

## **Regional Civil Society Task Force Meeting**

Bangui, Central African Republic

6 September 2012

### **Executive summary of points presented by RCSTF representatives to ministers and diplomats**

- Encouraging return requires making contact with LRA fighters and abductees.
- The involvement of national authorities in the affected countries is paramount to civil society engagement, civilian protection and the efficiency of international engagement.
- The use of force alone is not the answer as it will contribute to more loss of life among abductees and more retaliation from the LRA against civilians.

### **Background**

Armed conflicts in the affected region no longer respect political or territorial boundaries, but form part of wider cross-border dynamics. Against this background, we, civil society in the areas affected by the LRA, met for the first time in Gulu in 2009 to devise cross-border conflict strategies that draws on local perspectives and experiences to respond to the conflict with the LRA. The Regional Civil Society Task Force (RCSTF) is composed of religious leaders, cultural leaders and local NGO leaders.

A cross-border Regional Civil Society Task Force was created to: tap into the local perspectives and experiences of conflict-affected people, and draw on local knowledge. The RCSTF enables civil society leaders from areas affected by the LRA to share their experiences and strategies related to the conflict, discuss common challenges and come up with a joint plan of action. These civil society leaders are then able to return to their communities with a clearer understanding of the dynamics and challenge that the conflict poses, and possible methods they can use to deal with the challenges.

Since its formation three years ago, the Regional Civil Society Task Force has met in Uganda, South Sudan and DRC. September 2012 is our first time to meet in Central African Republic. Participants came from Central African Republic, South Sudan, DRC and Uganda

### **The Bangui Meeting**

The participants acknowledge the efforts of the governments of Central African Republic, DRC, South Sudan and Uganda – backed by the African Union, the United Nations and their international partners – to implement the regional strategy aimed at dealing with the threat posed by the LRA.

As civil society leaders, we also acknowledge that the LRA has been weakened in the recent past, although they still have the capacity to cause atrocities – including abductions, killings and displacements. Different research and observations by civil society and the UN suggests that there are still over 450,000 people displaced by conflict. This goes to show that further destabilisation of the region is a risk.

The consensus at this meeting was that there is an urgency to address the ongoing conflict, and that a durable and sustainable solution is urgently needed to avert the long-term humanitarian consequences for the entire region.

## **Main findings of the Bangui meeting**

### *1. Civilian Protection*

Civilian protection while a stated objective in all counter-LRA strategies has not been assured in practice. Yet, the LRA *modus operandi* is clear: They retaliate against civilians when under attack. In light of the LRA's known record of reprisals against civilian targets, we call for no offensive operations that do not have effective measures taken to protect civilians.

Security and the provision of basic services to displaced people are key pull factors for establishing confidence in defection of individuals still in the LRA. Coordination and planning efforts must increase the presence of security and justice services, such as policing and functioning justice systems in the areas affected by the LRA. We believe that protection of civilians will deny the LRA chance to abduct and forcefully recruit innocent people into its ranks.

Improved civil–military relations are vital for sharing information with communities affected by the conflict, increase confidence of communities in security forces. It is the right of the communities to know what's going on.

We are from the most isolated areas – left to our own devices for protection – our own countries have failed us. We appeal to the international community to contribute to de-isolating the areas affected by the LRA by improving the existing infrastructure – roads, health services, schools, among others.

### *2. Reaching out to communities*

The conflict with the LRA has further impoverished the otherwise hard-working communities in the region. Visible peace dividends in form of infrastructure that connect the people in the four countries need to be established. Communities in the affected areas are entitled to basic services like health, education and infrastructure in their places of origin, as well as livelihood opportunities to ensure a future free of displacement, conflict and reliance on humanitarian support.

- Need direct action to support victims of the LRA conflict – in the short-term humanitarian support is needed to revive villages that have been emptied by displacement.
- Increased economic opportunities are required – especially for women who are ostracised and stigmatised for coming out of the bush with babies.
- Communities must be sensitised regarding the experiences and vulnerability of returnees – We are working to do this through radio messaging. It's hard but we are doing it because we recognise that understanding and dialogue is the only way to peace. We ask for your support

### *3. Need to reaching out to LRA*

Re-establishing channels of communication with the LRA is the biggest challenge that we are faced with. As a Regional Civil Society Task Force, we feel that there is a strong need to continue to discretely and effectively engage with senior LRA leadership. Confidence-building measures, including developing a clear strategy for communicating incentives to individual LRA commanders (especially mid-level commanders) with a view to encourage them to abandon rebellion needs to be done. Such explanations must be designed for comprehension by the LRA leadership – including strategies to address issues of real and imagined personal security.

Let's not lose hope and patience. We appeal to the international community and governments to support civil society's peacemaking role. This is crucial for maintaining the space for us to act and ensure that important community-led dimension of the conflict resolution processes continue and are consolidated.

While there are reasonable structures to handle returnees from the LRA in Uganda (psychosocial support and reintegration), the situation in other LRA-affected areas is different. We appeal to the international community to reconsider victims of the LRA in these areas and also establish community centres that can address the multiple needs of communities.

We appreciate that the UN/AU has come up with a strategy to address the LRA. Part of the strategy is to encourage defection from the LRA through the use of radio programmes, leaflets and other techniques of messaging. However, we noted that there is no clear strategy of engagement beyond the radio programs and leaflets. How do you encourage defection if you do not engage with them?

We appeal to the international community to:

- Increase support to our radio messages – FM radio and expand radio / signal coverage
- Develop a clear strategy of engaging with individuals in the bush with a view of encouraging them to return. Otherwise, how do you encourage defection if you can't talk to them?
- Political and legal space is needed for people to be able to engage with the LRA without being arrested.
- There must be a comprehensive approach to amnesty in the region: LRA returnees shouldn't be arrested, it sends the wrong message to others who you want to defect.
- The LRA are still our abducted children. Learning to forgive can be painful but taking this non-violent approach saves the lives of more innocent children who've been abducted, and will help to facilitate their return home.

For more information on the composition of the Regional Civil Society Task Force, please see [www.c-r.org/RCSTF](http://www.c-r.org/RCSTF)