

Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War

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Abstract

This article takes a comprehensive look at the state and development of youth in both the Republic of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The primary focus of this article is given to the thousands of child soldiers that have been abducted by militant groups and trained to viciously kill in their most vulnerable adolescent years. Following a brief literature review of published sources that discuss the impacts of conflicts on children in Uganda and the DRC, this article provides an insightful analysis of the youth exploitation crises in these two countries and examines methods that have been implemented to reduce the involvement of youth in these conflicts.

I. Introduction

Innocent children being forced to fight in war is an awful crime against humanity. Both Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have extensive histories with direct child involvement in armed conflict. These confrontations, such as the clashes between the Ugandan and Congolese governments against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and other rebel groups have resulted in thousands of children being abducted and forced into armed conflicts over the years.

Taking advantage of political and social instability, rebel groups have frequently abducted young boys to fight in armed combat, and girls as sex slaves for gross exploitation.¹ As recently as 2005 in Uganda and 2007 in the DRC, government forces have also come under scrutiny from human rights organizations for being just as bad as the rebel groups, as they too were charged with recruiting child soldiers.²

¹ Becker and Tate (2003) p. 2.

² Child Soldiers International (2008), pp. 107 and 346.

The LRA formed in Uganda in 1986 under the leadership of Joseph Kony and has contributed to killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people, disrupting and tearing apart families, and creating an overall unsettled atmosphere in the country. The LRA has since spread from Uganda into nearby neighboring territories, including the DRC, killing thousands and abducting over 30,000 children since their inception in 1986.³ Newer rebel groups like the M23 are fresh obstacles the government of the DRC has recently been challenged by, and their continued fighting has wreaked havoc on an already unsettled and displaced society.

Child involvement in warfare has had detrimental impacts on the development of children and the possibility of a future stable society. Not only have children been directly killed, illegally abducted, and separated from their families, but they have also been deprived of access to a proper education, health services, adequate nutrition, and other basic necessities as direct or indirect results of war.

The Ugandan government conducted the Juba peace talks with the LRA in 2006, which effectively ended the armed conflict in Uganda.⁴ In the DRC, the fighting between the DRC and M23 has only just ended, with peace talks still underway. That being said questions remain unresolved; and these countries are still plagued with violence and instability from other militant groups. If the fighting ever ends, there will still be a great need for mass regrouping and rehabilitation to take place before society can return to a productive state.

This article is structured into eight sections. Following this introduction, the second and third sections provide, respectively, a brief literature review and some empirical background. The fourth section summarizes why and how children are chosen to fight, while the fifth section describes the life of an abducted rebel child. Section six examines the effects of child warfare on children and society, while the seventh section describes some of the main measures taken to resolve conflicts and reduce child involvement. The final section attempts to draw conclusions from the information presented throughout the article.

II. Brief Literature Review

There are numerous reports and documents compiled by international organizations, academics, and non-profit groups that discuss the impacts of war on the development of children in Uganda and the DRC. The Human Rights Watch Report by Becker and Tate (2003) provides a detailed history of the LRA in Uganda and gives several invaluable accounts from children who were recruited by the LRA. In addition to condemning the LRA, the report also criticizes the Ugandan government for violating international law and recruiting child soldiers.

Since 2003, more up-to-date literature has become available, as conditions have changed in Uganda and the DRC. The non-profit organization Child Soldiers International notes in the *Child Soldiers Global Report 2008* that some 2,000 women and children are still being used by the LRA in Uganda, and over 7,000 are in armed groups in the DRC. The report extensively discusses actions taken by the governments to try and reduce the number of child soldiers in conflict, noting however, that some of these legislative measures have been delayed in becoming law or are not properly enforced. Both Uganda and the DRC were highlighted as two of the world's 19 countries that recruited child soldiers between 2004 and 2007.

³ Invisible Children (2013).

⁴ Invisible Children (undated).

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2009) report reviews the broader societal issues effecting the development of children in Uganda and the DRC. Issues including health, education, HIV, child protection, and nutrition are discussed. Reports on both countries highlight the direct impacts of the LRA’s attacks on women and children, and the implications these attacks have on child development and social institutions.

Helmut Spitzer and Janestic M. Twikirize (2013) note that the number of child soldiers is decreasing in Uganda since 2006, although they have not fully disappeared. The article discusses the long-term effects of having children involved in armed conflicts and the ways in which child warfare prevents the improvement of social services, education, and other important societal developments.

An Amnesty International (2012) news item entitled “Landmark ICC Verdict Over Use of Child Soldiers” highlights achievements by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in beginning to bring justice to those who have used children as soldiers in conflict. The article highlights the conviction of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, a Congolese military commander, for child war crimes. The article notes existing warrants of arrest out for the DRC’s Bosco Ntaganda and for Joseph Kony (leader of the LRA).

Invisible Children, a non-profit organization that focuses on child soldier issues in Uganda, has recently taken the forefront in trying to create public awareness about the LRA. Their efforts went viral on social media in 2012, when they launched the *Kony 2012* campaign. The group created a half hour video dedicated to informing the public about Joseph Kony, the LRA, and the crimes they committed against humanity. Almost 3.7 million people pledged support to the organization’s efforts to have Kony arrested and brought before the courts. Amazingly, the group was able to gather thousands of supporters in Washington, DC to rally for the arrest of the warlord. They have also been able to raise considerable funds to try and combat the LRA and track Kony down.

III. Empirical Background

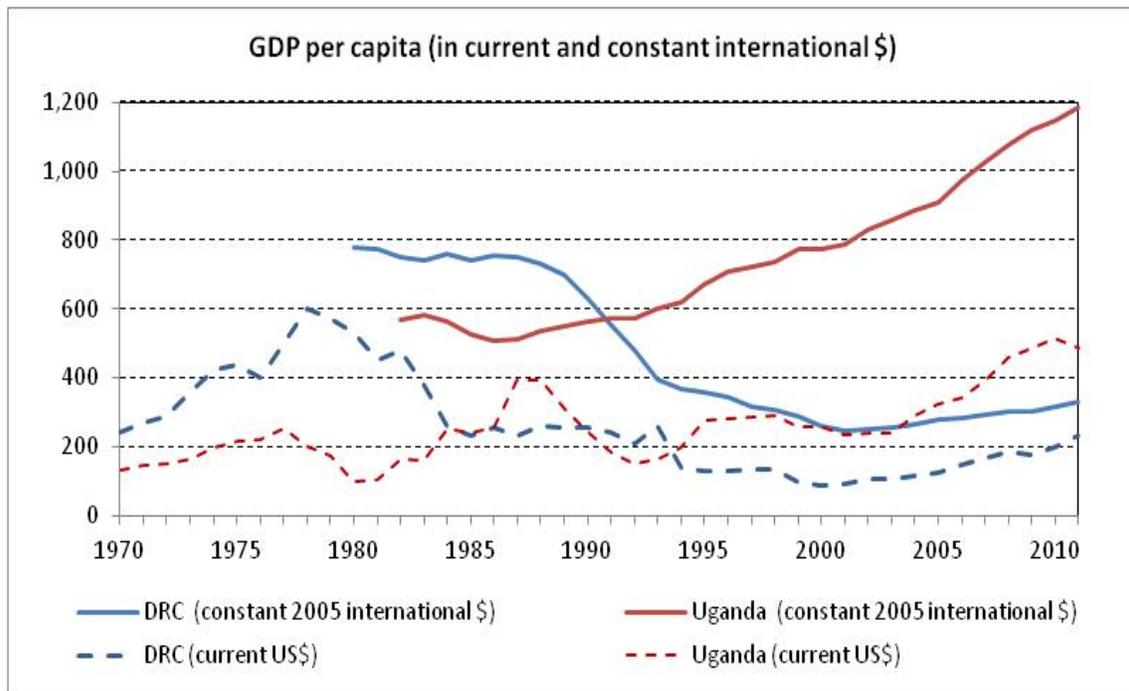
In order to understand the full effects of the development of children in Uganda and the DRC, the economic, social, and developmental aspects of these countries need to be examined. It is important to note that both of these countries have been at war and have had political instability over the last 40 years. The inefficiencies or inability for governments to collect and analyze data as a result of the unstable environment has led to inconsistent statistical information. However, for the purpose of this article, efforts have been made to find common points of comparison where consistent and comparable data between Uganda and the DRC are available for some key indicators: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, life expectancy, and infant mortality.

Figure 1 highlights the annual GDP per capita of Uganda and the DRC from 1970 to 2011. While it is typically more accurate to compare GDP per capita across countries after correcting for differences in purchasing power, given the limited availability and reliability for data in international \$, we provide the data for both countries in current US\$ and in constant 2005 international \$, see Figure 1.

While both time series (current US\$ and constant international \$) show an overall decrease in GDP per capita for the DRC since the 1980s and an overall increase in GDP per capita for Uganda, the two time series show different trends for certain time periods.

- For the DRC, GDP per capita in current US\$ has declined drastically from 1980 to 1984, while it has remained relatively stable in constant international \$. On the other hand, while GDP per capita has remained relatively stable between 1988-1993 if measured in current US\$, it declined sharply in constant international \$. The data in current US\$ is more accurately reflecting the DRC's unstable political climate, with numerous civil wars in the last 40 years.
- For Uganda, the data in current US\$ shows a drastic increase and a subsequent sharp decline in the late 1980s, while the data in current international \$ shows a gradual increase. Data in current US\$ shows another moderate decline in GDP per capita from 1998 to 2003, while it increased steadily during the same period if measured in international \$. As for the DRC, the data in current US\$ is better mirroring the conflict between the Ugandan government and the LRA, with the majority of fighting taking place between 1986-2005 and declining confrontations since the Juba peace talks in 2006.⁵

Figure 1: GDP per capita (in current US\$ and constant 2005 international \$)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

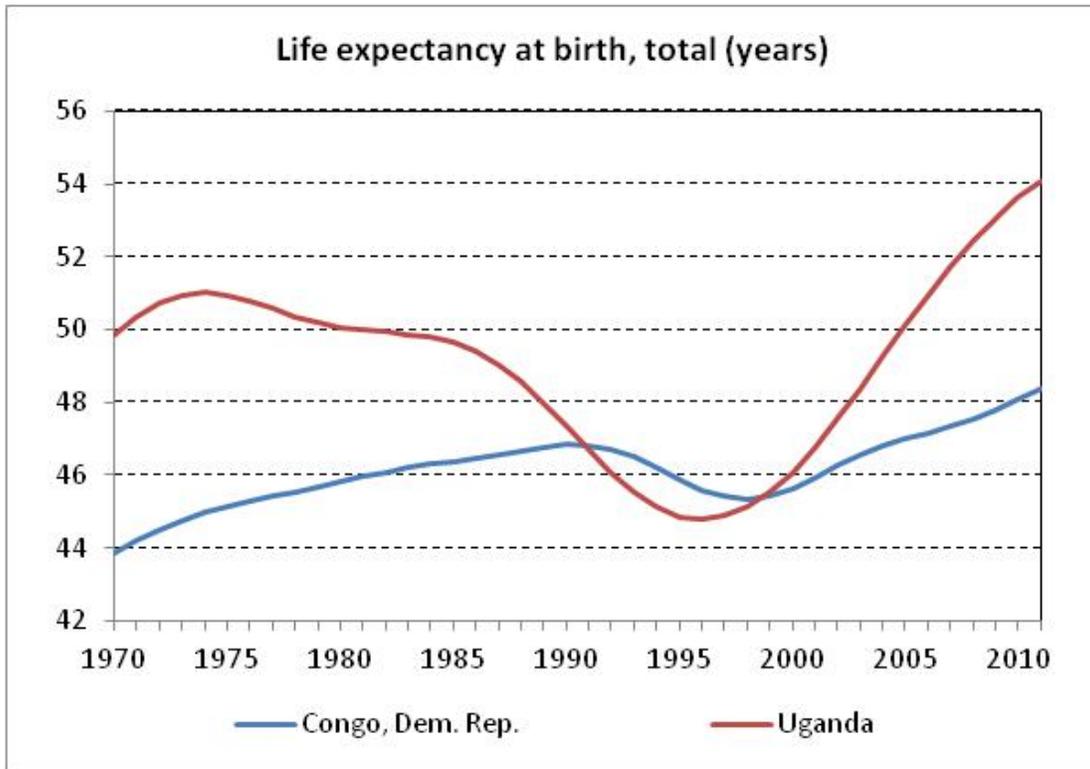
In any case, it is clear that both countries are very poor, with GDP per capita in current US\$ amounting to about US\$1 per day for the DRC for most of the time, and to about US\$2 per day for Uganda for most of the time.

As shown in Figure 2, both countries also have remarkably low life expectancies. During 1970-2011, it ranged between 44-48 years for the DRC and between 44-54 years for Uganda. The

⁵ Spitzer and Twikirize (2013), p. 69.

volatility in life expectancy has been far higher for Uganda than for the DRC, which implies that the HIV/AIDS epidemic having had a far bigger impact in Uganda. Low life expectancy indicates a less productive workforce, high dependency ratios, and low school enrollment as children are often forced to drop out and work to support their families. In any case, warfare and civil unrest have undoubtedly contributed towards these low life expectancies.

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth, 1970-2011

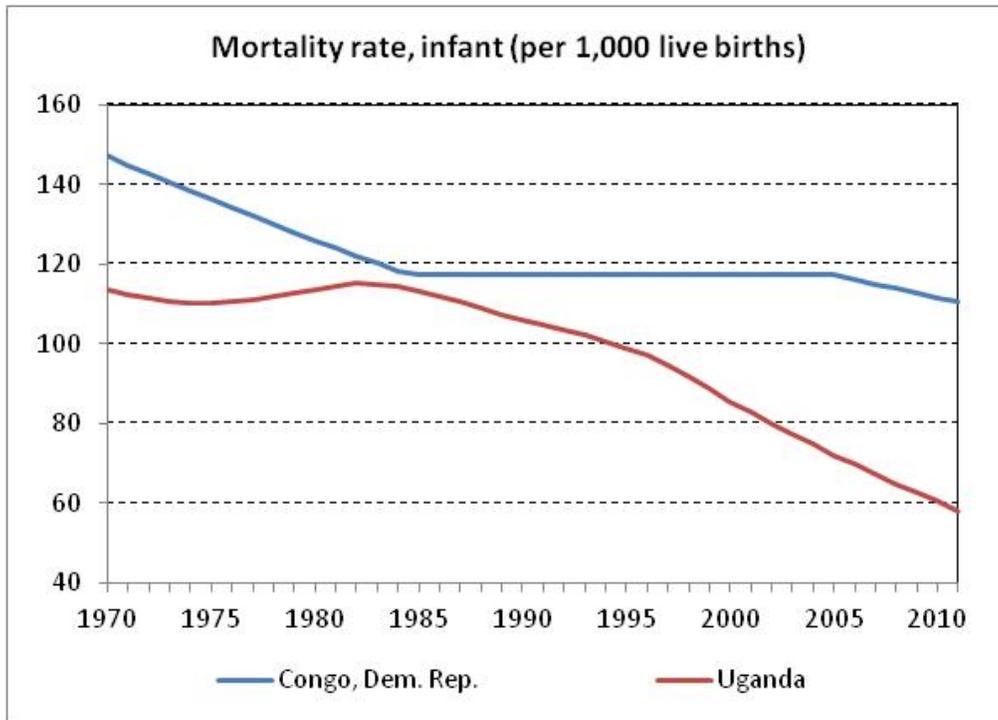


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

Although infant mortality rates in both Uganda and the DRC are decreasing (as shown in Figure 3 below), progress in the DRC has been limited. While it increased slightly in Uganda during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Uganda has made considerable progress since, decreasing infant mortality from 115.2 per 1,000 live births in 1982 to 57.9 in 2011. In the DRC, infant mortality was reduced from 147.2 in 1970 to 117.3 in 1985, but then remained stable for the next two decades according to the World Bank (2013). Some moderate progress has been made in the DRC since 2005. In any case, infant mortality remains high in both countries if compared to the world average of 63 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 and 35 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2012.⁶

⁶ World Health Organization (WHO) (2013).

Figure 3: Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births), 1970-2011



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

IV. Why and How Children are Chosen to Fight

Children are generally innocent, easy to persuade, dependent on others, and still forming their morals and values. These qualities specific to children make them highly valuable amongst revolutionary and rebellion groups, as they are more likely and willing to submit to their captors' views. In order to facilitate the military training necessary to force abducted children into conformity, children are quickly separated from captured adults. These rebel groups do this to prevent children holding onto societal values and connections with the past.⁷ Also as a part of their brutal training, children are forced to kill adults, or sometimes entire families with an assortment of weapons (oftentimes manually combative ones like clubs and machetes) provided to them by their leaders. Those who refuse to obey and carry out killings have often been killed themselves.⁸ Thus, there is usually only one option available to many children who find themselves in this predicament, either kill or be killed.

An article published by SOS Children (undated) suggests another motive for child recruitment in the DRC other than one of simply abducting children because they easily conform. The article suggests children have been actively sought because the enemy (which in a rebel groups case, are the government forces) often cannot not drive up the courage to kill mere children being forced to fight against their will. Thus, the rebels were able to lose fewer numbers in battle because they placed children on the front lines.

⁷ Storr (2014).

⁸ Storr (2014).

It was estimated in 2003 that around 3 in every 4 people abducted in Northern Uganda by the LRA were children.⁹ According to Becker and Tate (2003), children were most vulnerable to abduction from the LRA at night as the LRA conducted the majority of their raids on towns and villages in Northern Uganda under the cover of darkness. It was during these raids that they would coordinate widespread kidnappings, looting, and vandalism. As a consequence of these frequent attacks, many children became what was termed “night commuters.”¹⁰ Every night thousands of children would travel miles and miles on foot into areas like Gulu (see Figure 4 below) and Lacor, and take shelter in hospitals, schools, large tents, or surrounding pavements. It was widely believed these areas could provide more protection than their rural villages. Their parents would often remain in their homes to try to protect their property, as they were less at risk of being abducted. And in the event they were, adults were often released after providing short-term service to the group.¹¹ Children on the other hand, have hardly ever returned.

The trend of abductees getting younger was a scary element highlighted in the Becker and Tate (2003) report. It said that rebel groups were beginning to seek children as young as nine and ten years of age.¹² It can be assumed the rebels did this for the same reasons they go after children in the first place, the younger the child, the easier it is for them to convert the child into believing their practices and conforming to their violent ways. The report also highlights the pattern of abducting younger girls as they are less likely to have HIV/AIDS, and therefore, more desired by the rebels.

It is important to note however, that not all children have been forced into fighting for these rebel groups. It is suggested by multiple sources, including the Amnesty International (2003) Report on the DRC, that some children volunteered themselves. The report talks about a 1990s rebel group in the DRC, called the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), and suggests children joined this and similar groups as a means of escaping dire poverty.

Children were often enticed by an initial monthly payment of US\$100 that was being offered to recruits (which was at the time about 10 times higher than the average monthly wage in the DRC).¹³ Adults and children were driven by the poor economy to fight for these groups that could provide financing for their basic needs. Some chose to join rebel groups to protect their ethnic backgrounds or were enticed by nationalistic feelings. However, it should be clear that the vast majority of children in these groups have been forced into fighting against their will.

⁹ Becker and Tate (2003) p. 6.

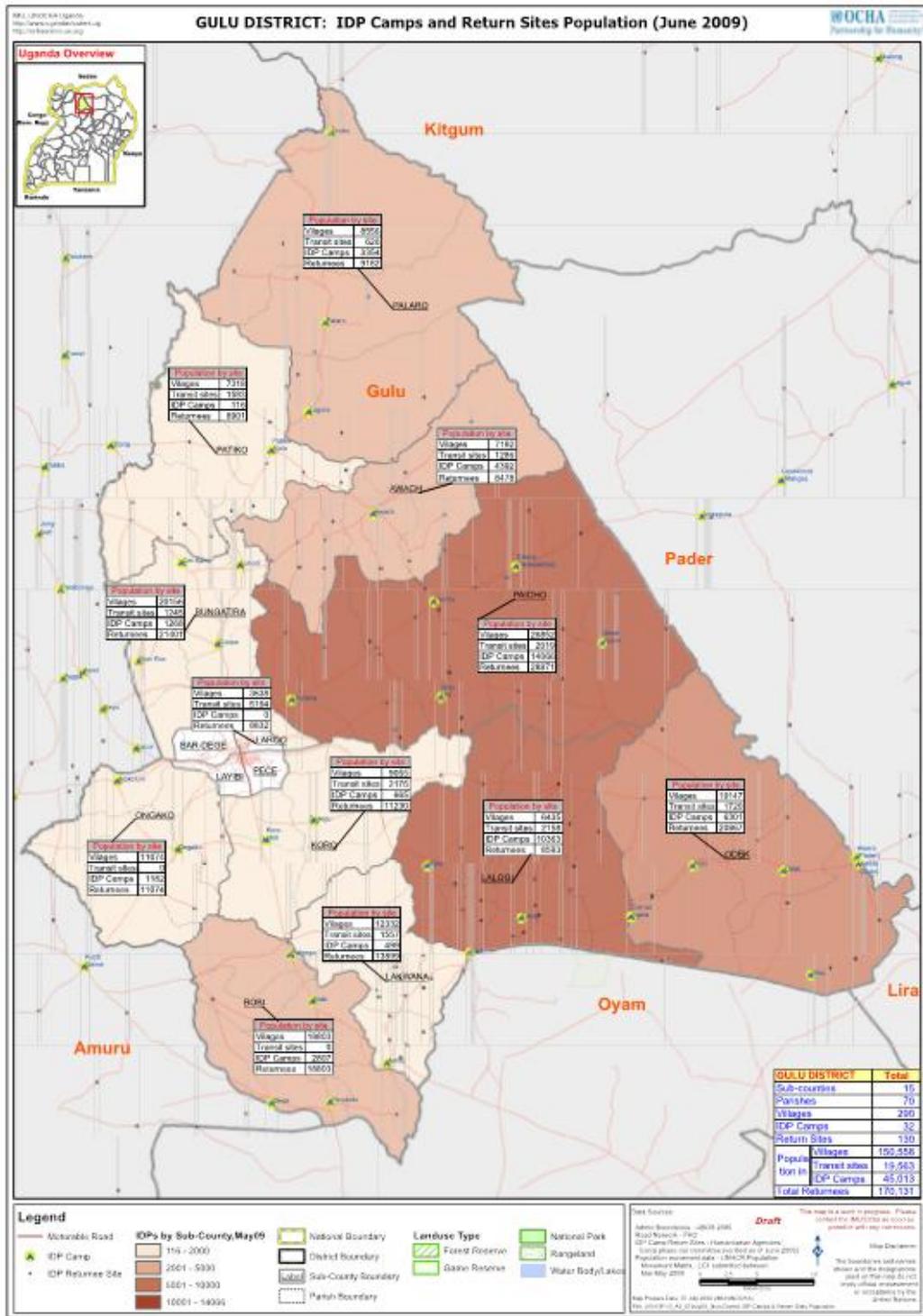
¹⁰ Morrison and Sandler (2006).

¹¹ Becker and Tate (2003), p. 6.

¹² Becker and Tate (2003), p. 7.

¹³ Amnesty International (2003), p. 3.

Figure 4: Map of IDP camps and return sites in the Gulu District in Northern Uganda



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2009).

V. Life of an Abducted Rebel Child

Being a child soldier for an armed rebel group is not an easy or enjoyable task. Apart from the gruesome training boys go through after being abducted, they have to complete a number of unpleasant duties and services for their commanders besides fighting in direct combat with government forces. Children in both Uganda and the DRC are assigned similar responsibilities regardless of the specific rebel group they are forced into. Many sources examined seem to point towards children having to fetch water, carry looted supplies, collect wood, cultivate, cook and undertake other laborious tasks.¹⁴ When abducted in mass groups, children are often roped together around their waist, forming a long coffle, and are forced to carry the looted supplies the rebels sought from defeated villages.¹⁵ Although widespread abductions have become rare, child abductions still take place.

In combat, young boys face the brunt of the battle and have often been forced to undertake the most horrible and heartless tasks. The United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (1997) report highlights the fact that the LRA officers would have the children serve on the front lines of the battles, forcing them to kill, and would usually not allow them to take cover when under return fire. They forced children to shoot and attack the enemy fully exposed, while the leadership safely took cover behind them. In the DRC, child soldiers have faced similar traumatic events. As a way of conditioning the children serving in the AFDL, they were routinely brutalized, like 11-year-old Oliver, who testified:

The commander ordered me personally to [kill] and told two other soldiers to watch over me and kill me if I refused to obey. And so I killed, I fired on these people. They brought me a woman and her children and I had to put them in a hole and bury them alive. They were screaming and pleading with me to spare them and release them. I took pity on them, but then I looked over my shoulder at the two soldiers watching me, and I said to myself: 'If I let them go, these soldiers are going to kill me.' And so I went ahead and buried the woman and children alive, to save my own life.¹⁶

This is only one of the thousands of testimonies regarding the horrific acts child soldiers have been forced to commit in both Uganda and the DRC. Any kind of refusal by child soldiers has often resulted in immediate beatings or death.

Although boys in rebel groups are forced to undertake dangerous combat, the girls in Ugandan or DRC rebel groups have it just as bad, only in a different way. Girls abducted in both of these places are forced into becoming sex slaves for the commanders of these groups. Adolescent girls as young as twelve years old have been given away as “wives” to the soldiers who could exploit them as much as they pleased.¹⁷ Girls lose all control over their bodies, and are often forced into pregnancy. They are also at an extremely high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS from their captors.¹⁸

¹⁴ Amnesty International (2003), p. 5, and United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (2001).

¹⁵ Becker and Tate (2003), p. 7.

¹⁶ Amnesty International (2003), p. 6.

¹⁷ United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (2001).

¹⁸ Becker and Tate (2003), p. 2.

VI. Effects of Child Warfare on Children and Society

Warfare and civil unrest in Uganda and the DRC have caused a plague of negative societal issues in these countries. One big problem is displaced migration. In Uganda, children would often have to “night commute” into bigger towns where rebel groups were less likely to attack in order to avoid being abducted (as already mentioned above).

Even worse however is the fact that entire communities are displaced due to violence. During the height of violence, more than 1.5 million people in Uganda are said to have fled from their rural homes to more secure camps that they hoped would provide better protection.¹⁹ In the DRC, it is estimated that around some 2 million people were living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in 2010.²⁰ This migration and displacement of people in both countries has had huge implications on the economy, as people have had to find new means of employment or ways to generate enough to meet their basic necessities, as they no longer have their plots of land to cultivate.

Displacement and general warfare is also said to have contributed to health epidemics in both of these countries, particularly children who are most vulnerable to catching communicable diseases. In the DRC, the impoverished health care system is plagued with under funding, staffing shortages, corruption, and lack of appropriate facilities to handle the population. Similar challenges are also faced in Uganda. Consequently, IDPs in both the DRC and Uganda are particularly vulnerable to diseases like cholera and hemorrhagic fever as the IDPs live in over-crowded spaces lacking proper sanitation.²¹

Widespread family issues have also developed as a result of child warfare. Spitzer and Twikirize (2013) state that approximately 22 percent of children in the Northern Uganda are orphaned as a result of their parents, siblings, and family members being killed off or unable to be found as a result of displacement from the conflicts. In addition, it is well noted by many reports that children who have managed to escape from the rebel groups are often shunned and turned away by their families and communities. Their families are often unwilling to allow children who have committed such awful crimes against humanity back in to their societies, which leads to numerous emotional and psychological problems for the children.²² They not only have to live in fear of being re-abducted by rebels and being punished for escaping, but some have nowhere to go or call home as they are not welcomed back into their communities.

The education of children in both of these regions has also been widely impacted by all of the aforementioned. The abduction of children and the physical prevention of them attending class is only one part of the problem. And not only are there challenges around getting children safely into school, but providing classroom facilities and instructors has also been a vexing issue for education officials. Spitzer and Twikirize (2013) note that a number of schools in Northern Uganda have been torched and hundreds of teachers have been killed by rebel forces. These challenges are illustrated by low literacy rates, which stood in 2010 at 67 percent in the DRC and 73 percent in Uganda.²³

¹⁹ Morrison and Sandler (2006).

²⁰ Zeender and Rothing (2010), p. 10.

²¹ Zeender and Rothing (2010), p. 11, and Spitzer and Twikirize (2013), p. 72.

²² Spitzer and Twikirize (2013), p. 70.

²³ World Bank (2013).

VII. Measures Taken to Resolve Conflicts and Reduce Child Involvement

Governments and international organizations have undertaken numerous steps to try and stop child warfare in Uganda and the DRC in the past few years. Although many measures have been delayed, some changes were finally made in the mid-2000s. Perhaps the biggest achievement for the Ugandan government was the Juba Peace Talks in 2006, which drove the LRA out of the country. Unfortunately however, these peace negotiations forced the LRA to retreat to bordering countries like the DRC, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, where, for example, violent attacks and massacres were carried out during Christmas in 2008 (see Figure 5).²⁴ Unfortunately, the DRC is still trying to deal with numerous rebel groups in the country, including the LRA. In November 2013 however, the government of the DRC successfully defeated the M23 rebel group after over a year of fighting.²⁵

Figure 5: Route taken by the LRA in the DRC during the 2008 Christmas Massacres



Source: Plaut (2010).

A number of legislative amendments have also been made to combat the recruitment of child soldiers by government forces in Uganda and the DRC. These measures are highlighted in the Child Soldiers Global Report (2008). An amendment to the United People's Defence Force (UPDF) in 2005 stated clearly that eighteen was the minimum age of recruitment in the government-armed service. Similarly in 2007 a comprehensive bill of child protection laws was being tabled in the DRC. Enforcing these and other protections has proven to be a challenge for these governments however, and they have come under fire from multiple human rights groups for

²⁴ Invisible Children (2013).

²⁵ BBC (2013a).

continuing to use child soldiers. While this is unfortunate and true, it is clear that both governments are trying to make progress towards eradicating children from their armed forces.

As previously mentioned in the literature review, the ICC is also actively involved in trying to bring justice to those who have committed intolerable acts against humanity, particularly children. They have had recent success with the conviction of DRC national Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, but there is still a great deal of work to be done. Unfortunately, Joseph Kony, the notorious LRA leader still remains at large despite being on the top of the ICC's most wanted list.²⁶

There are numerous non-government organizations (NGOs) that are dedicated to ending child warfare in Sub-Saharan Africa. One organization that is especially notable and focused on Uganda and the DRC is Invisible Children. The organization's informative 30-minute video "Kony 2012" went viral on the internet last year.²⁷ It inspired many, including the author of this article, to learn more about the injustices against children taking place in these countries. In addition to promoting international awareness, the organization is actively involved on the ground in Uganda and the DRC.

Recent success has been made by Invisible Children with their attempts to encourage captured children and adults to defect and escape. Invisible Children has distributed over 690,000 flyers (often dropping them by airplane over LRA territory in the DRC and the Central African Republic) and has produced 5 defectors who showed up with the flyer in their hands.²⁸

In addition, the NGO has also established a comprehensive radio network dedicated to encouraging LRA defectors to come home. The radio messages have been extremely successful in motivating captured children and adults to defect. Invisible Children reported that 89 percent of escapees running away from the LRA have done so since the broadcasts began and have claimed that it was the broadcasts that encouraged them to run away.

VIII. Conclusion

Child warfare is unquestionably wrong. It is sad that in this advanced day and age we still have children being abducted, abused, raped, and forced to kill and commit other unthinkable acts by rebel groups in Uganda and the DRC. Although child involvement in conflict appears to be on the decline in both countries (especially in Uganda), any child being forced to fight against its will is one child too many. Unfortunately, it is estimated that 2,000 abducted children are still held captive by the LRA.²⁹

Efforts being made by prosecutors at the ICC and NGOs like Invisible Children in conjunction with Ugandan and Congolese authorities to fight the LRA are proving successful. However, at the time of writing, many of these criminals, including Joseph Kony, have yet to be captured. Successful efforts aiming to reduce the enrollment of children in government and other armed forces from legislative standpoints appear to be making progress. While preventing children from conscripting has proven more of a challenge, the advancement of recent legislation shows efforts the governments are making to try and combat this issue.

²⁶ Invisible Children (2013).

²⁷ YouTube video by Invisible Children, entitled "KONY 2012", directed by Jason Russell (initially posted on March 5, 2012); available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>.

²⁸ Invisible Children (2013).

²⁹ Spitzer and Twikirize (2013), p. 7.

What remains troubling for these nations are the countless children that are left orphaned. The physical, emotional, and psychological scaring of these children are also pressing issues that need to be dealt with. The mass displacement of people in IDP camps who lack access to adequate nutrition, healthcare and educations are other major problems.

Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done even though rebel groups and direct child involvement in warfare is declining. Society has a number of child development and social issues to deal with as repercussions of decades of instability and child warfare. Perhaps the former Executive Director of UNICEF, Carol Bellamy, stated it best when she said the Northern Ugandan region is “pretty much the worst place on earth to be a child.”³⁰

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³⁰ Spitzer and Twikirize (2013), p. 73.

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