

Death of a people: Genocide in northern Uganda

by [Olara A. Otunnu](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

The worst place on earth to be a child today is northern Uganda. The suffering is far worse than in Darfur in duration, magnitude and long-term consequences. Genocide is being carried out by the government against the Acholi people.

The population of northern Uganda is trapped between the brutality of the Lord's Resistance Army and that of the government. The LRA rebels have been responsible for brutal atrocities, including massacres, abductions of children and gruesome maimings. The government cynically uses the LRA's activity to divert attention from what is happening in the government's concentration camps. A carefully scripted narrative has been promoted by the government according to which the human rights catastrophe begins with the LRA and will end with its demise. In this respect, the LRA's war and the war against the LRA have become both the cover and the pretext for genocide.

Like erstwhile regimes in Rwanda and the Balkans, the government has stoked ethnic racism to divide and rule. Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni has presented himself as the strongman of the southern Bantu people fighting the northern Nilotics, especially the Luo people. Years of indoctrination have inculcated the racist typologies of "us" and "those people."

For over ten years, a population of almost 2 million people, of whom 80 percent are children and women, have been herded like animals into concentration camps (some 200 camps in the districts of Acholi, Lango and Teso) with abominable living conditions. Imagine 4,000 people sharing a latrine, people waiting in line for 12 hours to fill a jerrycan at a water point, and six to eight people packing themselves in a hut of 1.5-meter radius. As a relief official stated, "People are living like animals. They do not have the bare minimum."

These camps have the worst infant mortality rates in the world. A recent survey by World Vision reported that about 1,000 children die every week. Said the director of

World Vision in Uganda: "When I first saw these findings, I thought it was a lie. But let's face it. We have reached the worst category an emergency can ever reach."

This situation was underscored by the UN in a November report which stated that the mortality rates in northern Uganda are double those of Darfur. As the Gulu NGO Forum noted, "The camp population is not coping anymore but only slowly but gradually dying."

Two generations of children have been denied education as a matter of government policy; they have been deliberately condemned to a life of darkness and ignorance, deprived of all hope and opportunity. This is the same land that produced Archbishop Janani Luwum, the martyred primate of the Anglican Church in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Boga-Zaire (Eastern DRC), who was murdered by Idi Amin in 1977.

The Acholi people are renowned for their deep-rooted and rich culture, values system and family structure. All these have been destroyed under the living conditions prevailing over the last ten years in the camps. This loss is colossal and virtually irreparable; it signals the death of a people and their civilization.

More than 20,000 children, unprotected, have been abducted and brutalized by the LRA. Some 40,000 children, the so-called "night commuters," trek several hours each evening to sleep in the streets of the towns of Gulu and Kitgum to avoid abduction.

Suicide is frequent in the camps. It is highest among mothers who feel utter despair at their inability to provide for their children or save them from starvation and diseases. In August of last year, 13 mothers committed suicide in Pabbo camp alone.

Rape and general sexual exploitation, especially by government soldiers, are routine. As noted in a recent report by Human Rights Watch, "Women in a number of camps told how they had been raped by soldiers from the Ugandan army. . . . It is exceptionally difficult for women to find protection from sexual abuse by government soldiers."

HIV/AIDS is being used as a deliberate weapon of mass destruction. Soldiers are screened and those who have tested HIV-positive are deployed to the north, with the mission of wreaking havoc on girls and women. The rate of HIV infection among the camp populations has galloped to staggering levels: between 30 percent and 50

percent, compared to a national infection rate of 5 percent. Significantly, the facilities and programs of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, although available in Uganda, have not been established among camp populations.

Those who carry out genocide typically prepare the ground with a hate campaign directed at the targeted community. In the case of northern Uganda, the government has led a toxic campaign of dehumanization and demonization against the Acholi and other northerners, issuing a steady stream of such threatening declarations as: "We shall make 'them' become like the *ensenene* insects; you know what happens when you trap them in a bottle and close the lid." This is particularly reminiscent of the racist campaign conducted in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide.

The first and most urgent step toward ending the genocide is to dismantle the concentration camps and return the people to their villages and lands. Such a program of resettlement will need strong international support and careful monitoring.

The land grab by commercial farmers must be halted and reversed.

Ending the war should be an absolute priority. For years, all attempts to accomplish this, through a negotiated settlement or the government's preferred means of a military campaign, have been sabotaged by the government itself because the war serves its political and economic purposes. Without concerted international pressure, the status quo will continue, with the populations in the camps paying the highest price.

But the dismantling of the concentration camps should not be made contingent on ending the war. This approach has been used as a pretext for maintaining the concentration camps for the past ten years.

Finally, a major program for rehabilitation, healing and reconstruction will be needed.

As I review what is unfolding in northern Uganda, I wonder if we have learned any lessons from earlier dark episodes of history: millions of Jews exterminated during the Holocaust in Europe, genocide perpetrated in Rwanda, children and women systematically massacred in the Balkans. Each time we have said "Never again," but only after the dark deed was accomplished.

The genocide in northern Uganda is happening on our watch, with our full knowledge. Tomorrow shall we once again be heard to say that we did not know what was going on for all these years? And what shall we tell the surviving children when they ask why no one came to stop the dark deeds stalking their land and devouring its people?