

EMBARGOED FOR 1200 HRS GMT 18 SEPTEMBER 1997

Uganda: Stolen children, stolen lives

LONDON -- Up to 8,000 children have been abducted and forced through the most brutal methods imaginable to become child soldiers and virtual slaves in northern Uganda, Amnesty International said today. The children, some as young as 11-years-old, have been seized over the past three years by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and forced to fight the Ugandan army.

Children abducted by the LRA are subjected to a regime of extreme and arbitrary violence. Those caught trying to escape are killed or tortured and both boys and girls are brutalized by being made to kill other children. Abducted children are "owned" by LRA commanders, with girls allocated to commanders in forced "marriages" and effectively held as sexual slaves. All children are sent to fight.

"The LRA's deliberate and systematic abduction of thousands of children to be soldiers is destroying a generation," said Dr Andrew Mawson, Amnesty International's Researcher on East Africa. "Children are being murdered and traumatized and the destruction of these young lives will haunt Uganda for years".

The Sudan government gives the LRA arms and base camps in Sudanese territory. They use the LRA as a militia group to fight their own internal rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) -- and to destabilize Uganda in retaliation for Ugandan support for the SPLA. Children attempting to escape have been caught by the Sudan army and handed back to the LRA.

"The Sudanese authorities could intervene to save children. Instead, they have sunk to new depths of cynicism about human rights by tolerating the killing and torture of children as they fight their wars by proxy. Their active use and support of the LRA makes them responsible for abuses by the organization," Dr Mawson said.

Uganda is widely regarded as a stable and increasingly influential regional power, surrounded by neighbouring states in varying degrees of internal turmoil. However, there has been war in northern Uganda for the past 11 years. Amnesty International's report describes how the north is devastated, with over 200,000 internally displaced people living in camps around army bases.

The LRA stepped up child-abduction in 1994, often targeting schools. It is estimated that around 90% of LRA soldiers are abducted children, and widely believed that the group could not survive militarily without them.

Joseph Kony, the LRA leader who claims to be acting under divine instruction, has not presented a political program readily understandable to outsiders, beyond calling for Uganda to be ruled according to the biblical Ten Commandments.

LRA commanders have laid down edicts to local villages including no riding bicycles, no habitation near roads and no keeping pigs -- in apparent deference to their Sudanese arms-suppliers. Punishments are harsh -- in October 1996, "J", a girl soldier, witnessed a man being killed for riding a bicycle. LRA soldiers cut off both his feet and forced his wife to eat one or be killed.

According to Amnesty International's evidence, LRA commanders force children to take part in the ritualized killing of others soon after they are seized. The intention appears to be to break down resistance to the LRA, destroy taboos about killing, implicate children in criminal acts and generally to terrorize them. Three boys were ordered to use an axe blow each to kill another child in August 1996. In October 1996, a group of girls was forced to kill another girl who had tried to escape, before being caned 15 times themselves as a warning. The rape of girls in "forced marriages" is fundamental to the organization of the LRA. They are allocated to senior soldiers as rewards and incentives.

Hundreds of children have managed to escape, despite being pursued by the LRA who sometimes exact revenge on their families and villages. For this reason some communities have been reluctant to welcome children back. Amnesty International's report quotes a boy whose family was killed after he fled describing how he later met and forgave the boy who did the killing. The children were united by the horror of what they had experienced.

"Even when they have managed to escape, children continue to suffer," Dr Mawson said. "Reintegration is difficult, with children haunted psychologically and facing an immense struggle to rebuild shattered lives. The medical and social consequences are particularly bad for girls. Nearly 100% are suffering from a sexually transmitted disease, and face the social stigma of rape."

One ray of hope for abducted children is the work done by World Vision Uganda and Gulu Support for Children Organization (GUSCO). These two organizations have set up programs for psycho-social counselling and therapy, to help the children come to terms with the violence to which they have been subjected and which they have perpetrated. However, on its own their work will not break the cycle of violence which exists in northern Uganda, Dr Mawson added.

Amnesty International's report condemns the LRA's human rights abuses and calls on the movement to release all children held as captives or child soldiers. It calls on the international community to improve measures to protect children in armed conflict and to put pressure on Sudan to end its support of the LRA. "The Sudanese government is clearly acting in breach of international human rights standards, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Slavery Convention," Dr Mawson said. "The government must be held accountable for wrecking thousands of children's lives."

Human rights violations by Ugandan government forces are not detailed in the report, which focuses on children and the LRA. However, violations by government forces take place. During a field visit to northern Uganda in May 1997, Amnesty International investigators discovered a man held in a pit by soldiers who had melted a plastic water container over his body. The organization believes that the Uganda government should demonstrate its concern about the continuing abuse of human rights in the north by setting up an inquiry into abuses by all parties in the 11-year war.
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**For more information, to arrange an interview or receive a copy of the report, please call:
Press Office, Amnesty International Press Office: (44) 171 413 5729/5566**

Today, Human Rights Watch also issue a report, *The Scars of Death: children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*. For information, call: (1) 212 972 8400/(44) 171 713 1995

Also today, Ugandan NGOs and UNICEF Kampala will be launching a program of action to highlight the issue. For information, call the NGO coordinator: (256) 41 245 526