

# CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

## **Uganda: Current Conditions and the Crisis in North Uganda**

**October 20, 2006**

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# Uganda: Current Conditions and the Crisis in Northern Uganda

## Summary

In February 2006, Ugandans voted in the first multi-party elections in almost 26 years. President Yoweri Museveni and his ruling National Revolutionary Movement (NRM) parliamentary candidates won a decisive victory over opposition candidate Kizza Besigye and the Forum for Democracy Coalition. Nevertheless, poll results showed a notable decline in support for President Museveni from previous elections. International election observers did not condemn the election results, nor did they fully endorse the electoral process. Critics charged the government with intimidating the opposition during the pre-election period, and Besigye spent much of the campaign period in jail. The election followed a controversial move by the Ugandan parliament in July 2005 to remove the constitutional two-term limit on the presidency.

In the north, the government of Uganda fought the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed rebel group backed by the government of Sudan. Through over 20 years of civil war, the brutal insurgency has created a humanitarian crisis that has displaced over 1.5 million and resulted in the abduction of over 20,000 children. In recent months, the government and the LRA have entered into peace negotiations mediated by the government of Southern Sudan. The negotiations have had some limited success in halting the fighting through a negotiated ceasefire, but observers suggest criminal indictments by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against the LRA's leadership may limit the rebels' willingness to reach a final settlement.

This report will be updated as significant changes occur in Uganda.

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# Uganda: Current Conditions and the Crisis in Northern Uganda

## Background

Uganda, a country slightly smaller than Oregon, gained its independence from Britain in 1962. Until the mid-1980s, the east African country was mired in civil war and ethnic strife, and suffered under a brutal dictatorship. By the time President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) took power in early 1986, the country's economy was in ruins, with an inflation rate of over 240% and an almost non-existent economic infrastructure. President Museveni is credited with bringing relative political and economic stability to Uganda, although he has not been able to end the conflict in northern Uganda. His strategy in the late 1980s and 1990s was to co-opt his political opponents and, when necessary, to use military means to neutralize rebel groups. Museveni's first government included opposition figures who had served in previous governments and arch critics of the NRM. Despite efforts aimed at achieving national reconciliation, armed opposition to his government continued for much of the 1980s and 1990s.

### Uganda at a Glance

**Population:** 28.2 Million  
**Population Growth:** 3.37 % (2006)  
**Comparative Area:** Slightly smaller than Oregon  
**Infant Mortality Rate:** 66.5 deaths/1,000 live births(2006)  
**Life Expectancy at Birth:** 52.67 years  
**HIV/AIDS Prevalence Rate:** 6.7 % (2005)  
**HIV/AIDS Deaths:** 78,000 (2003)  
**Religions:** Roman Catholic 33%, Protestant 33%, Muslim 16%, Indigenous beliefs 18%.  
**Language:** English (official)  
**GDP (purchasing power parity — PPP):** \$46 billion (2005)  
**GDP per capita (PPP):** \$1,700 (2005)  
  
**Source:** CIA — *The World Factbook*, 2006.

## Uganda: Political Profile

In May 1996, after a long transition period, President Museveni was elected to a five year term in direct presidential elections in what was known until last year as a “no-party” system. Museveni won 74.2% of the votes, while his opponent, Paul Ssemogerere, former deputy prime minister and longtime rival of the president, received 23.7%. The elections were declared by international observers to be free and fair. A national referendum on multiparty politics was held in June of 2000.

Museveni prevailed with 90.7% of Ugandans favoring a no-party government system. The President stated that multiparty politics could only be introduced once a no-party system had succeeded in eliminating the threat of a return to sectarian politics.

## **The 2001 Presidential Elections**

On March 12, 2001, Uganda again held national elections, and President Museveni won 69.3% of the votes cast,<sup>1</sup> while his closest challenger, Kizza Besigye, received 27.8%. Besigye, a doctor and Museveni's one-time ally, was a member of the NRM and Museveni's personal physician during the insurgency in the early 1980s. He ran on an anti-corruption platform, vowing to rid the government of its excesses. He also raised questions about Uganda's military involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Election observers, both local and international, declared the elections to be free and fair, although they acknowledged that the electoral process and management had many weaknesses. The results of the elections were rejected, however, by Besigye on the grounds that there were discrepancies and inconsistencies in the electoral process. He filed a petition at the Supreme Court challenging the declaration of Museveni as president-elect and sought to annul the elections. Besigye subsequently lost the petition and said he would respect the Supreme Court verdict. In August 2001, Besigye fled Uganda and later surfaced in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Third-Term Debate and Adoption of a Multi-Party System**

Uganda was ruled under a "no-party" system after Museveni took power in 1986. In March 2003, President Museveni suggested to his National Executive Committee, the leadership organ of the NRM, that the Movement should consider lifting the ban on a multi-party system. He and his supporters also urged a review of the two-term limit for a president. According to the Ugandan constitution at the time, "A person shall not be elected under this Constitution to hold office as President for more than two terms as prescribed by this article."<sup>3</sup> Under this provision, President Museveni's term would have expired in 2006, but many of his supporters argued that without Museveni, Uganda might plunge into another civil war. Critics of the President contended that Museveni did not wish to relinquish power. The President holds most executive powers. In January 2003, President Museveni told a British reporter "We will follow the Constitution because that is what I fought for. The present Constitution says not more than two consecutive terms."<sup>4</sup> Those ruling party members who criticized the President's third term proposal were removed from power, including Eriya Katagaya, the then-First Deputy Prime Minister and a

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<sup>1</sup> Ugandan Elections 2001, online at [<http://www.uganda-elections.com>].

<sup>2</sup> Besigye fled into exile a day after he met with visiting U.S. congressional delegation members.

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of Uganda can be found online at [<http://www.government.go.ug/constitution/detail>].

<sup>4</sup> John Kakande. "Museveni Speaks on 3<sup>rd</sup> Term." *The New Vision*, January 3, 2003.

longtime ally of President Museveni.<sup>5</sup> The Vice President also resigned, reportedly to pursue her academic studies in the United States. In May 2005, the Ugandan parliament voted to approve a referendum on multi-party politics. On July 28, 2005, Ugandans voted overwhelmingly in favor of a multi-party system, after almost 19 years of a “no party” system. Reportedly, more than 92% of the registered voters said yes to a multi-party system, although the polls were boycotted by the Forum for Democratic Change, an opposition group. In July 2005, the Ugandan parliament voted to remove the two-term limit on the presidency.

## Multi-Party Elections

In February 2006, Ugandans voted in the first multi-party elections in almost 26 years. President Museveni won 59% of the votes, while the leading opposition candidate, Kizza Besigye, won 37% of the votes. The ruling NRM won 202 seats in parliamentary elections, while the opposition Forum for Democracy Coalition won 40 seats. The election results show a consistent decline for President Museveni from his 74% and 69% victories in the 1996 and 2001 elections, respectively. Meanwhile, Besigye’s 37% share represented a 10% gain over his 2001 vote share. International election observers did not condemn the election results nor did they fully endorse the electoral process. According to the European Union election monitoring group report, “Uganda’s first multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections since 1980 have demonstrated significant improvements in comparison to previous elections.” According to the same report, “Despite a number of problems experienced by voters on election day, EU Chief Observer Max van den Berg, who spent the day traveling between Kampala, Gulu and Soroti, noted that voters came out in large numbers, knew that they had a choice between change or continuity, and made this choice with calm and dignity.” But the elections were marred by intimidation, counting irregularities, voter name deletions, and show of force by the government. Harassment and the trial of the opposition candidate, Besigye, by authorities, were seen as part of the overall strategy to secure victory. Kizza Besigye was charged and imprisoned soon after his return to Uganda to run as a candidate for president. He was charged with rape, terrorism, and treason. The rape charge was dropped, but he still faces other charges.

## The Situation in Northern Uganda

While much of the country has remained stable since the NRM took power in 1986, civil war has ravaged northern Uganda for over 20 years. The situation has been characterized as one of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, where civilians, particularly children, are the most affected, according to the United Nations and numerous reports by non-governmental organizations. The conflict and the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda have killed tens of thousands of civilians due to deliberate targeting of children by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) (see below), although the actual number of those killed is unknown.

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<sup>5</sup> “President Should Listen to Old Friends, Avoid Disaster (Editorial).” *The Monitor*, May 3, 2002.

According to a report by the Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), a coalition of 50 Ugandan and international groups, more than two million civilians have been affected. An estimated 90% of the population in the northern region of Acholiland, particularly in the districts of Gulu, Kitigum, and Pader, have been displaced; and some estimate that 80% of the forces in the LRA are the abducted children from these areas. For the past two decades, the victims in this conflict have largely been civilians, although the conflict began in an effort to overthrow the Museveni regime. The victims reportedly are abused routinely by security forces and the government has failed to provide adequate protection to civilians, particularly children in northern Uganda, according to several reports.

The LRA has abducted more than 20,000 children over the past decade for forced conscription and sexual exploitation.<sup>6</sup> According to the United Nations “the most disturbing aspect of this humanitarian crisis is the fact that this is a war fought by children on children - minors make up almost 90% of the LRA’s soldiers. Some recruits are as young as eight and are inducted through raids on villages. They are brutalized and forced to commit atrocities on fellow abductees and even siblings. Those who attempt to escape are killed. For those living in a state of constant fear, violence becomes a way of life and the psychological trauma is incalculable.”

Approximately half of all U.S. non-food aid in Uganda is directed at ameliorating the crisis in the north. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continues its support for the displaced children and orphans in Uganda. The program, Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF), “assist[s] war-affected children in northern and western Uganda by rebuilding traditional community and family structures and working to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS.” The DCOF funded programs such as the Community Resilience and Dialogue (CRD), which focused on aiding abducted children between 2002-2005. The CRD rehabilitated 7,000 abducted children and reunified and resettled 5,700 with their families. Other donor governments are also doing similar projects in support of former abducted children and internally displaced persons in northern Uganda.

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<sup>6</sup> Uganda Complex Emergency. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), July 2003.

### The LRA: Early Years

In 1985, the Milton Obote regime was ousted in a military coup by General Tito Lutwa Okello and other military officers from northern Uganda. The coup came at a time when the NRA attacks against the Obote regime threatened Obote's hold on power. In 1986, the NRA defeated the Okello regime, forcing the military and their supporters to flee to northern Uganda. Shortly afterward a rebel alliance was formed, the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). The UPDA began attacks against government military installations primarily in northern Uganda. The same year, Alice Lakwena, an Acholi spiritual healer, emerged as the dominant leader of the rebel alliance. Lakwena's faction, the Holy Spirit Movement, initially dominated the alliance and also began to make its move in Southern Sudan. After a devastating battle with the Ugandan military in Jinja, 60 miles from the capital of Kampala, in which a large number of the rebel alliance members were killed or captured, Lakwena fled to Kenya. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, UPDA was no longer active. One of Lakwena's key members and reportedly a relative, Joseph Kony, then in his early 20s, emerged as the leader of the remaining forces and emerged as the LRA leader. A major military strategy shift took place in the early 1990s with the emergence of Kony. Kony's group began to primarily target civilians in northern Uganda and forged a strong alliance with the government of Sudan.

The overall impact of the crisis in northern Uganda is not clear, although day to day life for many in this region has changed significantly. The economy in northern Uganda has been devastated, especially in light of the fact that much of the population is displaced internally and some have left the region. According to various sources, there are an estimated 1.5-1.7 million internally displaced people in northern Uganda. Large numbers of children who are not in internally displaced persons camps often leave their homes at night to sleep in hospitals or churches. They are known as "Night Commuters." Education for many of these children seems out of reach, since many are unable to stay in one place to attend school. According to a World Vision report, *Pawns of Politics*, "the north has suffered insecurity, manifested by violence against civilians, abductions and displacement. This insecurity has resulted in death, loss of property, and disruption of development activities. For example, more than 20,000 children and adolescents have been abducted between 1986 and 2003, of whom only 11,000 have returned to their homes. The insecurity of war has created an uncertain future for children. Children are losing vital educational opportunities; they are at greater risk for contracting HIV/AIDS and other STDs; and they are forced into child prostitution, child soldiering, and other forms of bondage."<sup>7</sup> As a result of the war and perceived ethnic bias, the NRM government remains unpopular in northern Uganda. In the 2006 elections, opposition candidate Besigye reportedly won 80% of the votes in Gulu.

## Regional Implications

Under the leadership of Joseph Kony, the LRA has conducted military operations in northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Southern Sudan. The regional impact of the northern Uganda crisis has been

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<sup>7</sup> *The Pawns of Politics: Children, Conflict and Peace in Northern Uganda*. World Vision, 2004.



particularly hard for Southern Sudan, in part because of its geographic proximity and also due to the government of Sudan's support for the LRA rebels. In Southern Sudan the LRA joined the government of Sudan to attack the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the liberation movement fighting then successive Sudanese governments, according to U.S. and regional officials. Southern Sudanese civilians have been and continue to be victims of LRA attacks. The LRA was given protection, facilities for training, and supplies by the government of Sudan to wage war in northern Uganda and Southern Sudan.<sup>8</sup> The LRA targeted civilians in Eastern and Western Equatoria and in the Juba region, the regional capital. The LRA leadership and its troops had a permanent presence in Southern Sudan under the protection of the government of Sudan. In the Juba region, LRA forces used schools and other government facilities to train and house their troops.<sup>9</sup> In late 2005, the LRA intensified its attacks targeting civilians in Southern Sudan, especially in Yei and Juba areas. However, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 between the government of Sudan and the SPLM has threatened the survival of the LRA as a force in Southern Sudan. The SPLA has been fighting the LRA and the takeover of the government in Southern Sudan by the SPLM has made LRA activities very difficult. The CPA has a provision in the Security Agreement that all foreign groups must be forced out of Sudan. The late leader of Southern Sudan, Dr. John Garang, had the LRA and foreign terrorist groups in mind when he insisted on this provision.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, some LRA units went into DRC, reportedly looking for a new home after the SPLM took power. Military clashes in DRC reportedly led to the killing of 8 Guatemalan United Nations peacekeepers in the DRC.

## Attempts to End the Conflict

A number of attempts in the past at a negotiated settlement with the LRA failed, in large part due to LRA intransigence and due to the government of Uganda's inconsistent positions. The first serious effort was launched by former Ugandan government minister Betty Bigombe in the early 1990s with the full support of President Museveni. In 1993, Bigombe made contact with the LRA leadership and the LRA initially expressed interest in a negotiated settlement. Prior to this effort, the government of Uganda launched what was known as the Operation North campaign. Operation North campaign was designed to deny the LRA support in the North and to arm the civilian population with bows and arrows, known then as the Arrow Group. The operation failed and created strong animosity between the government and elements in northern Uganda. The Bigombe initiative ended when President Museveni threatened to use force against the LRA and demanded its surrender. Other initiatives, both local and regional, failed to produce tangible results. Bigombe is once again engaged in an effort to bring an end the conflict in northern

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<sup>8</sup> The International Crisis Group. Northern Uganda: Understanding and Resolving the Conflict, April 2004.

<sup>9</sup> The author visited Juba last year and other towns in Southern Sudan over the past decade where LRA has been active.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Dagne interviewed Dr. John Garang on a number of occasions during the Security Arrangement negotiations.

Uganda. Contacts were made in late 2004-2005 with the leadership of the LRA and the LRA also had appointed two senior commanders, Vincent Otti and Sam Kolo, as negotiators in this new initiative. The peace initiative stalled in 2005 when Kolo defected to the government side and the government of Uganda began its military campaign. Resolution of the conflict through military means has not been successful, in part due to ineffective operations against the LRA and an apparent lack of will by the government to end the conflict through a negotiated settlement.

In October 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for five top LRA leaders, including Kony. Some observers, while supportive of the ICC prosecution of these leaders, maintain that the ICC action could make peace efforts very difficult. In April 2006, Bigombe stated that “it is now extremely difficult for me to talk meaningfully to the LRA leadership when they know they are being hunted down to be locked up behind bars in Europe.”<sup>11</sup>

## Current Peace Initiative

After a series of failed peace efforts, the government of South Sudan appears to have made some significant strides in brokering the conflict. Following months of talks in Juba, Sudan, the two parties signed a formal cessation of hostilities agreement on August 26, 2006. Under the agreement, LRA insurgents were expected to gather at assembly points in southern Sudan. The deadline for assembly was extended after ceasefire observers reported that both sides violated the agreement in October. The Ugandan army has admitted to approaching a rebel safe haven in Sudan, claiming it was escorting journalists and diplomats on a fact-finding mission. Meanwhile, LRA soldiers, claiming they feared attack by the Ugandan forces, violated the agreement by leaving a designated assembly point in southern Sudan. Many observers remain skeptical that all of the remaining LRA insurgents will comply with the terms of the agreement.

President Museveni has offered amnesty if the rebels accept a peace agreement. According to media reports and U.S. officials, there is support among many civilians in northern Uganda for reconciliation rather than revenge against the LRA leaders. To date, Kony has rejected Museveni’s offer, pronouncing that amnesty “presupposes surrender”.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, unless the ICC’s Chief Prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, accepts a local judicial solution, the indicted insurgents would have to accept asylum in a country not bound by the Rome Treaty. The ICC has announced that it will not consider any amnesty proposal until after the successful completion of a peace agreement.

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<sup>11</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Uganda: Mediator Critical of ICC Indictments, April 15, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Jaime Jansen. “Uganda Rebels Reject Amnesty Offer.” *Jurist*, July 7, 2006.

## Social and Economic Profile

### Economic Conditions

Uganda is blessed with fertile soils, regular rainfall, and sizable deposits of copper and cobalt. Its largest sector is agriculture, which employs 78% of the workforce, and accounted for about 90% of export earnings and 23.4% of Uganda's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2003/2004. Coffee exports make up half its export earnings and Uganda is Africa's largest coffee producer. Other major exports include cotton, tea, and to a lesser extent, maize. Crop production has been hampered by security concerns in the northern and western regions of Uganda. To stabilize the economy, Museveni adopted a policy of reducing inflation while simultaneously increasing production and export earnings. Uganda raised producer prices on export crops, increased the prices of imported petroleum products, and boosted civil service wages.

The industrial sector has also expanded, with real output growth approaching 10% a year, and contributed 24.2% of GDP in 2003/2004. The main industries include the processing of coffee, cotton, tea, sugar, tobacco, edible oils, dairy products, and grain milling as well as brewing. Other ventures include vehicle assembly and the manufacture of textiles and metal products. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit (3/2006), "real GDP growth is forecast to improve to 5.8% in 2006 and 6% in 2007, supported by continued expansion in manufacturing, construction, transport and telecommunications. Food production will remain vulnerable to disruptions such as drought and disease, and prices will fall back slowly, with inflation set to average 7% in 2006 and 6% in 2007. Declining coffee prices, high fuel prices and growth in investment-led imports are expected to result in a widening of the current-account deficit from an estimated 4% of GDP in 2005 to 4.8% of GDP in 2006 and 5.5% of GDP in 2007."

Obstacles to economic growth remain. Uganda's heavy reliance on coffee exports makes it vulnerable to international commodity price fluctuations and poor weather conditions. Privatization initiatives pose a problem as they are seen by many to be a scramble for the fruits of state-owned property. Another problem plaguing Uganda's economy is corruption. Uganda relies upon international donors for 41% of its national budget. Those donors, in particular Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, have become increasingly critical of governance issues and a rise in defense spending.

Uganda is eligible for trade benefits, including textile and apparel benefits, with the United States under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In 2005, Uganda's exports to the United States under AGOA provisions were valued at \$4.9 million, composing 19% of the country's total exports to the United States.

### HIV/AIDS

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Uganda was one of the African countries most devastated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Over the past decade, however, Uganda has made significant progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and the Museveni

government is widely credited for implementing a sweeping reform to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to USAID, the prevalence of HIV has dropped over 50% in the last fifteen years. Today the overall prevalence rate is 6.7%. Moreover, prevalence among pregnant women declined significantly. Despite these impressive declines, HIV/AIDS is still a serious problem in Uganda. An estimated 91,000 Ugandans died in 2005, and there are over 1 million orphans from the AIDS crisis. Uganda HIV/AIDS prevention program known as ABC (Abstinence, Be Faithful, or Use Condoms) is credited for the reduction in HIV infections, and has been viewed by the U.S. Administration as a model for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. In 2007, the United States is expected to provide \$188 million to support Uganda's fight against HIV/AIDS (see table below for a summary of U.S. assistance to Uganda).

## **Regional Relations**

Uganda is a member of the East African Community and has enjoyed favorable relations with its fellow members, Kenya and Tanzania. Uganda has at times had tense relations with two of its other neighbors, namely Rwanda and, more recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), resulting from its 1998 troop deployment into eastern Congo. While the government claimed the troop presence was aimed at discouraging attacks from Ugandan rebels based in the region, there were widespread allegations of natural resource exploitation, and Uganda eventually removed its troops under international pressure in 2003. In 2005 Museveni threatened to send troops back to the region when LRA forces moved from Sudan to the DRC if Congo failed to deny them sanctuary, although the current peace talks may avert further contention.

## **U.S.-Uganda Relations**

Relations between Washington and Kampala are warm. Over the years, successive American administrations have supported the Museveni government as a reformist regime and a staunch ally of the United States. The Clinton Administration championed the Museveni regime, and President Clinton visited Uganda during his 1998 tour of Africa. Relations cooled when Ugandan troops intervened in the Congo in 1998. Clinton Administration officials were also critical of Uganda and Rwanda when the two former allies clashed in eastern Congo in 1999 and 2000.

The Bush Administration appears to have restored good relations with Kampala. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Uganda during his four-nation trip to Africa in late May 2001. Secretary Powell met with President Museveni and opposition leaders to discuss a wide range of issues, including Sudan and DRC. He praised Museveni for lowering Uganda's HIV-AIDS infection rate. In 2001, Uganda withdrew several battalions from Congo and by May 2003, almost all of Uganda's troops had been withdrawn from Congo. President Museveni has also been a leading ally of the United States in the fight against international terrorism, and was one of the first African leaders to pledge support in the war against Iraq.

**Table 1. U.S. Assistance to Uganda**  
(\$ in thousands)

| <b>Account</b>    | <b>FY2005<br/>Actual</b> | <b>FY2006<br/>Estimate</b> | <b>FY2007<br/>Request</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| CSH               | 15,160                   | 19,948                     | 18,512                    |
| DA                | 27,967                   | 21,614                     | 23,845                    |
| FMF               | 1,984                    | —                          | —                         |
| GHAI              | 122,741                  | 145,000                    | 188,000                   |
| IMET              | 293                      | 238                        | 295                       |
| NADR-TIP          | —                        | —                          | 150                       |
| P.L. 480 Title II | 64,410                   | 16,193                     | 19,000                    |
| Peace Corps       | 1,768                    | 1,848                      | 1,868                     |

**Source:** Department of State.

**Acronyms.** CSH: Child Survival and Health; DA: Development Assistance; FMF: Foreign Military Financing; GHAI: Global Aids Initiative; IMET: International Military Education and Training; NADR-TIP: Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related programs.