

100428 Great Lakes - A regional strategy beyond killing Kony

Summary & Comment: Uganda's Lord Resistance Army has been responsible for many atrocities in the Great lakes Region exploiting the porous borders of Congo, South Sudan, and Central African Republic to maim and kill civilians. Recent efforts targeting LRA's leader Joseph Kony have failed. The government of Uganda must devise and lead a regional strategy that will not only aim at eliminating Kony but also provide concrete solutions to the problems confronting the people of Northern Uganda. MUB

Lord's Resistance Army: A regional strategy beyond killing Kony

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The *Lord's Resistance Army* (LRA) has become a regional problem that requires a regional solution. Operation Lightning Thunder, launched in December 2008, is the Ugandan army's latest attempt to crush militarily the one-time northern Ugandan rebel group. It has been a failure. After the initial attack, small groups of LRA fighters dispersed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo), South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR), where they survive by preying on civilians. National security forces are too weak to protect their own people, while the Ugandan army, with U.S. support, is focused on hunting Joseph Kony, the group's leader.

The Ugandans have eroded the LRA's numbers and made its communications more difficult. But LRA fighters, though disorganised, remain a terrible danger to civilians in this mostly ungoverned frontier zone. National armies, the UN and civilians themselves need to pool intelligence and coordinate their efforts in new ways if they are to end the LRA once and for all. As the Juba peace process began to fall apart, President Museveni of Uganda worked hard to convince South Sudan and the Congo to participate in a joint military operation against the LRA. He had to overcome their mistrust of his army, notorious for its past abuse of civilians and illegal resource extraction on its neighbours' territory.

The U.S. lent its diplomatic weight to advance discussions. Even though both South Sudan and the Congo finally agreed, Uganda undermined its chances of success by failing to coordinate with them, giving them little reason to commit to the fight. In the event, bad weather and leaked intelligence caused Operation Lightning Thunder to fail in its primary objective, killing Kony, and a lack of forward planning allowed the LRA to put on a bloody show of force against Congolese civilians.

The LRA has since exploited the inability of the Congo, South Sudan and the CAR to control their border areas. Small, fast-moving groups of fighters attack unprotected villages to resupply with food and clothes and seize new recruits before heading back to the cover of the forest. Killing and mutilating are part of a strategy of terror to dissuade survivors from cooperating with the Ugandan and other armies. Even with the help of U.S. satellite imagery and audio intercepts, the Ugandan army, the only force committed to the chase, has had great difficulty tracking its targets. What was supposed to be a sudden, decisive strike has become a slow and very expensive campaign of attrition across three countries.

It has also yielded unacceptably high human costs among local civilians, with virtually no accountability for the failure to protect. The weakness of all three state security forces and the limited means of the UN missions in the Congo and South Sudan have left civilians no choice but to fend for themselves, which in many instances they have done well.

In March 2010, Ugandan intelligence reported that Kony was in the southern Darfur region of Sudan, hoping to receive support from his former benefactor, the Khartoum government. He appears now to have crossed back into the CAR, where the bulk of his forces are, but with the fighters so scattered and mobile, it is difficult to pin down his exact whereabouts or the LRA's present numerical strength. However, as the Ugandan army slowly kills and captures more of his Acholi officers, Kony's faithful core is shrinking. This threatens the LRA's cohesion, which depends on the leadership controlling the rank and file through violence and fear.

The audio intercept capability the U.S. has given the army makes communication dangerous by any means other than runner. Despite these organisational stresses, LRA fighters continue to cause appalling suffering even in survival mode and would likely continue to do so even if Kony is caught or killed. To remove this twenty-year-old cancer, a new strategy is required that prioritises civilian protection; unity of effort among military and civilian actors within and across national boundaries; and national ownership. The LRA's need for fresh recruits and the ability of civilians to provide the most accurate information on its activities makes protecting them both a moral imperative and a tactical necessity.

Only by pooling intelligence and coordinating activities across the entire affected region can the Ugandan army, its national partners, the UN and civilians hope to rid themselves of the LRA. The Ugandan operation and UN missions, however, offer only temporary support to LRA-affected states. The latter need to put structures in place now to ensure they can cope with what is left of the organisation and its fighters when foreign militaries leave. Moreover, even complete victory over the LRA would not guarantee an end to insecurity in northern Uganda. To do that, the Kampala government must treat the root causes of trouble in that area from which the LRA sprang, namely northern perceptions of economic and political marginalisation, and ensure the social rehabilitation of the north.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding civilian protection

To the Ugandan and U.S. Governments:

1. Adopt a new strategy that prioritises civilian protection. Review the operation every four months to assess civilian casualties and increase civilian protection measures accordingly.
2. Set a clear goal and timeline for the operation, such as the neutralisation of the LRA leadership within one year.

To the Governments and Armies of Uganda, the Congo, the CAR and South Sudan, the UN Mission in Congo (MONUC) and the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS):

3. Deploy more soldiers and logistical support to LRA-affected areas to provide safe havens by increasing joint day and night patrols in villages, on frequently used routes and especially in larger settlements.

4. Work with civilians to set up unarmed and voluntary community security committees in the Congo and increase the capacity of self-defence groups in South Sudan and the CAR.
5. Rehabilitate roads in LRA-affected areas.
6. MONUC and UNMIS should deploy permanent joint protection teams to monitor human rights abuses committed in LRA-affected areas, and the Congolese government should urgently enforce discipline within the regiments deployed in Haut- and Bas-Uélé, encourage civilian oversight structures to monitor human rights abuses by its soldiers and punish and withdraw offenders from the field.

Regarding unity of effort among military and civilian actors within and across national boundaries

To the U.S. Government:

7. Deploy a team to the theatre of operations to run an intelligence platform that centralises all operational information from the Ugandan and other armies, as well as the UN and civilian networks, and provides analysis to the Ugandans to better target military operations.

To MONUC and UNMIS:

8. Create a regional team with members in both the Congo and South Sudan dedicated to gathering, analysing and sharing information on LRA activities and advising on how best to protect civilians.

To the UN Security Council:

9. Give the UN mission in the CAR and Chad (MINURCAT) a new mandate to remain in the CAR, deploy to the south east and join the MONUC/UNMIS regional team dedicated to gathering, analysing and sharing information on LRA activities and advising on how best to protect civilians.
10. Ensure that the planned and gradual drawdown of MONUC leaves sufficient forces in the LRA-affected areas in the Congo.

Regarding national ownership

To the Ugandan Army, MONUC, UNMIS and MINURCAT:

11. Work more closely with the Congolese, South Sudan (SPLA) and CAR armies through joint patrols and offensive operations, in full compliance with the UN's conditionality policy on support to national armies, and by sharing information so they gain a full understanding of the operation and improve their counter-insurgency tactics.

To the Governments of the Congo, South Sudan (GoSS), and the CAR:

12. Instruct local authorities, police and the security forces to work with communities in the support of self-defence groups; local administrators should register all members, agree in writing on their specific tasks, plan and monitor group activities carefully.

Regarding the root causes of the problem in northern Uganda

To the Ugandan Government:

13. Bring closure to the LRA conflict and minimise the risk of a successor insurgency by implementing the provisions of the agreements negotiated but not finally signed in Juba which relate to reconstructing the north, bringing the worst perpetrators to justice and reconciling

civilians with former fighters.

To Donors:

14. Finance a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program for LRA combatants and a regional communication campaign and support humanitarian relief and long-term development programs implemented in an accountable and transparent manner in northern Uganda.

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