



**International Rescue Committee**  
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**Statement for the Record**

**Congressional Human Rights Caucus**

**Members' Briefing:  
An Update on the Conflict in Northern Uganda**

**14 April 2005**

## **The IRC in Uganda**

Good Morning. My name is Anne Richard and I serve as the Vice President for Government Relations & Advocacy for the International Rescue Committee, or IRC.

IRC is very pleased to participate this morning in this important briefing. We are honored to have Congressman Tom Lantos, the founder and co-chair of the Congressional Human Rights caucus, as a long-time member of our Board.

### IRC Programs

IRC-Uganda has been working in the northern districts of Uganda since 1998. Our projects include psychosocial projects for internally displaced people (IDPs), programs to assess, respond to or prevent gender-based violence, health projects and water sanitation, education and programs to bring psychosocial rehabilitation, conflict resolution and HIV/AIDS services to victims of conflict in war-affected communities.

IRC has 12 expatriate staff working with 161 national staff and 262 refugee staff in Uganda. We had a population of about 500,000 beneficiaries in 2004, with a similar targeted caseload this year. Working in northern Uganda is particularly challenging because of security concerns.

My remarks today are based on IRC analysis and discussions with our experts in the field.

### Brief Description of Situation

First, the war between Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government rages on and the toll on the civilian population is significant. The number of Ugandans displaced from their homes has almost tripled in two years, increasing from 450,000 in early 2002 to about 1.4 million today.<sup>1</sup> About 80% of the population in the north is displaced.

Systemic violations of basic rights continue to proliferate, including forced abduction, mutilation, torture, murder, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Displaced women and children are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses.

It is estimated that almost half of LRA combatants are abducted children. More than 20,000 children have been abducted since the conflict began in 1986. They are forced to endure tremendous hardship, psychological trauma, and sexual abuse.

Children are, in fact, used as combatants – really cannon fodder – by both sides while military leaders stay safely away from the frontlines.

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<sup>1</sup> Until recently, IRC was using an estimate of 1.6 million IDPs. This revised figure reflects the fact that the LRA have left the Lango and Teso areas.

Fear of abduction drives thousands of children each evening to urban areas to seek a safe place for the night. A recent estimate is about 30,000 children every evening. All of IRC's visiting delegations have witnessed these so-called "night commuters". The Women's Commission on Refugee Women & Children, an IRC affiliate, issued an important report on this phenomenon this past February. The report describes how this nightly trek in search of safety and protection from abduction is itself fraught with danger. The children (and some adults) – many of whom are unaccompanied – are still vulnerable to attack while walking in to the towns or in sleeping spaces in town centers. Even if they avoid abduction, night commuters remain at high risk of exposure to infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS, and early pregnancy. Numbers of "night commuters" ebb and flow with the activity of the LRA, and the appearance of these children can be used as a measure of the seriousness of security situation.

I should also mention that pervasive insecurity means that humanitarian access is hindered. At the same time, the GoU has been unresponsive to the needs of the internally displaced.

To quote UN Under Secretary General Jan Egeland, "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 in the world do children make up 80 percent of the terrorist insurgency movement?...For me the situation is a moral outrage...."

### Recommendations

What is needed? Our field team had three main points that they asked me to raise with you today, and all involve increased US Government attention and support.

#### 1) Peaceful resolution

- As you know, the signing of a truce last December was never achieved. This breakdown was followed by recent increases in LRA attacks. The UPDF (Uganda Peoples Defense Force) moved to adopt an 'aggressive' footing. Their military successes have forced the LRA back to the peace table. And chief negotiator Betty Bigombe is working to revitalize the peace process.
- This dialogue must be supported by real actions and confidence-building measures. Such measures might include commitment to free humanitarian access on the northern Uganda roads and into and out of all IDP camps. Another step would be mutual respect for an expanded ceasefire zone.
- The IRC country team reports that negotiations are at a crucial point now. Historically, the Government of Uganda has preferred seeking a military solution instead of holding peace talks. Our team is convinced that peace will never be fully achieved as a result of military action. A negotiated settlement is the best hope for a lasting peace.

- What's needed now is for the US government to push hard, bringing real and sustained pressure to bear on the GoU to engage in meaningful dialogue with the LRA.

## 2) Protection of civilians.

- LRA attacks are increasing again, along with abduction, mutilations, and other abuses. There were several incidents recently where UPDF 'mistakenly' killed civilians (2 women in one incident, and elderly male in another), believing them to be LRA. Night commuters are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse.
- The GoU needs to do more to protect civilians effectively. The GoU needs to secure camps from attack, hold government forces accountable for their actions, and facilitate delivery of humanitarian assistance.
- US government protection programs could make a difference in terms of having trained people on the ground who can monitor and help safeguard human rights. In addition, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is also deploying a handful of human rights monitors, which can be described as "a start". The United States should support this and other UN efforts to put more pressure on the GoU to meet their obligations, especially with regards to protection of its civilians.

3) Funding - USAID funding for humanitarian programs has been adequate but slowly diminishing. Major donor aid budgets for northern Uganda are being cut in 2005 because of needs in other countries and regions.

The delays and reductions in USG funding to northern Uganda are forcing IRC to cut back on proposed activities, and restricting IRC's ability to deliver quality assistance at even fiscal year 2004 levels, which were still minimal compared to needs. The crisis in Northern Uganda, however, has only worsened in the past three years.

Once again, US Government support is key. Ironically, Uganda is internationally viewed as an African success story, for the gains achieved since the 1980s and for its aggressive response to the AIDS crisis. In fact, it has become one of the major recipients of US foreign aid. We would ask that official US government aid flows be re-examined to ensure that sufficient funding is being allocated for humanitarian and protection purposes in northern Uganda.

In fact, and I regret having to report this, our Regional Director in East Africa, who has just recently completed a trip to both northern Uganda and Darfur, has called the situation in the north "worse off than Darfur." As we all know, these are strong words. He gave two reasons:

- 1) the region is getting far fewer resources than Darfur, and
- 2) internally displaced in Darfur who are being helped are getting better care, because they have better planned camps (with regards to congestion) and access to medical facilities and water.

Perhaps one approach is to build on growing interest among US officials, media and public in Sudan and the Darfur crisis and try to adopt a broader, regional perspective. We should consider how to help people on both sides of the Sudan/Uganda border.

Without a doubt, though, the key is greater US support for peace and protection programs.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to take questions.