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Uganda: Justice system fails victims of sexual violence

Amnesty International today accused the criminal justice system in northern Uganda of ignoring, denying and tacitly condoning violence against women and girls, while it protects suspected perpetrators.

The accusation came as the organization issued a new report detailing individual cases of sexual abuse against women and girls in northern Uganda.

"The utter lack of justice faced by women and girls who are the victims of sexual violence requires the immediate attention of the Ugandan government and the international community," said Godfrey Odongo, Amnesty International's researcher in Kampala.

"The vast majority of cases of violence against women are not reported to the police because most victims have lost hope in getting any kind of justice."

Amnesty International researchers visited five districts in northern Uganda -- Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum, Pader and Lira -- and spoke to scores of women, girls and their families about the discrimination they suffered while trying to access justice, and the culture of impunity around cases of rape, domestic violence, assault and other forms of violence against women.

"Violence against women is endemic throughout Uganda," said Odongo. "But violence against women in northern Uganda in particular has been exacerbated by the effects of 21 years of brutal conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army and government forces -- and the situation remains grim, despite the recent cessation of hostilities."

Forms of violence against women and girls reported to Amnesty International researchers include rape, child sexual abuse and physical assault -- perpetrated especially in camps for the internally displaced, where most of the population of northern Uganda still live.

"The horrific violence committed during the many years of conflict in northern Uganda continues to aggravate discrimination against women and girls in the area today," said Odongo. "And adding insult to injury, the justice system operating in northern Uganda is grossly inadequate in ensuring the protection of these women and girls -- almost always allowing the perpetrators to walk free."

Victims told Amnesty International that the range of perpetrators include government forces, law enforcement officers, official authorities, local council leaders, spouses and relatives. Police are reluctant to investigate cases involving soldiers, while the Ugandan law does not recognize marital rape as a criminal offence -- mainly due to the presumption that consent to sexual intercourse is given by the act of marriage.

Inadequacy of police services compound the problem. Often, there are no police officers to report cases to, as police stations are few and far between in northern Uganda. Furthermore, police demand money to investigate cases and arrest and transport suspects. Victims are also often asked to pay costs such as providing lunch for police during the investigation, or to feed the suspect while he is detained.

Background information

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The conflict in northern Uganda was characterized by sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls by the LRA and government forces. UNICEF estimates that more than 32,000 children were abducted by the LRA between 1986 and 2002 and used as child combatants and sex slaves. Ugandan government forces also committed mass rapes.

The nature and scale of the crimes resulted in the International Criminal Court (ICC) issuing indictments and arrest warrants against senior LRA commanders for crimes against humanity, including sexual enslavement, rape, mutilation and abduction of girls.

To see a full copy of the report *Uganda: Doubly traumatized -- lack of access to justice for female victims of sexual and gender-based violence in northern Uganda*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf590052007>

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