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A view shows a section of the burnt building at the Lhubirira Secondary School June 17, 2023, after militants linked to rebel group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed and abducted multiple people overnight in Mpondwe, western Uganda. (OSV News photo/Reuters)

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June 19, 2023

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Ugandans woke up June 17 to the shock of a school massacre in which at least 39 students and two community members were killed.

Just before midnight local time June 16, rebels suspected to be members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) swooped into the Lhubiriha Secondary School in the town of Mpondwe, near the border with Congo.

Children educated in the school were between the ages of 13 and 18. Some victims were shot, many were hacked with machetes and others burnt to death when the dormitories where they lived were set ablaze, according to Fr. Sunday Augustine Masereka, director of the communications office in the Diocese of Kasese, located near the site of the recent attack.

"There were 62 children in the school," Masereka told Vatican Radio.

Pope Francis, in his first public appearance and Angelus prayer after returning from Gemelli hospital on June 16, prayed for the victims of the attack on June 18: "I pray also for the young students, victims of the brutal attack against a school in the west of Uganda. This battle, this war everywhere ... let us pray for peace!"

"On behalf of the Ugandan government... I extend heartfelt condolences to the families, students, staff of Lhubiliriha Secondary School and the broader community affected by this tragedy," said Uganda's First Lady Janet Museveni in a statement on Twitter June 17.

"We call upon everyone to offer prayers for the affected families and community while also urging vigilance to uphold the safety of our children in schools," Museveni added.

Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, extended "heartfelt condolences" to the families of the victims and called for the release of those abducted. "Those responsible for this appalling act must be brought to justice," his

statement read.

At least six students were abducted in the attack and forced to carry food that the rebels stole from the school's stores.

Guterres called for the immediate release of those abducted and underlined "the importance of collective efforts to tackle cross border insecurity between Congo and Uganda and restore durable peace in the area."

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The ADF is a shadowy rebel group linked to the Islamic State. It was established in the 1990s by some Ugandan Muslims who felt that Museveni had sidelined them in his policies. The Ugandan military launched attacks on the rebel movement, forcing it to relocate into Eastern Congo, where the absence of state authority has allowed several rebel groups to operate and thrive.

In 2021, the Ugandan military deployed troops to Eastern Congo to help the Congolese army fight off the rebels and reestablish state authority.

Masereka said the attack had retaliatory intent.

"Our military went to the Congo to help, and people there welcomed them, but it's a real surprise that the rebels now escape from Congo to attack Uganda," the priest told Vatican Radio.

He said the recent attack on Uganda and the repeated attacks across the border with Congo have created fear among the people.

"This time, they have come to attack children in a boarding school, and people are very much afraid at both the Uganda and Congolese sides of the borders."

He recalled that in the past, such attacks had tended to target churches, citing the 1996 attack in which a seminary was attacked and seminarians either killed or kidnapped.

The priest said it was critical that the international media and the international community put a spotlight on what's going on in Congo, because "people are dying silently in the Congo. The media only talks when there is an attack."

He said there is a need for an inclusive dialogue because "people continue to die, and guns aren't solving anything. It's the ordinary people dying every day. So, if they (the belligerents) can come together and have peace talks, maybe it can yield something."