

Mr Julius Baluku says he was shot in 1996 when rebels attacked civilians who had sought refuge at a Catholic Church in his village.

BY YOWERI KAGUTA

Man lives with bullet 30 years after ADF attack

For 30 years, Mr Julius Baluku Kagutiya has lived with a bullet lodged in his right thigh, a painful reminder of the night rebels stormed his village and turned his life into a nightmare that has never ended.

Mr Baluku, 52, a resident of Kaghema Village in Kyarumba Sub-county, Kasese District, said he was shot in 1996 when suspected Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels attacked civilians who had sought refuge at Kyarumba Catholic Church.

The rebels had entered Uganda through the Mpondwe border in September 1996 and carried out deadly raids across parts of Kasese District and the greater Rwenzori Sub-region. What began as whispers of insurgency soon escalated into organised attacks on villages, schools and trading centres.

On the night of the attack, terrified residents from Kaghema, Bwitho, Kiduku, Matthembe and Kihungamuyagha villages camped at the church, believing it would offer sanctuary. Instead, it became a killing field.

"It was around 11pm when they came, and started killing people instantly by shooting," he said.

According to survivors, at least 16 people were killed at the church that night. The attackers later moved to Mutanywana Secondary School, about half a kilometre away, where nine more people were hacked to death, before killing seven others at Kyarumba Primary School, bringing the death toll to 30 in a single night of terror.

For Baluku, survival came at a lifelong cost. "When I saw strange people entering where we were sleeping, I suspected they were rebels, and I jumped through the window. But outside, they had already surrounded the place. They shot me, and I fell, and they thought I was dead," he said.

A bullet tore through his right thigh as others died around him. He lay bleeding in the darkness, surrounded by bodies and the echo of gunfire.

After about an hour, he says, he gathered the strength to crawl away and dragged his wounded body to a nearby waterlogged area where he hid for hours until the Ugandan army arrived and rushed him to Kagando Hospital in critical condition.

"I only realised I was in hospital after three days. They had operated on me and removed one bullet. But they left another one inside. Doctors told me at the time that removing the second bullet was too risky. They said I might not survive if they tried to take it out," he said.

He spent three months in hospital. The government cleared his medical bill of Shs150,000 before he was discharged, with a bullet still lodged in his thigh. Three decades later, that bullet remains embedded in his body.

What was once a dormant injury has turned into a source of constant agony. Baluku says he has endured persistent pain for years, but recently



Mr Julius Baluku shows the bullet wound he reportedly sustained after he was shot by Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels. PHOTOS/YOWERI KAGUTA

emerging from his leg.

"For sure, I don't know what to do. A lot of pus is coming out. Recently, two small bones came out of my leg. I don't know if I will make it for another day," he says, fighting back tears.

Now a father of eight, Mr Baluku says he can no longer fend for his family. Chronic pain and limited mobility prevent him from engaging in manual labour.

"My wife has carried the burden of caring for the family since I was shot. I have no source of income," he says.

He recently returned to Kagando Hospital, where doctors reportedly advised that he requires specialised surgery to remove the remaining bullet at a cost of more than Shs7 million — money he cannot raise.

"This money is too much for me. I am just asking the government and well-wishers to help me get treatment before it is too late."

For three decades, Mr Baluku has lived with a piece of war inside his body —

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— Julius Baluku Kagutiya, victim

Another survivor of the insurgencies that ravaged Kasese in the 1990s is Mr Nehemia Kahaika, who has lived with one eye for 35 years after a rebel's bullet tore through his face during the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU) insurgency.

Mr Kahaika, now a father of seven, said he was only 17 years old when he was shot in 1991. A resident of Kibirigha Village in Kalonge Parish, Kyarumba Sub-county, he says the injury cost him



Mr Nehemia Kahaika says he was shot in the eye in 1991.

TIMELINE OF REBEL ATTACKS IN KASESE

- **1989:** Attackers strike Independence Day celebrations in Kitholhu Sub-county.
- **1991:** National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU) insurgency intensifies in the Rwenzori Sub-region.
- **November 1996:** ADF rebels enter Uganda through Mpondwe border.
- **1996-1998:** ADF carries out deadly raids on villages, schools and churches in Kasese.
- **2000s:** Government military operations weaken insurgent activity in the region.

"I was still young. I had just completed Primary Seven. Then the insurgency happened, and everything changed," he said.

The bullet left him permanently blind in one eye. He spent more than three months admitted at Kagando Hospital.

Before the attack, Mr Kahaika had scored 14 Aggregates in Primary Leaving Examinations and secured a bursary to join Kilembe Secondary School due to his athletic talent. He had represented Kasese District in athletics competitions and was considered one of the most promising young athletes in the area.

"I was a good athlete, and I had represented Kasese at different competitions. If I had not been shot, maybe I would have represented Uganda at the international level."

Instead, he says, the insurgency shattered his ambitions. Today, with one functioning eye and deteriorating health, he struggles to provide for his family.

"The coffee is no longer giving what it used to, and even the bananas are not doing well. We are now living in poverty," he says.

His family survives on two meals a day. One of his deepest regrets, he says, is seeing his eldest daughter drop out of school while in Senior Two due to lack of fees. After a year at home, she became pregnant.

"We were injured during those insurgencies, but up to now, some of us have never received any meaningful support. I lost my eye when I was still young. I lost my education. Now I am afraid my children will also lose theirs," Mr Kahaika said.

Their stories mirror those of many

Different armed groups operated in Rwenzori Sub-region.

Last year, Minister of State for National Guidance Godfrey Baluku Kabbyanga, alongside Minister of State for the Rwenzori-Luwero Programme Alice Kaboyo, delivered cash and iron sheets to nine families who lost relatives during Independence Day celebrations on October 9, 1989, when attackers struck Kitholhu Sub-county headquarters.

However, residents of Kyarumba say their broader contribution during Uganda's liberation struggle has been forgotten. Mr Jackson Muhindo Buseku recalls that in 1985, locals welcomed and supported the National Resistance Army Bush War fighters in the Rwenzori mountains.

"We gave them protection and fed them. Some people even sacrificed their property for the liberation struggle, but today they feel forgotten."

In July 2014, elders travelled to meet President Museveni at his Rwakitura home and were reportedly promised compensation, a pledge they say remains unfulfilled.

Human rights activist Johnnacion Muhindo of Creations Forum Afrika argues that government has a duty to support war-affected communities.

"Every country has a duty to protect its citizens. When people lose their lives or property during war, it means the state either failed to protect them or did not have the capacity to do so," he said.

He notes that Uganda's Transitional Justice Policy provides a framework for post-conflict recovery.

"This policy is meant to deal with issues related to helping survivors of war. In Kasese, we have landmine victims and amputees who can no longer work in their gardens. Their families need structured support," he says.

The Deputy Resident District Commissioner for Bukonzo County, Retired Lt Maate Magwara, acknowledges the suffering endured by residents.

"People here indeed witnessed hell. Businesses were directly affected. In 1998, the ADF rebels attacked Kasese town and burnt vehicles belonging to businessmen. Some lost several buses, and in places like Katri in Kilembe Sub-county, shops were burnt," he said.

He says some affected groups have received limited assistance under the Luwero-Rwenzori programme, and encouraged former security auxiliaries to organise themselves to ease government support.