

Amnesty International

Solidarity Action for Universal Rights

Uganda

Stop child abductions for slave soldiering

(Pic)

"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."

Abduction & slavery

Amnesty International is concerned at the abduction of children in northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition movement fighting the Ugandan Government. Over the last twelve years, the LRA has abducted more than 12,000 children from northern Uganda and forced them to become child soldiers and slaves:

"They (rebels) arrested me and started beating me terribly. They wanted me to walk them to their home but I was refusing. Finally, I walked them to my home. There, they killed my mother." -14 year old girl abducted in 1997

Brutality and terror

Ninety per cent of the LRA are children, mostly aged between thirteen and sixteen. Young boys and girls are kept and forced to work in conditions so appalling that it amounts to slavery. The abducted children are systematically terrorised and brutalised. Captured children are forced to kill very soon after their abduction, which traumatises them, implicates them in criminal acts, and makes them fear being shunned should they manage to escape back to their community. If a child is caught trying to escape, other children are often forced to kill them:

"One time there were two boys, 12 and 13, who had been captured. They tried to escape but failed. The rebels got them and tied them. When we reached a certain point, they called all of us. We told them we will not try to escape. But L. (the Commander) said we should be caned. They started caning all of us. Two rebels caning one girl. Once they finished, they took us aside. When they caned me, I fainted. I could not see anything. Then they took the two boys to the bush and told us to kill them. They picked two girls. They had to beat the boys until they were dead. Then with the bayonet of the gun, they checked whether they were dead and they walked on them. L. said "I know you are thinking the same thing as these boys. We'll do the same thing to you if you try to escape." - 17 year old girl

War

Both girl and boy children are used as soldiers. They are deployed in various conflict situations including attacking Ugandan villages, fighting the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and fighting in Sudan alongside the Sudan army which is waging a war against the armed opposition group the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

Amnesty International has interviewed many children who managed to escape from the LRA. Apart from those who escaped soon after their abduction, all the children had taken part in military operations in Uganda or Sudan.

Abducted Children: Soldiers and Slaves

The senior commanders of the LRA have such power over the children that they are effectively slaves. Commanders have the power to kill and to impose physical punishment and hard labour:

"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 the abductees died of hunger and thirst." - 14 year old girl abducted in 1997

"During the day, I used to dig, cook, wash. I was also trained for soldier." - 16 year old girl, abducted when she was 13

Conditions inhuman and life-threatening

In addition to being forced to fight abducted children also have to cook, clean and fetch water and food, often walking very long distances with little water or food to sustain them. The conditions they are forced to work under are inhuman and often life-threatening.

"In the morning, after getting 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 lunch. They made you carry more heavy luggage. If you could not carry the luggage, they'll kill you. I saw many people getting killed."

Sexual abuse

For girls, there is additional abuse - they are forced into what the children call 'marriage' to senior LRA soldiers or are 'given' as a sexual reward for boy soldiers who are obedient.

"From 13 onwards, we were all given as wives. There was no marriage ceremony. But if your refuse to marry, you're killed."

"Some men beat their wives. Some men killed them too. I saw one wife being killed by her husband." - 15 year old girl

"There was this girl.....The husband wants her to go and sleep with him. She refused, but she was beaten up terribly in the morning." - 15 year old girl

Nearly 100% of escaped girls and women have sexually transmitted diseases.

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.'

The Lord's Resistance Army - Violating International Humanitarian Law

The LRA specifically violates Article 4 (3) (C) under Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 - 'Children who have not attained the age of 15 years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or group nor allowed to take part in hostilities.' This protocol relates to the protection of victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.

The Sudan Government - Providing Military Support to the LRA

Since 1994, the Sudan government has given the LRA military and logistical support. It provides many weapons and bases where the abducted children are given training. The Sudan government supports the LRA in this way because it 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 for the human rights abuses committed by the LRA. In 1998 they allowed the UN to repatriate around 20 children who had escaped from the LRA inside Sudan. But they have not taken any truly decisive action and continue to actively assist the LRA with arms and bases. The Sudan government is in breach of international human rights treaties and standards, including the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Slavery Convention*.

The Ugandan Government - Protecting Children?

Thirteen years of war have taken a heavy toll on the civilian population of Northern Uganda. The ongoing violence which is often directly aimed at the civilians has resulted in mass displacement. Approximately 400,000 people, around 50% of the population of the two districts worst affected, are internally displaced. Most of these people are contained in camps, set up by the government. However, food and security are not guaranteed in the camps.

Bleak future

Children who do manage to escape from the LRA face a bleak future. The Ugandan Government has a policy of reintegration rather than punishment for abducted children who manage to escape from the LRA. This is a positive move, and is sensitive towards the fact that although the children have often committed gross human rights abuses themselves, they are first and foremost victims. Most of the children are interviewed at the Gulu Barracks before being transferred to the non-governmental organisations World Vision or GUSCO for counselling and therapy. However, once they have passed through the centres, many have to return to the camps where they are at risk of being abducted again. In addition, the severe disruption in Northern Uganda means that schooling, training and employment opportunities are few. The education system has been destroyed because schools and teachers have been specific targets of the violence. The Ugandan Government has so far failed to guarantee the protection of people in the camps from human rights abuses. The government should develop a long-term plan for conflict resolution and rehabilitation in Northern Uganda that places emphasis on establishing respect for human rights, confronting the legacy of past human rights abuse and includes education and training opportunities for children and young people.

World-wide Increase In Use Of Child Soldiers

The use of child soldiers by the Lord's Resistance Army is part of an increasing worldwide pattern of reliance by states and non-governmental entities on underage combatants. At least 300,000 under-18s are currently engaged in active combat. The increased use of child soldiers is partly due to the development of lightweight automatic weapons, simple enough for a child of ten to operate. The majority of child soldiers are between 15 and 18 and therefore not illegal under current international law. Fifteen is the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and the Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Stop recruitment of under 18's

International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

In June 1998 a coalition of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including Amnesty International was launched. The Coalition was formed because the United Nations has so far failed to agree a prohibition on keeping children out of armed forces. The current minimum age is only 15 years. The Coalition's primary objectives are the adoption of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibiting the military recruitment and use in armed conflict of any person younger than 18, and the recognition and enforcement of this standard by all armed forces and groups, both governmental and non-governmental. Visit the Coalition website at <www.child-soldiers.org>

No involvement in conflict for under 18's

1999 International Labour Conference - A Chance for Change

At its annual session in June 1998, the International Labour Conference (ILC) considered the first draft of the texts of the new ILO Proposed Convention and Recommendation concerning the prohibition and immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labour. The question of the use of children as soldiers being one of the worst forms of child labour was *not* included in the first draft of the Convention. Amnesty International, in close cooperation with the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, is campaigning for the **explicit inclusion of child soldiering** as one of the worst abuses of child labour in the Proposed ILO Convention and Recommendation. These texts have since been revised by the ILO in the light of discussions at the 86th session, and comments have been invited from governments (in consultation with trade unions and employers associations) on the revised texts, with a view to finalisation and adoption at the 87th session of the Conference which will take place in Geneva in June 1999. Inclusion would automatically mean that the involvement of persons under the age of 18 in the activities specified would be prohibited. *International pressure will help ensure that child soldiering is included in the Convention.*

What You Can Do:

The Sudan Government has the power to free the children abducted by the LRA.

- T** Write to the **Sudan Government** calling for them to intervene to free child soldiers who are being held captive by the LRA and to cease any joint military operations with the LRA which involves the use of child soldiers.

Write to:

Lieutenant-General Omar
 President and Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces
 Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir
 People's Palace
 PO Box 281
 Khartoum
 Sudan

Address letters to: Your Excellency

Mr Mustafa Osman Ismail
 Minister of Foreign Affairs
 Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 PO Box 873
 Khartoum
 Sudan

Address letters to: Dear Minister

Under International law the State has the main responsibility to ensure the protection of human rights of its civilians. Write to the **Ugandan Government** calling for them to:

- T** Take effective action to prevent the abduction of children by the LRA.
- T** Take strong practical measures to safeguard the children of northern Uganda from the severe human rights abuses which they suffer at the hands of the LRA.
- T** Ensure that the Government forces take decisive action to protect the human rights of people in northern Uganda.
- T** Provide adequate education and training opportunities which the children can use to build a brighter future for themselves.

Write to:

Mr Yoweri K Museveni
 President of the Republic
 Office of the President
 Parliament Buildings
 PO Box 7108
 Kampala
 Uganda

Address your letters to: Dear President

Brigadier Eriya Kategaya
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Box 7048
Kampala
Uganda

Address your letters to: Dear Deputy Prime Minister

Action around the 1999 International Labour Conference

- T Please lobby your Country Representative to the 87th session of the International Labour Conference to support the inclusion of **child soldiering** as one of the worst abuses of child labour in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Proposed Convention and Recommendation concerning the prohibition and immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labour.

- T Group members can organize a **letter-writing** action to all or selected **parliamentarians**, asking them to raise AI's recommendations with the government in the context of asking what action the government will take at the ILC.

- T Meet with representatives of your national trade union bodies and ask them to support AI's recommendations at the next International Labour Conference (ILC), 1- 18 June 1999 in Geneva.