

**Testimony of U.S. Agency for International Development  
Assistant Administrator for Africa Earl W. Gast  
before the  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**“The Continuing Human Rights Crisis in LRA-Affected Regions”**

Good morning Representatives McGovern and Wolf and members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) remains amongst the most persistent perpetrators of human rights violations in the world. As recently as last month, a UN report found that the LRA continues to commit all six grave violations against children identified by the UN Security Council as war crimes:

- Killing or maiming of children
- Recruitment or use of children as soldiers
- Sexual violence against children
- Attacks against schools or hospitals
- Denial of humanitarian access for children
- Abduction of children

These violations extend to the adult population as well. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed by the LRA over the years, and sexual violence continues to be a systematic characteristic of the LRA’s modus operandi. Today, more than 445,000 civilians remain displaced due to the fear that the LRA’s brutality has engendered.

Since the early 1990s, Joseph Kony has promulgated a policy of forced recruitment, particularly of children. With the exception of a handful of senior officers, nearly all of the LRA’s ranks were forcibly abducted from their communities. Abducted girls and boys are beaten into submission, are sometimes required to commit atrocities against others, and serve as combatants as well as cooks, porters, and spies. Many children are killed or wounded during fighting; others are murdered if they are unwilling to obey orders or try to escape.

Grisly gender-based violence, rape, and the use of girls as sex slaves have also been rampant. Amnesty International held scores of interviews with victims of the LRA in July 2010. In one of the interviews, a 26-year-old mother of two told how she was abducted by the LRA near the village of Obo in the Central African Republic (CAR) with as many as 80 other men and women. LRA fighters took the captives to their base in the forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Upon arrival in the camp, “women were distributed among LRA officers and were subjected to repeated rapes. Women who refused to have sex with the officers were beaten into submission.” Those who escape, especially girls and women returning with babies, are often stigmatized by their families and communities, who find it difficult to accept them.

Survivors continue to suffer long after enduring horrific traumas at the hands of the LRA. Abducted by the LRA at age 12, today Jacob says that, still, “we worry. The rebels, when they arrest us again, they will kill us. My brother tried to escape. Then they killed him using a *panga* [machete]. They cut his neck,” he said. Now a law student, Jacob remains haunted by the pain of his past. “When you wake up in the morning and you hear that people are still being abducted in Congo, it takes my mind back to the situation when I was abducted,” he said.

While the LRA has been weakened, it continues to pose a deadly threat to the communities across the CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. Between January and March 2012, the United Nations recorded 33 attacks, three deaths, and 51 abductions in the DRC, of which 16 were children; in the CAR during the same period, the UN recorded a total of 20 attacks, six deaths and 39 abductions.

As the threat of the LRA has been eliminated from northern Uganda and shifted to the CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan, USAID accordingly adjusted its response to address humanitarian needs and supplement ongoing efforts by regional governments and the United Nations. USAID aims to reach at least 240,000 people with humanitarian assistance, including emergency food, relief commodities, primary health care services, psychosocial and protection programs, and livelihoods support. In LRA-affected populations in the CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan, the United States’ life-saving emergency assistance totaled more than \$18 million in FY 2011.

Insecurity presents a significant challenge to providing humanitarian assistance and promoting development in these areas. Farmers’ access to land is limited, and deteriorating road conditions further hamper commerce. That is why we are implementing activities to mitigate the disruption of livelihoods. For example, USAID support to Mercy Corps in Haut Uélé District, DRC, has worked with more than 4,000 families to restore the assets that drive their small businesses and implemented cash-for work activities to rehabilitate community infrastructure. This program enables vulnerable LRA-affected beneficiaries, particularly woman-headed households, to provide for the needs of their families.

To address the severe trauma the LRA inflicts on individuals and communities, USAID support to the U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF) addresses the psychosocial needs of nearly 1,000 children in the CAR and 1,100 children in the DRC who have either been abducted or displaced by the LRA. UNICEF also strengthens local networks to protect children and helps reintegrate formerly abducted children into their communities. USAID funding to UNICEF enabled James\*, a 13-year-old boy from South Sudan who escaped the LRA in Dungu, Haut Uélé Province, the DRC, to be placed with a foster family and access psychosocial care and a place to play with other children. James is one of many who, as a result of our efforts, has been given the opportunity to become a child again.

The protection of civilians continues to be central to the overall U.S. Government strategy to help counter the LRA. Because the LRA preys on vulnerable communities, we are supporting the efforts of regional governments and nongovernmental organizations to reduce the vulnerability of those communities. On June 7, 2012, USAID issued a solicitation for a new three-year cooperative agreement to implement the “Secure, Empowered, Connected Communities

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\* Not his real name.

program, or SECC, which will help communities to better protect themselves from the threat of the LRA and other armed groups by empowering them to address community security threats and helping them to be better informed and connected with each other and the outside world . The program will focus on the LRA-affected areas of the CAR and will work closely with UNICEF and other stakeholders to prepare communities to receive potential defectors and escapees from the LRA. In LRA-affected areas of the DRC, USAID is incorporating high-frequency radios into community-based protection programs in 24 communities to provide early warnings to conflict and violence. Additionally, USAID is piloting an innovative cell phone tower project that aims to diversify the communications options available for use in early warning systems and humanitarian efforts. This project could be a model for how to introduce low-cost cell phone coverage to remote areas located outside of cellular networks and is expected to be operational by fall 2012.

USAID supports programs in LRA-affected areas that mainstream protection approaches into multi-sectorial initiatives, ensuring that sexual and gender-based violence survivors receive appropriate care, while also seeking to minimize the risk of further atrocities. For example, in LRA-affected areas of the DRC and the CAR, USAID partners provide resources that help health centers refer survivors to facilities that have a comprehensive package of services, including psychosocial, legal, and livelihoods support. In addition, child protection programs screen children for medical and psychosocial needs and refer them to appropriate care.

USAID also integrates protection considerations into its programs in the area—even those that don't specifically focus on protection. Agriculture and food security programs in LRA-affected areas, for instance, ensure that women tending fields are able to organize adequate care and supervision for their children and maintain safety in numbers while cultivating their farms.

USAID has been heavily engaged in LRA-affected areas of Uganda since the late 1980s, and our intervention has evolved over the years to reflect the changing needs and priorities. When atrocities carried out by the LRA made communities unable or afraid to seek assistance, USAID and other donors implemented preventative measures that focused on community awareness, engaging traditional leadership, and ensuring that access to justice was available to all parties. In addition, USAID and others worked extensively to improve policing, jails, and other government functions to better respond to incidents of sexual violence among those displaced by the conflict. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 80 percent of known survivors of sexual violence receive support.

In 2006, when the LRA was finally driven from northern Uganda, we shifted our programs from relief to recovery. We helped people displaced by the conflict return to their homes and re-establish their livelihoods. Investments in seed distribution programs improved food security, the rehabilitation of water points reduced health risk, and road repairs opened up access to markets, supporting local economies. As a result of these investments, in 2009 we were able to shift our programs in northern Uganda to focus on long-term development.

USAID's conflict mitigation and reconciliation program made significant contributions to the return of peace, recovery and development in the region. An estimated 95 percent of the 1.8 million Ugandans displaced by the conflict have returned to their homes; there has been a

significant reduction in poverty in northern Uganda, from 60.7 percent in 2005 to 46.2 percent in 2010; and household consumption expenditures increased by at least 34 percent between 2005 and 2010.

USAID's Northern Uganda Transition Initiative was a critical step in this evolution. This 2008-11, \$23-million flagship program renovated public service buildings throughout war-affected regions, including government office buildings, schools and teacher houses, health clinics and health clinic housing, markets, boreholes, and police and justice facilities. By partnering directly with government departments and offices, the initiative not only helped communities begin to rebuild, but also increased the visibility of, and confidence in, all levels of government. This effort sent a clear message that peace had returned to the region and the Government of Uganda was now at the helm of the reconstruction process.

To respond to the health needs of residents, USAID helped rebuild hospitals and clinics that were abandoned or destroyed during the conflict. USAID joined forces with the private sector to improve the delivery of health services and designed comprehensive workplace programs to fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Our malaria control efforts protect 85 percent of the people in ten northern districts. USAID has improved the conditions for peaceful development by involving communities in education programs. Services include psychosocial support, guidance and counseling, school leadership and governance, peace education, promotion of girls' education, performing arts, and community integration and participation.

USAID has helped nurture this progress by providing medical care and counseling to abductees, promoting reconstruction, supporting transitional justice and reconciliation, increasing opportunities for ex-combatants, and addressing key issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, water, and sanitation. In addition, USAID is helping northern Uganda to redevelop its farms; in 2010, agricultural training and projects helped increase the region's crop sales by more than \$7 million. USAID's unique Northern Uganda Development of Enhanced Local Governance, Infrastructure, and Livelihoods program enables local governments to expand basic services to areas with ex-combatants, abductees, and returnees, while at the same time infusing capital into the recovering economy by using labor-intensive methods of construction. In FY 2011, this program supported the construction of 70 boreholes, six schools with latrines and teacher housing, and contracts for 19 farm-to-market roads in four districts. Altogether, USAID supports 432 ongoing projects that are fully aligned with the Government of Uganda's Poverty Reduction and Development Plan that targets the war-affected northern region. This innovative approach to recovery and development continues to strengthen local government while promoting long term sustainability.

USAID remains committed to promoting stability and economic development in northern Uganda while also addressing the immediate needs of communities in LRA-affected parts of the CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. USAID staff in northern Uganda continues to work to consolidate gains, and broaden our long-term efforts to improve livelihoods and build good governance practices that will solidify peace and security in the region. Our sustained efforts in northern Uganda demonstrate that development can flourish once security has been assured.

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today on this critical issue, and I welcome any questions you might have.