

## **A CRISIS OF CHILDREN: Night Commuters in Northern Uganda**

*by Rebecca Czarnecki*

*Look into the eyes of a child who has been repeatedly brutalized, tortured or raped, as I did when I visited northern Uganda, and you will never forget what you find there. This abuse of children is one of the most serious in the world. It calls for urgent and concerted action. The international community has shown an increasing understanding of, and concern for, the suffering of the people of northern Uganda. Yet the traumatic nightmare of the people remains, haunting hundreds of thousands, sowing bitterness and destroying their future.*

Jan Egeland, UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs  
and Emergency Relief Coordinator

Recently, it seems that the war in Iraq and the crisis in Sudan have captured the United States' attention for foreign affairs. Sudan rekindles memories of the Rwanda genocide in 1994 that left nearly 1 million Hutus and Tutsis dead. The War in Iraq was a major flashpoint in the US presidential election this fall. Meanwhile, a civil conflict in Northern Uganda has been raging for eighteen years, displacing 1.6 million people and turning thousands of kids into cold-blooded child soldiers. Jan Egeland calls it, "a crisis of children." What will it take to get the world to pay attention to this emergency?

### ***Providing Safe Havens for Night Commuters***

The conflict in Northern Uganda began in 1986 when Alice Lakwena formed the Holy Spirit Army (HSA), an Acholi-based religious movement that sought to usurp President Yoweri Museveni, who is still in power today. The HSA was later taken over by Lakwena's nephew, Joseph Kony, who changed the name to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The resistance movement is composed of people from the Acholi tribe, one of the many small tribes that make up the population of Uganda, and is fighting

for a theocracy based on the Ten Commandments. The roots of the conflict are disturbingly hazy, but it is known that both Lakwena and Kony felt that the Acholi people were chosen to fulfill this spiritual destiny. Lacking support from the Acholi community the LRA resorted to kidnapping children from villages in the middle of the night in order to staff its army. An estimated 80% of the LRA's forces are abducted children. Children are targeted for a sickeningly simple reason: children are easier to manipulate and indoctrinate to LRA beliefs. Kony's claims to be a spiritual leader "gives him a strong power over young minds abducted and enrolled in his rebel army."<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to escape the fate of becoming child soldiers, countless young people have become night commuters. The term refers to those who leave their villages each night trying to protect themselves against late-night LRA raids by traveling to town centers. There are an estimated 1.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Northern Uganda of which 50,000, mostly women and children, are night commuters.<sup>2</sup> As night commuters these children are susceptible to a variety of threats. All too often



Photo by Matthew Emry, Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children

Night commuters in Uganda.

girl commuters are sexually assaulted and raped, and there are even incidents of assault at the shelters. Human Rights Watch states that "a local volunteer at the hospital reported that some men, including UPDF soldiers, sexually harass or abuse girls along the routes children typically take to arrive at the hospital."<sup>3</sup>

Noah's Ark, a Gulu night commuters' shelter, is better than most because they separate sleeping areas by gender and age. The Women's Commission report also states that "they are given an opportunity to bathe and can participate in bible study, drama and debate groups, singing and prayers, and health discussions until generators and lights are turned off. Several UPDF soldiers are stationed outside the Noah's Ark main gates beginning at sundown."<sup>4</sup> However, in districts like Kitgum the resources to provide these comforts or even the same degree of safety are not always available.

### ***Weakening Family Ties and Public Order***

Shelters may be part of the solution, but they are also becoming part of the problem. The Women's Commission believes that shelters are, in some cases, contributing to an increase in the incidence of rape. These shelters gradually eat away at family structures. Boys, in explanations offered to international workers, complain that they no longer have ways to meet girls, and that the frustrations of the conflict, their disrupted lives, and the waning presence of their families contribute to their actions.<sup>5</sup> Not only are traditional behavioral patterns falling apart, but these children become accustomed to the absence of a stable family life. Shelters like Noah's Ark are popular with children because they provide organized activities. Some people speculate that they are too comfortable. In addition, having to commute every night completely disrupts children's education. Instead of doing homework at home, they are traveling to a town

center. One young boy comments on his life, stating, "It is a tiresome life. I feel hungry most of the day; I don't get enough to eat. I spend most of the day walking."<sup>6</sup>

The culture of night commuting is directly related to the lack of commitment from the Ugandan government. They have not made the necessary strides to ensure the protection of people in the north. In the last couple of months, the LRA and the GoU have been working on ceasefires and tentative peace agreements. The possibility of peace is entangled in the power struggles of both sides. The LRA hopes to gain amnesty for its leaders, and President Museveni is looking to advance legislation that will allow him yet another term in office. The peace process is far from being a simple one. As the GoU establishes an existing amnesty to lure child soldiers out, the government has also filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>7</sup>

While the government of Uganda and the LRA continue to move towards the possibility of peace, the international community strives to bring additional help. The Northern Uganda Working Group, a collective of representatives from non-governmental organizations, operates like a PR firm for Uganda, constantly strategizing how to draw attention to the conflict in the region and how to get it onto the agenda of the UN Security Council. UNICEF is training people to be civilian protectors. The Watchlist for Children and Armed Conflict is formulating a report to be sent to NGOs and the UN with recommendations on the situation. But the key questions remain: How can, and will, the government protect the children, rehabilitate those children who have been abducted, and bring to justice the leaders of the LRA movement? In the words of Jan Egeland, "It is unacceptable that Northern Uganda remains the world's greatest neglected emergency. The gravity and magnitude of this humanitarian crisis is not being reflected in the response given to it – by the international community, including us in the humanitarian community and the Government of Uganda itself. None of us have done enough."

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- 1 "Sleepless in Gulu" Save the Children, May 2004.
  - 2 "No Safe Place to call Home: Child and Adolescent Night Commuters in Northern Uganda." Women's Commission on Refugees and Children, July 2004.
  - 3 "Abducted and Abused: Renewed Conflict in Northern Uganda." Human Rights Watch, July 2003.
  - 4 "No Safe Place to call Home: Child and Adolescent Night Commuters in Northern Uganda." Women's Commission on Refugees and Children, July 2004.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 "Children seek refuge away from home at night." IRINnews.org, 2003. Jan. 16 2005 <[http://www.plusnews.org/webspecials/uga\\_crisis/Commuting.asp](http://www.plusnews.org/webspecials/uga_crisis/Commuting.asp)>.
  - 7 Nyakairu, Frank and Grace Matsiku. "Kony Fears World Court Prosecution." The Monitor. 6 Jan. 2005. AllAfrica.net 14 Jan. 2005 < <http://allafrica.com/stories/200501050735.html>>.