

Lord's Resistance Army

Update as of 10 October 2011

By September 2011 the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Joseph Kony, and his top deputies were believed to have moved from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) into the Central African Republic (CAR), possibly to the vast Zemongo forest near the border with South Sudan's Western Bahr al Ghazal (WBAG) state.

At least one LRA group of about 50 fighters stayed in the DRC, based in the Garamba National Park, a former LRA base.

A small LRA group led by Dominic Ongwen, appears to have moved into WBAG or possibly CAR. The move might be an attempt to join forces with Kony's troops, who cross frequently into WBAG from CAR.

WBAG officials claim that LRA combatants have attacked civilians in the state at least five times in the last two months. The latest attack took place on 4 September in Deim Jallab in Raja county, where six people were abducted. A Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) spokesperson claimed that a group of 80 LRA had crossed into Raja from CAR.

A Ugandan army source claims that the Ugandan Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) deployed to Raja in September from their bases in Nzara in WES and engaged a large LRA group on 17 September, 60 km south-west of Raja town, near the CAR border.

On 31 September Government of South Sudan interior minister Alison Magaya said that the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are training LRA fighters in a camp between WBAG and South Darfur. This statement has been impossible to confirm. Government of Sudan officials have repeatedly denied supporting the LRA.

LRA fighters have continued to attack civilians in the DRC, mostly to secure food and new recruits. On 3, 9, and 23 September the LRA attacked villages near Nambia, Duru, and Bangadi, respectively (all in Haut-Uélé). In the case of Duru, the attacks came soon after the distribution of food rations by the World Food Programme.

In Uganda, the trial of Thomas Kwoyelo, a former LRA combatant captured by the UPDF in March 2009 in the DRC, came to an end when the Ugandan Constitutional Court ruled on 22 September that it was unconstitutional for Kwoyelo not to receive amnesty, already granted to him and 12,000 other former LRA members, including top commanders Kenneth Banya and Sam Kolo. Kwoyelo was charged with 53 counts of murder, kidnapping, and destruction of property.

For more information on these developments, and for detailed background on the LRA, see below.

Current status

The US-supported military offensive conducted by the UPDF against the LRA since December 2008 has had mixed results. LRA communications and operational capacity have been disrupted, but most senior commanders remain at large and their ability to create havoc remains unhindered. According to recent UN reports, the LRA has killed close to 3,000 people and displaced 400,000 since December 2008.

Pursuing small LRA groups scattered across vast areas of CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan has overstretched UPDF supply lines and logistics, demoralizing its fighters. Last year, UPDF commanders stated that the army was asked by CAR president François Bozizé to retreat to its bases in Djemah and Obo in the south of the country, near the DRC border. As of late September 2011 most UPDF troops were confined to these bases, leaving small units tracking LRA groups in CAR and the DRC as well as deploying to WBAG in South Sudan to chase after a large LRA group that moves between CAR's Djemah forest and WBAG's Raja county.

Ugandan military engagement in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the need for troops in the volatile Ugandan region of Karamoja have resulted in a gradual drawdown of UPDF troops from the LRA front. By December 2010 five battalions of Ugandan soldiers were in Somalia (approximately 4,500 of the mission's 8,000 troops), according to AMISOM.

Given the LRA's absence from Uganda since 2006 and the run-up to the Ugandan parliamentary and presidential elections that took place in February 2011—which drew away additional UPDF soldiers to provide election-related security during primaries—the group's leader, Joseph Kony, has become a low priority for the Ugandan government.

In November 2010, during the electoral campaign in northern Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni stated that Kony had been removed from Uganda for good. Post-election internal tensions that culminated in protests against rising commodity prices across Uganda in April and May 2011 have further detracted attention from the LRA. The number of UPDF soldiers in the LRA theatre of operations has steadily decreased from some 7,000 in January 2009 to around 1,500 by September 2011.

Uganda's most active partner in efforts to counter the LRA continues to be the United States. Key officials in the George W. Bush administration put significant pressure on the DRC government to permit Ugandan troops to enter the country for the 2008 offensive, while the US Army provided planning and logistics support. Support has continued, mostly focusing on military intelligence and fuel for UPDF helicopters. The United States has provided close to USD 30 million to the Ugandan army for the fight against the LRA since the start of Operation Lightning Thunder in December 2008. Officials from the US Agency for International Development, the US government's aid agency, also provided USD 6.5 million to the World Food Programme in Bangui, CAR on 5 April 2011. The money is intended to provide food for civilians displaced by conflict, including those escaping LRA attacks in south-eastern CAR.

A law signed by US president Barack Obama on 24 May 2010 could significantly increase US involvement. The Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 requires the US government to develop a multilateral interagency strategy:

to protect civilians from the Lord's Resistance Army, to apprehend or remove Joseph Kony and his top commanders from the battlefield in the continued absence of a negotiated solution, and to disarm and demobilize the remaining Lord's Resistance Army fighters.

On 24 November 2010 the Obama administration published its LRA strategy, which has four objectives: 1) protecting civilians in LRA-affected areas; 2) removing Kony and his top commanders from the battlefield; 3) encouraging LRA defections; and 4) ensuring humanitarian access. The strategy is vague on how the US administration intends to deliver on these objectives.

Little action has been taken to achieve the aims of the strategy since it was published. On 23 May 2011 a coalition of 39 international NGOs issued a public statement calling on the US government to take appropriate measures to protect civilians from LRA attacks and to appoint a US special envoy to the African Great Lakes.¹ As of August 2011, however, no significant policy changes were apparent. The Ugandan government seems to have renounced any financial responsibility for the LRA operations. At the end of July 2010 the Ugandan defence minister stated that no funds were dedicated to the LRA effort for the new fiscal year.

The African Union (AU) has also been involved in the regional effort against the LRA. The governments of CAR, the DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda met under the auspices of the AU on 13 and 14 October 2010 in Bangui, CAR to discuss the LRA problem. A series of measures were agreed at the meeting, including joint patrolling of borders, and the creation of a joint brigade to pursue LRA fighters and a joint command headquarters to exchange military intelligence on the group.

At the end of March and beginning of April 2011 an AU technical mission of 20 military and civilian experts visited the DRC, Uganda, South Sudan, and CAR. They met with high-level officials in the four countries to discuss the possible implementation of the recommendations from the Bangui meeting, especially the creation of the joint brigade and intelligence-sharing centre. In Malabo on 30 June, African heads of state endorsed the findings and recommendations of the AU technical mission. AU officials are presently concerned with securing the necessary funds for a proposed AU-authorized mission to LRA-affected areas. It is unclear where the funds will come from, but a European Union (EU) official said privately in Kampala recently that the EU intended to support the AU initiatives on the LRA, particularly the introduction of an AU special envoy to LRA-affected areas. A deployment date of 1 November 2011 seems increasingly unlikely given the lack of funds and inability of the AU to appoint a Special Envoy who can coordinate the mission.

Origins and history

Formed in April 1987 as the Lord's Salvation Army, the group of fighters led by Kony became known as the LRA in 1994. It was founded in response to violence in northern Uganda perpetrated by soldiers of the National Resistance Army (NRA) of President Museveni, who came to power in 1986. NRA soldiers committed abuses against civilians in the north while fighting the Uganda People's Democratic Army, an armed opposition group made up of soldiers from northern Uganda loyal to Tito Okello, whom Museveni overthrew while taking power.

The LRA came to life as a movement to address the Ugandan government's chronic neglect and marginalization of northerners. The group initially enjoyed support among the northern population, but the forced recruitment of children and abuses such as mutilations and killings of civilians, which led to mass displacement, eroded its popular support.

As early as 1994 Kony found an ally in the Sudanese government. Khartoum aided the LRA as a response to Kampala's support for the SPLA. Museveni aided the SPLA in part to neutralize another Ugandan rebel group, the West Bank Nile Front, which also had Khartoum's support. Former LRA fighters say that SAF provided the LRA with military supplies and training. Some LRA commanders, including Kony, travelled to Khartoum for medical care; meanwhile, SAF directly supplied the group's training camps in Sudan's Eastern Equatoria state, which borders on Uganda. Khartoum's assistance waned in 2001, however, after the United States listed the LRA as a terrorist organization; support stopped altogether in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Not long after the signing of this peace agreement, LRA troops started to move westward towards the DRC. By the end of 2006 almost all of the LRA fighters—estimated at 1,200—had settled in the Garamba National Park.

Independent researchers put the number of LRA fighters as of August 2011 at approximately 300, operating in CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. This number represents less than half the strength of its force in December 2008, when the US-backed UPDF offensive (dubbed Operation Lightning Thunder) began. According to researchers not affiliated with the Ugandan government, the core of the LRA leadership and armed fighters is Ugandan, numbering around 200 combatants. Another 100–150 fighters are Central African, Congolese, and Sudanese. Despite the relatively large number of foreign fighters, the LRA remains predominantly a Ugandan organization. Foreign fighters are forced to learn and speak Acholi, and only Ugandans are promoted to senior ranks.

According to a high-ranking Ugandan army officer, the UPDF 'put out of action' (killed) 397 LRA fighters and captured 63 others between 14 December 2008 and August 2010. An additional 123 reportedly defected. The UPDF claims to have rescued 707 abductees, 86 of whom were children. No data has been made public by the Ugandan army regarding LRA activities during the past several months. Nor has it been possible to verify the numbers killed, given that the UPDF has not produced any concrete evidence, photographic or otherwise. But testimonies from former LRA

fighters who have deserted since early 2009 indicate that encounters with the UPDF frequently leave many fighters dead. Despite these losses, the LRA has managed to survive, in large part due to its ability to replenish its ranks by abducting young men and women who are then brainwashed, trained, and forced to fight.

Coercion and fear are the foremost reasons that LRA fighters, both Ugandan and foreign, remain in the bush. The aim to engender regime change in Uganda—as stated in the past by LRA commanders—has become irrelevant now that LRA forces are operating far from that country. LRA fighters who have surrendered have reported that their commanders warned them not to return home because the UPDF would kill them. Despite attempts from the Ugandan government and the UN to dispel these myths, many fighters remain too afraid to leave the bush.

Efforts to encourage LRA fighters to defect were undermined recently when the Ugandan government captured and charged an LRA commander, Thomas Kwoyelo, with 53 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ugandan authorities have stated that because he was captured, as opposed to surrendering, he cannot benefit from amnesty. The Uganda Amnesty Act of 2000 makes no such distinction, however. On 6 September 2010 the mid-level commander was brought before the War Crimes Court in Kampala, becoming the first person ever to appear before the court, which was set up to prosecute grave crimes committed by rebel leaders and commanders. Kwoyelo's trial began on 11 July 2011, but was adjourned until 25 July when his defence counsel challenged the indictment on the grounds that not granting him amnesty is unconstitutional. On 16 August 2011 the state prosecutor argued in front of the Ugandan Constitutional Court that the Amnesty Act of 2000 is unconstitutional and that former LRA combatants who received amnesty in the last 11 years were not entitled to it.

According to the UPDF, at least 22 commanders holding the rank of captain or above have been killed or captured since December 2008. Three senior LRA commanders have been killed: Col. Santos Alit in August or September 2009; Col. Michael Epedu (alias 'the Technician') on 9 October 2009; and Brig. Bok Abudema on 31 December 2009. Ugandan authorities claim that Brig. Ochan Bunia was killed in April 2009, but LRA fighters who surrendered more recently say he is alive. Nevertheless, the LRA top leadership remains intact. More than 70 LRA commanders holding the rank of captain or above continue to fight; no top leaders have been killed since late 2009.

Leadership

Joseph Kony maintains his position as chairman and overall commander of the LRA. Okot Odhiambo is the LRA troop commander and Kony's deputy. Other senior commanders include Brigs. Caesar Achellam, Dominic Ongwen, and 'Nixman' Opuk Oryang. These five form the LRA high command. The International Criminal Court indicted Kony, Odhiambo, and Ongwen for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2005, for abuses committed against civilians in Uganda; all three commanders remain at large. No current criminal investigations into LRA crimes are under way.

outside Uganda. At least one commander accused of perpetrating mass killings in the DRC in December 2008, Charles Arop, recently received amnesty in Uganda. Arop is now fighting with the UPDF against the LRA.

Senior LRA commanders, with few exceptions, have been constantly on the move since the end of December 2008, trying to evade their UPDF pursuers. Since the Ugandan army has focused its pursuit on the high command, mid-level officers have taken on increased responsibilities, operating almost completely independently and occasionally managing to settle in areas of the DRC. It appears that the remaining LRA groups in the DRC have recently reorganized in the Garamba National Park. According to former LRA combatants who recently defected, a group of about 50 fighters (not including top LRA commanders) led by Lt. Colonel Binansio Anum is now operating to the north-east of Garamba.

Areas of control/activity

As of the beginning of September 2011 the LRA remained active in parts of CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. The majority of LRA forces, close to 300 fighters, were reportedly based in the Haut-Uélé region of the DRC, but a large group led by Kony appeared to have moved to CAR recently.

DRC

The areas worst affected by the LRA are in the DRC, as attacks have continued unabated since the UPDF offensive started in December 2008. Most of the attacks take place in Haut-Uélé territory, but Bas-Uélé, especially north of Ango, has also been affected. Some of the worst LRA violence took place during December 2008, when close to 900 people were killed in Faradje, Duru, and Doruma, and in December 2009, when more than 300 people were killed in Makombo.

Kony's foray into the DRC at the beginning of 2011 coincided with an increase in attacks against civilians even in areas that were previously considered free of LRA elements, such as Faradje and Aba. Radio Okapi reported attacks in Faradje on 1 and 2 January 2011 that caused the deaths of two people, including a member of the Congolese armed forces. Three young women were also abducted. On 15 January a Congolese nun and two other civilians were allegedly shot by an LRA group on the road to Ngilima, a place repeatedly attacked by the LRA since March 2009. Attacks continued from February through May, with a large number of abductions in Niangara, Ngilima, Bangadi, and Dungu.

According to a recent report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 84 LRA attacks took place and at least 125 people were abducted in the DRC in the first three months of 2011, raising fears that the organization is recruiting new fighters. A subsequent report detailed further attacks for the months of April and May 2011. Thirty-three LRA attacks were recorded in the DRC alone in these two months, resulting in 19 deaths and 61 abductions, 40 of which were of children. More than 332,000 people remain internally displaced in the DRC, an increase of 5,600 since the end of March 2011.

LRA violence in the DRC increased significantly in the summer of 2011. The UN recorded 53 attacks that resulted in 26 deaths and 21 abductions. Close to 50 attacks took place in the areas of Dungu and Faradje in Haut-Uélé. Small attacks were recorded in August, and a relatively large attack took place on 11 August 2011 in Banda in Bas-Uélé. At least five people were abducted, two injured, and one killed by a large group, possibly coming down from CAR.

South Sudan

Since January 2009 LRA attacks in South Sudan have focused primarily on WES. The violence has taken place in cycles related to the movements of a particular group under Brig. Dominic Ongwen. The latest major cycle of violence took place in mid-2010, when attacks on 30 July and 1 August triggered the displacement of civilians and significantly disrupted the rural economy.

After a lull in attacks in October and November, at least one LRA attack was reported in December in WES. On 20 December 2010 an alleged LRA attack in Maridi county left two people dead, while an estimated 50 people were abducted. Similar attacks between 23 and 27 December 2010 raised fears of efforts by the LRA to destabilize areas of South Sudan around the time of the referendum on its independence. Ten people were killed by the LRA during this time, while at least eight were abducted and over 500 were displaced in the Tambura and Yambio areas of WES. Violence attributed to the LRA in WES continued throughout January, with attacks on the 14th in Namoongbiti and on the 26th in Gangura, both in Yambio county. Three people were abducted in the former attack and two killed in the latter. Despite such attacks, the referendum in WES proceeded largely in a calm fashion.

Attacks in WES have continued in the months following the referendum. According to a local chief, there were 18 LRA attacks in the first five months of 2011 in Yambio county alone. The most recent attack occurred on 8 May 2011, when a group of ten LRA fighters attacked the village of Bangu in Tambura county in WES. One civilian was killed and five people, including an 11-year-old girl, were abducted. In response to persistent LRA attacks, traditional and religious leaders have resorted to raising funds to support home guards, i.e. groups of local civilians protecting their communities with locally manufactured guns. It is unclear whether the SPLA is involved in training and cooperating with these home guards.

North Sudan

Interviews with former LRA combatants suggest that LRA fighters, possibly led by Joseph Kony, moved into South Darfur in North Sudan in October 2010. A representative of a Sudanese armed opposition umbrella group, the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), said that an LRA group attacked LJM forces on 8 September 2010 in Dafac, near South Darfur, killing one person. On 24 September 2010 an SPLA spokesperson said that LRA groups were operating inside South Darfur in Radom and Kanja. In October the International Crisis Group also reported that Kony was operating in Darfur. It appears that a second meeting between the LRA and SAF—an initial meeting took place in October 2009—intended to inform Kony as to whether Khartoum would supply military and medical aid to the LRA took place in October or November of 2010. According to an interview with a former LRA

combatant present at the second meeting, the LRA did not subsequently receive any materials from SAF based in South Darfur.

A confidential Ugandan army report states that by the end of December 2010 about 100 LRA fighters led by Kony had moved back to CAR from South Darfur. This is consistent with reports from NGOs and the UN that the same group moved south into CAR and entered the DRC at the end of 2010 or the beginning of 2011.

Officials in Khartoum and West Darfur have repeatedly denied any LRA presence in North Sudan. Sudanese officials have instead accused the Ugandan government of supporting another Darfurian rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The Ugandan ambassador to Khartoum was twice summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August to explain allegations that President Museveni promised a JEM delegation in Kampala support against SAF.

Recently, Sudanese president Omar al Bashir denied having any relationship with the LRA. In an interview with Sudan TV in Juba on 6 April 2011, Bashir said that any claims connecting the LRA to Khartoum were mere allegations.

Central African Republic

In CAR, LRA groups moving from the south-east to the north-west have attacked civilians in Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou prefectures. Derbissaka, Djemah, Mboki, Obo, Rafai, and Yalinga are only a few of the many locations that have been targeted by LRA fighters. According to a recent report, 1,500 children have been abducted by the LRA in CAR since 2008.

In the last ten days of December 2010 a spate of LRA attacks took place in south-eastern CAR close to the DRC border. It is possible that these were caused by LRA groups, led by Kony, returning from South Darfur via Vakaga prefecture south to Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou and moving into the DRC. Carried out between the towns of Zemio and Mboki, the attacks seem to have commenced 80 km west of Mboki on 21 December and continued until 30 December, reaching 12 km west of Mboki. A preliminary report puts the number killed at four and those abducted at 19 or more. A group of Ugandan soldiers were deployed from a base in Obo by the end of December to confront LRA troops who were believed to be arriving from the DRC.

The violence continued in January 2011. Local media reported attacks on 14 and 15 January 2011 in Agoumar, near Rafai, 100 km east of Bangassou. It is unclear how many people were killed or taken hostage. Notably, this is the sixth time that the LRA has attacked Agoumar in the last 16 months. Few attacks were reported in January and February 2011, possibly suggesting that most of the combatants have moved into the DRC, although it is likely that small pockets of LRA fighters remain in CAR.

On 13 March a large LRA attack reportedly took place in the gold-mining town of Nzako in Haut-Kotto prefecture, considerably further north from where LRA groups have operated for the last six months in CAR. Nine people were killed and numerous buildings looted, including police headquarters. Over 40 people were abducted.

Attacks continued in April and May, with the latest occurring 35 km west of Zemio on 5 May 2011. A group of five to eight LRA fighters attacked a truck belonging to an international organization, killed the driver and injuring another person. Three days later another LRA group abducted eight people 85 km east of Zemio, near Maboussou.

Sources of financing/support

The LRA relies on the looting of local populations for its survival. Former fighters say they used assault rifles—mostly old Chinese-made AK-47s—that they received from LRA commanders. The majority of these firearms were stolen from UPDF and SPLA soldiers. Former LRA commanders also state that in the late 1990s Khartoum supplied the LRA with assault rifles, ammunition, and anti-personnel mines, some of which still remain in the group's possession.

The AK-47 remains the firearm of choice for LRA fighters, as ammunition is generally available in the areas where they operate, although bullets can also be scarce. According to testimony from recently captured LRA fighters, Ongwen's group possesses new guns and uniforms, as well as plentiful ammunition. The source of these supplies is unclear. Most of the group's ammunition and newly acquired firearms are stolen from soldiers killed by LRA fighters.

Opiyo 'Mission' Patrick, who joined the LRA during the Juba peace talks and was captured by the Ugandan army in March 2010, is among those who contend that the LRA has re-established its connection with Khartoum. He claims to have been part of a second LRA team of fighters who met SAF officers in January 2010 in Dafaq, a SAF base in South Darfur, north-west of WBAG. He alleges that he delivered a letter from Kony requesting military and material support, but was told that consultations with Khartoum were needed first.

In November 2010 Felix Kulayigye, Uganda's defence ministry spokesperson, said, 'We cannot pronounce ourselves on whether Kony receives any support from the Sudanese authorities but what we can confirm is that [the Sudanese] are aware of his presence on their territory and they've not done anything to chase him.'

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¹ See <<http://www.theresolve.org/blog/2011/05/president-obama-implement-your-lra-strategy/>>.