Joseph Kony kidnapped 591 children in past three years, UN report reveals

Ugandan warlord used some of under-age recruits as fighters, human shields or spies for his Lord's Resistance Army

David Smith in Johannesburg
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The Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony has kidnapped nearly 600 children in the past three years, forcing boys to take "magical potions" and turning girls into sex slaves, the UN has found.

Some of the under-age recruits were used as fighters, human shields or spies for Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), according to a report presented to the UN security council.

Kony has evaded capture for nearly three decades, kidnapping thousands of children to fill the ranks of the LRA and terrorising local populations. He achieved global notoriety earlier this year when a US-based charity, Invisible Children, launched the Kony 2012 viral video campaign.
On Wednesday, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general, submitted his first report to the security council detailing the LRA's crimes against children.

Between July 2009 and February 2012, Kony's group kidnapped at least 591 children - 268 girls and 323 boys - in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), the report found.

"Children reported that they were used in various capacities, as cooks, porters, guards, spies or directly in hostilities as combatants or human shields," Ban said.

"Girls who spent a substantial period of time associated with the group reported to have been subject to sexual slavery and exploitation, including by being forcibly 'married' to combatants. Some children were forced to use violence, including to kill their friends or other children in the armed group.

"Numerous children abducted, especially boys, reported to have received so-called magical potions from LRA leaders, which they were told would increase their physical capacities and make it possible to trace and reabduct them if they escaped."

Stigmatisation remains a major challenge for survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by the LRA, especially for girls returning with babies, Ban added. "Families that take in such LRA victims are often accused by their community of supporting LRA and the girls or young women escaping LRA with babies are often seen as bringing bad luck."

The reports cites an example from May last year in which three Congolese girls who had escaped the LRA in South Sudan and were reunited with their families in DR Congo, later returned to South Sudan because they were ostracised by the community.

The LRA continues to perpetrate grave violations against children some nine years after it was listed in the UN's report on children and armed conflict. "LRA continues to pose a significant threat not only to children, but also to the civilian population at large and has forced 45,000 persons in the region to leave their homes.

"While the number of children killed or maimed by LRA in 2010-11 appears to have decreased compared to previous years, the ongoing abduction and forced recruitment of children, as well as the systematic rape and sexual exploitation of captive girls, is egregious and unacceptable."

The long manhunt for Kony continues. Late last year the United States deployed 100 special forces personnel as advisers to help Ugandan soldiers track Kony and his senior commanders in dense jungle across a region spanning several countries.

Three countries - DR Congo, South Sudan and the CAR - are preparing to join an African Union coalition to intensify efforts to capture Kony and hand him to the international criminal court, which has issued a warrant for his arrest.

The UN has said that Kony appears to be increasingly nervous as a result and is now changing his location every few days.

A self-styled mystic leader who at one time was bent on ruling Uganda by the Ten Commandments, Kony and his combatants, "estimated to number between 200 and 500", are assumed to be in the CAR, though the UN has said it has information that Kony might have
recently slipped over the porous border into Sudan's troubled western Darfur region. Last month the Ugandan army captured Caesar Acellam Otto, one of the LRA's top military leaders, in the CAR.

A recent report by Human Rights Watch said the LRA has increased its attacks in the CAR since the beginning of 2012, putting civilians in affected areas in need of urgent protection. "The increase in LRA attacks shows that the rebel group is not a spent force and remains a serious threat to civilians," the watchdog said.

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