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UGANDA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR RELEASE OF SCHOOLGIRLS
ABDUCTED BY THE UGANDAN ARMED OPPOSITION LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

Amnesty International today strongly condemned the recent abduction of schoolgirls by the northern Ugandan armed opposition Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and called on the group to immediately release all captives.

Thirty schoolgirls abducted on 9 October from St. Mary's College in Aboke are reported to be among scores of captives in the hands of the LRA, despite military intervention by the army, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF). The raid on the school continues the pattern of LRA deliberate assaults on civilians which have intensified over the past three months.

"The abduction of the girls from Aboke is the latest in a series of attacks on schools by the LRA and demonstrates yet again that the rebels are blatant in their disregard for the human rights of the very people on whose behalf they claim to be fighting," Amnesty International said.

Since the massacre of 115 Sudanese refugees at Achol-Pii in July, LRA troops have been responsible for scores of other deliberate killings and hundreds of abductions, often of schoolchildren. Many captives are tortured and those who try to escape risk being shot. Abducted girls are at risk of rape. Children are forcibly recruited into the LRA's ranks or are used to carry equipment and looted property.

The LRA has bases in Sudan and is reportedly supported by the Sudan Government. The LRA troops holding the girls taken captive are reported to have crossed the Sudan border. Amnesty International is calling on the Sudanese authorities to take action to ensure that captives are freed and returned safely to Uganda.

Although the UPDF have often stepped in to free rebel captives, their own responsibility for human rights abuses is helping fuel the violence in northern Uganda. On 16 August two of the most senior army officers in Gulu town threw four alleged LRA members to a lynch mob. After one man was killed, the soldiers drove to the main barracks, picked out a seriously wounded rebel suspect, drove to another part of Gulu and threw him and the two others to the crowd.

The army has exonerated the officers concerned, who remain at their posts, claiming that they were overpowered. However, as yet there has been no genuine impartial judicial inquiry charged with establishing the facts and recommending appropriate action. Amnesty International's information -- which comes from a wide variety of independent sources -- contradicts the army's version of events.

One of those murdered was a young man taken captive by the LRA only the day before. His parents are reported to be seeking compensation from the army. Another was a tailor with no known connection with the rebels.

“It is difficult to understand how the authorities believe that local people can have confidence in the armed forces if soldiers, especially senior officers, are allowed to murder with impunity,” Amnesty International said.

“However severe the abuses of the LRA, nothing excuses violations by the UPDF or failure by the authorities to take decisive action to prevent or properly investigate UPDF violations.”

Amnesty International is calling for a judicial inquiry into the killings on 16 August and the army’s response. As an interim measure, the worldwide human rights organization is calling on the parliamentary Defence and Internal Affairs Committee investigating the causes of the insurgency to take a detailed look at the Gulu incident.

Journalists and human rights activists have on occasion been threatened by both the LRA and members of the armed forces. Amnesty International is also calling on the Ugandan authorities to ensure that journalists and human rights activists working in the north are able to carry out their work in a responsible and professional manner without curbs on their freedom of expression.

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