

Child abductees forced to kill by Ugandan rebels

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Lira, northern Uganda - After his kidnapping, Alex Acire quickly learned a core teaching of the Lord's Resistance Army: Children who try to escape may die a ghastly death.

Soon after his abduction in May 2002, rebels struck him again and again with a machete. It felt like a hundred blows.

But the rebels' lessons lodged deeper in his bones the day the 15-year-old was made to kill a man who was caught after trying to flee. Alex's face turns to stone as he sits in the Rachele Rehabilitation Center, remembering the scene in heart-stopping detail:

The 20-year-old escapee was brought back naked, hands tied behind his back. He was made to lie down on the ground on his belly.

Commanders ordered several boys, including Alex, to hit the man with a club as hard as possible. If they balked or tried to escape themselves, they were told, the same beating could happen to them.

"If you didn't hit hard enough, you got hit as well," Alex recalls. So he hit hard.

At that moment - when the boy became a beast, through

no choice of his own - Alex did not think of his old village life before the rebels snatched him. He did not yearn for the comfort of his mother or father: "There was not time to think of any relative or other person."

He could only think of survival - his.

So when Alex feared his first blow wasn't forceful enough, he hit the man on the head three more times. Alex listened for his cries as others took their turns, but heard none. When it was over, Alex was terrified.

"I thought the spirits would come and harm me," he says. "I thought I would be killed the same way."

When he was made a lookout while others went to dig up cassava, Alex escaped. "I didn't care what would happen to me. I just wanted to get away," he says.

He made it to a camp, whose residents then took him to the local Ugandan army unit.

He has been at the Rachele Center for three weeks and has yet to see his family. When he rejoins them, it will be in a camp for the displaced.

"I am even more scared to go and live in the camp. The rebels always attack the camps and do a lot of bad things," he says.

If his former commanders or others from his unit recognize him, they will kill him. He has other worries, too. What will his parents think about what he did as a rebel?

"They will be very sad about all that," he says. But he thinks they will not love him less.