

Beyond Kony2012

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Nicolas Tillon works with Conciliation Resources' East and Central Africa programme.

Ernest Sugule Kangoyangala is the director of SAIPED, a civil society organisation based in Dungu, DR Congo. He is the focal point of the Regional Civil Society Task Force, a platform of civil society organisations from the LRA affected region. They produce a quarterly newsletter: *The Voice of Peace*.

The Lord Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader Joseph Kony have recently become a lightning rod for mass online mobilisation. The multimedia campaign Kony2012 has raised awareness in an unprecedented way. Beyond its creative but superficial tone, the video offered a platform of expression for civil society activists and scholars, from the region and elsewhere, to react to the video and give a more accurate account of a situation that has been largely ignored for the past 25 years.

The advocacy campaign – and more importantly the African Union and the United Nations recent joint declaration to launch a regional (military) strategy – poses some challenges to peace prospects and to the protection of civilians in the region.

In this article we argue that any strategy to address the LRA conflict should focus on **civilian protection**, build on the work done by **civil society actors** in the region and **learn from the past**, particularly successful disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

Learning from the past

The LRA has been active in Northern Uganda and more recently in central Africa (South Sudan, CAR, DRC) for a quarter of a century. Over this period, the people, religious institutions and local civil society organisations of the affected countries have tried to prevent violence, support victims, and advise governments and international agencies on how to address the issue.

While social media channels have spread awareness about the lives of people affected by the conflict, they unfortunately do not contribute to finding sustainable solutions to address the violence and reduce the suffering of affected populations. By focusing only on military escalation rather than encouraging real dialogue, they may even further the suffering and the continuum of violence.

What will happen if the military intervention does not succeed? What will happen if there is another massacre and mass kidnapping? There is concern among people in countries affected by the LRA that the lives of innocent children, women and men will continue to be jeopardised by LRA retaliations if there is not a proper plan for civilian protection.

While to many people a military response seems the only real option, it has failed to achieve any success in defeating the LRA over the course of the conflict and is likely to fail again if its leaders do not learn from the past. These lessons include:

1. **The LRA is using guerrilla warfare tactics**; they avoid confrontation and live in proximity with populations from whom they extract resources (food, equipment, labour force, combatants). LRA factions are mainly composed of forcibly recruited child soldiers, and include twice as many civilians (women, young children) as combatants, living side-by-side. **A military offensive attacking LRA groups cannot discriminate between**

combatants and non-combatants and therefore can only result in loss of lives of innocent victims.

2. **The LRA is known to retaliate against soft targets when under-pressure.** The massacres which followed the Uganda-led joint military intervention “Operation Lightning Thunder” in 2008–09, are a reminder of this. Protecting civilians against attacks, abductions, killings, and looting needs to be the primary goal of any military presence.

3. **The armies in the region have poor human rights records and are feared by the people.** The current military intervention relying on the deployment of national armies can only lead to further violence if no mechanisms are in place to include protection measures. To whom are regional forces answerable to for any wrongdoing?

4. **Western intervention is often perceived as a magic bullet but cannot resolve the conflict.** The US army was part of the planning of “Operation Lightning Thunder”, which resulted in violent reprisals from the LRA. An efficient army and State presence are needed in order to guarantee people’s protection, border management and long-term stability in the region. Mindful of the challenges posed by army reform in DRC and in the region, international presence should focus on supporting changes from within and involve community representatives in monitoring civilian protection.

5. **Grassroots organisations such as religious institutions, local leaders, and civil society organisations should be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian, development and political strategies which affect the population.** Decisions made by western policymakers affect hundreds of thousands of people in three different countries in areas neglected by their own governments. Who are these policymakers accountable to? Facebook users? Western citizens? The governments of the countries affected? Or the very people who are victim of the violence? Unfortunately, the latter live in areas abandoned by their governments; they do not have access to the Internet, social medias or newspapers and are voiceless in decisions which primarily affect them.

What alternatives are there to a military solution?

There is no quick solution to any conflict, unfortunately. Well-designed videos and slick communication campaigns cannot replace locally owned and sustainable solutions. The coherence of any strategy to address the LRA issue needs to incorporate not only the security dimension but also the political, development and humanitarian, and protection challenges. It is not only about what needs to be done but how to do it.

1. **Put political pressure on the governments affected by the conflict,** not only on Western governments. The LRA affected areas are located far away from the capital of DR Congo, CAR and South Sudan. These governments have other priorities and do not take appropriate measures to address the issue. Any intervention driven by outside actors will not make headway if not inclusive of national and local authorities.

2. **The voice of the people affected by conflict, including women, matters and should be listened to** and included in the design, implementation and monitoring of any strategy. Western countries have democratically elected governments, why not respect these fundamentals overseas? Local organisations, committees and religious platforms do exist: Engage with them.

3. **Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes are one of the few success stories in reducing the military capacity of the militia and encouraging rehabilitation of its victims.** The UN and other organisations from civil society have been instrumental in driving these projects. During military operations, the LRA tightens its security therefore making it risky for anyone to escape. Military operations may threaten the efficiency of DDR initiatives by giving middle rank commanders no hope apart from fighting

to the end. On the other hand, a military presence and safe reception facilities, not military operations, are likely to encourage defection and reinsertion of abductees.

4. **Talking is not a crime.** Between 2006 and 2008, peace talks took place in Juba but they failed to stop the violence. Does this mean further peace talks are doomed to fail? The military option also failed but that is still dominating the agenda. **Peace talks are never a one-off discussion; they take place over years**, go through different phases but eventually, ending a conflict through talks is more sustainable and prevent the loss of innocent lives.

Conclusion

The recent launch of a 5,000-strong African Union-authorized mission to hunt down Kony, and the sensational Kony2012 campaign has brought unexpected attention to the LRA conflict. Beyond the urgent need to do something, the question is *how* and *who is responsible* for the consequences of an intervention?

In this article we argue that there is a need for a more comprehensive, coherent and coordinated intervention to end the LRA threat. Any intervention must be inclusive of protection measures, built on the work done by local actors and learn lessons from the past.

The military approach as used over the long-term has provoked suffering and displacement on a massive scale. Over 400,000 people over three countries have been displaced since the launch of Operation Lightning Thunder in December 2008. The primary function of a military presence in the region should be to protect civilians from abductions, looting, human rights abuses and any strategy needs to incorporate tools to monitor progress and engage with the population.

Doors should be left open for possible dialogue with the LRA to assess the level of disengagement of mid-level commanders, increase the impact of DDR programme, encourage the safe return of abductees into their communities and pave the way to addressing the long-term impact of the violence.

To find out more about recent peace initiatives in East and Central Africa and what local peacebuilding activities are underway, visit www.c-r.org/our-work/lords-resistance-army

The Regional Civil Society Task Force: www.c-r.org/featured-work/creating-regional-civil-society-task-force

Read *The Voice of Peace*, published by local peacebuilders: www.c-r.org/resources/voice-peace-1

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