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**SPECIFIC GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS:
MASS EXODUSES AND DISPLACED PERSONS**

**Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2004]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The plight of displaced persons in Uganda

The human rights situation in the war regions of Northern and Eastern Uganda has worsened in 2003/2004. Since the start of the Ugandan Army's "Iron Fist" campaign in March 2002 the number of internally displaced persons in Uganda has doubled. In the North of the country 800,000 people have fled their homes while in the East more than 400,000 have been forced to abandon their villages as a result of war and human rights violations. The humanitarian situation faced by 1.2 million internally displaced persons has been deteriorating for several years, largely due to the high level of insecurity, which has brought the economy to a virtual standstill. The displaced people lack the basic foodstuffs, tents, water and medicines they need because the Army is unable to guarantee the security of international aid workers. About 250 people share one pit latrine in camps of internally displaced persons in the district of Gulu. Internally displaced people in the district of Lira complained in November 2003 about the lack of medical assistance to 16,000 people. In one camp alone near the Bala Stock Farm (District of Gulu) at least 10,000 children were not schooling due to the lack of appropriate teaching institutions. Cattle raiding in North-Eastern Uganda are an additional cause of displacement. Northern Uganda has also been facing prolonged dry spells, which have led to a drop in production of major staples, such as millet and sorghum.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in particular has been responsible for human rights violations on a large scale. In spite of all international efforts that have been made to end the use of child soldiers approximately 90 per cent of the LRA's fighters are children and adolescents, the majority of them press-ganged into armed service. Since 2002 the number of abductions of children by the LRA has substantially increased. According to United Nations sources 8,400 children were abducted between March 2002 and June 2003. Between July and October 2003 another 2,000 children were taken, of whom 1,280 were set free by soldiers. In 2001 a mere 100 children were abducted. The abducted children have been forced by the LRA to serve as soldiers, bearers, mine-sweepers, spies, human shields and sex slaves.

Unfortunately Government forces still are continuing to recruit children into Local Defence Units and into the army. In training camps of local defence militias UNICEF identified 120 children among the recruits. The recruitment of children contravenes the 1989 U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The LRA uses night-time attacks on villages and refugee camps to intimidate the civilian population. Arson, looting, rapes and massacres are routinely perpetrated by LRA fighters. At least 5,000 children and adolescents flee their homes nightly as the war in Northern and Eastern Uganda has worsened. Fearing increased attacks and abduction by the LRA, these civilians escape to the relative safety of town centres every night. Night commuting started in the year 2002 after the Ugandan government launched the "Operation Iron Fist". This military offensive against the LRA led to a significant increase in violence in the region. Many of the night commuter girls and women reported that male youth and Uganda government military forces are sexually harassing and abusing them. In some cases, girls reported that schools in the town of Kitgum have been used as rape sites in the evening. There are few services for the victims of abuse and cases are rarely followed up. There is a high risk of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancy as a result of sexual violence or unprotected sex. Furthermore night commuters are facing harsh conditions. Due to a lack of appropriate

accommodation many children are forced to sleep outdoors, exposed to rain, wind, mosquitoes and unsanitary conditions. Consequently, many contract respiratory tract infections, malaria, diarrhoea and scabies.

The Ugandan government seems unable to put an end to the need for night commuting and to do more for the protection of the civilian population. In 1996 the Ugandan authorities started to build up camps for internally displaced people all over Northern Uganda. Despite objections from politicians from the crisis area Ugandan soldiers mostly forced the civilian population to leave their homes and to move into camps situated in government-controlled areas. Sometimes soldiers gave the civilians a three- or seven-day deadline to move into the camps, threatening to treat who resisted as rebels. In most cases soldiers stormed into the villages, without any previous warning, started to beat the inhabitants and ordered the immediate removal of the village. The civilian population complained about the lack of any previous consultation and about the disastrous consequences of the forced displacement. Much of the property left behind was looted by rebels and soldiers. Force was used by the army to ensure that people did not return to the abandoned villages and to their fields.

The camps have given little protection to the internally displaced people. The Ugandan army seems unable or unwilling to give an effective protection against attacks of LRA. On a regular basis, guerrilla fighters of LRA are entering into the camps and forcing the displaced people to share their relief aid with the rebel fighters. Furthermore the displaced people are threatened not only by neglect by the authorities but also by violence of Ugandan army. The soldiers are ill-disciplined and show little respect for defenceless civilians. Soldiers regularly attack refugee camps and fortified villages.

The military defeat of the LRA is the Ugandan government's highest priority. Its decision to create armed militia forces in the contested areas has helped escalate armed conflict. At the same time the security forces refuse to provide the civilian population with the protection they need from attack.

The disastrous consequences of this escalating conflict demonstrate the lack of any alternative to a dialogue between the parties to the conflict. The Commission should condemn the grave human rights violations perpetrated by the LRA and the inadequate protection and humanitarian assistance provided to the civilian population and should strenuously urge both parties to the conflict to enter into talks aimed at achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict. Furthermore the Commission should call upon both parties to immediately stop the use of child soldiers.
