

Ghosts of Christmas Past

Protecting Civilians from the LRA



Josephine, a former LRA
abductee, Haut-Uélé district, DRC.
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam,
September 2010

Almost daily, a small band of rebels known as the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, kills, abducts and attacks people across a vast area of central Africa.

The LRA has become the most deadly militia in Democratic Republic of Congo, with Christmas time over the past two years marked by appalling massacres. Since 2008, more than 400,000 people have fled their homes after the LRA rampaged across remote villages in Sudan, Central African Republic and DR Congo. Attacks came in retaliation to an ill-planned military offensive against the militia by regional armies.

The African Union and US government have recently announced initiatives to address the threat posed by the LRA. Renewed attention is welcome and vitally needed, but international and regional governments must learn the lessons of the past and ensure that future efforts provide effective security for local people. Women and men must be able to tend to their fields, children go to school and families sleep in their homes free from fear.

Summary

On Christmas Eve 2008 and over the following three weeks, 865 women, men and children were savagely beaten to death and hundreds more abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in a remote corner in the north-east of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and in southern Sudan. The attack was a murderous backlash in response to Operation "Lightning Thunder", a military offensive launched some 10 days before against the LRA by Uganda, DRC and southern Sudan. Less than a year later, between 14 and 17 December 2009, LRA commanders oversaw the killing of more than 300 people, again shattering communities in a remote corner of northern DRC.

Today the LRA continues to attack marginalised communities in Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and DRC almost four times a week. The militia now operates across an area 20 times bigger than it did before the "Lightning Thunder" offensive. Since September 2008, the LRA has killed more than 2,300 people and abducted more than 3,000. It has raped women and forced abducted children to commit horrific crimes. Over 400,000 people have fled from their homes for fear of attack, 260,000 of them in DRC. New figures show that over the last two years the LRA has become the most deadly militia in DRC.¹

In southern Sudan, a further 42,400 people have fled from LRA violence this year alone – one fifth of all those displaced in 2010. In all, an estimated 87,800 southern Sudanese have fled their homes as a result of LRA attacks since late 2008.² In southeast CAR, the LRA displaced at least 20,000 people in the first three months of 2010.

The acute suffering and mass population displacement the LRA has generated across international borders is undermining stability in an already fragile region, where southern Sudan is preparing to hold a landmark referendum on secession in early 2011.³

From its origins in northern Uganda, the LRA has morphed into a clear regional threat. It deliberately preys on people living in some of the most remote areas of central Africa, where there is very limited government presence, little or no functioning justice or police apparatus, and almost no road networks, phone coverage, electricity or essential services such as health clinics.

International efforts to address the LRA: the need to prioritise civilian protection

2010 has seen intensified, if long overdue, international momentum to address the threat posed by the LRA, with the African Union (AU) and the United States (US) government advancing specific courses of action to deal with the group.⁴

Encouragingly, both initiatives include commitments to enhancing civilian protection, improving humanitarian access, and encouraging the defection, disarmament and reintegration of LRA fighters. Such measures are desperately needed to reduce civilian suffering and will require concerted international support from the United Nations Security Council, regional governments, peacekeeping missions and donors.

The AU and US initiatives also refer to apprehending the LRA leadership. Without a doubt, a hardcore group of senior commanders is responsible for appalling atrocities. The international community should seek ways to prevent these commanders from orchestrating further attacks against innocent civilians – but for the sake of those civilians, much more thought is needed as to how this can be done.⁵

A long history of military action against the LRA has repeatedly failed to capture its leadership or to contain it as a threat to communities. In fact, it has had the opposite effect, dispersing the LRA and prompting horrific retaliatory attacks against civilians. Moreover, large numbers of the LRA are abducted civilians, many of them children, who may be placed in greater danger by a purely military approach. At the local level, authorities, civil society and churches, often with support from the UN and donors, have had some success in encouraging returns from the LRA. But much more must be done to promote the return and reintegration of rank and file and mid-level LRA fighters.

It is equally critical that UN peacekeeping missions and regional governments, with support from international partners, step up efforts today to protect civilians from the LRA. Despite the severity of the threat, the UN peacekeeping missions in the region – among them, the largest mission in the world in DRC – have failed to prioritise protecting civilians from the LRA. This must urgently change.

Survivor of December 2009
atrocities in the Makombo area of
Haut-Uélé district, DRC.
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam,
September 2010



Claude, 21 (name changed)

“The LRA crossed the river near my house and went from village to village, killing and kidnapping people as they went. They arrived at my house at six o’clock in the morning and tied me up. They ransacked the house... They then tied me to other boys in our village and we were forced to carry the goods they were stealing from us...

We walked three kilometres to the next village, where the LRA men did the same thing, kidnapping more than 100 people. This time though, they counted out 20 people, tied them up, and killed them by hitting them on the back of the head. They told us to move on and we continued walking, still tied to each other and carrying the heavy loot.

Every few kilometres we would stop and they would count out another 20 people and walk them into the bush. After a while, I was among the group that the LRA separated from rest. They tied our arms together behind our backs and forced us to kneel down. They took hammers, machetes and heavy sticks and began killing people one by one. One of the LRA men took a big stick and hit me hard on the back of my head. I blacked out.

When I woke up, I was still tied up and had several dead bodies piled on top of me. I spent four days drifting in and out of consciousness, tied up and bleeding in that stack of bodies. When people arrived to bury us, they discovered that I was still alive. They untied me and carried me to the nearest hospital, where I took six months to recover.”

Recommendations

Renewed international momentum to address the deadly threat from the LRA is welcome and vital, but it is imperative that it should be directed towards ensuring the safety and welfare of the women, men and children who have suffered at the hands of the LRA for far too long.

Ultimately, there needs to be long-term development and security to enable communities to live free from fear and poverty. In the interim, those abducted by the LRA must be helped to return to their homes, villages must be better protected from attacks, peaceful solutions must be sought and the risks of any military action mitigated.

1. Understanding the nature of the threat: the need for better information gathering, sharing and analysis

While the UN Security Council has called for improved information sharing between missions in the region, there is a chronic lack of information about the motivation, composition and location of the LRA. Better quality information is needed to promote a sustainable end to the conflict and more effective disarmament and protection responses, including by:

- The UN Security Council requesting the UN Secretary-General to submit a report on the regional impact of LRA violence, how the UN is responding to the crisis throughout the region, and further response options.
- The Security Council establishing a mechanism to improve understanding and monitoring of the LRA, such as a Panel of Experts mandated to investigate the group and report regularly to the Council on issues of relevance to the disarmament of combatants and the security of civilians.
- Regional governments and the international community stepping up engagement with civil society and church networks – a critical yet under-utilised resource – on developing peaceful solutions.

2. Preventing retaliation against the most vulnerable

Past attempts to deal with the LRA militarily have had a devastating impact on ordinary people. International actors such as the UN Security Council, US and AU and regional governments, namely in Uganda, DRC, Sudan and CAR, should direct their energies towards support for non-military action to address the threat posed by the LRA, but if a military approach is to be adopted it must involve:

- Planning to mitigate the risk of local residents being caught up in fighting or subjected to reprisal attacks, based on existing information and past experience.
- Coordinated planning of a protection response based on likely scenarios – for instance, military forces working with UN civilian agencies to draw up civilian protection contingency plans in the event of a spike in LRA attacks.
- The adoption of best practice on mitigating the risks of military action to civilians, including those abducted by the militia, many of whom are children. This involves avoiding the indiscriminate aerial bombing of LRA camps and ensuring that children and abductees are not placed at further risk.

3. Encouraging return from the bush

With many LRA fighters former civilian abductees, including children, encouraging return and reintegration into communities is crucial. This will involve:

- The UN working with regional governments to encourage and support the demobilisation and reintegration of LRA abductees and mid-level commanders.
- Demobilisation and reintegration programmes drawing on the frontline experience of civil society and churches, and catering for all categories of former combatants, including women and girls, who risk being excluded from these processes.

4. Protection by peacekeepers and national armies

UN peacekeeping missions and regional governments, supported by international partners, must prioritise protecting civilians from the LRA, including by:

- More effectively deterring and responding to attacks through mobile, proactive deployments to the areas most at risk and better engagement with communities, in particular women and girls.
- The UN Security Council and national governments ensuring that sufficient resources are available to enable peacekeepers and regional armies to undertake these tasks, and improving coordination and information sharing on protection needs and response.
- The leadership of the peacekeeping missions and national governments, supported by donors, providing specific training to national security services and peacekeeping forces to prepare them to respond to the different protection needs of women, children and men faced with LRA violence.

*Home abandoned during an LRA attack outside Nambia village, Haut-Uélé district, DRC.
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam,
September 2010*



5. Bringing aid, infrastructure and communications to remote villages

The remote and insecure nature of LRA-affected areas makes it extremely difficult for aid agencies to access people in need, while the lack of basic communications infrastructure, such as mobile phone and radio networks, means that communities cannot even warn neighbouring villages of an attack or call for help. Humanitarian access and communications must be drastically improved by:

- National governments and donors rehabilitating or building new road networks and undertaking a massive expansion in communications infrastructure for marginalised communities.
- Donors increasing humanitarian funding for LRA-affected areas for international and national NGOs.
- Peacekeeping missions providing security to facilitate access to LRA-affected areas by humanitarian agencies.

6. Security sector reform and development for the longer term

Ultimately, it is the very nature of the LRA-affected border areas – the marginalisation, underdevelopment and absence of state authority – that enables the LRA to operate and which consequently must be addressed. This will involve:

- National governments, supported by donors, building accountable state institutions, including national security forces that are able to protect the civilian population.
- Governments and donors working with civil society and communities to bring much needed development to LRA-affected areas.

Source: Reliefweb, 2010



1. Introduction

"The LRA come from the bush and attack silently at night. The police can't protect us against that. We won't return until it's safe."

Man displaced by LRA violence, Mundri, Western Equatoria, southern Sudan, July 2010

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a notoriously brutal rebel group, active for more than 20 years, with its origins in northern Uganda. From its emergence in 1986, the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government led to massive levels of destruction and suffering in the north of the country. Under the leadership of Joseph Kony, the LRA is composed largely of civilian abductees who are forced to commit atrocities in order to alienate them from their communities. Kony's supposed supernatural powers also help instil fear and loyalty among a disparate group of fighters.

Efforts to deal with the LRA have oscillated between military offensives and peace talks, led by the Ugandan government with varying degrees of involvement by regional governments and the wider international community. To date, none of these efforts have been successful, and military action has resulted in massive retaliatory attacks against civilians.

Following the breakdown of peace talks in 2008 and the subsequent Ugandan-led regional military operations, the LRA has dispersed into small groups and scattered across the region. It now threatens populations in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan and Central African Republic (CAR).

Security has improved in northern Uganda and many of those displaced by the LRA have returned home, but the legacy of the LRA continues to haunt its people. And in the meantime, the LRA has morphed into a regional threat: extremely violent attacks have occurred in DRC, southern Sudan and CAR, resulting in the killing and abduction of thousands of civilians and mass displacement. LRA fighters are thought to number in the hundreds, many of them abducted and coerced children. Yet, despite their relatively small numbers, the hallmark brutality of the LRA serves to spread suffering across vast tracts of central Africa. Even small-scale attacks send waves of terror throughout communities, causing mass displacement for miles around and leaving individuals traumatised for years to come. The LRA takes advantage of the absence of state authority in the remote, underdeveloped border regions of these countries, and now poses a clear threat to regional stability.

This paper is produced by the following organisations, who are all working in the affected countries or advocacy groups with a long-standing commitment to resolving the LRA threat:

Broederlijk Delen, CAFOD (UK), Christian Aid (UK), Conciliation Resources (UK), CORDAID (BE), Danish Refugee Council, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Intersos, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, Pax Christi Flanders, Peace Direct (UK), Refugees International, Resolve, Society for Threatened Peoples, Tearfund (UK), Trocaire, War Child (UK), World Vision.

It is informed by our day-to-day programme experience and by assessments, interviews and research conducted with communities on the ground over the course of 2009 and 2010.⁶

*Southern Sudanese family displaced by LRA violence in Western Equatoria, southern Sudan.
Photo: Caroline Gluck/Oxfam 2009*



The paper seeks to articulate the intense suffering caused both by LRA activity and by recent attempts to deal with the group militarily. Whilst welcoming the renewed international attention to the LRA, we are calling for words to be rapidly translated into deeds that make people safer on the ground. Achieving this will involve emphasising non-military options to address the threat from the LRA; scaling up humanitarian assistance; and ensuring more effective civilian protection by both peacekeepers and, ultimately, national security services. Above all, we call for sustained international commitment, which places the safety and welfare of affected women, men and children at the heart of efforts to address the threat of the LRA.

Terrorising a whole region – the facts

All figures are probably underestimates.

Since September 2008, the LRA has killed more than 2,300 people, abducted more than 3,000 and displaced over 400,000 others. The UN recorded nearly 200 attacks in the districts of Haut and Bas-Uélé in north-east DRC in the first 10 months of 2010, and 28 in southern Sudan to the end November.

It is estimated that 20% of the children abducted are forced to fight, 80% are used to do forced labour, and 100% of girls are raped.

Close to 260,000 people have fled their homes as a result of LRA violence in DRC, with an additional 20,000 Congolese civilians fleeing to Sudan and Central African Republic (CAR).

An estimated 15,000 people have fled LRA attacks in CAR this year alone and at least 1,500 have crossed into DRC.

More than 80,000 southern Sudanese were displaced by the LRA during 2009 and a further 42,400 in 2010.

2. The violence that haunts an entire region

The LRA is highly mobile and operates across a vast area, terrorising communities through extremely brutal and unpredictable violence. The predatory group attacks women as they perform their daily tasks – fetching water or tending to their fields – and children as they return from school. The LRA abducts, mutilates, rapes and kills women, men and children, using extreme violence against the most vulnerable. Survivors of such attacks are sometimes horribly mutilated – scarred for life with ears, lips or noses cut off – as a gruesome warning to others of what the group is capable of.

Democratic Republic of Congo

New figures show that over the last two years the LRA has become the most deadly militia in DRC.⁷ Since September 2008, the group has killed more than 1,900 people and abducted more than 2,500 across the districts of Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé, devastating lives and livelihoods. In the last year alone, more than 1,000 people, including children, have been killed or abducted in almost 200 separate attacks in these districts – almost four attacks a week in 2010.

Southern Sudan

In Western Equatoria – the worst affected state of southern Sudan – since the beginning of 2010, LRA rebels have carried out more than 28 attacks, killing, abducting, looting and burning down homes. In just four months between May and August 2010, in the two counties of Tambura and Nzara, the rebel group abducted three children and 15 adults, killed seven and wounded a further four people. Several villages, health clinics and churches were looted. As a result of such attacks, tens of thousands have fled from their homes to seek refuge in larger towns.

As one of the most fertile and relatively stable states in southern Sudan, Western Equatoria should have thrived following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Instead, insecurity and mass movements of people fleeing their homes in fear of attack have devastated otherwise self-sufficient farming communities and significantly hampered attempts to deliver desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Central African Republic

The impact of LRA activity is most difficult to assess in affected areas of CAR, where there are very few humanitarian agencies present and almost all the UN peacekeepers there have withdrawn. But the limited information that does come from civil society groups in the area, and from researchers who visit, suggests that the LRA continues to be a serious danger to civilians. It has been reported that at least 20,000 people fled LRA attacks in the first three months of 2010,⁸ and that in the 12 months to August 2010, 304 children and adults were abducted,⁹ although both of these figures are likely to be underestimates.

Beyond the numbers: the disproportionate impact of LRA violence

The impact of the LRA goes beyond even those killed, maimed, raped or abducted. The extreme brutality of the LRA and their targeting of the most vulnerable, isolated villages mean that even small-scale attacks send waves of terror throughout communities, causing mass displacement for miles around and leaving individuals traumatised for years to come. Hundreds of thousands continue to live in poor conditions far from home. Too afraid to return to their villages and fields, many face hunger and are vulnerable to disease and abuse.

Fear of abduction and falling prey to the LRA dominates the lives of people who have fled their homes – fears that are then reinforced by the testimonies of escaped or rescued abductees. Civil society groups in southern Sudan have detected signs that this constant anxiety is leading to changes in the behaviour of LRA-affected populations. For example, parents are reportedly seeking earlier marriage for their daughters in an attempt to protect them from the sexual violence the LRA are notorious for.¹⁰

Years after the end of major LRA activity in northern Uganda, 200,000 people have yet to return home and remain highly vulnerable to conditions of “failed crops and hunger, land disputes, forcible evictions and insufficient social services.”¹¹

The psychological impact of LRA brutality can last even longer. Children who have been forced to kill family members, victims who are physically scarred for life after having their nose or lips cut off, women and girls who have been raped and return home with children following LRA captivity – all often find themselves ostracised within their communities and having to deal with deep-seated trauma.

Counter-productive military action

Joseph Kony and senior LRA commanders are essential to the group’s survival and have been responsible for perpetrating unthinkable brutal attacks against civilians. Communities in the affected areas are desperate to see an end to the violence. Preventing these commanders from orchestrating further attacks against civilians must be a priority for regional and international action.

Yet the long history of military action against the LRA has repeatedly failed to capture the leadership of the LRA or to contain the threat that LRA units pose to communities. Instead it has, at times, had the opposite effect. A December 2008 regional military offensive, “Lightning Thunder”, targeting an LRA hideout in north-east DRC, failed to capture any senior rebel commanders. But in retaliation, LRA commanders ordered a series of massacres starting on Christmas Day, in which over 850 people were killed.¹² Since then, the murderous attacks against civilians have continued, killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands, as the LRA has dispersed into small groups across a vast region. The offensive has pushed the LRA further from their native Uganda, across an area 20 times larger than before it began.

December 2009 saw a grim re-enactment of the Christmas massacres: between 14 and 17 December, LRA commanders oversaw the killing of more than 300 people in one of the worst massacres in their 20-year history, shattering communities in a remote corner of northern DRC that had previously been considered relatively safe. One year on and the rebel group continues to attack marginalised communities in Sudan, CAR and DRC. These communities await Christmas with fear.

3. Civilian protection, or protection by civilians?

As a regional problem the LRA has sometimes seemed like nobody's responsibility – falling between the cracks of both national and international attention. The UN Security Council has long dropped addressing the LRA threat as a specific agenda item and has failed to respond adequately to LRA atrocities. While AU ministers meeting in Bangui, CAR, in October 2010 importantly agreed to incorporate the protection of civilians in any future military action, the reality across the region at present is that national governments have been unable or unwilling to prioritise civilian protection in LRA-affected areas. As a result, many communities have taken desperate measures to ensure their own protection.

"I don't know if I have HIV because there is nowhere to get tested in Niangara. We now live as displaced people in a town where there are some UN peacekeepers so we feel safer, but in our village there is no one to protect us. Until the UN comes to our area, it is too dangerous for us to access our fields and so we go hungry."

Woman, 18, former child abductee, Niangara, DRC, September 2010

National security forces: a mixed picture

National governments have a responsibility to protect their citizens from the LRA, yet the LRA largely operates in areas where national security services and state structures are weak or absent. In the long term, the security vacuum must be filled by well-trained national police and armed forces. Currently such forces do provide some protection in the form of escorts to markets or fields and a deterrent presence in some villages. However, armies and police forces often lack the equipment, training and transport needed to offer adequate protection to their own populations beyond this.

In northern DRC, for example, government army troops (FARDC) are deployed across a wide area and have become increasingly engaged in repelling LRA attacks and securing the release of abductees over the past year. However, often deployed in small numbers, ill-equipped and poorly supported, FARDC troops lack capacity to offer effective protection and in very many cases have themselves been responsible for violence and abuse against the local population. Communities in north-eastern DRC routinely report a succession of abuses by the Congolese army and police, including widespread sexual violence, which they link to the absence of effective discipline and justice, and frequent delays in the payment of wages.

Local men and women in Dungu territory, DRC, described in July 2010 how the Congolese army deployed on the outskirts of population centres were too small and ill-equipped to respond to the increased threat of the LRA, and so had moved their bases inside the villages for greater safety: "We're the ones protecting the FARDC, not the other way around."¹³

Patchy peacekeeping

None of the UN peacekeeping missions in the countries worst affected by violence have consistently prioritised protecting communities from the LRA.¹⁴ An absence of information-sharing and coordination both between UN missions and with national armies, as well as resource constraints – such as too few civilian staff and too few helicopters to reach remote locations – further hamper their ability to respond effectively to the threat posed by the LRA.

Efforts by the mission in DRC (MONUSCO, formerly MONUC) to step up patrols and deployments over the Christmas period in 2009 and again in 2010¹⁵ are welcome, but cannot adequately or durably compensate for the systematic lack of attention and resources devoted to the threat of the LRA. MONUSCO forces left the district of Bas-Uélé in August 2010 despite continuing LRA violence. This has left communities vulnerable to attack and hampered aid agencies' efforts to assist tens of thousands of displaced people in the district. Peacekeepers, civilian personnel and transport equipment remain disproportionately under-deployed in the LRA-affected areas of DRC compared to other areas of the country: MONUSCO has some 18,500 peacekeepers in DRC, but fewer than 1,000 are in LRA-affected areas.

Although UNMIS – the peacekeeping mission in southern Sudan – is also meant to help protect civilians from the LRA, its resources are stretched across the south and it has struggled to make the best use of those it does have. A newly approved mission strategy on civilian protection provides the opportunity for UNMIS to put intent into practice and mitigate the risk the LRA poses to civilians, in particular in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal.

In CAR, the situation is worse still. There are no UN peacekeepers at all in LRA-affected zones of CAR. The UN's MINURCAT peacekeeping force in Chad and CAR, already absent from the affected areas, has begun a process of drawdown and is due to pull out altogether before the end of 2010.

Self-defence groups: storing up problems for the future

In the absence of adequate protection by state authorities and UN peacekeepers, communities across the region have taken up arms to protect themselves, setting up local defence groups composed largely of boys and young men.

It is entirely understandable that communities should choose to defend themselves when those mandated to protect them fail to do so, but self-defence groups are not the answer. Sending men, and children who could otherwise be in school, out to fight in place of professional armed forces cannot be an – even tacitly – accepted component of national and international strategy.

Eastern DRC is full of examples of local defence groups morphing into violent militias, or lapsing into semi-organised banditry. Similarly, in southern Sudan, where there is a history of politicised inter-communal violence, rearming civilians could create a further destabilising factor ahead of next year's referendum. It also runs counter to the government of southern Sudan's efforts to disarm communities in other states.

The answer is not to condemn the communities concerned, but to improve the effectiveness of peacekeepers and national armies so that such desperate measures at the community level become unnecessary.

4. Cut off from help

The LRA deliberately preys on people living in some of the most marginalised, underdeveloped areas of central Africa, where there is very limited government presence, little or no functioning justice or police apparatus, and almost no road networks, phone coverage, electricity or essential services like health clinics. This makes it extremely difficult to keep civilians safe and deliver much-needed humanitarian aid after attacks. Poor communications also mean that numbers of people killed, attacked and abducted are likely to be even higher than reported.

Needs going unmet

The difficult terrain, a lack of security support to reach remote communities, and limited funding for emergency aid has resulted in a woefully inadequate humanitarian response to the huge needs across the region. While some local church groups and community-based organisations have developed coping strategies to surmount the challenges and are able to reach affected populations, most aid agencies cannot operate effectively in a context of rampant insecurity. As a result, few agencies are active in the areas most affected, and their scope is limited to a relatively small radius – owing to painfully slow travel on degraded roads and dirt tracks – around a number of less-insecure population centres.

For instance, in remote Bas-Uélé, one of the areas worst affected by LRA violence in DRC, almost half (43%) of those displaced received no international assistance at all in 2010.¹⁶ A recent interagency assessment highlighted urgent needs in Ango territory, which cannot be met without the deployment of peacekeepers to protect civilians and secure access.¹⁷ Other areas of particular concern include northern Haut-Uélé in DRC; Tambura, Ezo and Nzara in Sudan; and affected parts of eastern CAR, where humanitarian agencies are few and far between.

As a result, large-scale humanitarian needs remain unmet and in many places cannot even be assessed. Urgent action is needed to prevent and combat disease, promote food security and reduce malnutrition. More also needs to be done to provide sustained psychosocial support to those attacked, abducted and traumatised by the LRA.

Voices unheard

Basic information on the impact of the LRA is also lacking or far too slow to filter through. Shockingly, even in the case of horrific massacres, like the one in December 2009 when more than 321 people were killed over four days, the news can take months to come to international attention.

Critically, the absence of basic communications infrastructure, such as mobile phone or radio networks and, means that villages are unable to sound the alarm, warn neighbouring villages, or to call for help in the event of attacks. This deprives communities of even the most basic coping mechanism – having enough advance warning to run.



*Aerial view of Niangara town, DRC
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam,
September 2010*

Dangerous living

The lack of essential services increases people's exposure to attack

In a tragic incident repeated in villages across Haut-Uélé in DRC, in September 2010 two girls were abducted by the LRA while collecting water at a spring outside Nambia in Niangara territory; they had to go outside because the handpump on the well in the village itself was broken. The babies they were carrying on their backs were abandoned by the spring. It is estimated that less than 10% of the population of Haut-Uélé district have local access to clean water.

5. Putting words into action that saves lives

The acute suffering and mass population displacement the LRA has generated across a vast area straddling three international borders; the increased violence in already unstable Eastern DRC; the group's impact on regional food security; recent reports of arms trafficking; and its potential to create instability at a critical time ahead of the upcoming Sudanese referendum make the LRA a clear threat to regional peace and security. Finding international and regional solutions to this threat are therefore an urgent necessity.

Over the course of 2010, the US government, AU, UN, European Union and the World Bank have moved the issue of the LRA higher up their respective agendas.¹⁸ The AU and US have both outlined specific courses of action to address the LRA. Importantly, they have committed to enhancing protection from the LRA, encouraging escape and defection, and stepping up humanitarian aid to affected communities. Their policy statements also refer to apprehending LRA leaders.

This increased international momentum to address the threat posed by the LRA is welcome. But if it is to save lives, the US and AU must take stock of the past: ill-planned military operations against the group have led to vastly more – not less – civilian suffering. Moreover, as a transnational problem, the LRA requires a coordinated international response. The wider international community, in particular the UN Security Council, must urgently prioritise this threat.

As this paper is being written, ordinary women, men and children are being attacked by the LRA or living in fear of attack. Statements of intent by international actors must now be turned into a reality for local communities, who have been suffering for far too long.

Ghosts of Christmas Future

Recommendations for Next Steps

1. Understanding the nature of the threat: the need for better information gathering, sharing and analysis

There is a chronic lack of information about the motivation, composition and location of the LRA, and poor information-sharing among regional peacekeeping missions and governments about a rebel group that operates across borders. Better-quality information about the LRA is urgently needed to promote more effective disarmament and protection responses. Gathering and effectively sharing this information across national boundaries will involve:

- The UN Security Council requesting the UN Secretary-General to submit a report on the regional impact of LRA violence, how the UN is responding to the crisis throughout the region, and further response options.
- The UN Security Council initiating a more effective mechanism to improve understanding and monitoring of the LRA, such as a UN Panel of Experts. Neither the Panel of Experts on Sudan nor the Group of Experts on DRC has the mandate or capacity to investigate the LRA effectively. This mechanism should seek to increase understanding of the LRA in order to promote disarmament and improve protection responses.
- More effective engagement at local and regional levels with civil society and church networks – a critical yet under-utilised resource – on developing peaceful solutions.

2. Preventing retaliation against the most vulnerable

It is imperative that any consideration of future military action to apprehend senior LRA commanders should include effective contingency plans to protect civilians, incorporating the lessons from past offensives. This includes the need for realism about the potential of members of national armies to abuse civilians, women in particular. Regional governments and their international partners should direct their energies towards exploring peaceful solutions to the LRA threat (detailed below). But if military operations are to go ahead then it is vital that steps should be put in place to limit the risks to civilians, including:

- Planning to mitigate the risk of local residents being caught up in fighting or subjected to reprisal attacks, based on existing information and past experience.
- Coordinated planning of a protection response based on likely scenarios – for instance, military forces working with UN civilian agencies to draw up civilian protection contingency plans for the event of a spike in LRA attacks.
- The adoption of best practice on mitigating the risks of military action to civilians, especially those abducted by the militia, who include children. This involves avoiding the indiscriminate aerial bombing of LRA camps and ensuring that children and abductees are not put at further risk.

3. Encouraging return from the bush

The LRA relies on abductions to sustain itself, and large numbers of its ranks are kidnapped civilians, many of them children, who are now far from home or have been forced to commit atrocities designed to instil fear and alienate them from their communities.

It is likely, however, that many of these abductees are desperate to return to the safety of home; the steady stream of defections by Ugandan fighters – the core of the LRA – is instructive.¹⁹ Demobilisation and reintegration efforts spearheaded by the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC (MONUSCO) over the course of 2010 are also bringing LRA combatants “out of the bush”.

The handful of civil society groups working in the affected areas of CAR have also reported that defections have taken place there as well, and that these could be further encouraged by outreach efforts such as radio broadcasts and leaflets to convince LRA fighters that they can go home.²⁰

Overall, much more must be done to encourage the escape, defection and demobilisation of rank-and-file and mid-level LRA commanders. This will weaken the militia and allow LRA fighters, who are typically victims as well as perpetrators, to rebuild their lives. Encouraging return and reintegration will involve:

- The UN and national governments taking the lead in coordinating non-military action to promote the escape and demobilisation of LRA combatants and abductees. Such programmes must cater for all categories of former combatants and LRA abductees, including women and girls, who are often excluded from such formal processes, and be closely coordinated with civil society and church networks.
- The UN and AU opening channels of communication at multiple levels to make fighters aware of their options. This will involve working through the relevant Special Envoys,²¹ as well as through radio programmes and leaflet drops. This also requires provision of exit routes to enable defections and escape from the LRA.
- Donor support for demobilisation and community-based disarmament and reintegration programmes, and the establishment of reception centres, drawing on the experience of frontline civil society organisations and churches. These organisations can also provide useful analysis of what can encourage the defection of rank-and-file LRA members, as well as commanders.²²
- Increased funding for the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-LRA fighters into their communities, with an investment in long-term community-based survivor support.



Former LRA abductee, Haut-Uélé district, DRC. Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam, September 2010

Josephine, 18 (name changed)

“My parents and brothers left in the morning as usual to work in the fields and I stayed at home to cook... At lunchtime they came back and as we were eating we heard gunshots. A boy who lives nearby came running shouting that the LRA had attacked...

We left the house as quickly as possible. After about 100 metres, my grandmother said that she had forgotten something and went back to the house to get it. It was too late: a group of about 80 LRA men arrived and surrounded us. They tied us up and then shot and killed my grandfather right in front of me. They took me and my three brothers into the bush, leaving behind my mother and grandmother. After an hour of walking they separated us and I was left with my 14-year-old brother Patrick. My two other brothers were never seen again.

I was held by the LRA for eight months. We were always on the move, staying in any one place no more than a week. I was forced to carry heavy loads, find food and cook... Girls like me, some as young as 12, were forced to become the “wives” of the LRA men. I was assigned to a boy who... had also been kidnapped, but was now an LRA fighter. They sometimes would take one boy and tie him up, then force another boy to kill him by hitting him on the back of the head with a heavy stick or a machete.

I was finally able to escape one day when I was sent out to look for food. When the LRA fighters who were accompanying us fell asleep, another girl and I ran away. We walked 40 kilometres and finally arrived to safety in a village in Sudan. Patrick escaped two months after me during an attack on the LRA by the Ugandan army.”

4. Protection by peacekeepers and national armies

National armies can and must do more to protect civilians from LRA violence (see point 6 below), but they remain overwhelmed by a task for which they are largely untrained and under-equipped. International peacekeeping missions thus have a critical role to play in supporting and complementing regional and national protection efforts. The hard truth is that effective protection of civilians in LRA-affected areas will require more resources for peacekeeping, not less, and this must be taken into account in any discussion of reconfiguration or drawdown of the UN forces in the region and in mandate renewals and implementation.

Despite their limitations, MONUSCO and UNMIS have an important contribution to make in keeping civilians safe in LRA-affected areas of DRC and southern Sudan – and clear mandates to do so. To this end, the UN in New York and peacekeeping missions on the ground should:

- The leadership of MONUSCO and UNMIS should make decisions on deployment of their resources (military and civilian) based on where the civilian population is most at risk. The UN Security Council must ensure that the required resources are available.²³
- The missions' leadership, with support from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), should deploy civilian staff with relevant human rights and protection experience to support peacekeepers in the affected areas. Civilian staff, especially female personnel, are essential for liaising with the local population on their protection needs – particularly women and girls, who are often harder to reach than men.²⁴
- MONUSCO and UNMIS must ensure their deployments are as effective as possible. This means longer and more proactive patrolling during the day and night and conducting unpredictable short-term deployments across a wider area in order to provide a genuine deterrent; improving engagement with communities; stepping up monitoring and information sharing, and responding more effectively to threats.
- DPKO and the mission leadership should provide specific training to prepare peacekeepers to respond to the different protection needs of women, children and men faced with LRA violence.
- DPKO should develop a common strategic framework for improved coordination and information-sharing between the peacekeeping missions in the region, to enable more effective protection of civilians. This should also include UN missions in neighbouring areas, in particular UNAMID in Darfur.

5. Bringing aid, infrastructure and communications to remote villages

It is no coincidence that the LRA operates in some of the most remote and underdeveloped areas of Central Africa. Such an environment lends itself to the group's predatory approach, targeting the most vulnerable where the chances of facing a counter-attack are least.

The same conditions that facilitate the operations of the LRA – a lack of basic roads and infrastructure, the absence of communications equipment for communities to give warning or call for help, and the insufficient presence of national and international forces to protect civilians – present major challenges for the supply of urgently needed aid to affected villages and towns.

"Where we live there is no mobile phone network or community radio, so communication is difficult. That is why the LRA were able to attack village after village. If we had mobile phones, we could have been warned that they were coming and we would have fled before they arrived."

*Man, 21, Niangara, DRC,
September 2010*

For widespread food insecurity and lack of access to clean water and sanitation, essential healthcare and psychosocial support to be addressed, the flow of aid must significantly increase. This will require a number of steps to improve access, security and communications, including:

- Governments and donors rehabilitating and building new road networks.
- Donors increasing humanitarian funding to LRA-affected areas for both international and local NGOs and community groups – these last possibly the only actors that can reach the most remote communities.
- Peacekeeping missions creating a safer environment that allows humanitarian agencies to reach LRA-affected populations; the resourcing and deployment of UNMIS in southern Sudan and MONUSCO in DRC, must give due weight to the scale of needs.
- International donors, working with private partners, funding a massive expansion of radio and telecommunications coverage and of road access to enable communities to warn one another of impending attack and to call for assistance and protection. The highest-impact, lowest-risk way of improving the communication systems would be to invest in an expansion of mobile phone coverage, through the positioning of phone masts in collaboration with mobile phone companies in the region.

6. Security reform and development for the long term

Ultimately, it is the very nature of the LRA-affected border areas – the marginalisation, underdevelopment and absence of state authority – that must be addressed. This will require building accountable state institutions, including national security services that are able to protect their citizens from LRA attacks and are not themselves sources of abuse. Reducing poverty, providing essential services, promoting equitable development and political inclusion for the population together with reform of state security forces must be part of the overall strategy to combat LRA violence. This will involve:

- National governments, with strong, coordinated support from international donors, ensuring their armies and police force are paid, equipped, disciplined and held accountable for crimes committed against civilians.
- National security services receiving specific training to respond to the different protection needs of women, children and men faced with LRA violence.
- National armies deploying troops with regard for their human rights track record and prior protection training, and with military police accompaniment.
- National governments and donors working together with civil society and communities themselves to provide essential services and develop infrastructure for marginalised communities.

Conclusions

Recent renewed international attention to the threat of the LRA is welcome and necessary. For the sake of ordinary women, men and children of DRC, CAR and southern Sudan who continue to experience extreme suffering at the hands of the LRA, political statements must translate into real and lasting improvements in civilian safety.

Considerable international and regional debate has focused on military strategies to apprehend the LRA leadership. But much more attention must be given to keeping safe those who have been most affected by the group. There can be no repeat of the devastating consequences, which previous military operations have had for civilians. The protection of civilians must be the most urgent and critical priority for regional governments, the AU, the US, the UN Security Council and the wider international community.

There are peaceful options available that must be considered as part of any comprehensive strategy to respond to the LRA. These include encouraging the escape, demobilisation and reintegration of LRA fighters and working to end the marginalisation of LRA-affected areas by providing infrastructure, communications and essential services to communities.

Finally combating the threat from the LRA in the region will take sustained commitment from the international community and national authorities. They must work together with civil society, humanitarian agencies and communities to turn words into action that produces real and lasting improvements in security. Only concerted decisive action can prevent future Christmases being a time of violence and fear for communities across the border regions of central Africa.

Notes

1. According to OCHA, in the last year alone more than 1,000 people, including children, have been killed or abducted in almost 200 separate attacks in the districts of Haut-and Bas-Uélé in north-eastern Congo.
2. See <http://www.unhcr.org/4bed39619.html>
3. May 2010, HIU State Department, "Lord's Resistance Army: Reported Attacks, Displacement, and Peacekeepers." As quoted on Resolve Uganda website <http://www.theresolve.org/key-statistics>
4. In November 2010, the US government announced its 'Strategy to support the disarmament of the Lord's Resistance Army', <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/24/letter-president-strategy-support-disarmament-lords-resistance-army>, accessed 5 December 2010. Meanwhile, at a meeting in Bangui in October 2010, the African Union agreed to develop joint action in response to the LRA, and set out a number of core areas to be explored: African Union, Communiqué de presse sur la réunion régionale ministérielle sur l'Armée de Résistance du Seigneur (LRA) tenue à Bangui, en République centrafricaine (RCA), les 13 et 14 octobre 2010.
5. It is worth noting that the US government strategy acknowledges that 'there is no purely military solution to the LRA threat and impact.' See 'Strategy to support the disarmament of the Lord's Resistance Army', p.9.
6. This paper draws on consultations with communities, local government officials, UN, NGOs and civil society in DRC and southern Sudan in 2009 and 2010, including in Mundri and Yambio, Western Equatoria, southern Sudan (January, April, and September 2009 and July 2010), and in Niangara and Dungu territories, Haut-Uélé, DRC (July and August 2010).
7. See note 1.
8. May 2010, HIU State Department, "Lord's Resistance Army: Reported Attacks, Displacement, and Peacekeepers." https://hju.state.gov/Products/LRA_HIU_Dec2009May2010_.pdf
9. August 11 2010, Human Rights Watch, "CAR/DR Congo: LRA Conducts Massive Abduction Campaign: New Regional Strategy Needed to Protect Civilians and Rescue Children". <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/08/11/car-drc-congo-lra-conducts-massive-abduction-campaign>
10. Intersos, southern Sudan – exchange of e-mails with Oxfam, November 2010
11. See OCHA Consolidated Appeal for Uganda 2010 <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/EDIS-7Y5LV6?OpenDocument>.
12. It is believed that 865 were killed in the period between 24 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, in DRC and Sudan. Human Rights Watch (2009) The Christmas Massacres: LRA attacks on civilians in northern Congo, New York
13. Oxfam (2010) Rapport d'enquête de protection d'Oxfam en Province orientale, Kinshasa
14. Interviews with MONUSCO and UNMIS officials, 2010
15. In December 2010, MONUSCO has announced it will be conducting additional patrols in the Ngilima-Bangadi-Niangara triangle, where there are rumoured to be LRA camps.
16. Some assistance is finally due to get under way in 2011, following long-delayed MONUSCO security support to interagency needs assessments, but MONUSCO has still not indicated whether it will deploy to provide security for aid operations in the area.
17. United Nations (2010), Rapport humanitaire sur la mission d'évaluation conjointe, Ango, les 18 et 19 novembre 2010, Kinshasa
18. For instance with the establishment of the International Working group on the LRA as a sub-group of the International Contact group on the Great Lakes, as well as the US and AU announcements referenced above.
19. Cakaj, Ledio (2010), The Lord's Resistance Army of Today, Enough Project, Washington DC
20. CAR CSO representative, exchange of emails with Oxfam, November 2010
21. In particular the planned AU Special Envoy, whom the Bangui meeting of October 2010 agreed to appoint specifically to coordinate the response to the LRA, and also potentially the EU Special Envoy to the Great Lakes region. The office of the UN Special Envoy to the Great Lakes was closed in June 2010; a decision on the resourcing of UN coordination efforts in relation to the LRA could be one useful outcome of the proposed briefing of the Security Council on the response to date.
22. See, inter alia, Conciliation Resources (2010) Choosing to Return: challenges faced by the Lord's Resistance Army's middle-ranking commanders, London
23. In DRC, for example, MONUSCO has recently seen its fleet of transport helicopters dramatically reduced, although these are essential to reach remote communities at risk of attack.
24. In order to support its peacekeeping deployments across eastern DRC, MONUSCO estimates that it needs an additional 76 dedicated civilian staff and 20 community liaison interpreters in order to monitor threats to communities and facilitate a peacekeeping response.

Organisations

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*Women and children displaced by LRA violence, Niangara town, DRC
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam,
September 2010*



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