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Uganda

“Breaking God’s commands”: the destruction of childhood by the Lord’s Resistance Army

"I would like to give you a message. Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children. So that other children don't have to pass through this violence."

The 15-year old girl who ended an interview with Amnesty International with this plea was forcibly abducted at night from her home on 26 December 1996. She was taken by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition movement fighting the Uganda Government. She was made to kill a boy who tried to escape. She witnessed another boy hacked to death for not raising the alarm when a friend ran away. She was beaten when she dropped a water container and ran for cover under gunfire. She received 35 days of military training and was sent to fight the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF), the government army. We cannot reveal her name because the LRA sometimes hunts down those who escape and takes its revenge on them and their families.

This report is our response to her. It is a call to recognize what is happening to a generation of northern Ugandan children from Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts. It is estimated that since 1995 between five and eight thousand children, most from the Acholi people, have been abducted by the LRA and forced to become child soldiers.¹ Taking children is a systematic choice: most of those abducted are between 13 and 16 years old. Younger children are generally not strong enough to carry weapons or heavy loads while older children are less malleable to the will of their abductors. Boys outnumber girls.

It is a call to put an end to the human rights abuse to which children are subjected. Children are beaten, murdered and forced to become combatants. Girls are raped and used as sexual slaves by more senior soldiers. But in addition, becoming an involuntary part of the LRA means being made to abuse others. The killers of attempted escapees, captured government soldiers and civilians are themselves abused children. They are being abused by being forced to commit human rights abuses. This is deliberate. The children are often traumatized by what they have done and, believing that they are now outcasts, they become bound to the LRA.

¹ Statement by Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), CF/DOC/PR/1997/27, 3 July 1997.

Human rights abuses are also being committed against adults in northern Uganda, by government forces as well as by the LRA. UPDF soldiers have been responsible for illegal detentions, extrajudicial executions, rape and other forms of torture. However, Amnesty International has chosen to issue a report which focuses on abuses against children (and therefore mainly on abuses committed by the LRA) because thousands are currently being abused and tens of thousands more live each day at risk of being abducted. The wider dynamic of human rights abuses in Gulu and Kitgum Districts, including violations by the army, will be the subject of a separate report in late 1997.²

This report is a call to redouble efforts to break a cycle of violence that is destroying children's lives. The conflict in northern Uganda has lasted 11 years. Ultimately its roots lie in the traumatic impact on Ugandan society of the gross human rights violations of previous regimes. Northern Ugandans made up a significant proportion of the armed forces of these past governments. Some northerners claim that since 1986, when the current government took power, the rest of Uganda has turned its back on the north, blaming the Acholi in particular for mass human rights violations in the past. They say that this has created two nations - a prosperous, politically stable south and a devastated, backward north.³

While recognizing that a lasting peace in northern Uganda involves coming to terms with the past, arguing over history can sometimes become a barrier to addressing the future. Children from all parts of Uganda represent that future. Unless their human rights can be protected, and unless children can be helped to overcome the experiences to which they have been subjected, Uganda will not free itself from the legacy of its violent history. Establishing respect for the human rights of children lies at the heart of any forward-looking solution to conflict.

This report is addressed to the LRA and its foreign backer, the Sudan Government. Amnesty International does not take any position on the political program of government or armed opposition. However, the LRA's systematic abuse of human rights as its method of operation undermines its claim to represent a way forward for northern Uganda. The Sudan Government provides the LRA with food, weapons and communications. It uses the LRA as a militia to attack the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), an armed opposition movement fighting the Sudan Government. The Sudanese authorities allege that the SPLA is supported by the Uganda Government.

² Human rights violations by government forces in northern Uganda have been previously documented by Amnesty International in Uganda: The human rights record 1986-1989 (AFR 59/01/89), March 1989 and Uganda: The failure to safeguard human rights (AFR 59/05/92), September 1992.

³ pp 55-56 *Parliamentary report on the war in the north*, Sessional Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs, Parliament of Uganda, February 1997.

Many of the human rights abuses described in this report took place in military bases inside Sudan where Sudanese troops mix freely with LRA soldiers. It is within the power of the Sudan Government to prevent human rights abuses taking place and to ensure that abducted children are returned to Uganda.

The report is addressed to Ugandans living abroad. A minority of exiles claim that it is government forces that are responsible for abduction and other gross human rights abuses against children in northern Uganda. Such people are either badly misinformed or are knowingly ignoring gross abuses of human rights by the LRA.

It is addressed to the Ugandan authorities and Ugandans from all parts of the country. While this report does not address human rights violations by government forces, they do take place. Whatever the level of human rights abuses by forces fighting the government, under international human rights law the government has the main responsibility to protect human rights. There is no room for official complacency. This is doubly the situation in northern Uganda where many citizens regard the government with grave suspicion despite a general rejection of the methods of the LRA.⁴ In this context, violations of human rights by government forces are perceived as evidence of official hostility to the Acholi, giving each incident a special political significance.

Further, for the past year the government has, in public at least, emphasized a military approach to ending the war and has downplayed the possibility of dialogue. There are signs that at a district level the civil authorities in Gulu recognize the need for dialogue and reconciliation. However, seeking methods of reconciliation based on respect for human rights is more than a local challenge to be left to the Acholi themselves. It requires the active engagement of the entire nation. There is need for vigilance on the part of the media and organizations from all parts of the country concerned about human rights, including those of women and children.

The report is addressed to member states of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. Uganda may be an oasis of stability compared to surrounding countries like the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Kenya, each in different states of political turmoil, but continuing mass human rights abuses in the north are damaging regional conflict resolution and Uganda's long term future.

The report is based primarily on fieldwork by two teams of Amnesty International researchers in Gulu and Apac in May and July 1997. The organization conducted over 170 interviews with a wide range of persons from different walks of life, including 35 interviews with former LRA soldiers.⁵

⁴ *Ibid*, p56.

⁵ Other reports detailing the abuse of children's human rights by the Lord's Resistance Army

include *Shattered innocence: testimonies of children abducted in northern Uganda* by Robbie Muhumuza, World Vision Uganda/UNICEF, 1996; *Scars of death: children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*, Human Rights Watch, September 1997.

War in Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts

From the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s successive governments gave Uganda the unenviable international reputation of being a byword for the systematic and gross violation of human rights. In the 1970s Idi Amin's government used massacres and "disappearances" to create a reign of terror. Many Acholi and Langi soldiers in the Uganda Army were among those slaughtered. After his overthrow the new government's Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), heavily recruited from northern Uganda, took reprisals against civilians in Amin's home area of West Nile. In the years that followed the UNLA was responsible for mass killings in West Nile, Bushenyi, Mpigi and Luwero, all areas where the government of Milton Obote was facing armed opposition. In Mpigi and Luwero tens of thousands of people lost their lives; far from international borders people were unable to flee the violence. In July 1985 a power struggle between Langi and Acholi troops in the UNLA culminated in the Acholi senior army officers Tito Okello and Basilio Okello seizing power.

The military government was short-lived and when the primarily southern and western-based National Resistance Army (NRA) of Yoweri Museveni took power in Kampala in January 1986, the Okellos and many troops fled northwards. Some soldiers buried their weapons and uniforms and returned to their homes. Others passed beyond Kitgum and Gulu Districts into Sudan. There the troops regrouped and in August 1986 reinvaded Uganda calling themselves the Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A). So began 11 years of conflict in Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts. The NRA victory did not end conflict in Uganda; it moved it to more outlying areas.

The war in Kitgum and Gulu has gone through many phases since 1986. Human rights violations by government troops deployed in the north fuelled the conflict in late 1986. However, the UPDA did not last long as a military force. By 1988 most UPDA troops had given themselves up to the authorities and UPDA leaders reconciled with the government in 1990. Meanwhile a woman called Alice Auma, also known as Lakwena (Acholi for messenger), created a force that became known as the Holy Spirit Movement. By late 1986 Alice Lakwena had mobilized deserting UPDA soldiers, former members of the UNLA and Acholi and other Luo civilians through a powerful combination of local ideas about the spirit world and Christian beliefs. Her forces were eventually defeated outside Jinja in November 1987.

Following her defeat, an armed group led by Joseph Kony, initially known as Lakwena Two before becoming known as the Holy Spirit Movement, emerged as the focus of military opposition to the NRA in Gulu District. Like Alice Lakwena, Joseph Kony claims to be possessed by religious forces that use him as a medium. From the very beginning, forces led by Joseph Kony have committed serious human rights abuses against civilians.

In late October 1988 the NRA launched an offensive in Gulu District. Soldiers were responsible for extrajudicial executions, the internal displacement of thousands of people and the destruction of homes and granaries. It did not defeat the Kony's forces, which by early 1991 were called the United Christian Democratic Army (UCDA). During 1991 the NRA mounted another major military offensive which included sealing the north from the rest of the country. Although militarily effective, it was again tarnished by significant human rights violations. In 1992 new NRA commanders in the area worked with the civilian authorities on a more politically orientated counter-insurgency strategy, and in late 1993 and early 1994 government officials held peace talks with Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leaders, as Kony's forces were by then known.

The latest phase of the war began in early 1994. In February the peace talks collapsed after President Museveni gave LRA leaders seven days to lay down their arms. Meanwhile, the Sudan Government began to provide the LRA with military and logistical support, which gave the movement the means to intensify its activity. In 1995 the scale of violence and child abduction increased. In August 1995, for example, LRA units active in Kitgum were reported to have been set a figure of 1,200 children to abduct. Church sources report that by the end of the year 730 children had been abducted in Pajule, over 250 in Puranga, 502 in Patongo and over 600 in Atanga.

Schools are a common target. Between 1993 and July 1996 70 teachers were killed by the LRA in Kitgum District. In Gulu District in July and August 1996, 11 teachers and over 100 children were killed, 250 primary school children abducted and 59 primary schools burnt down, leading to the closure of 136 out of 180 primary schools. On 25 July 1996, 23 girls were abducted from St Mary's College and on 21 August 39 boys from Sir Samuel Baker School, two secondary schools near Gulu. On 10 October 1996, in an incident that has since galvanized public awareness of child abduction, 139 girls were abducted from St Mary's College, at Aboke in Apac District. Among the LRA raiders were boys from Sir Samuel Baker School. In the words of a team of investigating parliamentarians, "*there is hardly any meaningful education going on in the North*".⁶

⁶ *Ibid*, p49.

Since July 1996 nearly 50% of the population of Gulu District, some 200,000 people who normally live in communities of scattered farms surrounded by fields, have been forced to flee their homes. In April 1997 the number of displaced was estimated to be over 180,000.⁷ Some have moved into Gulu town, others are concentrated around outlying trading centres or small army posts (known as detachés) in so-called protected villages. In Kitgum District tens of thousands of people fled LRA attacks on Lamwo County in January 1997. In July 1997 unofficial estimates put the number of internally displaced in the district at approximately 60,000. Health centres in outlying areas are destroyed or are no longer able to provide services; children cannot be vaccinated.

The UPDF emphasizes that villagers are fleeing the LRA.⁸ While for many, perhaps the majority, this is undoubtedly true, it is also true that others are responding to encouragement and in some situations coercion by the UPDF, who are interested in isolating the LRA in the countryside and in cutting them off from sources of food. Unable to cultivate, many villagers are now dependent on relief assistance supplied by the World Food Program (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), World Vision Uganda, AVSI and other agencies.

Neither the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena nor the LRA of Joseph Kony have presented political programs that are readily understandable to outsiders, beyond calling for Uganda to be ruled according to the biblical Ten Commandments. As the testimony of children who have escaped describes, extreme violence is a deliberate tool used to terrorize civilians into providing support or newly abducted persons into staying with their captors, and as punishment for not following edicts laid down by LRA commanders. For civilians in the countryside, edicts include no riding bicycles (persons on bicycles can quickly reach army detachés); no habitation near roads (where people may witness landmines being planted or ambushes being laid); and no keeping pigs (which appears to be a response to support from the Islamist Sudan Government).

For Acholi civilians for whom religious belief is a formative part of daily life the power of violence is compounded by the claimed spirit possession of LRA leaders and an emphasis on spiritual purity. Rituals of purification are a recurring theme in the testimony of escaping children. Newly abducted children are often anointed with oil made from shea nuts shortly after being "arrested". To quote 15-year old A., abducted in October 1996:

"So they made us to go to where we were going to sleep. There they put some moya. They said it is holy oil. It comes from a tree. So they smeared us, put a

⁷ Figures compiled by Gulu District Disaster Committee.

⁸ The National Resistance Army was renamed the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces in the October 1995 constitution

cross in front here [A. indicated her chest], and here, and here and then on our hands also."

LRA leaders appear to regard violence as a way of purging society of impurity; those who die, whether civilians, government troops or LRA child soldiers, are those who are believed to have broken spiritual or religious commands (often as laid down by leaders claiming divine instruction). During an address to LRA troops at a base camp in Sudan in mid-1996, T., a 17-year old boy abducted in March 1996, heard Joseph Kony threatening to destroy Lacor Hospital near Gulu, because wounded people "*were cared for there, instead of dying*".

The terror inflicted by the LRA represents a pathological response to a history of violence and social trauma. Acholi society in Gulu and Kitgum is traumatized; the LRA is both the result and, in a terrible dynamic, in part the cause. The complex social forces that give rise to the violence and routine abuse of human rights require an equally complex response. Military success by the UPDF will reduce weapon supply and restrict the capacity of the LRA but history has shown that lasting peace can only be built on a solid foundation of respect for human rights. In northern Uganda building respect for human rights needs conflict resolution based on a commitment to justice and reconciliation within the communities of Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts, between the Uganda Government and the people of the north, and between northerners and society in the rest of Uganda.

The official response to escaping or captured LRA soldiers is a positive and important contribution in this direction as it chooses to recognize that the majority of LRA soldiers are abducted children whose actions stem from the brutalization and systematic abuse to which they are subjected. Since 1995 the UPDF has handed over former combatants to two non-governmental organizations (NGOs), World Vision Uganda and Gulu Support for Children Organization (GUSCO), for psycho-social counselling and therapy. The work of both NGOs has its origin in family members of abducted children recognizing that returnees are often deeply disturbed by their experiences -- and sometimes dangerous to those around them. The programs allow former combatants and their community to begin the process of coming to terms with the violence to which they have been subjected and which they have perpetrated.

However, on its own this work will not break the cycle of violence in which northern Ugandan children are the principle victims. This report concludes with further recommendations aimed at building respect for human rights within the framework of conflict resolution.

The involvement of the Sudan Government

Sudan Government support for the LRA has been a critical factor in the movement's operation since 1994. Without Sudanese support the LRA would not have had many of the weapons used to commit human rights abuses or the relatively secure rear bases to which abducted children are taken for training, often sited close to Sudan army units. The Sudan army uses the LRA as a militia to fight the SPLA (and to destabilize Uganda in response to the Uganda Government's alleged support for the SPLA). The Sudan Government's active engagement means that it can be held responsible for the abduction of children and other serious human rights abuses carried out by the LRA.

Working with the LRA is the extension across an international border of a method of war used by the Sudanese since 1985. Within Sudan there are several similar militia groups, notionally independent of the Sudanese authorities, but in reality armed by them and working closely with the Sudan army. Examples include a force led by Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, a former SPLA commander, which since late 1994 has operated out of government-controlled towns in northern Bahr al-Ghazal, and the Anya-Nya Two, led by Paulino Matip Nhial, which has operated in western Upper Nile since 1983.⁹

Seventeen year old T. describes what he saw in May 1996:

"In Sudan, there were many Sudanese soldiers. When I first arrived, the Sudanese soldiers identified a site where we could camp. Commanders sat together and exchanged ideas. Guns were brought in from Juba. The radio system was also provided by Sudanese."

Over the past three years the LRA have used bases at Gong near Katire, Owiny-Ki-Bul, Palotaka, Parajok and, more recently, near abandoned camps formerly used by Sudanese internally displaced persons at Aru. In April 1997 Aru was overrun by a combined force of Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and UPDF.¹⁰ As of August 1997 the LRA base camp had moved to a site 38 kilometres south east of Juba, one kilometre behind the frontline between the Sudan army and the SPLA.

Arms supplied by the Sudan army are usually brought by truck to LRA camps in Sudan. In 1994 arms were reported to be channelled through the SPLA-United, an SPLA breakaway faction led in Eastern Equatoria by William Nyuon Bany. However, by August 1994 Sudan army regular soldiers were directly involved. Children abducted in 1996 and 1997 report seeing Sudanese soldiers off-loading arms and ammunition from

⁹ Until April 1997 when a "peace agreement" was signed with the Sudan Government, Kerubino Kuanyin Bol's forces claimed to be at war with Khartoum.

¹⁰ LRA bases at Palotaka, Parajok and Owiny-Ki-Bul were overrun by the SPLA in October 1995.

army vehicles at the LRA base camp in Aru. The weapons included AK47 and G3 assault rifles, anti-tank weaponry (including B10 recoilless guns), 81mm and 82mm mortars and landmines, which were not a common feature of the war until the Sudan Government began to support the LRA. R.K. was abducted on 1 January 1997 and trained to place landmines:

"I was not trained in their names - I was shown how to use them. There are three different kinds. Small ones, which open like a mathematical set, for use against people. Then there are round ones, which are set off by 70-80 kilos - a bicycle will make them explode. And big ones, the size of a small washing basin, which are for heavy vehicles. There was Arabic writing on the mines. The Arabs also gave uniforms. I got one."

It is within the power of the Sudanese authorities to free abducted children. This they have chosen not to do. Indeed, quite the opposite - so far the Sudanese have actively assisted the LRA to keep hold of children.¹¹ R.O. was 15 when he was abducted in September 1996. The LRA group that took him was attacked by UPDF helicopter gun ships as it moved towards the Sudan border:

"When we reached Sudan our group had many sick and wounded. We went to an Arab detach and a signal was sent to Joseph Kony. A vehicle came, the sick were put on it. The rest of us walked to the main base."

In February 1997 J., a 15-year old boy abducted in November 1996, escaped with his brother from the LRA camp at Aru:

"We went towards Uganda but we came on a camp of the Arabs. They took us. We were held waiting for a vehicle to carry us back. We knew we would be killed so that night we ran again. But then we ran into an Arab patrol. It was dark, my brother and I went in different directions. He was caught. I waited for him but then had to go on."

J.'s brother escaped again while in transit back to the LRA base. He also managed to get back to Uganda.

The Sudan army's use of the LRA as a militia extends to joint operations against the SPLA. R., who was abducted in April 1996 and taken almost immediately to Sudan, reported that he took part in three joint operations with the Sudan army against the SPLA

¹¹ Some reports have claimed that children abducted by the LRA have been sold as slaves to Sudanese. Amnesty International has not found any evidence to support this.

in 1996 and early 1997. O.R., who was 17 when he was abducted in October 1994, also fought the SPLA:

"Sudanese soldiers collected some of us to go fighting in Sudan. I was picked. Many of the soldiers fighting the SPLA were Ugandans. Some SPLA soldiers were captured. We took them to the Arabs...I escaped in January 1995. I was one of those at the frontline observing the enemy. It was in Parajok. The enemy was the SPLA."

The capture by the UPDF of 114 Sudanese regular soldiers and 64 LRA members in an engagement on 14 April 1997 is evidence that joint operations were still taking place in the first third of 1997. The Uganda Government reports that this engagement took place at Lelabur, in Uganda close to the Sudan border.

Institutionalized violence

"They are violating human rights, they are breaking God's commands. This movement is for destruction".

T., a 17-year-old former child soldier, interviewed in Gulu three months after escaping the LRA.

The LRA has institutionalized physical and psychological violence, including killings, rape and other forms of torture. The effect on civilians is to breed fear and force acquiescence; the consequence of being found to have informed the authorities about LRA activity is simple and brutal. However, the violence is not just directed "outwards" at the civilian population or captured UPDF soldiers. It is also used in a calculated and deliberate way to enforce discipline within the LRA itself. The abuses described below are a fundamental method of organization aimed at the destruction of individual will and morality. It begins with forcible abduction to be a soldier or porter.

An army that feeds on children

Without abducted children the LRA would have few soldiers. Since 1994 child abduction has become the main method of recruitment. According to World Vision Uganda, which since March 1995 has provided psycho-social counselling for over 3,000 former LRA soldiers, approximately 47% were aged between 11 and 16 when taken. A further 36% were between 17 and 22 years old. Approximately 30% of abducted people seen by World Vision have been female; of these 54% have been aged between 11 and 16.¹²

¹² Figures presented by World Vision Uganda to a conference on *Challenges to reconciliation and the protection of human rights* in Gulu on 7 July 1997, organized by the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative.

Abducted children embark on a journey in hell. Abduction is itself an act of violence, ripping terrified children from the security of their families. It is often accompanied by killings, rape and severe beatings. B., a 14-year-old girl, was abducted in February 1997:

"I had gone to the garden to collect tomatoes at around eight or nine in the morning. Suddenly, I was surrounded by about 50 rebels. They started picking tomatoes and eating them. They arrested me and started beating me terribly.



They wanted me to walk them to my home but I was refusing. Finally, I walked them to my home. We went there and collected my clothes. There, they killed my mother.

They made me go, leaving behind my little brother and two little sisters. They are still very young. I was trying to explain to them that I could not leave behind the children because they were too young to fend for themselves. I was resisting. Then they started beating me until I became unconscious. Life was leaving me but I was thinking of the children. They stopped beating me."

R., a 45-year-old woman, described what happened when her children were taken from Paicho near Gulu in 1996:

"The rebels came and asked for my two children, a boy and a girl. My daughter was 14 years old, she had developed breasts. My son was 13. My daughter stayed with the rebels for two days. During an ambush she was shot in the leg and then rescued by UPDF soldiers. My son was in the bush for two months before he was rescued after an ambush as well. The day the rebels captured the children they

beat me and raped me. There were many of them. I was left unconscious outside my house...My daughter was raped as well. The commander took her as his wife the same day she was abducted."

O.J., 15 years old, was abducted from a village south of Gulu in November 1996:

"We knew there were rebels around, so I hid in the bush. Some children had run away. A small group was chasing them and they found me. They asked me which way the children had run, but I did not know. They took me to the big group. The commander said I should be recruited. So they beat me on the back. Three of us were taken, one was let go. I was made to carry cassava. I was getting tired. When we reached a certain place I was given 30 strokes again so that I would keep on carrying".

As the World Vision statistics suggest and O.J.'s testimony describes, the LRA does not take every child it encounters to be a child soldier. Those that are too small are set free; they are not strong enough to carry looted goods or to use weapons. It also seems that LRA units are given conscription targets that change according to need and objective. In relation to girls, age and "beauty" are selection criteria - one of the main purposes of taking girls is to use them for forced marriage to more senior male LRA soldiers. According to B., abducted in February 1997, *"the ones taken are supposed to create a new clan"*. One child interviewed in May 1997 claimed that *"rebels who had captured girls who were not beautiful or smart were beaten by the others for shaming them"*.

On 10 October 1996 139 girls from St. Mary's School, Aboke in Apac District were abducted. One hundred and nine were subsequently freed after the extraordinary intervention of teachers from the school who chased the rebel group and then pleaded for their release. According to selected girls, the 30 that remained were picked by the LRA commander using the criteria of "beauty" and area of origin. This is 17 year old G.O.'s description of what happened:

"I was sleeping in the dormitory. I did not hear when they first came. Only when they started banging on the door. I knew then that rebels had come. We all hid under our beds. They told us to open the door. They threatened to bomb the dormitory. But none of us opened the door. Then they broke open the window. One came in. He opened the door for the others. They went looking for us under our beds. They tied us [at the waist in groups of five] and we left the dormitory...

We walked, walked, walked. We reached a corner and we sat. The rebels started looting and capturing people in Aboke. Then we started moving again until morning. We crossed a swamp. The rebels had a big thing they used to communicate with their people. It looked like a telephone. But we were too far away and we could not hear what they were saying...

Then Sister Rachele arrived. It was about mid-day. We all cried when we saw her. We kept on moving. An air plane came. The rebels told us to remove all white shirts and asked Sister to take off her veil. We took cover. The plane shot, but far from us. "You take cover, you take cover" they were saying. We hid in the bush, together with the rebels. After, we kept on moving. Later on there was a UPDF ambush. We hid in the bush. The plane came back but did not see us.

In the evening, the girl rebels prepared tea. There were about thirty of them. The rebels gathered us and started choosing people. "Kony sent us to choose beautiful girls - 30 of them", they said. We soon realised we'll be left behind."

Fifteen year old A. was also one of those selected to remain with the LRA:

"They started choosing girls. If you were chosen, they told you to stand up. They chose me. They told me to stand up...I was the third to be chosen..."

Now, Sister was there with the commander. He said, "these are the girls we have chosen". Sister came. She could not do anything. She started crying. She said they should at least take her and release all the girls. But they refused. Sister pleaded for us. Even us, when we saw Sister, we started to cry, because we could not do anything. The others, they were going back. But for us, we were remaining. And they started getting some sticks to beat us.

Then Sister came back and kneeled in front of this man, L.O. He said you don't have to kneel before me, I'm not God. Sister was pleading for more girls to be set free. Then our teacher, Mr. B., came to Sister and said, "Sister, I think we have to go". Then they started going. Sister said, "let's pray". So we started praying. When Sister left, we started crying. The commander ordered the rebels to come and beat us. They started beating us, beating us, beating us. And then the commander told them they should jump on our chests with their boots. And even they jumped. For us, we cried."

The group moved back into Gulu District. The day after the abduction, a number of adolescent girls taken from Aboke village were released. Over the weeks that followed the group concentrated on abducting boys and youths. LRA child soldiers told G.O. this had been ordered by the spirit possessing Joseph Kony: *"they said Tipu Maleng refused us to capture girls. Only the students from Aboke."* In fact, testimony from other children in this group indicates that girls were being taken, but in smaller numbers than boys.

The LRA does not just abduct children. When there is a need for people to carry looted goods or ammunition, adults and older adolescents are also taken as forced labour. Once the raiding party has moved beyond danger of a confrontation with pursuing troops,

which can be hours or days later depending on the circumstances, the adults who have survived the journey are sometimes released and the loads redistributed among the newly abducted children and existing child soldiers. In the early hours of 22 May 1997 a residential suburb of Gulu town was attacked by a group of rebels who looted houses and small shops before burning 88 homes. Twenty-three children and young male adults were abducted. A., a 25-year-old man, was one of those taken as a porter:

"When I was asleep, deep asleep, the rebels came... They asked for my property and started beating me. I was forced to come out of the hut with them. They were looting the shops. My hands were tied behind my back. They continued looting and robbing. Then they untied my hands and ordered me to run. I was carrying the loot. Behind us, we saw the flames of the houses burning. When we reached Unyama, we were ordered to sit down and we were divided into two groups: a group of young boys and one of older boys. There were 18 of us in the older boys group. We were all released. I don't know how many young ones there were but they all remained behind."

Induction: terrorizing children

Discipline within the LRA is maintained by extreme and often arbitrary violence. LRA commanders force captured children to take part in the almost ritualized killing of others very soon after their abduction. The intention appears to be to break down resistance to LRA authority, to destroy taboos about killing and to implicate the child in criminal acts. The effect is to terrorize children. For many former child soldiers interviewed by Amnesty International this appeared to be a defining moment in their involvement with the LRA. On 15 August 1996 15 year old J.O. from Gulu District was forced to kill a boy called Oyet, who he knew:

"They arrested a boy called Oyet who had tried to raise the alarm. They tied him and stabbed him in the back. That night the new group of captured people was addressed and distributed to various commanders. I was sent to commander O. At two am they clapped in their hands, which meant we had to wake up. They placed a mat on the floor with three lamps and brought in Oyet. The commander told us that Oyet will be hit three times and then "sent home" [in other words, he would be killed]. All the new recruits were surrounding the mat.

Then the commander picked one boy. This boy made a small noise because he did not want to be picked. The commander got angry and called for a panga [a heavy broad-bladed machete]. His escorts started beating the boy until he was spitting blood and could not cry anymore. He was then asked to go back to his place and sit down. Then the commander chose another boy. He was given an axe and Oyet was told to lie down. The boy was told to hit Oyet once. Then he was told to hand over the axe to another boy who hit Oyet a second time. And then I was given the

axe as the third person. I hit Oyet a third time. I know that it is my blow that sent him home'."

There is no discrimination on gender grounds when it comes to making abducted children kill those who try to escape. G.O. was one of a group of children forced to kill a girl one week after they were taken in October 1996:

"One of the village girls tried to escape three times. The first time, they forgave her. The second time, they tied her to a tree and beat her. The third time she went to a house for protection from the owners, a man and a woman. The rebel girl who was keeping her told the commander she was missing. They went looking for her. They entered the house and found the girl.

Then they called us. They had already beaten her. They asked us to beat her with stones and sticks until she died. We had to do it. The rebels also killed the man of the house. The commander said: "if one of you tries to escape, I'll kill all of you". The rebels were told to cane us 15 strokes each."



The "family" - forced labour, forced marriage and sexual slavery

The testimony of children describes a strictly hierarchical structure within the LRA founded on a macabre re-ordering of experiences familiar to children. The bedrock of internal organization is what the children describe as the "family". This relies, in the end, on the abduction of girls for forced marriage -- without forced marriage the "families" would not exist.

Persons within the LRA appear to recognize four categories of member. Young children below the age of 13 are reportedly known as "siblings". Newly abducted children who have not received military training are known as "recruits". Children who have received military training are "soldiers". At the top are "commanders", also known as "teachers" (Acholi: *lapwony*). Joseph Kony is reported to style himself a major general and other senior commanders are ranked lieutenant colonel. Interviewed former child soldiers also used the word commander to describe ranks including corporal, sergeant, regimental sergeant major and lieutenant. Boy child soldiers who show enthusiasm for soldiering soon become commanders.

Each abducted child is allocated to a "family" headed by a commander:

"It's organized like a family. There is a man, his wife or wives and the children. At the start I was with B.M. family. His wife was called A. In the family there were six girls from Aboke school and boys with guns."

B. was part of a group based at a "sickbay", a relatively secure location where rudimentary medical attention is given to the wounded:

"I was part of O.K.'s family. He is a doctor taking care of the wounded. Those who were sick came to his house to be given medicine. He had four wives, two children and 12 recruits. In the home, there were also six abducted boys and six girls."

The powers of the men at the head of each family, under the overall authority of Joseph Kony and other senior commanders, are such that they effectively "own" the children allocated to them as chattels. Girls are held in forced marriage. Commanders have the power to impose hard labour and physical punishment -- and the power to kill. In Amnesty International's opinion the degree of ownership over child members of the "family" is such that their condition is consistent with the international definition of slavery.¹³

All children are forced to carry out a range of domestic and other tasks under inhuman and life-threatening conditions with an inadequate diet. According to O.J., who was taken to Aru in Sudan in December 1996:

"Sorghum and maize was brought by the Arabs once a month, but only enough for the commanders. We ate potato leaves. Sometimes we would raid the Dinkas and Letuhas for food."

¹³ Article 1 of the 1926 *Slavery Convention* defines a slavery as "the status or condition of a person over whom any of the powers of ownership are exercised".

J. was also taken to Sudan:

"I collected water. The area was very sandy and it was a six mile round trip. Collecting water took three hours. I saw one boy die. He was under a tree. I thought he was resting but he was dead. I ground and cooked sorghum supplied by the Arabs. We ate no beans or vegetables. We only had leaves for sauce. Boys were made to cut firewood."

V. arrived in Aru in early 1997:

"At O.'s place there were many people so the food was too little. Nine girls were there who had to share little food...People died of thirst because there was little water. You had to dig the ground to find it."

Girls and women are forced to carry out the range of domestic duties that in rural Acholi society might be expected of a wife. These include cooking, cleaning, and fetching water and food. In the LRA if rules are not followed, the head of the family has the power to punish, often carried out by caning, the number of strokes reflecting the severity of the offence. While on the move, for example, cooking should be carried out quickly and in such a way that smoke from cooking fires cannot be seen: *"if you cook too slowly, they beat you. The escort of the commander usually does that"*. Allowing smoke to be seen carries a death sentence.

Forced marriage means that girls are also forced to provide sexual services to their "husbands". They are effectively held as sexual slaves. Interviewed girls refer to themselves either as "wife" or "helper". Many girls appear to use the different terms as a matter of self-representation, with the choice of "helper" reflecting reluctance to recognize (perhaps to themselves, as well as to outsiders) that sexual relations were imposed upon them.

Other evidence demonstrates that sexual slavery is imposed on all abducted girls, with possibly two exceptions: girls below thirteen and those who manage to escape within a week of their abduction. When medically examined on escaping, nearly 100% of escaped girls and women have syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases, against 60% of boys and men.¹⁴ Except for those who had been married before abduction (a minority) and who may have been carrying sexually transmitted diseases, they are most likely to have been infected during their period with the LRA. People who work with former child members of the LRA attest that female "helpers" are, sooner or later, victims

¹⁴ Organizations providing aftercare for escaped child soldiers have opted not to check them for HIV/AIDS.

of rape by the head of the family to whom they are allocated. But many girls are unable to say so because of the stigma attached to rape, and it takes weeks of counselling for them to be able to articulate it. A counsellor told Amnesty International:

"When they tell me they were given as a "helper" to this man's family, I'll ask them about the sleeping arrangements. Eventually, they will say, "even at midnight, the man can call me." The man will say, "bring me water" or "prepare my bed". And then sexual abuse and rape will take place. All the girls deny it at first. But eventually they'll say so."

The testimony of girls who admit to forced sex either as a "wife" or "helper" corroborates the medical and professional evidence. As 16-year old G. described it:

"The Commander gave us husbands, except for the young ones, those below 13. But for 13 onwards, we were all given as wives. There was no marriage ceremony. But if you refuse, you are killed."

Male ownership of girls and women extends to the power to transfer them to another "husband". This appears to be more especially exercised in the bush in Uganda itself rather than the more settled conditions of base camps in Sudan. In Uganda rebels and their captives are on the move all the time. They are exposed to military action that results in death and injury. A group may be split up or united with a new unit coming from Sudan. The instability of the military situation and the fast changing composition of the group mean imposed relationships are precarious. Girls and women may pass through several men when the one to whom they were originally allocated dies or is moved on. According to a counsellor working with former child soldiers:

"If a husband gets tired of his wife, he gets rid of her and she is given to someone else. Within a one year period, girls would have seen many husbands."

Girls and women, on the other hand, cannot pick their own "husband". As B. puts it:

"There is a very strong discipline -- you are not allowed to pick another man."

Neither, once a girl has been allocated as a "wife", is she able to refuse sex forced on her by her "husband". Punishment for resisting is severe. A. described the case of a girl called L.:

"The husband wanted her to go and sleep with him. She refused. She was beaten up terribly in the morning. But she did not care; she said God is protecting her."

L. was fortunate; according to other testimony, men have near absolute power. According to P.:

"Some men beat their wives. Some men killed them too. I saw one wife being killed by her husband."

However, in the case of women with children it appears that their male "owners" are expected to take some degree of responsibility for their welfare, sometimes enforced by more senior commanders. G was allocated to S.O.:

"My husband treated me badly. I was beaten. When I delivered a child, I was isolated from the rest of the women. He said that the child I had delivered was not from him. But the child was from him. The Commander got angry with him and beat him up because he was refusing me and the child."

The function of forced marriage

The power inherent in the ownership of girl-children and women by male LRA soldiers is a twisted and extended form of that which exists in more familiar social settings. Government reports describe a broader patriarchal social context in Uganda in which women and girls have a lower status than males within the family, community, and society at large. Wife ownership, polygamy and a husband's exclusive sexual rights over his wife (which means that rape in marriage is effectively not recognised) all exist in society beyond the LRA.¹⁵ A report prepared by the Ministry of Gender and Community Development states that "*most people have been socialised to look at domestic violence as a normal practice*".¹⁶

What is specific to the LRA is the extent, nature, and function of violence against women, and the particularly brutal, hierarchical and institutionalized circumstances through which abuses of women's human rights are promoted. The ownership of women and girls resulting from abduction, forced conscription and forced marriage is part and parcel of the military strategy of the LRA and the social order devised by the leadership. It is both a reflection and the foundation of that social order.

The allocation of women is a reward system for male soldiers. It gives them persons to carry out domestic tasks and provides them with sexual access. R., a 15-year old boy, puts it succinctly:

¹⁵ p.140, *Equity and vulnerability: A situation analysis of women, adolescents, and children in Uganda, 1994*, Uganda National Council for Children, The Government of Uganda.

¹⁶ p.125, *Country Report in Preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women 1995*, Ministry of Gender and Community Development.

"When in Uganda boys don't have sex with abducted girls. They would be shot immediately. When they have been brought back to Sudan the girls are distributed to commanders, to those who are hardworking. It is to encourage them."

T. describes a commander being rewarded for fighting:

"In Sudan, I was attached to the home of brigadier M. There were 45 persons attached to his home. He had seven wives, one had a baby. When M. went back to Uganda [to fight], he was given two more wives."

Given that LRA military operations include abducting other children and deliberately and arbitrarily killing civilians and captured government soldiers, "encouragement" is an incentive for such behaviour.

Being allocated women is also a source of prestige and a proof of status. The higher the rank within the LRA hierarchy, the greater the number of "wives" or "helpers". R. again:

"Kony has 30 wives. Then the senior commanders have eight wives. Other high-ranking fellows have four wives. It works like a family."

Sixteen-year old G. was made a "wife" after she was abducted in April 1994:

"My husband was S.O. he was an old man! He was a major. I was his second wife. Two more were brought when I was staying with him. Some men did not have a wife because they had no rank."

The function of forced marriage as a pillar of the LRA social order is demonstrated by the strict regulations imposed on the sexual behaviour of both boys and girls, which R.'s testimony refers to above. Once a girl has been abducted, sexual contact with members of the LRA other than the allocated "owner" is strictly forbidden. It is punished by the killing of both the boy and girl in the case of consensual sex or of the boy in the case of rape. A girl abducted in October 1996 reported that one of her classmates was raped before she was allocated to a man:

"One of us had been raped at the beginning. We did not say anything. But after I had been transferred to B., I told him what had happened. He was telling me, 'you see, how well we are treating you.'" Then I said it was not true and reported the rape to him. Then B. reported the rape to O.L. [the commander of the group]. In the morning, they called the man. They caned him 200 strokes and then sent a

message to Kony, asking him what to do. He replied to kill him. The following day, he was killed. Then we were asked whether other men had tried to do anything to us. Some men had tried to corner us and we reported them. They got 150 strokes."

However, rape of women and girls is frequent during attacks on villages and in this situation takes place with impunity (see below). Committed against women outside the group, rape is considered, along with killing and torture, a tactic of warfare, a means of intimidation and control over the population. However, boy (and men) soldiers are unwilling to admit to raping. This is true both of admitting to having been allocated a "wife" and of raping during a military operation. It appears to be easier for the children to admit to having killed.

Abuses in the context of military operations

While in Uganda the LRA is organized into named brigades. At least four brigades have been active in Gulu and Kitgum Districts since 1996. Their names are reported to be Stockree, which was responsible for extensive child abduction in September and October 1996, Control Altar, Sania and Gilver.

All children abducted by the LRA undergo military training, either in bases in Sudan or while in temporary camps in Uganda. This includes girls:

"Each and every girl must be trained. It's a 'must'. In my group [which was operating in Uganda] there were few girls with guns because most of them were in Sudan. The rebels just choose which ones will fight, which ones will remain in Sudan."

The nature of the military training child soldiers receive varies in length, depending on the circumstances. In all situations it is minimal and idiosyncratic - and places them in enormous danger on the battlefield when they confront the SPLA or the UPDF. T., a 17-year-old boy, was trained in Sudan:

"It took 14 days only and then they sent us to fight in Uganda against people who were trained for one year. The rebels don't accept that you should lie down while firing. You have to stand up. Many of us died in battles."

R. was given even less training:

"I stayed two weeks in Sudan and then came back. The first week we were very tired and were allowed to rest. We got food - but it was not much. After one week we were given guns".

For children who remain in Uganda, the training appears to be equally minimal. A. was trained while working in a "sickbay":

"They trained all of us. For those people who were in the sickbay, they were trained in the sickbay. L. trained me and another woman. L. had stayed in the bush for nine years. She had been abducted. She changed her behaviour all the time. Sometimes, she would be rude. Sometimes, she'd just stay like that, quiet. She trained us how to lay an ambush, how to fire a gun. If she felt like training me, she'd call me, so I'd go."

Almost from the moment they are abducted, both boy and girl children are at risk of being exposed to combat with the UPDF. With the exception of those who manage to

escape soon after their abduction, all children interviewed by Amnesty International, including girls, had participated in military operations in Uganda or Sudan. However, it appears that boys and men are more likely to be sent to fight on a frequent and regular basis. This appears to be a result of there being a higher number of abducted boys and the sexual slavery (with resulting pregnancy) of girls.

There are two myths about military activity in northern Uganda. The first is that the UPDF does not confront the LRA; the second is that the LRA only attacks civilians and not the army. Neither is true. Many former child soldiers report battles between the UPDF and the LRA. The LRA group that abducted J. in August 1996 was attacked a few days after he was "arrested":

"At mid-day, as we were cooking, an helicopter arrived. It started moving far off and hit woods with bombs and then disappeared. The rebels said, "let's go, no more cooking". We were told that four lines of UPDF soldiers were coming up. It meant we would have to fight, but we, the new recruits, did not have any guns. The commander told us, "even if you don't have a gun, you must go and take part in the fighting by making noise". I was picked to be among the boys to make noise. A., the deputy commander, was speaking on the radio to check whether it was really the UPDF. Then the fight began. Those of us without guns we started shrieking. We were being caned too".

The number of the children who have died in military operations is unknown. J. reported that in the fight described above around 40 LRA and over 70 UPDF soldiers were killed. *The New Vision* and *The Monitor* newspapers carried reports of military engagements between 8 February 1996 and 30 April 1997 which, added together, give a total of 748 LRA soldiers killed by the UPDF and the SPLA. It is difficult to assess the accuracy of these figures, which draw heavily on official announcements by the army, because the UPDF on occasion seeks to play down the scale of fighting and on other occasions is anxious to demonstrate that it is on top of the situation. Interview testimony suggests that the figure is on the low side.

UPDF casualties are also difficult to establish. What is clear is that the LRA does not take UPDF prisoners; wounded and captured soldiers are killed. J.O. was made to kill soldiers shortly after his abduction:

"Later on, the new recruits were asked to finish off all the wounded UPDF soldiers. One officer was stabbed with a bayonet...Two UPDF soldiers were captured. The commander said, "the new recruits can now feed themselves on these two soldiers". Three of us were instructed to hit these two soldiers, twice each. This was my second day with the rebels."

T. also reports that UPDF soldiers were killed after being captured:

"I fought three times in Uganda. We never captured UPDF soldiers but another group did capture them and killed them."

Moving in the bush

When in Uganda, LRA units are highly mobile, moving quickly away from raided villages and covering large distances to reach new targets or to avoid the UPDF. It appears that child soldiers usually only remain in the same place for any length of time when attached to (or being treated in) a "sickbay". Abducted children (and adults) are forced to carry heavy loads of looted goods, ammunition, cooking equipment, food and water. Food is often in short supply. Children report that death from exhaustion, hunger or thirst while on the move is common. The number of children who have died in this way will probably never be known. Their death is lonely and, often, anonymous. This is B.'s experience. She was abducted in February 1997 north of Gulu:

"We walked to Pyeng [phonetic] and stayed there. For four days we stayed and raided food. My main task was to carry luggage and food. I also had to cook and fetch water. I underwent military training for one day. Some of us, the abducted children, died of hunger and thirst."

G.A. was part of another group moving in the Sudan/Uganda border area in late 1996:

"Eventually we reached a place to collect water and so carried that as well. Once it was finished, some of us died of thirst."

Porters are treated with brutality. J.O. describes carrying looted goods away from a raided trading centre:

"We took three bags of sugar, sodas, biscuits, sweets, a radio and money in a box. On our way, there was a river with water up to the chest. Women were given things to carry on their heads. They were threatened to get killed if they slipped and lost things."

One woman lost everything. She was pleading, "don't kill me, let me become one of your wives". "Do you think you are the only woman?" She was killed with a bayonet by two men and we were all warned by the commander, "even if you drop one biscuit, you'll be killed that way".

Those who cannot keep up are likely to be killed. Fifteen year old P. escaped in May 1997 after seven months with the LRA:

"In the morning, after waking up, we will move until mid-day. Then we will cook. Then we will move again until sunset. Sometimes we will move all day without having food. They made you carry heavy luggage. If you could not carry the luggage, they'll kill you. I saw many people getting killed. There was a man. They had given him too many things to carry. He could not walk anymore. They killed him and gave his luggage to another person."

J., who was abducted in October 1996, was taken quickly to the Sudan border:

"Once in the mountains we collected pregnant girls and babies from a sickbay and together walked to Sudan. We were walking constantly, day and night, carrying loads over difficult country. I developed sores on my legs. You were beaten if your baby cried, and if a gap emerged between you and the group you were killed. Two boys at the back with heavy loads were shot because they were too slow."

Attacks on civilians

It is civilians that have faced the brunt of LRA attacks. Roads and footpaths are liable to be mined. Vehicles travelling in Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts have been ambushed, sometimes with heavy loss of life. Schools, medical centres and government buildings have been targeted for destruction. The LRA needs food; it gets it by enforcing contributions from villagers terrorized into acquiescence or by looting. Violence is used to punish communities reluctant to provide support or who are believed to have supplied information to the authorities. Local councillors and other civilians working with the authorities are at particular risk of being killed. Above all, villages are attacked so children can be abducted. Deliberate killings of civilians are a routine part of these attacks. It is impossible to list all the incidents reported to Amnesty International. The following are examples.

On 20 April 1995 several hundred LRA soldiers raided Atiak, a trading centre north of Gulu. After assaulting a military detach, the LRA looted and burnt the market. Several hundred people were rounded up and taken approximately 10 kilometres southwest of the town to the banks of a river where the raiders halted. The captives were divided into categories - children below the age of 11, elderly men and women, pregnant women, breast-feeding mothers and young men and women, including children over the age of 11. The LRA commander is reported to have accused the civilians of not providing support for the movement. At midday the adolescents and young adults were shot dead. Over one hundred and thirty were killed by the riverbank, including over 40 students from the Atiak Technical College. In total, over 200 civilians are believed to have been killed during the raid.



Former child soldiers who were involved say that in fighting with the UPDF that followed many LRA were killed and some managed to use the confusion of battle to flee. An LRA unit returned three weeks later looking for a boy who had fled with a weapon. At Latebe, one kilometre from Atiak, three men and four women were battered to death. C., a 17-year-old girl abducted in 1994, was caught when she tried to flee:

"I was seen by rebels staying up trees. They caught me and punished me for trying to escape. The "teacher" tortured me...He poured boiling oil on my hand."

Since July 1996 there has been an escalation in the frequency of attacks on civilians, which were already common. On 12 and 13 July 1996 an LRA unit attacked camps of Sudanese refugees at Agago and Achol-Pii in Kitgum District. More than 115 refugees were shot or hacked to death. Two Ugandan policemen were abducted and murdered. The LRA regards Sudanese refugees, particularly Dinka, as supporters of the SPLA.

Seventy eight Ugandan villagers are reported to have been killed in Kilak county on 28 and 29 July 1996. In August 1996 J.O. was part of a group that encountered three boys who had ignored the LRA edict not to use bicycles:

"At 11, we crossed Omoro road. We found three boys riding bicycles. The rebels arrested them and we were told to beat them with an axe on the head. But teacher A. stopped us. Instead, they were tied and brought with us. We reached a certain home, about three kilometres from the main road. Commander O. started talking to the people and preached them not to go on the road. The order was then given to kill these three boys in front of the people from the house. Teacher A. said not to use guns but the axe. I was one of those selected to axe these three boys, but I did not have to do it because the commander asked for something in the bag I was carrying. I brought the bag to him. When I returned, the three boys had been killed."

On 16 September 1996 15 villagers were murdered in Burcoro. On 19 September, three women were axed to death in Abera near Unyama. The next day 11 men were "arrested" by the LRA in Oding village near Paicho. Their bodies were lined up along the roadside and the village burnt down. Also on 20 September, seven men riding bicycles were killed and their bodies left on a road south of Gulu. J., a girl abducted in October, witnessed another man being killed for riding a bicycle:

"They smashed up the bike and cut both feet off the man. Then they forced his wife to eat one of the feet, or be killed."

Between 7 and 11 January 1997 an LRA force massacred over 400 villagers in various locations in Lamwo county in Kitgum. According to villagers, the LRA said that they were punishing the people for their lack of support. Specifically, boy soldiers from the area had deserted the LRA with their weapons, local people had revealed the whereabouts of injured rebels hiding in villages and villagers were identifying positions of landmines to the UPDF. Over 80 men and women were killed in Palabek Kal, over 61 in Padibe and 82 in Lokung. Villages and granaries were torched. Another 90 civilians are reported to have been massacred in Palabek Kal on 18 and 19 January. Tens of thousands of villagers fled to seek the protection of the UPDF.

While killings are often publicly reported, the high level of rape is more hidden. Rape is not incidental to the conflict. It is a tactical weapon to terrorize civilians. D., describes what happened to her and her family during an LRA attack in 1996:

"I was sitting in my home with my six-month-old baby. The rebels arrived. They picked the baby from me and threw him on the ground. He survived. My husband is a civil servant. He was there, along with a man who had come to buy groundnuts. The rebels started beating them. They killed my husband. They did not kill the buyer, but he is now mentally deranged. Then they started raping me. My daughter was seven years old. They burnt her with fire, tortured her and

asked her where my husband had put government property. I was also beaten on the head and lost my teeth."

F. was at home near Gulu on 12 May 1995:

"One night they came. My two sons were sleeping in the bush so they did not find them. My husband was there. The rebels molested him and then killed him. Then they took me out of the house and raped me".

The stigma and probable social consequences of being raped mean that women consistently under-report it. This plays into a widespread predisposition to downplay it as an "unfortunate" side-issue. The reality is that sexual violence is a key part of the trauma experienced by women and girl-children in northern Uganda -- and a key part of the way the war is being fought.

The journey back

Attempting to escape is dangerous. This report has already described the consequences for those who try and fail. However, over the past three years thousands of children have managed to flee the LRA or have been captured by the UPDF. Some have planned their escape, others have fled when a sudden opportunity presents itself - often in the heat and chaos of a military engagement. G.O. was part of a group ambushed by the UPDF in early 1997:

"The UPDF shot. We ran and threw each and everything we were carrying. The guns were terrible. And there were bombs as well. A lot of them. I was with a small girl. I was holding her hand but she slipped. I don't know what happened to her.

I came to a river and I started crossing it. There was a lot of water. I felt as if I started drowning. I was slipping.. I thought I was going to die. But finally, I found myself touching a stone with my feet. I stayed there because I was very tired. I walked towards the bank. I heard girls screaming, "the water is taking me". I did not shout because I was afraid the UPDF will catch me.

I walked along the river for a while. There was tall grass that I could hide among. I was feeling so cold. I stayed there, shaking. I was still fearing. There was still bombing going on. I laid down in the grass. I closed my eyes. I stayed there until four. In the grass. I was not even hungry".

B. escaped in January 1997 when on an operation in Gulu District:

"We were on the move, going to a village to loot. It was at night. Me and two other girls hid under a tree and waited while the group moved on. We ran in the other direction."

Seventeen year old R. wanted to escape for a long time before the opportunity came in June 1997:

"I was picked to come looking for food and children in Uganda. I was stationed near Pabo. They had confidence in me. We came and abducted many. We were hurrying back to our detach, walking at night. I pretended to be branching off to urinate. They walked on and left me. After they had gone I started moving slowly. I reached a bush path, followed it and reached the main road. I ran along it and then ran off into the bush and hid. By now they had come back looking for me. They ran after me, down the main road and went past. I stayed all night, completely still. At dawn, when I saw people moving on the road, I stayed there in the bush. I was scared they would kill me."

For children escaping in remote areas the initial flight is followed by a long and often dangerous journey in the bush. G.O had to travel through a part of Gulu District deserted in late 1996 after people moved to trading centres for security:

"For two days I walked alone. I ate bananas and raw pawpaws. I put some in my bag. I was eating while I was walking. I was looking for homes but could not find any. I came across a road. I was moving, moving, moving. Night came. I could not move anymore. I slept under a tree. At night, I felt a presence. It was an animal. It just passed by me. In the morning, I moved again. I saw a mango tree. I ate mangoes and my bananas from yesterday."

On the second day of moving, I found a home; a certain place where the rebels had cooked. I ran, fast, fast, crossed that place, moved for a long time. I reached a cassava plantation. I kept on moving, moving. I reached a rice garden, but it had been picked already. I finally reached a big road and followed it, followed it, followed it. I saw many gardens, firewood."

Reception by the UPDF

Making contact with the UPDF is a process that carries risks, even though the army is following a policy of encouraging rebels to report. This is especially true when UPDF soldiers are patrolling in the bush or when a child has fled during an attack; in these situations soldiers are on edge and concerned that they might be ambushed by the LRA. When G.O. was hiding after her escape she encountered UPDF soldiers:

"Then I heard some noise. I was thinking to myself, "should I come out or not?" I decided to come out. I saw an old man and boy of about nine years old. I

recognized them, they had been captured earlier. We could not cross the river because it was too high. The old man could not walk much. His feet were so swollen. He walked very slowly. I was walking in the front, the child behind me. We found a place where we could cross the river. We heard voices. The boy said, "they are soldiers. Let's go. They won't shoot at us". I said, "no, if they see us they will shoot". Suddenly, the UPDF saw us and started shooting. I ran. I don't know what happened to the boy and the old man".

Most escapees give themselves up to civilians, often to women, who contact local councillors who in turn organize bringing the children to the army. After R. had hidden by the side of the road:

"I dismantled my gun and hid it in a bag. I walked towards the trading centre and saw an old woman. I reported to her. She took me to a local councillor. He took me to the detach."

When G.O eventually reached an inhabited part of Gulu District she too gave herself up to some women:

"I saw homes. I went to a certain home. There were two women. I asked them for the name of the village. "Paibona in Gulu, very far in Gulu." They invited me to eat. I told them each and every story. They told me to bathe and not to fear, "after the sun comes down, we'll bring you to the military barracks". They feared the UPDF will accuse them of sheltering rebels."

The government's official policy towards captured and escaped LRA child soldiers is to move them quickly from the outlying detach to which they have reported to Gulu Barracks. They are interviewed about their weapons and for intelligence purposes, either in the detach or in the barracks. Officially they remain only a short time at the barracks before being transferred to World Vision or GUSCO for counselling and therapy. It appears that in most cases this is what happens in practice. However, Amnesty International also heard reports that some under 18 year olds were given the option of joining the army and that some recently reported former child soldiers were taken out on operations by army units as guides and intelligence informants. These allegations are denied by the UPDF.

The vast majority of children interviewed by Amnesty International indicated that once they had reported to a detach government soldiers and officials treated them well. A priority for the soldiers is to locate weapons.¹⁷ The children, like 15-year old V., are often preoccupied by food:

¹⁷ This is also shown by the UPDF's own records of reporting or captured members of the LRA which are summarized into those who return with weapons and those who do not.

"The soldiers asked where were our guns. We told them we had thrown them away, but we had to go back with the soldiers to look for the guns. We could not find them. Around 10 pm we went back to the barracks. We were very hungry because we had not eaten anything. In the barracks we were given beans, beef and rice. We stayed four days there and were then brought to Gulu. We were well fed and even given biscuits".

Another girl, 16-year old G., escaped in February 1997 after nearly three years with the LRA:

"I was brought to fight at the border and we were defeated. I managed to escape with my gun. I ran to Ngoromoro Barracks in Kitgum. I was well received there. I stayed for a week. I was interrogated about the battle that had just taken place and was given food. They did not do anything wrong to me. I was taken to Gulu Barracks and after eating I was brought straight to the [counselling] centre."

However, despite official policy in a minority of cases UPDF soldiers have taken a more aggressive line with reporting children, effectively holding them briefly in detention and on occasion ill-treating them. T., a 17-year old boy, reported to a detach in February 1997 after he had spent 11 months with the LRA. The soldiers were suspicious:

"I finally came to a detach and reported to the army there. At first they would not believe me. They thought I was pretending to surrender. So they put me in a pit they had dug in the ground. They left me there for one day. The following day they removed me. Four other people had also reported to the detach. They released them to go home, but they kept me. They said, "we'll keep you here for two weeks. If the detach is not attacked by the LRA in that time, we'll release you to go to the barracks. After two weeks and two days I was transported to Gulu Barracks. After two days there, I was sent to World Vision."

Amnesty International has other evidence of the use of pits as places of detention in UPDF detaches and is concerned that their use may be relatively common, especially in more out-lying areas.

Although complaints from reporting child soldiers are few, it does appear that UPDF troops and associated forces such as Local Defence Units and home guards need to be sensitized to the needs of reporting or captured children. As one girl put it to Amnesty International, somewhat phlegmatically: *"the soldiers were rude. Anyway, I'm used to it. That's how soldiers behave."*

LRA reprisals

The LRA has responded to some escapes, especially to those that involve the loss of weapons, by carrying out reprisal raids on the village from which the escapee comes. As a result some villages are reported to have shunned returning child soldiers for fear of what might come in their wake. Reprisal attacks may be random, such as those on villages in Lamwo County in Kitgum District in January 1997 in which hundreds of villagers were killed, or targeted at individuals and their relatives. J.O., a 15-year old boy from Gulu District, escaped when on an operation in his home area. He ran to his uncle's home:

"I heard later that two boys from my home were captured and beaten because I had escaped. One of the boys was stabbed in the hand and asked to bring the rebels to my parents' home. At my parents' home, they found my mother whom they killed. This was told to me later on. In the home they found four women. The rebels asked who my mother was and they beat up a woman until she showed them which one was my mother. They started beating my mother and asked where my brother was. They found him as well. They beat my mother and my brother with clubs and axes until they died.

Still they were looking for me. They threatened that they'll kill more people if I don't come back. They then set fire to my home. This was told me by a boy who lived near my home. This boy shamed me for what had happened. He told me it was my fault my mother and brother had been killed."

J.O. has not gone back to his village since his escape in October 1996, staying instead in Gulu to try and pick up the threads of his education. While at a counselling centre in Gulu he met the killer of his mother and brother:

"Each time our eyes met, he'd turn his head away. One day he called me to speak with him behind the block. "O., my brother, when I see you I feel unhappy". "What did you do to me?" "I was forced. I killed your mother". Then he began to cry. I told him: "Don't fear me here. I will not tell my relatives you killed my mother". This rebel had not been abducted. His aunt had been killed [by the UPDF] so he joined the rebels to take revenge."

Former child soldiers understand the pressures exerted on others. They, too, have been forced to kill.

Going home

Abducted children who survive their ordeal and reclaim their freedom face an immense struggle to rebuild their lives. They do so against daunting odds. Their families may have

been wiped out or displaced from their homes to trading centres or camps where they are unable to cultivate and are reliant on aid. Back in the village or displaced camp, children are at risk of being abducted again - in May 1997 Amnesty International met several children who had been abducted more than once. Their education has been disrupted.

Many children are haunted psychologically by their ordeal, making social readjustment and reintegration a major challenge. Although NGOs working with children report that their families usually want children to return to them, other members of the community are not always so keen for former child soldiers, many of whom have taken part in appalling violence, to come back and live in their midst. However, a side effect of the increase in child abduction since 1995 may to a degree be greater community acceptance of returning child soldiers. Nearly every community in Gulu and Kitgum Districts has now experienced children being abducted at one time or another.

Physically children tend to be in a bad way when they come out of the bush. Medical examinations show that most children are malnourished at the time of their escape and many are suffering from skin infections and wounds from combat, long-distance walking or carrying heavy weights. Some are physically maimed. They often have gastro-enteritis, scabies and parasitic infections. They may be carrying life-threatening diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

The medical and social consequences for girls may be especially serious. They may experience complications arising from sexually transmitted diseases that can include infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth, all of which carry social implications. Girls can face social rejection and alienation because of the rape and forced sexual relations they are subjected to while with the LRA. In early 1997 ACORD, an INGO whose programs in Gulu have the long-term aim of community peace building and reconstruction, conducted a survey of 36 women who had been raped by LRA or government soldiers. Thirty had been rejected by their husband or husband's relatives. Three had not been directly chased away but their husbands no longer supported them. The men expressed fear that their wives have been infected with HIV/AIDS.

Situation analyses of women, children and adolescents make clear the importance of marriage and having children in Uganda. At the same time, government studies point out that inequalities between wife and husband are embedded in the marriage institution. However, if marriage is based upon a woman's second-class status, the absence of a husband is "a curse". Divorce leads to economic deprivation and single women with children are often stigmatized as prostitutes.¹⁸

¹⁸ pp 119-122, *Equity and vulnerability: a situation analysis of women, adolescents and children in Uganda, 1994* Uganda National Council for Children, The Government of Uganda.

In extreme circumstances socially ostracized women and girls may indeed be forced into prostitution. In Gulu District, the war is reported to have resulted in an increase in the number of women working as prostitutes. The presence of soldiers provides a ready market for sex and women may have no other means to support themselves and their children. Women may also become trapped in precarious and unstable relationships that expose them to abuse. A study by ACORD-Gulu describes girls becoming "camp followers" -- girls who elope with soldiers or who are forced to marry them who remain with the detach even when their partner has died or is transferred.¹⁹

Conclusion: towards an agenda for action

"The flagrant abuse and exploitation of children during armed conflict can and must be eliminated. For too long, we have given ground to spurious claims that the involvement of children in armed conflict is regrettable but inevitable. It is not. Children are regularly caught up in conflict because of conscious and deliberate decisions made by adults."

Report to the UN General Assembly on *The impact of armed conflict on children* by Graça Machel, 26 August 1996.

The human rights situation in northern Uganda has been eclipsed by genocide in Rwanda and war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (former Zaire) and Sudan. Internationally, Uganda is seen as a country that has put its bloody past behind it. In reality, the continuing violence in Gulu and Kitgum Districts points to there being two Ugandas -- a prosperous, politically vibrant south and a devastated north where the past continues in a brutal, insecure and traumatized present.

This report has concentrated on human rights abuses committed against and by children abducted to become LRA child soldiers. The forces that mobilize the LRA appear to be as much a religious reaction to social trauma as a political ideology. Outsiders often describe it as irrational, as a force whose leaders must be mentally disturbed. Whatever the difficulty outsiders have in understanding the motivation of the LRA leadership, what is clear is that it exists as a highly organized and disciplined force. The internal system and structure it has created, and the means used to secure these, are based on a perversion of more widely held attitudes and beliefs.

¹⁹ A survey of causes, effects and impact of armed conflict in Gulu District, ACORD-Gulu, April 1997.

As an armed opposition movement the LRA is bound, like governments, by basic principles of international humanitarian law. In particular, all parties to an internal conflict are required to observe the principles set out in Article 3, common to all four *Geneva Conventions*, which establishes minimum humane standards for situations of armed conflict which are not of an international nature.²⁰ Common Article 3 extends protection to the following:

"Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention or any other cause..."

It prohibits *"at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above mentioned persons:*

- a) violence to life and person, in particular, murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;*
- b) taking of hostages;*
- c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;*
- d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly constituted court.*

This report has documented human rights abuse that breaches most of these provisions. These abuses are war crimes, for which the leadership of the LRA must account.

The LRA exercises power of ownership over abducted children. They are chattels. Girls and women are effectively sexual slaves. Slavery and servitude are prohibited by Article 4 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*:

"No-one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

Protocol II additional to the *Geneva Conventions*, which relates to the protection of the victims of non-international armed conflicts, prohibits both rape and slavery.

²⁰ Uganda acceded to the *Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949* on 18 May 1964 and to the two *Additional Protocols* on 13 March 1991. Protocol II relates to the *Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts*.

The international legal regime for governments is more complex and far-reaching. As states parties, governments are additionally bound by international human rights law. The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* contains articles that specifically deal with the human rights of children. The Convention imposes an obligation on governments to safeguard children's rights to life, survival and development, and to freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion, association and assembly. Other articles safeguard the rights of children not to be subjected to torture or other cruel or degrading treatment or punishment, and their right to liberty.²¹ Slavery, one of the first abuses of human rights to be legislated against under international law, is also banned by the 1926 *Slavery Convention*, to which both Uganda and Sudan are parties.²²

This report has documented the role of Sudan in supporting the LRA, support that has been critical in enabling the LRA to extend its operations in northern Uganda since 1994. The Sudan Government has the power to free children held by the LRA but has instead chosen to help it keep hold of abducted people. In addition, the Sudan army cooperates with the LRA in military operations against the SPLA in which child soldiers are used. The Sudan Government is in clear breach of international human rights treaties and standards, including the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Slavery Convention*.²³ It provides many of the weapons with which human rights abuses have been committed and it allows the LRA use of base camps in Sudan, knowing that the movement consistently and systematically uses abduction and extreme violence against children and other civilians. For all these reasons, the Sudan Government can be held responsible for human rights abuses committed by the LRA.

The serious nature of the human rights abuses committed by the LRA poses a dilemma. If there is to be justice for the people of Gulu, Kitgum and neighbouring districts, the fact that serious crimes have been committed has to be confronted. Yet many of the worst atrocities have been carried out by forcibly abducted children, relatives of those killed or maimed, themselves subjected to horrifying violence. Thousands of children have fled from the LRA, an unknown number of others have been killed in the attempt. Under the terms of Ugandan law (and the international provisions cited above), former members of the LRA could be charged with treason or with serious crimes against the person, including murder and abduction. However, the authorities have recognized

²¹ Uganda ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in September 1990.

²² The *Slavery Convention*, as amended, was acceded to by Sudan on 9 September 1956, making it the first international human rights treaty the newly independent state committed itself to respect.

²³ Sudan ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* on 3 August 1990.

that these crimes are committed by children terrorized and brutalized into submission through the systematic abuse of their basic rights. There does not appear to be a formal amnesty *per se*, rather a decision not to pursue criminal prosecution.

However, there is still a need to confront these human rights abuses, to provide redress to victims and to take measures to prevent them recurring. Without confronting the trauma caused by the violent abuse of human rights it will be difficult to break the cycle of violence existing in northern Uganda. The provision of psycho-social counselling for escaped or captured LRA members is a positive and creative approach to dealing with a complex social and political - as well as psychological - issue. Many children are wracked by guilt and the process aims to help them come to terms with this. For others, it helps them recognize what they have done. Counselling is not a "soft-option". The children have to talk about what they have experienced and while doing this they inevitably re-experience some of what they have been through. In the end, the objective is to invest in the future by rehabilitating children.

Amnesty International has not assessed the quality or cultural appropriateness of the services provided by GUSCO and World Vision. However, in principle the organization endorses the provision of culturally appropriate psycho-social work which is based on understanding and respecting the needs of rural people as part of a process of confronting and dealing with the legacy of human rights abuse.

Three things became clear during Amnesty International's visits to Gulu in May and July 1997. First, the currently available counselling services are over-stretched and are collectively unable to deal properly with the numbers of escaping or captured former soldiers being brought to them by the UPDF. While recognizing the positive role of the Uganda Government in enabling NGOs to work with former LRA soldiers, in Amnesty International's opinion the government is not providing adequate support from its own resources for such programs. Indeed, as far as the organization is aware, the government is relying exclusively on the work of local and international NGOs.

Secondly, the level of internal displacement and disruption of communities in the countryside means that it is currently difficult for organizations seeking to provide psycho-social support to involve fully the wider community of relatives and others in confronting the trauma of violence. Community involvement is necessary. Former child soldiers are part of a community of relatives and neighbours. It is not just they that are traumatized, but the wider community itself. The consequence is that the need for psycho-social support is likely to grow rather than diminish if the level of conflict reduces and more people become accessible. It is also a long-term need and not one amenable to a "quick-fix". Psycho-social support will be necessary in northern Uganda for many years to come.

Thirdly, although community counsellors have been trained in Kitgum District, only limited psycho-social support is available there. Many children from Kitgum are currently brought by the UPDF to the World Vision centre in Gulu. This makes community involvement in their rehabilitation doubly difficult.

Counselling on its own, however, is not a sufficient way of confronting human rights abuse and arriving at a collective sense of justice. The LRA exists in a political context of strong distrust of the NRM government on the part of Acholi and a strong sense of Acholi alienation from the rest of Uganda. It exists in a context where there are those from other parts of Uganda who blame the Acholi for gross human rights violations in the past and, although they may not voice it, believe that the Acholi are only getting what they deserve. However, the children who are being abducted, killed and forced to kill were barely born when the killings in the Luwero triangle and Bushenyi were at their height.

Attempts to restore respect for human rights in northern Uganda will not work unless this alienation is addressed. The historical barriers to this are immense. But there is need for dialogue which confronts the past -- not to remain trapped by it but in order to build the future. There is also a need for redress for past human rights violations.

The restoration of peace and the reduction in human rights violations which is the experience of most of Uganda has been partly built on recognizing the need for dialogue. In Amnesty International's view dialogue means more than just government talking to opposition politicians or the leadership of armed opposition groups. It includes the government building relations of trust with the people of Kitgum and Gulu Districts. It includes investing in opportunities for northerners, particularly in education, training and employment. Dialogue also includes Ugandans from other parts of the country recognizing that improving the human rights situation in the north is a national priority and not just a local concern.

The particular needs of returnees for education and economic empowerment should be identified and targeted. No-one really knows exactly how many children have been abducted. Plans appear to be in train, with UNICEF support, to try and record the numbers and identities of children taken with a view to arriving at some sense of the scale of resource investment needed to help abducted people and their families. In May 1997 the commander of the 4 Division of the UPDF in Gulu suggested that children whose names were not recorded might face criminal charges. While this use of census data does not appear to be official policy, in Amnesty International's opinion if such data became the basis for deciding who should or should not be prosecuted, it would undermine the attempt to have a meaningful census (and therefore efforts to rehabilitate child soldiers). In addition, the reality on the ground is that the scale of disruption in the countryside and the degree of suspicion of the government means that a full census will never be possible.

Using census data to arrive at decisions on who should be made to account before the law for human rights abuses would make the process random. The authorities should give an under-taking that census data will not be used to take decisions on who should or should not be brought to justice.

It is not clear to Amnesty International that the government has a coherent, integrated plan for the rehabilitation of northern Uganda which takes into account both the need for significant investment in order to rebuild the economy and the education system but also the need to address the legacy of human rights abuse and the special needs of abducted children. If such a plan exists, it is not widely understood or recognized in the north. This is a contributory factor in the widespread Acholi belief that the rest of the country cares little for their situation.

In human rights terms, confronting the past to build the future means publicly investigating abuses of human rights by all parties in order that the truth might be known and remedial steps taken. In May 1986 Uganda was a pioneer among African nations when it set up a judicial Commission of Inquiry into human rights violations between independence in 1962 and the coming to power of the NRM in January 1986. The commission, which issued its report in October 1994, heard evidence about human rights violations from people of all parts of the country in an explicit effort to bring out in the open the abuses to which people had been subjected. This was an important part of coming to terms with the past by allowing a public airing of the hidden tragedy of many Ugandan lives. The aim was less to apportion blame -- although those who committed abuses were publicly exposed -- but more to produce recommendations on practical steps to be taken to prevent the repetition of human rights abuse.

However, history did not stop when the current government took power. The time bar on violations considered by the commission meant that it did not investigate abuses committed after 25 January 1986, which caused cynicism among some people from Gulu and Kitgum Districts about the motives of the government in setting up the inquiry. What is more, from a human rights perspective other investigations that have focused on the situation in the north have been disappointing. An inquiry set up in 1988 into alleged human rights violations in Gulu District spluttered in and out of existence until 1991 when it produced a confidential work in progress report and asked government for more funds. Since then it has collapsed.

One of the first acts of Uganda's new parliament elected in 1996 was to set up a parliamentary inquiry by the Sessional Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs *"into all aspects of the war currently taking place in Northern Uganda with a view to bringing it to a speedy end"*. Although the terms of reference did not explicitly mention the abuse of human rights, the committee received a considerable quantity of testimony about abuses. The committee's report paints a devastating picture of the impact of the war on

the north but stops short of making recommendations about human rights, other than to call on the Uganda Human Rights Commission to investigate complaints. So far, therefore, there has not been a focused, public confrontation of the human rights experience of people in northern Uganda during the 11-year long war.

Investigations by the Uganda Human Rights Commission, established in 1996 under the terms of the October 1995 constitution, are indeed vital, and Amnesty International endorses the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs' recommendation. The commission's constitutional status (independent of both government and civil society, it reports to parliament) and its wide-ranging investigative, reporting and educational powers give it real teeth. It is a fledgling institution, and with a wide brief and finite resources it is still working out its agenda and priorities. In Amnesty International's view there is an urgent need for the Human Rights Commission to establish a regional office in Gulu (and other outlying Ugandan towns) in order to make itself accessible to the general public. By being a vigorous, independent monitor of both government and armed opposition in the north, the commission would prove itself a dynamic institution prepared to use the powers at its disposal and would contribute to the process of building trust between government and the people.

Unfortunately, this would still leave several years of human rights abuse publicly unacknowledged. Under the terms of the commission's founding statute, it is barred from investigating human rights abuses that took place before the new constitution came into effect, in other words abuses that took place before October 1995. However, for the alienation of the Acholi people to be overcome, persons who experienced human rights abuses at the hands of both armed opposition and government between 1986 and 1995 must also be able to bring their cases before a public inquiry or truth commission. Amnesty International intends to discuss this recommendation more fully in a report dealing with human rights violations by government forces as well as abuses by the LRA, to be published in late 1997.

As this report has documented, the rape of women and girls in forced marriages within the LRA and rape of villagers during attacks is an integral and formative part of the dynamic of abuse in the north. Rape constitutes a crime against the physical integrity of the victim. Amnesty International believes that this abuse of women's human rights in Uganda deserves special attention, in part because studies by the government suggest that sexual violence in northern Uganda is an extreme manifestation of behaviour which arises from more widely shared attitudes towards women. Addressing rape and sexual abuse in the north might therefore be well addressed as part of a wider national campaign on rape and sexual violence in Uganda, a campaign that brings together government and civil society.

International action

Despite growing international concern about children in armed conflict, the situation of children in northern Uganda has received only limited attention. Amnesty International believes that Ugandan initiatives to improve the human rights of children in the north should be complemented by international awareness, engagement and support.

The abducted children of northern Uganda are a particular and appalling example of the abuse of children in situations of armed conflict. Their experience underlines the need for further protection of children to prevent them being exposed to the dangers and brutalizing effects of involvement in warfare. In August 1996 Graça Machel's study on the impact of armed conflict on children was submitted to the UN General Assembly. This exhaustive report makes valuable and far-reaching general recommendations on the protection of children's rights in armed conflict. One important recommendation is that the UN Secretary General appoints a special representative on children and armed conflict in order that the issue be kept high on the international human rights, peace, security and development agendas. Amnesty International believes that the recommendations of this study should be adopted and implemented by member states as a matter of urgency. To this end, it calls on the Secretary General to appoint a special representative without delay. Once appointed, the special representative should play a coordinating role in ensuring an international response to the plight of children in northern Uganda.

For more than a decade NGOs have campaigned for the minimum age of recruitment (voluntary or compulsory) into armed forces to be raised to 18 years of age. International humanitarian and human rights law presently forbids recruitment into armed forces of children under 15 years of age. The only requirement with regard to children aged 15-18 years is that priority for recruitment should be given to those who are oldest. In response to growing international pressure the UN Commission on Human Rights decided in 1994 to establish a Working Group to draft an optional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflicts. The Working Group has met three times but has so far failed to reach agreement on central issues such as the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities.

There is an argument over culturally appropriate definition often deployed in relation to children which suggests that defining 18 years old as the age of maturity is an inherently Western conceptualization inappropriate to African societies. Amnesty International believes that the particular experience of Uganda, where the government has already adopted an official policy of not recruiting under 18 year olds into the armed forces after public concern about child soldiers in the NRA, could be profitably shared with the Working Group. The organization urges the Uganda Government, and other African states, to become actively involved in the Working Group in order that the optional protocol be seen to incorporate their experience.

Amnesty International believes that the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the monitoring body of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, should help focus international attention on the situation by mounting investigations in northern Uganda. Uganda's initial report on the implementation of its obligations under the Convention is due to be considered by the committee at its meeting in October 1997. Specifically, the committee should assess the impact of war on the rights of children and progress by the Uganda Government to implement measures that discharge the government's positive obligation to protect the rights of children. The committee should come forward with recommendations that identify appropriate measures to ensure the protection of the rights of children..

Amnesty International will be submitting this report to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Sudan. The active involvement of the Sudan Government in arming, supporting and using the LRA as a fighting force alongside and as a substitute for the Sudan army is an example of the Sudan Government's widespread use of proxy forces. It means that the Sudan Government can be held directly responsible for many of the abuses committed by the LRA. The organization is calling on the Special Rapporteur to make the investigation of the abuse of children's human rights a priority in his forthcoming reports to the UN General Assembly and UN Commission on Human Rights.

Amnesty International will also be submitting this report to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women. Enabling women and girl children to lead lives free from actual or the threat of violence, including sexual violence, should be a priority. The organization will be calling on her to investigate the situation in Uganda with a view to identifying practical recommendations on how this can be achieved.

As the human rights arm of the Organization of African Unity, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has a lead responsibility to address the abuse of children's rights on the continent. Amnesty International urges the commission to place the human rights of children, especially those in armed conflict situations, on the agenda of its next meeting in October 1997. Amnesty International believes that the commission should issue a forceful call to African states to ratify the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, so that it will come into force in the near future.

Amnesty International is calling on donor governments to consider how they could support, first, the Uganda Human Rights Commission should it set in motion the creation of an office in Gulu, and, secondly, other initiatives aimed at publicly confronting the legacy of human rights abuses since 1986. These might include a public inquiry or a truth commission.

Summary of recommendations

For the human rights of children in northern Uganda to be protected, there is need for action by the leadership of the LRA, the Sudan Government, the Uganda Government, Ugandan civil society and the international community. The first stage has to be to acknowledge the scale of the problem; the second is for all concerned parties to develop the will to take the difficult political steps required to prevent further human rights abuses and the continued blight of the lives of thousands of children.

Amnesty International makes the following recommendations:

To the LRA

As an armed opposition movement, the LRA is obliged under international law to observe Article 3, common to all four *Geneva Conventions* and Additional Protocol II. To this end, the LRA should:

- end all forcible abduction of children and release all children currently held as captives or child-soldiers;
- put a stop to rape, sexual abuse and other forms of torture or ill-treatment;
- cease cruel or degrading punishment;
- end deliberate and arbitrary killings.

In addition, the LRA should:

- make a public commitment to observing the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*;
- allow the International Committee of the Red Cross access to places where children and other abducted persons are being held.

To the Sudan Government

The Sudan Government has the power to free children abducted by the LRA. Its support and cooperation mean that it can be held responsible for human rights abuses carried out by the movement. In the light of this, the Sudan Government should:

- honour its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, including the *UN Convention on the Rights of Child* and the *Slavery Convention*, by taking action to prevent human rights abuses, including the forcible abduction of children;
- ensure that all non-governmental entities within the borders of Sudan over which the government has power, including the LRA, fully observe Article 3, common to all four *Geneva Conventions*;
- allow the International Committee of the Red Cross access to the Sudan, including access to LRA camps in the country;
- cease providing arms, supplies and bases to the LRA until it has ceased abusing human rights;
- cease joint military operations with the LRA involving child soldiers;
- support measures to increase the protection of children from abuse in situations of armed conflict, including the draft optional protocol to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* aimed at raising the minimum age of recruitment of soldiers.

To the Uganda Government

Under international law the state has the main responsibility to ensure the protection of human rights. While the LRA may be responsible for widespread human rights abuses in northern Uganda, violations by government forces are also taking place. The government is obliged under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* to take positive steps to protect the human rights of children. To this end, the Uganda Government should:

- take action to prevent human rights violations by UPDF soldiers, police and other state actors. This should include the investigation of reports of human rights violations by government forces and action to bring to justice alleged violators;
- ensure that persons who report human rights abuses by either government forces or the LRA are protected from retaliation;
- undertake not to use census data on abducted persons for defining whether captured or reporting former LRA members face criminal charges;
- ensure that captured or reporting former child soldiers are well-treated, are not held for long periods in detaches or barracks and are not used in military operations;
- facilitate and resource the expansion of community-orientated psycho-social counselling services;

- in conjunction with concerned NGOs, identify the long-term needs of traumatized children and communities and implement plans for these to be met;
- develop a long-term plan for conflict resolution and rehabilitation in northern Uganda which places emphasis on establishing respect for human rights and confronting the legacy of past human rights abuse;
- initiate and respond to dialogue with the people of Gulu and Kitgum concerning the protection of human rights;
- establish a public inquiry or truth commission to hear evidence of human rights abuses by all parties since January 1986;
- ensure that the Uganda Human Rights Commission has sufficient resources to open an investigatory office in Gulu;
- facilitate and support the work of human rights NGOs in the war-affected parts of northern Uganda;
- in coordination with concerned NGOs and other elements of civil society, develop a national campaign against rape and sexual violence;
- invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Sudan to visit Uganda in order to investigate the abuse of children's human rights by the LRA;
- invite the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women to visit Uganda in order to investigate and report on the situation of women and girl-children in the north;
- implement the provisions of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform of Action related to women and armed conflict;
- implement the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- support measures to increase the protection of children from abuse in situations of armed conflict, including the draft optional protocol to the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* aimed at raising the minimum age of recruitment of soldiers.

To civil society

NGOs, churches, the media can play a critical role in breaking down the perceived alienation of northern Uganda. Contributing to rebuilding respect for human rights could be an important part of this. Amnesty International makes the following suggestions:

- develop programs of action within a framework that identifies the human and child rights situation in northern Uganda as an issue for all Ugandans and not just those from the north;
- monitor and expose the abuse of human rights by all parties in the north of Uganda;

- support and publicize, as appropriate, the work of human rights and child-orientated NGOs in northern Uganda;
- monitor the Uganda Government's progress in fulfilling its international obligations to protect children in northern Uganda;
- develop a national campaign against rape and sexual violence;
- encourage the Uganda Human Rights Commission to open an investigatory office in Gulu;
- campaign for an inquiry or truth commission into human rights abuses in northern Uganda since January 1986.

To the Uganda Human Rights Commission

The Uganda Human Rights Commission has strong powers, guaranteed in the constitution, to investigate reports of human rights abuses. It is also charged with developing a continuing program of education and information to enhance respect of human rights. As the commission defines its profile in the public eye, its preparedness to protect the situation of human rights in the north may become a defining issue for it. It is uniquely placed to demonstrate the role of proactive human rights work in building confidence between the people and the state. In this light, Amnesty International urges it to:

- expand its proactive investigation of human rights abuses in northern Uganda since October 1995;
- make itself accessible to the people of the north by opening an investigatory office in Gulu.

To the international community

Member states of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity and the human rights structures created by those bodies should be aware that the human rights situation in the on-going war in northern Uganda is grave. Uganda's traumatic experience of human rights abuse has not ended. The abuse of the human rights of children in particular points up the need for strong international measures to protect children in armed conflicts. In the light of this Amnesty international is calling:

- on the UN Secretary General to respond to the Machel report on the impact of armed conflict on children by appointing a special representative on children and armed conflict;
- on the Committee on the Rights of the Child to mount an investigation in northern Uganda on the impact of war on the human rights of children and on the progress of the Uganda Government in implementing in practice its positive

obligations under the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* to protect the rights of children. The committee should come forward with practical proposals to ensure the protection of the rights of children;

- on the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Sudan to make the investigation of the abuse of children's human rights a priority;
- on the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women to investigate and report on the situation of women and girl-children in northern Uganda;
- on the OAU's African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to place the human rights of children on the agenda of its next meeting in October 1997 and to issue a call for African governments to ratify the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*;
- on donor governments to support initiatives to resolve conflict and rehabilitate northern Uganda that place emphasis on establishing respect for human rights and confronting the legacy of human rights abuses by all parties;
- on governments to support measures to increase the protection of children from abuse in situations of armed conflict, including supporting the draft optional protocol to the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* aimed at raising the minimum age of recruitment of soldiers.