

Africa Report by Linda de Hoyos

Ugandan army under fire

Amnesty International points to violence of Museveni's military against civilians in northern Uganda.

For 13 years, a war has been raging in Northern Uganda between the Ugandan Peoples Defense Force (UPDF) of President Yoweri Museveni and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The Western media and human rights organizations have focused attention only on the LRA, whose assaults on the Acholi people living in the war districts of Kitgum and Gulu have brought the Acholi community to the point of annihilation. Over the years, the LRA has abducted up to 10,000 children from northern Uganda; the LRA is mostly an "army" of terrorized children, now some of them "grown up" in years of fighting.

But the Amnesty report, "Breaking the Circle: Protecting Human Rights in the Northern War Zone," documents, as earlier reported by *EIR*, that the UPDF has acted neither to end the war militarily, nor to protect the people from the LRA.

Today, in northern Uganda, almost 500,000 people are internally displaced. Many of the atrocities carried out against the Acholi people by the UPDF revolve around the forced removal of Acholi farmers and their families into "protective villages," where they have no means of livelihood, no sanitation, no clean water, no schools, and no food.

The Amnesty report details that, in late 1996, the military forcibly removed many people in Gulu district to the camps:

"In Aswa and Kilak Counties in Gulu many villagers were reluctant to abandon their homes, fields and possessions. Some villagers, especially those distant from roads, were con-

cerned that movement might make them more rather than less likely to be attacked by the LRA. They were concerned that their homes and property would be left unguarded and that their crops, which by this stage of the year were already maturing, would be unharvested, leaving them destitute. They were also concerned about the living conditions in the places that people were to be concentrated. For example, in early November 1996 local councillors in Bungatira told journalists: 'People fear that they will starve in the camps. They prefer the army deployment in their villages.' . . .

"The UPDF is reported to have used indiscriminate artillery and mortar fire to force people to move. The UPDF does not deny that it has shelled villages but claims that artillery fire has always been directed at LRA units. For example, on 17 September, Pabwo, in Bungatira, north of Gulu, was shelled. . . .

"On 29 October UPDF troops stationed at Anyama Teacher Training College are reported to have shelled and mortared the villages of Ngomrom, Agung and Lukome in Aswa to persuade people to move the camp at Anyama. A three-month-old baby boy was killed."

Once people had been forcibly removed from their homes into the villages, the UPDF indicated that it considered anyone caught in the countryside to be sympathizers of the LRA, and such people were often summarily killed.

The most vulnerable targets in the war in northern Uganda are the children, who also come under fire from

the UPDF. Amnesty reported:

"One of the most serious incidents involving UPDF troops in Kitgum District took place on 1 March 1998 at Ogole, eight kilometres west of Wol in Agago County. The LRA sent about 80 children, many of them such recent captives that they were bound together, to collect water under the guard of approximately 20 LRA soldiers (many of them also children). Many captives were carrying jerrycans. UPDF soldiers waiting in ambush opened fire. Villagers from nearby reported that at least 30 child captives were killed."

The army has denied the incident, but "according to persons who visited the site afterwards, the distribution of cartridge cases indicated that the soldiers' positions were within 10 metres of the nearest bound children—in other words, there can be little doubt that the soldiers knew they were opening fire on persons held captive. Abducted children who escaped described being chased by UPDF soldiers firing at them as they ran. Some of those bound became tangled up with each other and were unable to flee."

Caught in such vicious crossfire, which is threatening the disintegration of their community, it is understandable why the Acholi community is demanding an end to the war. But in the United States, this demand appears to be falling on deaf ears. Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), confronted with that demand at an Amnesty forum on the LRA on Capitol Hill on March 15, declared that the United States could not ask President Museveni to sit down and negotiate "with terrorists, since that would denigrate his office." Payne then made his counterdemand for an all-out assault on Sudan, where the LRA has found safe haven. But that policy has only brought total destruction to Northern Uganda, with no end to the war.