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## **Central Africa: Governments and UN must join forces to secure release of kidnapped women and children**

Amnesty International today called on the UN and governments in Central Africa to take immediate action to secure the release of more than 350 men, women and children thought to have been abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in recent weeks.

The abductions took place in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Southern Sudan while the LRA was ostensibly preparing to sign a peace agreement with the Ugandan government meant to end more than 20 years of a civil war that has been characterised by war crimes, including abductions and widespread unlawful killings and mutilation of non-combatants.

“As in Uganda, these people – including scores of women and children – are likely to be used as child combatants and sex slaves, and yet none of the governments in the region have done anything to try to secure their release,” said Amnesty International.

“The governments of Sudan, the CAR and the DRC – with the assistance of the UN – must join forces to secure the safety and release of those kidnapped immediately and bring those responsible to justice.”

Women and girls kidnapped by the LRA in the past have been used as sex slaves, while boys and men have been forced into combat and forced to commit atrocities, as well as used as porters to carry looted property.

The most recent abductions took place near Obo, a town on the south eastern corner of the CAR, bordering the DRC and Sudan.

The LRA appears to have moved their operations to southern CAR in a bid to avoid the arrest and transfer of their senior commanders to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, where they are wanted on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Recent information suggests that the fighters have since crossed into the DRC, taking the abductees with them.

Several LRA leaders were charged by the International Criminal Court in 2005 with large scale abductions and other crimes against humanity and war crimes.

There are currently five security forces operating in the CAR – the CAR Army, EU forces (EUFOR), UN forces (MINURCAT), multinational Central African forces (FOMUC – Force Multinationale en Centrafrique) and French government forces.

Amnesty International is calling on the UN and other forces operating in the area – including UNMIS in Southern Sudan, and MONUC in the DRC – to assist the regional governments to secure the release of those kidnapped.

The organization also called on international peace-keeping and government forces in the region to cooperate to arrest and surrender any person subject to an ICC arrest warrant, including leaders of the LRA.