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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE ON LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

Despite the weakening and scattering of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), it continued to be one of the gravest violators of children's rights and must be stopped, a top United Nations official said, as she introduced a United Nations report on the subject to correspondents this afternoon.

"Abduction by the LRA is probably the worst experience any child could have anywhere in the world," Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, said, as she presented the first report of the Secretary-General on children affected by the armed group between July 2009 and February 2012, directed to the Security Council (document S/2012/365).

Ms. Coomaraswamy was accompanied by Grace Akallo, a former girl soldier who was abducted from a school in Uganda in 1996, and affirmed the "unspeakable" nature of the experience she and the other girls went through. Almost all were sexually abused, with most forced into "marriages" with other soldiers and most becoming pregnant, with many contracting HIV/AIDS.

Both girl and boy soldiers were made to kill civilians, including family members, and were given so-called magic potions and brain-washed to think that the commanders could read their thoughts and kill them, if they thought about escaping. She said that one of her friends was still held by the group and many children were newly victimized. "My friend does not deserve to be suffering after all these years," she said, stressing, "It is very important that we get the LRA."

During the period covered by the Secretary-General's report, at least 591 children, including 268 girls, were abducted by the LRA and used as soldiers, mostly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but also in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, Ms. Coomaraswamy said. The group had been driven out of Uganda, where it had originated.

A new trend was noticed starting in 2010, Ms. Coomaraswamy said, with children held for very short periods as carriers, before they were able to escape or were left behind, suggesting that the group was changing more to a fast moving "survival mode". The number of children killed and maimed was also on the decrease, perhaps, she suggested, due to increased protection efforts of United Nations peacekeepers and the presence of other defence forces, including local self-defence groups. The group also no longer attacked schools and hospitals.

Among the international efforts that were bearing fruit were the African Union regional strategy, the deployment of United States military advisors and United Nations cross-border coordination of peacekeeping missions, patrols and market escorts conducted by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), as well as increased repatriation and reintegration programmes for rescued children.

She said that recommendations of the Secretary-General in the report include putting child protection front and centre in all efforts to address the threat posed by the LRA, with troops trained in child protection. In addition, he recommended that no amnesty for LRA commanders be extended, but that the abducted child soldiers should not be prosecuted, as per the guidelines of the International Criminal Court. He also called for more donor support to reintegrate rescued children back into their communities.

Asked if she had ever met Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, Ms. Akallo said that early in her captivity the soldiers would be addressed regularly by a commander who would speak about Joseph Kony in the third person, but it turned out to be him.

To questions on why it has been so difficult to end the LRA's reign of terror, both speakers agreed that the group was not given much attention in the late 1980s when it was created in North Uganda, because of turmoil in the country. Then, it was fought solely by the Ugandan People's Defence Forces. After it was driven out of Uganda, it scattered into numerous small bands hidden in deep jungle.

In addition, they said that children were always put in the front lines, so in military confrontations it was usually the youngest who were killed. Lack of international resources directed to the threat also played a part, they said. Out of the few hundred fighters that remained, many were children and many others had been abducted as children and grew into adults. Some had been given their first AK-47 at seven years old and had been forced to kill most of their lives.

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