



## **BACKGROUND HISTORY OF NORTHERN UGANDA**

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To give a glimpse into the background of the political history of N. Uganda, the U.N. Secretary of Humanitarian Affairs has called it “the biggest neglected humanitarian crisis in the world”. For the last 2 decades, a rebel militia known as The Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, has terrorized the entire region of Northern Uganda. The LRA, with no seemingly clear agenda, has abducted tens of thousands of children as soldiers and sex slaves, and have forced children to cut off the ears, nose, lips and limbs of innocent civilians. In response to brutal massacres by the LRA in 1997, the Ugandan government regrouped almost the entire population (1.6 million people, or 90% of the population) of the Northern Districts into approximately 200 Internally Displaced Persons Camps (IDP camps). The camps were formed to provide security from the LRA, but unfortunately demolished the entire social and economic structure of the North. Away from their land, many were unable to farm as a consequence leaving almost the entire population of IDP camp residents dependent on external assistance such as the World Food Program. The North has suffered from low productivity, limited business expansion and mismanagement, and gender based violence as well as gender based disparity (limited access to education for women). Many children have been abducted from the camps and because of the rising insecurity of the camps, a phenomenon known as the “night commuters” began, and up to 19,000 children set off every night walking for hours from the camps to reach the nearest town for safety. (It has been documented that some night commuters have traveled up to 25 km a night). In a report “War Affected Children and Youth in Northern Uganda”, a study showed that in the 4 main northern districts, 31% of families had children abducted, 5% had children mutilated, and 45% witnessed the killing of a family member. To put this into perspective, 42 children a week were being abducted and 50% of them were under the age of 15. A study by MSF also showed that 25.5% of children in the camps have severe psychological distress.

The LRA have been settled in Southern Sudan but their supply of food and military are in N. Uganda, therefore when supplies are limited, they raid the camps in the North, and ambush convoys on the roads. In 2002, Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA ordered the other leaders to destroy Catholic missions and kill priests, missionaries and nuns. To counter this, “Operation Iron Fist” allowed the Ugandan Army (UPDF) to pursue LRA across the Sudanese border. Although this weakened the LRA, it also led to more raids on camps and more abduction of children into their army. The rebels often move in big groups of at least 100 and are heavily armed. Landmines are also used by the LRA.

Having untrained militias protect the IDP camps has been counter productive as the government has also been guilty of committing violations on the people in the camps, leaving the camps increasingly vulnerable. Water has been a big issue as it takes hours to collect and there are few boreholes. Sanitation is appalling and one toilet is shared by as many as 200 residents, leaving many to rely on the bushes near the water sources. The contaminated water supply has led to cholera outbreaks and when rainy season comes, it will be an increasing

worry. Medical aid is scarce in camps and malnutrition, Tuberculosis, and malaria are also rampant.

Another problem in the camps has been food security because of fear of abduction/killing, there is enormous dependence on food aid for survival. In Oct 2004, WFP and UNICEF nutritional surveys showed that 7-21% of kids were severely malnourished. The HIV sero prevalence is also two times the national average in the camps.

Peace talks between President Museveni and LRA leaders have been ongoing since 1994. An Amnesty Process became active, allowing rebels who escape the LRA to be granted amnesty and be offered full reintegration and compensation packages. 6000 rebels have come out from the bush through this program and it is supported by about 65% of Northern Ugandans. Unfortunately it has also led to some resentment as villagers are often living next to a rebel who may have been responsible for their child being abducted, and yet rebels are receiving full compensation for coming forth. In Oct 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted Joseph Kony and 4 other LRA leaders. After this, the LRA began targeting International and National relief organizations, limiting humanitarian access. The murders of humanitarian workers also limited the presence of other NGO's. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates that between Jan to July 2005, 26000 excess deaths were due to conflict. For child soldiers who were abducted, it has been challenging for them to be re-integrated into society because of psychological trauma. There has been no humanitarian psychological support in the camps.

A study by Fafu Institute of Applied Studies showed that 9% of men and 1% of women in camps have secondary school education. 84% of women in camps are illiterate. There is little access to crop land and though 85% of residents are receiving food aid, they are only receiving about 65% of daily requirements, leaving malnutrition high. Also, crime remains high and a third of people hear daily gunshots. One third of children over 10 have lost a parent and 9% of children in camps are orphans. Extremely poor kids have been seen going to school in WFP sacks, and WFP estimates that 66% of the population of the N. Districts is under 15. The youth have been forced to work where attacks are common, such as collecting firewood and collecting water. The youth are by far the most vulnerable to LRA attacks and abductions and also by UPDF forces for suspected collaboration with the LRA.

On a positive side, the North Ugandan Peace Initiative has worked on mixing groups of LRA and youth to make bricks, softening the negative attitude towards returnees within the camps. For Agoro camps, after massacres occurred, a youth formed association called Agoro Community Development Association formed to provide coffins and have funeral ceremonies for families. ACDA is now one of the most active local NGO in Kitgum, and provides education and vocational training in camps.

According to Human Rights Watch, Uganda was a leading African country for HIV/AIDS prevention programs through positive behavior changes and political leadership as well as condoms and HIV testing. Unfortunately in a shift, orchestrated and funded by the US government, Uganda began only focusing on abstinence campaigns. The US is the largest donor to HIV/AIDS in Uganda, and they have been thus exporting their abstinence programs that have proven completely ineffective in the US, according to studies. Objective health information has been vetoed and President Museveni has made many anti condom statements. In 2004, school teachers were influenced to teach abstinence and the Ministry of Health issued a recall of all free government condoms because of "failed quality control tests".

Groups denying the effectiveness of condoms have received government support while other groups fear teaching objective material may blacklist them. Women are at much greater risk for acquiring HIV/AIDS because of infidelity, domestic violence and rape. Abstinence only programs fail to account that AIDS is a disease of poverty and many young girls are trading sex for school fees. A million children here in Uganda have been orphaned by AIDS, many at high risk for acquiring the virus themselves. In 2002, 6 girls were infected for every boy (Makerere University of Public Health Study). ¼ Ugandans also thought that the virus was transmitted by mosquitoes. (Many of the HIV stats were taken from the document: The Less They Know the Better- Vol 17, No4, HRW).

If anyone has made it to the end, thank you for reading this background information on Uganda. What is happening here and the conditions of the camps are absolutely devastating and need continued international support. Though conditions of safety have vastly improved, there are many many problems here still, particularly with the psychological affects of many people who have been traumatized by the war. Though peace talks have continued, the same things that have made peace talks ineffective are happening again this time, and so far, it looks like the talks are failing. A friend of mine, Adam, actually met Joseph Kony last week and was the first photojournalist to take his pictures. Adam said it was ironically hard to get a photo of the man not smiling, he apparently seemed like a gentle man, though being one of the most brutal leaders of a rebel militia in the world. When I was in Kampala, a man I met at a hostel said he had been attacked by the LRA in 2002, when he was working with a local org on reintegrating children into the camps. The driver in the convoy was shot dead, as well as a few others, though he survived and has only a limp to show for the attack...lucky guy. In Kampala, few people are very aware of the situation of the North as they are very far removed from it. The night commuters have for now decreased in numbers largely because of the peace talks so I will pray that they will continue and something will be negotiated for a safer Northern Uganda...