

# DIAGNOSTIC STUDY OF THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY (LRA)

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## Section I - Background, objectives & approach and assessment of the LRA challenge

### Background

The failure of the Juba Peace talks between the LRA and the Government of Uganda was followed almost immediately by a set of violent events that is still generating aftershocks in the three neighboring countries most directly affected by LRA operations: the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Sudan. The sequence of these events is significant though hasty attribution of cause to incidents that require further study has added to the general confusion associated with the LRA. However, the launch of Operation Lightning Thunder (OLT), a UPDF military offensive campaign against the LRA, and the deployment of Congolese and United Nations troops into the region were followed very quickly by a string of atrocities attributed to the LRA, including two successive massacres over the Christmases of 2008 and 2009 that left many observers questioning the effectiveness of protection measures put in place by the various military forces in the region. These events, particularly the massacre of December 2009 in the Makombo area of Haut Uélé, DRC, provoked questions about the wisdom of offensive operations against the LRA without adequate accompanying measures to protect civilians in the area of operations.<sup>1</sup>

The need to understand better the causes and correlations linking behaviors of both the LRA and the set of military forces arrayed against them is critical to developing coherent policy. At the moment, calls for strong action against the LRA from agencies such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Enough Project compete with calls for negotiation from the network of European NGOs for advocacy on Central Africa (EurAc) and regional religious and cultural leaders. Groups from both sides of this divide urge the need for a coherent and coordinated strategy yet each grounds its arguments on different perspectives that reflect fundamental differences in belief about both the evidence available and its interpretation. Given the number of lives already lost in the midst of what appears to be a policy morass, it is urgent that a

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Ochan, "Assessing Uganda's Cross-Border Pursuit of the Lord's Resistance Army," Tufts University, Feinstein International Center (Boston, Feb. 2009); Joost van Puijenbrock & Nico Plooijer, "How EnLightning Is the Thunder?: Study on the Lord's Resistance Army in the Border Region of DR Congo, Sudan and Uganda," IKV Pax Christi (Utrecht, Netherlands, Feb. 2009); Human Rights Watch, *The Christmas Massacres: LRA Attacks on Civilians in Northern Congo* (New York, Feb. 2009); Mareike Schomerus & Kennedy Tumutegyeize, "After Operation Lightning Thunder: Protecting Communities and Building Peace" (London: Conciliation Resources, April 2009); and Julia Spiegel & Noel Atama 'Finishing the Fight against the LRA,' Enough Project, 2009. For broader criticism of the handling of the LRA campaign, see also, Ronald Atkinson, (1) "Revisiting Operation Lightning Thunder," *Insight, The Independent* (Kampala, 9 June 2009); (2) "From Uganda to the Congo and Beyond: Pursuing the Lord's Resistance Army" (New York: International Peace Institute, Dec. 2009); and (3) "Afterword: A Perspective on the Last Thirty Years," in *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda*, rev. ed. (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010).

serious attempt be made to better understand all the relevant factors affecting the full range of policy alternatives, including the possibility of negotiation, and the challenges and limitations associated with all other approaches.

Though little has been written about the military history or composition of the LRA, a number of studies of its behavior and impact already exist. These can be studied to extract useful operational information that could be of benefit to diplomats, military planners, human rights activists and humanitarian actors alike. When studied together with research drawn from former LRA fighters and other military sources, it is possible to tease out a preliminary understanding of historical patterns which suggest consistent strategies and tactics used by the LRA.

However, little has so far been written about the various civil and military capacities of the countries now composing the LRA area of operations, and even less about the limitations that flow from the relative strengths of their military forces and the tactical advantages for either side entailed by strategy, time, space and terrain. Yet many of the calls for action made by humanitarian or human rights agencies would seem to impose protection obligations that are well beyond the capacities of the forces available. Similarly, calls to mobilize civilian defense or negotiations seem to reflect a limited grasp of the historical, political, social and cultural conditions that currently exist across the region. This leads to calls for unrealistic policy decisions and to strategies that have so far failed either to protect civilians or to contain the LRA. It is not, however, unreasonable to argue that military operations so far have achieved some useful outcomes through attrition. It might also be argued that these military operations would not have been possible had it not been for the intelligence gathering opportunities generated by the negotiations that preceded them.

This study is grounded on the belief that none of the current strategies in use by the forces and agencies in the region are adequate to the challenge presented by the LRA and that a rigorous study of the history of the LRA, the operational context, the potential for a negotiated solution, the relative capacities of the forces available and the political issues affecting the availability of resources as well as the likelihood of their use is the first step to generating more creative and effective solutions. It is the view of the study team that humanitarian work can only mitigate a situation that requires, ultimately, a comprehensive resolution, including political/ security/ and development aspects, if basic conditions of human dignity are to be restored to the affected region.

## Objectives and approach

This LRA Diagnostic Study sets out to describe the broad set of problems posed by the LRA, including regional and international capacities and commitment to address them. Recognizing that the success of any strategy will depend on the accuracy and completeness of the description and analysis that precedes it, this document is focused on the LRA and the political and operational context in which it operates, and offers only preliminary recommendations.

The study combines analysis, review of existing sources pertaining to relevant historical, cultural and psychological factors, field research and expert peer review. The study was carried out between November 2010 and April 2011. It began in November 2010 with a brainstorming workshop involving a select group of technical and academic experts. The workshop allowed for a refinement of the study's objectives, methods and work plans. However, a policy issue arose at this point that eventually prevented the team from fielding the full set of competencies required to complete the study and this

resulted in a delay over December and January while other options were explored.<sup>2</sup> In the end, it was decided to proceed with an analysis of general factors and the political context and to assemble a first draft of an operational history without the assistance of a technical military expert.

It was also decided to include a short discussion of those military factors that seemed to follow logically from the other portions of the work, even without the assistance of a qualified military expert who would have been able to conduct a satisfactory analysis of the military situation and to assist with the identification of militarily relevant correlations elsewhere in the Diagnostic. The objective was also to develop a network of technical contacts and identify consultants who can be engaged to pursue specific lines of enquiry in future research. The study has been reviewed by two independent expert consultants.

## Method

After the initial experts meeting in November 2010, a small team of consultants was assembled, and produced an Inception Report, which was shared with IWG members and discussed at a meeting in January 2011. A team of three expert consultants then conducted a review of documents and a series of interviews and field visits that included formal visits to the two United Nations Department of Peace Keeping Operations (UN DPKO) missions in the LRA-affected area as well as discussions with government and military leaders, civil society representatives, religious leaders and engaged NGOs. This included discussions held in national capitals of IWG members and regional states. Several efforts to reach Bangui for similar discussions foundered on logistics and security issues. Finally, the study team worked closely with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR) staff including several meetings in Goma.

This study is the result of a collaboration in which each expert researcher wrote up his own findings, after which these were assembled into a single document. The order of presentation of research proceeds from a short discussion of political context through a brief operational history of the LRA to a discussion of some of the implications that can be drawn from the previous sections for both military and non-military approaches.

## Difficulty in a common assessment of the LRA challenge

At a conceptual level, the set of problems posed by the presence and actions of the LRA in the four affected countries constitutes a direct challenge for those who hold to principles set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1674 (2006), which articulates states' responsibilities to protect their own populations (known as R2P). The section below on politics describes conditions of *realpolitik* that seem to underpin political decisions taken both in the region and by the international community through the United Nations and the African Union (AU). In some cases, political leaders challenge the truth of reports of the LRA presence in their country while other leaders acknowledge the problem but believe that it is beyond their capacity to handle and therefore requires outside assistance. Uganda's government and military leaders, on the other hand, have often promised quick and easy victory over the LRA, even as the group, now operating far beyond Uganda's borders, diminished as both a military and political priority throughout 2010.

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<sup>2</sup> The TDRP mandate did not permit the funding of a military study of this type and no other member of the IWG felt comfortable with the idea either.

As will be explained below, international partners may agree in principle about the nature of the threat, but seem in practice to be waiting for someone else to act upon it. In the meantime, the LRA problem is not adequately addressed and the Azande community in particular – situated astride the borders of northeastern DRC, western South Sudan and southeastern CAR where the LRA is active – pays the price. The challenge to adherents of R2P is to determine how collective agreements expressed in Resolution 1674 are to be translated into meaningful protective action in cases where either the political will or the physical capacity to act effectively does not exist –or where those actions that are being taken are not working.

It would be a grave mistake to write the LRA off as a spent force. It is worth remembering that a very small number of LRA fighters, sometimes operating in groups composed of as few as five,<sup>3</sup> were able to generate hundreds of internally displaced persons (IDPs<sup>4</sup>) in Southern Sudan while allegedly operating as allies of the Government of Sudan.<sup>5</sup> It should also be remembered that this method of operating in small dispersed groups was used effectively in Northern Uganda between 1988 and 2005. In short, the effectiveness of the LRA does not depend on its size but on its deliberate use of terror attacks, its exploitation of the weaknesses of opposing armies, an understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses, and its strategic selection of areas of operation that cut across national boundaries and military areas of responsibility.

It would also be a mistake to underestimate the capacity of Joseph Kony to analyze his situation and to adapt accordingly. He has survived several near defeats in the past and is skilled at adapting his strategies and tactics to maximize his own effectiveness against much stronger opponents. Neither should one forget the period when the LRA was reportedly supported by Khartoum<sup>6</sup> during the civil war with South Sudan, nor the LRA tactical defeat of the UPDF at the battle of Imotong Mountains in 2002. One of the earliest reports of the LRA occupation of Garamba Park included an account of them capturing a Park Ranger and debriefing him on geography over a period of weeks. As will be discussed in detail below, reports from former fighters indicate a training system that takes new recruits through progressive stages of experience and training culminating in leadership posts for the most gifted and reliable among those who began as captives. The LRA has intelligent leadership with long experience of fighting and surviving against superior forces.

The LRA is now widely considered to have lost its political relevance in Uganda and to have been reduced to a “survival mode”<sup>7</sup> of operations. However, its *survival* has been at the cost of at least 2,000 dead, 2,800 or more abducted and over 350,000 displaced.<sup>8</sup> It succeeded in generating this much harm during the period since the start of OLT, in other words, while on the run from a US-supported military operation by up to 4,500 UPDF soldiers who were supposedly operating in loose collaboration with UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC),

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Director of Operations, SPLA, Juba, 29 March 2011

<sup>4</sup> OCHA LRA Regional Update dated 7 April 2011

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Director of Operations, SPLA Juba, 29 March 2011

<sup>6</sup> The team did not have the chance to travel to Khartoum and so rely on open source material with reference to the LRA-Sudan connection. See inter alia. Dagne, Ted (2011) Uganda: Current Conditions and the Crisis in North Uganda. Congressional Research Service, Washington D.C, USA, pp.6-7 Schomerus, Mareike (2007) The Lord's Resistance Army in Sudan: a history and overview. HSBA working paper, 8. Small Arms Survey, Geneva, Switzerland, pp.24-27 and Prunier, Gérard. 2004. 'Rebel Movements and Proxy Warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986– 99).' African Affairs, Vol. 103, No. 412, pp. 359–83.

<sup>7</sup> See the previous section on political issues for a discussion of the level of consensus on this point.

<sup>8</sup> INTERSOS, “The Lord’s Resistance Army: A Regional Approach to a Regional Problem” April 2011, p2. Similar figures are found in relevant OCHA and HRW reports.

Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Armed Forces of Central Africa (FACA). It should be remembered that victory has too often been declared in Northern Uganda only to have the LRA re-appear.

Many sources – including UN and international NGO reports – indicate an upsurge in small-scale attacks since the beginning of this year; this is the same point in time that the use of the term “survival strategy” began to gain currency.<sup>9</sup> In the past, periods of heavy abduction and looting by the LRA have preceded increased military activity. The recently reported pattern of small-scale attacks in which few firearms were used is suggestive of what military forces call “live training” and may indicate that the LRA is using the period of relative security from UPDF pursuit to convert new recruits abducted over the past months into skilled fighters. This could be read as part of a process to prepare for prolonged operations away from their traditional area of operations in Northern Uganda rather than as a mere necessary adaptation for survival.

Though there is a consensus that the core elements of the LRA fighting force consist of less than 250 Acholi, there is little known about the numbers of new recruits who either have been or are in the process of undergoing conditioning and training. It should be remembered that many if not most of the LRA senior officers began as captives. The question now is the degree of confidence Kony places in his non-Acholi subordinates and the effectiveness of conditioning methods adapted to controlling Acholi when applied to Azande or other ethnicities. It is possible that there is a much larger potential force of combatants available than currently assessed.

It is also difficult at the moment to assess accurately the level of armaments and the numbers and nature of weapons and munitions available to the LRA. Some of the military support items received and cached during the period of Sudanese support have been captured or used but, without accurate knowledge of how much was cached in the first place, it is impossible to calculate what is left. It would be consistent with Kony's past practice to mask his strength by restricting the use of firearms and dispersing his forces so that only small numbers are reported at any one time.

Finally, it should be remembered that the LRA only has to survive to succeed. As long as it is present, it is capable of generating insecurity in the region. To survive, it needs only to avoid, as much as possible, direct contact with superior armed forces and continue to resupply itself from vulnerable civilians. As long as it retains the freedom to choose the time and place of its attacks, it retains the tactical and strategic initiative.

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<sup>9</sup> UNOCHA publishes a monthly report mapping LRA attacks across their area of operations. The term “survival” has been used in military briefings given by MONUSCO and the UPDF over the past few months.