

What will it take to end the LRA conflict?

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The Lord's Resistance Army conflict is famous. Its systematic targeting of children, abduction, use of fear as a tool of war, and population displacement make sure of that. Coupled with the ruthless (or ineffective) counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the governments in the region – which fails to protect civilians – it creates a self-perpetuating cycle of loss, resentment and hopelessness that feeds the conflict. In the process it further widens the gap between governments and local communities.

While the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) does not pose a direct military threat to the authority of national governments in individual states, the terror and displacement caused across an already politically and socially fragile area pose a threat to the stability of the region as a whole.

Current strategies risk relying too heavily on military means alone, which have failed to protect civilians and end the conflict over the past 25 years. As the displacement and violence rumbles on, the despair is evident in local communities: "With all the armies of the world here, why isn't Kony dead yet and the conflict over? When will this end and what will it take?" [2]

A conflict with a long gestation and an elephant footprint

The LRA has its roots in a rebellion against the current Government of Uganda, which took power through an armed insurgency in 1986. The conflict with the LRA has now become a regional issue directly affecting the lives of thousands of people in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan, as well as Uganda. It presents all the hallmarks of a protracted war and an all too elusive peace. [3]

This conflict shatters lives. Yet for national governments, beset by other urgent domestic issues, resolving it is not high on their list of priorities. There are doubtless significant obstacles to ending the conflict with the LRA. Meanwhile, in the affected areas, the capacity of law enforcement – police, judiciary – is minimal and a climate of near impunity reigns.

For the people living in the affected areas, however, the LRA is a prime concern. All too predictably, it's they who bear the brunt of the ongoing violence perpetrated by all sides. Operating in remote areas devoid of provision by the state – and beyond the reach of most international aid agencies – the conflict continues to result in destruction, abduction, displacement, trauma and death for civilians and whole communities. One parent in Dungu, DRC, explains that, "our role as parents is to raise complete beings – now we are raising incomplete corpses." Meanwhile, the credibility gap widens between governments and the local communities. [4]

The conflict's impact has also reverberated more widely, displacing people beyond the region and periodically drawing in external responses from the African Union, the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the United States and the European Union, among other actors.

Opinions differ while civilians die

Credible and verifiable information about the LRA is in short supply, leading to rumours and speculation – it is impossible to confirm the LRA's strength. Reflecting Kinshasa's tendency to down play the LRA problem, the Congolese army estimates the remaining LRA combatants to be between 12 and 18 fighters, while the Ugandan army put the figure to anywhere between 200 to 400. Of course, these figures do not take into account the regeneration of

LRA through abductions. [5] In DRC alone, UNOCHA estimates that 316 people were abducted in 2010, while in 2011 another 214 were abducted. [6] The LRA has also been abducting civilians in CAR and South Sudan.

In a situation where there is no regional data bank – for example, to track abductions and return – the actual force-level of LRA will remain a point of speculation. Local peacebuilders are working to address these issues at the grassroots. Information-sharing initiatives include the Voice of Peace newsletter from the Regional Civil Society Task Force, a network of groups, religious and cultural leaders and local NGOs operating in LRA-affected areas. [7] Between December 2011 and February 2012 this network documented more than 59 attacks, 72 abductions while 91 people returned from LRA abductions – they're now publicising this data, opinion and coping strategies via the bi-monthly newsletter and radio programmes. [8]

Perceptions about the LRA, its continued use of violence and prolonged lifespan vary across the region. In DRC, for example, many suspect the LRA presence to be a pretext for Uganda's exploitation of DRC's natural resources. In South Sudan people see the LRA as an instrument of Khartoum, which they think is being used to destabilise their new country. They see the ultimate solution to the LRA as laying in Khartoum, not in the bush where the LRA operates. Within Uganda, the LRA is considered to be a symptom of poor governance. In CAR, the LRA presence is considered to be a spillover from another theatre of war and ultimately Uganda's problem to solve.

Such perceptions point to a wider geo-political interests at play, the underlying feature of which is the long-standing antagonistic relations between Kampala and Khartoum, distrust between Kampala and Kinshasa, and a looming crisis between Sudan and South Sudan.

The Ugandan army has thus far succeeded in keeping the LRA out of northern Uganda, but in doing so has not resolved conflict. Instead it has displaced the violence deep into DRC, South Sudan and CAR. Civilian (and specifically child) protection, though a stated priority since the re-launch of military campaign in 2008, has not been provided in practice. Statistics from UNOCHA estimate that as of December 2011, there were 465,696 civilians displaced – an increase of over one-fifth compared to the same period in 2010. [9]

Fear breeds further violence

The LRA has a history of preying on local dynamics and conflicts, for example through forming opportunistic alliances. In DRC, returnees from the LRA have confirmed time and again the collaboration with Uda, a sub-group of Ambororo in the attacks on Bamangana, and with the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) in Nzako in CAR. In Darfur, some LRA fighters are believed to have participated in an attack on IDP camp in Daffak with a group of Janjaweed. While there is evidence of occasional collaboration of Uda – a Mbororo sub group – the Mbororo in general too appear to be victims of the LRA, suffering abductions and theft, as well as being demonised by locals and the government in Congo and South Sudan. Despite the odds, some breakthroughs are being made in facilitating dialogue and understanding between the various affected and divided communities. [10]

There's no doubt that protecting civilians in the context of this guerrilla war is highly problematic. First the area is vast with sparse population, with no infrastructure. Secondly, the pattern of LRA attacks is clear. When they are attacked or pressured, they strike out against soft targets connected with those who are doing the attacking or the pressuring. The Ugandan army made no provisions for that protection, and even denied any responsibility for doing so, instead, blaming its faux partners, the FARDC, the Congolese forces, and the SPLA in South Sudan for not doing this. They also blame MONUSCO, the UN forces that have a very limited presence in northeastern Congo.

In the three countries affected, there are suspicions of Uganda's motives reinforced by the sight of former LRA fighters in their ranks. The Ugandan army regularly uses formerly abducted ex-LRA combatants in active military service – according to local leaders sometimes these are the same men who had earlier terrorised their communities when they were still in the LRA.

In Dungu, DRC, local NGOs feel that the push to scale up the military offensive against Kony is unaccountable, at least to the people on the ground who bear the brunt of a violent backlash by the LRA. Talking with local people makes clear that fear and distrust runs deep: "The Government tells us that the LRA are finished. But on the ground people are dying. People are still scared of returning home. Those who have ventured to their farms are either killed or kidnapped by the LRA. We do not know who to believe and trust." [11]

In the absence of adequate protection by the national armies and the UN missions, vulnerable communities feel that they have no choice but to take up arms. Local defence units have multiplied across the region. Opinions on

the ground are understandably divided as to the merits of self-defence groups. In Western Equatoria State of South Sudan alone, an estimated 17,000 people are participating in self-defence groups or the so called arrow boys or home guards. In this region, the home guards are highly supported by the state government and communities; even the national parliament earmarked US\$ 1.2 millions for their operation. However elsewhere, in Kinshasa a former president of DRC's national assembly is insistent that to condone local self-defence units would be to further sanction the death of the state. Due to lack of oversight and training in basic concepts such as human rights, self-defence groups in themselves can become a driver of conflicts. The Mai Mai groups in DRC emerged out of such the self-defence groups. And so the cycle continues.

Efforts to end the conflict must pay attention to local opinions

The official military effort, led by Uganda's armed forces – with funding and support from the US since December 2008 – has been focused on containment of LRA actions, removing the LRA's leader Joseph Kony from the battlefield, and protecting families and communities from LRA attacks. Those who bear the brunt of the LRA's violent retaliations are therefore all too aware of the risks of a renewed military strategy. In research carried out in 2011 by peacebuilding organisation Conciliation Resources, conducted as part of an EU-funded project partnership with Saferworld, an overwhelming majority of those consulted expressed a desire for a solution based on protection and political engagement. [12]

However, some daylight is starting to creep into international policies. The US strategy to support the disarmament of the LRA, issued in November 2010, emphasises that “there is no purely military solution to the LRA threat and Impact”. [13] Its candour is refreshing. The same strategy paper notes that between December 2008 and November 2010, the US provided more than \$23 million to the Ugandan army for military operations largely in form of logistical (airlifts, fuel, trucks) and intelligence support. The figure has since risen to more than US\$ 40 million. In October 2011, a hundred US military advisers were deployed in the region to advise militaries in the region. [14] All of this military intervention is on going and yet the LRA attacks against civilians continue unabated.

The LRA conflict requires a holistic and coordinated response

In short, there's been no shortage of official attention on the chaos caused by Joseph Kony and his combatants, though seasoned commentators note that not all actors in this conflict have their heart truly set on its resolution. [15] Into the mix step Invisible Children and its latest campaign tool: Kony 2012. In bringing the conflict with the LRA to the attention of ordinary global citizens – particularly young people in the US and the industrialised world – the Stop Kony campaign has succeeded where two decades of campaigning work have so far failed.

The campaign has undoubtedly brought the issue of LRA into the spotlight of the mainstream media. It might even bring pressure to bear on governments to protect their citizens and look after their welfare.

However, what's clear for now is that it's had an interesting knock-on effect. For the first time in a very long period, the Ugandan Government, opposition politicians, religious and traditional leaders and the communities in northern Uganda agree on one fact: The Stop Kony campaign does not reflect the realities on the ground and glosses over the complicated history of the conflict and the search for solutions. [16] Patrick Loum, the Coordinator of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) noted that “there is nothing in the campaign that reflects Uganda of 2012”. He asserts that contrary to the impact of the military escalation [17] for which the campaign advocates, it was “the Juba peace talks [which] brought the peace enjoyed in northern Uganda and parts of South Sudan”. [18]

This is where lessons from Uganda should come into play for the situation as it currently stands. It is time for a new strategy. In spite of it being widely acknowledged that there can be no exclusively military solution to this deep-rooted conflict, the international community and governments in the region are not investing sufficiently in finding alternative solutions to the LRA problem.

Experience from northern Uganda teaches us that a combination of successful peacebuilding by civil society, a legal framework provided by the Amnesty law, political dialogue (the Juba Peace Talks) and increased vigilance by the army was responsible for the current peace enjoyed in northern Uganda and parts of South Sudan (Central and Eastern Equatorial State). What have worked have been local initiatives. [19]

Where next? Focus on the grassroots

If the international community and governments in the region are serious about addressing the LRA conflict there are simple but important steps that should be implemented. The regional political and security dimensions of the conflict require a comprehensive and coordinated response, in which any military effort gives priority to civilian protection and forms part of a broader strategy addressing the multiple dimensions of the conflict. Such a strategy requires interventions that recognise the limits of international and national-level influence, and take stock of the fact that the epicentre of the conflict rest very close to the ground in the social interactions of these war-affected communities.

These efforts would begin by developing a comprehensive approach that prioritises civilian protection from abductions, political, security humanitarian, development and governance efforts. It would start with ensuring civilian protection in tandem with political dialogue involving regional governments to address, for example, the political and military rivalries driving the conflict.

The people living in the midst of the violence often have the greatest insight into its causes. Yet they are often excluded from official efforts to find a resolution. Building a sustainable peace requires the involvement of all sections of the affected communities. It requires efforts to reduce the LRA through safe defection and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration strategies [20], backed by a legal framework that empowers communities to speak to individuals in the bush.

Journalists and media agencies in the region must also be able to openly debate these issues without fear of legal and political reprisals. [21] As it stands, with an appropriate legal framework lacking, self-censorship is the norm. The stark irony highlighted by the Invisible Children campaign is that in little over a week there have been 75+ million worldwide views of the 'Kony 2012' online video: people internationally seem to share an appetite for the peace and justice that has for so long eluded local communities. Such passionate debate and vigour is yet to be reciprocated in the region – especially in South Sudan, DRC and Central African Republic.

Achieving a peaceful conclusion to this conflict involves efforts aimed at ascertaining and closing the supply lines of the LRA. It also entails 'taking the governments' back to these under-governed places, addressing the development and social challenges in these neglected areas. [22] Civil society can play a critical role at all levels in promoting dialogue to promote engagement, understanding and reconciliation.

Despite enormous odds, support for a strategy based on protection and engagement is widespread among those who bear the brunt of the conflict, civil society and communities across the region. They recognise that building a just and lasting peace takes time. This is a job that requires support for local approaches and peacebuilding initiatives rather than imposing more external firepower.

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

Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We're there as long as we're needed to provide advice, support and practical resources. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and practice worldwide. Together, we can find peaceful alternatives to violence.

References

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