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SECURITY: LRA Briefing



Photo: UN Photo/Tim McKulka

Fear of the LRA has forced people from their homes in Sudan

NAIROBI, 22 November 2011 (IRIN) - The Lord's Resistance Army was one of several armed groups to emerge in northern Uganda in the late 1980s with the aim of overthrowing the government of Yoweri Museveni, who himself came to power at the head of a rebellion in 1986.

The group quickly gained international notoriety because of its professed aim of installing a new government based on the Ten Commandments – which still feature in the group's official emblem – and because of the brutality of its tactics, such as abducting children to serve in its fighting ranks and as “wives” for commanders. The young recruits were also forced to carry out murders and mutilations, notably of those who tried to escape or who were otherwise deemed “disloyal”.

The LRA is led by Joseph Kony, a self-styled prophet who is wanted, with other senior leaders, by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While the group maintained it was championing the interests of the Acholi people of northern Uganda, the region suffered considerably because of its attacks and abductions as well as [alleged abuses by the Ugandan army](#) and allied militia, especially soon after Museveni took power.

Massive displacement also resulted from a government counter-insurgency policy of forcing well over a million civilians into “protected villages”, where protection was in fact very limited and humanitarian conditions dire. The policy entrenched the sense of marginalization felt by the Acholi.

Where is the LRA now?

Having been pushed out of its original strongholds from the late 1990s into southern Sudan, the LRA no longer has an active presence in northern Uganda. It now operates in the newly independent republic of South Sudan, especially in the Equatoria states and in Western Bahr el-Ghazal; in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Haut and Bas Uélé districts; and in the eastern Central African Republic, where most of the group's senior leaders and fighters are now thought to be.

How big is the LRA?

Military pressure and massive defections spurred by a Ugandan amnesty have greatly reduced the LRA's numbers to the low hundreds, scattered in units of five to 10 across three countries. Its continuing attacks on civilians are widely thought to be aimed at mere survival rather than motivated by any clear political agenda.

What is the LRA's humanitarian impact?

Immense. “The conflict in northern Uganda is the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today,” Jan Egeland, then UN under secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, said in November 2003, decrying the lack of international and government assistance to civilians.

In northern Uganda, people have now mostly left the protected villages for their homes, but [face enormous challenges in rebuilding “normal” lives](#) as efforts to develop the region's basic infrastructure have had limited success.

Across the three countries where its fighters are now active, an estimated 440,000 civilians have fled their homes in fear of being killed, mutilated, abducted or raped. This has kept them away from their fields, greatly affecting food security. LRA activity, and the remoteness and inaccessibility of the affected regions, have also prevented adequate humanitarian access to civilian populations in need.

After a botched joint assault on an LRA base in northern DRC in December 2008, the group launched a series of raids that left at least 700 dead. More recently, between January and August 2011, the LRA has conducted 254 attacks, resulting in 126 deaths and 368 abductions.

How has the LRA lasted so long?

The Ugandan government has pointed to the difficulties involved in fighting a guerrilla insurgency in harsh terrain, the

support the LRA enjoyed (and, according to South Sudan, continues to enjoy) from Khartoum, and the presence of so many children among the group's ranks as reasons for its failure to eradicate it.

But in northern Uganda, there is a widespread sense that efforts towards both military and negotiated resolutions have been half-hearted, that senior military personnel profited from the conflict, which national political considerations also helped to prolong.

Credence is lent to this argument by a [2004 paper](#) by the International Crisis Group, which said the war allowed Museveni "to maintain an unreformed and corrupt army as a key pillar of the regime [and] gives him the arguments with which to resist mounting international pressure to reduce defence spending drastically. It also gives him pretexts to maintain the political status quo by denying the opposition a power base and curtailing freedom of expression and association in the name of 'the war against terrorism'."

What about peace talks...?

The LRA did enter into negotiations with the Ugandan government or intermediaries (notably Acholi religious leaders) on several occasions, most recently in 2006, following intensified military pressure and a cut in support from the Sudanese government. These talks resulted in the [finalizing of a peace accord](#) in 2008. But at the last minute Kony refused to sign, citing fears that he would be handed over to the ICC. Religious leaders in South Sudan and Uganda have recently called for negotiations to resume, but there has been no indication of Kony's – or Museveni's - willingness to take part. [According to the International Crisis Group](#), "there is no prospect of a negotiated end to the LRA problem".

However, one product of negotiations has borne considerable fruit: more than 26,000 members of the LRA and other armed groups availed themselves of the Uganda Amnesty Act and some of them are now working with the Ugandan army to track their former comrades.

...and joint military action?

After the debacle of 2008's Operation Lightning Thunder, joint military operations, usually Ugandan-led and with US logistical support, have continued in all countries with an LRA presence. A Joint Information Operations Centre has been established in the northern DRC town of Dungeni, with the participation of the UN stabilization force in DRC, MONUSCO.

Despite some tactical successes, the LRA's threat to civilians has not been diminished by these military operations, while cooperation among the states involved has not always been strong: in recent months the DRC has called for all foreign troops fighting the LRA to leave, claiming the group was no longer active on its soil. Uganda's engagement has also been scaled down recently as a result of the LRA no longer threatening its security.

Meanwhile, over the past 18 months, the African Union has appeared to take the LRA threat and the need for a coordinated response more seriously. But it has yet to appoint a promised special envoy or make significant headway in forming an announced Regional Intervention Force. Necessary funding for the force has not been forthcoming.

What next?

The recent US deployment of 100 military advisers to support the armies in the three affected countries - as part of the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act - has led to renewed hopes in some quarters that the LRA might soon be neutralized. But several factors weigh against the group's imminent demise: its scattered presence over a vast area, the difficult terrain, the lack of coordination between the affected countries and their limited military capacity and political will, as well as a tendency, especially in DRC, to play down the threat posed by the group.

Alongside this military objective, another key priority is to address and mitigate the humanitarian consequences of the LRA's presence. "[The] response urgently needs scaling up," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a 4 November report to the Security Council.

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

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