

War in Northern Uganda, World's worst forgotten crisis: UN

NAIROBI, Nov 11 (AFP) - A top UN official on Tuesday described the 17-year-old rebel war in northern Uganda as the worst forgotten humanitarian crisis on earth and pledged to beef up relief operations.

"The conflict in northern Uganda is the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today," Jan Egeland, UN under secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, told a news conference in Nairobi after a two-day visit to the north of Uganda.

"We have to increase our support. We will do things. We the United Nations have also done too little. The donors have done too little. The government has done too little, we have all done too little," the official admitted.

"We must rectify that," he added.

"I was shocked, it is a moral outrage what has happened and is happening," Egeland said, adding that the war waged by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government had led to the displacement of 1.3 million people and the deaths of tens of thousands.

"This is not a war where the civilian population is affected through collateral damage, it is a war targetting the civilian population, and especially children" said Egeland.

"How can we as an international community accept that a war is continuing that is directed and targetted against children... who are abducted, brainwashed and made into child soldiers or sex slaves and forced to attack and kill their own families in their own villages?" he asked.

"This senseless slaughter must end. It cannot and should not continue one day more," he declared.

The LRA took over the leadership of northern Uganda's rebellion in 1988, two years into a conflict fuelled by the perceived economic marginalisation of the region by Kampala.

The group distinguishes itself by its brutality and its total absence of a public political face, a characteristic that makes negotiating an end to the war all but impossible.

The LRA has said it wants to overthrow President Yoweri Museveni's government and replace it with a regime based on the Bible's Ten Commandments.

Few outsiders, government officials or journalists, have ever met LRA leader Joseph Kony, whose reputation for pseudo-mystical brutality was enhanced a couple of years ago when he reportedly issued and mercilessly enforced an additional, "divinely-inspired" edicts: thou shalt not ride a bicycle or eat pork.

Offenders were beaten and even killed but not often given a clear reason for the new commandments.

"I know of no place in the world where such a bad situation has so little international presence and so little international relief," Egeland said.

Egeland said the UN's Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which he heads, and other UN agencies will increase their presence and actions in northern Uganda from one to four or five over the next few months.

More would also be done, he said, to increase government protection for humanitarian convoys, which currently cannot move freely.

"There is some hope," added Egeland, on the basis of meetings with donors in Nairobi and Kampala who said they were also keen to step up their response.

When, on November 18, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan launches appeals for humanitarian operations around the world, Uganda will feature prominently.

"We will appeal to the donors to fund our work generously," said Egeland, adding that he hoped actual money flows will be greater than the usual 50 to 60 percent of the total sought in the past.

"I think Uganda will not longer be forgotten but it will continue to be a major emergency," he said.