

CHILD ABUSE

Nationwide, children are increasingly becoming victims of trafficking. *Weekend Vision* unveils the tactical manipulation involved in child trafficking within Uganda and DR Congo.

BY SIMON MASABA

They are snatched from schools, deceived with promises of wages they will never see and in the most harrowing cases, handed over to armed rebel factions in the battlefields of eastern DR Congo.

These are minors, majority boys, often dragged into rebel-linked operations and forced labour in eastern Congo. Among the most disturbing patterns *Weekend Vision* has learnt is the systematic sexual exploitation of girls.

Traffickers mainly operate through fake recruitment companies and social media job adverts specifically target young women and girls with promises of employment, domestic work or modelling opportunities.

Officials added that traffickers promise jobs, paying up to \$2,000 (about sh7.4m) and extract small initial payments from families, before disappearing with the girls.

DR CONGO PIPELINE

While girls are disproportionately funnelled into sexual exploitation, boys face a different, but equally devastating fate.

Derrick Basalirwa Kigenyi, the deputy national co-ordinator for the prevention of trafficking in persons at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, says these children account for eight out of every ten victims in Uganda's human trafficking cases.

"About 80% of these cases involve children. These are

GOVT RAISES RED FLAG AS TRAFFICKERS DRIVE CHILDREN INTO DR CONGO

GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATTE

Uganda's trafficking pipeline: From villages to DR Congo

RECRUITMENT

- Fake job offers via social media & recruitment agencies

PROMISED JOBS

- Domestic work
- Modelling jobs
- Mining work

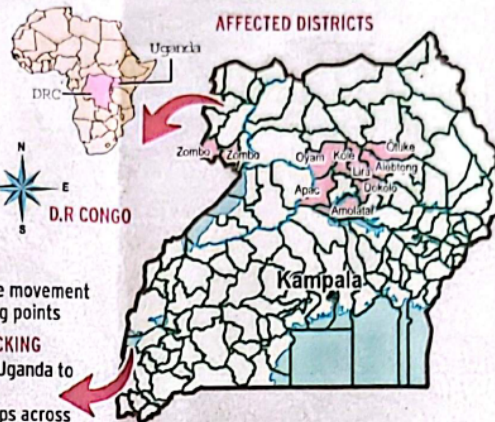
TRANSIT HUB

West Nile sub-region

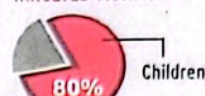
- Porous borders
- Shared languages ease movement
- Hard-to-police crossing points

CROSS-BORDER TRAFFICKING

- Route: Northwestern Uganda to Eastern DR Congo
- Victims moved in groups across the border



TARGETED VICTIMS



- Young women & girls for sexual exploitation
- Boys for forced labour, rebel activities

IN DR CONGO

- Forced labour in mines
- Recruitment into armed/rebel groups with roles in:
 - Wildlife trafficking
 - Drug trade
 - Logistics support

THE FARMS NO ONE TALKS ABOUT

The trafficking crisis is not exclusively a border phenomenon, Kigenyi said that victims, many of them children, have been traced internally to large commercial farms in western Uganda.

These operations represent a domestic face of a crime that Uganda too often frames as a problem at airports and border crossings.

Kigenyi said children and young people are moved from their home districts, placed on farms under conditions of forced labour and cut off from family contacts.

The geographic remoteness of some of these agricultural operations, he added, makes detection difficult and escape nearly impossible for victims who have no money, no phone and no knowledge of where they are.

Kigenyi attributed the persistence of this internal trafficking circuit to weak enforcement of labour conditions within large-scale agricultural enterprises.

Veronica Waseemba, a security expert, said targeting children from vulnerable communities of northern Uganda and West Nile points to systemic crime.

"Convictions are not keeping pace with the volume of cases. Traffickers have proven adaptable, shifting methods and routes when pressure mounts," she said.

In other parts of Africa, terrorist groups have been identified using fraud schemes, particularly crypto-based scams, as a source of funding.

"Enabled by artificial intelligence, low-cost digital tools and increased global criminal collaboration, we are witnessing the industrialisation of fraud," INTERPOL secretary general Valdecy Urquiza said recently in a statement.

"The cost of financial crime is not just money; it is people's life savings, their dignity and in the worst case, their life," he added.

TRAFFICKERS EMBED THEMSELVES IN COMMUNITIES, IDENTIFY VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS AND CULTIVATE TRUST BEFORE THE CRIMES.

the most vulnerable. They are targeted precisely because they are easy to deceive and difficult to trace," Kigenyi said.

Kigenyi added that traffickers are operating a systematic pipeline moving young people, including children, plucked directly from schools across Uganda's porous north-western border into the DR Congo.

When they reach eastern Congo, Kigenyi said, armed groups and rebel-linked operations absorb them as forced labour, fighters or as logistical support tools.

"Northern Uganda and the West Nile sub-region bear the heaviest burden of this crisis," Kigenyi added.

These districts, immigration

officials said, form a corridor of vulnerability running through the sub-regions of Lango, Acholi and West Nile.

"These are communities that are still recovering from years of conflict and poverty. Traffickers know exactly where to look," Kigenyi said, describing the trend as an organised racket where traffickers embed themselves in communities, identify vulnerable households and cultivate trust before executing their criminal act.

Security agencies have now turned their attention to bodaboda riders and other transporters, who they say, knowingly or unknowingly,

Uganda's trafficking in numbers

CHILDREN TRAFFICKED

2025 555
2024 597

- 7,581 victims recorded since 2020
- 4,835 cases reported
- 864 convictions secured
- 61 youth rescued in Nebbi
- 5 suspects arrested



ferry victims to border crossing points.

Robert Abak, the Nebbi Resident District Commissioner, told *Weekend Vision* that: "So far, 61 youth have been rescued after they followed intelligence reports of victims being kept incommunicado in rented rooms in Nebbi district ahead of their planned trafficking to eastern Congo."

"In the first operation, we rescued 21 and the other 40 were rescued in the second operation. All the victims were kept in different cells," he added.

Other children, Abak said, are deployed on large farms within Bunyoro region, specifically in Kiryandongo district, before being trafficked into eastern Congo.

The Nebbi incident, officials said, laid bare the mechanics of the cross-border trafficking.

"These youth were lured with promises of jobs, but ended up being trafficked across regions," Kigenyi said.

Upfront payments, Kigenyi said, create financial investment, making victims less likely to abandon the process.