

January 30, 2006

Dr. Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Crisis in Northern Uganda

Dear Secretary Rice:

We, the undersigned organizations call on the U.S. government to dedicate high-level attention to the situation in northern Uganda in order to help bring an end to the intractable conflict and catastrophic humanitarian conditions.

As you know, for the past 20 years, the people of northern Uganda have endured a conflict involving the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. More than 1.7 million people—eighty percent of the population—are displaced and forced to live in squalid internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. These camps remain largely unprotected and vulnerable to LRA attacks and abductions. The LRA has kidnapped more than 30,000 children from their homes – holding them hostage as soldiers, sex slaves, and bondservants. An estimated 35,000 children commute nightly to sleep in town centers in order to avoid violence and abduction. Nonetheless, these children, known as “night commuters”, remain vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse.

This deplorable humanitarian and human rights situation is the result of an ongoing conflict that continues to be a cause of instability in southern Sudan and, now, the broader Great Lakes. Threats to regional security are growing: the LRA has expanded its area of operation deeper into southern Sudan and, for the first time, into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). LRA attacks against southern Sudanese civilians threaten implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and recent LRA incursions into the DRC have heightened existing tensions between the Ugandan and Congolese governments. Within this context of increasing regional instability, multiple actors regrettably continue to provide covert support to the LRA.

Establishing a secure environment requires urgent leadership from the U.S. Government to put in place a comprehensive regional approach that addresses LRA cross-border movements and prioritizes a resolution to the conflict, while simultaneously ensuring civilian protection, humanitarian access, and the reintegration of former combatants. To reduce civilian suffering, help consolidate peace in Sudan, and prevent further destabilization of the region, our organizations recommend the following actions:

United Nations Security Council Action

The continued presence of the Lord's Resistance Army in southern Sudan and its recent expansion into the DRC underscores the urgency for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) engagement. Under Secretary-General Jan Egeland's December 19, 2005 briefing on the humanitarian situation and the passage of UNSC Res. 1653 are welcome first steps towards engaging the Security Council on this issue, but greater action is required. We urge the US to take a leadership role at the United Nations to place northern Uganda on the UNSC agenda. The February 2006 US presidency of the UNSC would be an opportune time to galvanize action on this important issue. Specifically, the UN should do the following:

- Continued encouragement and support for a regional solution to disarming groups within eastern DRC, Uganda, and southern Sudan. With the UNMIS mandate up for renewal in March, the United States should call on all relevant actors to accelerate the deployment of UNMIS and ensure that threats to civilians and disruption of humanitarian aid addresses the destabilizing presence of the LRA. Continued consideration should be given to the recommendations of the regional Tripartite Commission on disarming groups in eastern DRC.

- Appoint a Special UN Envoy for Northern Uganda who will work collaboratively with all local, regional, and international stakeholders to help mediate between all parties to end the conflict.
- Create a panel of experts to investigate and monitor the activities of the LRA, as well as the networks supporting the LRA, and its impact on regional peace and security.
- Call on all parties to declare an immediate ceasefire; encourage greater international diplomatic and financial support for on-going mediation efforts, while ensuring a coordinated response to LRA activity in the area.
- Call on the government of Uganda, in accordance with its national IDP policy, to adopt a security strategy that focuses on protection rather than confrontation, prioritizes civilian and aid convoy protection, and holds protection personnel accountable for crimes they commit.

Direct U.S. Support for Mediation

After 20 years of conflict, military victory is unlikely. Recent overtures made by the LRA leadership to negotiate are promising and greater international political pressure on all parties is needed to explore a peaceful solution. Approximately ninety percent of the LRA is comprised of children; further military aggression against the LRA only serves to inflict more violence upon these children. Former Ugandan Government Minister Betty Bigombe's mediation efforts deserve greater U.S. support. Accordingly, we strongly recommend that the State Department appoint a senior level advisor to coordinate efforts within the U.S. government, among the donors, and ensure that greater resources and material support are available for Bigombe as a negotiation strategy is developed.

Protection for Civilians and Humanitarian Workers

Efforts to protect civilians have languished and high-level involvement by the international community is needed. Eighty percent of the population is displaced and primarily dependent on limited international food assistance and services. The delegation of civilian protection and humanitarian worker security to local defense units (LDUs) both hinders humanitarian access and leaves IDPs vulnerable to LRA attacks. For example, at times LDU personnel have been inebriated while escorting humanitarian agencies, or sometimes have refused to provide escort unless provided with food. This gap in protection significantly hinders relief efforts and the population's ability to access employment, basic healthcare and education. Through US leadership, donor governments must work with the Ugandan government to devise a security strategy that prioritizes civilian protection instead of confrontational operations. This strategy must expand the area of protection around IDP camps to allow for greater civilian movement, so that the displaced can gain access to basic services and income generating opportunities.

Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration (DDR) Enhancement

In coordination with the government of Uganda, donors must develop and enact a comprehensive plan to draw LRA fighters out of this conflict and back into the community. Donors must provide adequate funding for DDR, including support for communities and children abducted by the LRA.

To conclude, we firmly believe that high-level engagement and sustained leadership by the United States will help bring an end to this conflict, which traps millions of children and families in despair and threatens ongoing peaceful transitions in Sudan and the DRC. We look forward to hearing from you about the Administration's plans to address this conflict.

Sincerely,

Africa Action
Africa Faith and Justice Network
Africare
Air Serv International
American Refugee Committee
CARE USA
Christian Children's Fund
Comboni Missionaries
Concern Worldwide US
Credo International
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Washington Office
Franciscans International
Friends Committee on National Legislation (Quakers)
GuluWalk International
Human Rights Watch
International Medical Corps
International Rescue Committee
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego
Lutheran World Relief
MAP International
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mercy Corps
Missionary Oblates
The NAME Campaign
National Association of Evangelicals
National Jesuit Conference
Oxfam America
Refugees International
Save the Children
Today's Urban Renewal Network
Uganda Conflict Action Network
US Catholic Mission Association
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
World Vision

CC: Asst Sec'ty Jendayi Frazer

Dr. Cindy Courville
Amb. John Bolton
Senate Foreign Relations
House Int'l Relations