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Uganda: Child soldiers at centre of mounting humanitarian crisis



With an armed rebellion threatening to undermine Uganda's progress to economic development, child soldiers emerge as central figures amid deadly violence and growing humanitarian emergency.

The bustling capital city of Kampala, located in the south, exemplifies Uganda's transformation from a country plagued by economic decay to prosperity. With a revitalized GDP growth of more than 8% over the past three years, Uganda comes across as a compelling story of hope for other African nations. However, an armed insurgency in northern and eastern Uganda has created one of Africa's largest displaced populations.

The 18-year old rebellion of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the government has forced over 1.6 million Ugandans - half of them children - to flee to squalid and overcrowded camps in order to escape wanton attacks and killings. The number of internally displaced persons has almost tripled since 2002. Attacks on soft civilian targets continue, carried out by child soldiers much younger than their victims.

The most disturbing aspect of this humanitarian crisis is the fact that this is a war fought by children on children - minors make up almost 90% of the LRA's soldiers. Some recruits are as young as eight and are inducted through raids on villages. They are brutalized and forced to commit atrocities on fellow abductees and even siblings. Those who attempt to escape are killed. For those living in a state of constant fear, violence becomes a way of life and the psychological trauma is incalculable. Fearing abduction, streams of children, often with mothers in tow, leave their homes every night and walk for hours from surrounding villages to reach the relative safety of major towns, only to trek their way home in the first light. Some 40,000 "night commuters" sleep under verandas, in schools, hospital courtyards or bus parking places to evade the snare of the LRA.

Since the rebellion began in the 1980s, some 30,000 children have been abducted to work as child soldiers and porters, or to serve as "wives" of rebels and bear their children. These numbers have soared, with 10,000 children abducted in the past 18 months alone.

Despite the gravity of the humanitarian situation, less than 10% of the \$130 million requested by the humanitarian community for 2004 has been received. In some areas, malnutrition rates as high as 30% have been recorded among children. Fear of rebel attacks badly hit the planting season for 2004, threatening to aggravate the already severe food shortages in the coming months. Health facilities barely function as stocks run out and health workers flee to escape LRA attacks.

Even as a peace process makes significant progress in neighbouring Sudan, the peace in Uganda is made tenuous by these developments. The “success story” that Uganda represents in the minds of the world’s economic policy makers presents a jarring contrast with the tragedy of conflict in the north and east that shows no signs of abating.

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