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Lord's Resistance Army update

In early March, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader Joseph Kony became global talking points after a video posted on the Internet by the US-based NGO Invisible Children went viral. 'Kony2012', which was viewed more than 100 million times, was designed to generate popular pressure for Kony's arrest.

The surge in interest led to a US Congressional resolution (H.Res. 583) highlighting the LRA's atrocities and calling for more cross-border regional forces to protect civilians and pursue LRA commanders. International Criminal Court Prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo said, "Invisible Children will, I think, produce the arrest of Joseph Kony this year ... I don't think US troops will do it. Ugandan troops, supported by the US working with the Central African Republic, they will do it."

But some humanitarian workers and academics criticized 'Kony2012', saying its cut-and-dried message of good vs. evil was simplistic, patronizing, and sometimes misleading. For example, the video appeared to imply that the LRA is still active in Uganda. The campaign also failed to place the LRA in its regional political context, a shortcoming felt keenly by experts in northern Uganda, which suffered LRA attacks until 2006. Stephen Oola, of the Ugandan Refugee Law Project, told the Voice of America, "Kony did not start that rebellion, and that is where the context is missing. It was started by ex-soldiers who were pushed out of power. So who are we to think that taking out Kony wouldn't bring another Kony? For the campaign to portray the issue as Kony vs. humanity is to miss the point. It's a bigger political problem, and something we have been struggling with in this country."

A screening of 'Kony2012' in the Ugandan town of Lira on 14 March was reportedly shut down amidst jeering and scuffles, while another screening in Gulu on 13 April degenerated into a riot, in which one person was killed and a policewoman was seriously injured. Resident Akello Mariam told the *Acholi Times*, "We expected to see the Acholi in the video but [saw] only the white people, so they really exploited our suffering to make money."

Despite the campaign's claims that the LRA is weakened and Kony is about to be captured, LRA attacks have intensified this year. According to Human Rights Watch, there were 53 LRA attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2012.

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An April 23 United Nations report said there was a sharp increase in LRA activities in March in CAR, where LRA attacks have caused the deaths of 89 people since 2008. The report said LRA violence had displaced more than 20,000 Central Africans and some 5,300 Congolese. Another 2,000 Central Africans have taken refuge in DRC and South Sudan.

In CAR, some LRA attacks have taken place in areas previously spared from recent violence, such as the Bangassou-Rafai axis, where the LRA carried out attacks in early 2011 but seemed to be absent for most of the second half of the year. LRA rebels have also moved further west than in the past, with attacks in the third week of March in Detia and Selim, west of Rafai, and in Banima, northwest of Rafai. One possible explanation for this westward push is that the CAR government does not permit Ugandan troops based in Obo and Djemah to chase LRA fighters beyond a certain geographical line, in this case perhaps the Chinko or Vovodo Rivers, both of which are east of Rafai.

The Congolese government apparently still forbids Ugandan troops from entering its territory despite a sizeable LRA presence in Province Orientale. After an almost eight-month absence from Bas-Uélé in northeastern DRC, some LRA groups have now relocated there, moving along the Chinko River from southeastern CAR. LRA attacks have also been recorded in areas frequently raided in the last three years near Dungu, Bangadi, and Ngilima in Haut-Uélé. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 33 attacks in DRC this year, many in March. "Since the beginning of March, now we have recorded more than 13 attacks against civilians in the DRC's Orientale Province," said a UNHCR spokesperson.

There were no reported LRA attacks in South Sudan in the last few weeks but South Sudanese officials say Kony and his commanders move regularly into South Darfur where they receive training and support from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). These claims have not been independently verified but former LRA combatants have confirmed that LRA representatives met with SAF officers at least once in 2009, and once in 2010. On 20 March, a Sudan People's Liberation Army spokesperson said SAF had recently armed Arab nomads and the LRA at the borders of Raja (Western Bahr al Ghazal state) and South Darfur to help them destabilize South Sudan.

Although there have been no recent LRA attacks in South Sudan, a UNHCR spokesperson said on 30 March that the country still feels the effects of violence in neighboring countries. "South Sudan is receiving regularly groups of refugees fleeing LRA attacks in the DRC and CAR. For

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example, now South Sudan is hosting more than 22,000 refugees from the two countries, including 700 who arrived this year," she said.

South Sudan hosts a Ugandan military base in Nzara, Western Equatoria state, and an African Union-backed mission to hunt the LRA in Yambio, the capital of Western Equatoria. The AU mission is supposed to have up to 5,000 troops from Uganda, South Sudan, the DRC, and CAR but it is far from reaching this goal. The force commander, Ugandan Colonel Dick Prit Olum, and his deputies have already deployed to Yambio, where they await the arrival of their troops. It is unclear whether the AU mission will include new contingents or be composed of the ones already fighting the LRA. It is believed that the 800-1,000 Ugandan troops already deployed in CAR and South Sudan will comprise the bulk of the force.

It is unclear what role, if any, US military advisers will play when the AU mission becomes fully operational. Thirty US advisers are based in CAR, 15 of them in Obo near the South Sudanese border and the rest in Djemah, close to Haut Chinko. Both US bases are close to Ugandan army barracks, but the relationship between the two armies is strained. The US advisers are not allowed to go on foot patrols with the Ugandans, who have questioned the value of the US troops. This could change if US plans to provide helicopters materialize. Ugandan army officers have long said helicopters and other rapid response vehicles are needed to foil and respond to LRA attacks.

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