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Uganda: Child "night commuters" fear abduction

As the international community prepares to mark Universal Children's Day on 20 November, an estimated 30,000 Ugandan children -- "night commuters" -- walk quietly through the darkness every night, fleeing their homes on the look-out for a relatively safe place to sleep in an urban area or in the centre of larger Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps -- only to return back home in the morning and repeat the trip all over again as night falls.

Some walk for several kilometres, without the protection of adult family members. Many end up sleeping in churches, hospital compounds or on shop verandas. Others manage to get to centres run by non-governmental organizations, where they are provided with a clean place to sleep, clean water and basic health care. All risk harassment, physical abuse, sexual exploitation and rape on the way.

The children come from the conflict-affected districts, including Gulu, Pader and Kitgum, of northern Uganda, where a war has been raging for nearly two decades. With no security in their own homes or villages, they take these risks every night in an attempt to escape the danger of being abducted by members of the armed opposition, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

"The child night-commuters' fears are well-founded," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "Children are bearing the brunt of the ongoing violence in northern Uganda. If abducted by the LRA, they risk being forced to become sex slaves or even to murder their own parents."

As many as 25,000 children have been abducted by the LRA for use as soldiers, sex slaves and porters since the conflict began in 1986. 7,500 are girls, with 1,000 having conceived children during captivity. An unknown number have been killed.

"The night-commuter phenomenon, while unique, is part of our broader human rights concerns related to the protection of civilians in northern Uganda," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "We continually receive reports of killings, mutilations, abductions, rape and sexual violence targeting the broader civilian population -- as well as violations of children's rights on a daily basis."

Amnesty International called on the Ugandan government 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 organisations providing humanitarian assistance in the conflict-affected areas of northern Uganda.

Background

The nearly two decade long conflict between the LRA and the Uganda Peoples' Defence Force (UPDF) has resulted in severe human rights violations by both state and non-state actors -- including the recruitment of child soldiers, large - scale displacement, abductions, indiscriminate attacks against civilians, rape, and other forms of sexual violence.

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.

See also: *Uganda: Child "night commuters"* (AI Index: AFR 59/013/2005)

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