

Outreach Teams Urged to Prioritise Children

Author: [Bill Oketch](#)

ICC called on to promote education of war affected children of northern Uganda.

Northern Ugandan youngsters have urged the International Criminal Court, ICC, to do a better job of educating them about how the court's work will affect children who suffered harm during the 21-year civil war between Ugandan government forces and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

They made this request when ICC officials and internal refugees - so-called internally displaced people, or IDPs - met recently in Otuboi IDP camp, near Soroti, in northeastern Uganda.

The open-air gathering was attended by 200 schoolchildren, dressed in purple dresses and shirts, and 800 adults. The adults included 70 IDP camp leaders from Otuboi and nine other camps.

The children recollected the suffering they had experienced at the hands of the LRA in a drama presentation. The LRA entered the region in which Otuboi is located in 2003, killing villagers, looting and burning houses and abducting children to serve as fighters and sex slaves.

Some fifty per cent of the population was forced to live in IDP camps for security. Living conditions in the camps, said the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, are deplorable, with a lack of adequate basic needs such as shelter, medical care, and food and non-food necessities.

In the aftermath of the LRA offensive, secondary and primary education collapsed totally before being slowly resurrected by government and international organisations.

The ICC team, comprising officials from the court's administrative division in The Hague and led by Charles Martin Juuko, the ICC's Field Outreach Coordinator for Uganda, was accused of failing to investigate sufficiently the role in atrocities of the Ugandan armed forces and government, whose president, Yoweri Museveni, referred the situation in northern Uganda to the ICC in December 2003.

The representatives of the world's first permanent war crimes court were also told by schoolchildren at the Otuboi meeting that they should be educating them, as well as adults, about the court's functions.

The ICC delegation has been visiting other areas of northern Uganda, holding seminars on the court's mandate as laid down in international law; the state of its investigations in northern Uganda; the complexity of the court's successive judicial phases; and the unique way that victims can participate in its proceedings.

Paul Ebiru, vice-chairman of the nearby Amuria district council, said the ICC presentation had been "an eye-opener" to him. But he warned that the ICC arguments would be unconvincing if court officials did not look at issue of educating children affected by the war.

The ICC delegates were also urged to investigate alleged atrocities committed by the Ugandan army and

its militia allies. This is a tricky issue for the ICC. For example, victims of a raid on the nearby Barlonyo camp said the 7,000-strong Amuka Defence Unit, an auxiliary militia trained by the army to fight alongside regular troops, admitted it had killed some one hundred camp occupants in 2003 as they fled from an LRA attack in 2003. Another 400 people were killed by the LRA as its guerrillas burned camp buildings.

Following President Museveni's referral to the ICC of the civil war in the north, the ICC's chief prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo issued arrest warrants in July 2005 for the LRA's top five men - its leader Joseph Kony and Vincent Otti, Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen. Lukwiya died in combat last year.

The LRA leaders have been indicted on 33 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including abduction, sexual enslavement, mutilation, the killing of civilians and forcibly using children as guerrilla fighters.

The LRA rebellion has driven more than 1.7 million people into internal refugee camps throughout northern Uganda. Some 100,000 people have died and as many as 38,000 children have been abducted and forced to join the insurgents.

Museveni infuriated ICC officials in July last year with a policy flip-flop when, without consulting the ICC, he offered a blanket amnesty for Joseph Kony and his top aides and opened peace negotiations with LRA representatives in Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

Bill Oketch is an IWPR reporter in Uganda.

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