

Africa Report by Linda de Hoyos

Ugandans suffer from Museveni's wars

Next to Burundi, Uganda has the worst nutritional levels of all Africa, according to a recent report.

The involvement of the military of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the insurgencies ongoing in Uganda's western and northern regions, is taking its toll on the population.

The toll is heaviest on children. Uganda's chronic-malnutrition levels are 17 times higher than the accepted level, and the second highest in Africa after Burundi, according to a report issued on Feb. 25 by the Early Childhood Development Task Force.

Child death rates in Uganda are high, the report further stated. "Infant mortality is 97 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The under-five mortality rate is 156 deaths for every 1,000 live births," the report said. Malaria and diarrhea are the leading causes of death in children. "Between 50 and 80% of children under two years have had at least one episode of diarrhea within the last two weeks. Nearly 40% of children below the age of four are stunted."

As the government funnels money into either the military or debt service, there is little left for delivery of medical services to the population. There is only one doctor in Uganda for every 27,000 people. The government spends \$3.50 per person annually on medical and education services, while it puts \$17.50 per person into debt service, according to Catholic Relief Services.

Another report carried out in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) corroborates the high poverty levels in Uganda, and says directly that such levels are due to the wars. Released by

Vice President and Minister of Agriculture Dr. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe in early March, the National Development Report says that more than 55% of Uganda's population live below the national poverty line—that is, are spending all or most of their income on food. Most of the poor are in rural areas, the report said. More than 60% of Ugandans have no access to clean drinking water.

The report also stated that poverty in Uganda—hailed in the Western media as the "success story of the International Monetary Fund"—is more severe than in countries like its neighbor Kenya. In eastern and southern Africa, the UNDP reported, only Malawi, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Burundi have worse poverty levels than Uganda.

The poverty is having a dire effect on life expectancies. Only 44% of Ugandans can expect to survive to the age of 40 years. This puts Ugandan life expectancy, a measure of overall mortality, below that of Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

What does this poverty look like? Take just a few instances reported in the Ugandan daily *The Monitor* on Feb. 17: "The boy's bare feet were literally eaten up by chiggers, his hair had grown 'branches' and had turned reddish-brown [due to malnutrition]. His efforts to cover his bare bum were fruitless because the shorts were torn to pieces, exposing everything. . . . He looked tired and hungry."

Or, the story of a newborn baby who died of tetanus. "When Kusiima (the woman who lost the baby) started feeling labor pains, her mother, with

whom she stays, didn't have the money to transport her to the hospital five miles away. She suggested that Kusiima give birth at home. . . . Kusiima and her mother share their hut with two goats. They cook from one corner and sleep in another. This is where the baby was delivered. And then, it was wrapped in pieces of cloth cut out from Kusiima's old skirt in which she used to dig while pregnant. 'It was no surprise the kid died from tetanus,' said a neighbor."

The wars are also destroying the social fabric of the society. In the north, where the government has been unsuccessfully waging a war against the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, the entire rural population has been forced into protected villages, where there is no sanitation, no clean water, and not nearly enough food. Said one elder, "It is a terrible thing to see your children starve. The young ones just sit and cry. But if they are ten or older, they just go off to find food. There is nothing you can do to stop them." In other words, the children leave the country, to scratch out a survival for themselves in whatever way they can.

It is among these children, it would appear, that the Ugandan military is now finding "recruits." A recent escapee from a training camp of the Ugandan Popular Defense Forces told *The Monitor* that he had been rounded up and taken to the camp with 2,500 other boys, most of them street children. The training, reported the 17-year-old boy, who declined to be named, was extremely tough and resulted in the death of some children. "Those who die in the process are buried without a trace, while those who complete the training are loaded onto Army trucks at night and taken for what they called 'deployment.'" The boy said that he had been rounded up with 15 other boys in December 1998.