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A Former Child Soldier Finds Escape, Heaven Through His Music

January 31, 2015, National Public Radio (NPR) Staff "Through music," says former child soldier Emmanuel Jal, "I was able to become a child again." Emmanuel Jal was only 8 when he was dragged into Sudan's long civil war. Like 12,000 other children, he was recruited as a soldier, fighting and killing alongside South Sudanese armed groups.

Only a few, like Jal, have managed to escape. The United Nations says that it has made an agreement that will gradually release 3,000 child soldiers from the armed group called the South Sudan Democratic Army Cobra Faction. The children are between 11 and 17 years old and have been "forced to do and see things no child should ever experience," Jonathan Veitch, UNICEF's South Sudan representative, said in a press release. "Most of us have seen our homes burned down, have seen terrible things happen," Jal recalls. "So when I witnessed one of my aunts raped and my home village burned down, and then we're told that I'm going to be given skills and guns to fight the people who did that in our homeland, there was not much for me to be convinced."

Jal, now 34, is an actor, musician and activist in Canada. He had a role in last year's film, *The Good Lie*, about a group of Sudanese refugees adjusting to life in Kansas City, Mo. He joined NPR's Scott Simon on *Weekend Edition* to talk about his experience. Here is an excerpt from their conversation, edited for length and clarity.

What was I like being a child soldier? It's hell. Seeing 6-, 7-year-olds dead. Nobody going to give them [answers] when they begin to ask questions: "Why are we here, where is our mommy?" That's when you get to know these are children.

Is it easy to forget that these are still children? They're still children but, you know, they've grown really fast in terms of [being] trained to be killing machines. The only thing is, children don't know you [only] die once. And AK is a terrible gun that has been invented because young people can carry the gun. An 8-year-old can fire an AK-47 as good as a 20-year-old.

How did you escape? We planned an escape. It was really dangerous. The movement that we were struggling in became tribal and so you see soldiers turning on each other. We said we go and die where our family members are. We were around 200 to 400, I think. And only 16 people survived. On the way some died of starvation, dehydration. I arrived at a place called Waat and I met a British aid worker, Emma McCune, who smuggled me into Kenya and put me in school.

When you heard that the U.N. is arranging the release of 3,000 child soldiers, how did you feel? It's exciting on one hand but it's also sad because if the war hasn't stopped, those kids are still going to go back to fighting. When they are disarmed, where are they going to go? Is there a place safe for them that the U.N. is going to keep them in? Where are their families? The best thing is get them to school. If they are not schooled, they'll be at home. They'll still get guns and go back. It'll just be a publicity stunt.

A former child soldier, Dominic Ongwen, is currently standing trial for the war crimes he committed as a rebel commander. In your moral judgment, does he deserve some leniency?

Most child soldiers — even me, I am not clean. As a child soldier I did stuff. But along the way I got help, I wanted to change and I'm here. So sometime we need to ask ourselves: Why do people do extremely terrible things? Crime

is like a disease. We have some psychopaths governing people and they kill millions of people. They're the same as that gentlemen on trial.

Getting that guy to the International Criminal Court, it's a good sign. It gives hope to a lot of people who have been hurt. But at the same time, he was a child soldier as well. So what I wonder is, what do the people say? Is there a situation where people who are directly affected can come and testify? What would they feel would be the best way to find justice?

Do you still get nightmares? Yeah, I used to have a lot of nightmares — life was difficult then. But music became the place where I was able to see heaven. So through music I was able to dance, I was able to become a child again. And I did not know that I was going to be a recording artist. I was doing it for fun because it kept me busy.

Does your current life seem unreal? I feel like I'm dreaming where I am now, I feel like I don't even know why I'm here. I've just been nominated for the biggest award in Canada — the JUNO awards — which means my music is getting recognized. I just had a new album, I also acted in a movie with Reese Witherspoon. All these platforms, I'm using them to raise conscious awakening. So even when the nightmare comes it's not as effective as it used to be.

A Former Child Soldier Will Stand Trial In The Hague For War Crimes

January 23, 2015, Peter Dejong/AP



Dominic Ongwen, a Ugandan commander in warlord Joseph Kony's feared militia, waits for procedures to start at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, on Jan. 26.

He came to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. He is the first member of Uganda's notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) who will stand trial for war crimes committed as a rebel commander. At the ICC pretrial hearing he was asked to verify his identity. His name is Dominic Ongwen. He is 35. And when he was 10 years old, he himself was abducted by LRA on his way home from school.

An account by his younger sister describes him as a shy boy, eager to please, who used to make crafts and sell them to pay his own school fees. But little else is known about this period of his life. After Ongwen's abduction, his new life began, deep in the forest, where he was trained to be a child soldier by the rebel leader Joseph Kony. One rule of that new life was that any child caught trying to escape would likely be beaten to death by the other children. Ongwen would have been one of the child soldiers ordered to gang up on an escapee.

Ledio Cakaj, an independent consultant who has been studying the LRA for close to a decade, has been interviewing former child soldiers about their experience. "Violence was the currency of survival," he says. Commanders trying to impress Kony came up with increasingly sadistic innovations, such as cutting off the lips, ears and noses of their victims. But Cakaj says Kony valued "the ability not only to inflict, but withstand violence."

As a teenager Ongwen allegedly became a fearless leader of raiding parties, abducting more children and subjecting them to initiations as cruel as his own must have been. Kony promoted him higher than any other abductee. "Kony was able to hold him up as a shining example," says Paul Ronan, director of the think tank The Resolve. It was this favored status, and the widely circulated legend of his notorious rise, that earned Dominic Ongwen an indictment in 2005 by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The court had been created to prosecute those who abducted children as fighters, but only a handful of top commanders besides Kony himself were indicted. Ongwen was the only one on that shortlist who'd been a child soldier himself.

Many people in Northern Uganda, where Ongwen is from, criticized the indictment, pointing out that as a boy he had little choice but to adhere to LRA doctrine. "He had to either follow those rules and survive, or frankly, die," explains Cakaj. "So to a certain extent we are holding him responsible for being alive. Particularly if you understand the story of people who are not here anymore because they either refused or were unable to perform the same way that Ongwen did."

But the details of Ongwen's behavior are terrifying. Titus Obali, who reportedly spent just under a year in Ongwen's captivity before escaping, told the humanitarian news site IRIN that "Ongwen and his boys used killing, beating, maiming and raping as a weapon. ... He forced many children to kill people." Clearly, the traumatized psychology of the child soldier will be part of Ongwen's defense when his trial begins at the ICC.

But whatever his fate is in court in The Hague, what's interesting is how different it is from the fate of other LRA fighters, who fall under a Ugandan amnesty law. Amnesty means that no matter how many murders or mutilations those other rebels have committed, they can walk out of the forest back into civilization and not do a single day in jail. Some argue that amnesty has worked — Kony's force has dwindled, according to Ugandan reports, to a couple of hundred core fighters. But because of Ongwen's ICC indictment, he doesn't qualify for amnesty. The only other living LRA rebel who has been indicted is Kony himself.

Only days after he entered U.S. custody, Ongwen recorded a message to those last holdouts — his former comrades — telling them to give up. He tried to dispel a common assumption among LRA rebels that they'll be massacred by the Ugandan military if they surrender. And he reminded the rebels that surrender also has its perks. "You wouldn't believe the bed I'm sleeping in now," he said. No wonder. It was likely Ongwen's first real mattress in 25 years.