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The LRA in Kafia Kingi

The suspension of the Ugandan army operation in the Central African Republic (CAR) following the overthrow of the CAR regime in March 2013 may have given some respite to the LRA, which by the first quarter of 2013 appeared to be at its weakest in its long history. As of May 2013, there were some 500 LRA members in numerous small groups scattered in CAR, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Sudan. Of these 500, about half were combatants, including up to 200 Ugandans and 50 low-ranking fighters abducted primarily from ethnic Zande communities in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan. At least one LRA group, including Kony, was reportedly based near the Dafak Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) garrison in the disputed area of Kafia Kingi for over a year, until February or early March 2013.¹

Reports of LRA presence in Kafia Kingi have been made since early 2010. A recent publication contained a detailed account of the history of LRA groups in the area complete with satellite imagery showing the location of a possible LRA camp at close proximity to a SAF garrison.² In April 2013, Col. al Sawarmi Khalid Sa'ada, the official SAF spokesperson, told the Sudanese official news agency SUNA, 'the report [showing an alleged LRA camp in Kafia Kingi] is baseless and rejected,' adding, 'SAF has no interest in adopting or sheltering rebels from other countries.'³

But interviews with former LRA members who recently defected confirm that a large LRA group of over 100 people, including LRA leader Joseph Kony, spent about a year in Kafia Kingi. The camp was located alongside Umbelasha river near the town of Dafak, about 30 km east of the CAR border and 18 km west of the SAF garrison in Dafak. Recent returnees explained in detail how the LRA camp contained several residences, made of mud walls and thatched roofs, for Kony, his wives, and his senior commanders.⁴ Interviewees said the LRA did not receive substantial support from SAF but that SAF soldiers were aware of the camp and that they allowed the LRA to cultivate and trade in the nearby market of Songo.⁵

At the end of February 2013, camp members witnessed a small beige plane circling overhead, which they promptly reported to Kony. Some two days later, two officials from SAF appeared at the camp and alerted a few LRA officers—according to former combatants, Kony's presence in Dafak was kept hidden from SAF—of a sighting of a large Ugandan army commando unit in the nearby border with CAR. Kony immediately ordered the evacuation of the camp, dividing the large group into four different units and moving south towards Western Bahr el Ghazal and then turning west into CAR. At least four people were able to escape from their groups at this time. Two made it to Tambura, where they were treated well by the population although their presence produced fears of possible LRA retaliation attacks.⁶

Three scouts left behind by the LRA leader to report on what transpired in his absence later reported that four groups of about 50 Ugandan soldiers each accompanied by three Caucasian soldiers with sniffer dogs descended on the camp from four different directions in early March 2013. They burned all the huts and later returned to the CAR border where they were airlifted by a Ugandan army helicopter. The scouts picked up the soldiers' garbage, such as food cans and water bottles that were

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reportedly manufactured in Uganda, and later presented them to SAF to prove the Ugandan army presence in Kafia Kingi. SAF reportedly brought three truckloads of reinforcements to Dafak following the Ugandan army incursion in Kafia Kingi.

While three LRA groups made their way into CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture, Kony and his small group of about 20 people reportedly returned to Kafia Kingi after joining another LRA group of about 50 led by one Acaye Doctor, which had been dispatched to CAR before the Ugandan army attack to collect food. By the end of March 2013 the entire group had moved back into Kafia Kingi, this time about 6 km west of the Dafak SAF garrison. Kony reportedly gave orders to all LRA group leaders to join him in Dafak during the rainy season, the months of July and August 2013, when heavy rains that erase foot tracks and cause the elephant grass to grow tall make pursuit of LRA groups almost impossible. It is unclear if further LRA units joined Kony or whether by August 2013 he was still in Kafia Kingi.

A Ugandan army source confirmed an incursion by the Ugandan army in Kafia Kingi in early March 2013, but could only speak on condition of anonymity.⁷ The source said that the LRA camp had been hastily abandoned but that certain documents had been seized that proved the long-term nature of the LRA's stay in Dafak. One such document was a photographed notebook allegedly belonging to a secretary or a quartermaster. There were detailed accounts in Luo of items sold in the Sudanese market town of Songo by various groups led by Kony's 'wives.' A typical passage read, 'Group of Mama Aci [Akello's Mother, Aci is short for Akello, one of Kony's daughters]; hippopotamus [dry hippo meat] – 16 bags, millet – 21 [bags or pounds], sim-sim [sesame] illegible.'⁸

The Ugandan army source could not confirm if Kony was in Kafia Kingi by July 2013. Echoing the Ugandan army commander based in Nzara, South Sudan, the source said, 'We don't know where Kony or his forces are now, the Ugandan army cannot move until further orders.'⁹

11 October 2013

NOTES

¹ Interviews with former LRA members, Yambio, 19, 20 and 21 July 2013.
² The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative. 2013. 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Sudan's harboring of the Lord's Resistance Army in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009-2013'. April.
³ *Sudan Tribune*. 2013. 'Sudan denies harboring Uganda's LRA fugitive leader,' 28 April.
⁴ Interviews with former LRA members, Gulu and Yambio, June 2013 and July 2013.
⁵ Ibid. Unless otherwise noted, all information relating to activities in Kafia Kingi come from these sources.
⁶ Interview with local official, Tambura, 21 July 2013.
⁷ Interview with Ugandan army source, July 2013.
⁸ Document shown to the Small Arms Survey.
⁹ Interview with Colonel Michael Kabango, Nzara, 20 July 2013.