

The Voice of Peace

News and views from areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army in Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Uganda



In 2009 the LRA attacked Djabir, northeast DRC. The assailants kidnapped this woman with three of her children and killed her husband. The woman managed to escape in 2012 in DRC and her children in early 2014 in South Sudan. (Image courtesy of CDJPR)

Over 100 LRA captives released, but why?

In the last three months, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has released 120 long-term captives, mainly women (59) and children (58), in five separate waves in DRC and CAR. This remarkable shift in the LRA's behaviour raises important questions about the reasons why and the way in which international and local actors should respond.

When asked why they were released, former captives gave various reasons. A common answer was that Kony ordered his commanders to release women and children since they were a burden and made military operations more difficult. Others explained that the LRA needed young and vigorous combatants to carry out operations, so weaker members had to be let go.

Others claimed that Kony's external supporters would only continue backing him if he released women and children. Even though it is difficult to know the real reasons behind these releases, they bode ill. Despite claims by the Ugandan army that the LRA is weakening,

INSIDE

Regional Security Report, July-Sept 2014	3
Hard times for LRA returnees	5
Interview: a recent returnee speaks out	6
Learning to heal invisible wounds	6
"What can we do as women?"	7
About The Voice of Peace	8

the release of women and children could enable the LRA to become a more mobile and effective fighting force.

All the releases followed a similar pattern. LRA fighters freed captives near villages and showed them the way to safety. For instance on 2 September, five armed LRA elements escorted 26 long-term captives (16 women and 10 children) to Kiliwa (45km northeast of Dungeni, DRC). The escorts told two farmers found working in their fields not to be afraid and asked them to take the captives to people who would help them find their families. The five LRA made sure the farmers received the captives well and even followed them to see the direction they took.

A warm welcome, but delayed reunification

In most cases, the local population has welcomed the captives warmly. For instance when two waves of captives arrived in Digba (45km north of Ango, Bas-Uélé district, DRC), local people gave them food, clothes and other items. This illustrates the vital role that communities play in facilitating return. However, the response by the Ugandan and Congolese armies and international institutions has been uncoordinated. The American army transported captives released in DRC to Obo

in CAR and later to Yambio in South Sudan. UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN peacekeepers in Congo (MONUSCO) protested that the Congolese should have been taken straight to Dungeni in DRC where they could be quickly reunited with their families. As an unfortunate consequence, many Congolese and Central African women and children remain in the transit centre in Yambio against their will. Some are asking when they are going to be taken to their own countries and reunited with their families. The transit centre has over twice the number of people it can accommodate and feed.

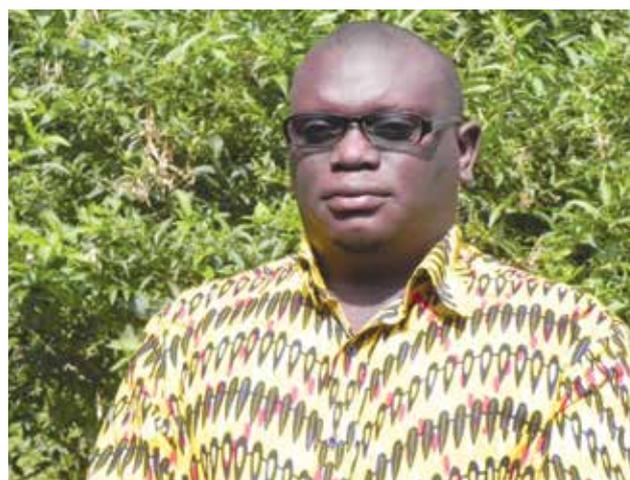
Since the LRA may continue to release dependents, it is important that all actors understand their responsibilities and make the most of the resources available. With the support of international donors, local organisations should ensure communities are ready to accept and care for LRA returnees. In Haut- and Bas-Uélé districts, DRC and in Haut-Mbomou prefecture, CAR most international NGOs have left or have limited personnel, while local NGOs have the expertise and understanding to carry out some activities effectively, especially those relating to reintegration of former abductees. Close cooperation between local organisations and Africom and MONUSCO, which have the means to react quickly and transport people, would bear fruit.

Editorial

Welcome, esteemed readers, to the 11th edition of the VOP. In this issue our leader article seeks to answer the question that has unsettled the minds of many in the region, *Over 100 LRA captives released, but why?* In the last three months, the LRA has released 120 long-term captives. We analyse what this unprecedented move may tell us about the LRA's state of health and future intentions and how local communities and international agencies can encourage this trend.

Whilst this seems good news for those released, it is far from the end of their troubles. The utopia they hoped for is often a distant dream; the reality on the ground seems grim to say the least. Our correspondents in DRC, South Sudan, Uganda and CAR have observed a sad trend where communities, civil society and government alike shun returnees leaving many in despair.

Then, "*What can we do as women?*" Often seen as the weaker sex, women are turning around this age-old view by championing the cause of justice,

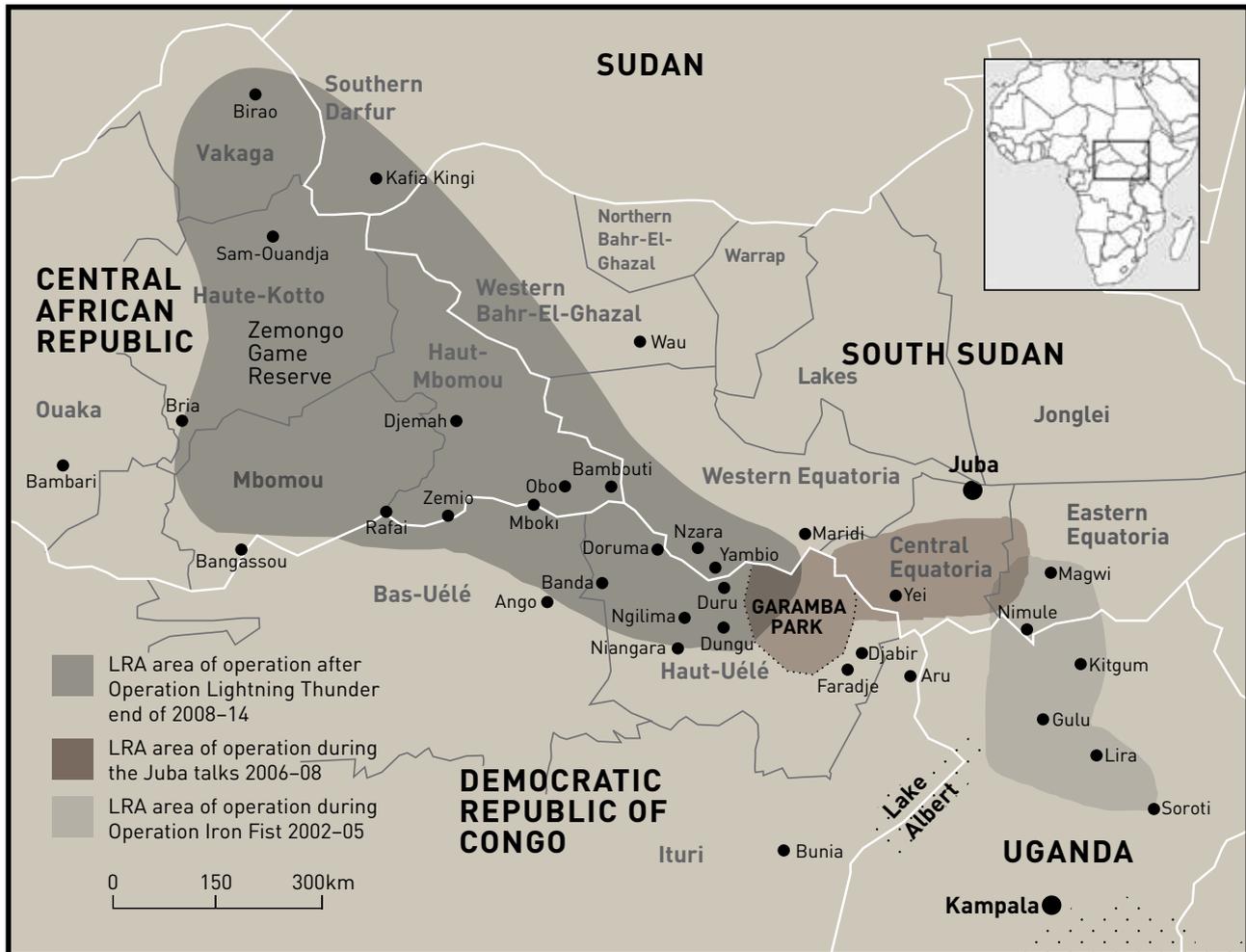


peace and accountability. We take a look at their gallant efforts across the four countries affected by the LRA conflict.

Enjoy the read and you are more than welcome to give us your feedback on the attached form.

Dixon Odur, Editor-in-Chief

Regional Situation Report: July-September 2014



Map of LRA affected areas. This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Borders, names and other features are presented according to common practice in the region. Conciliation Resources takes no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid. © Conciliation Resources

CAR: Despite the signing of a ceasefire agreement in Brazzaville on 23 July the country continues to experience high levels of violence in the centre north and Bangui, the capital. Clashes between the ex-Seleka rebels and anti-Balaka militia persist. Both groups exploit the disorder to prey on civilians to satisfy their daily needs. Haut-Mbomou prefecture in the south east has largely escaped this political violence and predation. But civilians live in fear of demobilised Seleka fighters, well-armed Mbororo herders and groups of LRA fighters. The latter continue to follow several well-used supply routes through the bush between the DRC and the Zemongo Game Reserve.

Between July and September 2014, LRA groups carried out four raids on travellers on the road between Zemio and Djemah, near the villages of Banangui and Ngouyo (55km and 30km from Djemah respectively). In the largest attack, on Kamanda (45km from Zemio), LRA fighters stole food and goods and kidnapped eleven people. Ten

were released after five days but a 12-year-old boy has not yet returned. On 12 August, 41 captives (21 children and 20 women) who were released at Nguiringuiri arrived in Obo and were received by the UPDF. They were followed three days later by three women, two men and two children, released by the LRA in the same place. Sources suggest there have been more releases near Obo and Djemah but the UPDF have withheld details from local authorities.

DRC: President Kabila's possible revision of the constitution has dominated the national political agenda and taken attention away from ongoing insecurity in Kivu, Katanga and Oriental Province. The LRA conflict in the north east seems not to be a priority for political leaders. However, the group is still creating desolation in Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé districts. In this quarter the epicentre of activity has moved west from Garamba National Park towards Bas-Uélé district, especially around Digba and in the Mbomou Game Reserve. The

	DRC			CAR			South Sudan			Uganda			Total
	J	A	S	J	A	S	J	A	S	J	A	S	
2014													
Attacks	8	22	4	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	38
Civilians killed	3	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Newly displaced	3	38	1	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	53
Newly displaced	0	130	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	130
Long-term abductees released	0	46	26	0	48	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	120
Short-term abductees released	5	73	7	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	95

Sources: OCHA, NGOs, Local Protection Committees, civil society and customary leaders

most significant change this quarter is the release of 72 long-term captives, mainly women and children, reportedly on the order of Kony. At the same time, LRA groups continue to raid villages and travellers for food and goods. LRA fighters killed ten people (eight civilians, 2 FARDC) and 130 people in Niangara area have fled their homes. Mbororo herders have destroyed 15 farms around Ango and Duru, stoking already high tensions with local residents.

South Sudan: At the national level the security situation is volatile with fighting continuing in the north east especially in Unity, Jonglei and Upper Nile states. The peace talks led by the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) have repeatedly stalled: both Salva Kiir's government and Dr. Riek Machar's SPLM-In Opposition have signed and broken two ceasefire agreements. Each group accuses the other of failing to honour the agreements and the two ethnic groups to which the leaders belong live in constant fear of each other, even in places where there is no fighting. The heads of state and government summit held in Addis Ababa on 25 August was a total failure. It proposed a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGONU) that stipulated that Salva Kiir would remain as President and SPLM-In Opposition would choose a new Prime Minister. But the choice would ironically need to be approved by the President. Machar rejected the deal.

In the last three months there have been no reported LRA activity in South Sudan but a large number of LRA captives released in DRC or CAR have arrived in Western Equatoria State. The constant LRA attacks and movement in DRC has caused a large influx of Congolese refugees into Ezo County and displaced South Sudanese living close to the DRC border. The LRA is not the only security threat; on 16 August a group of Uda (armed Arab nomads) crossed from CAR into Tambura County on horseback. The Home Guards and some SPLA soldiers pursued them and exchanged fire pushing them back into CAR from Andari, Ezo County.

Uganda: In the last quarter Uganda has been peaceful and government efforts to reduce armed robberies have had a positive effect. However, the LRA conflict is still having repercussions in the north. In the last three months the Ugandan army has brought back Ugandan women and children released by the LRA. But with dwindling resources available for reconciliation and reintegration, their future is uncertain. Women returnees are particularly vulnerable since their families and communities shun them and deny them the right to own and cultivate land. Other challenges facing the north include a high rate of trauma and mental illness which strains communities and land conflicts which on occasion turn violent and can cause deaths.

Hard times for LRA returnees

When LRA captives come home, they and their families are relieved and happy, but soon they face an awful and confused situation. Families and communities in Congo, CAR, South Sudan and Uganda are ill prepared to look after returnees who have lived through horrific experiences in the bush.

From the frying pan into the fire

Far from providing a soft landing for returnees, host families and communities often perceive them as abnormal and dangerous and have difficulty in accepting them. In addition, the communities are themselves faced with very difficult situations. Many are impoverished. They have had their properties looted and destroyed and live in camps for displaced people. They therefore cannot offer enough support. Some returnees, fearing they will be abducted a second time, do not return to their places of origin. They are homeless and cannot fall back on the emotional support of friends and family.

Feelings of emptiness and isolation from society combined with the trauma of a life lived under the tyrannical rule of the LRA leaves many returnees chronically depressed. Recent research* shows that many returnees with severe mental illnesses receive inadequate treatment with dire consequences for their private and public lives.

One mother of a returnee expressed her pain: "We love her so much ... but sometimes she gets into these states of extreme anger. 'Just one hit only and I can kill you... Don't forget that I am an LRA!' She then becomes uncontrollable and we all have to leave the house for a couple of hours until she calms down... What can we do?"

The governments of DRC, CAR and South Sudan are too preoccupied by other priorities to give due attention to the LRA issue including holistic reintegration. International NGOs have also shifted their focus elsewhere and some make matters worse. Returnees become even more frustrated when outsiders conduct numerous interviews but do not follow up with action. Some returnees become aggressive, others turn to a life of crime to make ends meet.

They've suffered enough

To ensure that LRA abductees do not suffer more than they have already, government authorities, community leaders, civil society and international organisations each have a part to

play in ensuring their safe return and a holistic reintegration process. This includes the provision of basic necessities (e.g. food, clothes, immediate healthcare), psychosocial support and livelihood programmes that give returnees the means to stand on their own two feet.

Women and children should receive special consideration because of their vulnerability and the LRA stigma attached to them. To prevent feuds and jealousies, support should also be directed to other vulnerable members of host communities. Successful reintegration not only benefits returnees and their families but makes return to normal society more tempting for those in the bush and plays a pivotal role in bringing an end to the LRA.

* "Back but not home: supporting the reintegration of former LRA abductees into civilian life in Congo and South Sudan", Dr Emilie Medeiros for Conciliation Resources, August 2014.



A young woman in Djibir, northeast DRC who was taken by the LRA into the bush with other children and young adults. The LRA last attacked Djibir on 17 July 2014. (Image: 28mm.co.uk)

Interview: a recent returnee speaks out

The Voice of Peace South Sudan correspondent talked to a recent returnee. Here is what she had to say about food in the bush, being married to an LRA commander and her hopes for future.

Q: What is your name?

A: I am Rosea Mbolibihine.*

Q: How old are you?

A: I am 18 years old.

Q: When and where were you abducted?

A: I was abducted at Duka in 2009.

Q: How did you feel when you were in the bush?

A: I felt so bad because we were always moving. They gave me to a man called Lafoyo Odam as one of his many wives. I was always thinking of my parents and relatives. The food in the bush was so bad; drinking water was not so good. The LRA made us dig yams every day and so all these made life so bad in the bush.

Q: When you were in the bush did you see Kony?

A: I only heard that he is in Mbomou, a place around Mboki but we never met him.

Q: Did you hear anything about Salim Saleh?

A: Yes I did, he is the chief commander.

Q: How did you manage to come out?

A: I was told we were released by the chief commander who gave orders for women and children to be released. We were released in Nambara [DRC], where the LRA left us on the main road and told us to return home. We then followed the road to Digba [DRC] where we were seen by the FACA [Forces Armées Centrafricaines/Armed Forces of the CAR] who took us to Obo [CAR]. In Obo, those who were Ugandans were taken to Uganda, the rest of us here were brought to South Sudan.

Q: How many of you were released?

A: We were many; I'm not sure about the exact number.

Q: What do you expect from your parents when you meet them?

A: When I return home I want my parents to take me to school, to feed me well, take care of me, to cure this skin disease that I have and also make me feel comfortable.

* Not her real name.

Learning to heal invisible wounds

With the number of LRA returnees rapidly increasing, many of whom have suffered extreme trauma, the need for effective counsellors grows by the day. In light of this, members of local organisations from South Sudan, CAR, Congo and Uganda came together in Gulu, northern Uganda from 5 to 14 August, to exchange experiences on easing reintegration and counselling. Participants visited various organisations and were exposed to various methods of counselling to help LRA victims.

“In the beginning I did not know how to talk to these LRA returnees, but now I understand how to approach a discussion about their experiences and how we can help.” Veronika Anni Michael, exchange visit participant.

Thanks to the visit, those who took part have helped provide psychosocial support. For example, the transit centre for LRA returnees in Yambio, South Sudan run by the Western Equatoria State government called on the Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA) to counsel women and children staying there. They were able to use new techniques to understand the fears of recent LRA returnees. After the visit UNICEF and UNHCR recognized the potential of SHWDA members and offered to provide more in-depth guidance in giving psychosocial support.

“What can we do as women?”



ROFU coordinating committee, Dungu, DRC

Across the LRA affected area women with little resources but great energy and compassion are helping their communities overcome suffering caused by the LRA.

In South Sudan, one woman, Veronika Anni Michael, was alarmed at how women and children coming out of the bush were rejected by their communities. One day in 2010 at the borehole she rallied 15 like-minded women to answer the simple question: “what can we do as women?” In the shade of a mango tree the Self Help Women’s Development Association was born and has now started work in all the counties hardest hit by the LRA: Yambio, Nzara, Ezo, Tambura and Ibba. These volunteers advise women and men returnees on how to grow and sell food, manage money and restart their lives. They lobby government officials on behalf of returnees and use radio talk shows to encourage listeners to see LRA returnees with sympathetic eyes. They plan to involve returnees in dance and drama performances to encourage community members to accept them.

In CAR, a team of concerned women led by Tatiana Viviane created Femme Action Plus (FAP) in 2011. With a head office in Bangui and branches in Rafai, Zemio, Mboki and Obo, FAP helps vulnerable women and children – widows, orphans and especially LRA returnees – by organising training in life skills and helps them be recognised as

valuable members of the community. FAP trains women how to grow manioc and groundnuts, make soap from palm oil, make clothes or open a small hotel, while boys are trained in carpentry and masonry. In addition, FAP paves the way for future returnees by encouraging communities to welcome them. As FAP’s good works attract more women volunteers, they are setting their sights higher; they would like to set up a welcome centre for LRA returnees – a safe place where they can find a listening ear and good advice.

In Dungu, northeast DRC sixteen local women’s associations have come together to form the Network of Women’s Organisations of the Uélés (*Réseau des Organisations Féminines des Uélés*, ROFU). ROFU works with internally displaced people and LRA returnees to ease their social reintegration. One woman, Henriette Mbolingbanemi, who fled her village to find safety in Dungu, expresses her troubles: “Life is hard for me because I’m powerless. My three children haven’t been to school in three years. I can’t afford it. And the roof of my hut is broken.” For her and other women in her situation, their displaced status makes it difficult to find wood and fertile land for farming. They survive from day to day. ROFU helps women like Henriette access basic education and training and lobbies local government and traditional chiefs on their behalf.



ROFU conflict analysis workshop, Dungu, DRC

In northern Uganda, war-affected women continue to fight for their rights. The Women's Advocacy Network (WAN), officially launched in

May 2011, is a forum through which war-affected women advocate for justice, acknowledgment and accountability for gender-based violations inflicted during the LRA war. They don't just work at the community level but have taken their cause to Kampala. In November 2013 WAN petitioned the Ugandan parliament through the women parliamentarians for urgent reparation for conflict-affected women. They also discussed with Acholi Parliamentarians on the plight of war-affected women and communities in northern Uganda. The petition led to a motion being read in parliament for a reparation fund with a focus on women's needs.

About The Voice of Peace

The Voice of Peace is a quarterly newsletter that aims to increase understanding among local communities and national and international policymakers of the severe challenges faced by people living in areas of DRC, CAR, South Sudan and Uganda affected by the Lord's Resistance Army.

It is written and produced by local civil society groups with support from Conciliation Resources, a UK-based peacebuilding organisation. It gives local actors a voice on problems that have a profound impact on their lives and the opportunity to inform the solutions.

This and past editions are available at www.c-r.org/resources/voice-peace

Contributing civil society organisations:

- Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), DRC
- Commission Diocésaine de Justice, Paix et Réconciliation (CDJPR), DRC
- Réseau des Organisations Féminines des Uéléés (ROFU), DRC
- Femme Action Plus (FAP), CAR
- Inter Church Committee (ICC), South Sudan
- Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA), South Sudan
- Justice and Peace Commission, Gulu (JPC-Gulu), Uganda
- Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), Uganda

Have your say

If you would like to share information or your opinion or write an article for the VOP, please get in touch

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