

UNICEF Ambassador Clay Aiken returns from northern Uganda's conflict-affected districts

Aiken witnesses the phenomenon of "night commuters"

NEW YORK (July 25, 2005) — In an effort to bring attention to the plight of children in northern Uganda, UNICEF Ambassador Clay Aiken traveled to the conflict-affected region to witness the phenomenon of "night commuters," children who trek from the countryside into slightly more secure towns and UNICEF-supported shelters every night to avoid being abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The conflict in northern Uganda has displaced approximately 1.4 million people — 80 percent of them children and women — as the rebel LRA seeks to overthrow the Ugandan government. Each evening, the threat of LRA attacks and abductions drives over 40,000 child "night commuters" to leave their homes. An estimated 12,000 children have been abducted by the LRA in the conflict-affected districts since June 2002, to be forcibly recruited as child combatants and sex slaves.

"Northern Uganda is one of the most dangerous places in the world for children," said Aiken. "Children are being forced to commit appalling acts of violence. Children are being killed and raped. It was all too clear that those living in the conflict-affected districts of Uganda deserve much more. The global community must act now with utmost urgency to put an end to these atrocities. No progress will be made until there is peace throughout the country."

Aiken toured UNICEF supported projects in northern Uganda, including internally displaced peoples' (IDP) camps, night commuter shelters and reception centers for formerly abducted children in Kitgum, Gulu and Katakwi districts. There are currently more than 200 IDP camps scattered across the eight conflict-affected districts.

"In the UNICEF-supported reception centers for formerly abducted children, I witnessed children receiving psychosocial counseling," said Aiken. "These children spend anywhere between a few days to several months in these centers."

The child-centric conflict has wrought unprecedented violence and poverty to a region once famed as Uganda's "food basket," because of the abundance of natural resources in the north. As a result, the local populations of mostly women and children are deprived access to basic healthcare, clean water, education, nutrition, protection and shelter.

UNICEF and its partners are providing rapid, high-impact humanitarian assistance to populations affected by conflict in northern Uganda. These interventions are in the areas of health and nutrition, water and sanitation, education, child protection and emergency shelter.

In March, Aiken witnessed UNICEF in action during his first field trip, which took him to the tsunami-stricken region of Indonesia. Aiken visited primary school students and camps for the internally displaced survivors in the ravaged province of Aceh.

About UNICEF

Founded in 1946, UNICEF helps save, protect and improve the lives of children around the world through immunization, education, health care, nutrition, clean water and sanitation. UNICEF is non-partisan and its cooperation is free of discrimination. In everything it does, the most disadvantaged children and the countries in greatest need have priority. For more information, please call 1.800.4UNICEF.

For media inquiries, please contact:

[Marissa Buckanoff](#), U.S. Fund for UNICEF Media, 212.922.2485

[Chris Gioia](#), U.S. Fund for UNICEF Media, 212.922.2517