

UN hints at possible intervention in northern Uganda's conflict

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A United Nations official has called the situation in northern Uganda “the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world” and compared it to the crisis in Sudan’s Darfur region.

Jan Egeland, the UN’s Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and its Emergency Relief Coordinator, said the situation was a “moral outrage”. Egeland had rhetorically asked the UN Security Council, “Where else in the world have there been 20,000 kidnapped children? Where else in the world have 90 percent of the population in large districts been displaced? Where else in the world do children make up 80 percent of the terrorist insurgency movement?”

Northern Uganda has had only a fraction of the international aid that Darfur has received, despite the crisis in Darfur being a relatively recent development. Kampala rejects the comparison, claiming that there is no state involvement in the crisis unlike in Sudan. Uganda’s ambassador to the UN said that the timing of Egeland’s comments was not good, and that the issue taking centre stage now “almost dramatically is really to give an unnecessary boost to the rebel group.”

The rebellion, initially against the central government’s sidelining of the north, has been transformed into an extremely brutal conflict perpetrated against the population in the north of Uganda. The rebel forces go by the name of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), comprising of a few thousand troops led by self-proclaimed Christian prophet Joseph Kony, who manipulates local traditional religious beliefs to rule by fear. He ostensibly represents the Acholi people in northeastern Uganda, though has no popular support, and it is the Acholi who bear the brunt of his brutal methods.

These include the systematic kidnapping of children for use in his “army” and their subsequent

brainwashing, rape and torture. Those attempting escape, or guilty of even minor indiscretions, are trampled, beaten, mutilated or even bitten to death by the other children spurred by fear for their own survival.

A study in the UK based scientific journal the *Lancet* found that 77 percent of the 300 children they surveyed had witnessed another person being killed, 39 percent had killed someone, and 39 percent had abducted other children. Over one-third of the girls had been raped and 18 percent had given birth whilst in captivity.

The number of abducted children trebled in the north after 2002, when the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF) attacked LRA bases in neighbouring Sudan, driving them back over the border. The rise in abductions has led to increasing numbers of children in the region evading kidnap by becoming “night commuters”. Some 40-50,000 children walk miles every night to the relative safety of the towns and sleep under verandas, and in schools, hospitals and parking lots, only to return to their villages in the morning. Many are forced to sleep in unsanitary conditions, exposed to the elements and to mosquitoes. Consequently malaria, diarrhoea, scabies and respiratory diseases are rife.

The health care system in the north has virtually collapsed. A report by World Vision International claims that HIV/AIDS is killing more people in northern Uganda than the conflict there, though the two are clearly related. The report found that HIV/AIDS accounted for 69 percent of deaths in the Gulu area (the district most affected by the conflict), three times higher than direct killings during military confrontation.

The average prevalence rate for HIV/AIDS in Uganda is 6.3 percent and falling, whereas in Gulu it is 11.9

percent. World Vision believes that displacement caused by the war has left many people destitute with many women resorting to “survival sex” in exchange for food, soap or money, thus increasing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Young “night commuter” girls are also often raped.

The high incidence of HIV/AIDS deaths throughout the continent has led to a huge number of orphans who are exploited or end up in local armies such as the LRA. World Vision observes that, “the terrorists are themselves hostages”.

Nearly two million Ugandans out of a population of almost 25 million now live in refugee camps. A heavy rainstorm last month devastated the largest refugee camp, Pabbo, 400 kilometres north of Kampala, and home to some 62,000 internally displaced persons. Strong winds, rain and hail destroyed thousands of makeshift huts, washed away food supplies, and destroyed fields and crops. Three schools and the camp health clinic were also damaged.

The UPDF, with its notoriously corrupt officers, is happy to perpetuate the conflict as an opportunity for profit. Like the LRA, the UPDF also uses child labour, often those who have escaped from the LRA.

President Yoweri Museveni’s government too is not unhappy with a low-level insurgency that occupies the Acholi and keeps them out of Kampala politics. He also uses the war to rally his supporters against the fear that northerners may come back to power, as under the previous regimes of Presidents Milton Obote and Idi Amin, both renowned for their brutality. However, divisions in his traditional support base in western and central Uganda may force Museveni to seek northern votes. He has recently offered immunity to Kony if he surrenders quickly.

The UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) says that it will soon be unable to feed the 1.6 million refugees in northern Uganda. The UN has appealed for \$112 million in aid for 2004 alone, largely for the WFP in the north. Medicines and shelters are also needed.

There have also been calls from various quarters, including the Ugandan media, for a foreign military intervention. UN Security Council member, Britain’s ambassador Sir Emyr Parry Jones, is backing intervention by the African Union and Ugandan forces ostensibly to protect the humanitarian effort in Uganda. But any western military intervention, direct or

conducted by proxy forces, will be used to further the predatory aims of the imperialist powers.

The moves towards intervention in Uganda echo the recent manoeuvres in Sudan’s Darfur region. African Union forces backed by the west have increased their presence in Sudan at a crucial stage in the southern peace negotiations, under the auspices of protecting the humanitarian effort.

Historically, neighbouring Sudan has backed the LRA, whilst Uganda like the United States, has supported the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) against Khartoum. Uganda was also one of the few African countries to endorse the US invasion of Iraq. The SPLA and Khartoum are on the verge of completing a US-brokered peace agreement that will allow greater access for western oil companies to the country’s southern oil fields.

Last week, Rashid Reich, director of the Uganda Chamber of Mines and secretary-general of the Uganda Mining Association, announced that uranium had been found in four regions of the country. “According to The Mineral Resource of Uganda, Bulletin Number Four,” he said, “produced by the colonial government after thorough exploration, Uganda was declared a mineral-rich area.” He announced that over 100 minerals are found in Uganda and that 46 areas have been confirmed to have gold. Uganda also has some oil.

Meanwhile, the Belgian army is to establish a base at Entebbe on Lake Victoria south of Kampala, ostensibly to provide logistical support to Benin military peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Ituri region. President Museveni has welcomed this development due next year.



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