

**An Introduction To Uganda and the World Rehabilitation Fund, Inc.**

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This paper will provide background information regarding the recent history and current political situation in Uganda. It will also introduce the reader to the activities of the World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF) in Uganda. WRF is an American private voluntary organization (PVO) which has been active in assisting the country's amputee population of some 20,000 individuals.

Land mines are a common weapon in Uganda and throughout East and Central Africa. In our training program in 1998, WRF recorded that forty-one percent of the patients (out of a total number of 115) had stepped on land mines. This sample of amputees suggests that land mines are also a significant cause of amputation in Uganda. More substantive information needs to be developed and we hope this article brings a higher degree of awareness of the challenges and possibilities currently faced in the region.

Today, in spite of Uganda's impressive economic development - GDP has grown at a yearly rate of six percent - the brutality and seemingly endless suffering in Northern and Western Uganda threatens the future prosperity of the country. Uganda's civilian population, particularly in the North, is exposed to rebel invasion by the Lord's Resistance Army. These terror campaigns involve extermination, torture, mutilation, and child abduction.

According to Human Rights Watch, "Northern Uganda today faces an acute humanitarian crisis. The two northern districts of Gulu and Kitgum, the homeland of the Acholi people, have been hardest hit: relief agencies estimate that over 240,000 people are currently displaced from their homes and villages,<sup>1</sup> while some local officials estimate that the figure is as high as two million displaced people. In Kitgum, nearly half of the displaced people are children, and more than a third of those children have been orphaned by the war.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Background Situation Report, June 1997.

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“The infrastructure in Gulu and Kitgum is in a state of collapse. The constant danger of land mines and rebel ambushes has made many of the region’s few roads unsafe for travel... Rebel raids on clinics and dispensaries have diminished the store of medicines available, and the instability has caused many health workers to flee. This has disrupted most basic non-emergency services, including immunization campaigns.”<sup>2</sup> The past history of Uganda also created a disproportionately high number of people with disabilities, which has been suggested to be about ten percent of the country’s population of twenty million.

At the time of Independence, October 9, 1962, Uganda was known for its beauty, stability, and advancement in many areas. The first reign of Milton Obote lasted from Independence to 1971 when Idi Amin staged a coup and assumed power in Uganda. Obote’s regime had divided the country, most notably his arrest of the King of the Baganda people, the *Kabaka*.

Under Idi Amin’s regime an **estimated five hundred thousand Ugandans** were killed. The atrocities of that era, which lasted until 1979, left deep scars in the country, suspicions between communities, and severe divisions between tribes. Professionals and intellectuals lived in fear and many fled Uganda to save their lives. In 1972, Amin ordered all Asians (approximately 70,000 people) to leave the country within ninety days, with only the clothing they were wearing. As the political climate worsened, the infrastructure and economy started to disintegrate and the number of refugees fleeing Uganda increased dramatically.

Later, Amin attacked Tanzania in retaliation for Tanzania’s support of the former president Obote and anti-Amin rebels. It was the involvement of the Tanzanian army of some 20,000 troops which finally led to the collapse of the Amin regime in 1979. This liberation war wreaked further havoc and suffering on the Ugandan population.

The collapse of the Amin regime led to a period of political instability, which saw various administrations come and go in a short period of time. The military commission in 1980 organized a national election, which was rigged in favor of Mr. Obote who had by then

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<sup>2</sup> **The Scars of Death, Human Rights Watch, pp. 53-55. 1997.**

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returned from exile in Tanzania. Obote thus began his famous Obote II regime, characterized by atrocities and persecution of the southern tribes, which led to an estimated 50,000 deaths and disappearances.

A group of Ugandans led by Mr. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, unsatisfied by the rigged electoral process, decided to go to the bush and fight the Obote II regime. This was the birth of the National Resistance Army. In a period of six years, the NRA with various other fighting groups all over the country, were able to dislodge the Obote II regime and assume power on January 26, 1986.

In the years that have followed, Uganda has sustained a remarkable recovery, with strong economic development and political stability. Tribal divisions have diminished and the progress of the country led US President Bill Clinton to visit in April of 1998. However, the ongoing fighting in Northern and Western Uganda has led to an increase in numbers of amputees and the physically disabled.

The Scars of Death, a report compiled by Human Rights Watch, quotes a doctor in Northern Uganda: “In 1995, we saw a total of 335 war injuries at this hospital. In 1996, we saw 117 victims of land mines, and 515 gunshot wounds. This year [1997], from January through late April, we saw fourteen mine victims and 155 other war wound victims. Remember those are just the people who we see – most people never come to the hospital.

“The problem is that we don’t see an end to the problem. When you have a problem and you think it’s coming to an end, then you say, let’s persevere. But I really don’t see how this is going to end... I foresee unlimited suffering... The last two years have been the worst in ten years.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1997, St. Mary’s Hospital at Lacor performed nearly 100 amputations<sup>4</sup>, mostly of children who had been abducted and forced to fight on the front line against government soldiers. One child, Innocent Oringa, said, “It was January 17<sup>th</sup> 1996, I was going to Pope Primary School (located in Gulu) early in the morning and I stepped on something, which

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<sup>3</sup> **The Scars of Death, Human Rights Watch, pp. 56-58. 1997.**

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blew off my legs and right arm. It was a painful experience. I was later told, after a couple of weeks, that it was a land mine. I do not remember what exactly took place, but I remember regaining consciousness, only to find myself in St. Mary's Hospital, Lacor.”

Another villager from Negri town in Gulu said, “The effects of the war are still with us and at times we fear to till our land, for you never know whether there is a landmine or not.”<sup>5</sup> Polio continues to be a problem in certain areas of the country, due to the partial ability of immunization campaigns to penetrate zones of instability. In 1994, the late Dr. Rodney Belcher diagnosed “three to four new culture-proven cases of polio in Mulago Hospital each week.”<sup>6</sup>

The World Rehabilitation Fund currently works in partnership with Kumi Hospital in Uganda to provide artificial limbs to amputees. These services have, since May of 1998, allowed over 180 individuals to walk and begin the process of physical rehabilitation. The accompanying photographs will provide a glimpse of some of the individuals who have benefited from the WRF initiative. **The needs of individuals with physically disabilities to walk with mobility aids and devices must be satisfied.**



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<sup>4</sup> Lacor Hospital Records

<sup>5</sup> “As Gulu War Continues, Fear and Hope Linger,” *The Monitor*, August 28, 1997, pp.14-15.



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