

# Abduction of Children and Violence in Northern Uganda

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## Introduction

*“That night, the LRA came abducting people in our village, and some neighbors led them to our house. They abducted all five of us boys at the same time. I was the fifth one. . . . We were told by the LRA not to think about home, about our mother or father. If we did, then they would kill us. Better to think now that I am a soldier fighting to liberate the country. There were twenty-eight abducted from our village that night. . . . We were all tied up and attached to one another in a row. After we were tied up, they started to beat us randomly; they beat us up with sticks.” (HRW Uganda, 2003)*

This is a quote from a twelve year old child in Uganda who was kidnapped by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Beginning in the 1980’s and intensifying significantly since 2002, the LRA, a rebel group in Northern Uganda, has been abducting children to use as laborers, sex slaves, and soldiers. These children are brutally treated and are also forced to participate in heinous acts of violence. This paper will examine the situation in Uganda and its psychological implications. It will first review Uganda’s background of civil war and then expose the details of the abductions and the violence occurring in the LRA. The paper will then look at how there are similar situations in other locations around the world. Finally, this paper will describe the psychological problems facing the abducted children, and it will look at the possible long-term effects of recurring guilt and continuing violence.

## **Background**

The current atrocities in northern Uganda are grounded in two decades of civil war. When President Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army took control of Uganda in 1986, soldiers from the previous government fled to northern Uganda and Sudan, forming the Ugandan People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Several splinter groups broke off from the UPDA, including the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony. While the LRA's avowed purpose is to oust the Ugandan government, their main activity has been to wreak havoc on the countryside of northern Uganda by murdering or abducting children and adults and by burning and looting fields and towns (HRW Uganda, 2003). The LRA was based in southern Sudan until 2002 when the Ugandan government reached an agreement with Sudan allowing it to conduct military operations against the LRA in "Operation Iron Fist." Because of "Operation Iron Fist," much of the LRA returned to Uganda and intensified the abductions, kidnapping over 5,000 children in the first year. To date, there have been no successful efforts to establish a ceasefire and broker a peace agreement. (HRW Uganda, 2003).

## **The Abductions**

As of March 2003, the LRA had abducted an estimated 20,000 children since the beginning of the conflict, with over 12,000 being abducted since June 2002 (Li, 2005). The LRA often carries out its raids at night, sweeping into towns and villages to loot and kidnap. While adults are often abducted alongside children, they make up a small proportion and are let go very quickly, whereas

children may be kept for years (HRW Uganda, 2003). Interviews with abducted children in a report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) describe the LRA entering sleeping homes and carrying off the children, abducting as many as seventy children in one raid. As initiation into the LRA, the abducted children are stripped and beaten with sticks and machetes, allegedly to toughen them for their new life as soldiers. Children who cry out are killed. They are then smeared with shea nut oil in a type of anointing to signify their new identity as part of the LRA (HRW Uganda, 2003).

From there the children begin a life of performing manual labor and other menial tasks for the soldiers, often in terrible conditions and with little hope of ever regaining their freedom. Some are formally trained as soldiers, but this has greatly decreased since the LRA returned to Uganda. Now the children face battle untrained and unarmed, and they are wounded and killed alongside the armed soldiers (HRW Uganda, 2003). For girls, captivity with the LRA often becomes sex slavery. When girls reach puberty, they are given as “wives” to the commanders. Sometimes the soldiers do not even wait that long: UNICEF officer Chulho Hyun met one girl whom a commander had attempted to rape when she was too young for it to be physically possible (Li, 2005). These forced sexual acts lead to pregnancies where girls must give birth in the bush without medical help. They also lead to STDs: a nurse with World Vision reported that 50% of the children she encountered had syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia (HRW Uganda, 2003).

## Violence

The most alarming aspect of the LRA's abduction of children is the brutal violence the children are subjected to and forced to commit. After the severe beating for initiation into the LRA, the children are often beaten again for failing to keep up on the march, dropping loads, or displeasing a soldier. In addition, the children are forced to watch and even participate in heinous acts of violence against children who try to escape and against civilians whom the LRA is attacking (HRW Uganda, 2003). Children interviewed by the Human Rights Watch reported being forced to trample or club attempted escapees to death and to watch other brutal killings. Edward T., a child abducted by the LRA, told this story:

“One boy tried to escape and was caught, tied up, and marched back to camp. All the recruits from the various companies were told that we were never going home, that we were fighting now with the LRA so as a symbol of our pledge to fight on, this boy would be killed and we would help. Soldiers then laid the boy on the ground and stabbed him three times with a bayonet until the blood began seeping from the wounds. Then the new recruits approached the boy and beat him on the chest. Each one had a turn and could only stop once the blood from the body splashed up on to you. This boy was sixteen years old” (HRW Uganda, 2003).

Mark T., another abducted child, remembers seven children hacked, clubbed, or trampled to death after a failed escape attempt. The youngest child killed in this case was only nine years old (HRW Uganda, 2003). In an even more disturbing account, one eleven-year old recounted being forced to bite to death an attempted escapee, swallowing the child's blood (World Vision, 2005). These alarming stories are quite common among captives. In a recent study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Ugandan child soldiers, Ilse Derluyn et. al.

reported that 39% of the children interviewed had personally killed someone, and 2% had actually killed their own father, brother, or relative (2004). These numbers reveal just how common it is for the abducted children to be forced to kill.

### **Other Locations**

Sadly, the use of children in combat and subjection to brutal violence is not limited to Uganda. The situation in Colombia is strikingly similar. In Colombia's current civil war, children fight on both sides of the conflict—in the paramilitary force and also in two of the guerilla armies. While most often the children are not forced to join the ranks, some are forcibly recruited, and even those who join voluntarily have few other options for survival in light of the poverty and civil war that surround them (HRW Colombia, 2003). Once they have joined, the children are taught how to fight, kill, and torture. They are forced to execute captured opponents and targeted civilians and are made to watch brutal torture inflicted on the enemy: needles stuck under fingernails, fingers and noses chopped off, and disembowelment. Many children try to desert, and those who are recaptured face a war council that decides their fate, most often execution. Friends or defenders of the deserter are forced to carry out the execution to demonstrate their loyalty (HRW Colombia, 2003).

Colombia is not the only other place where child soldiers can be found; they are used all around the world. In San Salvador's civil war in the 1980s, families were forced to flee to the guerilla camps after the government cleared

out the towns in the countryside. Children growing up in the camps quickly joined the ranks of guerillas, starting out as young as 11 years old (Dickenson-Gomez, 2002). In Sierra Leone, children between the ages of 7 and 14 make up 80% of the rebel soldiers (Dickenson-Gomez, 2002). Similarly, children fought with the Renamo rebels in Mozambique's civil war, and warlords in Liberia use them to swell their ranks (Maier, 1998). In Sri Lanka, it is estimated that 60% of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a rebel army, is under age 18 (Gunaratna, 1998). Some children even join the Black Tigers, the group of Tamil suicide bombers. (Joshi, 2000) The situation in Uganda is not an isolated incident. As these examples show, the use of children in war and violent acts is a worldwide issue.

### **PTSD in Abducted Children**

The traumatic stress endured by these children undoubtedly leads to serious psychological issues. In a study of Vietnam veterans, Breslau and Davis found that PTSD results independently from both victimization and participation in violent acts (1987). Applied to the current situation, these children have experienced both, which combine to greatly increase their risk of PTSD. This prediction of psychological problems is confirmed by empirical evidence. According to a nurse with World Vision in Uganda, children now free of captivity with the LRA experience nightmares and flashbacks, and they tend to withdraw from social contact (HRW Uganda, 2003). Similarly, a priest working with ex-child soldiers in Sierra Leone described them as "hyper-alert" and noted that they did

not sleep well (Maier, 1998). These are clear symptoms of PTSD, and they indicate that there is desperate need for both psychological help and study.

However, to date, there has been very little psychological research of child soldiers in any of these conflicts. For the situation in Uganda, there has only been one recent study. Ilse Derluyn, et. al. interviewed 301 former child soldiers abducted by the LRA about their time in captivity and their exposure to traumatic events (2004). 71 of these children filled in an "impact of event scale." Of those 71, 97% (69 children) showed post-traumatic stress symptoms of clinical significance. This is an extremely high percentage, and it suggests that children abducted by the LRA almost universally experience PTSD symptoms. This study confirms the prediction of psychological damage and reveals great need for further research.

### **Possible Long Term Effects**

Looking to the future of Uganda, it is difficult to predict what the long term impacts of the abductions and the brutality will be, for the war and the abductions continue to this day. However, the analogous situations in other countries can offer insight into the futures of the abducted children. These children are likely to wrestle with guilt for years to come. In San Salvador, this formed an identity crisis as children realized they were each becoming "one who kills," just like the enemy they were fighting (Dickenson-Gomez, 2002). In Uganda, this will most likely take the form of guilt over the acts of violence that the children were forced to commit. This guilt can be analyzed according to the model proposed by Kubany and

Manke (1995). They offer four sources of false guilt among survivors of trauma: hindsight bias, responsibility distortion, justification distortion, and wrongdoing distortion. Of these, all but hindsight bias clearly apply to the situation of the Ugandan children. Responsibility distortion is the belief that one caused an event that was actually out of one's control. Justification distortion is the wrong belief that one had more good choices available than were actually there and that one made bad choices. Wrongdoing distortion is the conviction that one violated a personal moral code. These ideas can fairly easily be applied to the situation in Uganda: the children were forced to kill and commit other atrocities; otherwise they themselves would have been beaten or killed. They had no good choices, thus they are not responsible for the brutal acts they committed. However, the children will likely be haunted by the guilt of their actions for years to come.

Another possible consequence is increased violence, even once the war has ended. In San Salvador the civil war is long over, but it has been replaced by intense gang violence (Dickenson-Gomez, 2002). This is partially due to the fact that many current gang members grew up in the guerilla camps. Having missed out on the normal training of childhood, they learned to solve problems by violence. Now that the war is over, they do not know any other way to live. There is a similar situation in Sierra Leone as demobilized child soldiers attempt to reintegrate into society (Maier, 1998). After facing the trauma of war and taking orders for so long, they see violence as an "acceptable means of communication" and are now unable to make their own decisions. Tiffin and Kaplan note the trend from psychological studies that violence inflicted on children is a strong indicator

that they will be violent in the future (2004). This trend and the examples from other locations offer a warning for what the future of Uganda may look like.

Formerly abducted children have not yet turned to violence, but they face a future filled with little hope. In Sierra Leone, family care has been the best way to help ex-child soldiers readjust to normal life (Maier, 1998). In Uganda, the children do not have this luxury. They often return home to find that their parents have been killed or have moved to a safer region away from the fighting (HRW Uganda, 2003). Esther Galuma, a UNICEF officer working in Liberia, describes the need for children to find a place, whether a family or a community, where they feel they belong (Maier, 1998). This is especially difficult for the escaped abductees. They often cannot return to their homes or their school for fear of being recaptured, and for the rest of their life they must carry with them the physical and emotional scars of their captivity (HRW Uganda, 2003). Even when they are able to go home, the situation is bleak: the girls are considered “damaged goods” from the sexual abuse that they suffered, and they frequently end up as prostitutes. Sixteen-year old John W., now an orphan, sums up the plight abducted children of Uganda: “What disappoints me most is the future. Some seem to have things to do here, and a place to go, but for me, the future is blank . . . What am I going to do?” (HRW Uganda, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

The tragedy in Uganda continues to this day, as the LRA continues to abduct children. A generation of children in Northern Uganda is being devastated

as their lives are shattered by sexual abuse and brutal violence. Yet too few people even know that this is going on. There is a desperate need for awareness of this issue to be raised so that there will be a public outcry to stop it. As atrocities continue, the first priority must be to put an end to the war and the abductions. In April 2005, Rory Anderson, Senior Policy Advisor for World Vision, a non-profit which runs refugee camps in Uganda, addressed the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus. He begged Congress to actively engage this issue and seek to end this war. Anderson said that on this rare occasion, he actually agreed with Sam Kolo, an LRA commander and war criminal, who said that "involvement by the international community would end this war" (World Vision, 2005). Once the war is over, the children who were abducted will need to be lovingly cared for as they slowly recover from the trauma and try to begin new lives. There will also be a deep need for further psychological study of this issue. There is currently only one study on PTSD in the abducted children, and even it has been criticized for being too narrow in its focus (Kurupparachchi, 2004). The simple truth is that no single study can accurately describe a situation as massive and complex as the one in Uganda. More research is required to get a complete understanding of the psychological damage caused to the Ugandan child soldiers.

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