

He was just 13 years old when he found himself fighting in the National Resistance Army (NRA) from the jungles of Nakaseke in Luwero Triangle. Maj. Awich Pollar 48, who has long retired from the army, is a legal consultant and an international human rights activist. He serves as a human rights expert at the International Criminal Court (ICC). RITAH MUKASA caught up with him and he shared his story of how and when he joined the liberation war, bush life as a child soldier and how *kadogos* (*kadogo* is a Swahili word for 'small') were integrated back in the communities after the war.

In 1983, I was just 13 years old when we got trapped in the fighting. I was living with my father, the late Yuvini Okwi, who was serving as a laboratory technician in Nakaseke Hospital. I was the only child. We had left my mother, the late Betty Among, in the family home in Lira district.

I joined the war with my father in its third year. However, we were separated only to reunite years later after liberation.

During that time, almost everybody felt indebted to support the liberation war. The political spirit in NRA (National Resistance Army) was so high. We all saw the cause and conviction, those who died were seen as martyrs. In fact, many people of different age groups joined as volunteers. The situation in the country was unacceptable; marred with high levels of insecurity, corruption, tribalism among others.

Even as children, many of us found all reasons to join and fight for freedom even when the NRA code and practice advocated for protection of available children.

From the hospital quarters, we were taken to a nearby camp, which was like the headquarters. Here, people were grouped and put where they would fit and the reorganisation started.

As *kadogos*, we were protected. Our superiors made sure there was minimum exposure to danger. There were more protective measures to safeguard the children. Because of this, bush life became normal to us, a reason we chose to stay.

We were also given rudimentary training in handling fire arms and also received some counselling.

Besides, children did simple work. For example, most part of my work was being an escort. I vividly remember escorting the then commander Katabarwa (deceased) to

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many bush errands and missions.

I would carry his luggage, gun and food while on the move.

Taking over Kampala

Prior to the last day of the final liberation on January 26, 1986, we had spent three days of intense action, which involved cutting off and blocking the enemy from particular areas.

I was still with commander Katabalwa, who was in charge of Kawempe access. This stretched to areas from Nansana and Kalerwe.

Meanwhile, as Kampala was being captured, we moved in a line to Entebbe Road in different battalions. For example, there was one going to Makindye, Entebbe, Lubiri in Mengo, Makerere and another one advancing to Kololo Summit View among others. Our formation was at the extreme end and it consisted of about three companies of about 500 fighters.

It was a frantic mission, but with a good concept note. However, the administration and logistics departments did a great job of serving us food. It was prepared from Busega, on the outskirts of Kampala and it mainly consisted of posho, beans and beef. There was a time we collected quite a big number of cows from volunteers who had farms. However, these were later on compensated after the war.

Managing trauma

Although it was a bush army, NRA was highly professional. I remember our commanders always warned us against



Kadogos during the Luwero bush war. Pollar says the NRA ensured they were not exposed to danger



Awich Pollar during the interview

reckless shooting. In fact most of us did not participate in killing people.

However, in hostilities soldiers do not actually see their bullets killing people, unless otherwise in close range though there is always fear. In such circumstances, it is common for the child soldier to feel the fear for the harm that is being caused to others. Also the hardships arising from logistical support are what caused psychological torture.

For those who were affected psychologically, the

counselling was done through political education that was put in place to empower the fighters with the mission of NRA that was to liberate Uganda and the commitment that it required.

However, later on, after we were regrouped in the Kadogo school, we then received professional counselling that helped many of us to enrol in school and be relevant.

Life after the war

After liberation, all *kadogos* were taken to Mbuya

barracks, but since it was in an urban setting and close to the city, they were running all over. We were in hundreds, both boys and girls of different age groups. Some of us came out with ranks. I was second lieutenant and I joined Primary Six in 1986. In 1987 I sat for my Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) and scored aggregate 7.

It was still in 1986 that I reunited with my family through an uncle I met in Kampala. Luckily my dad was still alive and working in Mbale Hospital while my mother stayed in Lira. They both died much later.

Elsewhere, some *kadogos* dropped out of school because since many of them were escorts, they enjoyed the privileges of being close to the commanders. For example, they were used to good meals, which were not in the barracks where we were settled. So many ran away, prompting the administrators to move the school to Bombo.

Unfortunately, it was the same story, the children were all over Bombo town and they had to move the Kadogo School to Mbarara at Makenke Barracks.

I managed to manoeuvre through. The life was completely different from the one I knew two years earlier. For example, abiding by the strict rules and regulations,

sleeping and eating in groups among others.

Meanwhile, I was among the 27 pioneer *kadogos* to sit for PLE from the Kadogo School. Nine of us made it to Ntare School, while others joined Mbarara Secondary School and other schools.

Unfortunately, out of the nine, six are dead.

Over the years, the *kadogo* numbers soared and at one time, Mbarara Secondary School had over 600 *kadogos*, almost half of the school population.

From school we would go back to the barracks. We also had to switch to speaking English at school from Swahili that united us in the bush.

The army paid our school fees and provided the necessities. The commandant of the Kadogo School visited us and also attended the parents' meetings. He was our parent who handled indiscipline cases among other issues.

Disciplined

Kadogos were among the most disciplined and well performing students wherever they went.

Even the former headteacher of Ntare School, Stephen Kamuhanda, in one of his books wrote a whole page about what he dubbed 'the good *kadogos*'.

Away from that, every end month, the pay master

in the eyes of a Kadogo

I WAS AMONG THE 27 PIONEER KADOGOS TO SIT FOR PRIMARY LEAVING EXAMINATIONS FROM THE KADOGO SCHOOL

would visit all to pay our salaries in cash. This was our money, which we spent as we pleased.

Senior kadogo

By Senior Four, I was a senior *kadogo*, given my rank (2nd lieutenant) at that time, I earned better than a graduate teacher.

I personally received many senior army commanders, such as commander Ikondere, Taban and more as visitors. I was very popular because we were just a handful of *kadogos* and adult soldiers from the northern region in the army. Taban ordered his sister who had a restaurant in Mbarara town to give me free food every weekend for years.

Meanwhile, we were allowed to visit our families, but with permission (movement orders) during holidays or for emergencies such as burial.

After my A'level, I joined Makerere University for a bachelors in law. From childhood, I envisioned being

a lawyer. I always joked about this at Ntare School, calling myself a lawyer who would judge the living and the dead. Law is a subject of humanities that allows one to solve problems in the society.

NRM mobiliser

At university, I identified myself as an NRA *kadogo*, which at first did not go well with many people because NRM (National Resistance Movement) was not popular there. One step at a time, I did a lot of mobilisation and later became a popular NRM focal person there. I hosted President Yoweri Museveni twice during my first and second years to have him answer questions from the students and later saw former guild president Sarah Kagingo win the election.

I also formed a study group through which I convinced students like Lt Col Paddy Ankunda and others to join the army.

Later on, upon completion of university, I was seconded by the army to work in the NRM secretariat as a lawyer after which I was nominated for a highly contested election in New York, US as a human rights expert which I won in 2005. This is a very high position which is why I was lucky to be among the nine persons elected. I served for two terms of four years each.

In 2014 I came back home and applied for retirement. I was immediately promoted from Captain to Major and officially retired.

In 2016, I decided to join politics to help the people in my area. I contested for Lira Municipality seat in Parliament and lost.

I, however, continue with my agenda. I help so much through other organisations, village savings groups and placement of children.

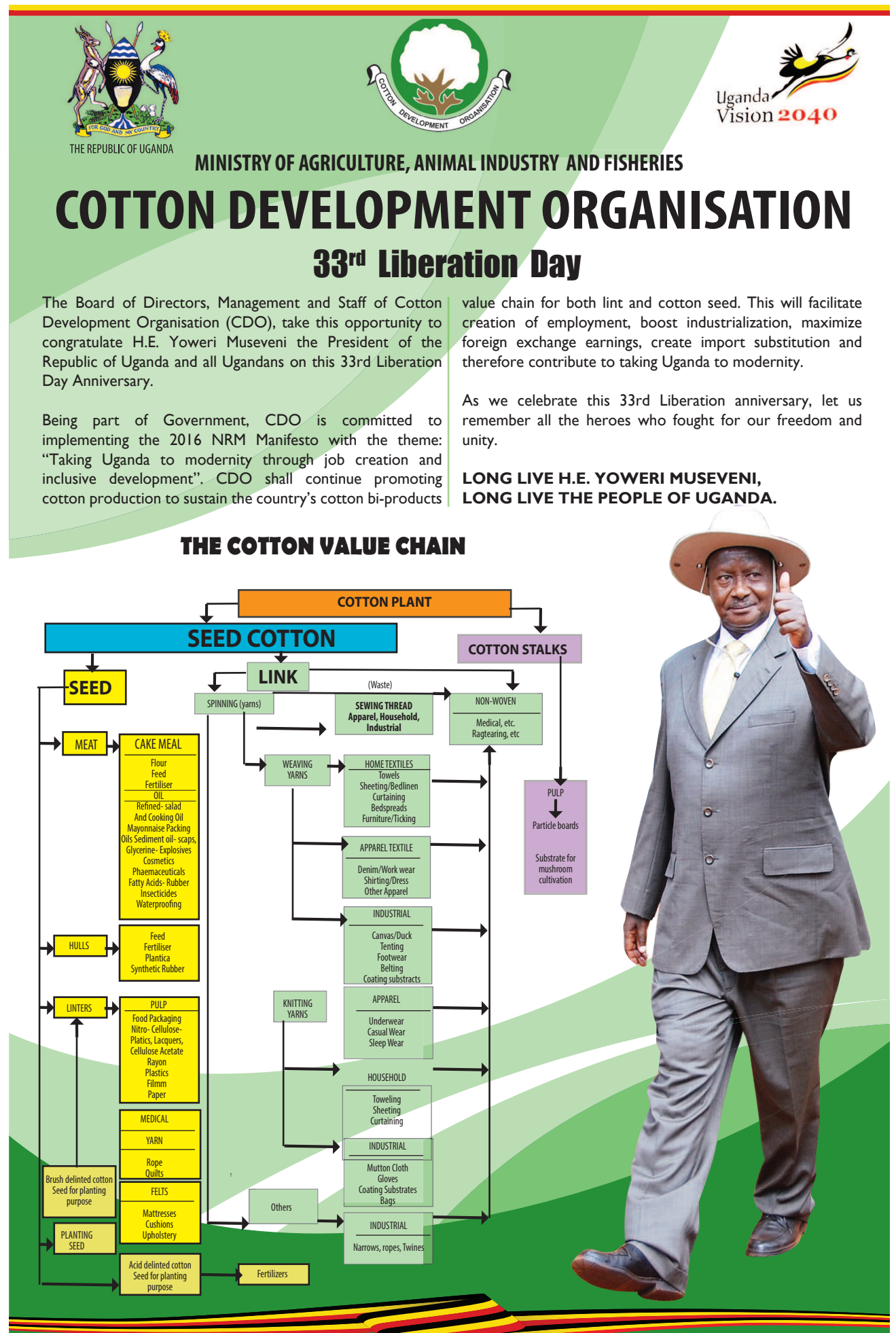
On the other hand, I am also serving as an expert at

the ICC. I give non-biased opinions on matters before court. The way ICC works is; when prosecution presents its case, the defence presents its case, the court asks from different experts

to present their case.

Finally, I am chairperson emeritus of Ntare School Old Boys Association. I lead the mobilisation of senior old boys including presidents Museveni and Paul Kagame

among others. I have been twice elected to this position. I have also recently been the chairperson of the Kadogos Association of which many renowned soldiers are members.



The NRA soldiers in 1985