

AI INDEX: AFR 59/05/99

EMBARGOED FOR 1000HRS GMT 17 MARCH

Uganda: The full picture -- uncovering human rights violations by government forces in the northern war

KAMPALA -- The vicious circle of violence in Uganda's northern war zone will not be broken unless government forces confront their own largely hidden pattern of human rights violation, Amnesty International said today.

The organization has documented scores of killings of unarmed civilians -- including of children -- dozens of rapes and hundreds of beatings by government forces over the last three years. While some soldiers have been arrested for these crimes, few have been brought to court as weaknesses in the criminal justice system delay trials of soldiers almost indefinitely.

"The extreme violence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has so far been allowed to obscure the government's failure to prevent its own soldiers from committing serious human rights violations," Maina Kiai, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Program, told a press conference in Kampala.

"We must have a full picture of the circle of abuse in order to restore respect for human rights in an area which has been torn apart by 13 years of bitter conflict."

The organization's report describes the wide dynamic of human rights abuses in northern Uganda, where controlling civilians is a key strategic objective for both the government's Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) and the armed opposition LRA. This puts villagers at the heart of the war and makes them vulnerable to abuses by both sides.

“Every time a government soldier or government official commits a human rights violation with impunity it further reduces people’s trust in the authorities and the possibilities of building a lasting peace,” Mr Kiai continued. “We therefore urge President Yoweri Museveni to make human rights protection in northern Uganda a national priority.”

Amnesty International published a report in September 1997 describing the LRA’s extreme violence against civilians and their abduction of children to act as soldiers and sexual slaves. The report highlighted the Sudanese government’s role in supplying the group with weapons and bases, which is enabling the LRA to continue its abuses and abductions on a weekly basis.

Over the past three years approximately 400,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in northern Uganda, in a war which still shows little sign of resolution. The districts of Gulu and Kitgum are economically destroyed. In Gulu approximately 80 per cent of the rural population live in displaced persons’ camps, dependent on humanitarian aid.

Internal displacement is a particularly contentious issue for northern Ugandans. Many have fled their farms to escape brutal attacks by the LRA, while others have been forced to move by government soldiers. The authorities emphasize villagers’ own search for security, while others point out that the army is also seeking to prevent the LRA from getting food. In some places the UPDF has

committed human rights violations to force villagers from the countryside, including indiscriminately shelling villages refusing to move.

Once in camps people are vulnerable to abuses by ill-disciplined government soldiers, who sometimes suspect them of being LRA supporters. The LRA has attacked camps to abduct children and loot food. It has also extended its operations to districts where people do not live in camps and have been able to cultivate the land. As a result of the creation of camps in Gulu District the LRA has redirected its human rights abuses onto other communities.

Faced with food shortages in camps and unimpressed by the degree of security they provide, some villagers have returned to their homes to cultivate or forage for food. UPDF patrols and the LRA alike have shot dead displaced people living in supposedly cleared areas. In December 1998 UPDF soldiers shot Korina Atuk dead while she was cultivating her land south west of Gulu.

Human rights violations also take place in the context of combat. In March 1998, 30 children who had been abducted by the LRA were shot dead by government soldiers at Ogole in Kitgum. The UPDF opened fire within 10 metres of their targets. The children had been bound together and many became tangled up as they ran in panic. There has been no investigation -- the army has simply denied that children were killed.

International humanitarian law allows for civilians to be displaced when their security or imperative military reasons so demand. But it also obliges the authorities to keep displacement to a minimum, to end it as soon as possible and to provide people with the food, shelter, water and security needed. The longer displacement lasts without these conditions being properly fulfilled, as in northern Uganda, the harder it is to conclude that it is lawful. It is certainly never lawful to use violence to control the population.

“Internal displacement is a complex issue”, Mr Kiai said. “We believe that the authorities must step up their protection of civilians from all kinds of violence and improve displaced people’s living conditions. But we also doubt whether taking away people’s choice about whether to leave their homes is currently the right course of action.”

Institutional failures in the administration of justice effectively allow soldiers to commit human rights abuses with impunity. The police are not able to carry out effective investigations and have developed a culture of beating as a normal method of inquiry. There is no Resident State Attorney, who is key to the prosecution of serious criminal cases. The army blames the police and the courts but is also at fault. Although the army denies it, soldiers freed on bail while facing serious criminal charges have been put back on active service.

Amnesty International is urging the Ugandan government to challenge current barriers to effective human rights protection. Measures proposed by the organization include setting up a specialist task force to investigate alleged human rights violations by soldiers and police officers in Gulu and Kitgum, establishing an inquiry into whether camps are the best method of protection of civilians in the north, and a public inquiry that confronts the legacy of past human rights abuses. The organization is also calling on the authorities to enable the Uganda Human Rights Commission to open an investigative office in Gulu.

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