



The Lord's Resistance Army: Implementing Policy to End an Enduring Problem

Event Summary
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The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is one of the most brutal groups in Africa. Although it originated in Northern Uganda, The LRA has not been operating in Uganda since 2005. Operating today in remote parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), the LRA is a relatively small group of only a few hundred fighters whose tactics of attacking civilians and abducting children have continued to make them a significant human security problem in the region.

The Failures of Peace Talks

Peace talks have previously failed and are not likely to be successful in the future. The LRA used the 2008 peace process in Juba as a time to find new territory and consolidate power. The talks failed to even create a cease fire as the LRA continued to attack civilians throughout the peace process. During those talks 758 people were abducted by the LRA, which had moved into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). After the peace deal failed in 2008, Operation Lightning Thunder, a coordinated effort between Uganda, the DRC, and the United States, succeeded in destroying the LRA's established camps. However, the LRA splintered into small groups that now occupy swatch of territory the size of California. The operation resulted in some of the worst massacres and human suffering to date as the LRA retaliated by attacking local communities.

Furthermore, granting Joseph Kony amnesty is unlikely to help bring him back to the negotiating table. Joseph Kony has been living in the bush for 25 years and is revered by his militia as a god. The cult of

the LRA feeds Kony's megalomania and he is unlikely to be willing to give up his status. Kony is not just surviving in the bush; he is thriving and has little incentive to sign a peace treaty. Even if Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni gave Kony amnesty as he has previously suggested, he would come under intense international pressure to turn Kony over to the International Criminal Court. Kony must be aware of the emptiness of such an offer.

Preying on Marginalized People

The LRA is now operating in remote and marginalized parts of the DRC, Sudan, and the CAR. It purposely attacks marginalized communities in very remote areas whose suffering is least likely to attract attention. The LRA chooses to operate in countries that have broader problems. In the DRC most attention is focused on the Kivus, in Sudan the focus has been on North/ South conflict. Because of the remoteness of the areas where the LRA operates, it took over three months for word of a serious massacre in DRC to reach the outside world.

Most people in the affected area have no idea what the LRA is. All they know is that foreign militias are attacking their communities and stealing children. The LRA deliberately attacks civilians to abduct people and add to their numbers. There is a cycle of victims becoming perpetrators and up to 90% of combatants are abductees. Abductees, who are often children, go through a brutal induction process. Abductees are killed if caught attempting to escape and children are often forced to kill other children or even their own families. They are forced to learn and speak Acholi, even though the LRA no longer operates in Northern Uganda, to add to their assimilation into the group and separation from their home communities. Because of the LRA's ability to turn abductees into fighters, communities affected by them have shown a reluctance to accept abductees back into the community. Defected combatants are often brutalized by their own communities because of the anger and fear caused by attacks. Even children who have been abducted for as little as two weeks have been attacked by their communities after escaping the LRA.

Fighting the LRA: Guns and Radios

Because affected communities are marginalized and in remote areas, their own governments have done little to protect them. In Sudan, local militia groups have sprung up to protect themselves; however, similar groups in the DRC have been disbanded because the Congolese government saw them as a threat. The only army fighting the LRA on a regular basis is the Ugandan army (UPDF) and there are concerns about how much longer Uganda, who has already committed troops to the UN mission in Somalia and dealing with its own internal problems, will have energy to fight an elusive enemy far from its own borders. The UPDF has also committed numerous human rights violations, but it has been by far more professional than any other military group fighting the LRA and its protection is preferred by civilians over the Congolese army or MONUSCO.

Regional cooperation over the past two years has reduced the LRA's numbers. However, military assaults face considerable difficulties. The LRA operates in a battlefield across three countries. It is easy for fighters to avoid capture in the difficult jungle terrain where they are now located. The LRA often responds to military attacks by massacring civilians. In the past, the LRA has been able to recover from military losses and it will be important that they are not allowed to do so again.

Fighting the LRA has required a multi-pronged approach. Along with countering the group militarily, local governments and NGOs have been increasing the options for LRA fighters looking to surrender and providing humanitarian assistance to affected areas. Radio programming has played a key role in fighting the LRA in Uganda, where 10,000 ex-combatants have been reintegrated into society. Radio programming has been used to inform soldiers of amnesty programs and to change attitudes towards LRA escapees and deserters in affected communities. However, these programs need to be implemented in DRC and CAR, where there is no rehabilitation program yet and local radio stations suffer from very poor infrastructure.

The LRA is weaker than it has been at any other point in its history. An increasing number of fighters want to leave the bush and return to their communities. The group has a finite number of Ugandan commanders and has not promoted abductees from other countries to leadership positions. Despite limited success, there are new attacks on civilians every week. If this militia group is to be defeated once and for all, it will require a much stronger approach. There needs to be more attention paid to the kind of fighting that might be successful in countering the LRA and an increase in intelligence operations.

US Involvement

The United States has been engaged in the LRA for a long time. The US supported the Juba Peace Talks and then supported Operation Lightning Thunder when those talks failed. On May 24th 2010, President Obama signed the LRA Reconstruction and Recovery Act committing the United States to work towards ending this enduring conflict. The United States is perceived as the international leader on this issue. Without the US there would be much less international attention on the LRA, and the US has been able to guide the conversation, bringing more focus from the UN and the AU.

However, the United States cannot make the LRA its top priority. The LRA as the group does not pose a security threat to the United States or its citizens, and there are many other competing issues taking priority. In the current difficult budgetary environment in Washington, this is a difficult issue to provide increased funding for. There was no line item budget request for fighting the LRA and the president has not yet visited the region. It is important for there to be African ownership of this issue. There are limitations on what the United States can accomplish if the countries where the LRA is currently operating do not take an interest in protecting their own people. The new strategy for fighting the LRA needs to be comprehensive and game changing. There is a near consensus among the advocacy community, civil society, the US government, and local governments on what it will take to end the threat of the LRA. It will take a more significant commitment from the US and its local partners to make these changes happen.