

‘Catch me if you can!’ The Lord’s Resistance Army

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Despite being a relatively marginal armed group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has triggered forced displacement on a massive scale. But why have national, regional and international responses so far failed to dismantle the group and to protect civilians effectively?

The Lord’s Resistance Army’s increasingly violent attacks against civilians in Uganda from the 1990s and well into the 2000s – through large-scale and systematic abductions, massacres, maiming and military use of children – led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis characterised by massive population displacement.

Six years after arrest warrants were issued by the International Criminal Court against the LRA’s leader, Joseph Kony, and four of its top military commanders, civilian populations across several countries of East Africa remain greatly affected by LRA violence. Regular armies and peacekeeping forces have so far failed to eradicate the group by force. Peaceful efforts to end the violence have also fallen short.

Unprecedented forced displacement

While there is generally a correlation between the presence of armed groups and the forced movement of populations, the level and scale of displacement in areas where the LRA has been operating are relatively high, especially considering the limited size and military capacity of the group.

Displacing populations by force has been a deliberate objective of the LRA. Acts of extreme violence and terror perpetuated by the group, whether in the form of large-scale massacres, repeated attacks or symbolic cruel acts such as mutilations, have spread fear in local populations and have resulted in the displacement of civilians and even the depopulation of entire areas.

The LRA has also displaced civilians during violent attacks by forcing them to move with the group, both as a military strategy and as a survival

strategy. Those captured or abducted are uprooted from their communities and – unless they are only forced to carry looted goods for a few days before being released or killed – they will have no other choice but to join the LRA for months or years to come. In addition to killing those trying to escape as a deterrent to others, the LRA purposely disorients its captives by forcing them to walk across vast areas and to cross borders. Testimonies of formerly abducted persons confirm that they had been kept constantly on the move, rarely sleeping twice in the same place. Many escapees recall the days or weeks they spent trying to get back to where they had been abducted from.

Government-led policies to resist or prevent LRA violence against civilians have failed and have often yielded results opposite to what was intended. Most significantly, in 1996, the Government of Uganda forcibly moved hundreds of thousands of Acholi into ‘protection camps’. The people displaced by this hasty and ill-conceived counter-insurgency strategy did not find the protection they needed at all, as these settlements became an easy target for the LRA to abduct civilians from, especially young adolescents. The high risk of abduction persuaded parents that it was safer for their children to leave the camps at nightfall for the main towns. This unique phenomenon known as ‘night commuting’, which led to the daily migration of thousands of children, lasted several years and eventually triggered an international outcry.

In 2002, the government ordered those remaining in villages to move into camps. By mid-2005, the level of displacement reached a peak with some 1.8 million IDPs, and approximately 90% of the population in Acholiland. For those forced

into these congested camps this has also meant forced dependency, vulnerability, humiliation and collective fear and disempowerment.

Running and hiding

Over the years, many people have prematurely announced the ‘end of the LRA’ and claimed military victory over the group; these predictions and statements have always proved wrong. The military option persistently pursued – although partially suspended by several peace initiatives – has not been tied into serious analysis of the LRA’s military strategy and their unusual resilience and adaptability. Years of successive military operations by the Ugandan People’s Defence Forces have had a limited effect in damaging the LRA’s top military command but have had disastrous humanitarian consequences.

The group has also been consistent in operating in remote areas where state presence and infrastructures are minimal or absent, where there are no communication networks but enough people, mineral resources and food to prey on. The LRA has therefore remained relatively undisturbed in border areas where state presence is weaker.

Once the Government of Sudan stopped backing the group in 2005, the deliberate military strategy of the LRA to be constantly on the move and in hiding gradually became their best option for survival. While for some the LRA appears to be under pressure and running for its life, for a number of analysts they are not just surviving but are skilfully using terror and running rings around several armies.¹ While over the past few years the group appears weakened and depleted by continuous military operations, deaths and defections, the scale of its violence has comparatively increased. It has been said about the situation: “This is a conflict that everyone says they want to end, but nobody seems able to.”²

Protecting civilians

The spread of the LRA over several national territories in the last five years has not coincided with the development of a coherent regional response to dismantle the group and protect local populations. The traditional state-centric security approach has been adopted by states who have mainly considered that the LRA does not have the military capacity to threaten their respective regimes. While they have occasionally deplored the human costs, the thousands of deaths and the displacement of about 400,000 people, this has so far failed to trigger a comprehensive intervention to halt the violence and protect civilians, which a human security 'people-centred' approach might have done. This can be observed at a national level, through the regional approach and internationally.

The fact that the LRA is no longer operating on Ugandan soil has lifted the pressure off the government there to protect its own civilians, and Uganda sees no obligation to protect foreign civilians against the exactions of this 'Ugandan-led' armed group.

For the governments of the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the LRA is but one among many armed groups operating on its territory – but one with very little political weight compared to others, not deserving an enhanced action from their already weak and stretched armies. For the Government of South Sudan, the implications of the self-determination referendum

have supplanted preoccupations about the LRA despite reports of LRA attempts to re-establish contact with the Sudanese Army.

Furthermore, the LRA has indirectly benefited from the shifting relationships between the states in the region and the continuous mistrust and lack of coordination that have characterised more recent joint operations.

What is needed

Like the states involved, the UN peacekeeping missions in the region are all well aware that the LRA almost systematically retaliates against civilians in response to military attacks. The regional armies and the peacekeeping missions alike have disclaimed responsibility for failing to protect civilians.

The LRA is considerably weakened now in comparison to the early 2000s but it is operating over a much larger territory and the effects of its actions remain disastrous for civilians and continue to cause large-scale displacements. The continuing lack of a strong, coherent and consistent regional response will play out in favour of the LRA which has proved to be very opportunistic and adaptable.

A new human security approach to conflict resolution is needed to avoid a prolonged low-level military campaign that causes extreme insecurity for civilians and yet fails to halt the LRA's activities.³ While the resumption of peace negotiations remains improbable in the short

term, there is scope to engage in a political process designed to establish regional peace and security through coordinated military efforts to apprehend the LRA's leadership together with the involvement of civil society and community leaders. It needs to be designed in such a way as to mitigate the risk of civilian casualties including by protecting civilians from potential retaliatory attacks by the LRA, improving information gathering about the group, combined with preventive deployment of peacekeeping and armed forces in areas at risk and, finally, encouragement for LRA defections.

While affected populations need increased emergency humanitarian aid, in order to progressively deprive the LRA of their operational space in border areas, governments and donors should also mark their presence by prioritising socio-economic development to reduce the vulnerability of isolated local communities.

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1. Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot, *The Lord's Resistance Army – Myth and Reality*, Zed Books (London), 2010
2. Chris Dolan, Director of the Refugee Law Project <http://www.refugeelawproject.org>
3. Mareike Schomerus and Kennedy Tumutegyeize, *After Operation Lightning Thunder, Protecting Communities and Building Peace*, Conciliation Resources, 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/Schomerus-Tumutegyeize> and *LRA: A Regional Strategy beyond Killing Kony*, Crisis Group Africa Report, No. 157, 2010 <http://tinyurl.com/ICG-regional-strategy-on-LRA>

Engaging with armed groups: dilemmas and options for mediators

Engaging with armed groups: dilemmas and options for mediators by Teresa Whitfield draws on experience and case studies to provide mediation practitioners with an overview of the challenges associated with engaging with armed groups.

The publication's focus is on the dilemmas, challenges and risks involved in a mediator's early contacts with an armed group and subsequent engagement as interlocutor, message-carrier, adviser and/or facilitator – all roles that may precede and accompany formal negotiation between parties to a conflict. The author also suggests options for mediators from early contacts to formal negotiation.

This is the second in the HD Centre's Mediation Practice Series. The first in the series, *External actors in mediation*, looked at how mediators can work effectively with actors such as regional powers, neighbouring states, regional organisations and donor countries. Forthcoming publications will address issues such as the negotiation of ceasefires, managing spoilers in peace processes, and whether or not to involve civil society in peace processes.

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