



Lord's Resistance Army

Current status

The US-supported military offensive conducted by the Ugandan Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) since December 2008 has had mixed results. LRA communications and operational capacity have been disrupted, but most senior commanders remain at large and their ability to wreak havoc remains unhindered. According to recent UN reports, the LRA has killed close to 3,000 people and displaced 400,000 since December 2008.

Pursuing small LRA groups scattered across vast areas of the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and South Sudan has overstretched UPDF supply lines and logistics while negatively affecting the morale of its soldiers. Last year, UPDF commanders stated that the army was asked by CAR president François Bozizé to retreat to its bases in Djemah and Obo in the south of the country, near the DRC border. As of January 2011 most UPDF troops were confined to these bases, leaving only small units tracking LRA groups in CAR and the DRC. It is unclear why President Bozizé requested the Ugandans to withdraw; his move may reflect a desire to increase the CAR army's role in pursuing the LRA, in the hope of receiving international—particularly US—assistance.

Complicating matters, Ugandan military engagement in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the need for troops in the volatile Ugandan region of Karamoja have resulted in a gradual drawdown of UPDF troops from the LRA front. By December 2010 five battalions of Ugandan soldiers were in Somalia (approximately 4,500 of the mission's 8,000 troops, the remaining being Burundian soldiers), according to AMISOM.

Given the LRA's absence from Uganda since 2006 and the run-up to the Ugandan parliamentary and presidential elections that took place in February 2011—which drew away UPDF soldiers to provide election-related security during primaries—the group's leader, Joseph Kony, is rapidly becoming a low priority for the Ugandan government. The defence minister announced in July 2010 that there were no funding provisions for the LRA war in the 2011 budget, adding that the money would have to come from Uganda's international partners if the fight were to continue. In November 2010, during the electoral campaign in northern Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni stated that Kony had been removed from Uganda for good. By March 2011 the UPDF had redeployed close to two-thirds of the initial force sent to deal with Kony in January 2009.

Uganda's most active partner in efforts to counter the LRA continues to be the United States. Key officials in the George W. Bush administration put significant pressure on the DRC government to permit Ugandan troops to enter the DRC for the 2008 offensive, while the US Army provided planning and logistics support. This support has continued, mostly focusing on military intelligence and fuel for UPDF helicopters.



A law signed by US president Barack Obama on 24 May 2010 could significantly increase US involvement. The Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 requires the US government to develop a multilateral interagency strategy:

to protect civilians from the Lord's Resistance Army, to apprehend or remove Joseph Kony and his top commanders from the battlefield in the continued absence of a negotiated solution, and to disarm and demobilize the remaining Lord's Resistance Army fighters.

On 24 November 2010 the Obama administration published its LRA strategy, which has four objectives: 1) protecting civilians in LRA-affected areas; 2) removing Kony and his top commanders from the battlefield; 3) encouraging LRA defections; and 4) ensuring humanitarian access. The strategy is vague on how the US administration intends to deliver on these objectives, although some of the details are probably published in a confidential annexe, particularly in relation to the second objective.

Partly in preparation for the forthcoming strategy, the governments of CAR, the DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda met under the auspices of the African Union (AU) on 13 and 14 October 2010 to discuss the LRA problem. A series of measures were agreed at the meeting, which took place in the CAR capital, Bangui, including joint patrolling of borders, the creation of a joint brigade to pursue LRA fighters, and the establishment of a joint command headquarters to exchange military intelligence on the group. It is unclear how quickly these agreements will be implemented, and funding will remain a key stumbling block. A European Union (EU) official said privately in Kampala recently that the EU intended to support the AU initiatives on the LRA, particularly the introduction of an AU special envoy to LRA-affected areas. Not much progress had been made by early March 2011, however.

Origins and history

Formed in April 1987 as the Lord's Salvation Army, the group of fighters led by Kony became known as the LRA in 1994. It was founded in response to violence in northern Uganda perpetrated by soldiers of the National Resistance Army (NRA) of President Museveni, who came to power in 1986. NRA soldiers committed abuses against civilians in the north while fighting the Uganda People's Democratic Army, an armed opposition group comprising soldiers from northern Uganda loyal to Tito Okello, whom Museveni overthrew while taking power.

The LRA came to life as a movement to address the Ugandan government's chronic neglect and marginalization of northerners. The group initially enjoyed support among the northern population, but the forced recruitment of children and abuses such as mutilations and killings of civilians, which led to mass displacement, eroded its popular support.

As early as 1994 Kony found an ally in the Sudanese government. Khartoum aided the LRA as a response to Kampala's support for the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Museveni aided the SPLA in part to neutralize another Ugandan rebel group,



the West Bank Nile Front, which also had Khartoum's support. Former LRA fighters say that the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) provided the LRA with military supplies and training. Some LRA commanders, including Kony, travelled to Khartoum for medical care; meanwhile, SAF directly supplied the group's training camps in Sudan's Eastern Equatoria state, which borders on Uganda. Khartoum's assistance waned in 2001, however, after the US government listed the LRA as a terrorist organization; support stopped altogether in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Not long after the signing of the peace agreement, LRA troops started to move westward towards the DRC. By the end of 2006 almost all of the LRA fighters—estimated at 1,200—had settled in Garamba National Park.

Independent researchers put the number of LRA fighters as of 1 March 2011 at approximately 400, operating in CAR, the DRC, and South Sudan. This number represents half the strength of its force in December 2008, when the US-backed UPDF offensive (dubbed Operation Lightning Thunder) began. According to researchers not affiliated with the Ugandan government, the core of the LRA leadership and armed fighters is Ugandan, numbering 200–250 combatants. Another 150–200 fighters are Central African, Congolese, and Sudanese. Despite the relatively large number of foreign fighters, the LRA remains predominantly a Ugandan organization. Foreign fighters are forced to learn and speak Acholi and only Ugandans are promoted to senior ranks. In November a UPDF spokesperson claimed that the total number of LRA fighters had been reduced to between 150 and 200.

According to a high-ranking Ugandan army officer, the UPDF 'put out of action' (killed) 397 LRA fighters and captured 63 others between 14 December 2008 and August 2010. An additional 123 reportedly defected. The UPDF claims to have rescued 707 abductees, 86 of whom were children. No data has been made public by the Ugandan army regarding LRA activities during the past several months. Nor has it been possible to verify the numbers killed, given that the UPDF has not produced any concrete evidence, photographic or otherwise. But testimonies from former LRA fighters who have deserted since early 2009 indicate that encounters with the UPDF frequently leave many fighters dead. Despite these losses, the LRA has managed to survive, in large part due to its ability to replenish its ranks by abducting young men and women who are then brainwashed, trained, and forced to fight.

Coercion and fear are the foremost reasons that LRA fighters, both Ugandan and foreign, remain in the bush. The aim to engender regime change in Uganda—as stated in the past by LRA commanders—has become irrelevant now that LRA forces are operating far from that country. LRA fighters who have surrendered have reported that their commanders warned them not to return home because the UPDF would kill them. Despite attempts from the Ugandan government and the UN to dispel these myths, many fighters remain too afraid to leave the bush.

Efforts to encourage LRA fighters to defect were undermined recently when the Ugandan government captured and charged an LRA commander, Thomas Kwoyelo, with six counts of abduction. Ugandan authorities have stated that because he was



captured, as opposed to surrendering, he cannot benefit from amnesty. The Uganda Amnesty Act of 2000 makes no such distinction, however. On 6 September 2010 the mid-level commander was brought before the War Crimes Court in Kampala, becoming the first person ever to appear before the court, which was set up to prosecute grave crimes committed by rebel leaders and commanders, including those of the LRA. Kwoyelo's trial is to take place at the end of March 2011 in the northern Ugandan town of Gulu.

According to the UPDF, at least 22 commanders holding the rank of captain or above have been killed or captured since December 2008. Three senior LRA commanders have been killed: Col. Santos Alit in August or September 2009; Col. Michael Epedu (alias 'the Technician') on 9 October 2009; and Brig. Bok Abudema on 31 December 2009. Ugandan authorities claim that Brig. Ochan Bunia was killed in April 2009, but LRA fighters who surrendered more recently say he is still alive. Nevertheless, the LRA top leadership remains intact. More than 70 LRA commanders holding the rank of captain or above continue to fight and no top leaders have been killed since December 2009.

Leadership

Joseph Kony maintains his position as chairman and overall commander of the LRA. Okot Odhiambo is the LRA troop commander and Kony's deputy. Other senior commanders include Brigs. Caesar Achellam, Dominic Ongwen, and 'Nixman' Opuk Oryang. These five form the LRA high command. The International Criminal Court indicted Kony, Odhiambo, and Ongwen for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2005, for abuses committed against civilians in Uganda; all three commanders remain at large. No current criminal investigations into LRA crimes are under way outside Uganda. At least one commander accused of perpetrating mass killings in the DRC in December 2008, Charles Arop, recently received amnesty in Uganda. Arop is now fighting with the UPDF against the LRA.

Senior LRA commanders, with few exceptions, have been constantly on the move since the end of December 2008, trying to evade their UPDF pursuers. Since the Ugandan army has focused its pursuit on the high command, mid-level officers have taken on increased responsibilities, operating almost completely independently and occasionally managing to settle in areas of the DRC. Lt. Col. Okot Odek, for example, operated independently between Dungu and Nabanga ya Talo for months, while Maj. David Lakwo was based in the Bas-Uélé region for more than a year, with little or no contact with other LRA groups.

Areas of control/activity

As of the beginning of March 2011 the LRA remained active in parts of CAR and the DRC, with sporadic attacks in South Sudan. The majority of LRA forces, close to 300 fighters, are now reportedly based in the Haut-Uélé region of the DRC. According to field reports, Kony and a group of over 100 fighters returned to the DRC at the beginning of 2011, entering via northern Bas-Uélé region and moving into Haut-Uélé by January 2011.



Democratic Republic of the Congo

The areas worst affected by the LRA are in the DRC, as attacks have continued unabated since the UPDF offensive started in December 2008. Most of the attacks take place in Haut-Uélé territory, but Bas-Uélé, especially north of Ango, has also been affected. Some of the worst LRA violence took place during December 2008, when close to 900 people were killed in Faradje, Duru, and Doruma, and in December 2009, when more than 300 people were killed in Makombo.

The re-emergence of Kony in the DRC seems to coincide with an increase in attacks against civilians even in areas that were previously considered free of LRA elements, such as Faradje and Abba. Radio Okapi reported attacks in Faradje on 1 and 2 January 2011 that caused the deaths of two people, including a member of the Congolese armed forces. Three young women were also abducted. On 15 January a Congolese nun and two other civilians were allegedly shot by an LRA group on the road to Ngilima, a place repeatedly attacked by the LRA since March 2009. Attacks continued in February with at least three killings in Niangara and two in Dungu and a large number of abductions in Niangara, Ngilima, Bangadi, and Dungu.

Religious groups from the Dungu-Doruma area in Haut-Uélé issued a statement requesting DRC government officials to stop downplaying the threat of the LRA and to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate the death of the Congolese nun. 'For the love of our people, we can no longer remain silent about the central government's policy of playing down the gravity of the LRA and its attacks', said the statement, signed by Bishop Richard Domba Mady of Doruma-Dungu and 38 priests and nuns.

South Sudan

Since January 2009 LRA attacks in Sudan have focused primarily on Western Equatoria state (WES). The violence has taken place in cycles related to the movements of a particular group under Brig. Dominic Ongwen. The latest major cycle of violence took place in mid-2010, when attacks on 30 July and 1 August triggered the displacement of civilians and significantly disrupted the rural economy.

After a lull in attacks in October and November, at least one LRA attack was reported in December in WES. On 20 December 2010 an alleged LRA attack in Maridi county left two people dead, while an estimated 50 people were abducted. Similar attacks between 23 and 27 December 2010 raised fears of efforts by the LRA to destabilize areas of South Sudan around the time of the referendum on its independence. According to initial reports from the ground, 10 people were killed by the LRA during this time, while at least 8 were abducted and over 500 were displaced in the Tombura-Yambio areas of WES. Violence attributed to the LRA in WES continued throughout January with attacks on the 14th in Namoongbiti and on the 26th in Gangura, both in Yambio county. Three people were abducted in the former attack and two killed in the latter. Despite such attacks, the referendum in WES proceeded largely in a calm fashion.



North Sudan

Interviews with former LRA combatants suggest that LRA fighters, possibly led by Joseph Kony, moved into South Darfur in North Sudan in October 2010. A representative of a Sudanese armed opposition umbrella group, the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), said that an LRA group attacked LJM forces on 8 September 2010 in Dafac, near South Darfur, killing one person. On 24 September 2010 an SPLA spokesperson said that LRA groups were operating inside South Darfur in Radom and Kanja. In October the International Crisis Group think tank also reported that Kony was operating in Darfur. It appears that a second meeting between the LRA and SAF—an initial meeting took place in October 2009—intended to inform Kony as to whether Khartoum would supply military and medical aid to the LRA, took place in October or November of 2010. According to an interview with a former LRA combatant present at the second meeting, the LRA did not subsequently receive any materials from SAF based in South Darfur.

A confidential Ugandan army report states that by the end of December 2010 about 100 LRA fighters led by Kony had moved back to CAR from South Darfur. This is consistent with reports from NGOs and the UN that the same group moved south into CAR and entered the DRC at the end of 2010 or the beginning of 2011.

Officials in Khartoum and West Darfur have repeatedly denied any LRA presence in North Sudan. Sudanese officials have instead accused the Ugandan government of supporting another Darfurian rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The Ugandan ambassador to Khartoum was twice summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August to provide explanations regarding allegations that President Museveni promised a JEM delegation in Kampala support against SAF.

Central African Republic

In CAR, LRA groups moving from the south-east to the north-west have attacked civilians in Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou prefectures. Derbissaka, Djemah, Mboki, Obo, Rafai, and Yalinga are only a few of the many locations that have been targeted by LRA fighters.

In the last ten days of December 2010 a spate of LRA attacks took place in south-eastern CAR close to the DRC border. It is possible that these were caused by LRA groups, led by Kony, returning from South Darfur via Vakaga prefecture south to Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou and moving into the DRC. Carried out between the towns of Zemio and Mboki, the attacks seem to have commenced 80 km west of Mboki on 21 December and continued until 30 December, reaching 12 km west of Mboki. A preliminary report puts the number killed at four and those abducted at 19 or more. A group of Ugandan soldiers were deployed from a base in Obo by the end of December to confront LRA troops who were believed to be arriving from the DRC.

The violence continued in January 2011. Local media reported attacks on 14 and 15 January 2011 in Agoumar, near Rafai, 100 km east of Bangassou. It is unclear how many people were killed or taken hostage. Notably, this is the sixth time the LRA has attacked Agoumar in the last 16 months. Few attacks were reported in January and



February 2011, possibly suggesting that most of the combatants have moved into the DRC, although it is likely that small pockets of LRA fighters remain in CAR.

Sources of financing/support

The LRA relies on the looting of local populations for its survival. Former fighters say they used assault rifles—mostly old Chinese-made AK-47s—that they received from LRA commanders. The majority of these firearms were stolen from UPDF and SPLA soldiers. Former LRA commanders also state that in the late 1990s Khartoum supplied the LRA with assault rifles, ammunition, and anti-personnel mines, some of which still remain in the group's possession.

The AK-47 remains the firearm of choice for LRA fighters, as ammunition is generally available in the areas where they operate, although bullets can also be scarce. According to testimony from recently captured LRA fighters, Ongwen's group possesses new guns and uniforms, as well as plentiful ammunition. The source of these supplies is unclear. Most of the group's ammunition and newly acquired firearms are stolen from soldiers killed by LRA fighters.

Commanders use satellite phones to communicate, and more often to send text messages. It is not clear who pays for the airtime for these phones. Ugandan intelligence officers believe it could be the Sudanese government, but there is no proof so far.

Opiyo 'Mission' Patrick, who joined the LRA during the Juba peace talks and was captured by the Ugandan army in March 2010, is among those who contend that the LRA has re-established its connection with Khartoum. He claims to have been part of a second LRA team of fighters who met SAF officers in January 2010 in Dafaq, a SAF base in South Darfur, north-west of Western Bahr el Ghazal. He alleges that he delivered a letter from Kony requesting military and material support, but was told that consultations with Khartoum were needed first. The details of the meeting remain unclear.

In November 2010 Felix Kulayigye, Uganda's defence ministry spokesperson, said, 'We cannot pronounce ourselves on whether Kony receives any support from the Sudanese authorities but what we can confirm is that [the Sudanese] are aware of his presence on their territory and they've not done anything to chase him.'

Updated March 2011