

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Lord's Resistance Army: A Symptom of Central Africa's Larger Problems

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The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has caused enormous suffering and instability in central Africa, launching violent attacks in Uganda, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and newly independent South Sudan. While Congress and the Obama Administration have provided substantial political, financial, and military support aimed at eliminating the LRA and addressing the humanitarian consequences of its violent acts, the region's fundamental challenges have contributed to the LRA's ability to evade capture and continue its attacks. Unless governance improves and regional actors establish greater trust and coordination, efforts to eliminate the LRA will be hindered.

**Lord's Resistance Army.** Joseph Kony, a disciple of Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, established

the LRA in the late 1980s to topple the regime of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and institute a government based on Kony's interpretation of the Ten Commandments.<sup>1</sup> Known for kidnapping women and children for use as sex slaves and child soldiers, the LRA has killed and enslaved tens of thousands of central Africans and forced millions to flee their homes for nearly three decades.

Although the LRA poses no direct threat to U.S. national security interests, it is a major source of regional instability. In 2006, the Ugandan military pushed the LRA out of the country's northern region and shifted its operations into the densely forested border area of the DRC, South Sudan, and CAR. Last year, there were over 250 attacks, and nearly half a million people were displaced across the region as a result of LRA activity.<sup>2</sup>

Kony has centralized power within the organization and is considered the "absolute leader." Since fleeing northern Uganda, the LRA's following has weakened. No longer commanding the thousand-man fighting force it used to, the LRA now has a force strength that ranges from 150 to 200 core fighters, in addition to individuals who have been captured.<sup>3</sup>

**Beyond the LRA.** The focus of the anti-LRA effort is to forewarn and protect civilian populations, encourage LRA defections, reintegrate victims into their communities, and kill or capture Kony and his deputies. Although the U.S. has provided assistance to Uganda and other governments in the region, these efforts have had limited success because of a lack of governance, the limited capabilities of the regional militaries, and distrust between regional governments that undermines coordination and cooperation.

The territories traversed by the LRA are among the least governed in central Africa. Northern Uganda was long seen by President Museveni as disloyal and, therefore, undeserving of government resources.<sup>4</sup> Eastern Congo was similarly neglected by former DRC (then Zaire) dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, and the region has been ravaged by conflict and instability since the late 1990s. South Sudan only recently gained independence from Sudan after decades of devastating civil war. The CAR has seen repeated coups since independence, with most governments focused on maintaining power rather than improving governance and development.

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At the national level, regional leaders have focused limited military resources on confronting direct threats to their authority and deemphasizing anti-LRA efforts unless they threatened the government directly. Museveni fought the LRA when it was an internal rebel group with support from the Acholi ethnic population but has been less active since the LRA was forced out of Uganda, in part due to the many complications of conducting operations in foreign territory.

Ugandan troops are also the leading force in the African Union's Mission to Somalia, which some argue has diverted limited resources away from anti-LRA efforts.<sup>5</sup> DRC President Joseph Kabila and CAR President Francois Bozizé have shown political will in addressing rebel groups fighting to overthrow their governments, but they have taken significantly less action against the LRA despite the group's violent attacks. In South Sudan, President Salva Kiir has not prioritized counter-LRA operations, focusing primarily on the country's hostile relations with the North.

At the regional level, lack of trust and cooperation between LRA-affected countries impedes the formation of a cohesive strategy. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir

provided support to the LRA and used it as a proxy force against the South during the civil war. During this time, the LRA also waged attacks against northern Uganda. The DRC and CAR view the Ugandan government and the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) with extreme suspicion. Uganda and Rwanda originally supported former President Laurent-Désiré Kabila in his successful rebellion against Mobutu but later sought to use rebel proxies to overthrow him. DRC President Joseph Kabila remains highly suspicious of Uganda, repeatedly forbidding Ugandan troops on its territory, most recently in 2011.

The CAR government is equally wary of a foreign footprint. While President Bozizé allowed Ugandan troops to enter the CAR in 2009 to track the LRA, in 2010, he ordered the withdrawal of UPDF troops in Sam Ouandja as he believed they were pillaging the country's diamond resources.<sup>6</sup> While Ugandan troops are currently hunting the LRA along the CAR's southern border, the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) are assigned to the lesser task of protecting key towns.

**U.S. Efforts.** The U.S. is the most significant international actor in countering the LRA. Under the Bush Administration, Kony was added to

the Treasury Department's list of "Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons." In 2008, Uganda received considerable support for counter-LRA offensives, providing planning and logistics support. During this time, the DRC was persuaded to allow Ugandan forces to temporarily enter the country.

The Obama Administration has continued this momentum. In 2010, President Obama signed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009, "providing political, economic, military and intelligence support for multilateral efforts to protect civilians." Last October, President Obama enforced this law when he announced the deployment of 100 Special Forces troops to Uganda.

Serving in an advisory capacity, U.S. troops are supporting regional governments through information-sharing, tactical support, and supply assistance. Uganda is serving as an operational home base, as the UPDF is the most professional and resourced military with a history of anti-LRA operations.<sup>7</sup> Despite being sent in October, U.S. troops did not deploy to other parts of the region until January 2011. Counter-LRA intelligence fusion centers are being built in the CAR and South Sudan, and the U.S. has provided basic

1. Now that Joseph Kony is no longer in northern Uganda, the LRA's objective is less clear.

2. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Support to Regional Efforts to Counter Lord's Resistance Army," March 23, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/03/186732.htm> (accessed March 27, 2012).

3. Ibid.

4. In 1986, Museveni, then leader of the National Resistance Army (NRA), overthrew President Tito Okello, a member of the Acholi ethnic group, and occupied northern Uganda's Acholiland. Following Museveni's ascendance to power, Acholi forces organized under the Uganda People's Democratic Army and attempted to reclaim their land from NRA forces. It is from this resistance movement that the Holy Spirit movement and eventually the LRA were created.

5. International Crisis Group, "The Lord's Resistance Army: End Game?," November 17, 2011, p. 4, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/182-the-lords-resistance-army-end-game.aspx> (accessed April 3, 2012).

6. The LRA returned the next month to nearby villages following UPDF withdrawal. See International Crisis Group, "The Lord's Resistance Army."

7. According to the International Crisis Group, regional governments are suspicious of U.S. military coordination with Uganda, which has a reputation as an occupying force. Furthermore, national leaders believe that the U.S. should be assisting their limited military capacity rather than the already professionalized UPDF. See International Crisis Group, "The Lord's Resistance Army."

supplies to the small FACA contingent in the southern CAR.

In the DRC, U.S. personnel are setting up tactical platforms for tracking LRA movements. U.S. trainers have also proven effective in training the 391st DRC light infantry battalion deployed in Dungen. They are considered to be an exception to the infamous reputation of the DRC's armed forces. While the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the eastern DRC has attempted to stabilize the region and protect civilians, its mission is not specifically focused on confronting the LRA.

**What Should Be Done.** Poor governance and regional tensions pose challenges not only to the effort to eliminate the LRA but also to long-term development and stability in central Africa. Although the region is not critical to U.S. interests, America would benefit from more stability in the region. Potential gains include the expansion of U.S.-African trade and investment relations as well as decreased reliance on U.S. and U.N. intervention in African crises.

With the American public demanding that action be taken to combat the LRA, the Obama Administration should seize the opportunity by:

- **Keeping U.S. advisers in the region until the job is done.** The U.S. committed itself to this operation and should continue it until

the LRA's leadership is eliminated. Apart from the humanitarian benefits, this military support will illustrate U.S. commitment to the region. Furthermore, by acting as a good-faith military partner, the U.S. will be better able to build trust and dispel lingering regional suspicions regarding the U.S. Africa Command.

- **Using U.S. military support to enhance regional cooperation.** The Obama Administration should use its assistance to improve the capabilities of regional militaries and encourage joint actions, cross-border coordination, and interoperability. This would make the anti-LRA operation more effective and better assist regional militaries to fulfill peacekeeping responsibilities at the behest of the African Union or the U.N.
- **Holding regional militaries accountable.** If the U.S. is to continue advising and supplying regional militaries, it should implement a zero-tolerance policy for violence inflicted upon civilians.
- **Using the U.S. special envoy to the Great Lakes region to address long-term challenges.** Ambassador Barrie Walkley was appointed special envoy to the

Great Lakes region in December 2011, but his mission and priorities remain unclear. Congress should insist that Walkley focus his efforts on addressing the fundamental governance challenges and distrust that will remain issues even if the LRA threat is eliminated.

**The Bigger Picture.** The LRA's continued existence is due in part to the region's governance failures. Eliminating the LRA threat is not a silver bullet to stabilize central Africa, but it could aid the effort to address the broader challenges. When establishing U.S. policy for the region, Congress and the Obama Administration should consider the broader and often overlooked challenges.

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