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Analysis: Taking on the LRA



Photo: [Obinna Anyadike/IRIN](#)

Previous Ugandan military operations failed to find Kony

GULU-JUBA-KINSHASA, 22 November 2011 (IRIN) - Washington's contribution of 100 military advisers to help central African forces neutralize the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been welcomed by some in the countries where the insurgency sows terror, but has also been met by caveats and calls for a negotiated path to peace.

"The situation is completely out of hand, people are being killed day and night," Silvestor Kimbezi, a Congolese priest, told a recent workshop on the LRA's impact in Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR), held in the northern Ugandan town of Gulu.

"These people are experiencing the worst form of violence they have ever witnessed; women and children are being abducted and subjected to inhuman conditions while older people are clobbered to death. We urge governments of these countries to get serious, otherwise people might be

wiped out in these places," he added.

Although the LRA is estimated to have fewer than 500 fighters, it has displaced some 440,000 people across the three countries, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Between January and August 2011, there were 240 attacks attributed to the LRA, leading to 130 deaths and 327 abductions. Most of these incidents took place in northeastern DRC.

"The government of South Sudan has endorsed and accepted the role of the US to help fight the LRA," that country's information minister, Barnaba Marial Benjamin, told IRIN in Juba.

"The US has a major role in terms of logistical support, in terms of trying to locate [groups] on difficult terrain," he added.

"We need the support from the superpowers, who have the capacity to detect them [the LRA] hiding in very deep forest," echoed military spokesman Philip Aguer, remarking on his country's lack of necessary air power and surveillance capacity.

In South Sudan, into which LRA forces were first chased from their original northern Uganda bases in the late 1990s, the group remains active, especially in Western Equatoria State's Yambio County, according to Justin Ginara, director of child welfare in the newly independent nation.

"People in Western Equatoria depend on the land. The LRA has frightened them away and they are running. All the villagers surrounding Yambio [town] have been pushed or displaced to Yambio and denied their source of livelihood, which is the land on which they depend," he said.

"They do not have food, they do not have medicines. They become vulnerable to anything that can happen and they cannot access all the basic services like health and education," he added.

"We hope that this suffering will soon come to an end," civil society organizations working in the region's LRA-affected areas wrote in a recent open letter to South Sudan President Salva Kiir, published online by [Human Rights Watch](#).

Such organizations have criticized the governments of affected countries, especially DRC, for playing down the threat posed by the LRA to civilians.

Attacks

DRC's government spokesman and communications minister Lambert Mende insisted in an interview with IRIN that "almost all [LRA] troops" have left DRC for CAR.

"According to the reports of our troops in the field and the evaluations that our partner make, there have been no LRA attacks since seven or eight months," he said.

"We have instances of abductions and looting in a few villages but each time we arrested the culprits we were surprised to see that they are Congolese citizens using the LRA label to scare the others and then try to loot them. So you can understand that the LRA is not as active as it was eight months, a year or two years ago," he said.

According to OCHA, the LRA was responsible for 82 attacks, 32 deaths and 41 abductions in northern DRC between June and August 2011.

Junior Safari, executive secretary of Groupe Lotus, a human rights NGO based in Kisangani, capital of Orientale province, suggested such assurances were attributable more to politics than reality.

"The LRA is still not annihilated. It still continues to massacre the population in villages.

"As the [electoral campaign](#) got under way, it is no surprise the authorities say the security situation is under control in the country, whereas this is untrue. As for the people allegedly 'arrested' the government is referring to, this is just a trick for them to be seen as peacemakers," he said.

Guy-Marin Kamandji, in charge of communication at Caritas Congo, told IRIN there was a "clear discrepancy between the official discourse" and the reality on the ground.

"The fact is that the threat really exists and that our populations still suffer the consequences."

Kamandji described the US intervention as a "good start that will reinforce efforts already under way" but warned that the Americans would "have problems collecting information in the field because of the difficulty of the terrain, which includes the Virunga National Park.

"And they will have to face rebels who behave like guerrillas, who can disappear when they want," he said.

Another caveat about the US involvement came from regional civil society organizations, which warned, in a [common declaration](#) signed after an October meeting in the northern DRC town of Dungu, that the "deployment will only be effective if the governments of CAR, South Sudan and Congo... fully commit to meaningful cooperation in regional and international efforts to protect civilians."

They also suggested that Washington's commitment, on its own, would be insufficient and appealed for "significant engagement from the African Union, European Union, UN Security Council and UN peacekeeping missions in the LRA-affected region". They further called for "more financial and technical support to early warning networks, sensitization and demobilization efforts, and long-term rehabilitation for returnees and ex-combatants".

Early warning

"The task will not be easy," warned Richard Downie, deputy director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, in an [analysis posted on the organization's website](#).

A botched international operation - codenamed "Lightning Thunder" - mounted against the LRA with US involvement in December 2008 prompted the massacre of at least 700 civilians and led the LRA to "scatter into smaller groups, making them much more difficult to track down... The groups have discarded any communication equipment that would allow them to be traced and instead rely on runners to relay messages. In addition, the LRA is a hardened guerilla force used to operating in difficult terrain. It has survived against the odds for a quarter of a century."

Religious opposition

Religious leaders in Uganda and Sudan, meanwhile, have spoken out against further military intervention.

The chairman of Uganda's Episcopal conference and the Archbishop of Gulu John Baptist Odama told reporters earlier this month: "We do not want the aspect of pursuing Kony with military means. History has taught us pursuing these people militarily will just make the conflict and suffering spill over to other places."

Sudanese bishops issued a similar message in late October, declaring: "The people of Western Equatoria, Western Bahr el-Ghazal and neighbouring countries continue to suffer due to the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army. We reject further militarization of any of these conflicts, and call upon governments and the international community to work for negotiated settlements."

After years of negotiations a peace agreement was completed in 2008 but at a ceremony in South Sudan Kony refused to sign it, mainly over concerns about his ICC indictment.

The catastrophic consequences of Operation Lightning Thunder are likely to be repeated with any further military action, according to the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative ([ARLPI](#)), which has played a leading mediatory role.

"While many have lost hope in any peaceful resolution to the conflict, the reality is that the peace process, in particular



Photo: Sven Torfinn/IRIN

LRA atrocities include the mutilation of thousands of innocent civilians

the Juba peace talks which began in 2006, is responsible for the relative calm being experienced in northern Uganda today,” ARLPI said when the US deployment was announced.

“Instead of relying on military intervention, let us redouble our efforts to engage in dialogue. We believe this is the only way to bring about a lasting solution that will foster healing and reconciliation in a region of the world that has long experienced instability and deserves peace.”

For more, visit IRIN's in-depth: [On the trail of the LRA](#)

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