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STATEMENT

Before

The Uganda North America Association (UNAA) 2006
Annual Convention

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NORTHERN UGANDA AND THE NATIONAL PROJECT:

Recovering Hope for Uganda's Forgotten
Children -
Building A Domestic and International
Constituency for Northern Uganda

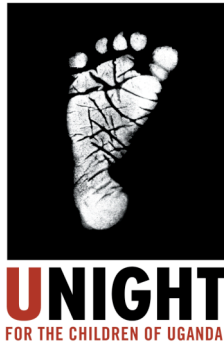
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By

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**NORTHERN UGANDA AND THE NATIONAL PROJECT:
Recovering Hope for Uganda's Forgotten Children- Building a
Domestic and International Constituency for Northern Uganda**

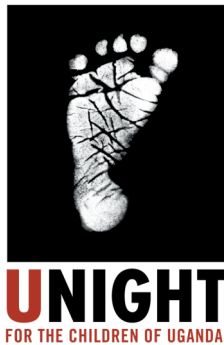
Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, honorable ministers, Professor Mazrui, let me thank you all for coming today. Thank you to the Uganda North America Association Convention (UNAA) organizing committee for having me. As someone who cares deeply about the future peace and prosperity of Uganda, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to speak on such an important topic.

Let me thank Olara Otunnu for his powerful presentation. It is an incredible honor for me to be able to share a podium with such a distinguished diplomat and human rights activist. Olara has won international respect for his unwavering and life-long commitment to the rights of the most vulnerable, especially children.

Throughout his impressive career, Olara has never forgotten the victims of the war in northern Uganda; he has been one of the few to consistently bear witness to this great tragedy. In 2001, Olara addressed the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva on the question of northern Uganda. Olara asked the delegates "what should I tell the children of northern Uganda?" What was Olara to tell these innocent youths when they cried: "Does anybody out there *really care* about our fate, about what is happening to us and to our parents? We hear your deep silence."

Five years ago, Olara was sounding the alarm on behalf of those children. Yet, despite his insistence, his plea fell on deaf ears. Half a decade later, not only has the humanitarian catastrophe in northern Uganda persisted, it has deepened. And the world remains silent. Today, as he did in 2001, Olara paints a picture not only of a dying society, but of a society dying painfully and alone. And it is this isolation of northern Uganda that I would like to underscore today.

Why has the international community – why have we – so proactively ignored northern Uganda? Is the value of human life somehow to be defined differently for the Acholi and other northern peoples? What is the difference between northern Uganda and other catastrophes that we deem



newsworthy and deserving of our support? In order to illustrate our failure to come to the rescue of northern Uganda, let's partake in some comparative analysis.

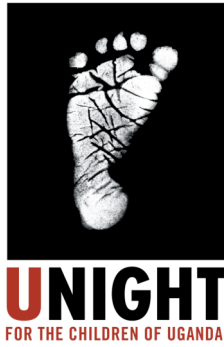
In December 2004, the terrible Tsunami wave ripped apart South-East Asia. In a matter of days, a continent was turned upside-down by a force of nature that no one could have prevented. It displaced approximately 2 million people; 13,000 people went missing; and over 180,000 people died. Yet, out of this turmoil came an outpouring of international support, a sheer exhibition of our common humanity. It took under a week for people around the world to pledge upward of 2 billion dollars for disaster relief. In the first few months of 2005, an additional 7 billion dollars followed. The World Bank alone contributed 1 billion dollars worth of aid.

Earlier this year, the World Food Program (WFP) Country representative for Uganda declared: "The humanitarian situation in the war-torn northern region is worse than the Tsunami disaster that affected millions of people in South Asia." However, in stark contrast to the Tsunami relief efforts, the level of international assistance to northern Uganda has been negligible. For example, the entire budget for the World Bank's Northern Uganda Fund is 61 million dollars, a mere twentieth of that spent on Tsunami victims.

To use a second example, we are all familiar with the international media coverage and the influx of foreign aid to Iraq. Turn your minds to the gratuitous violence coming out of Baghdad that you witness on the news every day. Yet, the death rate due to the war in northern Uganda is three times greater than the death rate in Iraq.

In a third example, consider the situation in Sudan. In Darfur there have been anywhere from 50,000 to 400,000 people killed, and an estimated 2 million people displaced. In March 2004, the outgoing United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan called Darfur the "world's greatest humanitarian crisis." Since then a movement advocating for humanitarian intervention has emerged in several countries. Meanwhile, as a recent Oxfam report noted, the mortality rate in northern Uganda exceeds that the rate in Darfur by approximately three times.

Darfur and northern Uganda are at the very least comparable. The horror witnessed and endured by both communities is simply unimaginable. However, Darfur's three-year-old conflict is getting noticed, while Uganda's twenty-year war remains largely unaddressed. How is it that as thousands march on Washington to protest the genocide unfolding in



Darfur, the world remains silent about the mortality and cultural decimation that is occurring in northern Uganda?

Lest anyone forget the extent of the devastation in northern Uganda, it is worth reiterating some of the facts:

The death toll in northern Uganda is estimated at 100,000 to 250,000. Two million people have been displaced – that is, approximately 95% of the Acholi have been forcibly removed from their ancestral homes. At least 25,000 children have been abducted. The physical and emotional wounds of returnees are unimaginable and unaddressed.

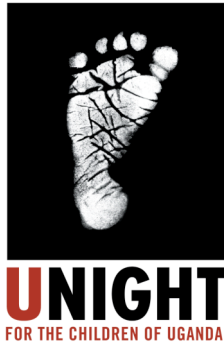
In northern Uganda, for years now, up to 45,000 children – “night commuters” – walk every night to escape the threats of violence and abduction. For many of these children, it is the camps that they flee. According to the government’s own statistics, 1,000 people a week die in the camps in northern Uganda. Approximately 50,000 people died in these camps in 2005 alone; at least a third of those were children under five. Education for the children who have survived in the camps is next to non-existent. In Kitgum district, only 2% of children currently proceed on from primary to secondary school; 25% of children have lost both parents.

In summary, a society and culture lies devastated.

A look at the numbers reveals that the level of human suffering in northern Uganda is at best comparable to that caused by the Tsunami, Iraq or Darfur. But, northern Uganda simply does not get the humanitarian aid, the media exposure, or induce the moral outrage associated with other catastrophes.

Some would argue that the Western media and public simply don’t care about Africa. However, as the outcry over Darfur illustrates, this is clearly not the case. So what is so peculiar about northern Uganda?

What distinguishes people in northern Uganda from the victims of the Tsunami, Darfur or the war in Iraq is that they lack an effective constituency to speak up for them. The time has come for us to help these thousands of lost children reclaim their future. uNight: For the Children of Uganda, a non-profit organization, was created precisely to do just this. It is uNight’s job – it is our job – to bear witness on behalf of these children.



As Olara has emphasized, it is not only the international community that has neglected northern Uganda, but also Ugandans themselves. The failure of Ugandans to adequately address the situation in northern Uganda indicates a country terribly divided. Hence the need for the national project that Olara has just described.

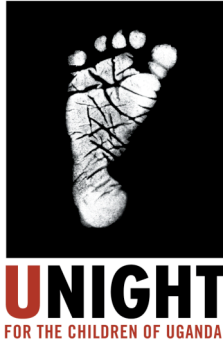
In light of the harrowing statistics, ask yourselves about the validity of the claim that Uganda is a “success story.” In 2000, in central Uganda, the percentage of the population living in absolute poverty was 20%; whereas in the North, 66% live below the absolute poverty line. What does it say about a nation, your nation, to wax lyrical about its twenty years of peace and prosperity when, for all this time, a third of the country lies in chaos? The rich culture of Acholiland lies in tatters. The North needs help – your help – to rebuild, so that the future of two generations of children is not lost.

The children in northern Uganda have been denied a childhood as well as basic subsistence provisions. And they have also been denied their voice. It is uNight’s mission, it needs be our mission, to bring people together to ensure that these children can never again be forgotten.

It is our task to build bridges between North and South. The children in northern Uganda need both an international and a domestic constituency to speak out on their behalf. The lives, the futures, of these children must be all of our responsibilities.

This is where groups such as uNight: For the Children of Uganda can play a role. Through walks, film screenings, discussion groups, art-shows, and more, uNight raises awareness about these children’s plight. It bears witness to their suffering. Through school and university chapters and community groups, uNight builds a strong constituency in the United States and Europe to give hope to these children. Together, we can build a network of concerned citizens to do for northern Uganda that which has been done for victims of the Tsunami, Darfur and elsewhere. This is our challenge.

Let us be thankful for the cessation of hostilities agreed to by the LRA and UPDF this week in Juba. In northern Uganda far too much blood has been spilt and unfathomable atrocities have been committed by both sides. Let us pray for the successful completion of the peace talks. *But let us not pause.*



The war in northern Uganda may be drawing to a close, but the real battle against destruction and despair has only just begun. According to the figures in a recent UN report, 90% of deaths in northern Uganda have occurred due to conditions in the camps, while less than 9% has been a result of the actions of the LRA. Therefore, the need for massive reconstruction and development of the North is urgent and critical.

We at uNIGHT hope that all of us can come together here today to build relationships – to build schools, clinics, and community centers – so that no child need ever feel alone again. Northern Uganda needs your resources, expertise and support. “Never again” need not be an empty expression. And I invite you all today to take an active role in this process of empowerment.

Foreign aid will be crucial to northern Uganda’s reconstruction and development, but it is not enough. Northern Uganda requires a grand response, but that need not be a centralized response. The children of northern Uganda cannot afford for government corruption to dictate the terms of their future. I believe that the responsibility and ownership of reconstruction needs to lie at the hands of the local community.

I ask of you here today that we, the international community, especially the Ugandan and African Diaspora, work together to build an effective constituency abroad to build links and partnerships with specific communities on the ground in northern Uganda.

The children are Uganda’s future. If it is not to be Ugandans themselves who take center-stage to help reclaim the future for these children, then who? If not now, when? Therefore, I ask of you today to break that “deep silence” heard by the despairing children in northern Uganda. Now, you can no longer say you did not know. Don’t let it be said that you did not care.

Thank you very much! Webale nnyo. Apwoyo.



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