run to look for their girls. They arrive in front of the dorms of 4th, 5th, 6th classes. They call the girls, but these don't reply, because they fear the rebels could have caught the sisters and think the men are obliging them to let the girls come out.

At the end the girls see and understand; they open the door, run out like a river in flood and begin to tell: their eyes have just seen the "littles", the ones from 1st to 3rd class, to be brought away. Someone had their little sister among the kidnapped girls.

• THE PURSUIT

"Still today I cannot say whether it has been a right decision to hide and to wait for - repeat Sister Rachele – maybe, if we should have gone in front of the rebels, we could convince them to bring nobody of the girls away. Or maybe they would oblige us to open also the dorms that, on the contrary, remained saved."

"In that moment we got that decision. The judge we leave to the Lord."

Rachele doesn't find peace, she cannot find it, while she thinks once more to the story traced since that evening. "We have hidden to save the girls - she remembers - but the girls have been brought away."

The Sisters arrive in front of the refectory. On the floor there's a lot of things: clothes, slippers and other. They move towards one of the dorms and they discover that the bars of the windows have been bent and dismantled.

In another dorm Sister Alba and Sister Rachele find that one wall has been demolished by blows with a pickaxe. In fact one window had been attacked and dismantled together with its bar.

"When I saw that wall there, I said: Alba, I run after them".

And Sister Alba, the Superior Mother: "Rachele, go!".

Sister Rachele changes her clothes, takes some money from the office for an eventual exchange or ransom, and in few minutes she's ready to go and to run after the rebels.

"If we talk with them - Sister Rachele wants to be hopeful - we are maybe able to convince them.

While I was leaving the office, two teachers - Bosco and Tom - came towards me and wanted to come with. Bosco is the younger and looking at him in the eyes I asked him: "Would you come with me?"

"Sister, let's go to die for our girls - Bosco replied."

"I went into the office - Sister Rachele goes on telling - I put the money in my bag and I was leaving, already at the door of the office, when somebody seized me by the waist. I turn back and I see one little girl, wearing maybe a sack; she was completely brown, I don't remember.

She looks at me and says: "Sister, I've been raped."

"My God!" - shouts out Sister Rachele, and she immediately calls the Superior Mother.

Sister Alba arrives and takes care of the baby, while Sister Rachele, even with painful heart, must leave to run after the rebels.

"And I had to leave her there. A girl of 1st class; her name is Eva, she was 13 years old - Rachele is telling despairing - Raped ... and later she could also no more look at her father's face."

"They raped her there - she indicates - near the Church."

Sister Alba assists the little raped Eva, while Sister Rachele runs looking for the kidnapped girls.

It's about 7.00 o'clock in the morning and neither she nor the teacher know the way where to go.

But the day before it had been the anniversary of Independence and therefore in the refectory there were still bonbons, drinks and cookies by which they had celebrated the National holiday. The rebels had sacked all this food and had eaten while escaping, leaving an Ariadne's thread made by waste-paper and bottles.

"This indicated us the road to go on.

We met an escaping man. He had seen the rebels, had curled himself behind one tree to let them pass away and then he had gone the opposite direction. He. Too, confirmed that the rebels with a quite big group girls had passed there.

Therefore the road was the right one, but just for this it was dangerous. The young teacher runs in front of Rachele and says to her: "Sister, put your feet only there, where I put mine."

In fact the L.R.A. men are used to spread the back-way with anti-men' mines.

"I was behind, following him, and more than one time some noise let me become afraid of the worst. And Bosco always suggested: "Sister, put your feet where I put mine."

They crossed a swamp, with their clothes soaked up to the armpits.

"I thought to the babies - Rachele continues to tell - and it was as I could see them in the swamp." "For some babies - Rachele thinks - the water will have surely reached their throat!"

Sister Rachele and Bosco leave also the swamp behind them and go on along the pathway.

They cross a little glade, where there are two huts as well as two women, one quite old and the other one younger.

"Where are you going?" - they asked us for - "We're looking for the rebels together with the girls: are they passed hereby?"

"Yes, they passed here - the younger woman replied - and they kidnapped also my baby girl. Please let me come with you."

Bosco looked at Rachele and she accepted. "Let's go."

The teacher always as first, suggesting the two women to follow him step by step; after him the new fellow-traveler and as last Rachele.

"We arrived on the top of a little stones' hill - Rachele tells lowering her eyes - I stooped and saw the slippers, the bag and the identity card of one of our girls."

But the young teacher is looking somewhere else, beyond the valley lying under their feet, and advises Rachele, absorbed in the personal things lost by one of St. Mary's College's girls. He touches one of her shoulders to catch her attention: "Sister, they're there." "I've looked up and I've seen them; they were going up on the following ridge. In fact we were in a good sight position. In front of us there was this group people walking up."

In front of them, in those excited minutes, Sister Rachele thinks to see an hand calling her from far away, maybe an enquiry for help. So Rachele waves the arm as reply.

From the other group peremptory shouts are coming; Bosco goes near to Rachele: "Sister, don't wave the hand. They are intimating us to proceed with arms up."

The three ones leave again, arms towards the sky, in the same position: the teacher as first one, the woman in the centre and Sister Rachele closing.

They go down the hill. In the valley they find a thick vegetation that does not allow to clearly see the other group.

They turn around the green wall and suddenly they face the runners.

• THE CONTACT

"They were about 30 soldiers, positioned in two lines, they were waiting for us with levelled rifles: as soon as I saw them, I had fear!"

Rachele, during her pursuit, counted a lot on the fact to be a white woman and a nun: two facts that in this Country still have a determinant weight.

As soon as she has in front the men of L.R.A. , she immediately realises that these important things will have any importance in this situation.

With a disarming simplicity Sister Rachele looks at me in my eyes: "You know, I had fear. When I have seen them in face, near to them, I noted that they looked at me, but their look was not a welcome."

Then she turns on and begins again to relive that morning; it's about 10.30 o'clock.

The pursuit had been finished in three and half hours, thanks also to the superficiality of the rebels that don't hurry, if they are not pursued by Uganda's army. But unfortunately the sack, kidnap, set on fire and kill what they are finding along their walking.

Rachele goes ahead, the young teacher has finished his work. Now it's her turn, she comes out from the end of the file, approaches the rebels and arrives in front of their rifles: "I'm the Sister of Aboke, I would like to speak with your leader."

One of them comes ahead and for the sister this is a first positive signal.

"In the year 1989, when they came here the first time – Rachele is specifying – I immediately asked for speaking with their leader, but the guy in front of mine immediately replied: we are all leaders.

And I understood that there would have been no possibility of dialogue."

This time, on the opposite, a leader is there and comes ahead. He walks towards the nun up to be in front of her.

"I'm the sister of Aboke" Rachele repeats.

"Do you speak Acholi?" he asks her. Rachele has been in Gulu one and half year long and since there people speak Acholi slang, she knows a little bit this language and this allows her anyway to begin a dialogue.

"Where were you when we came to the school?"

"I was not there – she replies – I was gone to Lira to bring Sister Alba that is sick. I returned back this morning. As soon as I entered the school I've seen what you have done; but I said to me: I follow them, I'm sure that they'll give me back the girls."

"You are cheating me" – he answers, but Rachele is satisfied, the comparison is begun.

"I've brought the money."

"But we don't want money."

Then Bosco let Sister Rachele understand that they are asking for her bag.

Promptly Rachele takes off the bag and put it in the hands of one soldier, that checks inside.

Then the rebels' leader let give again the bag to the sister, that has a rosary in the hands.

"What are you doing? – "I'm praying that you give me back the girls."

"Do not worry. I give you the girls."

Rachele has a jump, she cannot believe to the words coming out from the mouth of that man.

He orders to the woman arrived with them to go far away and then to Rachele and Bosco to follow him.

They begin again to walk, but they have still not yet seen their girls: who knows where they have been hidden!

The road goes up again, but Rachele keeps up with the preceding guy: he's the chief; and she well knows that before all he is the only man that in this moment can give her back her students.

• THE ABOKE'S GIRLS

"At a certain time we advance in a long pathway, straight one.

At least I see a group girls along the road. A group of 4/5 girls and a group of rebels, another group girls and another group rebels ...

Then I see Judith.

I see her ... she's crying with big tears ... I see her dress torn in the front side ... you can imagine what I have thought."

Rachele is brought in front of another soldier and invited to repeat her enquiry, but he asks her before:

"Where was the parish priest when we came to you?"

"He was not there. He was away."

He stands up; he invites her to walk near him: "You may speak with your girls."

In the meantime the group arrives in Acokara, where the railway is passing by. Just near the railway there are two huts, where the leader advises to place the camp.

"When we stopped I told me: now he gives me the girls."

And while his men were preparing the camp, he sat down on a trunk. I immediately went near him and Bosco near me."

The rebels' leader let separate the student girls of St. Mary's College from all other kidnapped people, some of whom had still hands tied behind the back.

Then he approaches them menacing: "Woe betide if you hide some girls that does not belong to your school!"

At this point Rachele still does not know exactly the number of her girls that have been kidnapped. While they are being menaced, from far away she tries to keep them quiet with some gestures.

"Now I must ask my chiefs" the rebels' leader says. He calls one of his men that takes out a sunny panel to charge the battery and connect.

In this moment Rachele is convinced that she'll go back home with all her girls.

• THE ARMY IS COMING

But on the footsteps of the rebels there was non only the Sister of Aboke but also the army of Museveni. And just when the whole story seems to canalize towards a desirable solution, they hear the noise of an helicopter. It's a unmistakable noise, even if it's coming from far away and is becoming bigger and bigger.

The immediate order is to hide at little groups, a little bit everywhere. Rachele is obliged to take off the white veil, which is easily to locate from over in the green spot.

The spells have unfortunately a very short life and in this case the spell was already finished. After the purposeless passage of the helicopter, the rebels chief immediately orders to run again. Rachele plays the card that the actual situation is offering her: "Let me go together with the girls, they will hinder you during the escape."

But there's nothing to do, they leave again. They still walk long time, cross the railway and suddenly they hear to shoot.

They are the soldiers of Ugandan army. Again all people on the earth. Rachele goes back among her students that, hearing the fire shots, try to cover the nun and to protect her with their bodies.

The bullets whirred over the head of all people. "I would have never thought to wish that soldiers would not find us, but in that moment I really would have preferred to be alone with the rebels in order to bring to the end the job I had begun."

The kidnapped girls and boys are sent ahead, while some of the rebels remain in the rear-guard and slacken the pace of the government's soldiers.

The march is often interrupted from sudden attacks that oblige the group to stop, to hide, to wait for and then to leave again.

"I've seen incredible things. I've seen how they transform and reduce the baby boys in cruel soldiers. There was a little boy about 12 years old, with the neck wrapped in one band of machine-gun's cartridges; hand bombs bound on one side, a knife on the other one."

Still four hours forced march are needed, with rebels strained and nervous because they feel hunted down. At every appearance of the helicopter the group is stopped and hidden in the thick vegetation. All people are obliged to cover themselves with big leaves to camouflage.

Then they reach a camp. It may be it's theirs. Here there are further people obliged to remain there against their will.

And once more the rebels' chief separate the girls of St. Mary's College from the other ones.

Then he seats on a chair; one woman of the champ arrives promptly to take him off the shoes and put him slippers.

Rachele and Bosco are sitting on earth, at his side.

He looks at her: "Do you have a picture of the Virgin Mary?" – "Unfortunately no. But I have a crucifix." She proposes, he takes it in the hand, looks at it and put it in the small pocket.

It begins a conversation almost like between big friends; he shows her a walkie-talkie, got from an attack in Karuma.

The tension seems to become just a little bit lower. He introduces himself: "I'm Mariano Ocaya. When we came to Aboke, if we should have found a priest, we would do nothing."

"Mariano, I'm a nun. And one nun has a bigger value than one priest." But the attempt does not get effects. And while they're talking, a boy approaches timidly Rachele and implores her in a whisper: "Please tell him that I'm a seminarist."

"What is he asking for?"

"He's a seminarist. Let him come with me" replies Rachele.

"Here are we all seminarists". Is the counter-reply of Mariano Ocaya.

The conversation is a little wandering. Rachele finds the correct pretext to come back to the core of the question. "Mariano, why don't we finish this story? Our people already suffered a lot, too much."

"We'll finish this war when President Museveni will decide to lead the nation with the Ten Commandments."

Then he calls one woman that comes directly with a basin and a soap, and orders to Rachele to wash herself.

She is surprised, cannot understand what's happening. Anyway she prefers to make Ocaya content. She is brought behind a hut, where on the earth has been prepared a mat made with banana leaves.

After a new pressing of the woman Rachele, more and more surprised, washes herself.

The woman disappears for few minutes. Then she comes back and in the hands she has a yellow dress and a white under-dress. "Change your dress" she orders her.

"No, you see, I'm a nun, I hold my dress." – "Change it!"

Rachele, with courtesy, refuses more times this invitation.

• THIRTYS REMAIN THERE

These instants will remain fire marked in her memory, because – she'll know later – in these instants Mariano Ocaya is choosing the baby girls to keep there.

In fact, as soon as she comes back to the group and sits down near Bosco, the teacher whispers:

"Sister, he does not give all them to us!"

"Why does not he give all them to us?" and then turning round: "Mariano, do you give me the girls?"

He looks at her and shakes the head: "No." Then he stoops towards the earth and with a stick he writes a number: 139. "In that moment I've known how many of our girls were exactly there.

Mariano told me: the girls are 139 ... I give you ... 109 and keep thirty with me."

Sister Rachele falls on his knees and implores: "Keep me. Keep me here and let go the girls. Please let them go, send them home and keep me."

"If Kony tomorrow says YES, I leave all them free."

"Let me speak with Kony, bring me to him."

"It is not possible – Ocaya replies – Write him a message."

Rachele writes her petition on a piece of paper found somewhere. Mariano Ocaya puts it in the small pocket.

"Now go and write the names of the girls that will remain here."

Sister Rachele feels like if she would die in the short distance she has to walk for reaching her girls.

She arrives and they are already divided in two groups: 109 in one side and in the other one the 30 ones that will remain. And all are already aware of their destiny. And in fact as soon as Rachele, trembling, is near the group of the thirties, all stand up and begin to cry imploring her.

Immediately Ocaya give a sharp, precise order.

In an instant the soldiers that were there around are jumped in action: savagely beating, flogging and trampling on them ...

"Jesus" invokes Rachele. The girls become silent and Ocaya advises his men to stop. And then towards her: "Write the names".

Sister Rachele is astonished, she cannot get convinced that she must leave there her girls in the hands of the rebels.

"Charlotte looks at me and says: "Sister, do you come back today evening?"

"Josephine: Sister, tonight they'll rape us all!"

"Jeska tells me: Sister, my mother ..."

"Agatha, terrorized, with so big eyes, without breath ..."

"All had something to tell me. Grace asks me: Sister, can you bring me tonight some clothes?"

"I've menstruations ... and what do you do?"

"I've turned back – Rachele continues to tell with tears in the eyes – I've seen him behind me; I knelt to him and said: "Mariano, give me all them".

"If you do so ... I give you no one." And he left.

Rachele follows him and apologizes. He stops, turns back: "Go and write the names of those that remain here."

Sister Rachele goes back, walking steps that have the weight of big stones. She tries to write on a piece of paper, she writes some names but she does not get it. It's Angela, one of the girls destined to stay there, that says her: "Sister, I write our names."

"Angela is now in Sudan" Rachele cries.

In this torment the sister is called by Mariano Ocaya that meantime let prepare cookies and tea.

"... and I had to go and drink tea and eat cookies with Mariano Ocaya and the other commanders ... while Angela was writing the names of those that remained."

At the end Ocaya invites Rachele to greet the 30 babies that remain there. The sister approaches, Angela gives her the paper sheet with the list and then in a whisper she tells her: "Sister, Janet is hidden with the other ones."

Rachele thinks over just one second, then she understands that she could put in a serious risk the further 109 girls, if she would bring with her the hidden girl. She takes one decision, the only possible one, but one of those that nobody would never want to be obliged to take. "Angela, go and call her ... Angela went and called Janet, that came back in the group of the thirties. She approached me and we pressed strongly, strongly." Then, in a choked voice: "Janet, I pray you, do it never more because you put in danger your mates."

"Sister, I'll do it never more" Janet replied.

"Janet is still in Sudan now" tells today Sister Rachele.

"After that we have knelt down, I've prayed with them. I have given my rosary to Judith – our head girls; the one that they killed.

"I said her: Judith, take care of the girls. " "Yes, Sister, I'll do it".

"When we have known she had been killed, I thought it had been owing to she had defended the other girls."

At this point Rachele knows to be leaving. She knows, in that moment she may do nothing for the thirty girls called by the destiny. A destiny which has anyway a name, Mariano Ocaya.

On the opposite she must hurry to bring back and save the others, before Kony or his men change again their mind. But in the mind of the Sister there are only they: the ones that will remain. And she knows, the girls know which one will be their works during the day and which one their beds during the night. They well know they'll be chosen and distributed in the nights of the leaders, while they'll be the slaves and the labour women of all men during the day.

"Take the pulls from your mates" invites them Rachele. So they do it "When we'll leave ... you must not loot at us". Angela replied: "No, Sister, we won't look at you." And that was the last time I've seen them".

.....

"You know, I could say him: Mariano, I stay here with the babies, let Bosco go with the others ... but I didn't think so, because otherwise I would be there with them, now."

"... and I should be there with them, today".

• THE MORDER OF JUDITH

Judith was one of the most responsible girls in the group of kidnapped ones; one head girl, as she's called in the Aboke's college.

To her Rachele had addressed and entrusted the further 29 girls that remained in the hands of the rebels.

It may be that this roll costed her the life, or maybe which other was the ground. Practically, her s was an exemplary and brutal killing, as it has been later told by the girls that could get escaped from Sudan.

Judith has been killed evenings, together with another young girl, Caterina, that did not belong to the group of Aboke.

The two girls have been tied with the hands behind her back and then, in turn, they've been injured with wild cruelty with sticks, bike's chains and machete's shots.

As it's used by the guerrillas, Judith and Caterina have been not killed immediately, but left on the earth agonizing. A further message for all other people.

Caterina died the following morning after an indescribable night pains.

Judith after 24 hours was still alive and asked for drinking.

She was caught and trailed in the forest, where she was left in slow agony.

The testimony of this fact is coming from the words of the escaped and returned back girls; also for this reason they are in the foresight of further retaliations from the guerrillas and their supporters, that of course are denying every involvement.

After about one week some girls, that had been sent just in that forest to look for firewood, found her corpse, tied at one tree and not yet in decomposition, in spite of the warm weather of this region.

... how long had she been left agonizing?

• THE RETURNED BACK HOME GIRLS

Milena and Carla, we'll call with these names two of the girls that escaped from the hell and could reach home, not without indescribable vicissitudes.

Milena is 22 years old and escaped after about seven months captivity.

Carla will be soon 18 years old; she's the latest one of the returned back girls. When she was kidnapped, she was only 14 years old. When we meet her, about one month after her coming back, she has in the eyes and in her silence the whole drama and the upsetting of the three and half years spent there out, over that wall of her school, which is now again protecting her; a wall that would also like to dandle her. She was a little girl when she was kidnapped, today she's no more, even against her will, and nothing and nobody can dandle her.

Carla arrived in Kitgum in April 2000, after nine months from her escape, that she spent hiding in the forest or in the house of somebody that welcomed her, running the same huge danger.

She was escaped in July 1999 from Jebelin, in Sudan. She had profited of a movement, caused by the work, in Nisitu.

The opportunity had come just a little bit earlier and had allowed her to find cooperation in another misfortune's mate: Marta, another young kidnapped girl (non coming from Aboke's school).

"Die to die – they told each other – better to try to escape."

Carla catches the opportunity as soon as it comes out. For three weeks she remains absolutely hidden in the vegetation; she knows that this is the period when the Kony's rebels stir up the other boys in the research. After three weeks then the researches are extended also to the nearer villages and there, at that point, are activated also the men of Arabian security of Sudan towns that are helping rebels in looking for the fugitives. Carla knows very well this way of proceeding. Over 20 days spent hidden, then the meeting with a much older man than she, an artisan, Marco that helps her. It's a big risk also for him and here nobody makes something for nothing. Carla must work for Marco and follows him in his movements up to Juba. Here she discovers that also Marta is still free.

But Marco is not satisfied to have her only as assistant and abuses her. He takes her isolated for about five months; and more, he would pretend that she becomes her wife but she does not accept; she wants to go back home with all her forces, still more now when she could become free from the L.R.A. men.

Since she could escape from them, she'll get it again, still more with Marco.

The opportunity has the name of Giuseppe, a boy she knows and that she can get in touch with, by a little trick.

Also Giuseppe, together with Fosco, another kidnapped boy, is escaping from the slavery of Sudan. The three young people get to plane also this escape, that happens evening, just after sun's falling down.

They are the Christmas days of the year 1999 when, on a truck, the three fugitives can put in practise their intentions and arrive up to Torit for another stage of about two months, that they use to find a covering and try to understand which one can be the following move to do a new step, maybe the last one towards the returning home.

And from here, after done the due controls, Carla leaves by foot with the two travel's mates, to try to overcome the border and enter again in Uganda. The difficulties are coming to every day, as well as the unforeseen events and the risks and in fact Carla, that is now almost at the limit of the exhaustion, makes lower the march of the two boys, even if she would not want to do it, and put them in further danger. Fosco would have in mind to forsake her in order to go on quicker.

On the opposite Giuseppe waits for her, assists her and incites her to proceed. Carla risks to don't arrive at the end, but Giuseppe is always at her side. On Easter Wednesday, when they are already arrived in Uganda (but anyway still risking, because the region is controlled by the rebels) they get a passage from our car and this fact opens, makes real and solves the nine months escape of Carla, that reaches Kitgum along with Giuseppe and Fosco: now they are safe (or almost ones).

Kitgum is controlled by the army but this is not a good reason for considering it as a quiet town. And so the three boys, arrived by friends, are transferred to Gulu and then brought to their houses, where huge are the joy's moments, accomplished however by further situations and dramas that we may not tell here, to don't get the risk to make them easily identifiable ones to the people that would have in mind to look for them in Uganda.

The meeting of Carla with Sister Rachele happens in Kitgum, on Easter Monday, at 9.30 a.m.

"Are you all here?" – Sister Rachele is asking, but Carla confirms: "No, Sister, Judith was killed for nothing."

• THE RECORD OF 1989

The incursions of rebels of L.R.A. are unfortunately an old knowledge for St. Mary's College in Aboke.

In fact on March 21st, 1989 the men of Joseph Kony had already taken the school of the Italian nuns as object of their attacks. At that time 10 girls had been kidnapped, one of whom never came back. Along with them the rebels had brought away also 33 seminarists and people of the village.

During the escape they had left behind their shoulders a road paved of death. Who had faced them in fact had been killed, like a man that rode by bike along the street and one woman burned alive in her hut while she was trying to alert the other people.

At that time all had begun in the morning, when two unknown men, dressed as soldiers, had entered the school. At the question of Sister Rachele: "Where are you coming from?" they replied: "From Lira" one town about half an hour far by car from Aboke. But few minutes later they had contradicted themselves asking for information just about the distance to Lira. Discovered, they had immediately shown their real intention taking off the rifles and ordering: "Sit down here, we are the ones of Holy Spirit".

An in few instants the school yard had been full of rebels (more than one hundred), while the girls

are running away in every direction.

The ones that could not find an escape place had run around Sister Alba, the Superior Mother, that serrated to her about seventy girls.

A stock house, where parcels and clothes coming from donations had been located, had catalyzed the attention of many rebels, that sequestrated some people to carry the fruits of their sack.

After an huge chaos, in the college the sisters counted the absences. Also then more than 100 girls were missing.

The sisters looked for them in the fields around the school and Sister Rachele arrived by bike up to Lira where, in the Cathedral, she found 118 student girls along with some teachers that had collected them as well as some parents that had been already informed and promptly had reached them.

But ten of them are still missing, and after coming back to the school Sister Rachele, then again, asked the Superior Mother for permission to search the girls.

Owing to the late time, Sister Alba could convince her to wait for the morning. And at 6.30 a.m. Sister Rachele, together with two teachers and with 40,000 Shillings in the pocket for an eventual ransom began to follow the steps of the rebels.

The raining of the previous days had permitted the mark of the shoes to be clearly seen on the earth, but still more clear were the traces of ruin that the fugitives had left in the villages when passed by.

For Sister Rachele it was an heart shot to find along the road the underwear, that she recognized to be of one girl of her, with the rosary.

In Acokara the drama in the drama was told by witness petrified by the terror: "Here they have spent the night and raped the girls."

Along the railway, on the right and on the left side the houses had been burned.

In the following village people, terrified, confirmed the passage of the rebels that with their continuous sacks had only two hours advantage.

All people tried to dissuade Sister Rachele from the pursuit. Few hours earlier, the mother of one kidnapped baby had followed the rebels, had reached them and prayed them in knees to let him free.

"Who is your son?" the leader asked her; "He's." the woman indicated and, as reply, the baby had been killed, in that place, in front of the terrified and astonished eyes of one mother that will never more feel such this.

Sister Rachele was desperate. Nobody had the courage to help her. The retaliations of the rebels are lethal ones.

Only two boys, armed with lances, dared to face the death's risk. "We'll come with you". Sister Rachele decided to leave the two teachers left with her from the St. Mary's College by one friend family and gave her the precise indication: "If I do not come back today up to 19.00 p.m., go back."

On the pursuit road, about at 17.30, suddenly they heard shots near them. The government's soldiers had crossed the escaping rebels and attacked them.

The nun had to stop the pursuit and go back. When she reached the family where he had left the two teachers, she did not find them. The 19.00 o'clock were already over, it was already dark and the two teachers had gone back, as she had indicated.

Also the two boys armed with lances left Sister Rachele and agreed to meet her at 6.00 of the morning after to run again after the rebels.

But at midnight Sister Rachele was reached by a seminarist of St. Mary and with him, still before dawn, she began again the pursuit of her girls.

After 20 Kms at Ikeme Sister Rachele met some soldiers, that during the conflict with the rebels could make free six girls and had already advised at St. Mary's College Sister Alba, that from her side had left to take them.

The young free made girls confirmed that 4 of their mates had remained in the hands of the kidnappers. They were now two days of forced march that the students had to walk.

At the third day escape, Helen caught the instant when she remained uncontrolled and could go up on a tree, hiding before and escaping as soon as the rebels, obliged to begin again the march, had to leave off the research of the disappeared girl, even against their will.

Also Betty and Marylin will become free, about three months later, destroyed by the continuous transfer moves, and thanks to the courageous help of one Acholi woman, that helped them after that the rebels of L.R.A. had left them behind because they could no more walk and therefore they made slower the escape.

Both girls had legs deformed by the fatigue and the woman accomplished them to Gulu, to the Lacor Hospital of Doctor Piero Corti, between 28 and 29 June of 1989.

It was just a little more than a fatality that just in those days the nuns of St. Mary's College were in Gulu for an assembly.

Therefore they'll bring back home the girls and within one month they'll see the same girls to pass the door of the school and take again their place in the class.

Susan is missing and be missing forever.

“She’ll never escape” told one of the escaped girls.

A further confirmation will arrive some years later, from the alive witness of a student, kidnapped by L.R.A. and then escaped.

He witnessed that Susan disappeared during a fire conflict with the regular army, happened inside the Murchison Falls Park, probably killed by one shot that was not destined to her but that has written forever the destiny of her story.

After this story, the Superior Mother, Sister Alba, asked once more for the military protection, menacing to close the school if not received.

This protection arrived in the year 1991, but that was missing just in the evening it was most necessary, on October 10, 1996.

• CONCLUSION

We’re waiting for being able to write also this chapter, that today is hold open owing to thousands grounds, 19 of which carry the names of the girls of St. Mary’s College in Aboke.

The others are the thousands of Ugandan babies, boys and girls, as well as of everyone other Country, kidnapped and involved in a feud, one battle, one war that nobody of them wanted, that nobody of them asked for beginning. Less more somebody of them would wish to be involved in.

We’re firmly persuaded that it is very important to let know the story which is the symbol of huge problems and also, unfortunately, still today of big and dramatic actuality.

It’s therefore important to be able to translate it in the most possible languages.

It will be therefore very appreciated the support of anyone will be available for the translation of the story in any language you did not already find in this site. The aim is to give all people the possibility to know this one and the thousands of further similar stories, in order to build an opinion movement that can give more impulse to the work of all ones that are already operating for this cause in a concrete way.

Some of them you can find in the book “Where is my home? – Children in war”; an incredible collection of drawings, realized only by boys, girls, babies in war as the same under-title is telling.