



The Lord's Resistance Army

*U.S. Response to a Brutal
Central African Group*

*Robert L. Wright
James Morris*
Editors

**FOREIGN
POLICY OF THE
UNITED STATES**

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Robert L. Wright

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PREFACE

This book provides an overview of The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony. The LRA is a small, dispersed armed group in central Africa that originated 24 years ago in Uganda. It has drawn the attention of Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers due to its infliction of widespread human suffering and its potential threat to regional stability. The group is infamous for its brutal attacks on civilians and mass abductions of children. Despite its Ugandan origins, the LRA currently operates in remote regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. When the LRA was based in northern Uganda, the United States provided humanitarian relief and aid for reconciliation and recovery in the war-torn region. As the LRA has moved across central Africa, the United States has taken a more active role in countering its impact.

Chapter 1- The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, is a small, dispersed armed group in central Africa that originated 24 years ago in Uganda. It has drawn the attention of Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers due to its infliction of widespread human suffering and its potential threat to regional stability. The group is infamous for its brutal attacks on civilians and mass abductions of children. Despite its Ugandan origins, the LRA currently operates in remote regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. When the LRA was based in northern Uganda, the United States provided humanitarian relief and aid for reconciliation and recovery in the war-torn region. As the LRA has moved across central Africa, the United States has taken a more active role in countering its impact. Since 2008, the United States has supported regional operations led by the Ugandan military to capture or kill LRA leaders. The United States has also extended humanitarian aid, pursued

regional diplomacy, and pushed for “early-warning” systems and multilateral programs to demobilize and reintegrate ex-LRA combatants. U.S. involvement has been spurred by human rights advocacy and by Uganda’s role as a regional security partner of the United States. The LRA is on the State Department’s “Terrorist Exclusion List,” and Kony is a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist.” Draft legislation before the 112th Congress includes H.R. 895, H.Res. 465, S. 1601, and S. 1867.

Chapter 2- This document reflects a strategy and framework for guiding U.S. support to mitigate and eliminate the threat to civilians and regional stability posed by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The strategy outlines cross-cutting actions in support of four strategic objectives: (a) the increased protection of civilians; (b) the apprehension or removal of Joseph Kony and senior LRA commanders from the battlefield; (c) the promotion of defections from the LRA and support of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of remaining LRA fighters; and (d) the provision of continued humanitarian relief to affected communities. This document also provides a description for reporting on U.S. assistance in support of efforts of the Government of Uganda and civil society to promote comprehensive reconstruction, transitional justice, and reconciliation in northern Uganda.

Chapter 3- The Department of State has included the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) on the “Terrorist Exclusion List” since 2001. In 2008, its leader, Joseph Kony, was designated as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” (SDGT). The LRA is responsible for one of the longest, most violent, yet most underreported conflicts in Africa – a conflict which has spread from Northern Uganda to South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Central African Republic – and threatens costly U.S. investments in peace and stability in the region. It is a predatory, guerilla force which has perpetrated some of the most deplorable human rights atrocities known to man.

Chapter 4- The United States has a strong interest in supporting our partners in Africa to develop their capacity to address threats to peace and security such as the LRA.

We appreciate Congress’ longstanding concern about the LRA, as demonstrated by the widespread bipartisan support for the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act that was signed into law last year. This legislation sent a strong message of bipartisan Congressional support for a comprehensive effort to help protect civilians and bring an end to the LRA threat. We are committed to engaging with Congress and keeping you informed about the progress of our strategy as we move forward.

Chapter 5- As my distinguished colleague from the Department of State mentioned, there are four pillars to the Administration's comprehensive strategy to help our regional partners end the threat posed by the LRA. The second of these pillars is the apprehension or removal of Joseph Kony and other top LRA commanders from the battlefield.

The Ugandan military, in cooperation with other regional militaries, has been pursuing the LRA and has reduced the LRA's strength significantly. The LRA has moved out of northern Uganda completely and is now operating in small groups across the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan. While weakened, the LRA leader Joseph Kony and the other top LRA commanders remain at large and continue to direct the group's members to commit atrocities.

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Chapter 1

THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY: THE U.S. RESPONSE*

Alexis Arieff and Lauren Ploch

SUMMARY

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, is a small, dispersed armed group in central Africa that originated 24 years ago in Uganda. It has drawn the attention of Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers due to its infliction of widespread human suffering and its potential threat to regional stability. The group is infamous for its brutal attacks on civilians and mass abductions of children. Despite its Ugandan origins, the LRA currently operates in remote regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. When the LRA was based in northern Uganda, the United States provided humanitarian relief and aid for reconciliation and recovery in the war-torn region. As the LRA has moved across central Africa, the United States has taken a more active role in countering its impact. Since 2008, the United States has supported regional operations led by the Ugandan military to capture or kill LRA leaders. The United States has also extended humanitarian aid, pursued regional diplomacy, and pushed for "early-warning" systems and multilateral programs to demobilize and

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reintegrate ex-LRA combatants. U.S. involvement has been spurred by human rights advocacy and by Uganda's role as a regional security partner of the United States. The LRA is on the State Department's "Terrorist Exclusion List," and Kony is a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist." Draft legislation before the 112th Congress includes H.R. 895, H.Res. 465, S. 1601, and S. 1867.

In May 2010, Congress enacted the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act (P.L. 111-172), which required the Obama Administration to submit to Congress a "strategy" to "guide future United States support... for viable multilateral efforts to mitigate and eliminate the threat to civilians and regional stability" posed by the LRA. The Administration's policy response, submitted in November 2010, stresses the protection of civilians, the "removal" of top LRA commanders, the promotion of LRA desertions, and the provision of humanitarian relief. On October 14, 2011, the President reported to Congress, "consistent with the War Powers Resolution," that he had authorized the deployment of approximately 100 U.S. armed forces to serve as advisors to "regional forces that are working toward the removal of Joseph Kony from the battlefield." The report emphasized that the deployed personnel "will only be providing information, advice, and assistance to partner nation forces, and they will not themselves engage LRA forces unless necessary for self-defense." The Administration has portrayed this decision as consistent with congressional intent as expressed in P.L. 111-172 and subsequent consultations.

The U.S. approach to the LRA raises a number of issues for policymakers, some of which could have implications far beyond central Africa. A key question, for some, is whether the response is commensurate with the level of threat the LRA poses to U.S. interests, and whether the deployment of U.S. military personnel could lead to unintended consequences. More broadly, decisions on this issue could potentially be viewed as a precedent for U.S. responses to similar situations in the future. Other issues for Congress include the timing and rationale for U.S. action; the role and likely duration of U.S. deployments in the region; the benchmarks for success and/or withdrawal of U.S. forces; funding levels for counter-LRA activities and for potential future humanitarian aid and related commitments; and the relative priority of counter-LRA activities compared to other foreign policy and budgetary goals. Other possible policy challenges include regional militaries' capacity and will to conduct U.S.-supported operations, and these militaries' relative level of respect for human rights. Congressional oversight may also focus on the appropriateness of the Administration's LRA policy approach, as outlined in November 2010; the status of its implementation; interagency coordination; and the role of other donors.

OVERVIEW AND KEY QUESTIONS

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is an armed group that originated in northern Uganda 24 years ago but has operated since 2006 in the remote border areas between the Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Sudan. Led by Joseph Kony, its numbers are tiny, but its actions, which include massacres, mass abductions, sexual assault, and looting, have caused significant human suffering and instability (see "Background" below). These atrocities have unfolded in a region marked by other complex security and humanitarian challenges. The repeated failure of regional and multilateral efforts to end the LRA and address its impact led some U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress, to call for greater U.S. action. In May 2010, Congress passed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-172; "the Act"), which states that it is U.S. policy "to work with regional governments toward a comprehensive and lasting resolution to the conflict," and authorizes a range of U.S. humanitarian, security, and development responses. The bill, which followed more than a decade of congressional activity related to the LRA (see "Previous Legislation" below), passed with 201 House cosponsors and 64 Senate cosponsors.¹

On October 14, 2011, the Obama Administration announced the deployment of about 100 U.S. military personnel to central Africa to act as advisors in support of regional military efforts to capture or kill senior LRA leaders. They are likely to focus these support efforts on the Ugandan military, known as the UPDF (Ugandan People's Defense Force), to which the United States has provided significant logistical support for counter-LRA operations beyond its borders since late 2008. Continued U.S. support to these UPDF operations has contributed to, and been justified by, the Obama Administration's view of Uganda as a key regional security partner. Several governments in the region and a number of human rights organizations have welcomed the Administration's decision to deploy U.S. advisors. Some Members of Congress have praised the decision, while others have questioned it. Initial congressional reactions appear to have been shaped, in part, by the nature of executive consultations with the legislative branch related to the use of force in Libya in early 2011, in which the Administration contended that congressional approval was not constitutionally required (see "War Powers Resolution" below).

The Administration and some Members have portrayed the counter-LRA deployment as consistent with congressional intent as expressed in P.L. 111-

172, and in subsequent consultations. The President stated that “there has been strong bipartisan support and a coalition... who have said it is an international obligation for us to try to take [the LRA] on.”² While the Act does not specifically authorize U.S. troop deployments, it directs U.S. policy to provide “political, economic, military, and intelligence support for viable multilateral efforts... to apprehend or remove Joseph Kony and his top commanders from the battlefield.” The Administration’s approach to the LRA, submitted to Congress in November 2010 as required under the Act, is organized around four broad objectives that closely respond to provisions of the legislation, including “apprehend or remove from the battlefield Joseph Kony and senior commanders” (see “P.L. 111-172,” below, for further discussion).³ More broadly, the Administration has expressed a commitment to preventing and responding to “mass atrocities,” including in its 2010 National Security Strategy and a Presidential Study Directive (PSD-10) issued in August 2011.⁴

Regional governments, United Nations (U.N.) agencies and missions, the African Union, and others have devoted resources to responding to the LRA, and the U.N. Security Council has recently called for greater international engagement on the issue.⁵ The United States, however, has been the main donor to have taken a lead role in facilitating regional military operations. Many analysts believe that a “decapitation” strategy—i.e., focused on removing the top five to ten LRA commanders—is necessary and perhaps sufficient to defeat the LRA.⁶ Still, it is difficult to assess whether such an approach would work, or if certain factions could retain internal cohesion, others could assume leadership in a power vacuum, or combatants could turn to new forms of violence. Additionally, although the UPDF is regarded as the most effective of the regional forces active in counter-LRA operations, some observers have questioned its capacity and commitment. Indeed, the governments of LRA-affected countries in central Africa each face other, arguably more vital, priorities with regard to their domestic security and to each other.

U.S. policymakers and observers who follow the activities of the LRA agree that it is a vicious, brutal group that has wreaked great human suffering across an impoverished swath of central Africa. They also agree that efforts by local governments and multilateral entities in the region, including two U.N. peacekeeping missions, have been insufficient to end the LRA’s humanitarian toll. Where some disagree, however, is over the extent to which the LRA poses a threat to core U.S. interests, if at all, and over the appropriate level and tactics of the U.S. commitment. Key questions, some of which could have implications far beyond the LRA itself, include:

- What is, or should be, the relative priority of counter-LRA activities compared to other foreign policy, national security, and budgetary goals? What is the impetus for U.S. action, when compared to other security and humanitarian issues?
- What is the appropriate level of funding for LRA-related activities, both military and non-military?
- What is the role and likely deployment duration of U.S. forces in the region? What are the benchmarks for success and/or withdrawal of U.S. forces?
- Are the elements of the Administration's approach to the LRA coherent, realistic, consistent with congressional intent, and likely to end the threat posed by the group? What more, if anything, should be done to advance civilian protection, support the demobilization and reintegration of LRA combatants, provide humanitarian aid, and achieve other goals laid out in P.L. 111-172?
- To what extent, given U.S. support, are regional militaries willing and able to defeat the LRA? What is the likely impact of a "decapitation" approach on the LRA's activities and the humanitarian situation in affected areas?
- What are the potential unintended consequences, if any, of U.S. support to the Ugandan military, in terms of regional relations and U.S. diplomatic influence?

BACKGROUND ON THE LRA⁷

The LRA emerged in northern Uganda in 1987, the year after Yoweri Museveni, a rebel leader from southern Uganda, seized power, ending nearly a decade of rule by northerners.⁸ Following Museveni's victory, Alice Lakwena, an Acholi spiritual leader, emerged as a key figure among northern rebel factions seeking to overthrow the government. Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) was defeated by the Ugandan military in 1987, and Lakwena fled to Kenya. Joseph Kony, a reported relative of Lakwena then in his early 20s, emerged and laid claim to Lakwena's legacy.

Kony's LRA began to target civilians in northern Uganda and sought support and protection from the government of Sudan (see "Sudan and the LRA" below). In the late 1980s, the Museveni government recruited Acholis into government-backed civilian defense forces, which led to escalated LRA

attacks against Acholi civilians and contributed to deep distrust between the government and northern communities.



Source: ReliefWeb, altered by CRS.

Note: The LRA has also been active west and north of Haut-Mbomou in CAR, and north of Western Equatoria in South Sudan. In 2010, LRA members reportedly traveled as far north as Darfur, Sudan.

Figure 1. Primary Areas of LRA Activity in Central Africa.

Some analysts contend that President Museveni initially had little interest in defeating the LRA, either because his administration and the UPDF were able to exploit the conflict for political and economic gain, or because the conflict was perceived as a way to further marginalize the Acholi population, which prior to Museveni had dominated the Ugandan armed forces since the colonial period.⁹ Others, however, dispute this interpretation and point to the

Ugandan military's eventual success in pushing the LRA out of the country. Since 2006, the Ugandan military has prevented the LRA from operating inside Uganda, and LRA leaders have shifted their focus to South Sudan, the DRC, and CAR. The LRA's current area of activity is vast, roughly equivalent in size to the state of California,¹⁰ and characterized by an extremely minimal government influence and a very limited international humanitarian presence. LRA factions appear to be constantly on the move.

The LRA has periodically laid out vague political demands, and in some ways its emergence and duration in northern Uganda can be understood as a product of longstanding northern grievances against southern political domination and economic neglect. The LRA's early endurance was also fostered by proxy struggles between regional powers, notably Sudan and Uganda. Yet the group does not have a clear political or economic agenda, and its operations appear to be motivated by little more than the infliction of violence and the protection of senior leaders.¹¹ The LRA has a cult-like dimension: Kony claims to receive commands from traditional spirits, and has also at times cloaked his rhetoric in Christian and messianic terms. LRA commanders are infamous for mutilating and brutally killing their victims, and they rely on the mass abduction of children, who are subsequently brutalized and forced to commit atrocities, to replenish their ranks.

The LRA's numbers have reportedly greatly declined in recent years, from thousands of fighters in the late 1990s and early 2000s to a reported several hundred, traveling on foot and equipped with small arms. They travel in small bands, along with hundreds of former abductees who are forced to act as porters, scouts, sexual slaves, and potentially junior fighters. While senior positions appear to remain in the hands of Ugandan Acholis, the group's lower ranks presumably increasingly reflect other ethnic groups from affected areas of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan. The level of command and control linking LRA leaders to each other and to the fighters they oversee is uncertain, and little is known about the ties that bind the network together.

LRA fighters nevertheless continue to inflict significant atrocities against civilian communities. The LRA has reportedly killed over 2,400 and abducted over 3,400 people since 2008 alone.¹² As of September 2011, an estimated 440,000 people in LRA-affected areas in central Africa were displaced for fear of attack.¹³ The conflict has consistently eluded a military or negotiated solution, resulting in widespread insecurity and worsening humanitarian conditions.

The LRA's Impact in Northern Uganda

While relative security has been established in northern Uganda since 2006, the area's economy remains depressed, in part due to the lasting impact of the conflict, and widespread civilian trauma and loss continue to plague local populations. In total, over 20,000 northern Ugandan children were reportedly abducted by the LRA between 1987 and 2006 for use as child soldiers, servants, or sexual slaves.¹⁴ Nearly two million people—virtually the entire affected population in the north—were displaced, with many coming to reside in internationally assisted internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Mass displacement was caused both by fear of LRA attacks and a controversial strategy by the Ugandan government to deprive the LRA of potential abductees by encouraging residents to move into the camps, which were widely criticized for poor living conditions. While most Ugandan IDPs have returned to their homes, 73,000 remain in camps due to complications related to their designated areas of return.¹⁵ Tensions between northern and southern Uganda persist, despite the government's reported efforts to increase its budget for reconstruction and development in the region.

International and Regional Efforts to End the LRA

The Ugandan government's approach to the LRA in the 1990s included a combination of counterinsurgency operations and support to local anti-LRA militia groups. Uganda also sought to target LRA rear bases in southern Sudan, which were established with reported Sudanese government support. In 2002, Sudan allowed Ugandan troops to conduct counter-LRA operations in the south, in an apparent shift from Khartoum's earlier policy. Ugandan-led military operations continued through 2005, with the support of southern Sudanese regional authorities, across an expanded area of what is now South Sudan and northern Uganda.¹⁶

In 2005, following a request by the Ugandan government, the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed warrants for five LRA commanders. Two have since reportedly died, leaving Kony, Okot Odhiambo, and Dominic Ongwen, reportedly alive and at large. In January 2006, international peacekeepers serving under the U.N. peacekeeping mission in DRC entered DRC's Garamba National Park with the goal of capturing then-LRA deputy Vincent Otti and eliminating LRA bases there. The operation was

unsuccessful, and eight Guatemalan peacekeepers were killed in a firefight. For the next two years, the LRA and the Ugandan government engaged in internationally-backed peace talks mediated by the then-semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan, known as the Juba peace process.¹⁷ As part of the process, LRA combatants were offered amnesty and senior leaders were given security guarantees. The government also committed to providing increased development aid, security, and participation in government for northern communities.

The talks broke down in 2008 when Kony refused to sign a final agreement. The ICC warrants, which Kony wanted repealed, were seen by some analysts as a key stumbling block in the negotiations.²³ Others, however, doubted Kony's sincerity. As one analyst has noted, "the commitment of the LRA to finding a peaceful solution to the crisis has always been questionable. Kony appears to engage in peace talks sporadically as a tactic to reduce military pressure on the LRA and garner time and space to regroup his forces."²⁴ Indeed, although the LRA at one time had a civilian wing, which called itself the Lord's Resistance Movement and framed its demands as ethnoregional socioeconomic and political grievances, its influence and ability to make credible commitments on Kony's behalf appeared limited.

In late 2008, the UPDF, with the support of Congolese and Southern Sudanese authorities, initiated "Operation Lightning Thunder" (OLT), a campaign intended to capture or kill senior LRA leaders in northeastern DRC, where they had established bases. The United States provided equipment, intelligence, and logistical assistance to the UPDF prior to the launch of the operation. The operation failed to kill or capture Kony; instead, it caused the LRA to splinter into small groups and prompted brutal LRA reprisals against civilians. Uganda came under strong criticism from human rights groups for alleged poor planning, intelligence leaks, and failure to protect civilians in the operation's aftermath.²⁵ The UPDF has subsequently deployed to LRA-affected regions of South Sudan and CAR, with the permission of local authorities and ongoing logistics support from the United States. This enlarged regional campaign is viewed as the continuation of OLT. While the UPDF has since succeeded in capturing or killing several LRA commanders, questions over the UPDF's capacity, will, and ability to coordinate effectively with other regional forces persist.²⁶

In addition to military operations, Uganda has sought to encourage LRA defections through information operations, internationally-assisted disarmament and reintegration programs, and the passage of an Amnesty Act in 2000, which applies to nearly all but the most senior LRA commanders.