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**RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

**Written statement\* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples International, 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.

[11 February 2005]

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

## THE PLIGHT OF CHILDREN IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Northern Uganda is the world's greatest neglected emergency. The Acholi areas of Northern Uganda have suffered from persistent insecurity since the mid 1980s. For nearly 20 years, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has waged a civil war against the Government of Uganda. The LRA has targeted the people across Northern Uganda and in the sub-region, including South Sudan. This has led to massive and persistent disruption, hardship, dislocation and suffering for the people within that region and far beyond. It is now one of Africa's longest running open conflicts and more than 1.5 million people have fled their homes.

At least 80 % of Northern Uganda's population is crammed into 200 refugee camps lacking basic facilities. Children are most suffering from this desperate situation of the refugees. The infant mortality rate in Northern Uganda is 172 per 1.000 compared to the national figure of 88 per 1.000. Out of every 1.000, 276 children under five years die in the region. The maternal mortality ratio is 700 per 100.000 live birth in the North compared to the national figure of 506 per 100.000. Reports of United Nations indicate prevalence of diarrhoeal diseases to be highest amongst children of Northern Uganda at 27 % compared to 15 % in Central Uganda. Internal displaced people lack access to basic services, in many cases because they are hosted in makeshift structures and tents. They are increasingly affected by malaria, diarrhoeal diseases, worm infestations, respiratory infections, under nutrition, sexually transmitted infections and trauma. With no jobs, the misery of life for many men in the camps is only relieved by alcohol abuse and promiscuity. Child prostitution is rife and health workers say HIV/AIDS infection rates of around 12 % in Northern Uganda are double those in the rest of the country. These conditions together with LRA's ferocious brutality against civilians and abuses committed by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), including arbitrary detention, torture, rape and stealing, rampant poverty, hunger and lack of adequate health services, raise serious concerns for maternal and child health. Medical services became overwhelmed with chronically ill patients, malnourished, traumatized and having various degrees of injuries in this area of high prevalence of insecurity.

More than half of the rural health units were either plundered, destroyed, or abandoned, and their health workers displaced to safer areas at the height of the LRA insurgency in Lira District in February 2004. Regarding the massive abuses and brutal attacks on the civilian population by all conflict parties the hospital bed occupancy in Lira was increased by 41 % from 152 % (year 2003) to 193 % (2004).

Recent mental-health surveys in Pader District in Northern Uganda documented that some 63 % of all interviewed people reported the disappearance or abduction of a family member. 58 % experienced the death of a family member due to the insurgency. 79 % had witnessed torture and 40 % had seen at least one killing. Most of the IDPs had been exposed to severe traumatic events since the UPDF restarted a massive military offensive in March 2002. This Operation Iron Fist has been a catastrophe for the people of Northern Uganda. The war has spread to more districts, abductions of children and displacement increased. The Government responded to LRA brutality by creating some local militias, which created new tensions and committed massive abuses.

The war of children against children is now in its 18<sup>th</sup> year. UNICEF estimates that 3.000 children have been abducted by LRA since October 2003 for use as soldiers, sex slaves and porters, adding to the approximately 22.000 abducted in previous years. The number of night

commuters – children, living during daytime in villages and seeking protection in the nearby towns during the night – has reached a high of 52.000 in June 2004, an increase of 15 % since January 2004.

From January to June 2004, there was a serious worsening of the security situation as LRA intensified their attacks on the displaced people in Gulu, Kitgum, Pader and Lira districts. UPDF has been unable or unwilling to effectively protect the civilian population. Killings and abductions continued unabated on a daily basis. The most significant and brutal LRA attack occurred on 21 February in Barlonyo, a non-recognised IDP camp in Lira district. Almost 337 people were massacred.

The Uganda Human Rights Commission has accused UPDF officers of raping women in several IDP camps. Despite promises to stop using child soldiers UPDF has continued to recruit children and teenagers, especially traumatized former LRA child soldiers. UPDF regularly has been torturing suspected LRA members and sympathisers.

Peace in Northern Uganda still remains an elusive and distant dream. Various efforts to end the war through peaceful means have failed so far, although religious leaders insist that the war can be settled peacefully. The Ugandan Government, however, favours a military solution to the conflict. The recent peace agreement signed between the Sudan Government and SPLA is a positive factor that may benefit the cause of peace in Northern Uganda. Unfortunately, Ugandan authorities have continued in 2004 to intimidate NGO's and religious personalities lobbying for peace in Uganda.

After an encouraging ceasefire the most significant peace talks between the Government of Uganda and LRA for a decade stalled on December 31, 2004, and fighting has resumed. The six weeks of ceasefire have seen enormous progress in achieving peace. Peace must be given a chance in Northern Uganda. We are welcoming that the Government of Uganda has once again declared a temporary ceasefire on February 4, 2005. There is no alternative to peace to ensure the safety of children and to improve their livelihood.

We are calling on the UN Commission on Human Rights to:

- condemn violence and abuses by all conflict parties in Northern Uganda;
- appeal to them to sign a ceasefire agreement and to achieve a longstanding peace. Blaming only the rebels for their brutal terror against the civilian population would not reflect the real situation on the ground and would not contribute to open a dialogue between all conflict parties.

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