

The Voice of Peace

News and views from conflict-affected areas of Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Uganda



Rebels in northern CAR practise drill. © Flickr/Creative Commons

CAR: Ongwen captured but power struggles overshadow LRA conflict

In a strange twist in the tragic tale of the Central African Republic (CAR) former Seleka rebels played the role of upholders of international law. On 6 January they turned over Dominic Ongwen to U.S. Special Forces.

He was once a high-ranking commander in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and in 2005 was indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The move was not motivated by a deep concern for justice. Seleka and the other armed factions across the country are seeking ways to advance their interests in the areas they control and on the political chessboard in Bangui. Some continue to use violence and crime, taxing the population, others are trying to form political parties, others still are entering the NGO 'business'. Seleka's claim for the USD 5 million reward for their part in Ongwen's capture reveals that their involvement was aimed primarily at strengthening their political and economic position.

Many paths to power

Following accusations of embezzling aid money from Angola, the credibility of Catherine Samba Panza's interim government has been

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shaken. Anti-balaka militia, the opposition and some civil society called for a change of government. But President Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville, mediator of the CAR crisis, has supported her stay in power until elections, now postponed from February to a later date, as yet undecided.

This shakiness at the top has encouraged armed groups to suit up for politics and gain access to state resources through the ballot box. In October 2014 Seleka held a general assembly in Bambari to form a political party but failed to agree on its leadership. Internal rifts, including on the question of secession, led to the formation of at least three separate parties.

In November 2014 the anti-balaka launched their own political party, the Central African Party for Unity and Development (PCUD). Patrice Edouard Ngaïssona, a businessman and a coordinator of the movement, is taking much of the limelight and looks like a potential candidate. But internal divisions there too saw some factions splinter off.

Sébastien Wenezoui, former deputy coordinator of the anti-balaka told VOP, "It is the politicians who are trying to take hold of the [anti-balaka] movement. We the initiators have pulled out to set up an NGO called the Collective of Central Africans for Reconciliation (Collectif des Centrafricains pour la réconciliation, CCR)." The NGO, which includes former Seleka, has been praised by donors and international NGOs for promoting social cohesion, but it has yet to prove its worth.

Doves hiding guns

All this talk of peace belies a dangerous reality. The arrest of Chadian militia leader Baba Ladde in early December in northern Kabo heightened tensions there. In addition, Cameroonian soldiers in the UN mission (MINUSCA) arrested anti-balaka leader known as general Andjilo on 17 January 2015. Reacting angrily his followers kidnapped over a hundred civilians and a French aid worker in Bangui demanding Andjilo's release.

These political manoeuvres and violence are the first priority for the government, donors and NGOs. Meanwhile the southeast, where the LRA continues to attack civilians (see regional security review), remains a neglected and impoverished corner.

Benick Kette, former MP from Djemah, southeast Haut-Mbomou prefecture, told VOP, "At Djemah you can't find the basic necessities, not even soap or sugar".

Slow road to peace

To steer CAR along the road to peace, local level dialogue is needed across the country to cool bitter resentment between ethnic and religious groups. In the southeast too, local reconciliation efforts are needed to help communities accept former LRA abductees. A planned national dialogue can only pave the way for peaceful elections if it builds on careful and rigorous talks within each and every community.

Editorial

Welcome to the first VOP of 2015. The year has begun with the exciting news of Dominic Ongwen's surrender – a major step towards the end of the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). But this edition exposes the troubling reality that the region is facing many grave security and political challenges, including the still active LRA.

Our lead article explains how the many armed factions in the Central African Republic (CAR) including Seleka and anti-balaka have been pursuing alternative paths to power in the lead-up to elections. Some have set up political parties, others an NGO. But on the ground the reality is still dangerous and volatile.

We put a spotlight on the Kafia Kingi-Vakaga corridor that straddles CAR, Sudan and South Sudan. Because of its remoteness, lawlessness and natural resources, the area has become a

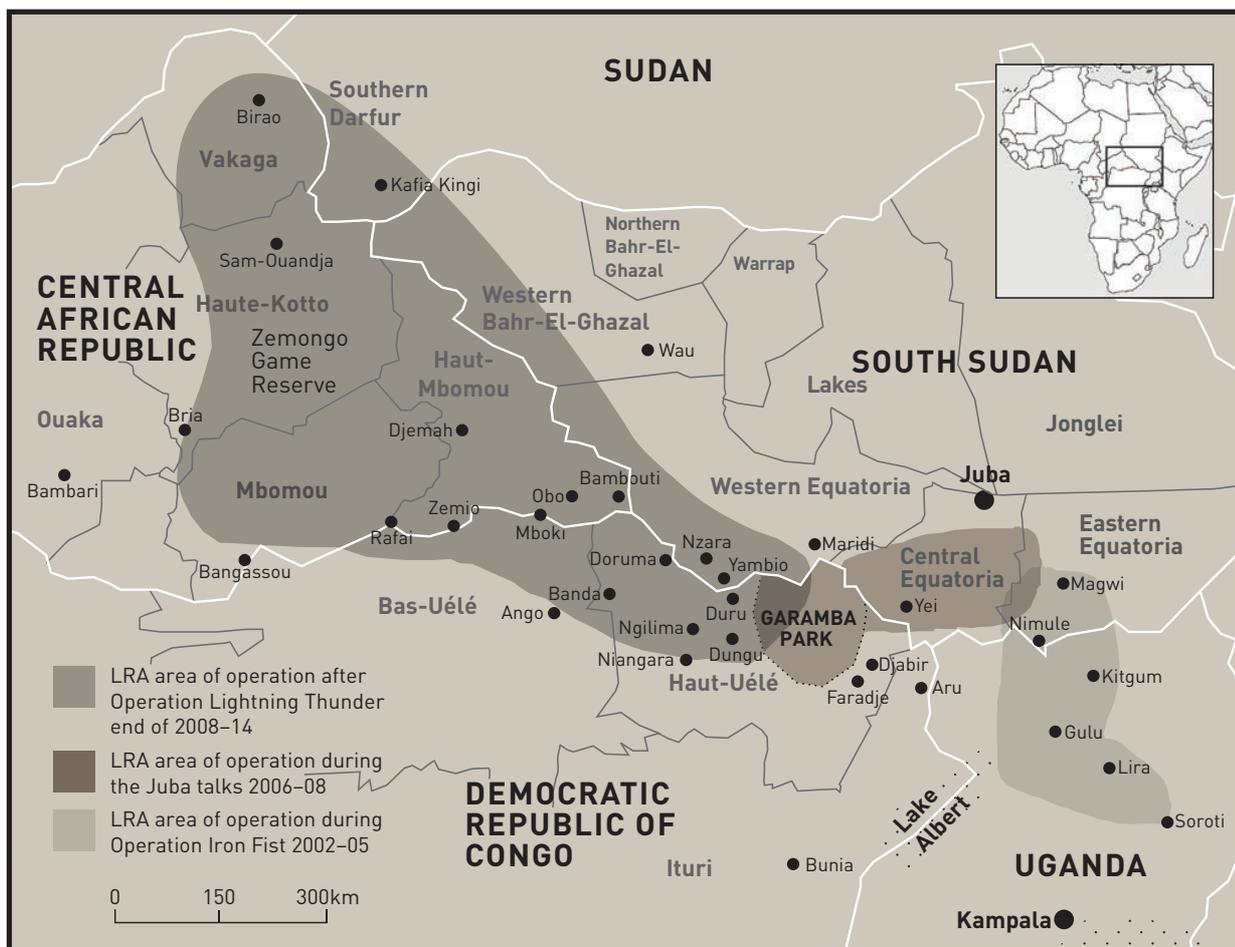
rebel haven. African governments and the international community must realise that without investigating and tackling insecurity in these hard-to-reach areas, the region will remain prey to armed rebel and criminal groups.

As ever, we bring you inspiring stories of how civil society groups are stepping up and playing their part for peace. In DRC and South Sudan, Local Peace Committees have been set up to quickly alert security forces of imminent threats, resolve local conflicts and help citizens hold authorities to account. How will you play your part?

Enjoy the read and remember to send us your feedback. See the back page for our email addresses.

Dixon Odur, Editor-in-Chief





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

Regional Situation Review: October - December 2014

DRC: In the last quarter of 2014 the possible revision of the electoral law dominated national political debate and caused protests and human rights violations in some cities. In the east, the Congolese army (FARDC) supported by the UN mission (MONUSCO) continued military operations against armed militia.

In Haut- and Bas-Uele districts, Province Orientale, there were 23 attacks on civilians, of which 11 have been confirmed as carried out by the LRA. They killed seven people, abducted 146, released 93 and 36 captives escaped. The FARDC supported by MONUSCO conducted twelve military operations against the LRA, which remains active in and around the Garamba National Park on the Dungu-Bitima and Dungu-Faradje-Sambia axes. Park rangers, FARDC and their partners have collaborated well to combat poachers and push them out of the park. Locals wish that this

collaboration be extended to secure the population outside the park. Cattle belonging to Mbororo herders continue to devastate fields fuelling a permanent conflict between them and the indigenous people. The conflict is aggravated when Mbororo prevent locals accessing natural resources – farmland, water sources and hunting grounds.

CAR: From October to December 2014, CAR's eastern Mbomou, Haut-Mbomou, Haut-Kotto prefectures have witnessed consistent attacks by the LRA and a flare-up of violence between Muslims and Christians in Zemio. Dominic Ongwen confirmed that LRA groups have been circulating in the vicinity of Sam Ouandja, Haut-Kotto prefecture but due to the presence of Seleka they mostly stay hidden in the bush. Locals have felt the LRA's presence more sharply further south. At the end of November and again at the end of December, one group attacked and abducted civilians near

Rafai, but most attacks were reported further east around Mboki and Obo. Kpabou, Ngilingili and Gbassigbiri villages have been targeted. Local civil society reports that more fighters are wearing new uniforms and more of the members are armed, suggesting new income streams. LRA have also been sending Mbororo herders with as many as 40 donkeys to buy supplies for them in Obo, reducing already low stocks.

In November 2014, Muslims from Zemio, angered by the killing of a Muslim businessman at Selim village, burnt several villages and clashed with Christians, leaving three dead and others injured. Local authorities organised a dialogue which stopped the fighting but tensions remain high.

South Sudan: The LRA has stayed out of South Sudan, fearing pursuit by local self-defence groups, the Arrow Boys. But returnees continue to suffer due to lack of support to help them reintegrate into families, school and work.

At the national level, fighting has continued to rage between government forces and the SPLM-In Opposition rebels led by Riek Machar. Both sides have failed to abide by cessation of hostilities agreements despite repeated commitments. The talks in Addis Ababa led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) look increasingly bleak.

As the dry season sets in, cattle keepers have been forced to cross large areas in search of

pasture. The result is conflict. In Unity and Western Equatoria states, farmers and cattle keepers have come to blows. So have Mundari pastoralists and Bari farmers in Kuorgik, Central Equatoria State. Amidst all this, President Salva Kiir announced January 2015 that elections would take place in June 2015. This sparked criticism by citizens and the international community calling for stability first, especially the United States which said it would not support the elections.

Uganda: In the last three months banditry has increased on the Juba highway, especially on the section between Gulu, northern Uganda and Nimule on the border with South Sudan. That country's civil war, the availability of guns and the porosity of the border have fostered this worrying trend. In one incident at Mori Adru, South Sudan on 16 December 2014 South Sudanese gunmen ambushed five trucks that were returning to Uganda after delivering food to Juba. The gunmen ordered a driver to tell the Ugandan government to evacuate its nationals from Juba or face the consequences. It seems some South Sudanese feel Ugandans are taking their business. The UPDF believe the armed men are linked to Major General Martin Kenyi, a top South Sudanese army officer, recently demoted. Local authorities on both sides of the border are worried that the attack may stifle business as vehicle owners become fearful.

Local Peace Committees help protect, rebuild lives after LRA

The surrender of Dominic Ongwen, one of Kony's longest serving commanders, is a bittersweet moment. We celebrate the weakening of the LRA and hope that Ongwen will use his voice to persuade other members to surrender. But his own tragic story – a 10-year-old boy forced into a life of violence – reminds us of the thousands of families that have been pulled apart.

Civil society organisations in all countries affected by the LRA have taken it upon themselves to do what we can to increase our safety and play an active role in how our lives are governed. It is our duty as citizens, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

We have set up 24 Local Peace Committees (LPC) - 21 in DRC, three in South Sudan. These voluntary groups comprise respected community members - be they farmers, teachers or chiefs. They are

elected by their fellows to lead initiatives that seek to increase the security of the local community and strengthen governance and law and order in the long-term.

These committees alert security forces to imminent threats, resolve conflicts and enable citizens to hold authorities to account. They also play a vital role in the return and reintegration of former LRA.

On 15 December 2014 in Djibir, DRC, members of the LPC responded immediately when a young man (18), a woman (20) and another girl came out of the bush after six years of captivity. The committee members accompanied the former abductees to the UN mission (MONUSCO) who transferred them to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). They also informed the community,



*A member of the Local Peace Committee at Aba, Haut-Uele district, northeast DRC, explains how to resolve land disputes.
© CDJPR*

reassuring them that they were safe. Being safe is not enough. You have to feel it.

The impact of the Local Peace Committees over the last year is noticeable. In the past, former fighters and abducted women and children faced great fear and suspicion in the communities to which they returned. Now, thanks in part to the LPCs, communities are much more willing to receive returnees

peacefully and ease their difficult reintegration into school, work and family.

There is clearly a lot of work to be done. But we are confident that by working together across national borders – civilians and military, civil society and the government – we can come through these hard times and make a future for our children that will make our ancestors proud.

The unfinished story of a child transit centre

Six months ago Amari (not her real name) was a wreck. Originally from South Sudan, she had lived the past ten years of her life trekking through the forest in LRA captivity. The only thing that had kept her alive was the hope that one day she would return home and see her two children again. Seven months pregnant, she thought that she was going to give birth to the child in the

LRA was unbearable. Amari made a break for freedom. She escaped her captors and found her way to Yambio, South Sudan where she was housed in a child transit centre. Since her family has not yet been traced, she is still there six months on.

The centre was established by the government and UNICEF to assist children aged 0 to 17 and women



Women and child returnees at child transit centre © SHWDA

with babies or small children who have been victims of conflict. It aims to remove children from danger, let them enjoy their childhood and give them skills for the future. It can accommodate 40 women and children.

Upon arrival, Amari was registered, received medical attention and began the process of looking for her family. She also gave birth to a healthy baby boy. The centre provides psychosocial support and guidance on health, HIV/AIDS and non-violence. Fun is also emphasized with cultural and recreational activities: music, dance, drawing, sports and games.

But the once dynamic centre is now a shadow of its former self. Funding is drying up. Many women

like Amari have needed the centre's services. With time its few resources have dwindled leaving many of its beneficiaries in dire straits. Amari recounts that she has had to skip meals and sometimes eat nothing the whole day.

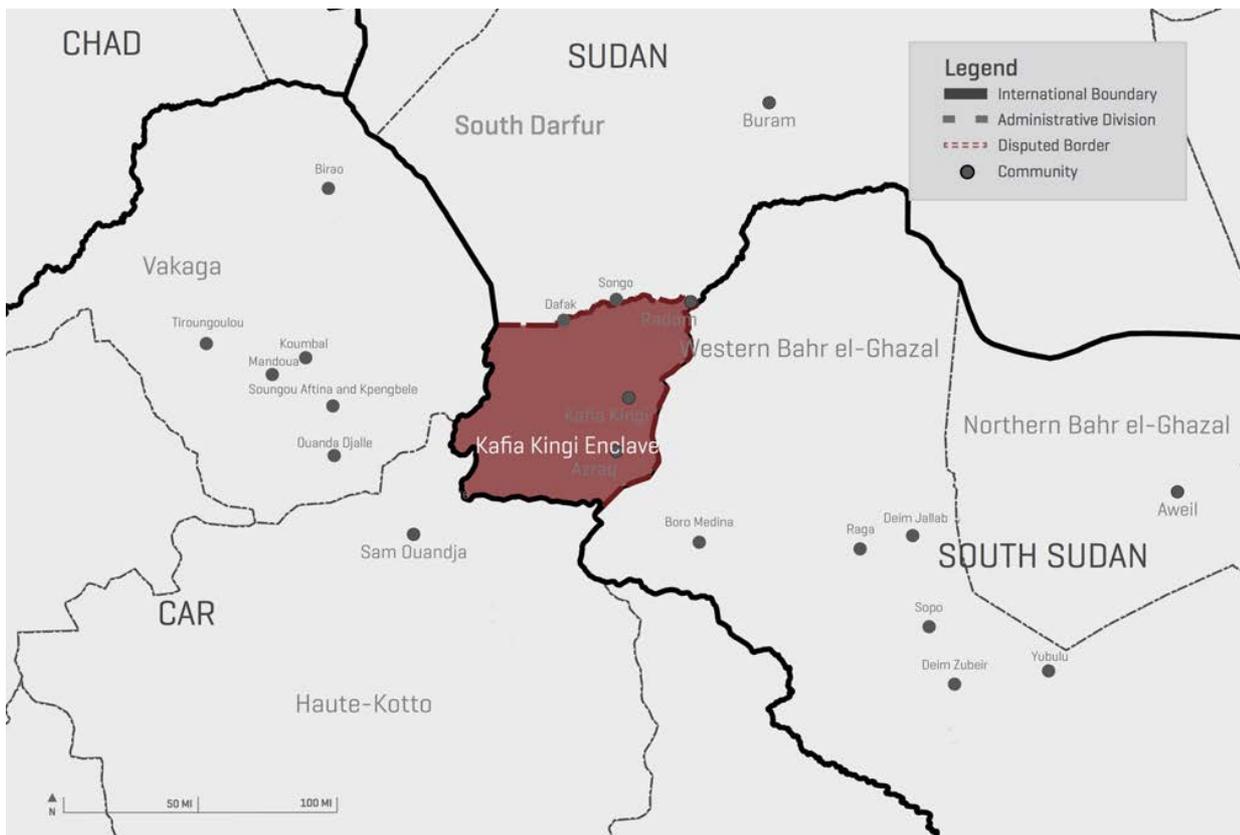
The centre should be sufficiently funded to provide temporary safety for vulnerable people. But in the long process of reintegrating returnees into normal life, the sooner they are reunited with their families, or at least foster families, the better. It is there they are most likely to be given the support, understanding and acceptance they need. Confident in themselves they can then begin to find a role for themselves in society.

Rebel Haven: Spotlight on Kafia Kingi-Vakaga corridor

The disputed Kafia Kingi enclave on the border of Sudan and South Sudan and, to the west, Vakaga and Haut Kotto prefectures in north-eastern Central African Republic (CAR) host a bewildering number of rebels and criminals. Seleka rebels, Sudanese Janjaweed, Torabora from Darfur, Chadian militia and the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) all exploit the lack of state presence there.

According to Dominic Ongwen, Joseph Kony and some of his fighters are in the vicinity of Sam Ouandja, Haut Kotto prefecture, CAR. It's time to find out more about this rebel haven.

Kafia Kingi used to be inhabited by an estimated 15,000 people of Kresh and Binga ethnicity. In 2012 the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) seized the area from the Sudanese People's Liberation Army



Map of Kafia Kingi enclave © Kenneth Transier / The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative

(SPLA) and 95 per cent of residents were displaced to Boro Medina, a village in Western Bar al-Ghazal State, South Sudan.

Those left behind were first attacked by the LRA the same year. Afterwards, the LRA reached an understanding with individual SAF commanders. Since then, there has not been any LRA attack in the area. The limited government presence makes it easier for armed groups to move around without impediment.

The area has been a launching ground and crossing point for rebel groups for many years because government forces have found it very difficult to operate so far from country capitals. But with the collapse of the CAR government in 2013 and the army in disarray, any vestige of state control has gone. Meanwhile international forces including the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA), the European force (EUFOR) and the French operation (Sangaris) are still struggling to contain violence in Bangui and elsewhere in the country.

Seleka and anti-balaka warlords are dividing up CAR into their own zones of influence. By creating baronies along tribal and religious lines, they seek to strengthen their local power bases and gain control of economic resources, especially gold and

diamonds. Another draw for rebels is that they can smuggle the precious stones, ivory and guns through the region without fear of detection.

Extending state authority to the Kafia Kingi-Vakaga corridor is a near impossible task and will take time. But the process of returning law and order and protecting civilians in these remote areas must begin with better information and analysis. Only then can peacebuilders identify opportunities.

The Sudanese government has invited the African Union (AU) to send a fact-finding mission to Kafia Kingi to investigate the reported presence of LRA groups. The AU should seize this opportunity and promptly put together a team including human rights officers.

International donors should fund and provide security for researchers to go there. Publishing analysis of the area's fluid power dynamics, trade routes and ethnic composition will help policymakers and civil society figure out how to bring security to this embattled area.

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 conflict-affected areas of CAR, DRC, South Sudan and Uganda.

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.

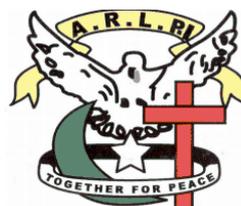
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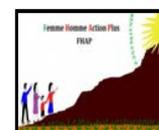
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