

Congo Emergency accompaniment returns child to home

Written by Joy Mosley
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A Minnesota-born organization working in South Sudan is bringing children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army back home. Tiffany Easthom, Country Director for Nonviolent Peaceforce, speaking to an audience of over 100 people in St. Paul, recounted how Nonviolent Peaceforce child protection specialists drove into the Democratic Republic of the Congo from their location just inside South Sudan to bring home Betima, a girl who had been kidnapped by the LRA four years ago. She was returned to her family and community.

Nonviolent Peaceforce, an organization funded by individuals around the world, and by grants from major European governments and the United Nations, has eight teams in South Sudan, the world's newest nation and 193rd member of the United Nations. In addition to returning LRA-abducted children back home, they are protecting children who were injured in the recent tribal fighting in Jonglei. The Nonviolent Peaceforce team in Juba, the capitol of South Sudan,

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is documenting the children (often separated from their parents in the conflict) who are brought to the hospital for treatment of injuries. The peacekeepers photograph and document the children; the NP teams in the three tribal areas of Jonglei locate their parents and bring them together by Skype and photographs.

In Central and Western Equatoria, Nonviolent Peaceforce teams are bringing together women to give them a voice. Women, they find, are more sensitive than men to emerging conflict. For example, when milk appears in the market place, it's an indication that cattle keepers are bringing their cattle through agricultural areas in search of water, an indicator that conflict may be coming. NP teams are providing safe spaces for women to talk about protecting themselves and each other from conflict-induced domestic violence. And they are finding ways of protecting children from abduction by armed forces as well as from raiding tribal groups who often take women and children as well as cattle.

NP also does two-way protection: they accompany women, children and other vulnerable individuals, but also protect the government officials, who are often new to their jobs as "duty bearers". So as NP peacekeepers are protecting children caught up in violence, they are also accompanying government social workers. They assist police officers that have never had to take complaints of domestic violence or child abduction. In this way, the government officials gain confidence in their new roles protecting human rights.

NP is also working on the border with Sudan, where daily clashes of armed forces threaten children and their families.

In all their work, Nonviolent Peaceforce peacekeepers are unarmed and non-partisan. They do their work by making relationships with the parties in conflict in the communities, and with government officials, military and police at every level. They do not take sides, so teams work in communities of cattle keepers and in communities of farmers who often are in conflict with each other. By being unarmed, they are not a threat to anyone. And most important, the peacekeepers provide safe space for people in these communities to resolve their own conflicts and to do their own peacemaking.

You can find out more about Nonviolent Peaceforce and see the pictures of NP work in South Sudan at <http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org>