

Capturing Kony at the Expense of Protecting Civilian Lives:

The LRA in the Central African Republic

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The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a rebel group that originated in northern Uganda and waged a guerrilla war against the Ugandan government for just over twenty years, under the leadership of Joseph Kony. Despite the length of the conflict, the LRA have only recently started to receive widespread international media coverage. Several factors have contributed to this. Firstly, in 2001 the United States government placed the LRA on its list of global terrorist groups following the 9/11, which meant that the group now held the highest level of international political attention.^[i] In 2004, the LRA was placed firmly on the international map when United Nations (UN) official Jan Egeland, referred to the situation in northern Uganda as 'the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world.'^[ii] Furthermore, in 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for the arrest of Kony and several other high-ranking LRA members for crimes against humanity. After several unsuccessful peace talks and a warrant still pending for Kony's arrest, the LRA now commands worldwide attention. Yet despite increased international focus, Joseph Kony has yet to be captured.

The war has now spread across three international borders, with Kony's rebel group active in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR), making it the longest running conflict in Africa.^[iii] Within the CAR, the LRA has found refuge in a country destabilised by coup d'état politics, which has given rise to various [rebel factions](#), still actively operating in the region. Despite being considerably weakened by international and national forces, LRA attacks on local communities continue. In 2014 the U.N. humanitarian office reported 65 presumed LRA attacks within the first quarter of 2014 in the CAR and Congo.^[iv]

Background

In 1985 a number of religious and secular movements emerged in Uganda to fight Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). Of these groups the most publicised have been the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), 1985-6, and the LRA.^[v] Following the defeat of Lakwena, Kony formed the LRA two years later, absorbing some ex-members of the HSM. The LRA's membership was further bolstered in 1988 when the government signed a peace agreement with some sections of the Ugandan Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA) – a group formed to fight the NRA – as disillusioned ex-UPDA members joined Kony's group in protest.^[vi]

The LRA and the HSM emerged due to a process of political militarisation, inept governance, economic instability, and social disparities, which created a political and economic chasm between northern and southern Uganda. Faction groups such as the LRA, UDPA, and HSM, attracted membership from those on the margins of their societies and offered an opportunity to (re)gain political power, by challenging state military authority. With the contemporary political histories of South Sudan, the CAR and the DRC in many ways mirroring that of Uganda's political past, it is perhaps unsurprising that the LRA has found it relatively easy to wage a guerrilla war between three regional borders by capitalising on the political instability in all three countries.

'Victory' is not the end goal

Joseph Kony has over the last 26 years acted as an opportunist who continued to use violence against civilians as a highly effective political weapon to ensure the LRA's survival. If one considers David Keen's assessment regarding the rationality of contemporary wars, the aim is not necessarily win, but to prolong the conflict by looting, abduction and controlling micro-territories. Thus maintaining a protracted conflict and eluding capture becomes a victory in itself.^[vii] In a continuation of the tactics used by the LRA in Uganda, within the CAR, the group has continued to effectively use violence to create a climate of fear and terror among local communities.^[viii] This is a tactic that the LRA has become highly adept in, and has aided the group's survival for nearly three decades. Furthermore, for many LRA members, guerrilla warfare has become a way of life, offering the opportunity to violently acquire scarce economic resources. Consequently, it stands to reason that the capture of Joseph Kony alone is unlikely to end this protracted and trans-national conflict.

Why the CAR?

In December 2008, the DRC, Uganda, and Sudan launched '[Operation Lightning Thunder](#)', a joint military offensive against the LRA in north-eastern DRC. Despite weakening the group, the operation had extremely negative consequences. Firstly, it failed in its primary objective which was to capture Joseph Kony. Secondly, the weakened LRA undertook harsh reprisals on civilians, a repeat of the disastrous '[operation iron-fist](#)' initiated in Uganda in March 2002, which saw large-scale reprisals by the LRA against the civilian population, indicating that in the fight against the LRA, lessons of the past are still being largely ignored. Lastly, the offensive only served to disperse the group further into the CAR, making the capture of key members of the LRA even more difficult.^[ix] As the East Africa bureau chief for the New York Times, Jeffrey Gettleman assessed, 'the Central African Republic would be an excellent place to disappear. Its national army is one of the regions smallest and weakest. Its terrain is primordial thick. And its infrastructure is shambolic.'^[x] Decades of turmoil made the country an ideal refuge for the LRA.

CAR as a lifeline

The militia was first spotted in the CAR in 2006, near the border with South Sudan. However, the group's first reported attack was not until February 2008 when it raided the town of Obo, in the south-eastern border with Congo.^[xi] The group remains extremely weakened, splintered into small and uncoordinated bands, totalling about less than 200 combatants.^[xii] Its attacks have become sporadic and desperate, driven by the need for food as apposed to tactical manoeuvres. In response to increased international and regional pressure, the LRA has avoided committing mass attacks, fearing that it will reveal the groups' location to the RTF army. In addition, an important wave of defections has been reported in the CAR.^[xiii]

However, the LRA is still an important threat. The group continues to organise attacks to civilians, commit raids and loot resources to ensure survival.^[xiv] Between January and March 2014, Human Rights Watch and the UN reported that the LRA carried out 53 new attacks in Congo and the CAR, a significant increase from the previous year. "The increase in LRA attacks shows that the rebel group is not a spent force and remains a serious threat to civilians".^[xv]

In fact, as the director of Resolve Paul Ronan recently stated, "the deteriorating security and human rights situation in the CAR could prove to be a lifeline for Kony."^[xvi] The African Union, United Nations, and the LRA-affected countries should take urgent steps to implement civilian protection measures.

International presence in CAR

Currently, there are several international military actors in the CAR. In 2009, the UN created BINUCA – the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic – which focuses on ensuring stable governance, supporting the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of armed groups.^[xvii]

At the request of the UN Security Council, the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UN-OCA), the UN Office to the African Union, LRA-affected countries, UN entities and the African Union are coordinating efforts to halt the threat posed by the LRA. As a result, the African Union's Regional Cooperation Initiative against the LRA (RCI-LRA) was launched in 2012 and a Ugandan-led Regional Task Force (RTF) was deployed to the CAR and South Sudan. The force is composed of more than 3000 soldiers whose mission is to capture the LRA's leadership and especially Joseph Kony.^[xviii]

To support these efforts, the US deployed around 100 military advisers and personnel to CAR in, Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda in late 2011. The group advises and assists militaries in the region in apprehending the LRA senior leadership, protecting civilians, and encouraging defections from the group. The US force has also helped improve civilian-military

relations, coordination between armies and the conduct of Uganda soldiers. The mission has recently been supported with more troops and military aircraft.[\[xix\]](#) In addition, the U.S. government also offered a reward of \$5 million dollars for any leads that led to the arrest of Kony.

(In)efficiency of the international actors

Foreign military actors in the CAR have had important successes. RTF military efforts have weakened the LRA, which has lost about one fifth of its core Ugandan fighters since 2013. One LRA commander, Vincent Binary, was killed and the survival of the group was threatened as several of their camps and arable fields were destroyed. [\[xx\]](#) In addition, the US military and NGOs launched peaceful defection campaigns targeting LRA combatants and captives by organising radio programmes and spreading defection flyers. This enabled an important wave of defections that further depleted the group.[\[xxi\]](#) More significantly, the presence of Ugandan RTF troops in the north has deterred large-scale LRA attacks on civilian communities.[\[xxii\]](#) Yet, Joseph Kony is still to be captured and the atrocities against civilians continue without impunity.

The international community seems to be more interested in tracking Joseph Kony and the remaining leadership than protecting civilians. Only a minimal number of RTF troops, US soldiers and BINUCA personnel have been deployed in LRA-affected areas to date. In several towns there are only two to five ill-equipped soldiers with limited transport and communications means. Some villages and towns have no soldiers deployed at all.[\[xxiii\]](#) Consequently, very few measures have been adopted to protect innocent civilians. LRA forces continue to operate with little interference, as can be observed by the fact that most of the recent attacks have occurred near the CAR-Congo border, where security presence is minimal and tracking troops is difficult.[\[xxiv\]](#)

The situation is further exasperated by the difficulty in accessing LRA-controlled areas and the lack of high frequency radio and mobile phone services. However, the minimal effort being made to protect local communities in CAR is due to the exaggerated focus on capturing Joseph Kony, particularly by the Obama administration. Finding Kony would provide the U.S. with the opportunity to meet both internal and external interests. After the release of [Kony2012](#), the viral video produced by 'Invisible Children', Kony became one of the world's most wanted men. With minimal effort, the U.S. could help capture him and satisfy an important national and international constituency.[\[xxv\]](#) More importantly, the LRA provided the perfect motive for expanding the Africa Command of US military (AFRICOM) – launched in 2008 to protect and promote American interests in Africa – presence in Central Africa.[\[xxvi\]](#)

These distorted motives have led to an exaggerated focus on capturing Joseph Kony at the expense of focusing on the protection of innocent lives. As Anneke Van Woudenberg from Human Rights Watch stated, 'despite the presence of foreign armies and their own security forces, civilians in CAR have shockingly little protection from the LRA's brutal attacks.'[\[xxvii\]](#) Apprehending the group's leaders is an essential step to stop the atrocities and

would satisfy a widespread international public. ‘Without a doubt, a hard-core group of senior commanders is responsible for appalling atrocities. The international community should seek ways to prevent these commanders from orchestrating further attacks against innocent civilians – but for the sake of those civilians, much more thought is needed as to how this can be done.’^[xxviii] These efforts are not halting the massive atrocities perpetrated against local populations and none of the UN peacekeeping missions has consistently prioritised protection of civilians from the LRA.^[xxix] What is more, the continuous failures to capture the LRA’s leadership have only lead to dispersing the group and prompting atrocious retaliatory attacks against civilians. A balanced effort on capturing the leadership and enforcing comprehensive civilian protection measures is urgently needed to alleviate the situation in the CAR.

[i] S. Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, London, 2008. p.9.

[ii] ‘A litany of horrors’ *The Guardian*, 2 November 2004.

[iii] ‘Joseph Kony: US Military Plans to hunt LRA leader’ *BBC News*, 24 March 2014

[iv] *Sudan Tribunal*, 7 May 2014.

[v] H. Behrend, ‘The Holy Spirit Movements of Alice Lakwena, Severino Lukoya and Joseph Kony (1986-97)’ (ed.), C. Clapham, *African Guerrillas*, Oxford, 1998. p.107.

[vi] L E. Cline, ‘Spirits and the Cross: Religiously Bases Violent Movements in Uganda’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.14, No.2, 2003, p. 119.

[vii] D. Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*, Oxford, 2005, introduction.

[viii] A. Vinci, ‘The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord’s Resistance Army’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.16, No.3 2005, p. 371; K C. Dunn, ‘Uganda: The Lord’s Resistance Army’, *Review of African Political Economy*, ICTs ‘Virtual Colonisation’ & Political Economy, Vol.31, No.99, 2004, p 141.

[ix] ‘Finishing the fight against the LRA’, *Enough Project*, 12 May 2009.

[x] ‘In a vast jungle: US troops aid in search for Kony’, *New York Times*, 29 April 2012.

[xi] ‘The LRA in Congo. CAR and South Sudan’, *Enough Project*.

[xii] ‘Why is the US hunting for Joseph Kony?’, *Aljazeera*, 11 May 2014.

[xiii] ‘In a vast jungle: US troops aid in search for Kony’, *New York Times*, 29 April 2012.

[xiv] ‘The LRA Crisis Tracker’, *The Resolve and Invisible Children*, Security Brief, 2014.

[xv] ‘Central Africa Republic: LRA Attacks Escalate’, *Human Rights Watch*, 20 April 2012.

[xvi] ‘The LRA Crisis Tracker’, *The Resolve and Invisible Children*, Security Brief, 2014.

[xvii] *BINUCA MANDATE*, United Nations.

[xviii] ‘Central Africa’, *United Nations Department of Political Affairs Report*.

[xix] ‘The LRA in Congo. CAR and South Sudan’, *Enough Project*.

[xx] ‘Joseph Kony’s LRA Exploits’ *Relief Web*, 10 February 2014.

[xxi] *Ibid*.

[xxii] ‘Central Africa Republic: LRA Attacks Escalate’, *Human Rights Watch*, 20 April 2012.

[xxiii] *Ibid*.

[xxiv] ‘The LRA in Congo. CAR and South Sudan’, *Enough Project*.

[xxv] ‘Why is the US hunting for Joseph Kony?’, *Aljazeera*, 11 May 2014.

[xxvi] ‘The imperial agenda of the US’s ‘Africa Command’ marches on’, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2014.

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[xxvii] '[Central Africa Republic: LRA Attacks Escalate](#)', Human Rights Watch, 20 April 2012.

[xxviii] E. Kemp, 'Ghosts of Christmas Past – Protecting civilians from the LRA', *Oxfam Briefing Papers*, 2010, p.3.

[xxix] *Ibid.*, p.2.

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