

Uganda

Children bear the brunt of Uganda's 19-year conflict

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'Night commuters' in northern Uganda's conflict-affected Kitgum District make their nightly journey into the main town of Kitgum.



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Some 'night commuters' will spend the night in shelter facilities provided by schools, hospitals and churches; others will sleep in open veranda areas.

By Kun Li

KAMPALA, Uganda, 23 March 2005 - As the conflict in northern Uganda carries onto its 19th year, violence, displacement and poverty continue to exacerbate an already strained humanitarian situation.

The conflict has displaced approximately 1.4 million people in the north - 80 per cent of them children and women - as the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) seeks to overthrow the Ugandan government. With an acute malnutrition rate hovering near 20 per cent, and a similar percentage of children not attending school, the rights of children are being seriously violated in the conflict-affected districts.

Each evening, with the threat of attacks and abductions by the LRA lurking, approximately 30,000 children leave home to seek safety in the urban centres. This phenomenon of "night commuting" occurs primarily in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader.

"Recently, I visited one 'night commuter' shelter site in Kitgum," said UNICEF Communication Officer in Uganda, Chulho Hyun.

"We met a 7-year-old child who was walking into town on that particular night. We asked him why he walks on a nightly basis away from his family. He said that he honestly didn't know, that he was only walking because his parents had told him it would be safer to sleep away from home."

"He was speaking as if this was a perfectly normal routine in his life," remarked Mr. Hyun. "It was an indication of how after 19 years of conflict, an entire generation of Uganda's children has been lost, with another on the verge of being lost."

Since 1986, more than 20,000 children have been abducted by the LRA, and up to 12,000 since June 2002. The abducted children are used as combatants or sex slaves.

Last year, 3,500 formerly abducted children passed through civilian reception centres run by UNICEF and other non-governmental organizations in the districts. The centres are designed to provide basic health care and psychosocial counselling. They also aid in the crucial process of tracing family members for formerly abducted children.

"I had the opportunity to meet with an abducted girl at one reception centre in Kitgum. She said that while held captive by the LRA, one of the rebel commanders attempted to rape her," recalled Mr. Hyun. "However, she was so young that the heinous act was physically not possible. She then was tied to a tree with a knife at her neck, until another commander



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A four-year-old child plays with toys inside the Kitgum Concerned Women's Association for formerly abducted children in Kitgum, Uganda. The child's mother, who gave birth to him after being abducted by LRA rebels, is presumed to be in captivity still.

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Audio

23 March 2005:

UNICEF Communication Officer in Uganda, Chulho Hyun, describes his recent encounters with two Ugandan children: one a young "night commuter" and the other a girl formerly abducted by the LRA.

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