

Lord's Resistance Army

More than five years after the Ugandan army attacked Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) bases in north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), at the start of Operation Lightning Thunder, Joseph Kony and his forces continue to pose a threat to civilians in DRC and Central African Republic (CAR). While the Ugandan offensive may have significantly weakened the LRA—almost two-thirds of LRA combatants have been killed, captured, or defected since late 2008—it has also pushed Kony and his fighters into new territory and caused them to adopt new survival strategies. Recent reports from former LRA combatants and regional analysts suggest that an LRA group is now operating in the Kafia Kingi enclave near South Darfur. There are also unconfirmed reports of LRA fighters harvesting tusks from elephants in DRC, presumably to barter for guns and ammunition. While the LRA evolves in order to survive, institutional responses, such as a regional United Nations strategy and an African Union (AU) mission against the LRA, have been plagued by inaction, bureaucracy, and lack of funding.

Following an order from Kony in mid-2012, top LRA commanders attempted to meet the end of 2012 near Djemah in CAR. On 21 January 2013, Ugandan soldiers reportedly shot and killed Lt. Col. Vincent Okumu, known by the *nom de guerre* Binany, near Djemah. Binany had been in charge of all DRC-based LRA groups, or about 50 fighters. Kony's former personal bodyguard, Binany exemplified a typical LRA commander; in his 30s, abducted at a very young age and therefore uneducated, and brought up through the ranks under Kony's tutelage. It is unclear how many fighters are now left in DRC but reported LRA attacks continued through the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013. Some groups may move between CAR and DRC, escaping Ugandan army pursuers and attacking civilians to capture food and people.

Between 150 and 200 LRA combatants are now based in CAR. A small number might also operate in Kafia Kingi, a disputed enclave between South Darfur, Sudan and Western Bahr al Ghazal, South Sudan. Some former LRA combatants, who recently defected, said a small LRA group had settled in Kafia Kingi, near a Sudan Armed Forces garrison. The UN Secretary-General's 13 December 2012 report on the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa quoted defectors and refugees as saying the base was "south of Garmadora".

Recent activity

In 2012, LRA violence decreased, continuing trends seen the previous year. The LRA Crisis Tracker¹ documented 51 LRA-related deaths in 2012 compared to 154 in 2011, and 273 in 2010. Recorded attacks have also dropped steadily: 469 in 2010, 299 in 2011, and 273 in 2012. The Ugandan army's war of attrition is likely part of the explanation for these declines, but Kony may have also ordered his men not to kill civilians to avoid attracting the international media's attention, a well-known tactic.

According to Col. Michael Kabango, the operational head of the Ugandan army contingent deployed to chase LRA groups in CAR, since the beginning of the offensive in December 2008, the Ugandan army has killed 495 LRA fighters, captured 71 fighters, and rescued 860 people (presumably women and children). At least 130

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fighters have reportedly voluntarily left the LRA since the end of 2008, including 20 Ugandan fighters in 2012. This is significant considering the rebels' inability to abduct in Uganda, and the LRA policy of only placing Ugandans in command. That policy remains in place, according to reports from former combatants, making every Ugandan loss virtually irreplaceable. Estimates of the total remaining LRA fighting force vary from 200 to 400 combatants with no more than 50 operating in DRC.

DRC attacks

Despite the presence of fewer fighters in DRC, LRA attacks continued throughout the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013. There were roughly ten reported attacks per month from November 2012 through January 2013. Most consisted of attempts to steal food and other subsistence items. The focus on stealing, rather than killing civilians, has given rise to speculation that some may be copycat attacks—violence perpetrated by people pretending to be LRA fighters.

But the LRA threat in DRC remains real. A reported attack in Lidjo, near Watsa in Haute Uélé, for example, took place on 12 December 2012. According to eyewitnesses, the assailants were Ugandan, accompanied by young Congolese abductee fighters who had spent years in the LRA. Similar attacks by small groups of fighters attempting to steal food and other goods have taken place in the last three months along the Faradje–Doruma axis, as well as along the route from western Garamba National Park to CAR alongside the Duru River in Haute Uélé.

CAR attacks

Attacks in CAR were less frequent than in DRC, with about half as many, but they generally involved more fighters. On 23 November 2012, for instance, a large LRA force attacked Agoumar, abducting 48 and killing one person. In mid-December 2012, an LRA group abducted a dozen people near Zemio. In another attack on 23 December 2012 in the village of Bani, 50 km north of Yalinga, a large LRA group abducted 12 people, including an 11-year-old girl.

Most LRA attacks in CAR have been reported in Haut Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures, particularly around Zemio and Bangassou towns. LRA fighters have been reported not far from the towns of Obo and Djemah, where Ugandan army and US Special Forces are based. On 21 January 2013, civilians reported seeing a small LRA group near Gougberé, about 5 km southeast of Obo, a village that has been repeatedly targeted by the LRA over the past four years.

South Sudan attacks

There were no reported LRA attacks in South Sudan in 2012 and 2013.

Poaching claims

On 6 February 2013, the Ugandan army said it had found a small cache of ivory tusks in CAR allegedly hidden by LRA fighters—implying their involvement in the illicit ivory trade. If true, this would be a huge departure for group. But the alleged find came soon after reports that 20 elephants had been shot from the air (probably from a helicopter) and their tusks hacked off. The Ugandan government denied any involvement. If the LRA is involved, their aim is likely to trade ivory for guns and other goods with Sudanese soldiers or poachers.

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After a briefing by Special Representative of the Secretary-General Abou Moussa, the UN Security Council issued a statement (19 December 2012) calling on the UN and the AU to “jointly investigate the LRA’s logistical networks and possible sources of illicit financing, including alleged involvement in elephant poaching...”

Assessing the UN’s LRA strategy

Moussa heads the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), a political mission based in Libreville, Gabon that oversees regional security threats, including the LRA and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. During his briefing, Moussa called for the swift finalization of a document that would allow UN agencies to streamline their work on the LRA. He also noted that the funds needed to do this were not yet secured.

Issued on 25 June 2012, the *Regional strategy to address the threat and impact of the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army* “was developed to guide the efforts of the United Nations and other stakeholders in support of international efforts, led by the African Union, to neutralize the threat posed by LRA and to address the impact of its activities in the four affected countries” (CAR, DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda).

The *Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa and on areas affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army* (13 December 2012) recognized the lack of funding as a chronic deficiency in the whole region. It indicated that as of 5 November, humanitarian appeals were at 59 per cent of total requirements in CAR and 54 per cent in South Sudan, and that funding shortfalls had led some NGOs to pull out or change staff, disrupting programmes. The secretary-general was, however, “encouraged by the progress made in tackling the threat and impact of the LRA” since the regional strategy’s adoption.

NGOs take a less rosy view. According to the joint NGO report *Getting Back on Track* released in December 2012, there is no coherent plan to implement the strategy and a decided lack of urgency on the part of the partners; as a result, the situation on the ground is largely unchanged.² The report also says better coordination between UN agencies is needed, and it calls on the AU-led mission against the LRA to quickly become operational.

The Security Council also seemed dissatisfied with the pace of implementation of the UN regional strategy, as evidenced in a presidential statement of 19 December 2012. The council asked the secretary-general to submit by the end of February 2013 a prioritized and sequenced implementation plan with a clear division of labour between all parts of the international system as well as UN organizations. Moussa’s next briefing to the Security Council is set for 15 May 2013.

The AU RCI-LRA initiative

One key aspect of the UN regional strategy is to support the ongoing AU-led *Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the LRA* (AU RCI-LRA). But four months after its official launch, the initiative seemed near collapse. Though politics have hindered its progress, its biggest weakness is a lack of funds and general support for it troops. The military component of the initiative, the Regional Task Force (RTF), has few capable troops, a lack of clear command and control structures, and insufficient logistical capabilities to access LRA safe havens.

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Officially, about 2,800 troops are supposed to be at the disposal of the AU-appointed commander, Ugandan Colonel Dick Olum. The majority of the force, some 2,000 soldiers, is composed of Ugandan troops already on the ground under Col. Kabango. Despite official pronouncements, this Ugandan force acts independently of the AU RCI-LRA, as it did before.

The Ugandan contingent receives funding and other support from the US government, which has a small team of US Special Forces, or military advisors, based in Obo and Djemah in CAR. About 30 US Special Forces are in the field, while another 70 are deployed as support staff in Entebbe, Uganda. Until recently the troops were not allowed to chase after LRA groups alongside Ugandan soldiers, providing only intelligence and logistical support. This policy may be under review, however.

The RTF includes 500 soldiers contributed by South Sudan, but the AU lacks the means to feed, clothe, and arm them. An additional 300 troops from CAR, initially meant to take part in joint operations with the Ugandan army, were redeployed to the country's capital in December 2012 to increase security in the aftermath of a rebellion that threatened to topple the government. As of the end of January 2013 there were no soldiers from the DRC under the RTF. Congolese army officials have said there is no LRA presence in DRC and forbade Ugandan soldiers from entering the DRC to chase LRA groups. The ongoing crisis around DRC's eastern frontier has also necessitated the transfer of most Congolese troops from Province Orientale to the Kivus.

AU officials have tried to breathe life into the initiative by organizing a series of meetings. On 20 December 2012, as the government of CAR dealt with an increasingly dangerous rebel movement that eventually forced President François Bozizé to form a new government, the chiefs of staffs from the RCI countries met in the capital Bangui. That meeting was followed by gatherings of experts and foreign ministers from the RCI countries in Addis Ababa on 14 and 15 January 2013. The meetings produced consensus rules of engagement and standard operating procedures for the initiative, but funds have not yet materialized. According to a diplomat, the AU has shown little interest in funding the initiative as it prioritizes donor support for its Mali intervention. With few troops, little funding, and regional concerns overshadowing the LRA issue, the AU initiative risks becoming obsolete.

US activity

Most of the urgency and initiative for dealing with the LRA has come from the United States—both from government and non-government sources. The NGO Invisible Children organized a series of meetings in Washington on 17 and 18 November 2012 to focus attention on the LRA. At one meeting, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson said the Obama administration is “pursuing a comprehensive approach, supporting both military and civilian efforts. Over the past year, the United States has deployed military advisors and increased our logistical support to regional military operations. At the same time, we have deployed civilian officers and expanded programs to promote defections from the LRA, establish communications networks, and empower affected communities.”

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In addition to continued support for the Ugandan army effort, the US has also introduced legislation to assist in capturing Kony. On 14 January 2013 President Barack Obama signed into law the Department of State Rewards Program Update and Technical Corrections Act of 2012. The law allows the US to offer monetary rewards for information that leads to the arrest or conviction of individuals involved in transnational organized crime—including Kony, and leaders of the Congolese rebel groups M23, and the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda.

But while Carson and Ugandan officials hailed the capture of Caesar Achellam, a top LRA commander, as a major achievement, no one has clarified Achellam’s legal status. Captured in May 2012 in south-eastern CAR, he was brought to Uganda and paraded in front of journalists. Ten months later, there is no word whether Achellam will be prosecuted for crimes committed while in the LRA.

Believed to be in government custody, Achellam cannot take advantage of the Ugandan Amnesty Act of 2000, which offered pardons to LRA fighters who renounced violence. The act was allowed to expire in May 2012, and Ugandan officials have said Achellam is not eligible. Another former LRA combatant who was eligible for amnesty, Thomas Kwoyelo, remains in prison despite a decision by the Ugandan Constitutional Court that he should receive amnesty. Analysts have identified the expiry of the amnesty act and the haphazard way amnesty is granted as disincentives to other LRA fighters who might be tempted to surrender.

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¹ The LRA Crisis Tracker is a website run by non-governmental organizations Invisible Children and Resolve that tracks LRA attacks in the region. See < <http://www.lracrisistracker.com/>>.

² See <http://www.enoughproject.org/files/LRA_Joint_Report.pdf>.