

# Parents' group spreads the word on missing children

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**L**ira, northern Uganda — Angelina Atyam knows how it feels to create a life, and how it feels to have that life stolen.

Atyam is the chairperson of the Concerned Parents Association. She helped establish that group after the Lord's Resistance Army in 1996 abducted her daughter Charlotte Awino from a highly regarded Roman Catholic boarding school in northern Uganda.

Charlotte, then 14, was sleeping in the dormitory of St. Mary's College in the village of Aboke when rebels burst in, tied up the hands of 139 girls ages 13 to 17 and led them away to captivity. (The story of the abducted Aboke students is told in the book, *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda* by Els De Timmerman. The ISBN is 9970022563.)

Like all of the children who are abducted, Charlotte and the other Aboke girls spent many of their days carrying heavy supplies while marching through the countryside. They were raped and made to kill.

Not long after the abduction, Atyam and others began the parents' association to lobby for their daughters' release. Atyam has become the most visible Ugandan spokesperson on behalf of the abducted children of her region.

She has traveled around the world, describing the plight of these children and pressing every donor nation and United Nations official she meets to press for the unconditional release of the abducted children.

She is sitting at a table on the veranda of the White House Hotel in the northern town of Lira. It's a cool night, with the strong odor of old buses noisily idling at a service station across the street.

Atyam describes the reunion of a just-returned Aboke girl named Susan with her parents in Lira. "It was something special. We sang, we thanked the Lord. It was wonderful," Atyam said. Atyam had her own reunion in July 2004, when Charlotte escaped from a town in Pader

District after eight years of being an LRA captive. She vividly recalls those events.

Some members of the Concerned Parents group called her with the news that her daughter had escaped and was in the custody of the Army.

"I knew she was being guarded very heavily," Atyam said. "It was getting late. I grabbed some things and drove to Pader, even though it was risky."

The next day, a military escort took her to the barracks where Charlotte was being housed temporarily.

There she saw that her little 14-year-old was a woman — and a mother. "The moment she saw me," Atyam recalled, "she put the baby down. She ran toward me and she shouted. For a long time, we could just cling to one another and say nothing. The tears were just flowing and it was hers to say, 'Mama, don't cry, I am here.'"

Then Atyam heard the baby cry. A social worker from the parents association had prepared Atyam to meet her 3-year-old grandchild.

Still, Atyam couldn't help but notice that the baby didn't look like Charlotte. She also couldn't help but bring the child some clothes and something to drink.

Atyam is hoping that efforts to negotiate an end to this 19-year civil war will be successful. "Civil society wants peace. The government seems to want to give a peaceful resolution a chance," she said. As a midwife, Atyam used to spend her time helping children enter the world, rather than advocating for those who disappear.

"I was very comfortable with my job as a midwife in a private practice. It was a joyous thing to see births. The day the rebels took my daughter, I no longer have concentration. I have been on the move trying to be the voice of the voiceless."

She spends a lot of time with the CPA. The advocacy calls for her presence at any time. Even though her daughter has been free, she says the issue "is still very personal. Concerned Parents is a family that came together out of suffering."

She makes clear that her life will not return to the way as it was before her daughter's abduction: "It's very difficult to say, 'I've got mine.'"