



Northern Uganda: Urgent Measures Needed to Address the LRA Threat to Regional Peace and Security

Testimony by
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I would like to thank Representative Christopher Smith for calling this hearing today on the crisis in northern Uganda, demonstrating the concern of the House International Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations about the brutal 20 year conflict that has displaced up to two million people. Refugees International is an independent humanitarian advocacy organization that does not accept funding from governments or the United Nations. Refugees International has been a strong advocate for the Ugandan people displaced by this war for over four years, and I have traveled to northern Uganda on four separate occasions during this period. I visited northern Uganda most recently in February 2006, and my comments are based on my experiences in February. Refugees International also had a team in southern Sudan in March 2006 assessing the threat posed by the Lord's Resistance Army --- or LRA --- in southern Sudan.

The response by the international community and the Government of Uganda to the crisis in northern Uganda continues to fail. Up to two million people in northern Uganda are living in camps for internally displaced persons without access to basic services and without protection, and as a result almost 1,000 people are dying a week. As one of Uganda's larger donors and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the United States has an important role to play in protecting Ugandan civilians and ensuring that their basic needs are met.

Despite the Government of Uganda's statements that the Ugandan military has defeated the LRA, the LRA is still very much active in northern Uganda. The LRA commits acts of extreme violence against the civilian population—abducting children and turning them into fighters or sex slaves, mutilating and killing civilians, and terrorizing them to such a degree that people are afraid to leave the squalid camps and return to their homes. Although the number of attacks on civilians in northern Uganda has decreased in the past nine months as have direct attacks on internally displaced persons camps, the LRA remains a significant threat outside the camps. Since March 1, the LRA has killed eight people and has abducted 66. On Refugees International's assessment mission to Uganda in February 2006, attacks on civilians and abductions had recently occurred in the immediate vicinity of each of the eight camps that we visited.

In response to this violence, the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for the top five commanders in the LRA, which has complicated mediation efforts. LRA violence has taken on an increasingly regional dimension, threatening stability in the Democratic Republic of Congo and southern Sudan. Despite the presence of the Ugandan military in southern Sudan through an agreement with the

Government of Sudan since 2002, the LRA remains strong and is an increasing threat to Sudanese civilians, a threat that the Ugandan military has been unable to mitigate in the past four years. Refugees International condemns the LRA and its violent actions towards civilians. We have seen first-hand how the LRA has brutalized and terrorized the population in northern Uganda, condemning up to two million people to poverty and squalor in IDP camps.

In recent months, the Government has focused on people able to leave camps and return to their homes. Returns should be encouraged in areas where security permits, but for people living in the Acholi region of northern Uganda, the area most impacted by LRA violence, security has not improved to the degree necessary to encourage returns. In my interviews with people in camps in northern Uganda, most explained that they will return only when the war ends. We are concerned that the Government of Uganda will try to demonstrate improvement in the security situation in northern Uganda by encouraging people to return to their homes prematurely. We urge the Government of Uganda to respect the principle of voluntary returns.

The Government of Uganda has the primary responsibility to assist and protect internally displaced persons in northern Uganda, and it has clearly failed in fulfilling its responsibility. Over the course of my visits to northern Uganda, I have seen no indication that the government has taken significant concrete steps to improve living conditions in camps. The response from the United Nations and non-governmental organizations has also been weak, although in the past two years, the UN has increased its presence and programs and NGOs have strengthened their response. But despite some small improvements, I have seen no significant positive changes in the past four years in the living conditions for internally displaced persons, particularly in Kitgum and Pader districts.

The living conditions in the more than 200 internally displaced persons camps in northern Uganda are horrific. The camps are overcrowded and people do not have access to adequate health care, water, sanitation, education, livelihoods and protection. According to international standards, camp residents need a minimum of 15 liters of water per day to meet their basic needs for drinking, cooking, and hygiene. Most of the displaced receive half that. On my recent trip to northern Uganda, I witnessed many classrooms where one teacher was attempting to teach over 100 students. I visited with sick people in the camps who were unable to access appropriate health care, including reproductive health care and HIV/AIDS treatment; estimated HIV/AIDS rates in northern Uganda are higher than the national average. I spoke to men and women with no way to earn a living, and displaced people whose rights had been abused with no access to justice.

Rather than focusing on improving living conditions in camps, the Government's response to the crisis in the north has emphasized defeating the LRA through military means. This strategy has proven to be ineffective, and the Ugandan military has been unable to defeat the LRA over the past 20 years. It is Refugees International's assessment that the conflict in northern Uganda must be settled through mediation which addresses the root causes of the conflict. Obviously, given the numerous failed attempts, this is no easy task. Neither the Government of Uganda nor the LRA seems particularly committed to a negotiated settlement to the conflict, but without dealing with the root causes of the conflict and supporting national reconciliation programs, the war will continue.

The Government of Uganda has used the war in the north to justify consistent increases in its military budget but has not provided adequate financial resources to northern districts for basic services. When I visited the internally displaced persons camps, government officials responsible for working in the camps were usually absent. Teachers and health workers were not showing up for work and district officials were not traveling to the camps to monitor them. For the most part, the UN and non-governmental organizations were providing the majority of assistance available in the camps.

The displaced consistently told us that they believed their government had abandoned them, and many of them believe that there were political motivations behind the Government's weak humanitarian response. Northern Uganda historically has not supported the President in elections, and in this past election, voted overwhelmingly for the opposition. Refugees International recognizes the challenges the Government faces in providing services in such a difficult environment, and equally recognizes the brutality and the security threat posed by the LRA. But Uganda is not a failed state --- indeed both the Clinton and Bush Administrations have touted it as an African success story --- and could be doing much more. The Government has not devoted the necessary human or financial resources to provide an effective response.

The Government has been widely praised for passing a National Internally Displaced Persons policy in August 2004. This policy clearly outlines the Government's responsibilities for assisting and protecting IDPs in the north. While the policy itself is sound, the Government has not actually implemented it and its response to the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda has not remarkably improved since the policy was passed. The central government does not provide its ministries with the financial and human resources to ensure that the policy is implemented, and district officials lack the resources and capacity to meet the massive humanitarian needs in the north. Given the Government's lack of response to the crisis in the north and the dependence of the displaced on the programs of the UN and NGOs, recent Government threats to expel outspoken NGOs are of grave concern.

The Government has also failed to develop coherent plans to disarm former LRA combatants and reintegrate them into society. Former LRA fighters are returning to the camps without a way to earn a living, often having no choice but to join the Ugandan armed forces. There are few training programs or educational opportunities available to them, and programs that address the trauma that they have experienced are inadequate. Formerly abducted children, particularly girls and women returning with children, face difficulties reintegrating into their communities and rebuilding their lives. The Government should invest more resources in the Amnesty Commission, as well as reintegration and reconciliation programs as a way to encourage fighters to escape from the LRA.

The Government of Uganda has announced that it will strengthen its humanitarian and protection response, as well as develop a comprehensive approach to ending the conflict, by establishing a Joint Monitoring Committee. Through this Committee, the Government hopes to strengthen its cooperation with the UN, key donors and NGOs. Refugees International welcomes the Government of Uganda's stated intention to strengthen its humanitarian response in northern Uganda and its initiative in creating the Joint Monitoring Committee, but we remain deeply concerned about the actual implementation of the agreements. The Government has committed to improving its response in nine key areas, including increasing Government expenditures to improve basic services in northern Uganda, improving service delivery to reduce mortality rates, and strengthening protection of those displaced by the conflict.

The Core Group of Donors, of which the United States is a member, and other members of the Joint Monitoring Committee, must hold the Government accountable for fulfilling its responsibilities by ensuring that the Government meets clear, measurable and time-bound benchmarks and by ensuring that living conditions for the displaced improve. The Core Group of Donors must ensure that the Joint Monitoring Committee does not follow a similar path as the National IDP Policy. Given the regional implications of the conflict, this new Committee cannot be viewed as a substitute for Security Council engagement and must be pursued as a parallel process.

Throughout northern Uganda, human rights violations against civilians are widespread. The LRA is the main perpetrator of human rights violations, and they continue to terrorize the displaced, particularly when they travel outside the security perimeters surrounding internally displaced persons' camps to gather firewood and water and to access their land.

Human rights violations are also committed by members of the Ugandan military who are there to protect them, as confirmed by the 2006 Department of State Human Rights Report which stated, “UDPF [The Ugandan People’s Defense Forces] soldiers reportedly raped women and girls and security forces detained and mistreated suspected LRA collaborators in the camps. Security forces severely restricted the freedom of movement of IDPs and imposed nighttime curfews in many camps.” The Department of State Human Rights Report also includes information on civilians killed by security forces and the “precarious” humanitarian situation in displaced persons camps.

As I mentioned earlier, the government’s response to the conflict in the north has been predominantly a military one, and the large presence of Ugandan military, which includes the national army, the Ugandan People’s Defense Forces, and locally trained militias, or Local Defense Units, in camps where government civil servants are absent has had a detrimental impact on human rights protection. The large numbers of often poorly trained local defense units and the proliferation of arms in the camps is of grave concern and could have negative consequences in the future. Poor humanitarian conditions and a lack of employment opportunities have led to sexual exploitation of displaced women and girls and underage recruitment. Displaced persons told Refugees International that Ugandan soldiers, particularly members of the mobile units, steal, rape, exploit and kill and victims have almost no way to address these violations. There are no police present in most camps, so IDPs have little opportunity to report abuses to civilian authorities.

On my trip in February, however, the displaced reported some improvements in the conduct of the Ugandan army. They reported that abuses were still widespread, particularly sexual exploitation and sexual violence, but many people we interviewed said they had recently developed more trust in the army to protect them. Internally displaced people reported that in recent months more security forces, mainly local defense units, were stationed around the perimeter of camps, and that there were fewer attacks directly on camps. People in some of the camps explained that soldiers escorted them when they travel outside the security perimeter to collect firewood or go to their land. In some camps, a complaints system between the army and camp leadership has been established. These are welcome initiatives. Ultimately, the Government must strengthen its incredibly weak police and judicial capacity in northern Uganda, hold human violators accountable, and fulfill its obligation to protect internally displaced people.

While the LRA has decreased its operations in northern Uganda, the conflict has now spread to neighboring countries and has taken on a regional dimension. For the past six months, the LRA has been present in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and was responsible for the deaths of eight MONUC peacekeepers in January. It is rumored that LRA leaders Joseph Kony and Vincent Otti are in the Democratic Republic of Congo now, and it seems as if the LRA is using Garamba National Park as a rear base to launch attacks in Equatoria in Sudan.

It does not appear that the LRA in eastern D.R. Congo currently poses a significant threat to the civilian population. In Sudan, however, the LRA has sought safe haven in the south for over a decade and LRA attacks on civilians in southern Sudan have intensified over the past six months. Refugees International traveled to southern Sudan in March 2006 and found that LRA attacks on civilians in the south were impeding humanitarian access, slowing the ability of Sudanese refugees and displaced people to return home, and causing new displacement and refugee outflows. The UN peacekeeping mission in southern Sudan, the UN Mission in Sudan, does not have the mandate or resources, or, more importantly, the political will to intervene proactively to protect civilians from the LRA. Unless troop levels, logistics, and equipment are dramatically increased, the UN Mission in Sudan cannot be expected to protect civilians from the LRA.

There is also concern that disgruntled former fighters from the Sudan People's Liberation Army who, now that the war is over, have not received any help reintegrating into their communities could be joining ranks with the LRA. It is also likely that members of the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese Armed Forces are still providing support to the LRA. In February, Refugees International interviewed formerly abducted children in northern Uganda who had escaped LRA captivity in January; they believed that members of the Sudanese government were still supporting the LRA. They cited new guns with Arabic inscriptions and Joseph Kony being escorted by Arabs as the basis for their assertion. The LRA is a serious threat to regional peace and security and could undermine the peace agreements in Sudan and DRC.

In recent months, the UN Security Council has become more engaged in looking at the LRA as a regional threat. We urge the United States to play a leadership role in the Security Council on the issue of the LRA in northern Uganda and the region. The Security Council passed resolution 1653 in January and Resolution 1663 in March. Both resolutions request the Secretary General to make recommendations to the Security Council on ways the UN can mitigate the LRA threat. Unfortunately, the report has been delayed.

It is critical that the Security Council maintain its engagement on the LRA threat both inside and outside Uganda. Refugees International is hopeful that the Secretary General will recommend that the UN peacekeeping mission in Sudan have a stronger mandate and sufficient resources to intervene more proactively to protect civilians from the LRA, disarm LRA fighters and return them to northern Uganda, and capture indicted commanders. Eighty percent of LRA fighters are abducted children, so the strategy against the LRA must focus on capturing them safely and returning them to Uganda. UN peacekeeping forces in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo must protect civilians from further violence. In addition, a high-level Special Envoy who regularly reports to the Security Council should facilitate parallel political initiatives that focus on all countries impacted by LRA violence, as well as encourage increased regional cooperation and dialogue. There is also a need to establish a Panel of Experts to determine the sources of support to the LRA.

The Government of Uganda has expressed its support for military action against the LRA in southern Sudan and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, with the support of the UN, the SPLA, and the armed forces of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Government has been reluctant for the Security Council to become engaged on northern Uganda and supports Security Council action outside of Uganda. The Security Council must analyze the threat the LRA poses to the region, including the threat to Ugandan civilians and the Government's ability to respond to the crisis in northern Uganda. The Secretary General and Security Council will have to convince the Government of Uganda to pursue political and humanitarian objectives inside northern Uganda as well, and provide the necessary support to any new initiatives.

Despite repeated government assertions that the war is over, there is no indication that the Ugandan military has defeated the LRA. Instead, the situation is now more serious. The LRA now poses a significant threat to regional peace and security and could undermine fledgling peace agreements in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mediation efforts are stalled, and it is unclear whether the LRA or the Government of Uganda are committed to dialogue. There is no end in sight to this war, and until the war is over, up to two million people in the north are condemned to a life of terror and poverty in displaced persons camps.

The United States has contributed to the current difficult situation by neglecting the severity of the displacement problem in the north. Indeed, given the severity of the crisis, the U.S. Agency for International Development should commit increased resources and attention to northern Uganda. Furthermore, the U.S. has failed to press the Government of Uganda to establish a multi-faceted response

to the disaster focusing on an effective humanitarian response, protection, and reconciliation. The U.S. has been content to consider Uganda a valuable ally in the war on terror, and has provided substantial support to President Museveni and his Government in this context, despite the continuing failure of the Government's response in northern Uganda. With the war and its attendant problems continuing, and the LRA threatening instability far beyond the boundaries of northern Uganda, this approach is no longer tenable as important US interests in peace and stability, especially in southern Sudan, are at risk.

In this context, the US needs to increase substantially its engagement in the northern Uganda problem. On the political and diplomatic front, the US should:

- Stress the importance to the Government of Uganda of reaching a political settlement to the conflict, and provide high-level support to the effort as needed. The Government of Uganda must be more proactive in its support for a mediation process. The US should hold the Government of Uganda accountable for meeting time-bound benchmarks under the Joint Monitoring Committee and significantly strengthening its humanitarian response.
- Support the appointment of a high-level UN envoy on the regional crisis, including on northern Uganda, who reports regularly to the Security Council.
- Support the appointment of a Panel of Experts to investigate the sources of support for the LRA.
- Support the strengthening of the UN peacekeeping missions in the Sudan and the Congo to ensure that they have the resources to protect civilians from the LRA. The US should share intelligence with the UN to promote effective civilian protection.

To improve the lives of civilians in northern Uganda, the US should:

- Demonstrate its commitment to northern Uganda by allocating the necessary resources to the U.S. Agency for International Development to enable it to increase support to displaced persons.
- Continue to fund NGOs and the UN to provide humanitarian assistance in camps for internally displaced persons.
- Cooperate with the Government to implement comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs that promote dialogue, reconciliation and community-based initiatives.
- Support peacebuilding and reconciliation programs at local, regional and national levels to stem the cycle of violence.