

Uganda: Hundreds of civilians massacred by Lord's Resistance Army

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1 March 2004

A rebel group in northeastern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) massacred over 250 defenceless civilians on February 21, at Barlonyo refugee camp 400 kilometres north of the capital Kampala. It is the worst attack against civilians in the last ten years of an 18-year-old conflict.

Around 300 LRA rebels attacked the Barlonyo camp, in Lira district, armed with light machine guns, assault rifles and rocket propelled grenades. They were dressed in brand new uniforms of the regular army, the Ugandan Peoples Defence Force (UPDF). After ordering people at gunpoint to go inside their thatched huts, they then burnt these to the ground. Those attempting to flee were shot, bludgeoned or hacked to death with machetes. This attack comes just weeks after the rebels massacred around 50 people in Abia camp, also in Lira district.

Barlonyo is one of the so-called "protected villages" which the government established in order to safeguard the local population from LRA attacks. It was home to almost 5,000 refugees, but was defended by just 30 guards, with little experience, who failed to alert nearby troops. Several thousand Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Barlonyo camp have fled to a nearby trading centre at Oguk.

There has been much public anger at the army's failure to protect the camp. Accusations have been made that sections of the ruling class—in both the army and in government—have collaborated with the rebels. The quality of arms that the rebels have at their disposal has raised questions also.

Fear of attacks in the camps has meant that crops do not get cultivated and economic life largely disappears. This is replaced instead by food aid. Disease and famine are rife.

The LRA has traditionally been backed by the

Sudanese government, whilst the Ugandan government has backed the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) which has until recently been fighting against Khartoum. This arrangement is in something of a transitory stage as Sudan is about to conclude a peace-deal with the SPLM/A, and the LRA has been driven from Uganda.

In order to deflect criticism, President Museveni has put the responsibility for the massacre onto the army and its command structure, accusing it of "negligence". "It's very sad, on behalf of the government, or the army, I apologise to the people because the mistake is on the side of the army," he said.

Museveni has made a scapegoat of the regional commander, removing him to headquarters for further training. This is punishment for allowing an "unofficial" camp to be set up in his area with too little security. Museveni has also promised further bases in the north to combat the LRA.

The LRA are a notoriously brutal outfit, of no more than a few thousand, which operates in an area covering parts of Uganda, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are led by Joseph Kony, a shadowy recluse who claims to have magical powers derived from the Christian Holy Spirit, and manipulates local beliefs in witchcraft to rule by fear. He promotes his operation as a Biblical mission.

Kony proclaims that his intention is to topple the government in Kampala, which is dominated by southerners, and restore power to the Acholi people in the north, whom he claims to represent. It is these very Acholi civilians that the LRA brutalises through its operations.

The conflict has continued for almost two decades and has cost some \$1.3 billion. Aid agencies estimate that over 23,000 people have died, and there are also

approximately 1.4 million IDPs in the northeast of Uganda.

The LRA operates by abducting adults and children as young as seven, largely from the Acholi. They are then used for menial work and also to raid villages for food, fight against the UPDF, slaughter civilians and abduct other children. Girls as young as 12 are given as wives to LRA commanders. Children who attempt to escape are killed, sometimes by other children who are forced to trample on them.

The UN estimates that 30,000 children have been abducted since the 1990s. This has accelerated over the last few years, with Human Rights Watch estimating that around 10,000 have been abducted since mid-2002, up from one hundred in 2001. The intensification followed the return of the LRA to Uganda after the Ugandan government's "Operation Iron Fist" against the LRA's bases in southern Sudan in March 2002.

Escalating rates of abduction have meant that many children leave their homes at night and head to the relative safety of the towns. In late 2003, figures for Gulu municipality indicated 16,000 of these "night commuters", many of whom walk up to 10 kilometres each night, returning home the following morning. Some will sleep rough, or with relatives, others may get a bed at one of the various shelters that exist.

In July last year some 20,000 children marched through Kitgum to protest against the abductions.

In December 2003 the Ugandan government asked the newly formed International Criminal Court (ICC) to help prosecute LRA rebels. In January ICC Prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo announced that he was considering a probe into the LRA. He has now announced that he will investigate this current massacre.

This is the second preliminary investigation ever launched by the ICC, and the first to involve gathering evidence "in the field". The ICC has said that as well as investigating the LRA it will also look at allegations made against the UPDF.

The UPDF is notoriously corrupt, with officers happy to perpetuate the conflict since it represents an opportunity for profit. The UPDF also uses child labour and exploits children for fighting. Often these are children who have escaped from the LRA. Children are also recruited into official Local Defence Units (LDUs).

LDUs ostensibly provide security for their villages, but they are then used also to fight alongside UPDF troops against the LRA. This is not only in northern Uganda but also in the Congo and the Sudan.



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