

UGANDA: Child “Night Commuters”

“We come to the shelter because I fear being abducted again. I was eight years old then. I do not want my brothers and sisters to be abducted as I was. We walk fast in the night to be here.”

Girl aged 14, walks a kilometre, along with her four siblings, to the safety of a shelter in Lacor, five kilometres out of Gulu Town.

In northern Uganda an estimated 30,000 child “night commuters” flee their homes at night and go to urban areas and to the centre of larger camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The “night commuting” phenomenon started in 2003. A main reason for this movement is to escape attacks and the risk of abduction by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), and a general climate of insecurity. Most of the children commute without the protection of adult family members and *“face the threat of physical abuse, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, including rape.”*¹ “Night commuting” is symptomatic of the broader issues relating to the protection of civilians in northern Uganda and illustrates how these can impact on family and community life.

After almost two decades of conflict in northern Uganda, there are still reports of continuing violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, including killings, mutilations, torture, abductions, rape and sexual violence. The human rights of children are violated on a daily basis.

Since 1986, northern Uganda has been shaken by insurgencies and Joseph Kony’s armed group, the LRA, has operated in the area since around 1987. The LRA has targeted the civilian population. His group has abducted civilians, burnt villages, attacked schools and hospitals and ambushed vehicles across northern Uganda. The LRA has

mutilated and maimed civilians, cutting off lips, ears and noses and chopping off hands.

Children have suffered disproportionately in this conflict. As many as 25,000 children have been abducted by the LRA since the conflict began, for use as soldiers, sex slaves and porters. 7,500 are girls with 1,000 having conceived children during captivity.² An unknown number have been killed.

Walking several kilometres each way, many children sleep at specially established centres in towns and their outskirts. These centres, run by non-governmental organizations, provide a safe and clean place to sleep, clean water and sanitation, basic health care and counselling. Scores of children also sleep at temporary shelters, hospital compounds, verandas and other public places.

The Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the body of independent experts mandated to monitor the implementation of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* by states parties) on Uganda’s second periodic report were published on 30 September. These observations contain a number of recommendations that relate to “night commuters”. In particular, paragraph 70 in the section *Children in Armed Conflict and Child Abduction* reads:

¹ Page 49, *The State of the World’s Children 2005*, UNICEF Report.

² Page 3, Northern Uganda UNICEF Humanitarian Situation Report – October 2005

“The Committee urges that the State party address the phenomena of night commuters and takes all necessary measures to protect to the maximum extent possible children against the risk of abduction by LRA and other armed forces. In addition, the Committee recommends that the State party strengthen its support to the night commuter’s shelters.”

Uganda ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990 and the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* in 2002.

As the international community prepares to mark Universal Children’s Day on 20 November, the date on which the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* in 1959, and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, in 1988, Amnesty International calls upon the government of Uganda to protect and promote the human rights of children in northern Uganda.

“The idea of childhood as a protected time of healthy growth has been effectively obliterated in northern Uganda.”³

The State of the World’s Children 2005,
UNICEF Report

ACT NOW!

WRITE TO THE UGANDA GOVERNMENT CALLING ON IT TO:

- Uphold Uganda’s obligations under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* and implement without delay the recommendations made to the government of Uganda by the

- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child;
- support the work of night commuter shelters and the development of community-orientated support services;
- develop and support measures in northern Uganda to prevent the abduction of children; rescue those who are still abducted and rehabilitate those who have been abducted, as well as their families and communities;
- facilitate and support the work of national and international organizations providing humanitarian assistance in the conflict-affected areas of northern Uganda.

► Please send your appeals to:

The President of the Republic of Uganda:
His Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni
President of the Republic of Uganda
Office of the President
Parliament Building
PO Box 7168
Kampala Uganda

Fax: +256 41 346 102

Salutation: Your Excellency

Please raise Amnesty International’s concerns with your own government.

More information on the human rights situation in Uganda can be obtained on Amnesty International’s website:

<http://web.amnesty.org>

Amnesty International
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³ Page 50, *The State of the World’s Children 2005*,
UNICEF Report