
RI BULLETIN

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Uganda: Numerous Challenges Ahead for Formerly Abducted Children and Adults

Formerly abducted children and adults from the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda are finding themselves without options as they return to communities that are unprepared to meet their reintegration needs. A brutal civil war has raged in northern Uganda for the past 18 years between Government forces and the LRA, which is made up largely of children who were abducted from their homes and forced to join the rebel group. In 2004 the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) has had military success, weakening the LRA, and resulting in an increased number of formerly abducted children and adults being rescued by the UPDF or escaping and seeking amnesty.

Upon return, some of the former abductees feel that they have no choice but to join government forces, either the UPDF or militias known as Local Defense Units. Children are particularly vulnerable to re-recruitment by the UPDF. After escaping or being rescued from the LRA, and prior to going to the UPDF-run Child Protection Unit (CPU), where NGOs have access to them, some of the children "get lost." These children are usually the ones who have been identified by former LRA commanders, now working for the UPDF, as skillful fighters. Although the CPU is a focal place for child protection agencies to access children and take them to reception centers, the CPU is housed in the UPDF barracks and thus the children remain in a militarized environment.

Some adult former LRA, especially the hard core fighters, choose to stay with the military, either due to the appeal of a steady income or for fear of returning to communities in which they have committed atrocities. Within the UPDF, a special battalion --- Battalion 105 --- has been created strictly for former LRA fighters. According to NGOs, the battalion retains the LRA culture and command structure, which are built on coercion. According to a child protection expert, "...[T]his battalion is a time bomb, waiting to explode." The battalion has come under a great deal of criticism, and NGOs are pressuring the UPDF to allow former LRA to go through reception centers before they are given the choice to join it.

There is also concern about government proposals to create a settlement for former LRA and their families at Labora farm. Government officials describe Labora as a place where former LRA will receive basic services and can work on agricultural enterprises. Isolating the former LRA, however, is likely to undermine their ability to reintegrate into society. The special attention given to former LRA living at Labora, with better access to job opportunities and improved facilities, is also likely to increase tensions between returnees and communities, which are not benefiting from similar services and which suffered at the hands of the rebels. While donors have been unwilling to fund this scheme, it is going forward under a Presidential directive.

The former LRA who end up going to reception centers from the Child Protection Units stay at these centers for an average of 3-6 weeks to receive psychosocial counseling (special cases stay longer). From here, they are reunited with their families, almost all of whom are living in IDP camps. Many children don't want to go to camps, fearing re-abduction and shame of facing relatives against whom they may have committed atrocities. In many cases, returnees end up staying in towns. According to a NGO worker, "There are hundreds of former LRA fighters in Gulu town, just drifting with no opportunities."

There is clearly not enough support for returnees and their families in the camps. IDPs report that some children exhibit violent behavior and have difficulty reintegrating, but these children and their families have nowhere to seek assistance. Follow up assistance to former LRA fighters is almost non-existent. NGOs find that it is too insecure for them to regularly travel to camps to monitor the reintegration of returnees. Also NGOs do not have adequate resources and staff to improve their follow up assistance. There are Community Volunteer Counselors in each camp to provide support to the returnees, but they are not trained counselors and serve more as resource people. They cannot do more than act as a listening ear to parents, many of whom are unable to cope with the needs of their severely traumatized children and therefore suggest that they go back to the reception center.

The Community Volunteer Counselors whom Refugees International interviewed expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed by the dimensions of their work. In one IDP camp, the counselors told RI that there are 16 of them for a camp population of more than 12,500 people. Not only do they follow up on former abductees, but also those suffering from HIV/AIDS, and those experiencing trauma after surviving a LRA attack or losing their houses in fires. Additional support could be provided by the support network for parents of abducted children, the Concerned Parent Association. The Parent Association is present in most IDP camps, at least in Gulu district.

Existing reintegration programs are extremely limited. There is not enough support for formal education, vocational training, and business training opportunities for returnees. Those who want to go to school after return find that the longer they have been out of school, the more difficult it is to go back. Currently, there are no "catch up" programs for children who want to return to formal education, but there are plans to develop these programs. The conflict in the north has been a blow to the education system and not enough secondary schools exist to absorb all the children who want to continue after primary school and, unlike primary education, secondary education is not universal. The Government of Uganda has launched a program to provide 47,000 Ugandan Shillings per term to children living in camps who want to go to secondary school. This is a positive step, lack of funds is hampering the program. As a result, instead of 47,000 Shillings, children are getting grants closer to 7,700 Shillings, or no grants at all.

Most vocational training programs run for six months and focus on developing skills such as tailoring and carpentry. Returnees say that they cannot find jobs after six month courses when they have to compete with others who have been training for two to three years. Further, job opportunities for returnees in the camps are rare.

Reintegration is particularly difficult for the child mothers. After going through the reception centers, these women are reunited with their families and are expected to provide for their children. Child mothers often are uneducated and have no skills, so it is very difficult for them to earn a living. NGOs report that child mothers consistently request assistance in starting small businesses. Child mothers sometimes find it difficult to be accepted in Northern Uganda's Acholi society and their chances for remarrying are minute. Child mothers with more than one child face extreme stigma, and some children have been abandoned.

There is ongoing debate about whether, after return, child mothers should stay with the men who coerced them into marriage or be allowed to separate from their captors. The UPDF complicates the ability of recently released child mothers to get information about the options available to them. Former senior LRA commanders, most of whom have joined the UPDF, want the women who were forced to marry them to stay with them after they re-enter society. NGOs have problems accessing these women soon after their return, and have to wait for commanders to be deployed for duty before being able to meet with these women and notify them of their options.

The Government of Uganda's Amnesty Commission has the role to provide reinsertion packages to returnees, which consist of non-food items and a cash grant of \$150. However, due to a lack of donor funds, the Commission has stopped providing the assistance and has a backlog of about 8,000 people from different rebel groups, with the largest number being from the LRA. The Amnesty Commission will soon be receiving a grant of \$4.2 million from the World Bank to continue providing reinsertion packages for all those going through the amnesty process. Ideally, reinsertion packages should be part of a larger community-based reintegration process in which these long-suffering communities receive assistance as well. Reports indicate that in some cases IDPs are coming out in disguise of former rebels to apply for assistance packages. Aid targeting only the returnees will increase resentment between perpetrators and victims. RI is particularly concerned that children under the age of 18 are going to receive the cash payment, thereby conveying the perception that these children are receiving preferential treatment.

Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:

- The Ugandan military limit their time with returnees to not more than 24 hours and permit humanitarian and protection agencies immediate access to all former abductees.
- The Ugandan military cease efforts to recruit formerly abducted children into the UPDF and LDUs.
- The Government of Uganda halt plans to segregate former LRA by building special facilities for them and instead focus on integrating them into communities.
- Donor governments increase funding for reintegration assistance for former LRA fighters and their communities.
- The Concerned Parents Association be viewed as an additional source of support to Community Volunteer Counselors and members of the Parents Association be trained in providing psychosocial assistance to the children and bolstered as a support network. Donors should fund the training and facilitation activities of the Parents Association.
- More resources be devoted to encouraging returnees to pursue formal education through “catch up” and accelerated learning programs. Vocational skills training should go hand in hand with increased placement programs and resources should be earmarked for creation of income generating activities for returnees, particularly child mothers.
- The Government of Uganda continue and expand its support for displaced students, including formerly abducted children, attending government secondary schools. Donors should promote this initiative and should consider supporting students attending private schools, especially given the shortage of government secondary school in northern Uganda.
- The Amnesty Commission and World Bank recognize the disadvantages of cash payments to children and consider alternatives that benefit all the youth of the community, such as youth centers, recreation centers, or vocational training centers.

Senior Advocate Michelle Brown and Advocate Kavita Shukla were in northern Uganda in November.