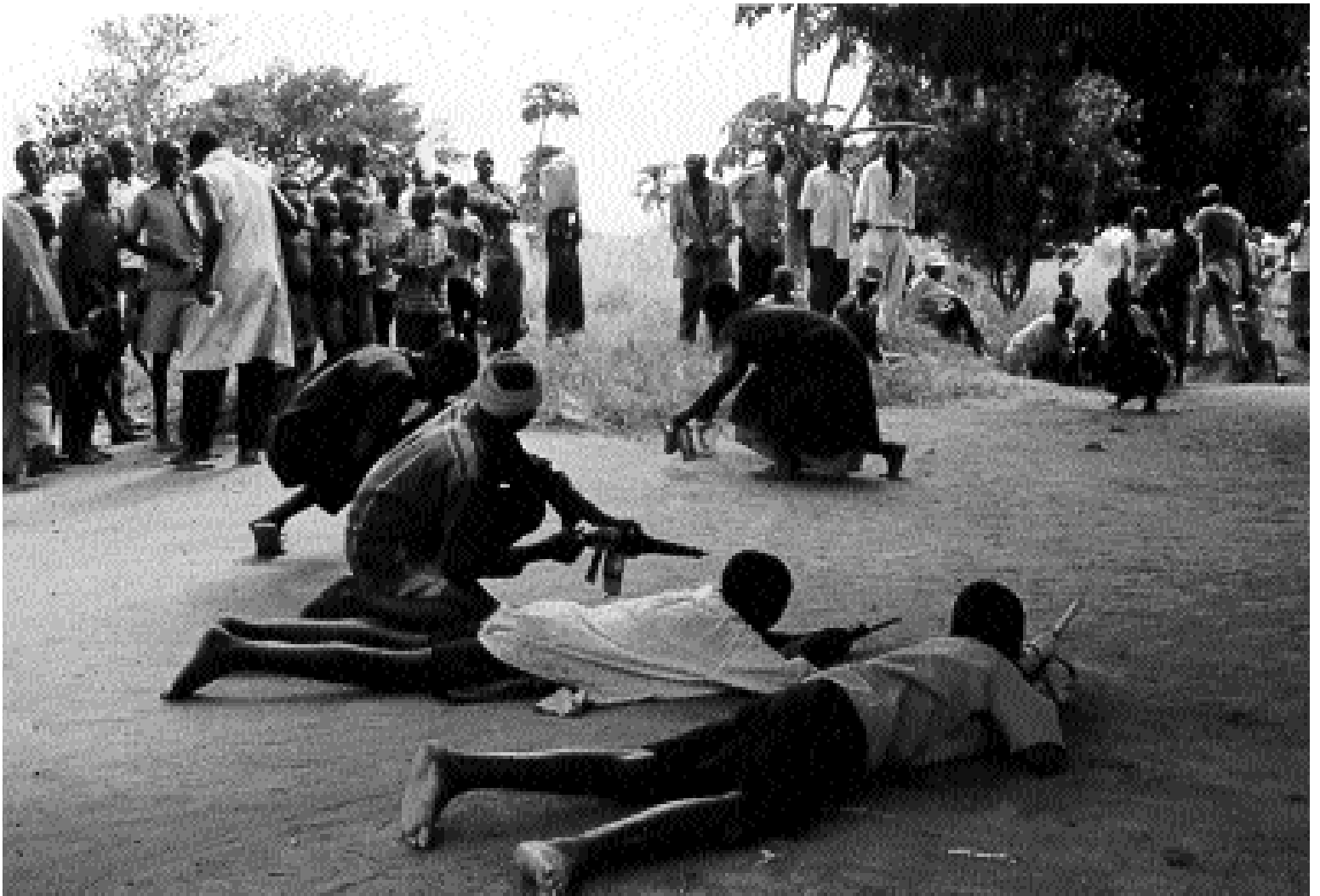


OUR CHILDREN ARE MISSING

Uganda delegation report

November 1999

Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict



Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict
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MISSION STATEMENT

Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict

The Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict is a joint body of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and the International Rescue Committee. The Council advocates action to protect children caught in the brutality of war and supports programs to meet their most urgent needs. Members use their expertise and influence to alert media and mobilize lawmakers, United Nations officials and others to address the special needs of children.

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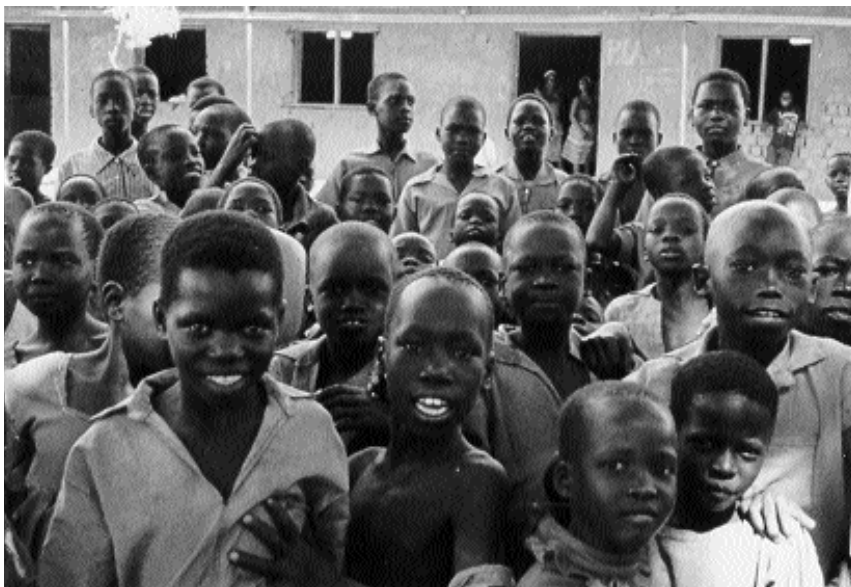
CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Map | ii |
| I. Executive Summary | 1 |
| II. Opportunities for Peace and the Return of Children in Captivity | 1 |
| Child Rights Violations in Northern Uganda | 1 |
| Political Climate | 2 |
| Children Still in Captivity | 3 |
| Advocacy Recommendations | 3 |
| III. Rehabilitation and Reintegration of War-affected Children and Their Communities | 5 |
| Background on IDP Crisis in Kitgum District | 5 |
| Education and Livelihood | 5 |
| Health | 6 |
| Psychosocial | 7 |
| Child-headed Households | 9 |
| Building Local and National Capacity | 9 |
| IV. Report Recommendations | 12 |
| V. Appendices | 13 |
| Profile of an Abductee | 13 |
| Letters to the Delegation | 13 |
| Delegation Meetings | 15 |
| Delegation Members | 15 |
| Acronyms | 16 |

MAP

I. Executive Summary

A delegation of the Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict, a joint body of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and the International Rescue Committee, went to Uganda in late November 1999 to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by children and adolescents abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and affected by the 13-year-long conflict in the north. The delegation, which included three members of the Leadership Council, the Deputy Director of Government Relations for the International Rescue Committee and the Program Manager of the Children and Adolescents Program at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, visited internally displaced camps in Kitgum District to assess the conditions for children and adolescents, and to learn more about the International Rescue Committee's psychosocial support programs for formerly abducted children and adolescents. The delegation also examined the possibilities for securing the release of the children still held in captivity by the Lord's Resistance Army. The Council intends to advocate for and raise awareness about the plight of war-affected Ugandan children and their families, ensuring that policy makers, donors and the media continue to support protection and assistance programs for them.



II. Opportunities for Peace and the Return of Children in Captivity

CHILD RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN NORTHERN UGANDA

More than 10,000 children from northern Uganda have been abducted over the past thirteen years. These abductions are brutal, and many children are forced to witness the killing of family members and friends and the destruction of their homes. Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA abducts children to serve their needs: as child soldiers, sexual slaves, porters and cooks. The ongoing abduction, forced conscription and killing of children by this rebel group is one of the worst violations of children's rights anywhere in the world. It is estimated that over half of the LRA combatants are abducted children. Young children, many as young as eight, though most are between the ages of 12 and 14, are preferred by the rebels because they are more easily intimidated and indoctrinated than older adolescents and adults.

Punishment for trying to escape the LRA is notoriously gruesome, as abducted child soldiers are frequently forced to beat and hack to death other children caught trying to escape. Despite this fact, at least 4,000 children have succeeded in escaping during the past decade, particularly during battles with Ugandan government or other rebel forces. However, UNICEF records 5,834 children as still missing, although officials believe that nearly half might have died of disease, hunger or in battle. Besides the children, the LRA has abducted about 13,000 adults, many of whom have escaped and made their way home.

In addition to this conflict in the north, it must be noted that there is another conflict raging in the West between ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) rebels and the Ugandan government. This conflict has become so explosive since late 1999/early 2000 that most humanitarian activities have been suspended for the over 105,000 internally displaced persons. Reports of violent attacks, including the murder of 26 people, mostly women and children, and the dismemberment of a three-year-old girl in one night during

the first week of January 2000, child abductions and other child protection concerns require more investigation and international attention.

POLITICAL CLIMATE

As the American Ambassador to Uganda, Martin Brennan, told the delegation, "There is a greater opportunity for peace in northern Uganda now than there has been anytime during the last 13 years." Indeed, most of 1999 was marked by the absence of LRA activity. One major contributing factor to the lack of conflict is the apparent shift in the Sudanese government's attitude during the past year. One year ago, the Sudanese government claimed it had never heard of the LRA, despite widespread evidence that the government in Khartoum supports and supplies the LRA. However, in mid-1999, two Sudanese Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Sudan National Assembly made an official visit to the districts of Gulu and Kitgum to assess the atrocities committed against people, particularly children. The two MPs gave encouraging signs that the Sudanese government would take steps to have the children released, and the government has since acknowledged that the LRA exists. Many believe that Sudan has stopped supplying and supporting the LRA, although it is not clear whether this is permanent or temporary. What is clear is that for peace to come to northern Uganda, the LRA must be permanently disarmed and disbanded, and the children in captivity must be freed.

The Ugandan government has also made important contributions leading to a decrease in LRA activity in 1999, as it has been increasingly sensitive to the needs of the north. In particular, the government has increased its military presence along the Uganda-Sudan border to better protect the north by making it more difficult for the LRA to cross the border. This increased military presence has been welcomed by the Acholi people in northern Uganda. Another recent opportunity for peace is the amnesty bill that was passed in the Ugandan Parliament on November 30, 1999. The bill offers LRA rebels (and ADF rebels in the West) amnesty if they agree to disarm and surrender to Uganda's army within six months, though the bill also contains a provision for an extension. The new law completes a change of policy by the Ugandan government, which previously maintained that rebel groups could only be "subdued militarily." The bill, which also calls for the reintegration of the rebels into society, has wide support among people in

northern Uganda. As one adolescent boy, a former child soldier, told the delegation: "I wouldn't fear if Kony returned with amnesty, not like I fear being re-abducted now. If he returned because of an amnesty agreement, Kony would be unarmed and powerless."

Another positive step toward the peaceful settlement of conflict is represented by an agreement signed by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and his Sudanese counterpart Omar al-Bashir on December 8, 1999. The agreement is aimed at re-establishing diplomatic relations and promoting peace in the region. Among the pledges contained in the 11-point document are renouncing the use of force to resolve differences, ceasing support to any rebel groups and disbanding and disarming terrorist groups. The two presidents also agreed to locate and return abductees to their families and offer amnesty and reintegration assistance to all former combatants who renounce the use of force. Following this agreement, the newspaper 'New Vision' reported that eight of the 24 top commanders of the LRA, including Joseph Kony, were to be relocated in late December from Sudan to countries of their choice. The paper also said that at least 200 captives in Sudan, most of them girls, would be among a first group of abducted people returned to Uganda. Although there is no sign of the top LRA commanders relocating, since January 18, 2000, the Sudanese government has facilitated the release of 75 Ugandans abducted by the LRA, including 54 children, who were handed over to UNICEF in Khartoum, which is facilitating the process of repatriation.

Despite these very encouraging signs, the calm that has settled upon northern Ugandan during the last several months in the absence of LRA activity does not translate into peace. The threat of conflict still pervades the camps and the minds of the displaced children and their communities. Indeed, after 11 months of peace, during which the LRA remained based in southern Sudan, the LRA re-entered Kitgum and Gulu Districts on December 24, 1999, repeating what has become an annual tradition.

Early reports of LRA activity between December 24 and 31 were confused; some indicated that the LRA was attacking to make a statement against the recently signed peace agreement between Uganda and Sudan, while others reported that LRA combatants were actually coming home to Uganda to surrender and take advantage of the recently passed amnesty bill. Yet other reports indicated that the LRA had split into factions, with different factions pursuing

the above different agendas. However, LRA actions soon revealed that surrender and peace were not the intention of the majority of LRA rebels: between December 24 and 31, there were a number of violent clashes, including raids on villages and ambushes of vehicles, leaving several civilians and army personnel dead. There were also reports of up to a dozen people abducted, including a few children.

Since January 1, 2000 numerous attacks have taken place across Gulu and Kitgum Districts by many different groups of LRA, although each group is reportedly small in number. As a result, many people have come into Kitgum town to sleep at night, and there is concern among humanitarian workers about the water/sanitation situation. As stated by Jan Coffey, Country Director of IRC Uganda: "At this point, predictions of the future are pure speculation. No one really knows what the LRA intends to do, how many factions are operating, what their manpower/firepower is and how long they will be able to stick around wreaking havoc in northern Uganda. Most people speculate that the LRA, as in past years, will continue to loot and shoot throughout January but will exhaust itself by early February and retreat once again back across the Sudanese border."

Since these new attacks, the Ugandan and Sudanese Presidents have spoken together and reaffirmed their mutual support for the Ugandan-Sudanese pact aimed at ending each country's support for rebel groups in the other.

CHILDREN STILL IN CAPTIVITY

As Sylvester Opia, the Deputy District Commissioner of Kitgum, told the delegation, "Our children are missing." As previously mentioned, the UNICEF database lists 5,834 children as still missing, although it is uncertain how many of these children are still alive. Three recently escaped child soldiers told the delegation that there are only 50 "big men" left in the LRA — only 50 commanders. They also said that abductees are all divided into groups and separated from each other, so it was difficult for the children to know precisely how many children remain in captivity. One child did estimate that there were 10 commanders and 500 children in each defense; thus, if there are indeed 50 commanders left, the number of remaining children may be around 2,500. Whatever the number, it is urgent that the abductions are stopped and that the children in captivity are released so that they, their families and

communities can move forward with their lives.

The relative lull in LRA activity in northern Uganda has meant that few children have a chance to escape, and thus there is little information trickling out on the children still in captivity. What is known is that living conditions are extremely harsh and many children have reportedly died of dehydration, hunger or disease. Recently escaped boys told the delegation that it is about a 10-day walk from the various LRA camps in southern Sudan to the Ugandan border, and many of the children are starving, so their chances of making the journey are increasingly low. The children also reported that those abducted receive no medical attention nor any form of education in the Sudanese camps; only children born to the commanders are given education. Instead, when they are not fighting, abducted boys dig and plant food, cut bamboo, cut and collect firewood, and girls weed, wash clothes, cook and many are forced to be "wives," or sexual slaves, to commanders. Some boys are allowed to go to camps of Sudanese soldiers to exchange firewood for food, but the girls are never allowed to leave. Boys also reported fighting in the LRA along with Sudanese troops against the SPLA, a Southern Sudanese rebel group opposed to the Sudanese government and supported by the Ugandan government. Furthermore, the delegation is very concerned about unconfirmed reports, including from the US Ambassador, that children abducted by the LRA are being sold and traded into slavery in Sudan.

Until now, the abduction of children in northern Uganda has gained a certain amount of international attention. However, with the recent lull in LRA abductions, there is a real danger that attention may drop off and the international community may turn its eye away from the children who are still in captivity. Despite the sharp reduction in abductions in 1999, there is an urgent need to raise awareness about the existence and plight of children still in captivity, and to pressure the international community to ensure their release before it is too late.

ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

Everyone whom the delegation spoke with felt that it is imperative that the international community send the message that it wants an end to the abduction of children. Therefore, **the delegation recommends that all international organizations, donors, governments and intergovernmental organizations ensure that the issue of the 5,834 abducted children still missing**

receive media and political attention and that their release remain high on the international community's agenda.

Furthermore, **it is essential that international pressure be put on the government parties to the conflict, Uganda and Sudan, to solve the conflict and obtain the release of the children.** Sudanese support of the LRA must stop, and all soldiers must be demobilized and reintegrated into civilian society, including children. By refusing to support the LRA, the Sudanese government would be sending the message that it cares about children and it wants better relations with Uganda and the rest of the world.

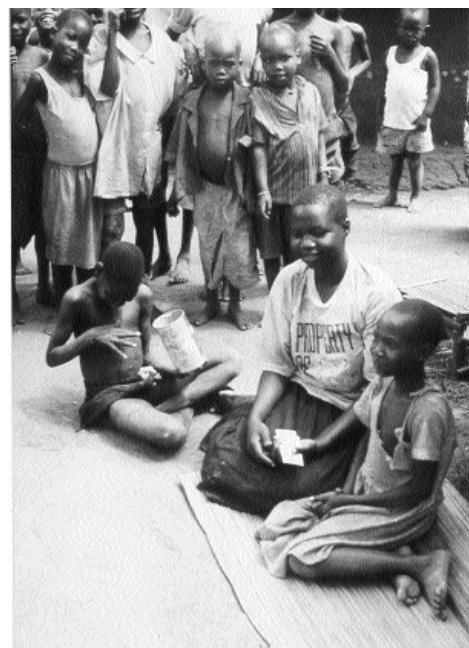
Other potential avenues towards securing the release of the children in captivity involve **donor governmental pressure, upholding the international human rights and children's rights standards, to send the message that they are watching what happens with regard to the missing children and that the conflict must be resolved.** For instance, the European Union is a potential trading partner for Sudan, and Sudan wants good relations with it, and with France in particular. The EU must require Sudan to end its support of the LRA in return for good relations, and all policy makers should support the European Union's demand that their representatives be able to visit the camps in Southern Sudan. Likewise, the Canadian government, which has political power to influence Sudan due to its oil link, must demand that the Sudanese government end its support of the LRA. The United States also needs to put pressure on Sudan, although this is difficult due to the lack of relations between the two governments. While the Leadership Council applauds the US's funding activities for children in northern Uganda, it also believes that there must be a dialogue for resolution to the conflict and an end to child rights violations. US government officials must ask what the US is doing with regard to securing the release of the children and reassess whether their hardline policy is actually harming children whose rights have already been so brutally violated. Moreover, the US government should consider the impact that food assistance to southern Sudanese rebels would have on peace efforts between Uganda and Sudan and the prospects for releases of children by the LRA.

The amnesty recently passed by the Ugandan Parliament offers rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army the opportunity to return to Uganda without fear of prosecution. The Acholi of northern Uganda expressed their confidence to the delegation that

amnesty is the will of the people and forgiveness a deeply rooted spiritual belief of the Acholis. They also expressed concern that international attempts to prosecute members of the LRA for war crimes may neutralize the amnesty offer of the Ugandan government. Therefore, the Acholi leaders urged the delegation to carry the message to policy makers in Washington and to the United Nations that **the international community should refrain from imposing western style justice on the LRA.**

Another potential avenue for obtaining the release of the children is for **the international community to support UNICEF's ongoing efforts.** Similarly, the Leadership Council encourages the international community to support Bishop Ochola, who told the delegation of his desire to go to Southern Sudan with representatives from UNICEF Uganda and UNICEF Sudan to negotiate the release of the children with Kony.

In general, **the international community should support an end to the use of child soldiers.** One avenue toward this end is supporting the work of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and urging all governments to ratify and sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This treaty, unanimously agreed upon on January 20, 2000, raises the age of compulsory recruitment and direct participation from 15 to 18 and establishes 18 as the minimum age for recruitment or use in hostilities by nongovernmental armed groups. Furthermore, the United States should sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child.



III. Rehabilitation and Reintegration of War-Affected Children and Their Communities

BACKGROUND ON IDP CRISIS IN KITGUM DISTRICT

Kitgum district in northern Uganda, along with neighboring Gulu district, has suffered the bulk of the devastation resulting from the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government forces, and more than 300,000 northern Ugandans were internally displaced by the end of 1998. Mass displacement due to LRA insurgencies led Kitgum town to establish camps for those internally displaced from the fighting; half of the internally displaced people (IDPs) in the north are estimated to be under the age of 15. Overall, more services and funds are needed to assist, protect and contribute to the effort to reunite formerly abducted children with their families and work within their communities on psychosocial healing. This will be particularly urgent if the children in captivity are soon released. Additionally, the existing psychosocial, education, health, livelihood and skills training programs targeting formerly abducted children and their families should be expanded to assist the more general war-affected population in the IDP camps and surrounding areas.

EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOOD

Many children in the IDP camps of Kitgum district are deprived of their right to an education and a means of livelihood. The Acholi officials and people with whom the delegation spoke want more education; they see it as their avenue for advancement and progress. In theory, there is universal primary education in Uganda, mandated by the Ugandan government. However, the delegation found a very different reality for many children in the IDP camps, who are unable to attend school, and are chased out if they do, because they do not have enough money to buy the necessary uniforms and school supplies, such as books and paper. Innovative programs emphasizing self-reliance to enable children and their families to earn money so that they can attend school are urgently needed, such as the skills-training/income-generating projects of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (see box, page 6). Despite the barriers to IDP children's school attendance, overall pri-

mary school attendance is rapidly rising in Uganda, creating an ever greater need to build new schools, the destruction of which was a deliberate act of the LRA. This construction will be particularly urgent if the abducted children are returned en masse. Moreover, school supplies such as paper and desks are also needed; in primary school, most children sit on the ground for lack of desks and chairs.

Ugandan government and local and international NGO focus has been on primary education, and there is a dearth of opportunities for adolescents to pursue education. As stated by the US Ambassador, "Adolescents are idle and bored; there is nothing for them to do." There is only one secondary school in Kitgum town for a population of over 468,000, and children make up more than 55% of the population of Uganda. The \$500-a-year fee for the secondary school makes it impossible for any IDP adolescent to attend, unless they are among the few sponsored by an international aid organization or worker. Moreover, most adolescents who return from captivity and many who were displaced by the conflict had not finished primary school before they were abducted or displaced. At this time, the only educational possibility for these adolescents in Kitgum district is to be put into primary level classes with younger children. Consequently, most adolescents refuse to go due to the embarrassment of being in classes with children much younger than they, as they are often called names by the younger children. There is an urgent need to develop adolescent-specific primary educational services. One project example that could be emulated for war-affected adolescents is COPE (Complementary Opportunity for Primary Education), a joint government of Uganda/UNICEF initiative for reaching Ugandan children out of school. The initiative, which began in 1995, reaches out-of-school and disadvantaged children, especially girls, from the ages of 8 to 14 who have never attended school. It is based on the concept of "learning centers or posts" and class work emphasizes group work, discussions and projects to identify and develop individual skills. Most of its key characteristics could be adapted to IDP/post-conflict education for adolescents and youth.

The Deputy District Commissioner of Kitgum told the delegation that there is a great need to "give hope to the children. A child without hope fears that he cannot do anything in the future; nothing for the community." Livelihood programs offer such hope, as well as psychosocial healing. Agriculture has been

the traditional means of subsistence; however, rebel insurgencies and raids from neighboring tribes have decimated livestock in the region. Consequently, most adolescents, as well as adults, have no means for supporting their extended families. The lack of such opportunities increases the risk of idle and disillusioned youth turning to crime and banditry, which have been increasing in the Kitgum area. More income-generating opportunities for war-affected adolescents and their families are needed, and existing programs, like the livelihood agricultural program for formerly abducted children in Padebe camp (see box) and the vocational school run by parents in Padibe camp, should be expanded and funded by donors. Such programs enable adolescents, and others, to regain a sense of dignity by using the money that they make to buy clothes, food and school supplies for themselves and their families, rather than having to rely on aid agencies.

HEALTH

Many of the children who escape from the LRA during battles sustain serious injuries, such as bullet wounds, and most experience severe infections in their feet, having walked in the bush with the LRA for days, months and sometimes years. Others, like Michael, a fourteen-year-old boy with whom the delegation met, was abducted by the LRA when he was eleven and was forced to walk to Sudan across the mountains barefoot; he lost all of his toes, eroded by the sharp and rough mountain rock. Lacking food or water, he was too weak to continue, so the LRA left him in the mountains to die. Fortunately, the Ugandan military spotted him at the border and he received emergency medical help and was eventually reunited with his family, thanks to IRC and KICWA (see box, page 11).

Unfortunately, primary health care facilities for children like Michael were targeted by the LRA, and they are still lacking in the IDP camps of Kitgum district. The delegation found that war-affected children

Income-generating Project Gives Children a Chance for Education

The delegation met with a group of 70 formerly abducted children and adolescents, both boys and girls under the age of 18, in the Palabek Kal sub-county IDP camp who have come together as a group to maximize their livelihood options. With the help of IRC Uganda and community volunteers, the group was given four acres of land and the tools (hand hoes and seeds) and training to plant and harvest a field of cow green peas and beans, both of which are highly marketable within and outside of their community. The children work the field together on their day off from school (Saturday), supervised by the community volunteers who have also donated the land on which they work. As they work, they share stories and sing about their experiences in captivity and war, with lyrics such as, "so many problems, I can't talk/when I am home, I am afraid of death/It seems like god is punishing us/ This problem is too much for us." The group harvested their first crop during the school break in late December, which they will sell together and use the income to buy school supplies for themselves. All money left over from buying schoolbooks will be used to buy more seeds for the group to plant. The children and adolescents do not want to be seen as victims; rather, the group builds upon the strengths of its members.



in these camps suffer from lack of food, clothing and basic health care. Many children, particularly those in child-headed households, suffer from lack of food, malnutrition, parasites and have only the clothing that they wear, which is dirty and worn out. The delegation is particularly concerned by reports that the World Food Program is considering cutting back or halting the distribution of monthly food rations in the region, as many child heads of household claimed to be unable to survive without food assistance. Moreover, several child-headed households that the delegation spoke with said that they were not able to register with the World Food Program's food aid program, and thus were not receiving, but badly needed, food assistance. This problem of access needs to be investigated and addressed immediately. Better sanitation and clean water sources are also needed to improve the health standards in these communities, as they suffer from water-borne diseases.

While in captivity, girls are frequently given to rebel commanders as "wives" and are sexually abused and raped. Many of the girls contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, and become pregnant during their abduction. The reproductive health care needs of these girls and women should be made a priority. There are no reproductive health education services available in the camps; these should be accessible at clinics and offered in a youth-friendly manner at clinics for those who want it. Furthermore, girls in child-headed households, which are generally the poorest households in the IDP camps, told the delegation that their lack of clothing was a particularly embarrassing problem when they were menstruating.

Although there is little stigma attached to discussing HIV/AIDS, the prevalence of the disease is a major problem for all of the war-affected population in northern Uganda. Indeed, in 1997, the most recent year for which statistics are available, Uganda had the highest number of children (statistically defined by UNAIDS as those under age 15) orphaned by AIDS: 1,100,000. It also has one of the highest numbers of children living with HIV/AIDS in the world: 67,000 (UNAIDS statistics from 1997). The government of Uganda has done an exemplary job in educating people about HIV/AIDS prevention in the cities: from 1992 to 1998, the death rate from AIDS in Kampala, Uganda's capital, decreased from 30% to 15%, the most dramatic decline being among youths aged 15 to 19. However, more must be done in rural areas surrounding Kitgum, including the IDP camps.

PSYCHOSOCIAL

In addition to serious health problems and a lack of educational and livelihood opportunities, formerly abducted children in Uganda also face the challenge of overcoming psychosocial trauma and reintegrating into the community following their escape from the rebels. As previously mentioned, at least 4,000 children have succeeded in escaping from the LRA. When found, many of the children are in a state of shock and in need of immediate medical and psychological attention. After being forced to commit atrocities, sometimes against their own relatives, the children might need forgiveness from their communities, families and themselves. It is especially difficult for some girls who were forced to be sexual slaves to be accepted back into communities, especially if they have children fathered by their abductors. For these reasons, the problems of formerly abducted children must be dealt with within the context of their families and communities. Although there are several centers for demobilizing and rehabilitating children who have escaped, there seems to be an emerging consensus among local and international practitioners that the time that formerly abducted children spend in centers should be kept to a minimum and that the focus of follow-up programming should be on psychosocial healing work with children within their



families and communities. In this way, reconciliation and rehabilitation are seen as holistic processes involving individual, family and community, including district/community leaders, teachers and elders. Some organizations, like the IRC, have begun to support traditional rituals that involve the community as part of the psychosocial healing process, to great success (see box). Donors should be educated about such processes in order to increase their willingness to fund them.

A fine balance must be kept to ensure that the specific needs of former abductees are met without making them stand out and stigmatizing them in the process. This is particularly true for girls who were sexually abused by the rebels. Consequently, it is necessary to work with formerly abducted children in programs that are open to the wider war-affected community. Furthermore, many children and adolescents who were not abducted but are war-affected also need to be targeted for psychosocial services. It is important that all aid organizations and donors recognize that education and livelihood opportunities are very important forms of psychosocial healing, and that they fund such activities for the wider war-affected community as well as former abductees (see box).

A Psychosocial Coordination Group in Kitgum meets every two weeks. Meetings are chaired by the District Community Development Officer and attended by IRC, AVSI (Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale), World Vision, KICWA (Kitgum Concerned Women's Association), Concerned Parent's Association, ACET and Meeting Point. There is also a

National Core Team for Psychosocial Programs, which meets in Kampala every month. Meetings are chaired by the Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) and are attended by Ministry of Health, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), AVSI, IRC, Red Barnet (Save the Children Denmark), SCF-UK (Save the Children Fund, UK), World Vision, TPO (Transcultural Psychosocial Organization), Hope After Rape and sometimes others.

Following the recent signs suggesting that the government of Sudan will no longer support the LRA (particularly the visit of the two MPs), a preparedness planning meeting took place in Gulu in September with organizations involved in the psychosocial care of war-affected and formerly abducted children in the north, including government and district officials, local and international NGOs, and religious and community leaders from five northern districts. At this meeting it was agreed that, should the children return en masse, the representatives at the meeting would implement a four-phased plan for treating, reunifying and working with former abductees. The phases include a UNICEF-led team that will screen and register returning children at the border and the establishment of a holding center in Gulu and district reception centers in each district. The second phase (holding center) is envisioned as lasting only one or two days, during which each district will employ a team of psychosocial workers and district officials to ensure that immediate needs are met, further assess the children and arrange for

Sewing and Tailoring Help Heal Psychological Trauma

In Padibe camp, the delegation met with twelve war-affected adolescents participating in IRC's income-generating and skills training sewing/tailoring program. The program, operational only since October 1999, is for formerly abducted and vulnerable adolescents who lack money for school fees, including formerly abducted girls who have children to take care of. While training for a minimum of six months, all of the money from the clothes that the group sells goes into a fund for buying new material for the group. After the group finishes the training, they will form sewing/tailoring groups of three or more to work together and share resources. They will also teach future groups the skills that they have learned. Once they have finished the program, they will make clothes for themselves and their families, and sell clothes to others so that they can pay for their school fees. Many of the adolescents articulated the psychosocial healing power of the activities. One boy said, "Tailoring makes me forget about what happened to me in captivity." Another said: "At first, I was stigmatized by other children for having been a rebel. But now that I am part of the tailoring program, I have more friends, and life is like it was before I was abducted." The children don't just sit at their machines, but they also do energizers, share stories and sing together. One song that was performed by the sewing/tailoring group for the delegation included the lyrics: "When you go back to America, please remember us." At the end of the song, an adolescent girl thanked the delegation and asked them to expand the programs to help other war-affected children in the Padibe IDP camp.

transfer to district centers. In the third phase the children will be sent to the reception center in their home district, where they can be fully assessed and have access to psychosocial services. In the final phase, each district will identify a focal person and a place in each sub-county, so that information about children will be sent to the focal person. That person will then coordinate family tracing and give information to parents inquiring about their children. This phase also includes psychosocial teams that will sensitize parents and communities to ensure that children are welcomed back, with community volunteers, teachers and other local leaders assisting in the ongoing process of assessing the children's needs and monitoring their progress.

CHILD-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

It is estimated that there are over 50,000 child-headed households in the IDP camps in Kitgum district, although a comprehensive assessment needs to be undertaken to confirm this number. IRC is preparing to do this and expand its present work with 30 child-headed households to many more, providing clothes, plates, cups, blankets, basic education, medical help and livelihood opportunities. The delegation was extremely concerned by the lack of assistance and protection for child-headed households, whose needs are largely unmet (see box, page 10). As they are generally extremely poor, many young children cannot afford the necessary school supplies and uniform to attend school, and the adolescents cannot attend because they have to work and look after the family. Nor can they afford medical or reproductive health care, a change of clothes, food or basic cooking utensils. The delegation was pleased to see that community volunteers were following-up on the progress of child-headed households, which usually lack nearby relatives. The delegation was also very impressed with IRC's animal husbandry projects for child-headed households. Child-headed households, or groups of child-headed households, are given five female goats and one male goat to tend. When the goats reproduce, the child-headed household(s) can keep the kids for food or sell them for money, but they must give some of the offspring to other children in need. In this way, the livelihood project is a continuous process of helping and restocking the community. More programs like these, which offer self-sustaining livelihood opportunities, need to be funded for child-headed households.

Another protection issue that the delegation was con-

cerned about is the Ugandan government's and army's role in recovering children once they escape the LRA and are found crossing the border. There is a need to decrease the time spent by escapee children in the military barracks under interrogation.



BUILDING LOCAL AND NATIONAL CAPACITY

There is a need to strengthen local community capacity to help war-affected children and follow-up within the community on their progress. The delegation was impressed by the good coordination and collaboration between some NGOs and community volunteers as well as local government officials, in assessing local needs and developing capacity, particularly the training of community volunteer counselors. AVSI and Kitgum District officials have trained more than 200 community volunteers, who are chosen by the communities and elders, and they have also worked to train local teachers and health

A Portrait of a Child-headed Household in Kitgum

Angom Jennifer is an 18-year-old girl with a 1-1/2-year-old child, Amato Innocent. For the last three years, she has also been the head of a seven-member family consisting of her younger brothers and sisters: Odien Geoffry, 15; Onok Nicholas, 13; Aduko Angela, 10; Nono Alfred, 8; Lokwiya Kenneth, 5; and Kidega David, 3. Her parents died several years ago, and her older brother took care of the family until he was abducted by Lord's Resistance Army rebels. Since then, Jennifer has had to move with her family to an internally displaced persons camp, where she works every day weeding and harvesting crops with Innocent strapped on her back. The fields are 6 km away from her tiny, round thatch roofed hut. The family's only material object/furniture is a makeshift coal grill that their one food pan sits atop. All of the children sleep on the dirt ground and share one blanket. Jennifer uses the money she makes, 500 Ugandan shillings/\$0.33 a day, to buy food for the family, which consists of beans, grains and vegetables during the rainy season. She has no water jug and therefore has to beg to borrow other families' water jugs. The children only have the one set of clothes that they wear, which is particularly embarrassing for Jennifer when she is menstruating. She buys soap when she has extra money left over from buying food, which is rare. Three of the children are very sick: Innocent has serious diarrhea; Alfred has malaria and intestinal problems due to worms; and David has periodic convulsions, but they don't know what causes them. However, Jennifer does not have enough money to go to the hospital for medical help. The four oldest children besides Jennifer want to go to school, but they do not have enough money to buy the required uniforms or books/school supplies. Regardless, they go to school everyday, although they are often chased out by the teachers for not having uniforms and books. When she was asked what she hoped for the future, Jennifer looked puzzled and said, "I can't imagine the future for myself — I have no future." When she was then asked, "But what would you do if you could?" she replied, "I would like to start a business, like selling second-hand clothes or fish, that could sustain me and my family."

workers. The training consists of basic trauma counseling and community response sensitization, with feedback, role playing and follow-up. The volunteers then identify vulnerable groups in the community, make proposals to community development groups and assist NGOs working in IDP camps.

There is also a need to develop and strengthen the capacity of local NGOs and community organizations working with formerly abducted war-affected children, families and communities, such as KICWA (see box, page 11). This is particularly necessary, as there is a great need for local and international NGOs to begin to spread services out from the IDP camps to the rural areas where people have slowly begun returning. Moreover, travel is difficult in the region, and NGO programs suffer from a lack of vehicles to transport staff. Funds are needed to enable local and international NGOs to carry out basic tasks, such as family reunification and community follow-up work, in the form of more transportation vehicles. More support and community sensitization trainings are also needed to work with parents whose children have not escaped. Such work can be modeled after the example of CPA (Concerned Parents Association), a group of the parents of abducted children that has spearheaded the call for forgiveness and the release of children still in captivity.

The delegation was told that to sustain peace and strengthen the fabric of society, the local traditional leaders and traditions must be restrengthened and empowered. Therefore, the district of Kitgum and surrounding areas should support more community activities, such as the Cultural Festival on December 10, which included traditional dance and was a unifying event for people throughout the north (23 sub-counties, 1,300 people) to meet and share their experiences.

The Ugandan government is heavily decentralized, and the districts decide on funding for themselves. There is a dangerous trend for social welfare and educational matters to get very few funds allocated to them by the district officials compared to infrastructure development. The Department of Children and Youth has a yearly operational budget of 4 million Ugandan shillings (\$2,618.00); it needs more funds to respond to the vast needs of Ugandan children, including war-affected children. It also needs increased funds to implement Ugandan child rights statutes and to raise awareness about their existence, as the delegation was told that the statute is not widely known about, and thus not widely used. Likewise, the National Council for Children, established in 1996 to provide a structure and mechanism that will ensure proper coordination, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs relating to the

Women Volunteers Support Abducted Children

KICWA (Kitgum District Concerned Women's Association) is a local NGO run by women volunteers who came together as mothers in August 1998 to care for and support formerly abducted children in a Reception and Reintegration Center in Kitgum. From the beginning, IRC entered into a fruitful partnership with KICWA, providing technical training and financial support. At the end of 1999, more than 150 children had gone through KICWA. Upon arrival at the KICWA center, all children receive a medical check-up and required treatment at the local hospital. A psychosocial assessment is conducted for each child to determine the most appropriate course of action for that child. Children also receive basic care and counseling and participate in psychosocial activities designed to assist in the recovery from their traumatic experience, including family tracing, reunification and follow-up, and community-based psychosocial support. When the conflict ends, the women of KICWA intend to help war-affected children throughout Kitgum district, particularly those who don't have parents or nearby relatives. The women also told the delegation that they would like to expand their programs to the war-affected community and focus on economic security and sustainable livelihood projects because "when you feed the land, the land feeds you."



In order to ensure comprehensive family tracing, reunification and follow-up, IRC has been working with KICWA to help develop their capacity to benefit children and the wider community. As soon as a child is brought to the KICWA Reception Center, IRC immediately begins the process of family tracing and reunification. The majority of children are

reunited with their families within two weeks of arriving at the KICWA center. Once a child returns to his/her family, a caseworker makes regular follow-up visits in an effort to give community-based psychosocial support. Meetings are held with the school headmaster to ensure that the child may resume his/her studies. The children and adolescents are also encouraged to take part in IRC-sponsored community activities designed to assist all war-affected and vulnerable children and their families in developing and strengthening healthy psychosocial responses and coping strategies. IRC needs assessments have emphasized children and community participation in program creation. Activities include community sensitization; family and peer-group discussions; parent support groups; formation of sports teams; promotion of traditional dance, drama, play therapy and cultural rituals; adolescent health education and life skills training; vocational skills training and income-generation schemes. IRC's psychosocial program is exemplary, and it would be very useful to have a lessons learned report/work manual that could impact psychosocial work throughout the region.

survival, development and protection of the child, needs a larger operational budget to ensure the oversight of the implementation of child rights statutes.

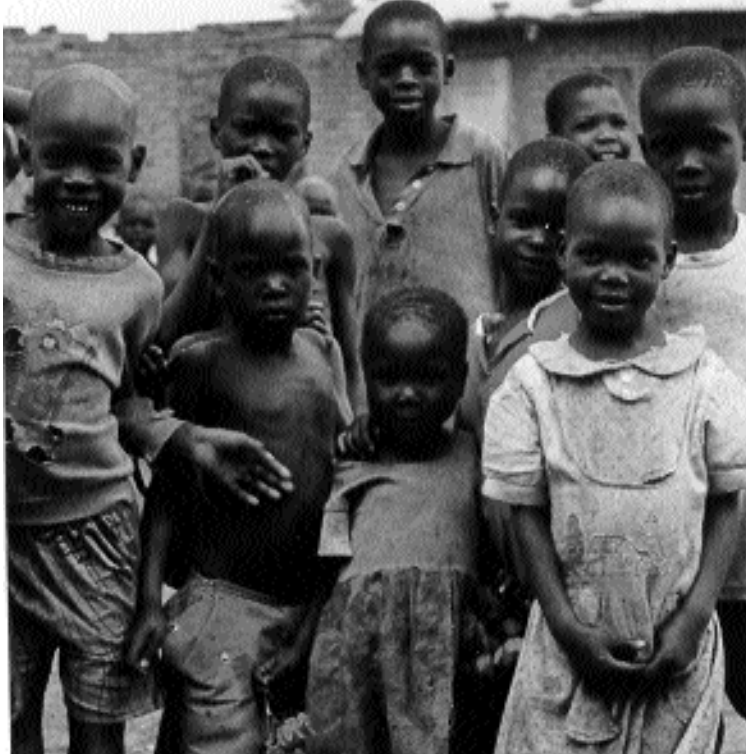
Communication lines must also be a priority for donors and international organizations. The people of the north have been cut off from information for

decades, and a means of communication would send a message to the LRA that the world is watching as well as give the Acholis a voice and a connection to the outside world. UNICEF is working on this now in Gulu, where the local radio will link communities and schools by mobile phones, enabling them to call into programs and discuss their problems.

IV. Report Recommendations

Even though the centers for abducted children are largely empty now, it is imperative that the international community not turn its back on the children of northern Uganda. **The need among formerly abducted children and war-affected children is enormous, and funds and services for their assistance and protection should be increased.** Furthermore, while the international community has responded to the crisis in northern Uganda, **more needs to be done by the United States government and other donor governments, both on a policy level and as donors,** to assist the region's return to a self-sustaining civil society.

It is important to get services, particularly education and livelihood opportunities, back to normal as soon as possible for IDPs and the more general war-affected community. **Adolescents in particular are denied educational opportunities; time for learning is running out for this age group. Efforts to enroll the most at-risk into existing opportunities as well as to develop more formal and non-formal education programs for them, including vocational training, are urgently needed.** There is also a need to restock livestock killed during the last 13 years and to increase agricultural opportunities, both of which can contribute to the psychosocial healing of war-affected communities.



A systematic and participatory assessment of child-headed households in IDP camps and the surroundings must be carried out in order to properly address their serious protection and assistance concerns, including lack of clothes, food, basic household utensils, health services, education and livelihood opportunities.

In particular, given the dependence of many child-headed households on food aid, and the fact that others need but are not receiving it, the delegation urges that **World Food Program continue its food distribution and re-register IDPs within the camps, making sure that child-headed households are included.** Furthermore, the delegation recommends that **NGOs begin or increase food aid programs aimed at the vulnerable population in internally displaced camps, including child-headed households.**

HIV/AIDS prevention and care efforts for war-affected children, adolescents and adults must be addressed by the Ugandan government. Furthermore, local, national and international NGOs in the field **should designate a point person within their organizations to address this pressing problem.**

Documentation of community-based psychosocial programming is needed in order for other organizations to learn from the successful and beneficial work being done for war-affected children and adolescents in northern Uganda. Furthermore, practitioners and advocates should undertake to **educate donors and others about the effectiveness of community-based psychosocial work** versus the institutional approach in order to increase their willingness to fund the former.

In order to provide effective support and assistance to displaced and refugee communities, **donors should prioritize funding to strengthen the logistics capacity of NGOs,** particularly with regard to increasing the number of vehicles available to them.

V. Appendices

PROFILE OF A FORMER ABDUCTEE

Oyella Susan was abducted by the LRA in 1996 at the age of 13 and remained in captivity for two years. She went through military training and fought on the frontline. After returning to the LRA camp in Southern Sudan after a battle in Gulu, Susan's feet became swollen and sore; she could barely walk. However, on the journey back, Susan managed to escape from the LRA. While recovering at the World Vision center in Gulu, she learned that her mother had died of AIDS. Now 16 years old, Susan lives in Padibe IDP camp in Kitgum district and takes care of her brother Joseph, who is twelve years old and mentally disabled. (See photograph, page 4.) She is also responsible for taking care of her eight-year-old sister, Margaret. Although Susan and Margaret are able to go to school with the help of the IRC, there are no programs for Joseph. Susan told the delegation that her hope for the future is to continue her studies, although she fears that she will not be able to do so because of her responsibilities to care for her younger brother and sister. "Who will take care of my brother?" she asked as she began to cry.

LETTERS TO THE DELEGATION

20 November 1999

Our Guests from the USA and the staff of IRC Uganda:

On behalf of the pupils, staff and Lokung Sub-County and on my behalf, I would like to register to you our sincere and warm welcome to this part of the country, and more particularly, to our school.

This school now hosts two other schools, Potwach and Ngom-Oromo Primary Schools. We have a total of 1,559 pupils and 17 teachers. In fact, we are getting resettled after a hard time of war here, where we lost friends and parents. Many children were abducted, out of whom about 100 managed to escape back. It is very regretful that so many were killed over the course of time.

We are grateful to the IRC for their intervention, especially in their psychosocial programs. They have played a good role in psychological healing, medical treatment, social and cultural activities. They have contributed sports uniforms, footballs and traditional costumes. However, we would like to emphasize the need for skill training and income-generating projects to be initiated, especially for child-headed families and school dropouts.

Our guests, the IRC staff and community, please, let us join hands and advocate for peace without which nothing can be done. If there is peace, then the resettlement program can be accomplished.

May the Good Lord bless and keep you in all struggles. Amen, Otto Disor Baffin

21 November 1999

Memorandum of the Abductees, Palabek Kal Sub-County

We, the abductees of Palabek Kal Sub-County, most welcome you, our important visitors from America, to Uganda Kitgum district, especially Palabek Kal Sub-County for the first time.

The people of Palabek Kal have suffered most through rebel activities with a lot of massacres, abductions and houses burnt, since the sub-county has been a corridor for the rebels' penetration to and from Sudan. A number of people in the sub-county have been abducted or killed from different families; however, some have managed to escape back:

- In Kal parish, 155 children have returned, 29 are still missing and 51 are known to be dead;
- In Lugwar parish, 79 children have returned, 23 are still missing and 58 are known to be dead;
- In Labigiryam parish, 165 children have returned, 8 are still missing and 59 are known to be dead;
- In Lamwo parish, 261 children have returned, 134 are still missing and 141 are known to be dead;
- In Paracele parish, 126 children have returned, 29 are still missing and 51 are known to be dead;
- In Lokung parish, 19 children have returned, 14 are still missing and 17 are known to be dead.

In total, 805 children have returned, although 234 are still missing and 377 are known to be dead. This assessment has been made possible with the assistance of the Office of Resident District Commissioner of Kitgum District.

The IRC, an NGO, started working in our sub-county in early April 1999 and has assessed 279 school pupils and 45 out-of-school children. Out of these, 70 abductees from 18 years and below have initiated an income-generating project in the sub-county, whereby four acres of land have been planted with green grams and beans. They have been assisted with hand hoes and seeds given by IRC Kitgum district.

We would however request that you, through the IRC Kitgum district, continue assisting us with the following:

- school requirements such as fees, uniforms and text books;
- medical care; and
- oxen and ox-plough to improve on our agricultural production project.

In conclusion, we do appreciate very much the work done by IRC in the sub-county since it has provided some of our abductees with medical care, school requirements for students and uniforms for recreational activities. We still have high hopes in IRC for further assistance to us and our fellow abductees in the internally displaced camps in Kitgum district.

Long live IRC Kitgum, long live the government of Uganda. Thanks, Chaolo Santana, Community Development Assistant, Palabek Kal

The location of Lokung IDP camp, which sits 14 kilometers from the Sudanese border, makes it one of the most vulnerable camps in northern Uganda. Since 1997, the camp has sustained continuous rebel attacks, and the high security risk has meant that little outside aid, including food and medical care, has reached the more than 18,000 inhabitants of the camp. While in theory there are over 3,000 internally displaced children in the camp who can attend the classes for grades P1-P7, the reality is that attendance is erratic due to fear of rebel attacks and the daily struggle for basic survival. The school has a floor and roof, but no walls for protection from the weather and rodents. Materials for instruction are minimal: each grade level has only one or two books per class. Moreover, while there are seventeen certified teachers, none have National Diplomas.

During the delegation's meeting with the school's headmaster, he emphasized the camps' problems with food supply and the importance of, but lack of, vocational and skills training opportunities for adolescents. He expressed his gratitude to the IRC for their psychosocial work and their development of cultural and sports programs. In their efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate formerly abducted children in Lokung, the IRC team has supported culturally based psychosocial interventions, such as singing, dancing, drawing and traditional

Acholi healing rituals. It is an Acholi belief that if a person has killed someone, the spirit of the dead person inhabits, and haunts, the killer. IRC has found that traditional rituals are a very effective, yet underused, psychosocial intervention for aiding the reintegration of child soldiers into the community. The IRC team helps the families locate “adjowki,” or traditional healers, and also provides materials that are needed for the ceremony, such as goats, chickens or eggs. The ceremonies involve not only the family of the child, but also the entire community. This wide support and involvement is important in the acceptance and reintegration of the child back into family and community life.

During the course of carrying out assessments of formerly abducted children in Lokung in October 1999, IRC discovered a group of 17 formerly abducted and vulnerable children and youths, between the ages of 9 and 16, who had formed their own support and income-generating group, named Dii Cwinyi (“Have Courage”). The founder and leader of the group is Odoki William. William witnessed the brutal murder of his parents by the LRA and was captured by the rebels. He managed to escape and returned to Lokung where he lived with his two brothers and a 70-year-old guardian. However, the guardian was unable to provide for the basic food and education needs of William and his brothers, and William realized that if a group of children like him joined together to work, they could earn income for school fees and supplies. After forming a group, the children and adolescents approached their neighbors and offered to do manual labor and dig in the fields in return for income. IRC is working with the group to help them develop sustainable projects that foster their strong sense of self-reliance. For example, after providing the group with school exercise books for the present school term, IRC has given them agricultural tools so that they can more efficiently cultivate the fields to earn money for their future schoolbooks. In the midst of a daily struggle for survival, the young members of Dii Cwinyi have not only exhibited courage, but also the belief that there is a future for them.

Delegation Meetings

The delegation would like to thank the following people with whom it met:

Ambassador Martin Brennan, US Ambassador to Uganda
Jan Coffey, Country Director, IRC Uganda
Annette Devereux, AVSI International (Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale)
Cindy Dubble, IRC Uganda Program Manager, and IRC Kitgum team
Greg Duly, Director, Save the Children Federation
Hilary Haworth, AVSI International
Farida Khawajo, AVSI International
Members of KICWA (Kitgum Concerned Women’s Association)
The Rt. Reverend Macleord Baker Ochola II, Bishop of Kitgum
Sylvester Opia, Deputy District Commissioner of Kitgum
Reverend Dr. Kefa Sempangi, Director of the Ugandan National Council for Children
Keith Wright, Chief, Coordination, Communication and Advocacy, UNICEF
Richard Young, Country Representative, Red Barnet (Save the Children - Denmark)

UGANDA DELEGATION MEMBERS

Mark Bartolini

Mr. Bartolini is IRC’s deputy director for government relations in Washington, D.C. He joined IRC as a coordinator of NGOs in Bosnia in 1993, and became deputy director of IRC’s Bosnia program in 1996. In addition to his current refugee advocacy work, Mr. Bartolini often travels to the field as a media representative for the IRC.

Jodie Eastman

Ms. Eastman, a Board member of the IRC, is actively involved in the Leadership Council on Children in Armed Conflict and presently serves as the Chair. She is an ardent and energetic advocate for the rights of displaced and war-affected children, and traveled to Rwanda on a Leadership Council delegation in 1998 to assess the conditions of children affected by the 1994 genocide.

Dr. Gail Furman

An assistant clinical professor at the New York University Medical School and one of the leading child and adolescent psychologists in Manhattan, Dr. Furman serves on the executive board of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and on Human Rights Watch’s Advisory Board for Children in

Armed Conflict. She has been on fact-finding delegations to Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Macedonia, Cambodia and on the Thai/Burma border under the auspices of the Women's Commission and the IRC.

Susan Patricof

Ms. Patricof is an active member of the Leadership Council, with which she traveled to Rwanda in 1998. She is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the NCCD, a mental health agency located in Harlem, New York, and serves on the Advisory Board of Directors of the Columbia University School of Public Health.

Allison A. Pillsbury

Ms. Pillsbury is the Project Manager for the Children and Adolescents Program at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Apart from helping the program to advocate for and effect policy relating to war-affected children and adolescents, she works with the Leadership Council and also helps to coordinate the NGO Committee on UNICEF, Sub-Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict.

ACRONYMS

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| AVSI | Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale |
| CPA | Concerned Parents' Association |
| IRC | International Rescue Committee |
| KICWA | Kitgum Concerned Women's Association |
| LRA | Lord's Resistance Army |
| MGLSD | The Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development |
| Red Barnet | Save the Children Denmark |
| SCF-UK | Save the Children Fund, UK |
| TPO | Transcultural Psychosocial Organization |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |

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