

DOMINIC ONGWEN'S DOMINO EFFECT



HOW THE FALLOUT FROM
A FORMER CHILD SOLDIER'S DEFECTION
IS UNDERMINING JOSEPH KONY'S
CONTROL OVER THE LRA

JANUARY 2017



LRA CRISIS TRACKER

DOMINIC ONGWEN'S DOMINO EFFECT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since founding the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda in the late 1980s, Joseph Kony's control over the group's command structure has been remarkably durable. Despite having no formal military training, he has motivated and ruled LRA members with a mixture of harsh discipline, incentives, and clever manipulation. When necessary, he has demoted or executed dozens of commanders that he perceived as threats to his power.

Though Kony still commands the LRA, the weakening of his grip over the group's command structure has been exposed by a dramatic series of events involving former LRA commander Dominic Ongwen. In late 2014, a group of Ugandan LRA officers, including Ongwen, began plotting to defect from the LRA. In November 2014, Achaye Doctor, a longtime LRA officer and one of Ongwen's co-conspirators, orchestrated the escape of nine Ugandan fighters, while Ongwen remained in an LRA group under Kony's command. Suspecting Ongwen had played a role in Achaye's duplicity, Kony ordered Ongwen beaten and held in detention, only to see him escape weeks later with the help of LRA members sympathetic to his plight. Soon after defecting, Ongwen was transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC), where he is currently on trial for 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"All officers loyal to me come back home. Caromon, Doctor, Kidega Alala, what we have planned together has been detected and officers who are loyal to Kony are deployed to trace and kill you."

–Translated excerpt from message recorded by
Dominic Ongwen, January 2015

As Ongwen's fate unfolded, Achaye Doctor's group established a camp in a remote forested region of Bas Uele province in northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Instead of surrendering, they began operating as a splinter LRA group, abducting Congolese boys to strengthen their fighting capacity and acquiring weaponry in an ambush of a Congolese military unit. In 2016, they shifted their operations into neighboring Central African Republic (CAR), where they

abducted dozens of civilians, including 15 children. Though it is not uncommon for LRA groups to operate without direct contact from Kony's chain of command for extended periods of time, Achaye's group is the first to intentionally operate independently from Kony's control and self-identify as a splinter group.

The Ongwen saga's ripple effect highlighted and exacerbated fault lines in the LRA command structure that had been simmering for years. Kony's harsh punishment of loyal LRA officers for infractions of the group's code of conduct, which included his execution of at least five combatants in 2012 and 2013, had sparked disillusionment within the LRA ranks long before his punishment of Ongwen in 2014. Kony's grip on the LRA had also been weakened by a series of military operations led by Ugandan and US troops that killed several high-profile LRA commanders in 2012 and 2013.

Internal threats to Kony's rule continued after the defection of Ongwen and the departure of Achaye's group. In May 2015, seven LRA bodyguards assigned to protect Kony and his inner circle defected, boldly but unsuccessfully trying to kill Kony as they did so. At least one of them had been involved in the Ongwen defection plot the previous year. In January 2016, Kony executed Jon Bosco Kibwola, an LRA commander who had killed a Sudanese trader, prompting another long-time bodyguard, Okot Odek, to defect.



Kony is a seasoned survivor, and his resilience should not be underestimated. Despite the recent threats to his authority, he has managed to prevent a majority of remaining LRA combatants from defecting. Loyal LRA commanders continue to carry out difficult missions on his command, including long treks to DRC's Garamba National Park to poach elephants and collect ivory. Adding to violence perpetrated by Achaye's group, Kony also ordered the forced recruitment of dozens of children during a surge of LRA attacks in eastern CAR in 2016, the group's most violent since 2010.

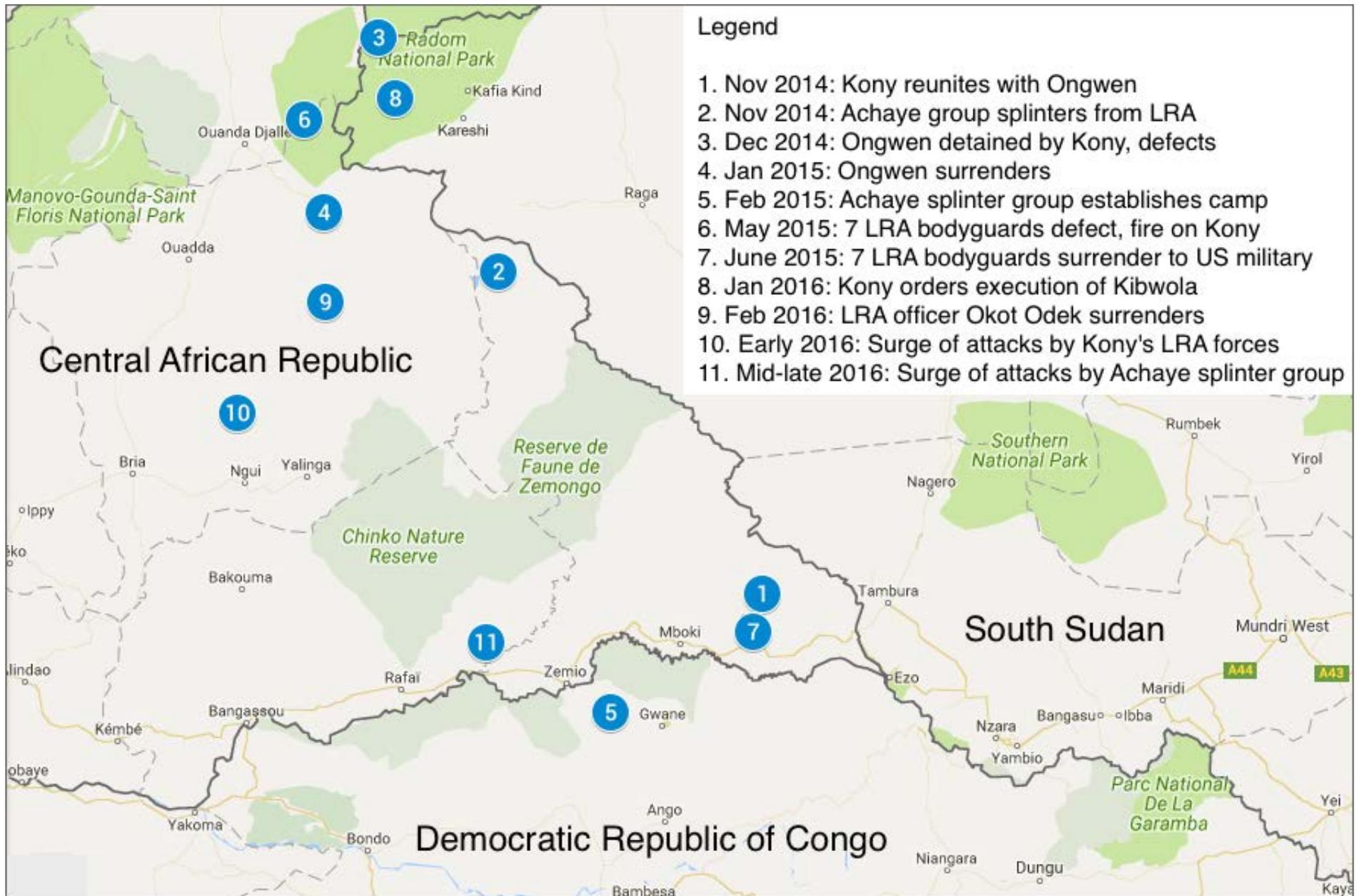
The fracturing of the LRA's command structure has important implications for the future of counter-LRA initiatives, emphasizing the need for improved civilian protection mechanisms and more effective defection messaging and reintegration programs. The decision of Achaye and his followers to remain active and continue targeting civilians despite being independent of Kony tests long-held assumptions that killing or capturing the LRA leader would lead to a swift dissolution of the rebel group. Unless defection messaging and reintegration programs targeting LRA combatants improve, Kony's death or capture may instead lead to the creation of more LRA splinter groups that threaten civilians in eastern CAR and northern DRC.

Ugandan troops deployed in eastern CAR have led counter-LRA operations in recent years with substantial US support, including President Barack Obama's deployment of dozens of US Special Forces advisers in 2011. Ugandan and US military offensives and defection messaging have helped reduce the number of LRA combatants from approximately 400 in 2010 to less than 150 today, but the effectiveness of military operations and the pace of LRA combatant defections has waned considerably since mid-2014.

The future of the US-Ugandan counter-LRA partnership is also in flux. The Ugandan military is the only force in the region currently capable of pursuing Kony and the LRA, but Ugandan officials have announced plans to withdraw their troops from eastern CAR in 2017. President Obama made his counter-LRA strategy a priority within his broader agenda in Africa, but it is unclear whether the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump will reauthorize the deployment of US military advisers or continue funding defection messaging initiatives. Should the Ugandan and US governments scale back their counter-LRA efforts, more pressure will be placed on national militaries and UN peacekeeping missions in CAR and DRC to protect civilians from the LRA, a responsibility they are currently ill-prepared to assume.

The splintering of the LRA, while undermining its chances of long-term survival, makes the group a more dangerous menace to civilians in the short-term. Whether the LRA is soon disbanded or is able to sustain itself—or even rebuild into the future—will likely depend on whether the international community can exploit the fault lines within the LRA's command structure so clearly exposed by Dominic Ongwen.

Dominic Ongwen's domino effect on the LRA



I. KONY'S GRIP ON THE LRA BEGINS TO LOOSEN

The fault lines in the LRA's command structure exposed and exacerbated by Dominic Ongwen's defection have been slowly deepening in recent years, the result of Joseph Kony's harsh and erratic leadership style. Though Kony has helped consolidate his position as the LRA's center of gravity by providing promotions and incentives to loyal fighters, he has also developed a track record of ruthlessly demoting or executing commanders who threaten to develop an alternative center of power to his rule. Over time, his brutal disciplinary tactics have alienated large swaths of the LRA command structure, setting the stage for Ongwen's dramatic escape from the rebel group.

Ruling the LRA through promotions and punishment

Lacking the ability to give his commanders and fighters much material wealth, Kony cultivates loyalty by disbursing promotions, which come with a range of benefits. Promotions may give rank-and-file fighters greater access to abducted "wives" and personal bodyguards, or escorts. They also offer reprieve from the arduous physical labor of gathering food and setting up camp, which can be a daily burden given the mobility of LRA groups. Promotions may also result in increased food rations and permission to listen to FM and shortwave radio receivers, perks that pass for luxury in the austere and remote life of an LRA fighter.

In recent years, Kony has frequently issued promotions to his former personal bodyguards, several of whom have risen to prominent positions. Among these former bodyguards is Aligac, who reportedly replaced Okot Odhiambo as the LRA's second-in-command after Odhiambo was killed by the Ugandan military in 2013. Aligac currently commands several LRA groups operating in DRC and southeastern CAR. Kony also promotes officers who succeed in bringing him illicit goods, which Kony's group barter for food and ammunition in the Kafia Kingi enclave, which borders CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture, South Sudan's Western Bahr el Ghazal State, and Sudan's South Darfur State. In late 2014, Kony promoted Awila for successfully delivering at least 40 elephant tusks poached from DRC's Garamba National Park.¹

Kony's inner circle also includes his family members, particularly his two eldest sons Salim and Ali. The latter has served in a senior operational position where he has acted as a gateway for other officers seeking access to Kony. By late 2016, however, he was reportedly deployed to another group operating further south. Another of Kony's sons, Salim, oversees the LRA's logistical and financial transactions, of which the LRA has historically kept a close record. Kony also has numerous "wives," abducted girls and women forced to marry him in the bush. Several of these "wives" reportedly serve as armed bodyguards to Kony, including a young Congolese woman abducted in 2008 named Aimee. These women are part of a long tradition of female combatants in the LRA, though in recent years Kony has reportedly restricted their number.

When necessary, Kony does not hesitate to employ coercive tactics to maintain control over the LRA. He holds ultimate authority over all LRA ranks, giving him the power to demote or place in "detention" officers who displease him. Demotions prevent LRA officers from amassing enough influence to threaten him, and are often accompanied by moves designed to humiliate the offender, such as beatings, losing access to weapons, removal of personal escorts, and being placed under the command of younger officers. Occasionally, Kony offers discredited officers the chance to work their way back into his good graces. One example is Alphonse Lamola, who Kony demoted in 2012 and then re-elevated the next year as a commander of several LRA groups in eastern CAR in November 2013.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all information about the LRA's internal dynamics is derived from interviews with former LRA combatants conducted by staff from The Resolve or Invisible Children between 2010 and 2016 in CAR, DRC, and Uganda.

Kony has also created an atmosphere of paranoia and fear to prevent internal alliances that could undermine his authority. He rewards LRA fighters for informing on their comrades for breaking any of the many taboos within the LRA, which include openly second-guessing his decisions or raping abducted girls and women without his permission. As a result, LRA combatants are discouraged from confiding in each other about uncertainty in Kony's leadership or making plans to defect from the group.

In extreme cases, Kony simply executes officers who displease or threaten him. In 1999, Kony uncovered a plot led by his second-in-command, Otti Lagony, to kill him and lead a mass defection. Kony subsequently ordered his execution.² In 2007, Kony ordered the execution of his chief deputy, Vincent Otti, and several Otti loyalists. Kony felt threatened by Otti, who had gained prominence through his engagement with the press and mediators during the Juba Peace Talks and whose openness to demobilizing the LRA had gained some support within the rank-and-file. In March 2013, Kony ordered the execution of one of his most loyal enforcers, Otto Agweng, in part for raping an abducted woman without his permission. He executed at least three other Ugandan LRA fighters in 2013 for insubordination.³

A weakened LRA

Kony's harsh tactics have been effective in maintaining his control over the LRA, but they have likely weakened the LRA as a whole. Executions of LRA fighters for breaking the code of conduct can play a role in reinforcing discipline and cohesiveness, but because the LRA no longer operates in Uganda Kony cannot replace the Ugandan fighters that comprise the LRA's backbone. Consequently, his executions of experienced officers such as Otto Agweng and Jon Bosco Kibwola do irrevocable damage to the LRA's upper ranks. Fear of Kony's unpredictable wrath has also led to several prominent defections from the LRA. In 2005, Brigadier Sam Kolo, Kony's chief negotiator with the Ugandan government, escaped after discovering Kony planned to have him executed.⁴ Other prominent defectors have included Opio Makasi, who defected in 2007, and Caesar Achellam, who defected in May 2012 after being demoted by Kony.⁵

Furthermore, Kony's concentration of power in his own hands and fear of allowing rivals to accumulate a power base has made the LRA command structure heavily dependent on his survival. Should Kony be captured or killed, the LRA's weak institutional hierarchy could undermine efforts by other commanders to consolidate control of the group. Kony likely intends for one of his two sons to assume the LRA's leadership, but they may have difficulty winning the loyalty of older fighters who resent their rapid rise in the LRA's ranks and see them as less intimidating than their father.

The destabilizing internal dynamics within the LRA have been exacerbated by military pressure on the group from the Ugandan military and advisers from the US Special Forces. Operating primarily in eastern CAR since 2009, Ugandan military operations have dealt a series of major blows to the LRA command structure, killing senior LRA officers Santo Alit (September 2009), Okello Kalalang (September 2009), Bok Abudema (December 2009), Binany Okumu (January 2013), Samuel Kangul (November 2013), and Okot Odhiambo (December 2013). This pressure forced LRA groups to scatter across a huge geographic area spanning eastern CAR, northeastern DRC, and Kafia Kingi. Military monitoring techniques also forced the reduction of HF radio and satellite phone communication between LRA groups, making it more difficult for Kony to communicate with and exert control over distant commanders.

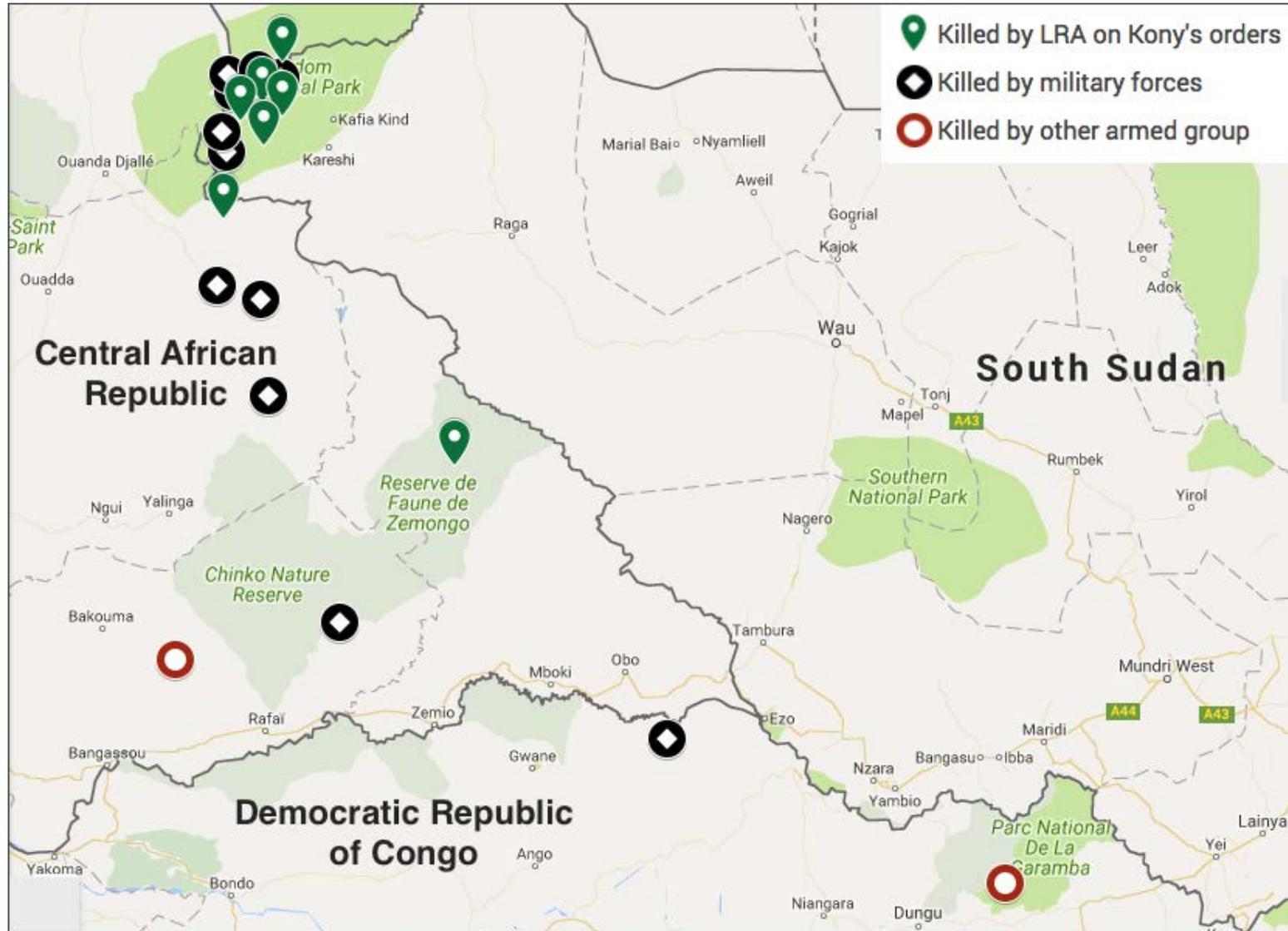
² Some sources report Kony had Otti Lagony shot. See BBC News, "Ugandan rebel leader 'kills deputy,'" 7 January 2000. A detailed account given by Evelyn Amony, a former forced wife to Kony, reports that Kony ordered Lagony and several co-conspirators stoned to death after discovering a letter in which Lagony had outlined his plans to kill Kony and defect. Evelyn Amony (edited by Erin Baines), "I Am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life From the Lord's Resistance Army," The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.

³ Ledio Cakaj and Phil Lancaster, "Loosening Kony's Grip: Effective Defection Strategies for Today's LRA," The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, July 2013.

⁴ IRIN News, "Some key players in the northern Uganda conflict," 9 June 2005.

⁵ Cakaj and Lancaster, "Loosening Kony's Grip," 2013.

LRA combatants killed, 2012–2016



II. THE FALLOUT FROM THE ONGWEN SAGA

The saga of Dominic Ongwen's last days in the LRA and the subsequent fracturing of the group's command structure illustrates how fragile Kony's hold on the LRA has become. Abducted as a young boy from northern Uganda, Ongwen grew to become a senior commander, one of the five LRA officers (along with Kony) indicted in 2005 by the ICC. He became a favorite of Kony, a tie strengthened when Kony forcibly married Ongwen's cousin, who was also abducted.⁶ However, Ongwen was also a protégé of Vincent Otti, and boldly, if unsuccessfully, pleaded with Kony to spare his life in 2007 during the Juba Peace Talks. Following Otti's execution, Ongwen continued to test the boundaries of Kony's patience and gradually fell out of his favor, periodically disobeying orders to rendezvous with him. In 2011, Kony further diminished his influence by demoting him and placing him under the command of more junior officers.⁷

Subsequently, Ongwen operated primarily in northern DRC and southeastern CAR, distant from Kony's influence. During this time Kony operated in and near Kafia Kingi. In late 2014, Kony decided to temporarily leave this safe haven, walking with his entourage hundreds of miles further south into CAR. In November, he summoned Ongwen's group to rendezvous in a forest just miles away from the town of Obo, the operational headquarters of the US Special Forces and Ugandan military troops sent to hunt him down. After camping there for several days, Kony, Ongwen, and a large LRA group then began the return journey to Kafia Kingi.

"I moved with Joseph Kony to Darfur and he planned to kill me, those who trust me released me and I escaped.... For those of you who are still there you should know that Kony now has no plan that can push the LRA higher. He only wants to be the chief and you to work for him like a slave, for him and his family. See now, even officers are made to carry his food and luggage, so you should take your time and come back home."

- Translated excerpt from message recorded by
Dominic Ongwen, January 2015

During the long trek, Ongwen and a number of other disillusioned Ugandan LRA officers planned their escape from the LRA. Despite his fall from Kony's graces, Ongwen reportedly retained his popularity with many LRA combatants, and he and his co-conspirators cautiously approached other LRA fighters they hoped would be sympathetic to their plan. Near the end of the month, several of the fighters involved in the conspiracy, led by Achaye Doctor and Kidega Alala, broke off from the LRA groups traveling north and began to walk southwest through CAR, eventually crossing the border into DRC's Bas Uele province. Confusion

between LRA commanders traveling separately from each other meant that Achaye's group's desertion was not detected by Kony and his inner circle for several days, by which time it was too late to send a group in pursuit.

Enraged, Kony immediately suspected Ongwen of having played a role in Achaye's group's betrayal. He placed Ongwen in "detention" and ordered loyalists to severely beat him. Kony also reportedly ordered Ongwen to name others who were involved in the defection plot. Though it is likely that Kony planned to have Ongwen executed, in late December he escaped with the complicity of sympathetic LRA members, a betrayal that dealt another blow to Kony's authority. After several days of traveling in the bush, Ongwen surrendered near Sam Ouandja, a small mining town in CAR's Vakaga prefecture, which borders Kafia Kingi.

⁶ Cakaj and Lancaster, "Loosening Kony's Grip," 2013.

⁷ Ibid.



After being placed under the custody of ex-Seleka rebel commanders, Ongwen passed through the hands of the US Special Forces and Ugandan military in Obo before being transferred to ICC authorities in Bangui. Ongwen is currently in ICC custody at The Hague, where his trial began in December 2016.

The fallout from Kony's harsh treatment of Ongwen continued in May 2015, when a group of seven bodyguards responsible for protecting Kony and his inner circle defected. In an unprecedented move, they tried to kill Kony in a hail of gunfire as they escaped, but were unsuccessful. Kony sent a group to hunt down the defectors, but the defectors succeeded in fending off their attack, even recovering some supplies from their pursuers during the assault. The seven defectors, one of whom had been involved with Ongwen and Achaye in the defection plot, walked through the bush for several weeks before eventually surrendering to US Special Forces in Obo.

The LRA's internal discord continued into 2016. In January, an LRA group led by Jon Bosco Kibwola killed a Sudanese trader in Kafia Kingi following a dispute, leading to outrage amongst local community leaders.⁸ In an apparent attempt to mitigate tensions, Kony had Kibwola executed and also placed Okot Odek in detention. Fearing for his life, Odek soon defected, walking more than one hundred miles before surrendering in the Central African town of Pambayamba.

In late 2016, additional defectors from Kony's group trickled into Sam Ouandja. In one incident, six people who attempted to escape from Kony's group were pursued by Kony loyalists, who killed two of the defectors, including a Ugandan LRA combatant. The four who managed to safely defect included a Ugandan LRA combatant, a Central African male abductee, and two abducted women.



Achaye Doctor, commander of the LRA splinter group.
Photo obtained by Paul Ronan.



Kidega Alala, a senior Ugandan officer in the Achaye Doctor splinter group.
Photo obtained by Paul Ronan.

⁸ Author email exchange with LRA researcher, 2 May 2016.

III. ACHAYE'S SPLINTER GROUP REGROUPS AND RECRUITS IN DRC

As fallout from Dominic Ongwen's punishment and defection continued to ripple through the LRA, Achaye Doctor's splinter group remained safely out of Kony's reach. Achaye and his comrades set up camp near the village of Gwane in the vast, forested Bili-Uele Protected Area Complex in DRC's Bas Uele province. The area had long been frequented by LRA groups, who forced thousands of civilians from their villages there in 2009 and established fields and semi-permanent camps there in 2013.⁹ No troops from the Ugandan military or UN peacekeeping force in DRC (MONUSCO) are deployed in Bas Uele, and only a handful of under equipped and poorly trained soldiers from the Congolese military (FARDC) are stationed there, making the area an ideal safe haven for Achaye's splinter group.

The original band of deserters who accompanied Achaye was relatively small, including just nine Ugandan LRA combatants, six Central African and Congolese boys, and five women and children. Fearing they were vulnerable to attack by Kony loyalists forces, Achaye ordered a series of abduction raids throughout 2015 on communities in Bas Uele such as Bili, Bakpolo, Digba, and Ebale. The group abducted at least 15 Congolese boys who, along with the six original non-Ugandan fighters, received training in marksmanship and assembling and reassembling weapons.¹⁰ At least 11 girls and young women were also abducted during these attacks, all of them forced to work as camp laborers and become forced "wives" to male combatants within the group.

As in Kony's LRA, Ugandan officers comprise the senior ranks of Achaye's group. Younger Central African and Congolese abductees, both boys trained as fighters and girls forced into marriage, form a subordinate class that is expected to take orders without complaint. However, there are signs that distinctions between Ugandan and non-Ugandan fighters are beginning to blur within Achaye's group. Several Congolese fighters who were abducted in 2008, years before Achaye's group deserted, appear to have attained a higher status than more recently abducted compatriots. At least two Congolese fighters have been allowed to take an abducted girl as a "wife," a symbol of status within the LRA historically restricted to Ugandan officers.

Achaye's group also replicated traditional LRA survival tactics, preying on civilians once they arrived in Bas Uele. Ugandan members of the group periodically stopped motorcyclists along roads to inquire which villages had the most food before launching attacks, which were most often carried out by Ugandan fighters. These fighters would force civilians to porter looted goods to a prearranged location in the forest where the non-Ugandan group members would be waiting. From there the non-Ugandan group members would porter the goods back to their camp. This method ensured that no civilians knew the actual location of the group's camp. As an additional security precaution, Achaye ordered most attacks be conducted on villages far from their camp.

Despite these precautions, in April 2015 a FARDC contingent located the group's camp and attacked it, injuring one of the Ugandan fighters, Okot Ogwiri. Achaye immediately planned an ambush in retaliation during which 8-11 FARDC troops were reportedly killed. Following the battle, Achaye's fighters looted uniforms, weapons, and ammunition from the dead soldiers.

⁹ For an account of LRA activity in Bas Uele in 2009, see Ledio Cakaj, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: LRA Attacks and Congolese Army Abuses in Northeastern Congo," The Enough Project, March 2010.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics concerning LRA attacks, abductions, killings, force capacity, and returnees are attributable to the LRA Crisis Tracker, a joint project of The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative and Invisible Children. Data can be accessed at <http://www.lracrisistracker.com/>. All LRA Crisis Tracker statistics in this report are accurate as of 6 January 2016.



Achaye's group hunted antelope and bush pig to supplement supplies looted from small villages and the FARDC. The group periodically saw endangered forest elephants in the forest as well, but Achaye ordered his subordinates to refrain from killing them, possibly to avoid drawing attention to the group's location. Elephants poached for their ivory further east in DRC's Garamba National Park in 2015 were killed by LRA groups loyal to Kony.



The LRA's use of mobile phones

Despite their isolation in remote, sparsely-populated areas, LRA members have shown an interest in adopting modern technology, with a particular affinity for mobile phones acquired during looting raids. They rarely use them to call other phones, as the group operates in areas lacking widespread mobile service coverage. Combatants prize the phones for their cameras and ability to play music via memory cards. In some cases, LRA combatants loot phones solely in the hopes of finding a memory card with new music, later discarding the phone itself. Interviews with victims of LRA attacks confirm that combatants frequently ask specifically for phones while looting civilians.

The interest in mobile phones is present in both Kony's LRA and Achaye's splinter group. Several photos of Achaye's group, taken on the phones of defectors, have trickled out in 2016. Many show young Congolese boys, dressed in soccer jerseys, posing with automatic weapons, or abducted Congolese girls and women with their children. Photos have also been taken of commanders loyal to Kony meeting with community leaders and ex-Seleka representatives in CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture.

Photo above: Child soldiers abducted by Achaye's splinter group pose with automatic weapons in DRC in mid-2015. *Photo obtained by Paul Ronan.*

IV. A FRACTURED LRA TARGETS EASTERN CAR

LRA forces, including groups loyal to Kony and Achaye's splinter group, combined to abduct more than 500 civilians in 104 attacks in eastern CAR in 2016—the most there in a single year since 2010. The surge of violence may be an indicator that the fracturing of the LRA command structure, while undermining the group's long-term survival, poses an increased threat to civilians in the short-term. In particular, the violence in 2016 included an increase in the number of child abductions, which may indicate rival LRA factions feel the need to boost their fighting capacity to gain strength relative to each other.

Kony orders forced recruitment in eastern CAR

Following Ongwen's escape in late 2014 and the defection of the seven bodyguards in May 2015, Kony continued to operate between Kafia Kingi and neighboring areas of eastern CAR, frequently moving camps. In November 2015, he summoned an LRA commander named Awila, who operated primarily in eastern CAR, to a rendezvous in Kafia Kingi. Through Awila, Kony issued orders to three LRA groups in eastern CAR to abduct dozens of young boys that he planned to have trained in order to strengthen the LRA's lower ranks.

In January and February 2016, LRA groups loyal to Kony carried out those orders, abducting dozens of children. Many of these attacks were concentrated east and south of Bria, the capital of Haute Kotto prefecture and the eastern sector headquarters of the UN peacekeeping mission in CAR (MINUSCA). An LRA group loyal to Kony led by Onencan Acirokop "Unita" was responsible for several of these raids, which marked a significant shift in its modus operandi. In May and June 2015, Acirokop's group peacefully interacted with several communities east of Bria, organizing meetings with community leaders and ex-Seleka representatives. Acirokop even allowed ex-Seleka representatives to take photos of the meetings and also wrote a note to a local chief listing the names of senior officers in his group. When they returned in early 2016 to abduct children and forcibly collect food, some victims recognized Acirokop and other fighters from interactions the previous year.

"LRA groups collect diamonds and gold during robberies on the road to Bria, Yalinga, Sam Ouandja, Nzako, and Bakouma [in CAR]."

– Defector from Joseph Kony's LRA group,
November 2016

In one recruitment raid led by Acirokop's group east of Bria on January 10, 2016, his fighters set up a roadblock and forced each successive traveler to a nearby location in the bush. There, Acirokop and his deputies forced victims to turn over any food, mobile phones, gold, diamonds, and cash they possessed and wait under guard as more travelers were brought to the location. After dozens of victims were gathered, the LRA commanders separated out seven people, a mixture of young boys and strong adult men, before releasing the remaining victims. They then forced the children and adults to porter the looted goods further into the bush. Several of the children have yet to be accounted for.

Following the surge of attacks in early 2016, Kony's forces dramatically reduced violence in Haute Kotto, abducting only 23 civilians between March and November 2016. They were also responsible for small clusters of attacks west of Bria in Ouaka prefecture in June (2 attacks, 34 total abductions) and between Obo and Mboki in June and July (5 attacks, 20 total abductions).

Achaye's splinter group targets communities in the southeast

In January 2016, Achaye's splinter group crossed from DRC into Haut Mbomou prefecture in CAR's far southeastern corner. Though they launched a series of major attacks on communities there, abducting 30 people, their activity was initially overshadowed by the surge of attacks by Kony's LRA forces further north in Haute Kotto prefecture.

Achaye's group began to gain more attention in March and April, when Kony's LRA forces reduced their activity. On March 5, they attacked the community of Tabane, killing two civilians and setting fire to several homes before abducting 12 civilians. Two weeks later they attacked the nearby community of Dembia, abducting eight people and setting fire to several homes. In mid-April the group launched three attacks on civilians near the community of Rafai, abducting six people and killing three hunters.

Our commander [Achaye Doctor] would sometimes meet with a trader who came from Dembia [CAR] in order to purchase ammunition. He used cash looted during attacks on civilians to pay the trader.

–Defector from Achaye Doctor splinter group, October 2016

After several weeks of relative calm, Achaye's group launched a series of rapid attacks east of Rafai from May 30 to July 3. They abducted 17 people and targeted artisanal gold miners in several incidents. On June 19, the group fired on several people, including an American, participating in guided hunting trip near the village of Barroua.¹¹

From late August through early November Achaye's group continued to target communities east of Rafai, abducting 55 civilians in seven

attacks. During an attack on September 16 in Dembia, Achaye's group reportedly targeted a trader who had informed local authorities that another trader was supplying Achaye's group with food and ammunition. In addition, the group is believed to be responsible for ambushing a commercial truck carrying food meant for South Sudanese refugees in Obo on October 26. After forcing the truck to stop, Achaye's fighters forced more than a dozen passengers to porter the food into the bush, where they spent the night in captivity before being released.

MINUSCA's challenges in protecting civilians from the LRA

The presence of multiple LRA factions in eastern CAR poses a major challenge to the ability of MINUSCA peacekeeping forces deployed there to fulfill their protection of civilians mandate. When MINUSCA became operational in September 2014, it was preoccupied with stabilizing Bangui and the volatile west and center of the country, largely ceding responsibility for protecting civilians in the southeast of the country to Ugandan and US forces. For MINUSCA's initial 16 months in operation, LRA violence was at its lowest point in years, giving mission personnel a misleading sense of the group's threat to civilians. When LRA violence suddenly spiked in early 2016, the overstretched mission had only two battalions deployed in the vast eastern sector of the country, both tasked with stabilizing large towns and major roads. This posture was ill-equipped to respond quickly to asymmetric LRA groups that are highly mobile and operate in remote areas, a challenge also faced by MONUSCO peacekeepers deployed in LRA-affected areas of DRC.

In addition to the direct threat the LRA poses to civilians, the rebel group is becoming increasingly intertwined with local conflict dynamics in eastern CAR. In 2016, as MINUSCA forces struggled to respond quickly to attacks by highly mobile LRA groups, community frustration and dissatisfaction with the mission mounted. Seeing an opportunity to boost their local credibility, ex-Seleka factions began

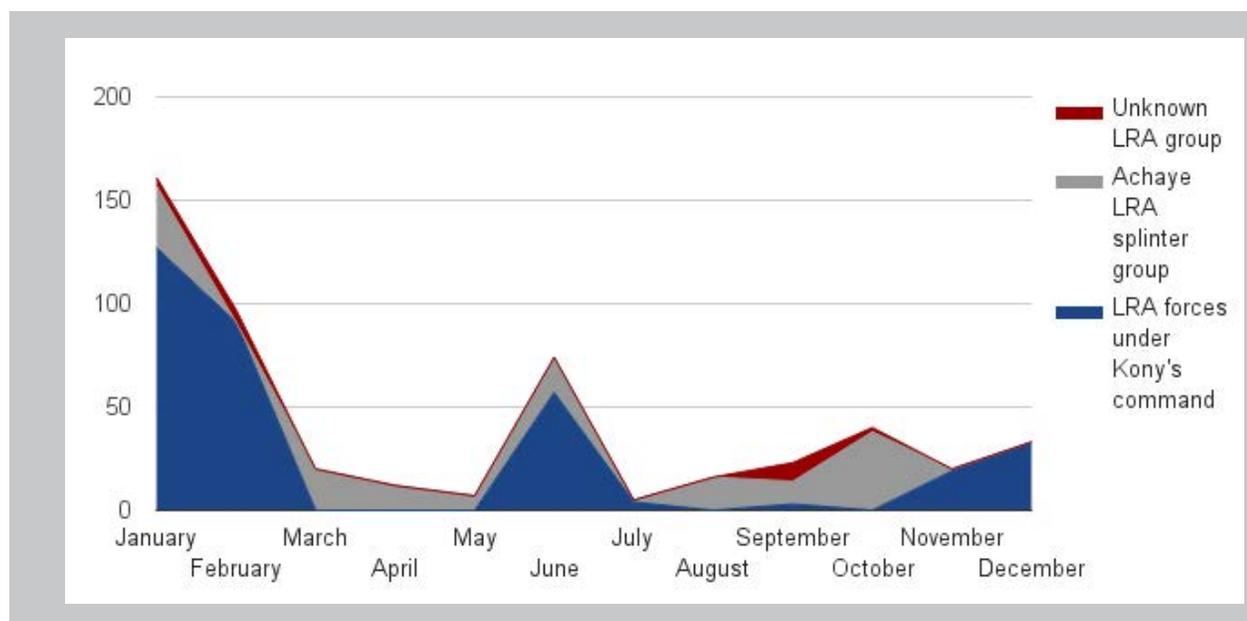
¹¹ The incident may be the first in which an American citizen was attacked by the LRA, though it is unlikely the Achaye group intentionally targeted the hunting party or was aware it included an American. An account of the incident from the American's perspective can be found at Africanhunting.com, "A Father's Day Brush with Death in CAR," 28 June 2016.

sending armed fighters to “respond” to LRA attacks. These interventions did little to deter LRA activity, but they allowed ex-Seleka leaders to claim that they were more effective in protecting civilians from the LRA than MINUSCA, despite being vastly under-equipped compared to the peacekeeping force. Such rhetoric helps ex-Seleka leaders undermine the legitimacy of the mission and the national government, and reinforces their calls for the east of the country to have more autonomy.¹² In communities where ex-Seleka forces are less established, local authorities have supported self-defense groups that respond to LRA attacks, a development that also reinforces local frustrations that MINUSCA is failing to adequately fulfill its mandate.

Such tensions can have explosive consequences. Following the series of attacks near Rafai by Achaye’s group in April 2016, a local self-defense group clashed with Achaye’s forces and captured one of the Congolese abductees in his group. When MINUSCA forces, who had been unable to repel the initial LRA attacks, sought to prevent an angry crowd from killing the captured abductee, the crowd confronted the MINUSCA troops, killing one Moroccan peacekeeper.¹³

The impending withdrawal of Ugandan and US troops from eastern CAR will place even more pressure on MINUSCA to respond to the LRA violence. Simultaneously, peacekeepers must also respond to a host of other threats to civilians in eastern CAR. These include tensions near Bria between ex-Seleka factions that resulted in at least 14 civilian deaths in November 2016 and could reignite.¹⁴ Unless MINUSCA sends additional troops to the east—and pushes existing contingents to more proactively respond to the LRA and other protection threats—popular discontent with the mission will likely continue to grow.

Abductions by LRA factions in eastern CAR, 2016

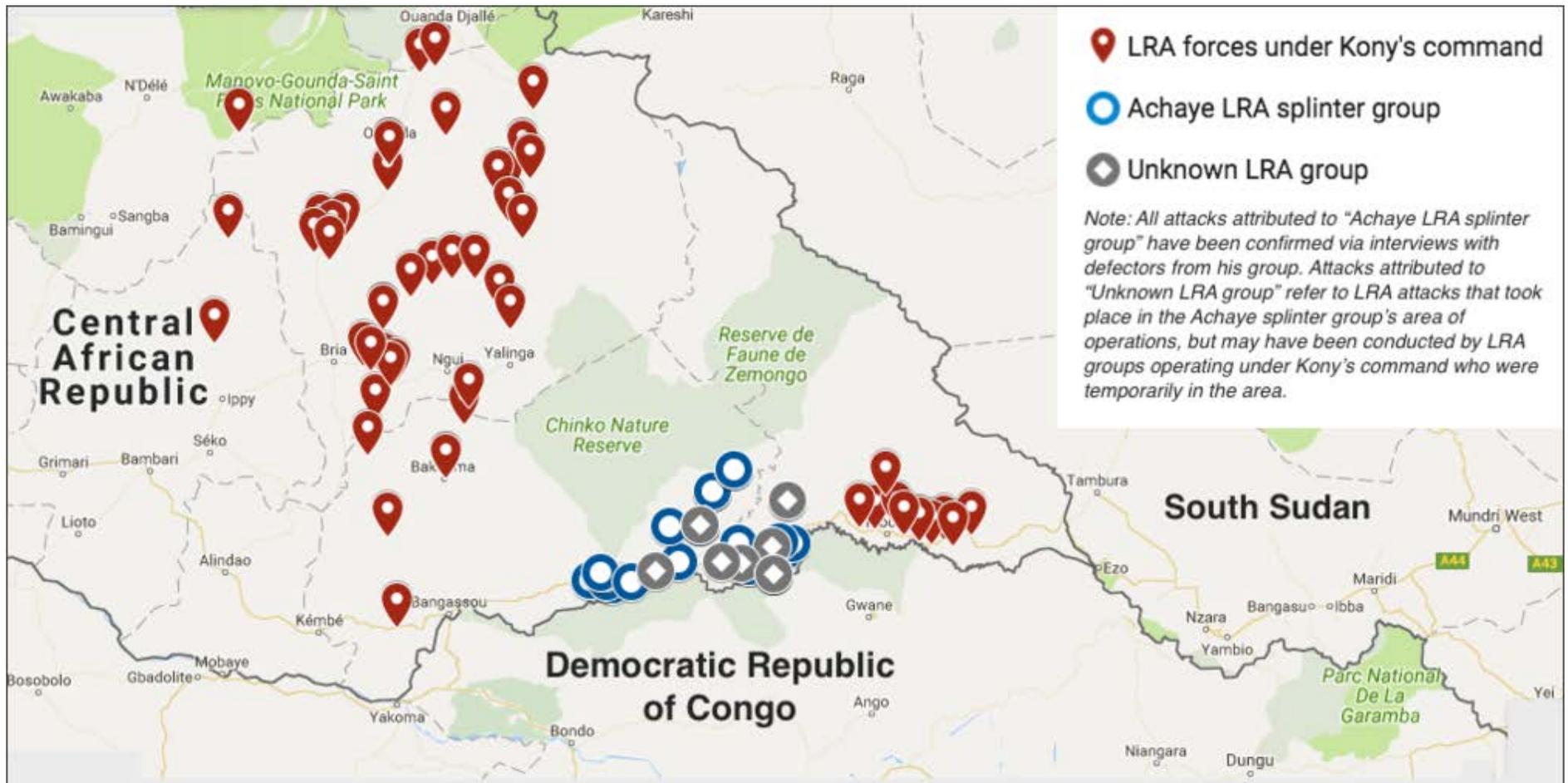


¹² For more on the political agenda of ex-Seleka factions in the east, see UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, “Letter dated 5 December 2016 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2262 (2016) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2016/1032, UN Security Council, 5 December 2016.

¹³ UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, “Letter dated 9 August 2016 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2262 (2016) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2016/694, UN Security Council, 11 August 2016.

¹⁴ “Central African Republic: Civilians Killed During Clashes,” Human Rights Watch, 5 December 2016.

Attacks by LRA factions in eastern CAR, 2016



V. ENCOURAGING DEFECTIONS FROM A FRACTURED LRA

Kony's harsh leadership style and the fracturing of the LRA's command structure has created an opportunity to weaken the rebel group from the bottom up by encouraging disillusioned fighters to defect. Civil society groups and the US military have created a template for defection messaging that has helped encourage dozens of combatants to defect in recent years, but since 2014 the pace of defections has slowed considerably. To capitalize on the dissent within the LRA, further investments in defection messaging are needed to expand their geographic reach and ensure they are sufficiently nuanced to counter Kony's propaganda.¹⁵ The increase in LRA violence in 2016 as the group's command structure continued to fracture adds urgency to improving defection messaging efforts. Kony's control over his fighters has long been seen as a primary obstacle to encouraging defections, raising hopes that his capture or killing would lead to a swift dissolution of the rebel group. However, the failure of defection messaging to convince independent officers such as Achaye Doctor and his followers to surrender serves as a warning that even if Kony is captured or killed, his remaining followers may stay active and continue targeting civilians.

Understanding the reduced pace of Ugandan LRA defections

LRA fighters contemplating defection face a daunting set of obstacles. Kony and senior LRA officers beat or execute LRA members caught in the act of escaping, and often those who dare even discuss the subject with their peers. The LRA's modus operandi—operating in remote forests and brutally attacking civilians—is also intentionally designed to discourage defections. Fighters know that even if they elude the LRA they must often trek through remote forests for weeks at a time before finding a community in which to surrender, and even then they may face hostile civilians reluctant to assist a member of an armed group that has frequently targeted their homes and families.

Kony has also planted seeds of doubt amongst his followers about what awaits them if they successfully surrender. He has long maintained that defection messaging is part of a bait-and-switch scheme, claiming that defectors are killed by the Ugandan military, thrown into jail, forced to work on farms owned by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, or live in destitute poverty.

Kony often uses elements of truth when attempting to manipulate his fighters. He seizes on isolated judicial cases targeting ex-combatants, which active LRA members hear of via shortwave radio, to claim that all defectors are subject to prosecution. Though only two ex-LRA combatants have faced charges to date, many LRA fighters identify with their experiences. Dominic Ongwen, currently being prosecuted by the ICC, was abducted as a young boy, while Thomas Kwoyelo, currently being prosecuted by the Ugandan government, was only a mid-ranking officer at the time he was taken into custody following a clash between the LRA and Ugandan military in DRC in March 2009.¹⁶ Many active LRA fighters are also aware that some defectors who have returned to northern Uganda live in poverty and benefit little from reintegration programming, a reality that Kony also manipulates to his benefit.

Reluctance to attempt defection can also be driven by reasons unique to specific individuals. Achaye Doctor's unusual history of entering the LRA may be factoring into his reluctance to surrender and return to Uganda even though he is no longer under Kony's command. Achaye's father was a traditional healer in northern Uganda in the 1980s and early 1990s, an occupation that Ugandan military forces viewed with suspicion given the prominent role of traditional beliefs in the rebellions led by Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement and the LRA. In the 1990s, Achaye's father, fearing harassment from the Ugandan military, joined the LRA. He brought with him his wife, two daughters, and young son, Achaye. Achaye's

¹⁵ See also Ledio Cakaj and Paul Ronan, "The Lord's Resistance Army is finally weakening in central Africa. This could dismantle it." *The Washington Post*, 6 December 2016.

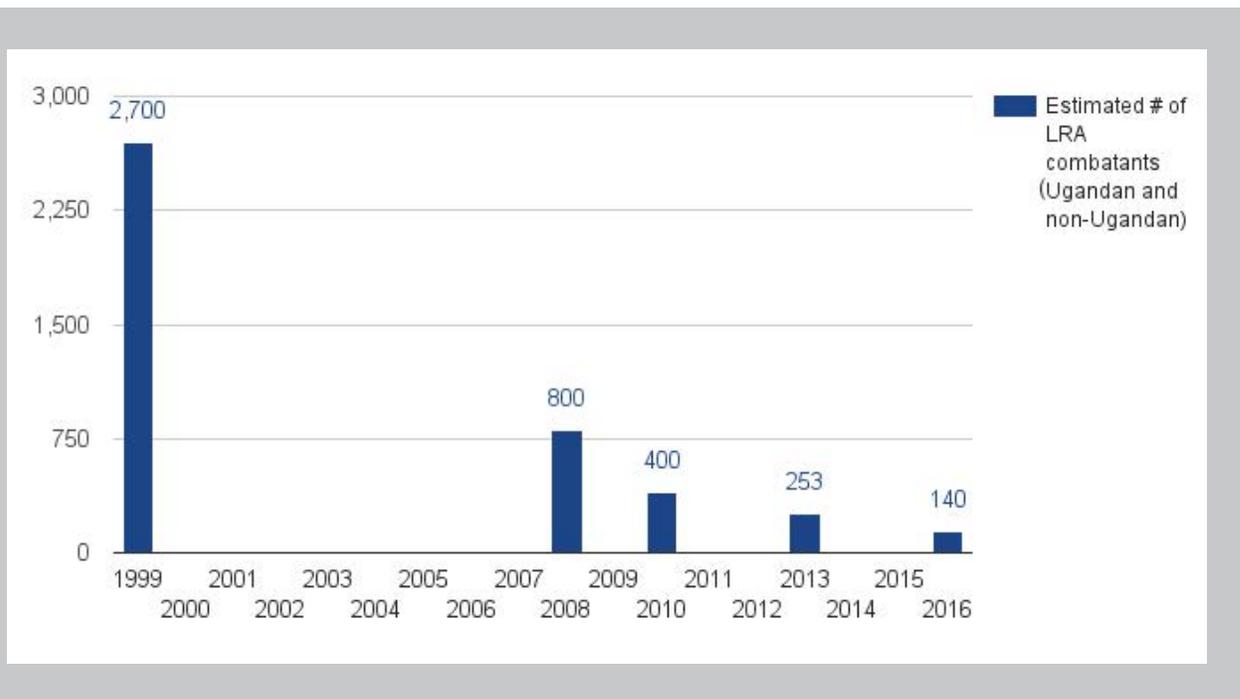
¹⁶ For more on the Kwoyelo case, see Justice and Reconciliation Project, "Moving Forward: Thomas Kwoyelo and the Quest for Justice," 15 November 2011.

parents died while still in the LRA, but his two sisters have since escaped and returned to northern Uganda.¹⁷ However, Achaye may fear that his family’s history of voluntarily joining the LRA may prevent him from acquiring amnesty, or he may simply feel that he does not have much of a home to which he can return.

The progress in encouraging defections has masked a sobering trendline—the number of Ugandan combatants to defect has decreased every year since 2012. The slowed pace in defections is likely linked to several factors, including the prosecution of Ongwen and Kwoyelo. The size of the LRA’s fighting force has also shrunk significantly, with only approximately 85 Ugandan male combatants left in the LRA, including Achaye’s group. Furthermore, many of the combatants most willing to attempt escape have already done so.

The sharp decrease in military pressure on the LRA since mid-2014 is also responsible for the decrease in Ugandan LRA combatant defections. The threat of being killed by Ugandan troops has been consistently cited by defectors as a “push” factor making combatants more likely to risk an escape attempt.¹⁸ From 2012 through mid-2014, Ugandan military forces placed steady pressure on many LRA groups, killing or capturing at least 15 LRA commanders and combatants. During that same time period, 43 Ugandan LRA combatants also defected. Since mid-2014, the effectiveness of Ugandan military operations has dropped dramatically, with not a single public report of Ugandan forces killing or capturing a Ugandan LRA combatant. In that same time period, only 13 Ugandan combatants have defected.

The decline of the LRA’s combatant force, 1999–2016



¹⁷ Author interview with Ugandan civil society leader, Kampala, Uganda, 20 August 2016.

¹⁸ For example, see Patrick Munduga, “Factor’s Influencing Lord’s Resistance Army Defections in Central Africa Today,” ANCHOR, April 2016.

Redoubling defection messaging

Despite the many obstacles, encouraging defections from the LRA has long been one of the most effective strategies of weakening the group. Northern Ugandan civil society leaders pioneered innovative FM radio “Come Home” messages in the 1990s and 2000s, encouraging thousands, if not tens of thousands, of LRA members to defect. In recent years civil society groups and the US military have taken a leading role disseminating Come Home messages via FM and shortwave radio, leaflets, and helicopter speakers. Some programs have also provided training to communities in CAR and DRC on how to safely facilitate LRA defections, as defectors often encounter civilians before surrendering to military forces. Dollar for dollar, US investments in defection messaging have been the most effective tool in President Obama’s counter-LRA strategy. At least 55 male Ugandan combatants have defected from the LRA since the US Special Forces advisers deployed to the region in 2011.

Life in the LRA is very hard, and I felt I had no future there. I realized that half of my life was over and I wanted to live the other half of my life at home with my family.

–Defector from Joseph Kony’s
LRA group, June 2015

Counter-LRA defection messaging initiatives may be thrown into upheaval in 2017, however, as Ugandan officials have indicated they will withdraw Ugandan troops from eastern CAR in the coming months.¹⁹ The Africa policy priorities of the incoming Trump Administration also remain opaque, which may give officials at the US African Command (AFRICOM) who have been critical of US spending on the counter-LRA mission an opening to downsize or end US support.²⁰ Should the Ugandan and US forces wind down military operations, the prospects for effective military pressure on the LRA are grim, as the UN peacekeeping operations and national military forces active in LRA-affected areas have neither the will nor capacity to pursue experienced LRA groups.

As military pressure wanes, promoting defections from the LRA will be the most effective strategy available to weaken the rebel group and reduce its threat to civilians. The reduction in military pressure will remove an important push factor for potential LRA defectors, but Kony’s erratic and harsh leadership style increasingly provides an effective internal push factor to replace the external threat. US Congress and the incoming Trump Administration should ensure that even if the US Special Forces deployment is downsized, funding is maintained throughout 2017 and 2018 to support FM radio broadcasts, leaflet distributions, and other mediums to deliver Come Home messaging to LRA members in the bush.

The content of Come Home messages should build on the lessons learned from previous campaigns, which date back to the innovative FM radio broadcasts by northern Ugandan civil society leaders in the early 2000s.²¹ Messages should be tailored to specific LRA officers, using audio recordings or photos collected from family members back in Uganda as well as from LRA defectors who can credibly alleviate the fears that those still in the bush have of returning home. Creation of these messages should be led by civil society experts in Uganda and former LRA combatants who can ensure there is a steady pace of fresh content and adequate attention to cultural nuance.

As important as defection messaging is, the process of facilitating the return of LRA combatants to their homes upon defection requires an equal amount of attention. Currently this process relies heavily on US military logistical capability. With the prospects of US counter-LRA operations being downsized or ended completely, regional governments, NGOs, and UN agencies will have to dedicate additional resources to supporting LRA defectors with transit, family tracing, and reintegration support.

19 Elias Biryabarema, “Uganda says will withdraw troops hunting rebels in Central African Republic,” Reuters, 10 June 2016.

20 See John Vandiver, “AFRICOM boss scrutinizes US role in hunt for warlord Kony,” Stars and Stripes, 22 April 2016. See also John Vandiver, “AFRICOM could scale back counter-LRA mission in coming year,” Stars and Stripes, 18 November 2016.

21 For more detailed recommendations on Come Home messaging, see Cakaj and Lancaster, “Loosening Kony’s Grip,” 2013, and Munduga, “Factor’s Influencing Lord’s Resistance Army Defections,” 2016.

Encouraging signs in the escape of women, children, and non-Ugandan combatants

Though much counter-LRA messaging aims at encouraging Ugandan male fighters to defect, such initiatives also play an important role in encouraging women, children, and non-Ugandan men to escape long-term captivity within the LRA. Though often overlooked in assessments of the LRA's capacity to attack civilians, these long-term captives—who have spent six months or more within the LRA—play a critical role in the LRA's operations. They perform the grueling labor of transporting looted goods between camps, setting up camps, foraging for wild yams and other food, cooking, and collecting water. Even the most experienced LRA commanders are dependent on this labor for day-to-day survival. These long-term captives play a role within the LRA distinct from civilians who are temporarily abducted to porter looted goods for short distances.

Since 2014, even as the pace of defections by Ugandan LRA combatants has slowed, a total of 214 women, young children, and non-Ugandan adult males have escaped from long-term LRA captivity, subtly undermining the rebel group. In 2016, 12 escaped from Achaye's splinter group alone, including six who escaped in October 2016 when Achaye left the young abductees with few guards in order to launch the retaliatory attack on the trader in Karmadar, CAR. Several of these defectors were male youth among those abducted during the recruitment raids Achaye had overseen in DRC's Bas Uele province in 2015. Because the LRA can no longer recruit in northern Uganda, non-Ugandan male abductees between the ages of 12 and 25 represent the best hope for long-term growth and sustainability in both Kony's LRA and Achaye's splinter group. A handful of such abductees appear to have integrated deeply into the LRA, such as those in Achaye's group who have been given "wives." However, most young non-Ugandan male abductees resist assimilation into the LRA and seek to return home to their families whenever they see an opportunity to escape.

Many women also escape on their own initiative, bravely risking their lives for a chance to return home, often taking children fathered by LRA commanders with them. In other cases, LRA commanders have intentionally released women and young children, particularly the widows and children of deceased or defected LRA officers. Many of these mass releases have occurred in northern DRC, where LRA officers released 28 women and children in 2013, 70 in September and October 2014, and an additional 24 in August 2015.

CONCLUSION

Dominic Ongwen's plan to defect from the LRA with sympathetic LRA combatants in late 2014 backfired, resulting in his narrow escape from Kony's wrath and eventual transfer to the ICC. Regardless, the ripple effects of the events surrounding his departure from the LRA, including the creation of the Achaye Doctor splinter group, deepened the divisions within the LRA caused by Kony's brutal and erratic leadership. Even as they focus on arresting Kony in the coming months before the Ugandan military withdraws, the US military and its international partners would be wise to exploit divisions within the LRA by investing in expanded defection messaging that targets senior LRA commanders, rank-and-file combatants, and women and children in long-term captivity. Doing so provides the best available opportunity to definitively end nearly thirty years of atrocities against civilians in east and central Africa by the LRA.

ABOUT THE LRA CRISIS TRACKER

Data reflected in this brief was collected as part of the LRA Crisis Tracker, a project of [Invisible Children](#) and [The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative](#). The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in areas of Central Africa affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Through publication of regular reports and open-source sharing of collected data, the LRA Crisis Tracker aims to help overcome the current deficit of relevant and timely information related to the LRA crisis and to support improved policy and humanitarian responses. For a comprehensive guide to the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit LRACrisisTracker.com

In the interest of continually strengthening the LRA Crisis Tracker dataset, The Resolve and Invisible Children welcome new sources of current or historical reports of LRA activity. To contribute information to the LRA Crisis Tracker project, please contact The Resolve at paul@theresolve.org.

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