

Section III – An Operational History of the LRA

The LRA has displayed behavior typical of a rebel group with some characteristics of a regular army as well as elements more commonly attributed to a cult. This multidimensionality has contributed to a general lack of understanding and, in turn, to a common tendency to underestimate the LRA. The confused aspect presented by the LRA accounts, in large measure, for the Ugandan government's inability to deal with it effectively, either through military efforts or peace talks. The purpose of this section is to review the historical operational record of the LRA in an attempt to clear up some of the confusion.

Significant misunderstandings persist. For instance, the LRA has recently been described as weak due to having dispersed into small groups in three different countries. However, a study of their history indicates that the LRA often operated in small scattered groups even at its peak strength. Over time, the LRA has not necessarily been a homogeneous organization but rather has been composed of small groups operating at least semi-independently of each other, all reporting to Kony.⁴⁸

The use of small group structures was a strategic decision on Kony's part. The widely held belief that the LRA is a group of bandits operating without a coherent strategy is mistaken. This decision was made to facilitate overall control (it does not allow other commanders to create power bases), to limit opportunity for collusion (competition and animosity between group commanders have often been encouraged by Kony), and to enable maximum mobility which has been key to the LRA's longevity. Recently, the LRA's strategy has been to "survive" and maintain open corridors of movement in DRC while trying to secure outside support, especially from Sudan.

The LRA's fighting strength is also commonly underestimated. Statements from Ugandan Army spokespeople to the effect that the LRA currently has only 250 fighters, and is therefore significantly weakened, betray a lack of understanding or acceptance of the challenges at hand. Even if the LRA is indeed operating with 250 fighters, the number is consistent with estimates of LRA core power over many of the years when it was causing chaos in Northern Uganda. Furthermore, the LRA's past history and current modus operandi suggest that they can wreak havoc with a small number of fighters, as witnessed in mid-December 2009 when an estimated 30 LRA fighters massacred over 300 Congolese civilians (and caused thousands of internally displaced) in Makombo, Haut Uélé.⁴⁹

LRA general characteristics

Secrecy

Secrecy allows for better control and mental conditioning of the fighters inside the LRA, ensures intelligence is not leaked to the Ugandan army and creates a shroud of mystery that tends to discourage pursuing armies. Maintaining secrecy in the LRA is a strategic decision on Kony's part and is intended to take advantage of the "ignorance" of the world outside the LRA. Kony appears to understand that one

⁴⁸ There is a lot of emphasis in the LRA on operating in small units as seen in the 'families': small groups with a commander, referred to as *lapwony* (teacher, in Lwo) in charge, his "wives," military escorts and domestic workers or young girls called *ting-ting*.

⁴⁹ HRW, "Trail of Death: LRA Atrocities in North Eastern Congo" 2010.

cannot defeat the enemy one does not know, and consequently masks the LRA behind a curtain of mystery. The rituals performed in the LRA, some military in nature, others religious, are in part designed to maintain the secrecy and mystery of the LRA—much like a secret society or a cult.

Kony has jealously guarded secrecy within the LRA, punishing with death those who try to escape and mutilating those who speak of the LRA to outsiders. There was a serious effort over time to minimize the exposure of LRA fighters to foreign (non-military) actors as observed in interactions with peacemakers such as Betty Bigombe, Carter Centre representatives and religious figures.

The Juba talks provided the first exposure for many LRA fighters to the outside world and, in the process, weakened the LRA.⁵⁰ For the first time the outside world caught a glimpse inside the LRA, learned about the top commanders and their external supporters. The talks also allowed some limited interaction with the rank and file. Ultimately, the talks led directly to the killing of Vincent Otti, the LRA's chief negotiator, and the subsequent defection of a host of commanders including director of operations Opiyo Makas.

Flexibility

Kony has consistently tried to maximize his options over the years. This can be seen in two main tactics; (1) in allying or cooperating with different groups, regardless of their ethnic, ideological or religious orientation (These include the West Nile Bank Front, mostly Madi or Alur from West Nile, the Equatoria Defense Forces and other South Sudanese militia of various ideological leanings and ethnicities but all allied to Khartoum, the northern Sudanese government and Allied Democratic Forces); and (2) in participating in peace talks while preparing at the same time for hostilities as seen particularly in the last 10 months of the Juba Talks, which ended officially on 14 December 2008.

Adaptability

The LRA is able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Though they operated initially in compact groups conducting attacks in military formation, eventually this changed to hit and run tactics operating in smaller very mobile groups. Today LRA groups tend to “melt” when attacked, dispersing from 20-30 fighters in ones or twos, regrouping after in pre-arranged rendezvous (RV) locations. Furthermore LRA groups have been remarkably adaptable to different terrain, including living in relatively dry lands in Southern Sudan in the late 1990s, in lush areas in mid to 2000s in Garamba Park and in arid conditions recently in and near South Darfur.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Kony must have been aware of the pernicious effects the exposure had on his troops as such talks usually ended in commanders defecting as in the case of Sam Kolo after talking to Betty Bigombe in 2005 or a couple of mid-level commanders such as Moses Rubangangeyo after talking to Catholic priests in Northern Uganda 2002-2003. The latter episode prompted Kony to threaten to kill Catholic priests (interviews with Carlos Rodriguez, November 2010 and February 2011). Kony, however, still agreed to participate in the Juba Talks, an indication perhaps that he might have been serious about the peace talks after all.

⁵¹ According to former LRA combatants there were at least two different LRA missions to Southern Darfur, one in October 2009 and another in August/September 2010. According to an SPLA officer a small team of LRA fighters remains in Southern Darfur, north of Kafia Kingi.

Susceptibility to exogenous events

Despite its inward focus, the LRA, unlike a typical cult, is surprisingly affected by outside events. LRA commanders, including Kony, are well informed about events not only in Northern Uganda and Uganda in general but also about the outside world. Their most common source of news is radio broadcasts. In 1996, for instance, Kony promised to stop all attacks against civilians so that they could vote for Paul Ssemogere, a challenger to President Museveni in the presidential elections. Attacks on civilians are also sometimes the result of exogenous events, often in response to deals made in countries' capitals to attack the LRA or claims from those capitals that the LRA are weak and incapacitated. It is plausible, for instance, that an increase in LRA attacks against FARDC soldiers in the months of February and March 2011 came as a response to public statements by Congolese officials that there are few or no LRA fighters in Congo.⁵²

LRA commanders are known to be avid listeners of Ugandan and foreign radio stations, particularly the BBC World Service. The content of news broadcasts, often misinterpreted or misunderstood, is known to be discussed in relation to the LRA. In conversations with various interlocutors such as Betty Bigombe and Joyce Neu, formerly of the Carter Centre,⁵³ Kony has made references to Jonas Savimbi's death, rebellions in Chechnya and Thomas Lubanga's trial in the ICC, all in relation to the LRA and Kony's position.

Efforts are also made to control what happens inside the LRA when outside events threaten to disrupt the cohesion of the troops. The killing of Commander Otti Lagony in 1999 on Kony's orders seems to have been carried out partly in response to an amnesty act for rebel fighters being passed at the time in the Ugandan parliament. In addition, LRA propaganda disseminated by commanders, increased in 1999. Fighters were told to not believe Ugandan government lies and that they would all be slowly poisoned or killed if returning to Uganda.

Recently the propaganda has continued in an effort to stop combatants from defecting. In a response to Ugandan government (and DDRRR) radio messages encouraging defections, LRA commanders ordered that privates were not allowed to listen to radios. News can also trigger strategy change, mostly in order to protect the group from any perceived threats; another indication of the flexibility and adaptability of the LRA. Kony ordered groups in Congo to stop large scale killing of civilians after the December 2009 Makombo attack after he heard on the radio about the US anti-LRA bill.

Predictability

Yet, time and again LRA commanders have gone back to using old, tried-and-tested tactics. For example, after not being able to use satellite phones and walkie-talkies, the LRA returned to their former use of messengers and pre-arranged RVs, something they have been doing since the late 1980s. The hit and run tactics and splintering into small groups when attacked are strategies used since the mid-1990s. The current "survive, wait and see" strategy has been often employed by the LRA in the past with the aim

⁵² Statements made by various officials, civilian and military. The Congolese army force commander stationed in Dungu, Haut Uele, Lt. Colonel Nasibu Babu Nadoo was heard on BBC News saying that the "over the last two years we have successfully neutralized Kony" and "there are only 18 LRA left here." Mike Thompson, "Who can stop the LRA," BBC News, 18 February 2011. A large LRA attack against Congolese army barracks in Bamangana took place on February 24 where at least six Congolese soldiers were killed.

⁵³ Interviews with Betty Bigombe, November and March 2011 and Joyce Neu, 24 March 2011.

of holding out until a new opportunity presents itself. And LRA retaliatory attacks on “soft” (usually civilian) targets following military offensives against them are signature tactics utilized by the rebel group over and over again.

Command and control

Kony’s absolute power in the LRA

The importance of Joseph Kony to the LRA cannot be underestimated. In many ways, Kony is the LRA. His roles in the organization throughout the years confirm his absolute power. Kony has been and remains the chairman of the LRA, its chief priest, military strategist, political officer and even top doctor.⁵⁴ From the inception of the LRA until at least May 2009 when Kony left Congo and moved to CAR, he was consulted on everything including what to do with misbehaving “wives,” what dreams meant, how to go about attacking villages or government soldiers and even what to do with objects found by other commanders.⁵⁵

Kony has been described as a charismatic leader by former combatants.⁵⁶ Many former fighters refer to him respectfully as “*mzee*,” the Kiswahili word for elder, or “number one” or “teacher” (*lapwony*). Other people formerly in the LRA have spoken of him as a loving father and a caring commander, unusual qualities for someone accused of having caused so much suffering to so many. Fear however lies at the heart of the positive descriptions given by former combatants. Such fear seems often based initially on Kony’s seeming ability to hear and see everything, but for anyone even contemplating defection or opposition to Kony of any sort the fear which mattered most was the fear of revenge. Kony has worked hard to ensure he was feared ultimately as a military man rather than respected as a spiritual leader.

In the early days of the LRA’s existence, Kony’s reliance on spirits was nearly all-consuming. Spirits, which Kony claimed to be channeling, were in charge of everything in the LRA, from tactics to personal behavior and hygiene. Orders were literally conveyed as having emanated from a particular spirit. Some spirits were violent and ‘responsible’ for ordering the execution of people outside and inside the LRA while others were more peaceful.⁵⁷ Kony was often regarded as having no particular agency apart from being a vehicle for the spirits which gave him extraordinary powers nevertheless.⁵⁸ For many Ugandan men and women who grew up believing in good and bad spirits, it was not hard not to believe in Kony’s role as a spirit medium.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Former combatants say Kony is often consulted on the kinds of medicinal herbs to use for various illnesses

⁵⁵ In a transcript of LRA communications recorded by the Uganda’s intelligence service on 23 May 2005, a commander asks Kony via radio about what to do with the horn of a sheep he came across, taking it to be an omen of some sort. Kony’s signaler responds that Kony will talk about its meaning when he meets the commander personally.

⁵⁶ A former combatant said Kony sounded like President Museveni, he could give speeches for hours and he also “spoke English perfectly”; the latter claim is dubious judging from recorded interviews with Kony in 2007 .

⁵⁷ Legend has it that a particularly violent spirit ordered that Kony’s three brothers who had joined him early on had to be killed.

⁵⁸ Betty Bigombe recounts talking to a former combatant in the mid-1990s who was very afraid that Kony was listening to their conversation despite being in Gulu town. Interview with Betty Bigombe, Kampala, 22 March 2011.

⁵⁹ Interviews with various people in Northern Uganda, including Dennis Ojwee, Gulu, 5 December 2010 etc.

By the late 1990s however, Kony seems to have become a military commander in his own right while still retaining spiritual powers. In 1999, right after ordering the execution of his deputy, Otti Lagony, Kony told LRA commanders that the spirit would only come to him in his dreams to “inspire” him.⁶⁰ At this time, Kony assumed full agency in his role as LRA overall commander. While he continues to refer to the spirits, particularly chief among them being the Holy Spirit, Kony has emphasized his role as military commander, eclipsing his mystical persona.

Kony’s role in the LRA’s hierarchy

Kony has been in sole charge of the LRA since its inception in 1987. There was a potential rivalry when Odong Latek, a brigadier in the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), joined Kony in the late 1987 but it ended with Latek’s killing by the National Resistance Army (NRA) in 1988. Other commanders, especially ones with a military background, who Kony perceived as threats, were either executed or punished.

By 1999 the then-second in command, Otti Lagony – a former soldier in the UNLA – reportedly became convinced that the LRA could not defeat Museveni militarily and asked Kony to consider coming out of the bush.⁶¹ The Ugandan parliament was, at the time, discussing a proposed Amnesty Act (passed in early 2000) aimed at encouraging rebels to return to Uganda peacefully without prosecution. According to Rwot Oryang Lagony, an Acholi traditional chief and close relative of Otti Lagony, Kony feared a mass defection of LRA fighters taking advantage of the proposed amnesty.⁶² The killing of Lagony, decided by Kony as a preventive measure against possible defections as well as to eliminate a potential threat to his own position, was the first recorded high-level execution in the LRA, and an illustration of Kony’s absolute power over the group.

Kony’s increasing emphasis on his military role was possibly in part because of Sudanese support. This support helped increase recruitment into the LRA in the second half of the 1990s, leading to a force numbering thousands of people.⁶³ By 1999 Kony referred to himself as a Major General and took over military strategy without openly invoking the spirits any longer.

By the early 2000s, Vincent Otti, had become prominent in the LRA, partly due to his charisma and leadership – he was mentor to a few promising young commanders such as Dominic Ongwen and Ochan Bunia, both holding the rank of brigadier in the LRA today – which is why he was put in charge of the LRA advance party to Garamba, Congo, in September 2005. Otti was also able to brush aside successfully other commanders, as indicated by the near-demise of Caesar Achellam, a former junior officer in the UNLA and a contender for the number two position in the LRA.

In August 2006, immediately after the UPDF killed Raska Lukwiya, Kony’s deputy at the time, Otti accused Achellam of having received money from the Sudanese Vice-President, Riek Machar, and of planning to leave the LRA. Kony believed Otti and decided, perhaps for practical reasons, to spare Achellam, but demoted him and took away his escort – a public humiliation. According to a former LRA commander, Kony kept Achellam around because of the latter’s relationship with the SAF and his good

⁶⁰ Interviews with Ray Apire, former LRA commander, Gulu November, December 2010 and February 2011.

⁶¹ De Temmerman 2009, p. 157.

⁶² Interview with Rwot Oryang Lagony, Kampala, 10 March 2011.

⁶³ Schomerus, 2007, p.12. As Schomerus discusses in her paper, it is impossible to determine the real number of people in the LRA camps at the time. The rather exaggerated number of 10,000 people, including women and children has been suggested in the past although the number of armed people was perhaps between 2,000-3,000.

knowledge of Arabic.⁶⁴ After Kony had Otti killed in October 2007, Achellam, who was still under “house arrest” at the time, regained his rank status but not the position of Kony’s deputy. This was given instead to the younger Okot Odhiambo. Achellam later became useful to Kony when he was dispatched, after OLT, to reestablish contact with the SAF.⁶⁵

Otti’s death in October 2007 was a transformative moment in the LRA, in three ways. First, Kony showed that 20 years after the founding of the LRA his power remained absolute; secondly, a transfer of influence took place from older to younger commanders; and lastly, it is possibly the beginning of the first serious split within the LRA, as Dominic Ongwen, who openly opposed the execution of Otti, may have used the scattering of the LRA in the aftermath of OLT as an opportunity to operate independently of Kony.⁶⁶

It is possible that Otti was planning to leave the ranks and take with him a large number of fighters, as Kony accused him. There is reason to believe that the Ugandan government infiltrated the LRA with the aim of convincing Otti to either defect and/or possibly kill Kony.⁶⁷ Kony did not like the involvement of Otti in the peace talks, perhaps because he was receiving a lot of attention as the main LRA interlocutor.⁶⁸ Kony decided to take no risks and ordered Otti’s killing, along with three officers including his chief bodyguard, Captain Pope, and one of Otti’s sons, who had joined the LRA during the Juba peace talks.⁶⁹

At least one commander, Colonel Thomas Kwoyelo⁷⁰, alias Latony, was publicly shamed, his escort was removed and he was left without a rank. According to former combatants, Kony told Kwoyelo, “you know what you did; I am letting you live as a reminder to others of what will happen to them if they try the same as Otti and yourself.”⁷¹ Kony then proceeded to say that he was a General who kills, and that “no one has heard of a General who prays,” thus emphasizing his transformation from a spiritual guide to a military commander.⁷²

Dissent and a possible split in the LRA

By ordering the killing of his second in command, who was immensely popular in the LRA—many former LRA still refer to him as a good *lapwony* (teacher/commander)—Kony was willing to risk serious dissent

⁶⁴ Achellam was in charge of handling SAF officers when the LRA had bases in Sudan.

⁶⁵ According to interviews with former combatants, Achellam has been in charge of liaising with SAF officers during the last two years.

⁶⁶ At least six accounts of the circumstances and death of Otti and others were collected for this report, including from a former combatant who claimed to have seen the bodies of Otti and others.

⁶⁷ Interviews with Ugandan security operative and Ugandan politician, Gulu and Kampala, February and March 2011.

⁶⁸ Interviews with Makas, G.O, Gulu, November, December 2010 and February 2011. Here and in other footnotes initials of interviewees are used to protect their identity at their request.

⁶⁹ Two of the officers, Ben Achellam and Otim “Record” were killed because of their close relationship to Otti; both hailed from Atiak, Otti’s birthplace. Another officer, Major Swaib Adimani, alias “Adjumani,” was from Madi (close to Atyak), was killed a day before Otti, accused as the person planted by Otti to kill Kony.

⁷⁰ Kwoyelo’s trial before the International Crimes Division of Uganda’s High Court started in July 2011. The trial stopped on September 22 when the constitutional court ruled that Kwoyelo qualified for amnesty under the Amnesty Act.

⁷¹ Interview with G.O., R. and Opiyo Makas. Gulu, November 2010, February 2011.

⁷² Els de Temmerman and Henry Mukasa, ‘How LRA Deputy Vincent Otti was killed,’ New Vision, 9 December 2007.

within the ranks in order to consolidate his power. Many commanders, including director of operations and Otti confidante, Opiyo Makas, left the ranks immediately after the execution of Otti. Makas believes that Kony spared Kwoyelo in order to deter other defections.

As noted above, it is possible that Dominic Ongwen's open disagreement with Kony over the order to kill Otti had prompted a decision on Ongwen's part after OLT to act independently of Kony. A former bodyguard to Kony who came out in March 2010 claimed that Kony sent at least three envoys to DRC to bring Ongwen to CAR between May 2009 and February 2010 but that Ongwen apparently refused to meet with them.⁷³

In a reversal of Kony's gradual shift away from the spiritual aspects of his leadership to more purely military ones, Kony over the last two years has actually increased the use of spiritual propaganda in the LRA. This can be seen most clearly in the role that Kony has given to a new wife he "married" recently. Unusually, Kony brings this young woman, a Sudanese Zande named Foisha, to his council with top commanders, a first in the LRA. He claims that the Holy Spirit has instructed him that together with this wife, Kony will finally overthrow Museveni. Interestingly it appears that this is a new strategy aimed at encouraging LRA fighters through the tough times of the last two years. However, Kony has also continued to use violence to keep his commanders in line, as was seen in July 2010 when he ordered the killing of Major Peter Olooya alias "Adioch," allegedly believing that he was about to defect.⁷⁴

Influence shifts from senior to younger commanders loyal to Kony

The death of Otti appears to have caused a shift in the power immediately below Kony. Kony explained to fighters the reason for executing Otti, which was framed as a power struggle between the two command centers of the LRA: High Command headed by Kony and Control Alter headed by Otti, with the participation other top commanders. Kony claimed that Otti and Control Alter commanders wanted to kill Kony and take over High Command (even though technically Control Alter was under Kony as overall commander and chairman of the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement).

Whether the story was true or not, Kony used it to increase the power of the High Protection Unit (HPU), his personal escort. Kony's bodyguards had always had influence in the LRA – proximity to Kony seems to have consistently included increased power. However, in 2008 HPU became the sole conveyor of Kony's orders. The head of HPU, Lt. Colonel Otto Agweng, became Kony's most trusted soldier as well as his advisor and personal envoy. In October 2009, Agweng led a mission to South Darfur where an LRA delegation made contact with officers from the Sudanese Armed Forces. Upon his return to Kony's position in CAR, Agweng was promptly promoted to Colonel.⁷⁵

Senior commanders were then systematically shunned, including one of the oldest commanders, Brigadier Opuk, who had been in Control Alter under Otti. Despite his senior rank, Opuk was placed in the first brigade under Lt. Colonel Achellam Smart, a Kony protégé. Caesar Achellam (no relation), who was next in line after Otti for the deputy job, was overlooked for the younger Okot Odhiambo who was in his mid to late 30s. Colonel Santo Alit, another senior commander, was also shunned – he was still a Colonel in 2009 when the UPDF shot him in CAR – possibly due to his position in charge of logistics

⁷³ Interview with G.O, Gulu, 2 February 2011.

⁷⁴ Interviews with Makas and G.O.

⁷⁵ International researcher's interview with Okello Mission, Kampala, 16 June 2010.

during the peace talks and his consequent exposure to foreigners.⁷⁶ The only senior commander who maintained his influence was Brigadier Bok Abudema who enjoyed Kony's trust and who pushed for and was personally present at Otti's execution.

The dismantling of Control Alter and the loose function it served – as a sort of council of LRA high commanders – has ensured that no recognized institution apart from Kony himself can make important decisions in the LRA, such as choosing a successor if Kony is killed or captured. There is however an understanding amongst former combatants that Odhiambo would take over if Kony is captured or killed, although it is not impossible that Otto Agweng, possibly in collaboration with one of Kony's sons— there are at least two in their early 20s who were born in the bush and move with Kony—might also try to take over.⁷⁷

Given the tendency of LRA commanders to always plan ahead, it is highly probable that plans have already been made to deal with Kony's possible death. This is suggested by Kony's movements separate from Odhiambo and Achellam in order to avoid the elimination of the top leadership in a single blow, and reports that Kony's half-brother – Major Olanya, who bears apparently a striking resemblance to the LRA chairman—has been impersonating Kony recently.

It is likely that in the case of Kony being killed, LRA commanders will try to keep it a secret from the rest of the fighters or deny it as Ugandan government lies. If Kony is captured, it is likely that some LRA commanders will remain operational forming a loose alliance with other LRA groups and continue similarly to what they have done in the past two years.

Operational strength in the LRA over the years – A handful of hard-core fighters

In the past two years, Ugandan army officers have stated that the LRA has no capacity to cause harm due to reduced numbers, which the UPDF have estimated at 250-300.⁷⁸ It is likely that, while the overall LRA fighting force numbers over 400, the "core" of the LRA, mostly from Northern Uganda, does not surpass 250 fighters. Given, however, the history of LRA in the past to cause violence with very few fighters, 250 is a worrying figure. As noted above, in 2009 about 30 LRA fighters killed over 300 civilians in Makombo, Congo.⁷⁹

Arguably, the number of committed, well-trained and conditioned fighters has never surpassed a few hundred even when the LRA total fighting strength measured in the thousands. An international researcher who studied LRA commanders during 2002-2003 believes that "at that time the LRA core

⁷⁶ Yet according to a Ugandan researcher who spoke to Alit in 2007 during the peace talks, Alit "who seemed a reasonable man," was very loyal to Kony. Interview with Mike Otim, Kampala, 13 December 2010.

⁷⁷ Various interviews with former combatants suggest this line of thinking. At least one interviewee, who was one of Kony's bodyguards, suggested that one of Kony's sons was being groomed by Kony as a possible successor.

⁷⁸ The Ministry of Defense spokesperson, Lt. Colonel Kulayigye, told a journalist in January 2010, "The LRA's capacity to create havoc is no more," before information of an LRA group killing over 300 civilians in Congo in December 2009 had filtered out. Richard Ruati, "Ugandan army outlines OLT achievements on LRA rebels in 2009," Sudan Tribune, 11 January 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview with MONUSCO official, Goma, 18 February, 2011.

numbered no more than 150-200 fighters, but people who could hold guns were about 600-800.”⁸⁰ There has always been a high prevalence of recruits in the LRA over the years that revolve around a core group of fighters. The new recruits tend to either escape when they can or be killed in battle due to their lack of training and experience. Those who make it in the LRA past an average of five years become by default core fighters.

The combination of defections and fighters killed by the Ugandan army between 2002, during Operation Iron Fist, and 2007 with Otti’s killing, left the number of “real fighters in the LRA at about over 200 or so,” according to a Ugandan intelligence officer with years of experience in the LRA.⁸¹ While the LRA has been weakened over the past two years, it is premature to regard them as lacking capacity since the number of the core fighters is not much lower now than what has been throughout the years.

Organizational structure

See Appendices 2, 3 and 4 for detailed charts of LRA organizational structure in 1998, 2008 and 2011.

1998

One of the striking things about the organizational structure of the LRA in the late 1990s was its high degree of organization and its resemblance to a regular army. Former combatants talk of entering a highly regimented lifestyle when arriving in camps in Sudan from Uganda, complete with daily “roll calls” and military parades. A typical experience involved being assigned to a battalion where recruits were thoroughly questioned about their area of origin, date of birth, family members and other genealogical information, all of which was noted down by administration officers. Usually, new recruits underwent a medical checkup and received treatment for diseases or wounds they might have sustained during the arduous trip from Uganda to South Sudan. They would then be “purified” with shea-nut oil, “holy water” and ashes before being subjected to heavy beatings, which were part of their initiation into the LRA. The recruits would then receive military uniforms and gumboots supplied by the Sudanese, and start military training.

Still, it is unclear whether the military structure worked well in practice, especially since Kony exercised arbitrary power as described above. Officer ranks and positions were assigned by Kony alone, as he saw fit, which must have had a confusing effect on hierarchy. At times he demoted high-ranking officers to privates while leaving them in charge of their military units. Such was the case with Otti Lagony, who was demoted in 1996 to private while still being in charge of intelligence for the entire LRA.⁸² The importance of Control Alter or the military council (Kony has been known to refer to Control Alter as the Joint Chiefs of Staff) is therefore questionable. While it would appear that Control Alter should have constituted the “brains” of the LRA, in practice Kony often gave orders directly to brigade and even battalion commanders without consulting Control Alter or the relevant top commander inside Control Alter. It is for this reason that some former combatants refer to Control Alter as another LRA brigade.

Kony’s behavior, especially his use of spirits, makes it difficult to consider the LRA as a regular army. The spirits, which were in charge of particular aspects of life in the LRA, including giving out military orders, were in effect also in direct competition with Control Alter—yet another example of Kony (via spirits) ignoring his top officers, many of whom were former soldiers in the Ugandan military pre-NRA. Similarly,

⁸⁰ Interview with Chris Burke, formerly of Carter Centre, Kampala, 23 November 2010.

⁸¹ Interview with Ugandan intelligence officer, Gulu, 2 February 2011.

⁸² Interview with F. Ochen, Gulu, 3 February 2011.

certain individuals associated with the spirits and Lakwena (Holy Spirit) in particular were also more influential than the top military commanders and could often give military orders as interpretations of messages from the spirits.⁸³

Kony's personal security detail was also outside of the normal LRA command structure. Central Brigade's sole purpose was to provide security for Kony and his family. There were two units within Central Brigade—essentially Kony's first line of defense—Home Guard, responsible for the security of Kony's family, and "High Protection Unit," (HPU or HAPPO), Kony's second line of defense. Within HPU, there was the personal security detail for Kony and his *aide de camp* (ADC), Kony's third and immediate line of defense. Over the years, Central Brigade, where only trusted people were admitted, became a breeding ground for young, violent commanders who rose quickly in influence within the LRA. A few prominent examples include Brigadiers Ochan Bunia and Dominic Ongwen, as well as Lt. Colonels Okumu Binansio 'Binany' and Okot "Odek."

2008

In 2008 the organizational structure of the LRA was similar to that of 1998, with a few significant exceptions. By 2008 the LRA organizational chart appears much simpler than ten years earlier. Control Alter had either been disbanded or lost significance, while HPU had taken on the functions of Control Alter. The number of combatants was smaller in 2008, estimated at around 800-1000 fighters, or about one third of the LRA strength in its peak in 1998-2000.⁸⁴ The brigades were much smaller, probably around 150 combatants in each. Moreover, because as part of the Juba peace talks then underway the LRA were primarily based in settled, organized sites in Garamba Park in northeastern DRC, there was an emphasis on self-reliance in the LRA which meant that many fighters spent most of their time working in large fields of sorghum, maize and vegetables—a shift from a purely military to a more "civilian" existence.

By 2008, the LRA forces were divided into six different camps, unlike Sudan in 1998 where there were two or three major camps with a few groups operating in Uganda. In April 2008, when convinced that the peace talks were not going to succeed, Kony started to prepare for possible military alternatives. One new camp, called Nigeria, had been established 50 km to the west of Garamba National Park, near Bitima. There were at least five named camps inside Garamba, known as Cover, Anyica (Luo for coldness), Swahili, Gangboo (Luo for vegetable garden) and Angula (a Luo traditional name). Kony's headquarters and family were located at Swahili camp but he maintained residences in all the other camps. For instance, in late 2007, Vincent Otti, Ben Achellam and Otim "Record" were called to a meeting at Kony's house in Anyica camp, before they were executed.⁸⁵

From the end of 2007 until Operation Lightning Thunder in late 2008, Kony reportedly moved every few days, with his escort, staying at different camps to avoid possible attacks. It was therefore not unusual for Kony to leave his camp, as he did on 14 December 2008, the day Operation Lightning Thunder was launched. If he had not already been alerted about the operation a day or two before, as sometimes claimed, it is very likely that Kony was alerted to incoming helicopters by LRA fighters in Camp Nigeria,

⁸³ This was the case for instance with the LRA 'High Priest' Abonga 'Papa,' who had a powers of a top commander in the LRA before he came out in 2006. Similarly Kony's personal secretary who takes notes, amongst other things, of Lakwena's orders acts as a commander of one of Kony's personal protection squads.

⁸⁴ Various interviews with former combatants and MONUSCO officials.

⁸⁵ Interview with G.O., Gulu, 3 February 2011.

as the helicopters would have had to fly close to Bitima en route from Dungu to Garamba. Kony would have had ample time to move and a selection of safe places to go to avoid the Ugandan offensive, which he did successfully.

2011

The structure of the LRA today has changed from that of 2008 mostly due to the fact that Kony has been moving, in close proximity to groups led by Odhiambo and Caesar Achellam, since May 2009. The constant movement of LRA top commanders coupled with the lack of reliable communications—satellite phones and radio calls are seldom used due to fear of signal triangulation—has resulted in a less centralized organization. Many of the groups, particularly the ones in DRC led by Dominic Ongwen, have been operating almost entirely independently for over 16 months.

Operating in scattered groups over vast territories does not necessarily mean that the LRA is weaker. As mentioned above, it is important to note that even at the peak of its strength in the late 1990s, many groups in the LRA operated far from the group's main bases in southern Sudan. Such was the case, for instance, with Kwoyelo's and Ongwen's groups, which operated north of Kitgum at least until the Juba Talks were well underway, only joining Kony in Garamba in early 2007. Even when the entire LRA was based in Garamba, the troops were divided into the six different camps noted above operating as separate entities and responding directly to Kony.

Modus operandi

Tactics and training

Kony learned from the failure of Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement that military tactics and training were keys to survival and success. Having had little military experience himself, Kony found help from Odong Latek, an Acholi officer in the UNLA and overall commander of the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA).⁸⁶ Latek shared with Kony a deep mistrust of Museveni which led to his refusal to sign a peace agreement with the NRA in 1988. Together with a few Acholi officers, some of whom remain in the LRA, Latek joined Kony who led one of the few rebel groups remaining in Acholiland by 1988.⁸⁷

The influence of former UPDA soldiers in today's LRA was profound. Military training on attack formations, hit and run and ambush tactics, as well as handling guns of various calibers took on the same importance as praying.⁸⁸ After Latek's death in 1989, military training continued under other former UPDA soldiers such as Mixman "*Opu*k" (tortoise) Oryang, who is still referred to as "UPDA" today by LRA combatants, and Caesar Achellam.⁸⁹ However, until the mid-1990s training had been ad hoc. In 1995 this changed as LRA groups moved into bases in Sudan's Central and Eastern Equatoria and training in the LRA—overseen by officers from the SAF—started to resemble that of a regular army.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Heike Behrend refers to Latek as "supreme commander" of the UPDA. Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*, Oxford, 1999.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Behrend, 1999, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Interview with Ray Apire, Gulu, 2 February 2011.

⁹⁰ Interview with Francis Ocen, former LRA Director of Signals, Gulu, 3 February 2011.

Former LRA combatants talk of a regimented daily routine during their time in Sudanese camps. Each day included morning parades, daily drills in various military tactics and handling of sophisticated weaponry, including anti-aircraft guns (12.7 mm being an LRA favorite⁹¹), anti-personnel mines and SAM7 missiles. Makas, former Director of Operations in the LRA, says he and other LRA commanders were trained not only in Juba but also in Khartoum on SAF bases. “We were taught how to use 82 mm mortars, RPG7s, SPG9 73 mm and B10 recoilless rifles.”⁹²

Various tactics were practiced daily and included attacking in formations LRA combatants refer to as “L or C shaped,” which LRA commanders modified to their liking. “The Arabs taught us how to take on the Ugandan army but they were cowards, they would not stand up when fighting like we did,” said a former fighter, referring to the explicit order from Kony that fighting had to be done standing erect advancing against the enemy. Fighters were also trained in search and destroy tactics, still used in attacks against villages. This involved learning to encircle a target and positioning attackers to avoid friendly fire and minimize the possibility of escapees.

SAF officers trained the LRA in clearing out trenches, a way to deal with SPLA fighters. A former combatant said that “the Dinkas [SPLA] were tall” and could be easily hit when standing up in the open so they fought in trenches where they could mow down advancing LRA fighters. “The smallest LRA rebels—those who could move unseen through the bush—were then sent to the trenches to shoot as many Dinkas as possible and clear out fast, before they were hit.”⁹³

Training in ambush tactics were seen as especially relevant in engaging the Ugandan army. A well-rehearsed move, according to former combatants, involved an advanced LRA party, usually 10-15 fighters, making contact with Ugandan army troops and retreating hastily towards a well-set up ambush manned by a large LRA group with at least a couple of fighters manning PK machine guns in elevated positions. “It had to be done quickly,” said a former combatant, “in the hope that the Ugandan soldiers would immediately come after us rather than call for artillery cover or air support.”⁹⁴

A great deal of training and learning came about as a practical necessity. Such is the case with knowing how to avoid being seen by encircling aircraft, a learned experience from years of facing Ugandan army gunships. “Everyone in the group, including the newly abducted, knew exactly what to do when a helicopter appeared. We were told to walk in silence so we could hear the noise of incoming helicopters, to quickly find cover mostly in the bushes or under trees and make sure everything that could reflect in the sun including our fingernails were shielded or not facing upwards,” said a former combatant.⁹⁵ LRA combatants also mastered moving unseen under helicopters by covering their heads in cassava leaves and crawling in the grass.⁹⁶

Training and learned experience were attuned to serve mobility in the bush, including learning how to confuse trackers (walking backwards, splitting into many groups and reuniting a few miles after) and

⁹¹ See for instance Intelligence Briefing, 6/9/2004, “Kony summons Odyambo to base ahead of mission to Uganda,” *The Independent*, 17 February 2010.

⁹² Interview with Opiyo Makas, Gulu, 2 February 2011.

⁹³ As recounted by “Norman” in *Aboke Girls, Children Abducted in Northern Uganda*, Els De Temmerman, Kampala, 2009, p. 72.

⁹⁴ Interview with G.O. Gulu, November 2010 and February 2011.

⁹⁵ Interview with R. Gulu, 2 February, 2011.

⁹⁶ *Aboke Girls*, p. 22.

how to increase chances of success when attacking villages. Reconnaissance plays a key role in the latter and is something LRA commanders take very seriously. In every LRA group there are Intelligence Officers (IOs) whose duty is to gather as much information as possible about hostile forces and locations the group is about to attack.

Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance is a crucial component of LRA tactical procedure. Hours before attacking, LRA scout units, usually composed of approximately five fighters, abduct a few individuals from the area about to be attacked. The abductees are then questioned thoroughly on everything there is to know about the areas they come from (troops in the area, markets, geographical features, houses of local chiefs, religious and governmental buildings and medical clinics), a procedure conducted by the group commander and the IO. LRA commanders decide whether to attack based on the information received. The abductees are threatened with death if found to be lying, some may be killed during the interrogation to scare others or may be brought along when the attack takes place to act as guides or to be killed if they had lied during the interrogation.

The insistence on mastering their operating environment has been a key element of LRA survival in the past. Such was the case toward the end of 2005 when Vincent Otti and a group of about 120 LRA fighters crossed the Nile to move to DRC from Southern Sudan. Immediately upon arriving in Garamba National Park, LRA combatants abducted a park ranger and forced him to “show the LRA around,” as a Ugandan intelligence officer put it.⁹⁷ In a matter of days, Otti and his fighters had mastered their new territory, assigning names to particular locations including valleys, streams and elevations.⁹⁸ This proved crucial when a few weeks later, in January 2006, Otti’s group came in contact with 80 Guatemalan peacekeepers. Knowing the territory well allowed the LRA group to retreat, and later deploy 11 fighters to encircle and ambush the Guatemalan peacekeepers allegedly killing eight and injuring many more.⁹⁹

As the LRA moved to DRC and the fighting slowed down during the Juba Peace talks, training became less rigorous. After Operation Lighting Thunder and continuing today, military training is done “on the job,” as many groups are constantly on the move. There are unconfirmed claims, however, that two new training camps were recently set up in South Darfur where Sudanese officers have allegedly resumed training the LRA.¹⁰⁰

Survival

It is impossible to underestimate the ability of LRA fighters to survive under the hardest of circumstances. All of the members of LRA groups, including top commanders, have learned to live on little food and water. Their extraordinary ability to survive, even when constantly on the move, gives LRA fighters an edge over all pursuing armies.

⁹⁷ Interviews with Ugandan officer, Gulu, November 2010 and February 2011.

⁹⁸ Assigning names to places they operate is an important LRA practice which ensures not only that the fighters know their territory well but also that such knowledge is internal to the LRA, not understood by others as names are usually in Luo.

⁹⁹ Interview with G.O., Gulu, 3 February 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with SPLA Director of Operations, Juba, 29 March 2011.

Nature often provides the biggest challenge to LRA survival. The combination of constant movement and the scarcity of water mean thirst is one of the common causes of death in the LRA, especially among newly abducted captives, who have no one to look after them. "A young man we took in Namutina fell to the ground, dying of thirst. I realized that one Acholi guy [fighter] had taken his bottle of water by force and drunk it," said a former combatant.¹⁰¹ This type of predatory behavior directed at people outside but also inside the LRA accounts to a large extent for combatants' survival rates and illustrates how senior commanders ruthlessly preserve their own lives at the expense of their followers.

People in the LRA employ every possible trick to survive and their conditioning allows them to endure extreme hardships. Former combatants talk about surviving for days by licking the dew off leaves every morning, drinking each other's urine and digging for water. As a former combatant explained, "we could tell which parts of the earth might have little water deep down. We would then dig with sticks and fingers until we found wet dirt, then put our shirts on top of the dirt and suck really hard. It was never enough but we kept alive like this."¹⁰²

"Normal" food is more often than not unavailable to the rank and file in the LRA. They depend on leaves, roots, wild berries and fruit, lizards, insects and small birds for sustenance when nothing else is available. Desperation from hunger frequently causes LRA fighters to kill civilians for their food. Surviving on little and looting food wherever and however they can, including killing people for it, gives the LRA an advantage regular army troops cannot match. "We live on the air we breathe," said a former commander, "unlike the Ugandan soldiers who have to wait for the helicopter to bring them their posho [maize meal] and beans."¹⁰³

Ideology & religion

It is commonly assumed that LRA ideology is about establishing a regime based on the Biblical Ten Commandments or that the LRA ideology revolves entirely around Kony. Such views are incomplete and misleading when taken out of context. As an LRA researcher says, "active LRA fighters have said that they do not fight the war for the chairman (Joseph Kony). They see themselves as fighters for their people, the Acholi, whom they believe to be marginalized, abused, and excluded from Uganda's development by an oppressive regime."¹⁰⁴

Like other rebellions that predate it in Northern Uganda, the LRA was formed essentially on legitimate grievances and fear of domination experienced, or perceived, by the Acholi population. It is important to note that senior LRA commanders were aware first-hand of violence perpetrated by NRA soldiers in Northern Uganda in 1987. As a Catholic priest who was based in Kitgum at the time says, "the first NRA to arrive after the UNLA soldiers had left for Sudan were the *kadogos* [child soldiers] who initially behaved well but later started to beat people up and demand that all guns were handed over. Some former UNLA soldiers were too afraid to surrender worrying that they would all be killed as Amin had done with the Acholis. They instead joined the UPDA or Alice [Lakwena], and later - Kony."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Interview with G.O., Gulu, 3 February 2011.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 2 February 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Mareike Schomerus, 'The Lord's Resistance Army in Sudan, A history and overview,' Small Arms Survey, September 2007, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with F.J., Gulu, 3 February 2011.

Thus in the beginning, the LRA was based on a spirit of genuine rebellion; a group trying to overthrow those in power because of a series of perceived injustices, hardly unusual at the time given that Museveni had just come to power through a similar process, and in the two years after Museveni came to power “some twenty-seven different rebel groups were reported to be resisting the government.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, reports of Sudanese support to the LRA in the late 1990s and early 2000s relay the “legitimization” of the LRA—they were no longer just an irrelevant group of fighters in a remote corner of Northern Uganda. It is not hard to see that Kony and a few older commanders might still believe in the “righteousness” of their cause and the possibility of succeeding in their quest, something they impart to younger generations of fighters.

While the overall ideology has evolved over time—mirroring a tactic of precisely the same sort used throughout Uganda’s post-colonial politics, including by President Museveni and the NRM/A going back to the “bush war” that brought them to power—Kony has continued to nurture an ethnic theme of the Acholi against the Banyankole, the Western Ugandan tribe of President Museveni.¹⁰⁷ It is not uncommon to hear former LRA combatants in their teens refer to the “treacherous Ankole” (a reference to the Peace Talks between Okello and Museveni in 1985, derided by the Acholi as the Peace Jokes) or the Bantu wanting to eradicate the Nilotic people.¹⁰⁸ Such discourse, almost certainly initiated by Kony and senior commanders, is maintained in order to motivate fighters who regard the UPDF as controlled by Ankole officers. Whether or not Kony really believes he will eventually overthrow Museveni, LRA commanders have continued to tell their fighters that their aim is to take Kampala. Promises of positions in the army and government when Kony becomes President of Uganda continue to be made, not only to Ugandan fighters but also Sudanese and Congolese.

Scholars of the conflict have pointed out that the Acholi rebellions of Alice Lakwena, and eventually Kony, were not only about defying Museveni, but also about challenging the established order in Acholiland of politicians and elders considered corrupt and sinful.¹⁰⁹ Being in the LRA provided more than just protection from the NRA, it offered Kony and his fighters a parallel structure where they decided what was right and wrong. Given tendencies toward authoritarian rule by their governments, it is not surprising that the allure of challenging the established order remains strong, not only for Kony and the Acholi soldiers, but also for the Congolese, Sudanese and Central Africans.

Religion, or rather a unique blend of Christian and Acholi traditional beliefs, has been effectively used to legitimize the movement, bonding together recruits and even more importantly providing a code of conduct that has been key to troop cohesion. Religion-inspired behavior, such as refraining from committing adultery (i.e., not sleeping with other commanders’ wives) has helped avoid conflict among

¹⁰⁶ Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings*, 2008, p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ On the use of ethnic stereotyping and demonizing by Museveni and the NRM, see Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity*, 2010, “Afterword.” The term Ankole is also used in a derogative form by LRA and akin to warrant death. In the January 1997 Palabek massacre in Northern Uganda (north of Kitgum) LRA soldiers told people there they were treacherous like Banyankole after massacring over 410 people in retaliation against people from the area for disclosing LRA hidden ammunitions to the UPDF. See Gersony, “The Anguish of Northern Uganda,” July 1997.

¹⁰⁸ This theory is widely discussed in Northern Uganda more generally. People in Gulu for instance mention the arrival in the district in 1987 of current Rwandan President Paul Kagame, at the time in the NRA, leading a group of other NRA fighters including many who were under 18 and from Western Uganda, as evidence of attempted “domination of the Tutsis.”

¹⁰⁹ For example, see Adam Branch, “Exploring the roots of LRA violence: political crisis and ethnic politics in Acholiland,” in *The Lord’s Resistance Army, Myth and Reality*, Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot eds., London 2010, pp. 36-37; Finnström, 2008, pp 218-19.

troops. Religion in the form of convincing combatants they are fighting for and are protected by God has helped to encourage valor on the battlefield.

It is incorrect to ignore the importance of the Acholi beliefs in the supernatural, as is the case with the spirits. Usually regarded as a sign of the LRA's "backwardness," the significance of spirits and their various roles in daily life are today commonly accepted in Uganda.¹¹⁰ LRA combatants are not the only ones who believe in the power of spirits, the malice of evil practitioners of witchcraft and Kony's supernatural powers. Various interviews with UPDF officers and high Ugandan officials indicate that despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the LRA's enemies share some of the same beliefs and fears of the otherworldly as LRA combatants do.¹¹¹

The emphasis on religion and widely accepted beliefs in spirits and the supernatural have helped to create the "perfect soldier." But this is only one element in the process. The typical, usually Acholi, LRA combatant not only believes in the cause for which he is fighting for spiritual or religious reasons, but also for political ones, and he also observes strict military practices of training and fighting techniques and adheres to a code of conduct that includes not drinking alcohol or consuming drugs.¹¹²

Religion, specifically aspects related to Catholicism, has acted as a bonding element for the non-Acholi troops, particularly the Zande from all three countries, who are overwhelmingly Catholic (as are also the Acholi). Singing Christian songs and praying—something the new recruits are immediately taught to do in Acholi Luo—as well as "traditional" or hybrid religious practices of anointing new recruits with shea-nut oil and "holy water" are well thought and carried-out bonding practices in the LRA.

LRA ideology has evolved throughout the history of the organization. So have techniques of indoctrination and control. According to interviews with former combatants, the LRA can be appealing to teenagers, even though they were abducted and forced to participate, because of the status and benefits associated with being a fighter. For senior commanders, including Kony, participation in the LRA may not have provided the means to the end they desire but has rather become an end in itself. This is possibly true for most of the privates also, particularly those who have spent a considerable amount of time in the bush already. But while ideology formed partly on a history of ethnic and regional resentment provides some motivation for fighters remaining in the LRA, it is now the status they achieve which has become the salient reason for continuing the fight.¹¹³

Status

Being in the LRA confers on senior commanders a status to which they could not otherwise aspire. "Kony is the most famous person in Uganda," said a former commander who himself felt he has been an important person in the past; particularly when being flown to Khartoum and interacting with senior

¹¹⁰ See for instance Finnström, 2008.

¹¹¹ The course of an interview with a Ugandan official was typical. It began with the official ridiculing Kony for "pretending to be talking to spirits," and ended with the officials claiming, "Kony is a son of Satan and capable of deeds outside of this world."

¹¹² In a recent interview with "Rambo," a former LRA combatant who surrendered to the Congolese troops and spent four nights in the FARDC base in Doruma, he said, "the Congolese soldiers are not what we in the LRA consider to be real soldiers, they were drinking all night and smoking marijuana, you get shot in the LRA for doing those things."

¹¹³ For a good discussion of spirituality in the LRA see Kristof Titeca 'The Spiritual Order of the LRA' in Allen and Vlassenroot 2010.

Sudanese officers. “I am amazed LRA commanders decide to leave the ranks,” said a Ugandan intelligence agent. “One day I saw Makas in Gulu digging a ditch for a 1,000 shillings [50 cents] a day. Here was this former commander who had hundreds of men under him in the bush working to survive.”¹¹⁴

LRA commanders continuously promote among the rank and file, the significance of being a soldier by reinforcing the notion of military status as superior to that of civilians. There are very clear procedures commanders follow to “transform” recruits from civilians to soldiers which include beating and forced killings. Such initiation rituals aim not only to break and rebuild the psyche of the newly abducted so that they will accept their new fate, but also to make them feel part of a group bound together by often cruel bonding exercises and brainwashing. Rituals such as anointing the recruits with shea-nut oil serve to signify entry into the LRA. This marks such recruits as having become fighters, clearly distinguishable from civilians, whom the LRA refer to as *waya* (ants) or *funu* (pigs).¹¹⁵

Bonding practices and rituals intended to reinforce the special status of LRA fighters continue throughout their time in the LRA. The use of military ranks is a particularly important part of the structure of status reinforcement. Given for bravery shown in the field, ranks in the LRA are similar to ranks in the UPDF, an attempt to legitimize the rebellion as well as to encourage fighters to fight hard. It is not surprising that after years in the LRA, many combatants feel a sense of belonging to the organization. “Kidega was a commander, he was 20 years old. He wanted to die in the bush; everybody close to him had already died there. I miss him but I know he will never come out,” said a young woman, former “wife” of the subject, who managed to escape from the LRA.¹¹⁶

The significance of status conferred by the LRA is not lost on the rank and file. “I was in charge of 15 people in the LRA,” said a 17 year old former combatant, “now that I am out, my mother orders me to collect wood.”¹¹⁷ The increased freedom within the organization and respect enabled by their status as LRA fighters, in stark contrast to the lack of opportunities for recognition or status back home in Northern Uganda, have made many former combatants express regret for leaving the LRA, despite the extreme living conditions and dangers of life in the bush.

Communications

Given the challenge of retaining cohesion while operating in groups scattered far apart from one another, communication has been of enormous significance to the LRA. From early days, messengers—runners carrying messages from one commander to another—were the preferred method of communication. From 1995 onwards, commanders started to use two-way radios (walkie-talkies) and by the late 1990s LRA groups were using radio calls. According to Major Ochen, a former director of

¹¹⁴ Interview with Ugandan intelligence agent, Kampala, 22 November 2010.

¹¹⁵ For an in depth discussion of the experience of recruits in the LRA including reasons for staying in the rebellion see Blattman and Annan ‘On the nature and causes of LRA abduction: what the abductees say,’ in Allen and Vlassenroot, 2010.

¹¹⁶ Excerpt from interviews with former combatants conducted by an international NGO carrying out psychosocial support. D.I. 18 years old.

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted by international psychologist, Subject I.

communications (chief signaler) in the LRA, over 200 people were trained by SAF officers by 1999 in operating and fixing radios as well as in the use of codes.¹¹⁸

The LRA maintained a strict practice of opening radios at 9 am in the morning and checking in at the top of every hour until 9 pm, after which radio silence was observed. Kony, who almost always spoke through his signaler, received reports of attacks and situation reports covering each day's events. Detailed reports, however, of particularly large attacks were expected to be given in person to Kony. By 2000-01, as the Ugandan army started to eavesdrop on LRA chatter, the LRA increased their use of coded messages.

A Ugandan intelligence officer who studied the LRA forms of communication for over five years in the late 1990s and early 2000s says that signalers in the LRA used both simple and sophisticated coded messages when communicating by radio. Keys to decode messages, or *tonfases* as the LRA calls them, were put together by top commanders with the aid of signalers. The keys were then given names and disseminated by messengers to all signalers. The signalers would then give the message referring to the particular key needed to decode it. Names given to keys ranged from "African Leaders" category (e.g., Mandela) to random words in Luo, English or Kiswahili.¹¹⁹

Keys could be as simple as numbers corresponding to a word in English or Luo (e.g., 1-private, 2-military, 3-AK47, 19-water, etc.). In this case a message over the radio could be (in Luo): "Suspicion of 2 near your area." More complicated keys involved numbers corresponding to letters in particular words (e.g., ANGOLA – A=1, N=2, G=3, O= 4, L=5, A=1). Particularly sensitive messages were "double-coded," signalers used the original key, numbers corresponding to particular words (which was referred to as GANG MA COL – Luo for "Africa") as well as using the second method of using numbers referring to letters in particular words.

But as LRA signalers were captured or defected to the Ugandan army, LRA commanders (particularly Vincent Otti) started to create complicated keys. According to Ugandan intelligence agents, in the early to mid-2000s, LRA coded communications evolved to a sophisticated level that proved extremely challenging to break.¹²⁰ There was an increase in jargon and use of nicknames (e.g., "collect the water" for "cross the river"). Crucially, the messages became esoteric, understood only to commanders in question (e.g., Otti to Kony – *Cross the road where Kapere's Mteso wife escaped and turn right where we had posho with Ochan Bunia.*)¹²¹ "It was impossible for us to know what this meant," said a Ugandan intelligence officer, "even after interrogating former signalers in the LRA, who did not know either."¹²²

Other messages were made up of words corresponding to a particular letter forming a different message. Again, the words used were also known mostly to commanders in the LRA (e.g., 1. the name of your third son, 2. Sudanese tribe, 3. name of your chief security. This formed: 1. NONO 2. LUTUGU 3. ODONGO. Nono means "nothing" in Luo, Lutugu was a code word for "food" and Odongo was a code word for "water." Hence the message would be: "send food and water."¹²³)

¹¹⁸ Interviews with F. Ochen, Gulu, 2 February 2011

¹¹⁹ "LRA's Communication Method," Uganda External Security Organization, Confidential, March 2007.

¹²⁰ Various interviews with former and current intelligence agents, Gulu and Kampala, November, December 2010 and February and March 2011.

¹²¹ Transcript from intercepted communication, Ugandan External Security Organization, 27 February 2006.

¹²² Interview with ESO agent, Kampala, March 2011.

¹²³ Ibid.

By the early 2000s LRA commanders came into possession of satellite phones, one allegedly supplied to them by the Carter Centre and others taken from foreigners attacked in Sudan.¹²⁴ During the Juba Talks, the LRA received many more satellite phones; Kony is reported to have had at least 16 at one point in 2007.¹²⁵ It is unclear where the air time for the satellite phones came from, although it was reportedly from LRA sympathizers in the diaspora and international non-governmental organizations which wanted to maintain open channels of communication with Kony and other commanders.¹²⁶ Kony, was, however, convinced that Jonas Savimbi of UNITA was killed by a satellite phone-guided missile and refused to touch them, using instead his signaler.¹²⁷

Satellite phones were mostly used until May 2009 when Kony rightly guessed they were being monitored by the Ugandan army (with US help), their signal triangulated and the position of user attacked by Ugandan helicopter gunships. Walkie-talkies and radio calls have stopped being used altogether. There has been sporadic use of satellite phones since 2009, mostly in the form of coded text messages. Some commanders send their signalers with satellite phones 20 kilometers away from the main group, where calls are made before they immediately return to the original location. There have also been reports that some commanders, particularly Ongwen, are taking advantage of recent coverage in some areas of South Sudan to use cell phones to communicate with people in Uganda.

Most of LRA commanders, however, have gone back to using only messengers (runners) to communicate. Pre-arranged rendezvous (RV) places are also used. Some of the Congo groups, for instance, used pre-arranged RVs to meet at the first of every month from January to May 2009 when they were attacked by the UPDF soldiers who had intercepted a runner and extracted info about the RV location.¹²⁸ Written letters are also used, usually pinned to a tree or hidden under a rock near a RV location where other commanders check frequently.

Weapons

The AK 47 is the weapon most used in the LRA. Other weapons include the G3, FN rifles and PK machine guns. There are also a handful of M16s looted throughout the years, particularly after an attack against Garamba Park Rangers. Many of the LRA groups also possess and use RPG7s. There has been a reported shortage in ammunition for most of the weapons LRA groups use today. Most of the ammunition for LRA weapons had been hidden (buried) by LRA commanders during the time in Garamba. Guns and ammunition, particularly AKs, are usually taken from soldiers that LRA fighters kill, especially FARDC troops. Other sophisticated weaponry that the LRA has used in the past includes B10s and SPG9 recoilless guns, as well as anti-tank and anti-personnel mines and SAM7 missiles.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Kony asked a representative of an international organization for a satellite phone in 1999 and received it a year or so later. At least three expatriates were robbed of their sat phones by the LRA in 2005 in Sudan.

¹²⁵ Interviews with former LRA combatants, Gulu, November, December 201 and February 2011.

¹²⁶ Interview with former LRA members of delegation to the Juba talks, Gulu and Kampala, November 2010 and March 2011. Interview with former escort to Kony, Gulu, 3 February 2011. The latter said, "there was a satellite phone which appeared to have unlimited airtime, and Kony used it frequently in 2006 and 2007."

¹²⁷ At least three former combatants have recounted the story of President Museveni calling Kony in November 2008 which was answered by Michael Epedu (technician), Kony's signaler. Kony refused to handle the phone and reportedly fled the camp.

¹²⁸ This led to the killing of the notorious brigade commander, Okello Kalalang.

¹²⁹ Former combatants talk of never mastering the SAM7 and needing help from SAF officers to recalibrate the missiles due to problem with the batteries.

Strategy

The LRA seems to have followed a strategic plan of some kind or other from the beginning of its existence. Decisions to cooperate with other rebel groups, participate in peace talks, launch military action, use mutilation, and so on, were all part of a strategic thought process. LRA commanders have played a key role in shaping the actions of the LRA through their proximity to Kony. The decision to move to DRC was influenced by Vincent Otti, who convinced Kony to do so and undertook an explanatory mission in September 2005, before establishing an LRA base and then ensuring that Kony reached Garamba safely in 2006.

Kony, however, has always had the last word on strategy. His orders are relayed by radio or messengers and are often explicit (detailing how many people to abduct and what to loot). Commanders of attacking groups are then expected to report back to Kony in person or, if far away, call in using coded language. Kony has continued to dictate strategy in the LRA even as different LRA groups are operating far from one another. Immediately post OLT, Kony ordered the deployment of troops in various areas inside DRC and CAR, an order most groups have largely obeyed while Kony and two top commanders tried to rekindle the relationship with the SAF.

Use of strategy can also be observed in efforts to maintain organizational cohesion and encourage LRA fighters, particularly non-Ugandans, to continue to fight. Kony and other top commanders tell the non-Ugandan fighters that they will too receive high posts in the Ugandan army and government when the LRA overthrows Museveni. It is also likely that Kony's assertions that his Sudanese wife, Foisha, has been chosen by the Holy Spirit to aid him to overthrow Museveni are intended to create a "bond through marriage" with the Sudanese element in the LRA.

Strategy these days in the LRA entails a "wait and see" approach with the hope that opportunities for more decisive action will materialize soon. Kony rightly understands his troops can outlast the regional hunt as the Ugandans and Congolese soldiers eventually lose interest or the ability to keep up. Such a strategy in fact seems to be working.

Based on interviews with former combatants and reports of recent movements of LRA groups in Congo, Garamba remains an important location for Kony and LRA commanders. It is perhaps a combination of factors such as proximity to Uganda and South Sudan, hidden caches of ammunition in the mid-2000s, an abundance of water and wild animals and the fertility of the land that make Garamba an appealing location to the LRA. Relative proximity to other rebel groups in Ituri, particularly the Allied Democratic Front, might also make Garamba a good location for LRA bases.¹³⁰ It is unlikely, although not impossible, that LRA groups would at any time in the foreseeable future attempt reentry in Uganda. For now, it is sufficient to a long term strategy that they survive.

¹³⁰ According to interviews with former combatants, in late 2007 Bok Abudema led a recon group south of Ituri allegedly to make contact with a former Ugandan rebel group, the People's Redemption Army. Allegations about a possible cooperation between the LRA and ADF have also been made in the past but have not been confirmed through our research.