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- [Home](#)
- [News Releases](#)
- [About HRW](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Info by Country](#)
 - [Africa](#)
 - [Americas](#)
 - [Asia](#)
 - [Europe/Central Asia](#)
 - [Middle East/N. Africa](#)
 - [United States](#)
- [Global Issues](#)
 - [Arms](#)
 - [Children's Rights](#)
 - [HIV/AIDS](#)
 - [International Justice](#)
 - [Prisons](#)
 - [Refugees](#)
 - [Women's Rights](#)
 - [United Nations](#)
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- [Campaigns](#)
 - [Film Festival](#)
 - [Photo Galleries](#)
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Uganda: Child Abductions Skyrocket in North

(Geneva, March 28, 2003) Children are being abducted in record numbers in northern Uganda by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today. The children are subjected to brutal treatment as soldiers, laborers and sexual slaves.

"The increase in abductions is dramatic and alarming. More children have been taken in the last 10 months than in any previous year of the conflict."

Jo Becker Advocacy director for the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch

conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government.

"The increase in abductions is dramatic and alarming," said Jo Becker of the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. "More children have been taken in the last 10 months than in any previous year of the conflict."

The surge in abductions followed the return of the LRA to Uganda after the Ugandan government launched a military offensive, "Operation Iron Fist," against the LRA's bases in southern Sudan in March of last year.

Children abducted by the LRA 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 as virtual slaves. Many are given weapons training and some are used to fight the Ugandan army, the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF). Girls are sexually enslaved as "wives" to LRA commanders, and subjected to rape, unwanted pregnancies, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

The LRA uses brutal tactics to demand obedience from abducted children. Children are forced to beat or trample to death other children who attempt to escape,

Since June of 2002, an estimated 5,000 children have been abducted—a striking increase from 2001, when fewer than 100 children were abducted. In total, an estimated 20,000 children have been abducted during the 16-year

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and are repeatedly told they will be killed if they try to run away.

The 31-page report, "Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda" draws on interviews with children who have recently escaped from LRA captivity. The majority of those interviewed were abducted after the escalation of the conflict last year.

"Children live in fear," said Becker. "They know that if they are abducted they will be brutalized, possibly killed, and may never see their families again."

Every night thousands of children pour into Gulu and other northern Ugandan towns from surrounding areas, hoping to avoid abduction. They sleep on verandas, in bus parks, on church grounds, and at local hospitals before returning home again the next morning. In February 2003, Human Rights Watch observed nearly 3,000 individuals, the vast majority unaccompanied children, seeking refuge at Lacor hospital in Gulu. These children are known locally as "night commuters."

Uganda's government also recruits children. Human Rights Watch documented the recruitment of children as young as 12 into Local Defense Units, also known as home guards. These children are trained, and sometimes fight, with the Ugandan army. Boys who manage to escape from LRA captivity, particularly those with combat experience, are also pressured to join the UPDF while in UPDF custody for debriefing.

Human Rights Watch called on both the LRA and the Uganda government to comply with international standards prohibiting the recruitment and use of children as soldiers.

"The abduction of children has destroyed the lives of thousands of children and their families," said Becker. "The United Nations should appoint a special envoy to act on behalf of these children and to seek their release."

Human Rights Watch called on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which is now meeting in Geneva, to request that the UN Secretary-General appoint a special envoy to seek the release of the abducted children, by conducting "shuttle diplomacy" between the LRA and the Ugandan government. A broad group of Ugandan and international non-governmental organizations has endorsed the proposal. These include humanitarian agencies working in the north such as Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, and World Vision International.

On March 2, the leader of the LRA, Joseph Kony, announced a unilateral ceasefire. The government initially rejected the declaration, but later announced a limited ceasefire to allow for talks with the LRA. However, the LRA did not appear at sites designated by the government for the talks, and LRA fighters have violated Kony's ceasefire announcement by attacking and abducting civilians.



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