

The Conflict in Northern Uganda

The war in northern Uganda is Africa's longest running war. The brutal conflict, between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—led by fanatical, self-styled mystic Joseph Kony—and the government of Uganda is now in its 23rd year. The devastating effects on the security, economy and culture of the northern region of the country have been incalculable.

The war began in the late 1980s as a series of uprisings against President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) and is part of a long series of attempts to seize power by force in Uganda. Kony's professed "spiritual war" against the government soon lost any real political aspirations and turned instead against the very people Kony originally claimed to support.



For years, the LRA's principal means of recruitment was the abduction of children. An estimated 25,000 to 30,000 children were abducted over the years of conflict, the boys forced to serve as combatants, the girls as wives or sex slaves. Hundreds of villages were destroyed and tens of thousands of unarmed civilians killed, raped or assaulted.



In the mid-1990s, President Museveni insisted that the people of northern Uganda leave their homesteads and settle in crowded internally displaced persons (IDP) camps on the grounds that the displacement was militarily necessary to combat the LRA and to help distinguish civilians from the rebels. More than 1.6 million people (over 80% of the population of the north) were displaced, their new lives distinguished by deprivation and dependency on international relief organizations, and by a lack of international awareness of their situation. At the end of 2003, Jan Egeland, the United Nations undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs

stated, "I cannot find any other part of the world that is having an emergency on the scale of Uganda that is getting so little international attention."

Conditions in the camps have led to acute malnutrition in children as well as the destruction of social networks, culture and norms. It is estimated that 300,000 children under the age of five have suffered from malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea and preventable diseases. Many women and girls have been forced to trade sex for basic necessities, contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The good news is that in August 2006 the LRA and the government of Uganda signed a cessation of hostilities agreement and have been in peace negotiations. The prospect that the conflict will end and that peace will return to northern Uganda is foremost in everyone's mind. When asked, most northerners respond that they are "cautiously optimistic". There has been considerable movement out of the camps and into the countryside although many of the displaced still wait for a formal peace agreement before putting themselves or their children at risk. Meanwhile everyone acknowledges that this is the best chance for peace in over twenty years and talk has begun in earnest about rebuilding the north and reclaiming its future.

