

UGANDA

STOLEN CHILDREN: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda

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I. SUMMARY

Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA explained to us that all five brothers couldn't serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until the two of them died. They told us it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was nine years old.

—Martin P., age thirteen

I was scared. There were many bullets fired. I dropped down for safety, but could see the tree leaves falling from the bullets. . . . I didn't shoot, but six rebel soldiers and many abducted children were killed. Over twenty children died. I was running for safety and had to jump over many of the bodies. The youngest was about twelve.

—Grace T., age sixteen

Children are abducted in record numbers by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and subjected to brutal treatment as soldiers, laborers, and sexual slaves. Since June of 2002, an estimated 5,000 children have been abducted from their homes and communities—a larger number than any previous year of the sixteen-year-old conflict and a dramatic increase from the less than 100 children abducted in 2001.

Children have been targets of LRA abductions throughout the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government in the northern part of Uganda, which began in 1986. Conservative estimates place the total number of children abducted at more than 20,000. The rate of abductions has escalated dramatically since early 2002, when a military offensive launched by the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) resulted in the LRA returning to Uganda from their camps in southern Sudan.

Children are abducted from their homes, schools, and off the streets. They are frequently beaten, and forced to carry out raids, burn houses, beat and kill civilians, and abduct other children. They must carry heavy loads over long distances, and work long hours fetching water, firewood, gathering food and performing domestic duties. Many are given weapons training and some are forced to fight against the UPDF.

The LRA uses brutal tactics to demand obedience from abducted children. Children are forced to beat or trample to death other abducted children who attempt to escape, and are repeatedly told they will be killed if they try to run away. Children who fall behind during long marches or resist orders are also killed. Many others have been killed in battle or have died from mistreatment, disease and hunger.

Girls are used as domestic servants for commanders and their households. At age fourteen or fifteen, many are forced into sexual slavery as "wives" of LRA commanders and subjected to rape, unwanted pregnancies, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

The threat of abduction has made children throughout the region fear for their safety. Each night, thousands of children pour into Gulu town and Lacor hospital from surrounding areas, hoping to avoid abduction. They seek refuge on verandas, in the bus park, on church grounds and in local factories before returning home again each morning.

Children are also recruited as soldiers by the Ugandan government. Boys as young as twelve are lured into joining the Local Defense Units (LDUs, also called "home guards") with promises of money. After training, they may be used to fight with the UPDF against the LRA, in some cases, inside Sudan. Boys who have escaped or been rescued from the LRA are also recruited by the UPDF while in UPDF custody for debriefing.

Human Rights Watch calls on the LRA to immediately stop abducting children and to immediately release all children from its forces. Human Rights Watch also urges the Ugandan government to immediately end all recruitment of children and to identify and demobilize all children in both the LDUs and the UPDF.

Human Rights Watch also calls for action by the international community. We urge the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to request that the Secretary-General appoint a Special Envoy for the abducted children of northern Uganda. Such an envoy should be encouraged to conduct “shuttle diplomacy” between the LRA and the Ugandan government with the aim of securing the release into safety of all those abducted by the LRA as children, and to seek an end to future abductions.

Methodology

This report is based on field research conducted by Human Rights Watch in northern Uganda in February 2003. During our investigation, we interviewed eighteen children who had been abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army, and three others who are now young adults but were abducted as children. They ranged in age from ten to twenty and had been abducted from Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, and Lira districts. Their time in LRA captivity ranged from several weeks to ten years, although the large majority of those interviewed had been abducted since early 2002.

Human Rights Watch also conducted numerous interviews with representatives of nongovernmental organizations, religious and civic leaders, UNICEF, local government officials, and representatives of the Ugandan People’s Defense Force. The names of all children interviewed for this report have been changed to protect their privacy. Some community leaders and representatives of nongovernmental organizations have also requested anonymity.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Lord’s Resistance Army

- Immediately stop abducting children;
- Immediately end all killing, torture and sexual abuse of children;
- Immediately release all abductees remaining in captivity;
- Ensure that members of the LRA respect the human rights of all civilians in the areas of conflict.

To the Government of Uganda

- Immediately end all recruitment of children into the Local Defense Units or UPDF and ensure that all individuals recruited in the future are at least eighteen;
- Investigate allegations of recruitment of former LRA abductees while they are at the barracks, as was the case for children held at Achol-Pii barracks in late 2002. Promptly bring those responsible for child recruitment to justice;
- Identify and demobilize all children currently serving in the LDUs or UPDF;
- Instruct the UPDF and security personnel to take all possible steps to protect children from abduction by the LRA;
- When fighting the LRA, make all feasible attempts to minimize child casualties;
- Transport children as quickly as possible from outlying barracks in the districts to the Child Protection Units. Ensure that children are kept at the CPUs no longer than 48 hours.

To the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

- At its 59th Session, request that the Secretary General appoint a Special Envoy for the abducted children of northern Uganda. Such an envoy should be encouraged to conduct “shuttle diplomacy” between the LRA and the Ugandan government with the aim of securing the release into safety of all those abducted by the LRA as children, and to seek an end to future abductions. The envoy should work closely with the appointed government negotiation team, religious, and other civilian leaders in northern Uganda, as well as with NGOs and UN agencies that have been involved in the situation;
- Urge the LRA to immediately end all recruitment of children and to release all children currently in captivity;

- Urge the government of Uganda to end all recruitment of children, in accordance with its obligations under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

To UNICEF

- Establish and maintain an office in northern Uganda in order to strengthen its child protection activities on behalf of children in the north;
- Systematically monitor child recruitment by Ugandan military forces, including both the UPDF and Local Defense Units, and continue to raise the issue with the relevant authorities.

To Donor Countries to Uganda

- Closely monitor any military assistance to the Ugandan government to ensure that human rights standards are strictly observed by the UPDF;
- Continue to support UNICEF and international NGOs working in northern Uganda for the protection of children;
- Provide diplomatic and financial support for the appointment of a Special Envoy for the abducted children of northern Uganda.

To the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

- Send a team to investigate and report on children's rights abuses in the north of Uganda and widely circulate the findings to members of the African Union.

III. BACKGROUND

The current conflict in northern Uganda began soon after the National Resistance Army (NRA) of President Yoweri Museveni took power in 1986 from Tito Okello Lutwa's government. Remnants of the previous government's forces fled into northern Uganda and southern Sudan and formed the Ugandan People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Many of these soldiers originated from the north, including the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, which are inhabited almost exclusively by the Acholi people and are known collectively as Acholi-land.

The UPDA continued to fight the government in the north until 1988. During this period, several splinter groups formed in Acholi-land, which were based partly on traditional and Christian religious beliefs. One of these groups, which was organized by Joseph Kony, drew support from UPDA deserters, Acholi youth and members of other splinter groups. Kony first named his movement the Lord's Salvation Army which was later changed to the United Christian Democratic Army and, finally, renamed the Lord's Resistance Army. The NRA later became the army of the government of Uganda, and in 1995, was renamed the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF).

The LRA, ostensibly dedicated to the overthrow of the Ugandan government, has brutalized the Acholi population in northern Uganda. It kills and mutilates civilians, abducts children and adults, loots homes and public buildings, and burns villages and fields. Until 2002, the LRA had been principally based in southern Sudan, conducting cross border raids, attacking UPDF positions, and abducting children and taking them to Sudan. The LRA enjoyed the support of the Sudanese government in retaliation for the support which the government of Uganda gave to a Sudanese rebel group, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). In late 1999, the governments of Sudan and Uganda entered into an agreement to cease support for each other's rebel groups, and strengthened diplomatic relations, later exchanging ambassadors. Improved bilateral relations led to Sudan giving permission to the Ugandan government to conduct a military operation inside southern Sudan known as "Operation Iron Fist." The operation was launched in March 2002, when the government of Uganda sent up to 10,000 UPDF troops into southern Sudan to rout the LRA from their bases. Some of the LRA fled into the Imatong Mountains in Sudan, many more crossed back into Uganda in mid-2002.

One justification for “Iron Fist” was the rescue of abducted children. Since the beginning of the operation, at least 2,000 children have been retrieved, captured or have managed to escape on their own. During this same period however, 5,000 more children have been abducted—more than in any previous year.

In response to the conflict and purportedly to protect civilians from LRA attacks, the Ugandan government has forcibly displaced much of the civilian population into camps commonly known as protected villages. From 1996 to 2000, some 400,000 civilians, mostly from Gulu district, were rounded up by the military and forced into camps. Following the return of the LRA into Uganda in 2002, another 400,000 have been forced to relocate into camps, mainly in Kitgum and Pader districts. Currently, some 800,000 people out of an estimated total population of 1,100,000 are internally displaced in Acholi-land. The UPDF has also committed human rights abuses in the north, including the murder and rape of civilians, recruitment of children, and the looting of property.¹

Efforts to broker a ceasefire and lasting peace between the LRA and the government have to date been unsuccessful. The closest attempt, negotiated by then Minister for the North Betty Bigombe in late 1993, fell apart in February 1994. More recently, a group of prominent Acholis initiated contacts with the LRA and carried written and oral messages back and forth between the LRA and the Ugandan government regarding conditions for peace talks. In 2000, the Ugandan government adopted an amnesty law to encourage members of the LRA to give up their arms, but to date, few higher-level LRA fighters have left the LRA. In 2002, the government appointed an official delegation to negotiate with the LRA but as of the time of writing, official talks have not yet taken place. On March 2, 2003, Joseph Kony declared a unilateral ceasefire, but LRA fighters violated the declaration in the following days killing and abducting civilians. President Museveni on March 6, announced that the UPDF would not accept the ceasefire declaration but several days later declared a limited cease fire by UPDF forces so that the government delegation and LRA commanders could meet.²

IV. ABDUCTION AND ABUSES AGAINST CHILDREN BY THE LORD’S RESISTANCE ARMY

Abduction

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.

—Martin P., abducted in February 2002 at age twelve³

Since the beginning of the conflict in 1986, the LRA has abducted thousands of children from their homes and communities.⁴ Conservative estimates place the total number of children abducted at more than 20,000.⁵ As

¹ See Human Rights Watch, *Hostile to Democracy: The Movement System and Political Repression in Uganda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 1999), pp. 120-123. See also, Gersony, Robert, *The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a Field-Based Assessment of the Civil Conflicts in Northern Uganda* (Kampala: U.S. Agency for International Development, August 1997), pp. 45-48, Human Rights Focus, *Between Two Fires: The Human Rights Situation in ‘Protected Camps’ in Gulu District*, February 2002, pp. 43-54.

² The New Vision, “No Ceasefire, Says Museveni,” Kampala, March 6, 2003, The Monitor, “Museveni Offers 5-Day Ceasefire,” Kampala, March 11, 2003.

³ All interviews with former LRA abductees were conducted in Gulu between February 4 and 8, 2003. All names of children have been changed to protect their privacy.

⁴ In this report, the word “child” refers to anyone under the age of eighteen. Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as “every human being under the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.N. Doc. A/RES/44/25, ratified by Uganda on August 17, 1990.

a result of the UPDF's military offensive, "Operation Iron Fist," launched last year in southern Sudan, many of the LRA returned to Uganda. Since their reentry, the rate of abductions has increased dramatically, with an estimated 5,000 children abducted since June 2002—more than in any previous year of the conflict and a sharp increase from the less than one hundred children abducted in 2001.⁶

UNICEF states that in 2002, 3,927 children between ages five and seventeen were registered as abducted in Pader district alone, one of three districts which comprise Acholi-land. Based on reports from local volunteers, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative calculates that children account for approximately three of every four abductions.⁷

Children are most vulnerable to abduction at night, when the LRA carries out raids on villages and camps, looting food and supplies, burning houses, and taking both children and adults captive.

Fearing abduction, each night thousands of children from surrounding areas travel into Gulu and Lacor hospital to sleep on verandas, in the bus park, on church grounds, and in local factories before returning home the next morning. In early February 2003, more than 1,000 children were sleeping each night in Gulu town, and about 3,000 people, the vast majority unaccompanied children, sought safety at Lacor hospital. These children are known locally as "night commuters."

Adults usually stay in their homes to protect their property. Experience has shown that adults abducted by the LRA are generally kept for short periods to help carry looted goods, and then released. For children who are abducted, captivity can last for years.

Fifteen-year-old Christopher W. was abducted in August, of 2002 from Omoro county in Gulu district. His father had sent him out to get some cigarette papers.

When I was coming back, I was stopped. The LRA told me not to run and they grabbed me and tied me up around the waist. . . . I had a school uniform in my pocket. They told me to go ahead and drop the uniform, and to leave it for some others to go to school. Now that I was working for them, I wouldn't need it anymore.

About twenty children were abducted that day. Christopher W. said they were tied together and given loads to carry. "That first day, they gave me some fresh cassava to carry on my head and a pail of cabbage that was very heavy. I was not allowed to drop it."

Mark T., seventeen, from Pader district, has an older brother named Julius who had been abducted by the LRA several years ago. After Julius escaped in 1997, the LRA went to his village to look for him. Julius was being kept in the army barracks at the time; the LRA killed his parents instead.

Following his parents' death, Mark T. lived with his uncle in a different town. Mark T. returned with a group of boys to his native village on August 5, 2002 where they were immediately ambushed and abducted by the LRA. They were forced to march towards Kalong. The next day, "we passed another group. There I met my other brother, Amos, nineteen, who told me that he and Julius were abducted from home the same day as me."

⁵ UNICEF reports that over 38,000 adults and children have been abducted during the course of the conflict, with children making up the majority of abductions. Data provided to Human Rights Watch by UNICEF, February 3, 2002.

⁶ Ibid. UNICEF states that a conservative estimate is that 4,500 children were abducted in 2002, the vast majority in the second half of the year. Abductions have continued in 2003.

⁷ The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative also documented abductions of more than 2,500 people in Kitgum and Pader districts from June through December 2002, but believes that due to under-reporting, the true total is higher. Data provided to Human Rights Watch by Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, February 2003. For more information, see www.acholipeace.org.

For Julius, this was the second time he was abducted by the LRA. The World Vision rehabilitation center reports that since 2000, at least eighteen children who had passed through the center were reabducted and escaped for a second time.⁸ Gulu Save Our Children Organization (GUSCO), another rehabilitation center, reported that ten children from their program had been reabducted between September and December of 2002.⁹

Nongovernmental organizations also report that the average age of abductees appears to be getting younger. A representative of the World Vision rehabilitation center told Human Rights Watch that, “Now, children of nine or ten are being abducted. It used to be thirteen, fourteen or fifteen. Now, children of fifteen and sixteen are being released. They’re more interested in the younger ones.”¹⁰ This may be because younger children are easier to control and younger girls are less likely to be infected with the HIV virus.

Susan A. was abducted from her village in Pader in October 2002 when she was twelve. She was returning from her grandmother’s house with her older sister at about four in the afternoon when they met a group of eight LRA. “They beat my sister badly and left her on the roadside. They wanted to know where the gumboots (rubber boots) were, but she wouldn’t tell them.” The LRA took Susan A. As they moved through the bush, they abducted more children, including an eleven-year-old girl whom Susan A. knew.

Janet M. was twelve when she was abducted in late November 2002 from Kilak county, in Gulu district. She told us that two rebels came into her home where she was sleeping. They woke her and her two sisters, looted their home and took the sisters. She said that the LRA stopped at another house, abducted four boys around thirteen or fourteen years old, and then proceeded to the home of Janet M.’s uncle. There, Janet M. and her sister found that their father had also been abducted. The LRA first tied the abductees around the waist and then tied them to one another in a long chain. They were also given loot to carry on their heads.

Janet M. said, “Thirty-two were abducted from the village, both children and adults. I was the youngest, at age twelve. The next day they divided up the captives, and told the old people, including my father, to lie down on the ground. They started beating them with a machete. They cut him badly and left him there.” Later, she heard he reached home safely. Of her two sisters, one was eventually released; the other is still in captivity.

Children are often taken in large numbers. John W. reported that thirty-eight children, mostly boys and girls in primary school, were taken when he was abducted in July of 2002. Martin P. was taken with twenty-eight boys from his village in February 2002. Grace T. told Human Rights Watch that in July 2002 she was abducted with seven other children but soon joined a larger group of at least seventy new abductees.

Many people in the north fault the UPDF for not offering the civilian population adequate protection from LRA attacks, including abduction. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative reports that between June and December 2002, the LRA carried out at least 456 attacks in Kitgum and Pader districts, but that the UPDF intervened in only thirty-three of these instances.¹¹

Ruth K. was abducted in July of 2002 from Purongo, one of the “protected villages,” or camps, where the UPDF maintains a detachment. She reported that the LRA attacked the camp, shooting towards the detachment and burning houses, and then looting food items from shops nearby. She said that when the UPDF did not respond, the LRA returned to the camp and abducted Ruth K. and at least eight other children.

Children are repeatedly told by the LRA they will be killed if they try to run away. When Edward T. was abducted from his home in July of 2002, he was tied to other abductees and forced to carry *posho* (maize meal) on his head. “I kept thinking that I would run away as soon as I could, but then I saw someone who tried to run was

⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Gulu, February 4, 2003.

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with GUSCO representative, Gulu, February 4, 2003.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Data provided to Human Rights Watch by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, February 2003.

captured and killed. He was shot. After I saw that, I was afraid and realized I may never be able to run away.” Nevertheless, he took this chance later.

A day or two after their abduction, all children are initiated. First they are beaten, purportedly to “harden” them to life as soldiers, and then smeared with shea nut oil. Thirteen-year-old Martin P. told us that the LRA said that “they were beating us to give us strength, so not to fear what would lie in store for us in the future.”

Seventeen-year-old Mark T. from Pader district described the beatings:

They gave us 150 strokes of the cane, and eight slaps with the machete on the back. It was the soldiers who did the beating. For the cane we were made to lie on our stomach and then the soldiers would beat us on the buttocks. There were twenty-three of us. For the machete, we were made to bend over at the waist, and then the soldiers would use the blunt end of it to beat us on the back.

Grace T. told Human Rights Watch that after she was abducted in July, of 2002 from Omoro county, Gulu district, the LRA told her and the other abductees, “Now we want to train you to be soldiers, but first we must harden you by beating you twenty strokes.” She had been abducted with two of her sisters and a younger brother, who was fourteen. She said they were all stripped naked and beaten on the back, first with a stick, and then with a machete. When one of her sisters asked to put on her clothes before being beaten with the machete, the LRA threatened to kill her. Grace T. said she and her other sister and brother pleaded for her life, saying that they were willing to be soldiers.

According to John W., age sixteen, children were ordered not to cry during the beatings or they would be killed. Fourteen others were beaten with him; one, a fifteen-year-old boy, cried out. John W. said that he was clubbed on the back of the head and killed.

After the beatings, shea nut oil is placed on each child’s forehead, chest, back, hands and feet in the sign of the cross. Brenda O. explained that after being smeared with oil, “then you are no longer with your mother and father, but for the LRA. If you leave, they will kill you.” Some children were told or believed that the shea nut oil would make it easier for the LRA to locate them should they try to run away. Samuel B. said that when he was anointed with shea nut oil, he was told “that it would make us not escape, for if we would try, this would help them track us down and find us.”

Brutality

I was with the LRA for six months and during this time many abductees escaped. Not all were so lucky. 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. We were beating him with sticks, each recruit was given a stick.

—Edward T., age eighteen

Children told us that in addition to a caning at the time of initiation, LRA commanders and soldiers beat the children, often severely, for minor infractions committed while under their orders. The LRA also beat children to encourage them to march faster, including those wounded in the fighting, and sometimes kill those that can’t keep up. Child abductees are forced to beat and sometimes kill civilians in looting operations, participate in the abduction of new children, and steal from and burn houses in their home regions. Children are forced to witness and to participate in the killings of other children, usually those who attempt to escape and are captured. The practice of using the children to collectively kill fosters guilt and fear among them, and sends a powerful message to the children of their potential fate if they attempt to escape. In addition, the brutal tactics used to control the

children make their personal rehabilitation and reintegration into their home communities that much more difficult.

According to children interviewed for this report, the weapons used for the beatings include sticks made from branches of trees, the butt of weapons and other instruments. Sixteen-year-old John W. explained that in addition to the cane, a piece of wire that is normally used for locking a bicycle was used for punishment during his time with the LRA. Other times, the wooden end or the blunt side of a machete would be used to beat the buttocks of a child. Soldiers beat John W. with both during his seven months with the LRA.

Ten-year-old Stephen A. spoke of his second beating with the LRA: "I was severely beaten for shooting my gun during an operation. During a raid on a local village, I was sent into one of the houses to see what could be taken. I found a man hiding inside. I was confused. I shot my gun in the air to warn the others. The LRA fired back. The soldiers were angry and beat me with a machete."

Children are often assigned as servants to individual commanders or soldiers and are charged with caring for their personal items. Any lost or broken personal effect can mean a caning.

Charles M., thirteen years old, described the punishment he received from his commander:

I was nearly beaten to death by my commander, Bukot, because of another officer in the LRA. While we were in the bush, commander Bukot had come across a Cwaa tree, this is a tough tree that has strong branches and it makes good poles for building houses. Commander Bukot cut a branch from the tree and shaved it down to a smooth pole, about two feet long. He then ordered me to keep it well for him to use. Some days later, a soldier from a different company, came up to me and ordered me to hand over the stick. I could not refuse an officer. When Commander Bukot found out that I had given away his stick, he charged me with negligence and ordered 250 strokes of the cane. About half way through the beating, the pain became so great, I thought I was going to die. I lost count of the beatings and lost consciousness. Following the caning, I was forced to my feet and had my arms tied behind my back, bound just above the elbows. I was told that I was going to be taken and clubbed to death, but evidently, the commander felt that I had had enough and the clubbing never happened.

Thomas O., fourteen, said he was made to carry a crate of soda that belonged to the officer to whom he was assigned. "I was tired from the long marches and the heavy crate of drinks on my head and at one point I slipped. It was very hot, I was thirsty and we had marched for many kilometers. I lost my balance and the crate fell to the ground. One of the bottles broke. The commander then forced me to lie down and caned me for the accident."

The children also spoke of the hardships of long marches. Those who were unable to keep walking because of blisters or war wounds were sometimes killed. John W. told Human Rights Watch that LRA soldiers would sometimes kill boys who got blisters and could no longer walk, but other times the leaders would make the new abductees come and help with the clubbing. Those who refused risked death themselves.

Christopher W. was one fifteen-year-old who suffered from injuries and beating:

As we continued on the endless marches, I got bad blisters on my bare feet. Thorns embedded in the bottom of my feet became infected. Eventually, I could no longer keep up and the commander who had initially abducted me told me I was useless as I could not walk. He turned away and then two soldiers, in full uniform, approached and started beating me with the heavy ends of their RPG's (rocket propelled grenades). I was repeatedly beaten on the head and body and left for dead. Two days later, a local farmer found me.

Sondra O. told of the fate of children who could not continue to march. "You were not allowed to rest, because the moment you tried they would kill you. Three children with swollen legs had difficulty walking and tried to stop. The LRA tied the children's hands behind their backs and ordered the others to beat them to death

with sticks as big as my arm. Later they removed the clothing from the children and threw their bodies into a swamp.”

Many of the children interviewed for this report told us they were forced to participate in the beating or trampling of fellow abductees. Some of the children, while fearing to refuse the orders of the LRA, nevertheless spoke with difficulty about performing these killings. James K. told Human Rights Watch, “Just a few days before an air assault by UPDF helicopter gunship, there was a group of children who escaped. Two girls, aged fourteen, were captured. They were given to the group of child abductees and we were told that we must kill them with clubs. Every one of the new recruits was made to participate. We were warned that if we ever tried to escape, we would be killed in the same manner.”

According to seventeen-year-old Samuel B., he was spared from killing personally, but had to mutilate the flesh of a corpse. “During my time with the LRA, we looted houses and stores, abducted and even killed people. I didn’t participate in the killing, but one time I was ordered to cut up a dead body with a knife. I was then forced to pick up the pieces of flesh and throw them down on the ground to show my loyalty. This child was killed because he had tried to escape. He was caught and then beaten to death by other children.”

Mark T., also seventeen years old, spoke of the killings:

One time when we were marching towards Pajule in Pader district, one eighteen-year-old male tried to escape but was soon captured. Soldiers laid him on the ground and told us to step on him. All the new recruits participated—we trampled him to death. During my time with the LRA, there were other children who escaped and seven of these were caught. Of them, two were hacked to death with machetes and five were clubbed or trampled. We were either made to participate or watch the killings. The youngest recruit killed was maybe nine or ten years old.

Susan A., aged twelve said, “I saw many dead bodies in the bush. One day, a man tried to escape. After he was caught, four of us girls were forced to beat him to death. When we started crying, the LRA told us that if we cried, we would also be killed. The man pleaded with us, ‘You forgive me, you sympathize with me, please let me live.’ But the commander told him, ‘If you speak again, we will cut you to pieces with a machete.’”

In addition to the killing of those who attempt escape, children are also made to kill and beat civilians in the villages and displaced persons camps which are raided. Some of the boys expressed confusion as to why this was done and how some individuals were chosen. James K. explained, “What did I do with the LRA during my time in captivity? Killed people, beat up people and looted property. This was under order from the commanders; when we approached a village, some persons would be singled out. We were never told why these people and not others, we were simply told that this one had to be killed.”

Christopher W., aged fifteen, told us, “At one time, we went to a displaced persons camp and immediately killed three people. This was done to warn people not to stay in the camps but to move back to their villages. I don’t know why these three were selected. We later abducted many children from that camp.”

Life in Captivity

As we moved from place to place, we would have to sleep on the grass, under trees, or in the sand. I had to fetch water, wash clothes, and cook the meals. The wives would sometimes beat me or make me carry heavy loads. If I walked slowly, I was beaten. I was beaten practically every day.

—Susan A., age twelve

Children’s main duties during their time in captivity are to perform menial tasks, often acting as servants to the commanders, soldiers, and their wives. Children who were taken across the border to Sudan typically spent many months in one place and were ordered to fetch water, plant and harvest, and especially for girls, perform domestic services to “wives” and their children. More recent abductees who remain in Uganda lead a much more

nomadic life than their age mates in Sudan. These children are tasked with portering goods, cooking, looting fields and homes, and abducting other children.

Christine A. from Odek subcounty, Gulu district, spent several years at Aru camp in Sudan, spending much of her time looking for water. “There was a big water problem, more of a problem than food. We would wake up around four in the morning and go out to search for water, sometimes returning home at mid-day. Some children became so thirsty they would drink their own urine for relief. Other times, we were unable to urinate our thirst was so great.”

Fifteen-year-old Josephine M. from Kilak county, Gulu, said, “In Sudan, we worked from six in the morning until sundown in the fields of the commanders. We weren’t given food from those fields, it went to the commanders and their wives.”

Matthew A., with the LRA for four years, explained, “When we weren’t fighting, we were digging and planting in the fields outside the camps. This was hot work we performed in the morning. In the afternoon hours, we would cut trees to make charcoal. Some would be used in the camps, but much would be loaded onto trucks and sold in Juba. . . . At the commanders’ houses, it was the new recruits who would do the cooking, fetching of water, and caring for children. Often it was girls who performed these duties. Boys and soldiers in the LRA would do the heavy, manual work. There was never enough to eat and we often ate wild roots and leaves.”

Many of the children, particularly those who spent time in Sudan, said they were frequently hungry. Josephine M. said, “Sometimes we would go on an empty stomach for days. We had no food and were eating only wild leaves and wild fruit. . . . Sometimes we only had one handful of beans for ten people. . . . Hunger kills many children, including the children of the commanders.”

With the launching of Operation Iron Fist and the return of the LRA to Uganda in mid-2002, abducted children’s lives changed to reflect the much more mobile status of the LRA. Often moving to a new spot each night, children described breaking into small groups during the day and often joining up with their larger units at night. Those interviewed for this report expressed their worry about being detected and attacked by Uganda government troops and their exhausting, mobile lifestyle.

Thirteen-year-old Charles M. said, “I had to carry things in the LRA, but they were not too heavy, because I was assigned to a big important man, he was a top commander. I carried his chair and his gun. I would get very tired, not so much from the loads, but from walking the long distances. Sometimes we would walk from dawn until late into the night.”

Sondra O. spent four months with the LRA in Uganda. “I was given one and a half basins of beans to carry plus an empty water container, all on my head. It was very heavy and my neck caused me great pain. It still aches today. We would march many kilometers each day. I never carried weapons or ammunition, just these heavy loads.”

Christopher W., aged fifteen, explained, “My main job with the LRA was cooking and watching the fires. I had to beat the women, girls, and boys who let the fires grow too large. The leaders would get very angry if too much smoke was coming from the fires as this could attract enemy aircraft. If I didn’t do my job well, I risked being beaten myself. . . . I also looted houses in the villages—whatever we could find—beans, supplies, and even livestock. We would approach the villages in small groups. The leader would instruct us to pillage certain houses and bypass others. I never knew why some houses were chosen.”

Edward T. told us he spent some of his time stealing from homes as well:

When we arrived at a village or camp, we would break into small groups. The soldiers would stay outside and send the recruits into the houses to steal and bring the goods outside. We would loot as much as we could carry and then move off together in a group. . . . Sometimes LRA soldiers would

attack the army detachment and we the recruits would be ordered to wait. If they were successful, when the shooting ended we would be given the all-clear sign and then break into the houses and shops.

An additional responsibility for the children serving in Uganda is the abducting of new recruits, often while looting villages and camps. Thomas O. explained, "I was with the LRA until December 2002. I never went to Sudan but stayed in Uganda, mostly moving in Pader district. During our time, we abducted more people, even girls were abducted in Lira district. We abducted them during a looting raid on a village there. A few days later, three of these girls were released."

Fifteen-year-old Matthew A., who spent four years with the LRA, said while in Uganda, "I didn't burn any houses or kill civilians, but had to loot and abduct children. In four months, I abducted four girls and seven boys during raids. When I was responsible for choosing new recruits, I would ask questions and one time released some children. I didn't like to take two children from the same house, so one time, I took one sister and left the other."

Training and Battle

The air bombing happened a few weeks after I was abducted. It was a UPDF helicopter gunship that shot at us. I was wounded during the attack, but many abductees were killed as well as LRA soldiers. We were a group of 500 before the attack, with 400 of those abducted children and adults. Hours later only 200 had survived.

—James K., age seventeen

In addition to their other responsibilities, abducted children are given arms training, forced to carry weapons and ammunition and in some cases, fight alongside LRA soldiers. And like their other responsibilities, the nature and duration of these tasks changed once the LRA moved back into Uganda. Most children who were abducted before 2002 and spent time in Sudan were given a longer, more formalized training program and fought in the front lines, both against the Ugandan army and in earlier years against the SPLM/A, what the children refer to as "the Dinka," the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan, disproportionately represented in the SPLA. Since 2002, training for new recruits has been more sporadic. Some of the youngest are not trained at all; others are given minimal training but no weapons or uniform. While only a few of those interviewed fought directly against the UPDF in attacks, the majority faced battle conditions and some were wounded due to their proximity to the fighting.

Matthew A., aged fifteen, spent four years with the LRA, first in Sudan then in Uganda:

During our military training, we were divided into groups of fifty children, the youngest in the group was age eight or nine, and they included boys and girls. We learned to march in formation and parade. We were taught to shoot, clean, and assemble and disassemble sub machine guns. These weapons held a magazine that can shoot thirty rounds. They were large, heavy to carry and not easy to use at first. The training lasted for several weeks. During that time, if you made a mistake, you were severely beaten.

When we moved back into Uganda in 2002, we fought in many places in Pader district near Pajule. Later, we set an ambush near Aliwa in Lira district. As the vehicles passed we opened fire and soldiers escorting the trucks shot back at us. I was wounded in the leg and could not get up.

James K. was abducted in May 2002 and like many of the boys interviewed, he said he received arms training but never a weapon itself:

I was taught to march, to shoot, and to assemble the guns. All the abductees were trained, but not at the same time. We moved around a lot, there wasn't much time for training. Only a few of the older recruits received arms. During the training, the soldiers were harsh, slapping us for not doing what was

demanded. I was never given a gun of my own, but had to carry the gun of the commander. During the fighting, he would take the gun and leave me with no protection.

Edward T. also received training but no weapon. “The training I received was foot drill, assembling and disassembling the gun and how to fire, but I never shot a weapon in the training. There was no time for formal training, we would get one lesson here and another at the next place we marched to. We were drilled to work faster to load and dismantle the guns as quickly as possible, so that we would be good under fire.”

Stephen A., aged ten: “I was shown how to load, assemble, and clean the gun. It was a gun with a wooden handle that could shoot many bullets at a time, I don’t know what kind of weapon it was. I never used the gun in battle, but carried it for an adult soldier. It felt nice to have the gun. I felt safe.”

In contrast to many children abducted in 2002, Martin P. from Kitgum district was trained and armed to fight:

The training lasted about one week, we were shown how to load, shoot, and fire. Following the training I was given my own submachine gun and a pair of military trousers. I fought twice with the LRA. The first time we attacked a military detachment in Moyo district. We suffered heavy losses, and many of the LRA soldiers were killed. In the second battle, we laid a successful ambush on a passing UPDF convoy.

Although Sondra O. received neither a gun nor arms training, she was wounded in battle like so many abducted children. “One morning in September 2002, there was fighting between the UPDF and the LRA which lasted for several hours. I saw seven people killed and I was shot in the leg. The fighting began while we were crossing the road, with the UPDF firing on us. Many LRA soldiers and captives alike were killed.”

Charlotte W., fourteen, told us, “The abductions should stop, because when people are abducted, the children suffer a lot. When we enter ambushes, children die. When there is bombing, children die because they don’t know what to do.”

Slaves, “Wives,” and Mothers: The Experience of Girls

Angela P. was only ten when she was abducted by the LRA. At age fifteen, she was forced to become a “wife” to an LRA commander. She gave birth to two children in the bush. The first, a boy, she named *Komakech*, which means “I am unfortunate.” The second, a girl, she named *Can-Oroma*, meaning “I have suffered a lot.”

Although not as numerous as boys, girls are abducted in large numbers by the LRA. Some are given military training and are forced to fight, carry out raids on villages, and help abduct other children. Most are virtual slaves, forced to work long hours carrying heavy loads, walking long distances to fetch water and firewood, and performing other tasks, including cooking and field work. At age fourteen or fifteen, many are sexually enslaved as “wives” of commanders and subjected to rape, unwanted pregnancies, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

After abduction, younger girls are assigned to commanders as *ting ting* (servants). They often begin work before dawn and continue until evening. Janet M. explained, “You must work all of the time. The moment you refuse to work, they will kill you or beat you to death.” She, like other girls, was forced to carry heavy loads, fetch water and firewood, cook, wash, “dig” (farm), and tend the commanders’ children.

Brenda O. was assigned to Commander Ochang, and said:

He didn’t treat me very well. He would order young soldiers to beat me and two of the other *ting ting*. The commander would call to us to come and lie down. He would say, “Do you know why I am beating

you?” We didn’t know, so the soldiers caned us, fifty strokes. This happened every day. They beat us on the buttocks, but if you cry, they will beat every part of your body and not count the strokes.

Other girls described being mistreated by the commander’s “wives,” who are often abductees who had been similarly brutalized when they were *ting ting*. Charlotte W. told us that Commander Okeny did not mistreat her, but that his wives “would beat me every day for small mistakes, or for no reason.” Ruth K. said two of her commander’s six wives beat her repeatedly. “Not a single day passed when I wasn’t beaten.”

After reaching puberty, girls are forced to become “wives” to commanders. Angela P. said, “when I became a wife I was smeared with shea nut butter and told my loyalty was to Commander Okello.” Forced into sexual relationships, many girls become pregnant and give birth in the bush, with only other young girls to assist them. According to one girl, by the late 1990’s, over 800 children had been born to LRA wives and were concentrated at Jabelein camp in southern Sudan.

Many “wives” contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). A nurse at World Vision reports that of the children currently coming to the center, about fifty percent have STDs, including syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia. Two years ago, when returnees were more likely to have been in captivity for longer periods, the rate was much higher – nearly eighty-five percent.¹²

The rate of HIV infection among abductees is unknown. World Vision and GUSCO, two rehabilitation centers for former LRA abductees based in Gulu, have been offering HIV/AIDS testing to children in their centers in recent years. Former abductees are given HIV/AIDS education and counseling and then may choose whether or not to be tested. At World Vision, eighty-three children have been tested, and thirteen—seven boys and six girls—were HIV positive. The youngest was thirteen. Three of the girls had children of their own. At least one has since died of AIDS.¹³ At GUSCO, of eleven children tested between June and December of 2002, two were HIV positive.¹⁴

For many girls, becoming a “wife” brings some privileges. Wives often work fewer hours and receive better food. Once they have children, they no longer participate in raids or fighting. Christine A. was given as a wife to Commander Okello¹⁵ when she was sixteen. She said that when she became pregnant, he was “very happy” and took good care of her. After he was killed in battle, life became more difficult. She said, “they start to treat you like a girl again and beat you. I was beaten severely and given less food. Sometimes I didn’t have food for my baby. I had to work in the garden like a slave, beginning at 5 a.m. and coming back late in the evening. Unless you get another man, you suffer.”

For Angela P., life was better as a *ting ting*. She said, “as a wife, I was beaten and sexually abused. As a *ting ting*, I was beaten twice; as a wife I was beaten so many times I couldn’t count.”

After the beginning of Operation Iron Fist, the LRA released over 100 “child mothers” with their children. Christine A., released with her two children in June of 2002, was told by the LRA that the LRA “was coming (to Uganda) for battle, for real war.” Local NGOs believe that mothers were released because their young children hindered the LRA’s movements. When Christine A. learned she was being released after nearly ten years in captivity, she said, “I was happy because I knew I would come back home and not suffer any more.”

The child mothers were sent to rehabilitation centers in Gulu with the message that they should be well taken care of. At least twenty of the child mothers were “widows;” their commanders had been killed in battle or died from disease. Many commanders did not want to release their wives, however. During Operation Iron Fist, the

¹² Human Rights Watch interview with nurse at the World Vision rehabilitation center, Gulu, February 10, 2003.

¹³ Ibid. It should be noted that children at both centers who chose to be tested were more likely to be at high risk of HIV infection than those who chose not to be tested.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with GUSCO representative, Gulu, February 4, 2003.

¹⁵ Okello is a common Acholi name. This commander Okello is a different person than the Commander Okello described by Angela P., above.

LRA sent many of these child mothers to Alar, an LRA camp southwest of Gulu, which also tended many of the sick and wounded among the LRA.

Christine A. said that she is fearful that the LRA may come back for her and has heard from children who escaped the LRA more recently that the LRA leadership now regrets their decision to release the child mothers, especially those with boy children. Her son Patrick is now three, and her baby Richard is seven months. Christine A. has no relatives in towns that are thought to be safe, so feels she has no choice but to return to the village from where she was abducted.

Escape/Release

One night I was beaten terribly and then sent to sleep outside in the cold and rain. The next morning, at 5 a.m., I was beaten again and then sent to fetch water. My hands were swollen so I wasn't able to lift the jerry can onto my head. No one came to help, so I decided to pour out the water and throw the can away. I went into the bush. It was raining heavily so I stayed under a tree. When it stopped, I stayed in the wilderness, eating leaves. I spent three weeks there. One day I saw a road. I had no strength left and collapsed by the road. A hunter came and found me and carried me on his bicycle.

—Ruth K., age twelve

Despite the risk of death if they are caught, some children manage to escape from the LRA. Others surrender to the UPDF, are “rescued,” or captured during battle. Some are released or abandoned when they become sick or injured.

The number of children returning from the LRA has increased dramatically since early 2002. This is in part because of the increased rate of abductions, and also because increased LRA activity within Uganda has provided more children with the opportunity to escape from their captors. Within Uganda, they are more familiar with their geographical surroundings and have shorter distances to travel to find assistance.

In 2002, more than 1,700 returnees, mostly children, passed through the World Vision and GUSCO rehabilitation centers based in Gulu after escaping LRA captivity. There were more than 1,000 returnees (both adults and children) assisted by World Vision alone in 2002, up from 263 in 2001. GUSCO assisted 745 children between June and December of 2002, with the largest number of children—185—being brought to the center in December. Other children have gone directly home, without passing through the centers.

The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative reports that of 2,611 abductions documented in Kitgum and Pader districts from June through December of 2002, at least 870, or one-third of those abducted, escaped or were released within several weeks of being abducted. However, they found that although children make up three-quarters of abductions, half of those returning are adults, and concluded that “a larger portion of children are remaining with the LRA.”¹⁶

The children interviewed by Human Rights Watch escaped or were released from the LRA between May of 2002 and February of 2003, with half of those interviewed leaving captivity in December 2002 and January of 2003. The majority had escaped the LRA inside Uganda, although a few were released or abandoned after they were injured in battle or developed physical problems from the hardships of LRA life. One, a child mother, was released in June 2002 together with more than 100 other girls or women with young children.

Children look for opportunities when they may not be watched or choose to run during the confusion of battle. Thirteen-year-old Martin P. escaped in December 2002, when he and three others were on a raid looking for food. “I saw some *sim sim* (sesame) and told the others to go and collect it. They ran off and left me alone. So then I took off the gum boots I was wearing and left my gun and ran. I ran until I got to Amuru camp. I ran

¹⁶ Information provided to Human Rights Watch by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, February 2003.

because life was bad with the LRA. I couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't stop thinking about my brothers (whom the LRA killed)."

Charles M., age thirteen, escaped during a battle. When a UPDF armored vehicle began firing on the LRA, "the LRA fled in all directions. I fled then and fell into a swamp. I lay among the papyrus reeds. I could hear the fighting still going on, but I kept calm and didn't move at all. After some time, there were shots that landed quite near to me, so I crept along the reeds and found a place to sleep in the bush. I spent the night there by myself. The next day, I went to the UPDF forces."

Mark T., seventeen, decided to run after his unit carried out an ambush and killed the brother of an uncle with whom he had stayed in Kampala. "I realized that I had to get out. Killing all my relatives was bad. Better to try (to escape) and die than not try at all."

Some children are "rescued" by the UPDF during military operations. These are often children who surrender or who are wounded in battle and left behind. Local NGOs are critical of the UPDF for the way it reports on military operations during Operation Iron Fist. "Those killed are called terrorists or rebels, and those who survive are 'rescued abductees,'" said one local NGO representative.¹⁷

Some children who are injured are simply abandoned or left for dead by the LRA. Julius Tiboa, director of the GUSCO rehabilitation center, said that children released by the LRA "are mostly sick and malnourished, children who could not be of help or significance to their efforts."¹⁸

James K., seventeen, was injured in an UPDF air attack near Lira. He said that many new LRA recruits were killed in the attack, and others, old and new, were left for dead.

Following the attack, we moved on, and I felt the pain increasing in my legs. I was urged to move on and told that if I did not, I would be killed. When we reached a certain position, we settled there for two days. I was not given any medical treatment. After two days, my legs were swollen and there was a yellow puss coming out of the wounds, but I had to keep moving. . . . During this time, I was very afraid. I didn't know what to do and if I was going to live because my legs were hurting me so badly. When I was limping, the soldiers would come once in a while and beat me with a stick and say "move faster." They kept threatening to kill me. Finally, my wounds got so bad that they abandoned me in the bush. I was left there to die, but I decided to crawl on my knees until I came to a dirt road. Finally, a cyclist passed and agreed to give me a lift.

Samuel B. was abandoned in October 2002 after being injured in a UPDF helicopter attack. When he could no longer walk, he was left at an empty house with some food and water. For five weeks, he survived by eating raw cassava until the owner of the home finally returned and helped him get to the local army detachment.

Thirteen-year-old Janet M. developed swollen legs from walking and was left at a woman's house. The woman was told to take care of Janet M. and that the LRA would come back for her. "They told her not to allow me to go home. If they found that I was taken home, they said they would either kill the woman or her family." The woman gave her food and medicine, washed her clothes, and then took her to the army barracks. Janet M. is now worried about what the LRA might do to the woman who helped her.

Children who are released, "rescued," or escape are usually brought to the nearest army detachment, transported to the Fourth Division army barracks in Gulu, and then to a special Child Protection Unit (CPU) managed by the army, where they are kept for debriefing with army intelligence. If injured, they may receive treatment at the local army hospital.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with nongovernmental representative, Gulu, February 4, 2003.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview at GUSCO, Gulu, February 4, 2003.

Most children, particularly those who were in captivity for a short period of time, are kept at the CPU for brief periods of one to three days. However, children who served with the LRA for longer periods, particularly as combatants, are kept for several weeks or more. In one case reported to Human Rights Watch, two children were kept for over two months, reportedly because the children were receiving medical treatment at the army hospital.¹⁹

Children are taken from the CPU to rehabilitation centers in Gulu, Kitgum, or Pader that are supported by nongovernmental organizations. Other children are brought to the centers directly by community members. At these centers, children receive medical care, including testing for STDs, counseling, vocational training, and other assistance. The centers help trace the families of abducted children and work with both the children and their families to reintegrate the children into their communities.

The Future

I'm not happy at all because they ruined me. I had to cut short my studies. I have no hope that I will one day be somebody. I gave birth to two children and was not prepared. I have two children and no means of survival. I worry about what will happen next.

—Christine A., age twenty

For most abductees, release or escape does not end their ordeal. Most are fearful of reabduction and few are able to return to their original homes either because of the increased LRA activity or the forced displacement by the Ugandan government. Many have siblings or other family members still in captivity. Girls and young women with children born in captivity fear they will not be able to support their children. Most bear physical or psychological scars.

After escaping from the LRA in January 2003, Angela P. discovered that the LRA had killed her mother during a raid. Others find that their families have relocated to other districts seeking safety from the LRA or been forcibly displaced into IDP camps. Ruth K., age twelve, was abducted from Purongo, a “protected” village in July 2002. Her family left the camp after her abduction and moved to Masindi district. Unable to join them, she plans to stay near Gulu and live with a cousin.

Many of the children worry about brothers and sisters who are still in LRA captivity. One third of the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch were abducted with siblings that are still missing. Grace T., age sixteen, told us she was abducted in July 2002 together with two of her sisters and a brother. She and one sister have managed to escape; the other sister and her brother are still in captivity. Janet M., age twelve, was abducted in November 2002 with two sisters, ages fifteen and seventeen. One sister was eventually released, but the other remains missing. Thirteen-year-old Martin P. was abducted with four of his brothers; two were killed by the LRA, one was killed by the UPDF, and one is still missing.

Most of the children want to return to school, but many don't feel it's safe at home. Charlotte W. said, “I want to go back to school, but I will stay with my uncle in town. In my home area, rebels are moving freely, so I could easily be reabducted.” Similarly, Janet M. says, “I want to go back to school, but I'm afraid the rebels will come for me. I will go to visit my parents, but will study in town and stay with my uncle.” Matthew A. fears that if he returns home, he will not be able to run if the LRA attacks his village. His leg was amputated after he was shot in a battle with the UPDF.

Representatives of Save the Children Denmark, which supports the GUSCO center, said:

The insurgency has made reintegration difficult. Initially the idea was to have social workers go out first and contact family members and the community, and then go back a week later. Then send the child out for one day, and then have the child come back for a longer period, a gradual reintegration process. But this has been disrupted. There is insecurity to the child, the families, and to the social

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with local religious leader, Gulu, February 5, 2003.

workers. So this work has been interrupted by the insurgency. The majority of kids are now staying in and around the municipality, or they are sent to other districts.²⁰

Some children will join the “night commuters”—the children who travel into town each night to sleep, seeking safety from abduction. Grace T. was abducted from Agwe, just two kilometers from Gulu town. She plans to return to her family in Agwe, but will go into town to sleep at night, together with her sister, who has also escaped the LRA. She said that she is “afraid when I hear about the LRA, because now that I have been abducted, they might kill me.”

Returnees also suffer ongoing physical and psychological problems. A nurse at World Vision identified gunshot wounds, skin problems from walking long distances, and sexually transmitted diseases as the major physical problems affecting returnees. She estimates that about fifteen percent return with gunshot wounds, and another five percent have injuries from bomb fragments. Fifteen children assisted by the center since 1996 have had limbs amputated.

The nurse also identified psychological problems for returnees. “Almost all of them suffer from nightmares and flashbacks, especially those that were long in the bush. Some are quiet, withdrawn, and don’t want to talk.”²¹ Susan A. is one of the children who has nightmares about the LRA. She told us that she dreams that she is staying with her mother and that the LRA comes and abducts her.

Many wonder about their future. Sixteen-year old John W., now an orphan, said, “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?”

²⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, Gulu, February 6, 2003.

²¹ Human Rights Watch interview with nurse at World Vision rehabilitation center, Gulu, February 10, 2003.

V. CHILD RECRUITMENT BY UGANDAN FORCES

The Recruitment of Children into the Local Defense Units and Their Use by the UPDF

Ugandan government forces also recruit children.²² Typically, children are recruited into the Local Defense Units (LDUs), also known as “home guards,” which are intended to provide security for local villages or camps. However, after being trained, many children do not return to their home areas and are reportedly used to fight with the UPDF against the LRA. The use of LDUs outside their home areas led one activist to note, “It is the broadest definition of the word ‘local’ when describing the activities of the LDUs in the Congo or the Sudan.”²³

The salary for a soldier in the LDUs is 40,000 Ugandan shillings (Ush) a month, (U.S. \$23) while regular UPDF receive between 90,000 and 150,000 Ush (U.S. \$51 and U.S. \$86 respectively). For many boys from families impoverished by the war and without a source of income, the promise of a salary is sufficient incentive to join the LDUs. The LDUs come under the military authority of the UPDF, although salaries for LDUs are paid through the Ministry of the Interior, while salaries for the UPDF come from the Ministry of Defense. According to reports received by Human Rights Watch, many LDU salaries are paid late or not at all.

According to Lt. Paddy Ankunda, the public relations officer for the Army’s Fourth Division, candidates for the LDUs must be at least eighteen years old, have completed their education to level S4 or above (four years of secondary education), be in good health, and have a recommendation from their LCI (local councilor).²⁴ He stated that the responsibility for the recruitment process lies with the LCIIIs—the subcounty leaders—and that verification of age is the responsibility of local leaders who presumably know the candidates and their families.²⁵

According to local councilors questioned on LDU candidature, there is a both an official and unofficial recruitment process. The official recruitment is conducted much as described by Lt. Ankunda above, drawing largely from retired military and former security personnel. An unofficial recruitment however, bypasses the local councilors, with men and underage recruits reporting directly to military posts. Age and education verification as well as letters of recommendation are neither presented nor demanded. One local councilor responsible for an area just outside of Gulu town became aware of this “unofficial” recruitment, when parents of the boys came and berated him because they believed he had recommended their children to serve. The youngest boy recruited from his parish in 2002 was twelve years old. When this local councilor approached the barracks on several occasions to protest, he was told that the boys were not there or were fighting for the defense of their country. The leader of an IDP camp outside of Gulu town also reported that boys approach the barracks directly for recruitment, skirting the recommendation requirement. However, in this instance, the councilor working in his area was able to secure the release of some of the boys.²⁶

Representatives of the Church of Uganda provided Human Rights Watch with details related to twenty-two boys and young men, aged fifteen to eighteen, who were recruited into the LDUs and subsequently escaped from the UPDF.²⁷ The recruitment took place in Nebbi district in March or April of 2002. Some of the recruits responded to radio announcements regarding LDU recruitment and were promised that after training, they would be returned to their home areas. Others heard that the UPDF was offering scholarships for secondary boarding schools. Both groups were loaded into trucks together with up to 300 other boys, and taken to the Fourth Division headquarters in Gulu, where they reported that all of their documentation, including identification cards and birth

²² See also Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Global Report 2001*, and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers 1379 Report*, November 2002.

²³ Human Rights Watch interview with a representative of the Church of Uganda, Gulu, February 8, 2003.

²⁴ Local Councils are elected bodies that start at the village level (LCI), and progress through the parish (LCII), to the sub-county (LCIII), county (LCIV), and district level (LCV).

²⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Lt. Paddy Ankunda, public relations officer, UPDF Fourth Division Infantry Headquarters, Gulu, February 5, 2003.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews, Gulu, February 5 & 9, 2003.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Church of Uganda representatives, February 6, 2003. These representatives conducted direct interviews with the recruits in June and July of 2002.

certificates, was burned. The recruits were then taken to a UPDF training camp called “Waligo” and quartered in the barracks of Ngomoromo in Lamwo county in Kitgum district, near the Sudan border.

The boys told the church representatives that the military training lasted a month, and that during that time, many trainees died from disease, lack of food, and other hardships. Over time, they said, they became weaker and weaker, and began making more mistakes, resulting in more frequent punishments. In some cases, recruits who tried to escape were reportedly killed. Trainees reported that they were given military uniforms, but no papers, matriculation number, or salary.

Eighteen of the twenty-two boys who have returned had escaped from the training camps in Uganda. The remaining four were sent to Sudan with other boys and young men to assist with Operation Iron Fist. These four were not used as fighters but carried communications and served as porters. They later escaped from Sudan in June and July 2002.

Church leaders believe that the recruitment of children in 2002 is linked to the beginning of Operation Iron Fist:

There is a strong connection here between Iron Fist needing manpower and empty places on payrolls, so people needed to fill the ranks quickly to cover themselves. There were articles in the paper at this time about empty payrolls and “ghost soldiers.”²⁸

Church leaders believe that large-scale recruitment of children, like that in Nebbi, may have ended, in part because of protests by the Church. However, other reports indicate that smaller-scale recruitment of child recruitment into the LDUs continues.

An LCI, a local councilor representing an area near Gulu, told Human Rights Watch that in December 2002 many boys responded to radio announcements calling for new recruits for the LDUs. He said that boys responded because of the promised salary and “out of frustration” with their situation, and often joined without the permission of their parents. He reported that boys were trained at military positions in Binya parish or in Acet, both in Omoro county, Gulu district. He estimates that at least fifty boys had been recruited from Acet and Awer camps in December. He also provided specific details of seven boys between the ages of twelve and sixteen, from Omoro, Nwoya, and Aswa counties, whose parents reported that they had been recruited into the LDUs with the knowledge of local authorities.²⁹

The councilor said that some parents try to get their children back through LCIs or LCIIIs, but have been told by soldiers that if their son has been in training for two weeks or more, he cannot be released. He knew of about ten cases where boys had run away from the LDUs after enlisting, but had been retrieved and taken back by soldiers. He had also been told by some families that their sons had reportedly been killed by the LRA during battles.³⁰

Recruitment of Former LRA Abductees

I joined nine others who were there, mostly boys. The soldiers lured us into accepting to fight with the UPDF with offers of money and benefits, but I refused. One boy, sixteen, accepted and he immediately started training at the barracks with the other soldiers. He was moved from us and kept in better quarters.

—Edward T., age eighteen

²⁸ Ibid. See Ogen Kevin Aliro, “Records Show 10,000 ‘Ghosts’ Found in UPDF,” The Monitor, May 22, 2002; “UPDF Ghosts That Will Not Go Away,” The Monitor, June 10, 2002.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with a local councilor (LCI) from Pece division, Gulu, February 5, 2003; additional documentation provided to Human Rights Watch, February 28, 2003.

³⁰ Ibid.

The children who escape, are captured, or released from the LRA usually pass through UPDF detachments or barracks before transfer to the Child Protection Unit and finally, the rehabilitation centers. Children spend on average one week in the barracks, depending on the location of the military outpost, before transfer to the CPUs in Gulu or Kitgum towns. While at the barracks and awaiting transportation and safe passage to the CPUs, UPDF soldiers question the children on their activities, the LRA structure, and recent LRA maneuvers. Boy abductees are also asked to join forces with the UPDF at this time.

In barracks in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader districts, soldiers asked the majority of the boys interviewed for this report to enlist in their ranks. The youngest asked was thirteen years old. Although no instances of force were reported, soldiers nonetheless knew the ages of the boys from their questioning and that underage recruitment is in violation of Ugandan and international law. Boys, some of whom had spent years with the LRA undergoing the hardships detailed above, were tempted with promises of respect, money, new uniforms, and a better life. None of the boys who were interviewed by Human Rights Watch at the rehabilitation centers agreed to join, but they gave credible details on others who did. One military detachment where this type of recruitment was repeatedly mentioned was Achol-Pii barracks in Pader district.

Sixteen-year-old John W. spent nine days in the barracks at Achol-Pii in January. “The soldiers would lure us into accepting to join the armed forces of Uganda. They would say things like, ‘We will treat you well, give you money and food and a new uniform. Why waste your time going home and doing nothing?’ At one point, soldiers approached me with a newly pressed uniform and 80,000 Ush (U.S. \$45). They told me that I could have this money and clothes right now, and more later if I agreed to join them.”

Mark T. spent one week in early December at Achol-Pii:

When I arrived at the barracks, there were twenty-four escapees there—almost all were boys under seventeen. We were asked if we would join the UPDF. Five of the boys accepted, but I refused. The youngest was a fifteen-year-old named Michael. Soldiers would tempt and taunt us, insulting us for being in an army like the LRA which only runs away during the fighting. ‘Be a real man, fight with a real army now like the UPDF. You will get money for your work, a gun and a uniform.’

Thirteen-year-old Martin P. initially agreed to “help” the UPDF find the LRA but the commander intervened. “I spent two weeks at the UPDF detachment at Amuru in Gulu district. The soldiers there asked me lots of questions about the LRA, just like you. They asked if I could take them to where the LRA was located, but once the commander of the post learned I was going out with the soldiers he intervened. He refused, saying that ‘this boy could not be taken back out there.’ He saw that I didn’t really want to go.”

Once the children pass through the rehabilitation centers, they resettle in their home areas or in new locations. NGO and civic leaders in Gulu report of cases where UPDF soldiers recruit and harass children who have been resettled. In an interview with Human Rights Watch, one counselor at a child rehabilitation center expressed surprise at seeing children who had passed through the center, now wearing uniforms of the UPDF. Church leaders have documented and brought to the attention of military authorities cases where UPDF soldiers approach formerly abducted boys and men in their home areas. As at the barracks, they are urged to ‘help’ with UPDF operations in southern Sudan and offered monetary benefits. In one case, a UPDF officer insulted a wounded child, suggesting he could no longer perform at school and should join the army instead.³¹

Boys who return from the LRA are often seasoned fighters, knowledgeable about LRA activities, and are understandably valuable to the UPDF in the fight against the LRA. They are also malnourished, abused, and often arrive with only the clothes on their back. In a physically and psychologically weakened state, they may fall prey to temptations from the soldiers and the promise of money and a new life.

³¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Gulu, February 5, 2003. Letters in possession of Human Rights Watch researchers.

VI. LEGAL STANDARDS

Both the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government are in violation of international standards prohibiting the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. Uganda is also in violation of its national laws, which establish eighteen as the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces.³²

The additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions, which are part of international humanitarian law (the laws of war), prohibit all recruitment of children under the age of fifteen or their use in hostilities. This standard is binding on both governmental and non-governmental forces and is now considered customary international law.³³ Under the statute for the International Criminal Court, ratified by Uganda on June 14, 2002, such recruitment is also considered a war crime.³⁴

On May 6, 2000, Uganda acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Optional Protocol sets eighteen as the minimum age for all forced recruitment or conscription, and for participation in hostilities. Under Article 3 of the protocol, Uganda has also made a binding declaration affirming eighteen as its minimum age for any voluntary recruitment into its armed forces. This declaration states,

The Government of the Republic of Uganda declares that the minimum age for the recruitment of persons into the armed forces is by law set at eighteen (18) years. Recruitment is entirely and squarely voluntary and is carried out with the full informed consent of the persons being recruited. There is no conscription in Uganda.³⁵

The Optional Protocol also places an important burden upon nongovernmental armed forces such as the LRA. Article 4 states that "armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a state should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen." States Parties must take measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including criminalizing such practices.

The Protocol also places obligations on the government to assist in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers. It states (Article 6) that States Parties shall "take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to this Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service. States Parties shall, when necessary, accord to these persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social integration."

Uganda is also party to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, a regional treaty that came into force in 1999. The Charter states that a "child" is anyone below eighteen years of age, and that "States parties to the present Charter shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from recruiting any child."³⁶

Both the LRA and the government of Uganda must take immediate steps to comply with international law by ending all recruitment of children under the age of eighteen, demobilizing or releasing all children from their ranks, and facilitating their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

³² See the National Resistance Army (NRA) Statute 3/92, the Conditions of Service Men Regulations 1993, and the Conditions of Services (Officers) Regulations 1993.

³³ 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions. Article 4(3)(c) of Protocol II, which governs non-international armed conflicts, states that "children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities."

³⁴ Article 8 (2)(b)(xxvi) and Article 8 (2)(e)(vii), Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.183/9, adopted July 17, 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002.

³⁵ Binding declaration deposited with the United Nations Secretary-General at the time of Uganda's accession to the Optional Protocol, May 6, 2000.

³⁶ Article 22 (2), OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force November 29, 1999.

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*Human Rights Watch
Children's Rights Division*

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