



After Operation Lightning Thunder

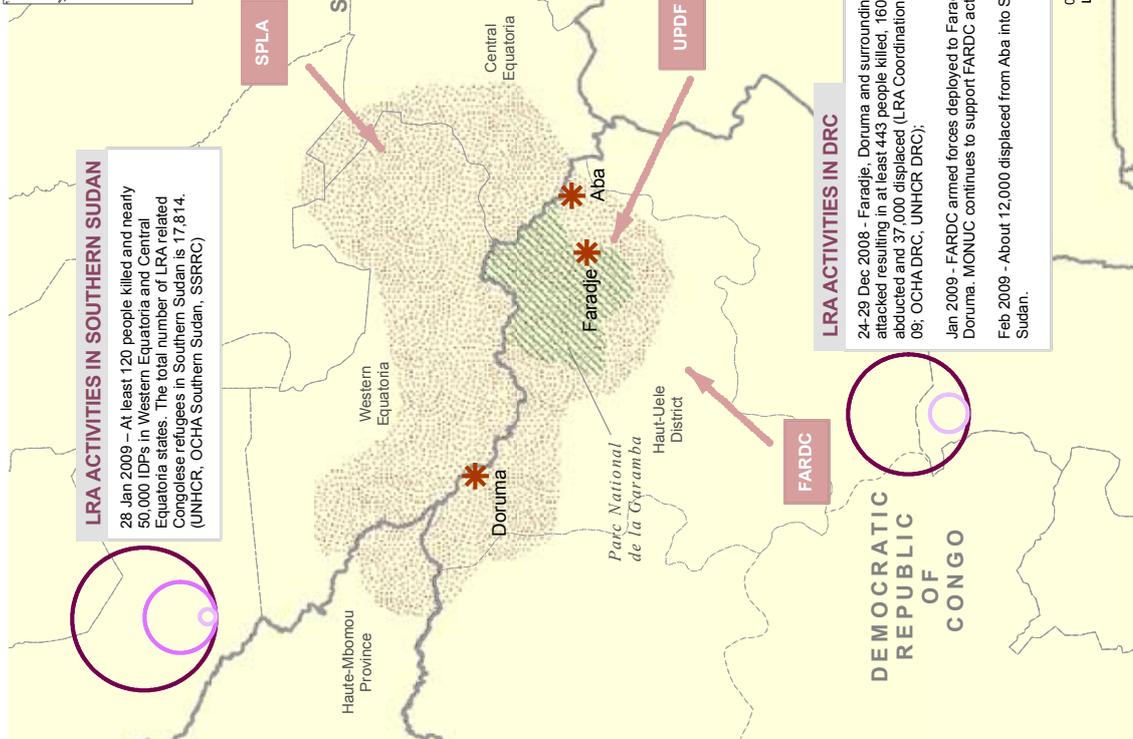
Protecting communities and
building peace

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conciliation
resources

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY AFFECTED AREAS & POPULATION MOVEMENTS AS A RESULT OF THE DECEMBER 2008 ATTACKS



OVERVIEW: Status of humanitarian consequences due to LRA attacks

DRC
 Nearly 1,000 DRC citizens killed in LRA attacks, including 500 children since Dec 2007. There have been 460 children abducted and 162,000 or 10% of this population displaced since Sept in Haut-Uele. (OCHA DRC, LRA Coordination Cell, Feb 2009)

SOUTHERN SUDAN
 141 persons killed in LRA attacks and at least 53,267 displaced (35,453 are IDPs and 17,814 are refugees from DRC) and 78 persons abducted (OCHA Southern Sudan, 23 Mar 2009)

LRA ACTIVITIES IN SOUTHERN SUDAN
 28 Jan 2009 - At least 120 people killed and nearly 50,000 IDPs in Western Equatoria and Central Equatoria states. The total number of LRA related Congolese refugees in Southern Sudan is 17,814. (UNHCR, OCHA Southern Sudan, SSRRC)

LRA ACTIVITIES IN CAR
 Feb - March 2008 - Four villages attacked in the southern Haute-Mbomou Province 157 people abducted of whom 55 were children.
 No confirmed LRA activities in 2009.

POLITICAL & MILITARY TIMELINE

- 1991 - 'Operation North' launched by the Ugandan government in the north pushed LRA into Southern Sudan
- 2002 - 'Operation Iron Fist' launched by Uganda, renewed violence for the country
- 2005 - ICC issued arrest warrants for LRA leader Joseph Kony and four other rebel commanders
- 14 Jul 2006 - Juba Peace Process was initiated between LRA and Ugandan government
- 26 Aug 2006 - Cessation of hostilities between LRA and Ugandan government signed
- Oct 2006 - LRA completes withdrawal from northern Uganda
- 14 Dec 2008 - 'Operation Lightning Thunder' was jointly launched in Garamba National Park, DRC, by Uganda, DRC and Southern Sudan forces when Joseph Kony refused to sign Juba Peace Talks Final Peace Agreement
- 22 Dec 2008 - UN Security Council authorized the renewal of MONUC mandate for 2009, allowing up to 20,000 MONUC peacekeepers mainly in the Kivus and Orientale Provinces. Protection of civilians and support to humanitarian action was prioritised
- 24-25 Dec 2008 - LRA retaliate to 'Operation Lightning Thunder' with counter attacks on civilian areas in and around Faradjie and Doruma, DRC
- 9 Jan 2009 - Allied countries armed forces (UPDF/FARDC/ SPLA) reinforced 'Operation Lightning Thunder'

LRA ACTIVITIES IN DRC
 24-29 Dec 2008 - Faradjie, Doruma and surrounding villages attacked resulting in at least 443 people killed, 160 children abducted and 37,000 displaced (LRA Coordination Cell, Feb 09; OCHA DRC, UNHCR DRC);
 Jan 2009 - FARDC armed forces deployed to Faradjie and Doruma. MONUC continues to support FARDC activities;
 Feb 2009 - About 12,000 displaced from Aba into Southern Sudan.

Map data source(s): OCHA, UNICEF and UNHCR
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Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities.

UN OCHA map of LRA-affected areas

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Operation Lightning Thunder

The military offensive known as Operation Lightning Thunder, launched on 14 December 2008, marked the end of two years of peace negotiations between the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) and the Ugandan government. The Ugandan army, in partnership with the forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Southern Sudan and supported by the United States, carried out aerial bombing of the main LRA camp in Garamba Park in the DRC, followed by a three month ground offensive.

Between 2006 and 2008, a set of agreements were negotiated between the Ugandan government and the LRA, under the mediation and facilitation of the Southern Sudan government in Juba. But the Final Peace Agreement (FPA), pulling together five separately signed agreements, was never signed amid the increased insecurity and violence. LRA leader Joseph Kony failed to turn up to scheduled signing ceremonies, first in April and then in November 2008.

Billed as a strategy to force Kony to sign the FPA, Operation Lightning Thunder destroyed the LRA base camp and scattered the LRA over the DRC, Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR). The Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) started withdrawing from the operation in mid-March 2009, handing over to the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC). The operation was declared a success that had significantly weakened the LRA's command structure, led to the rescue of about 300 civilians and the killing of about 150 LRA. While the official objectives – to make Kony sign, or to capture or kill LRA soldiers – were only partially achieved, it remains to be seen how much the LRA's central command has been hurt. Few senior LRA figures were captured and Joseph Kony remains at large.

Security

Security on both sides of the DRC/Sudan border worsened during the second quarter of 2008. Increased LRA activity was reported, including attacks and abductions. In June, when military chiefs from Southern Sudan, Uganda and the DRC were planning strategies for military cooperation, the LRA attacked the southern Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) stationed near the LRA assembly site in Ri-Kwangba. Civilians in the DRC suffered increased LRA attacks in the provinces closer to the border.

Since the onset of Operation Lightning Thunder security for most people living in the area has deteriorated. When the LRA camp was bombed, LRA fighters scattered in small groups in Sudan and DRC and continued to attack. On Christmas Day the LRA launched several coordinated

massacres in Congolese towns. In total, it is estimated that more than 1000 civilians¹ have been killed and several hundred abducted by the LRA since they increased their violent activities in 2008.

Protection

Operation Lightning Thunder commenced without clear arrangements for adequate civilian protection and civilians have borne the brunt of the operation. Tens of thousands of Congolese and Sudanese have been displaced fleeing possible attacks. In the DRC, citizens either flee to major towns or across the border to Sudan. Thousands of Sudanese have left their villages along the border and are seeking shelter and security in major towns. Yet even in towns protection is limited: it is unclear whether any army was specifically assigned protection duties. The United Nations Organization Mission in DRC (MONUC) lacks sufficient troops to provide protection to civilians on an appropriate scale.

There appears to have been no coordinated effort between the different national armies to protect civilians and a significant gap between what they officially agreed and how this played out on the ground. Although official cooperation between the three armies was announced in mid-2008, SPLA mid-level commanders claim they were sidelined in the operational planning and were thus unwilling to support it from the Sudanese side. The FARDC, having taken over fully from the UPDF in mid-March, lack capacity due to unrest in the Kivu regions. During the operation, the UPDF's focus was clearly on fighting the LRA, rather than assigning manpower to civilian protection.

Humanitarian situation

The humanitarian situation has been equally devastating. With tens of thousands displaced, often in extremely difficult territory at the start of the rainy season, delivering humanitarian aid has been challenging. Lack of food and basic services will become even more pronounced: citizens have been unable to tend their fields due to the insecurity so local authorities expect severe food shortages in the coming months.

While the goal of the military operation was to rescue as many people as possible from the LRA, few provisions have been made to cater for those that return, including young women with children from LRA soldiers. Secure shelter and reliable mechanisms for tracing family members and preparing families for reintegration are needed.

1. Estimate based on UN sources, army reports and Human Rights Watch research.



Uganda People's Defence Force armoured vehicle in Yambio, February 2009.

Community militarization

Most communities along the border have set up civilian defence groups as a direct consequence of the increased insecurity. Armed with anything from bows and arrows to AK-47s, these groups patrol the streets and villages, at times with support from local army bases. Communities see a need to provide their own protection since they do not expect to be protected by national or international troops. While stressing the importance of community self-defence, some local authorities and community leaders have expressed concern this will lead to renewed militarization and a change in local power structures that could have a damaging long-term effect on peacebuilding.

Prospects for a resolution to the conflict

The peace talks in Juba are over, despite the fact a finished negotiated agreement lies unsigned on the table. Yet the military operation has also failed to end the conflict and force LRA to sign the FPA. In the DRC and Southern Sudan, the LRA threat to civilians is now greater than before. It is unlikely that military force will result in any deal being signed, and any trust that was built between the negotiating parties in Juba – however fragile – has gone. This has caused local frustration with the military attempt to end the conflict, and has made reviving a political process and establishing channels of communication with the LRA more difficult. The recognition that the LRA conflict is part of the complex web of violent political conflicts and conflicts in the Uganda, Sudan and DRC border regions is an essential step towards protecting the civilian populations of these areas.

There are other obstacles. During the Juba negotiations, the LRA delegation was largely drawn from the Acholi

diaspora and serious rifts developed, repeatedly undermining the process. The legacy of international involvement presents further challenges. The intense international involvement, unprecedented in previous initiatives, had contradictory effects. On one hand, it made the peace talks possible through international funding and advocacy for a political solution. On the other, it created a tremendously complex environment that was hard for the LRA to navigate. For example, the LRA was required to trust various actors, some with very conflicting views on international justice system. The obstacles created by the complex international machinery can be overcome by a smaller, civil society driven process.

A new approach to a conflict resolution is urgently necessary to avoid a prolonged low-level military campaign that causes extreme insecurity for civilians and again fails to end the LRA campaign. The recent rejuvenation of diplomatic cooperation between Kampala and Kinshasa provides new opportunities. This may be a starting point to a new regional approach to solving a conflict that now directly affects four countries and has destabilized the entire border region between Uganda, DRC, southern Sudan and the CAR.

Members of civil society in Sudan, DRC and Uganda are calling for increased regional cooperation that includes civil society in order to restart a political process and communication with LRA leaders. Community leaders stress a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution is needed since all affected areas suffer parallel violent conflicts. A consistent and inclusive political process across regional borders is necessary to bring regional peace and security.

Methodology

2

As an appendix to the Conciliation Resources report *Perilous Border: Sudanese communities affected by conflict on the Sudan/Uganda border*,² this report looks at the current situation in the border areas of the DRC and Sudan's Western Equatoria state. It reflects the attitudes of civilians, government and army officials towards recent military operations and on the peace process between the LRA and the Ugandan government. These views were expressed in more than 70 interviews conducted in February and March 2009 in Bunia and Dungu in DRC and in Yambio, Ganguran, Ibba, Maridi and Juba County in Sudan. In Sudan's Makpandu refugee camp, refugees from the Congolese villages of Lilika, Duru, Bitima,

Nawenangwa, Bagbele (Garamba), Nakale, Ngilima, Bayote were interviewed.

In addition, two workshops inform this report. On 3 March 2009 representatives from civil society and local government from Eastern and Central Equatoria gathered in Juba to discuss the ongoing problems associated with the LRA. In Gulu, on 16–18 March, a regional civil society joint analysis workshop on peacebuilding across the Ugandan, Sudanese and Congolese borders was held to discuss the way forward. The workshop was attended by traditional and religious leaders from the affected regions, representatives from NGOs and government as well as former LRA combatants.

The LRA conflict

3

The LRA has been in rebellion against the Ugandan government since 1986. Initially the conflict played out in northern Uganda, and in particular in the Acholi districts. The conflict spread across the Sudanese border around 1994, when the LRA started operating from bases in Eastern Equatoria, which is home to, among others, large populations of ethnic Acholi. The LRA became a proxy supported by the Sudanese government in Khartoum, ostensibly in retaliation against Ugandan and international support for the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

The LRA conflict entered a new stage with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A in 2005. In

the same year, the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed arrest warrants for the top LRA leadership. Throughout the conflict, there have been many peace initiatives with different levels of success. Motivated and resilient grassroots social, cultural and religious networks and organizations have played important roles in these processes, despite their weak capacities. After 19 years of war, the Juba process initiated in 2006 renewed hope for a peaceful resolution. The immediate security dividends of the Juba process were tangible in the areas historically most affected by the conflict. A semblance of de facto peace came about when the LRA moved its troops out of northern Uganda and Sudan's Eastern and Central Equatoria states.

The current situation in the DRC and Western Equatoria State

4

“This was the most peaceful side of southern Sudan during the war and now in peace, we have war.” Yambio government official

Sudan's Western Equatoria State borders the DRC and the CAR. Comprised of ten counties, it covers an area roughly the size of Austria, much of it dense forest. During Sudan's civil war the area was relatively peaceful, with most fighting confined to areas near the state borders to the north, quite removed from the state capital Yambio or the DRC border. Approximately 360,000 people are believed to live in Western Equatoria, but recent displacements make estimates unreliable.

On the other side of the border in DRC is Dungu territory, one of six territories that make up Haute Uélé district of the Orientale Province. It has an estimated population of 225,000 inhabitants covering a total area of approximately 32,000 square kilometres, about half the size of Western Equatoria. Other affected territories along the border include Faradje, Watsa, Rungu, Ango and Niangara and the Wando Collectivity where Garamba Park is located. Dungu territory is a severely deprived area even by DRC

2. Details can be found at <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/uganda/documents/Perilous-Border.pdf>



Ugandan religious and traditional leaders waiting for Joseph Kony at the failed signing ceremony in Ri-Kwangba, April 2008.

standards. Few services are available and a government presence was rarely felt even before the LRA attacked the area.

The LRA has been present in this area since late 2005, with a permanent base in Garamba Park and mobile units in Western Equatoria between Ezo County towards the CAR border and all the way to Tore and Yei towards Juba. During the Juba peace process, the negotiations held between the Ugandan government and representatives of the LRA under the facilitation of the Southern Sudan government, the only LRA camp that was accessible to outsiders was in Ri-Kwangba, near the village of Nabanga on the Sudan/DRC border.

The story of the LRA's presence has been one of gradually deteriorating security conditions and relations. Residents in DRC report that from 2005 to 2007, the LRA was more or less a 'friendly force', freely mixing with some communities. One of the chiefs of a village in Garamba park recounted how, "when LRA came from Uganda for the first time, they passed and did not disturb us. They just passed to the park". He explained that when the LRA came to DRC, they conveyed messages to the Congolese civilians that

we don't have a problem with Congolese, we only have a problem with Sudan and CAR people. This made us [the Congolese civilians] fear because we thought: if they don't like Sudanese and it is not their country, why should they like Congolese?

Abductions were reported throughout this period, albeit on a small scale. In 2006, eight Guatemalan peacekeepers died when MONUC engaged the LRA in combat.

Anticipating a humanitarian crisis and military force against the LRA, in 2007 MONUC started preparing the necessary infrastructure, including rebuilding the airstrip in Dungu. Around the same time, a string of defections from the LRA caused by an internal leadership struggle began a period marked by regular looting, and attacks on villages by LRA members. In those attacks, local chiefs who reportedly helped some LRA commanders defect were directly targeted.

Western Equatorians experienced periodic LRA hostility, abductions and looting. Around the designated assembly area in Ibba County, reports of looting, attacks and abductions were more frequent. In early 2008, UN military observers reported increased suspected movement by the LRA along the border and within DRC.

The situation deteriorated noticeably after LRA leader Joseph Kony failed to appear at a scheduled signing of the negotiated peace agreement in early April 2008. In June the LRA attacked an SPLA detach in Nabanga, killing 15 soldiers and 12 women and children, according to an SPLA commander on duty that day.³ When asked what he felt prompted the LRA attack on the SPLA after almost two years of friendly interactions, he said that just before that day, he had heard on the radio that "SPLA, UPDF and DRC were going to team up against the LRA, so I think that was the reason."

From September 2008, the LRA intensified their attacks in the DRC, starting in Dungu town. Since then, the LRA has extended their operations, covering approximately 450km from East Faragi to Western Duruma, a heavily forested and sparsely populated area. Congolese residents of the

3. The exact number of deaths is unclear – UN military observers say that 17 SPLA and 6 civilians were killed.

affected areas have fled their homes, many moving into Sudan towards Ganguran, near Yambio, about nine miles from the DRC border. Some also simply fled to the bush or towards Duru in DRC. In Sudan, the LRA is currently active between Ezo and Yei, with most attacks happening along or south of the main road towards the DRC border.

Since the beginning of Operation Lightning Thunder, the security situation for the local and displaced population has again deteriorated. A few days after the initial aerial bombings, some LRA commanders regrouped with Kony, having been given ample time to do so by a 72-hour delay in the arrival of ground troops. They then reportedly received orders to attack several Congolese villages on Christmas day. These attacks turned into some of the most gruesome massacres in the history of the LRA conflict, with hundreds of people killed. Dozens of small attacks and several large-scale massacres have led to the deaths of an estimated 900 civilians in three months, with tens of thousands displaced. Around 800 people are reported missing and presumably abducted. By February 2009, the SPLA and the civilian population reported regular sighting of small LRA groups (sometimes as few as five people, rarely more than 20), while also discovering traces of sleeping places for larger groups of 100 or more near Ganguran, close to Yambio. Since then, there has been a steady trickle of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to sites in DRC and Sudan.

4.1 Conduct of Operation Lightning Thunder

The peace process suffered a severe setback when Kony failed to sign the FPA on 10 April 2008. He also failed to turn up for subsequent meetings organized at his request. The LRA's attacks and abductions of civilians in the DRC and CAR had already been exacerbating insecurity. In one incident the LRA reportedly abducted over 150 people around Obo in the eastern corner of the CAR, an area criss-crossed by various armed groups including units of Sudanese janjaweed and Congolese rebels.

Citing the lack of progress towards a peace deal, the military chiefs of Uganda, the DRC and Southern Sudan agreed in early June to cooperate militarily against the LRA. The stated objective was to force Kony to sign the peace deal. On 14 December, the UPDF took the lead in launching Operation Lightning Thunder by bombing LRA camps in Garamba park. This was followed by a three month ground offensive in Sudan and the DRC, led by the UPDF with some support from Congolese forces. In mid-March 2009, the UPDF withdrew, declaring the operation a success and handing over to the FARDC, who renamed the offensive Operation Rudia.

LRA returnees interviewed for this report said that on the day before the bombing, Kony announced there would be a plane attack the next day and that camps needed to be evacuated. Others seemed to have been less well

informed: in Uganda and DRC, parliamentarians said they were not consulted on the use of the Ugandan military in the DRC. While the SPLA was theoretically in charge of sealing off the borders to prevent the LRA from fleeing to Sudan, in practice it is not clear to what extent the SPLA felt responsible for this or had the capacity to do it. Border villages like Sakure had no military presence when the bombardment started and residents reported there was no reaction to LRA movement from the SPLA. Criticizing the UPDF's approach, one SPLA official explained the lack of SPLA participation stemmed from a mutual lack of trust in the other's capacity. From the SPLA point of view, he said, the UPDF was wrong to approach Operation Lightning Thunder,

as if they were going to fight a conventional army, but that was not the case. They did not follow the principle of war, which is surprise and speed. Also, SPLA, UPDF and FARDC forces never sat down together. SPLA was supposed to seal the borders and they were drunk. The US helped plan this, but Western systems normally undermine how our systems work. US officers will rely on equipment. They want to do their own intelligence gathering without relying on basic local intelligence. The [US] State Department has no experience with realities on the ground. The UPDF troops were in Koboko for days, it was like they were going to a party. There was no alliance between SPLA and UPDF, the government of Uganda wanted to keep the operation secret from [Southern Sudan's Vice President and Chief Mediator] Riek [Machar]. The SPLA was not very happy. The SPLA just said to some forces, just go and sit there, let the Ugandans see if they really are the best.

The scope of the UPDF military operation is hard to determine with precision. Local witnesses can only give snapshots. In one case, they reported having seen 23 UPDF vehicles and four armed tanks moving in Sudan from Maridi towards Madebe just before Christmas.

Upon its withdrawal in March 2009, the UPDF reported that the LRA's permanent base camps in Garamba had been destroyed, five senior LRA commanders had been captured, 150 LRA killed and around 300 abductees rescued. Moreover, the LRA command structure had been impaired and its ability to regroup destroyed.⁴

However, the LRA operates extremely effectively in small groups and this has become the mode of operation once more. Since the strength of the LRA is unknown, it is impossible to verify the Ugandan government's claim that a fifth of the LRA were killed. Rumours of high-level individual or group surrender remain unsubstantiated.

4. Barbara Among, 'Ninety Days of War in Garamba Forest', *New Vision*, 13 March 2009.



A camp set up by Congolese refugees in Makpandu, Sudan.

4.2 Impact and perceptions of Operation Lightning Thunder

"The international community has communication, they have satellites, yet they have left us and we are alone." Yambio resident

Operation Lightning Thunder brought residents in DRC and Sudan a mixture of hope, despair and eventually disappointment. One local leader said, "Initially locals were apprehensive that the military was not protecting them, but with combined [Ugandan, Congolese and Sudanese] forces they felt better". Echoing the hope that the campaign would conclude with Kony's arrest, another said that the increased insecurity and the bombing of LRA abductees was a painful but necessary step to take: "Attacking Kony with FARDC and UPDF was the only option. There are casualties, but we have to pay them. There is no peace without bloodshed."

Criticism of how the military operation was executed has been voiced locally, nationally and internationally. As a strategy to end the conflict, protect civilians and encourage LRA members to leave the bush, Operation Lightning

Thunder has been weak. Its official objective was to either force Kony to sign the FPA, or to capture or kill LRA rebels.

The operation utilized 'psyops' (psychological operations) to encourage LRA members to leave the bush. This included dropping leaflets over Garamba Park urging the LRA to come home and assuring them they would be received with open arms. Yet it was ill-prepared: the leaflet informed the LRA that they should report to the nearest church or army units, but churches had not been informed that they were supposed to receive the LRA or what to do with them.

A local government official from Yambio said the military campaign was doomed from the start because it failed to take into account local knowledge:

The way UPDF is doing it, it is not the right way. The way they started was wrong. They should have come to talk to the community. They came without talking to the governor of Western Equatoria. They just started bombing. As a result, the LRA has scattered like red ants, but they are like the red ants that come back and destroy your house.

When the UPDF started to withdraw its troops from DRC in mid-March 2009, the move confirmed what one Yambio resident's stance that "the people know UPDF is

not the solution, it is only temporary and they can leave tomorrow." Few residents have expressed confidence in the capacities of either the FARDC or SPLA to actually arrest the LRA leadership. Although the military campaign has been declared a success by the UPDF, Joseph Kony remains elusive and the FPA has not been signed. One local SPLA member felt that the task left to them had now become even bigger after Operation Lightning Thunder: "I don't think the LRA will be wiped out," he said. "If anything they have just made them stronger."

4.2.1 The humanitarian situation

The humanitarian situation is extremely severe, and the outlook for the next few months is bleak. In Sudan and Dungen territory, local government officials and aid organizations are still verifying the exact number of IDPs and refugees. In Maridi County, local officials estimate that more than 10,000 Sudanese have been displaced, but that at least 30,000 are affected along the border. In Yambio county, officials said that 1139 individuals had been displaced. The exact number of Sudanese IDPs is hard to determine since they are not in one place, but scattered in the bush or with relatives. In February, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Dungen territory estimated that there were 160,674 Congolese IDPs and 20,000 refugees, most of whom had fled to Western Equatoria state.

In both DRC and Sudan, humanitarian assistance is scarce and those receiving assistance are likely to be staying within major towns or camps. Hopes that the situation can be improved anytime soon are slim on both sides of the border, made worse by the start of the rainy season. In DRC, as of mid-February 2009, the WFP had accessed only 54,511 people with food items and 27,065 with non-food items.

Outside major towns, delivery of humanitarian assistance is extremely difficult due to a lack of roads. To cover the 500km from Beni to Dungen by road takes a minimum of 12 days during dry season. In rainy season, the roads become impassable. Niangara (97 km west of Dungen) hosts 11,000 IDPs who cannot be accessed. IDP camps in Gangara or Bodio are considered unsafe for humanitarian workers due to the lack of any military presence or police force. Protection of both civilians and aid workers is a major challenge.

Local authorities expect an even worse food shortage in the months ahead due to lack of cultivation in the last few months. Those displaced or those with remote fields have not been able to tend to their crops. The lack of a harvest is a major concern to authorities and civilians alike.

4.2.2 Security

The major complaint of the local populations in the DRC and Sudan is that too little consideration was given to civilian protection in the planning and execution of the military campaign. In Sudan, the key criticism is that aerial bombing started without positioning the SPLA along the border to prevent LRA groups from entering. The area in need of protection is vast and it is hard to say with certainty whether it would have been possible for the SPLA to seal off the borders. But in the absence of any attempt to do so the LRA has roamed freely, splitting into small mobile units to avoid military confrontations and to attack civilians.

Sudanese and Congolese civilians have, in their own view, become caught between a rock and a hard place. By allowing the UPDF into their countries, they made themselves more vulnerable to LRA attacks, as one youth leader said, because "the UPDF presence makes them look like enemies to the LRA." Yet the withdrawal of UPDF from the operation has left civilians with one less force to protect them. The task of civilian protection is now in the hands of the FARDC, and with Congolese forces engaged in fighting in the Kivus, there is little expectation that they will have the capacity to counter the LRA.

Military observers have expressed doubt about the capacity of the three armies involved to provide adequate protection, while MONUC forces, whose mandate theoretically allows them to engage in fighting for protection, have limited fighting capacity. The UN Security Council authorized an increase in troops for MONUC in November 2008,⁵ but it has been a challenge to get any country to commit to contributing more troops. With the problems in Kivus, the prospects that MONUC will mobilize sufficient troops in Dungen against the LRA seems unrealistic.

On the Sudanese side, many Equatorians have an uneasy relationship with the SPLA, based on a long history of distrust. "The feeling of protection is not there strongly," explained one Equatorian leader. "One reason could be one of those drunkard soldiers who, when [the LRA] appear, says we are tired of fighting, you civilians go. So when that was said civilians had little hope." During an LRA attack on the village of Mboroko, a messenger was sent to alert the SPLA who reportedly said "you just wait, we are coming later." The person who sent the messenger said that, "the army is now really struggling to make people believe in them." This lack of confidence is rooted in years of strained relationships between the Equatorian tribes (such as the Zande in the Yambio area or the Baka around Maridi) and the Nilotic tribes (such as the Dinka, who make up the majority of SPLA soldiers). Equatorian civilians perceive SPLA soldiers' behaviour and their failure to act as protectors in ethnic terms, rather than as isolated incidents of army misconduct.

5. Resolution S/RES/1843, 20 November 2008.



Civilian defence groups along the Yambio-Maridi road.

The intervention of the ICC has raised hopes of an imminent solution based on international law that are both high and unrealistic.⁶ One local government official in Western Equatoria said, "nothing needs to be negotiated here, there is nothing to reconcile. We are waiting for the ICC. The ICC needs to come here and take care of this issue." At the same time, residents realize that the involvement of the ICC has caused friction in the peace negotiations with the LRA: "The ICC has never been here. Maybe it was just created to get some people paid. They seem to create problems without solving it. Kony now says he won't sign peace, so they have created a problem without solving them."

4.3 Community militarization

As a response to the lack of protection, civilians on both sides of the border are now arming themselves, either individually or as part of organized civilian patrols. While some use guns, the most common weapons are bows and arrows. Civilian patrols say that their own effort could be seen as adding to the military effort in an attempt to more effectively cover a larger territory and work with better local knowledge. In DRC, the local self-defence units were first formed in 2000, but most fell dormant until the September 2008 attacks on Dingu. In communities where self-defence units are considered strong, such as Bangadi

and Dingu town, LRA attacks have been minimized. Initially made up of idle youth and hunters, these self-defence units have been recognized by the territory administrators and carry out joint patrols with FARDC. They move freely in town with their hunting guns. The behaviour of these groups and their relationship with the FARDC and the police has been problematic. For example, in Ngilima, the self defence units attacked policemen, wounding the commander and taking firearms. In some other areas, they are reported to be harassing ex-abductees or killing those that try to escape from the LRA. The creation of the self-defence units underlines the existing gap in protection capacities.

Sudanese residents report that during Operation Lightning Thunder, they were sometimes supplied by military forces: "[The UPDF] sometimes distribute ammunition and go with the community. And when there is [no incident] they ask for ammunition back because it belongs to the government. That is what the community wants." Hence along the Yambio-Maridi road, civilian patrols have been a regular sight since mid-February. Making arrows during the day, the groups work in organized patrol shifts from 8pm through the night. The leader of one patrol said that the "community has to be encouraged to use their weapons for fighting. We can't have army everywhere and the government cannot provide arms to the community."

6. In 2005, the ICC unsealed five warrants for LRA commanders, two of whom have since been killed. In March 2009, the ICC also issued a warrant for Sudan's president Omer al-Bashir from crimes committed in Darfur. The fact that the warrants in both cases were issued before peace agreements had been made has drawn much criticism. Critics say the warrants have made it impossible to strike peace deals for Uganda or Darfur while supporters believe that the warrants bring pressure to resolve the conflicts.

Another local resident said that was confident that the community solution could work, if sufficiently supported: "If the local community is empowered to take the security of the area, the LRA will be flushed out. But everybody is so scared to give firearms to communities... In Uganda they had the arrow boys and it worked." Others look with concern to the Ugandan example. "With the arrow boys in Uganda," explained one man who had been a refugee in Uganda, "it took only a very little while until they started to set up roadblocks and forcing people to pay them. It is not a voluntary force. They start doing things for themselves."

Local leaders in Yambio and Maridi, while supportive of their communities' attempts to defend themselves, are pessimistic about the prospects of solving the greater security problem this way. "The community is now doing self-defence but in reality that does not help," said a local church leader. "Because in the last attack, [the LRA] surprised [the locals], the bows and arrows were there, but there was no time. It is just raising of morale." Another civil society leader explained that community militarization exposes the shortcomings in community protection and psycho-social programmes: "In some villages, young people start patrolling throughout the night. It is a bit like counselling. What they do helps the mind. They do not feel powerless."

4.4 Impact on Sudan's peace process

With civilian disarmament one of the major challenges in Sudan's own fragile peace process, rearmament may have far-reaching implications for Sudan's CPA. Moreover, vast parts of Sudan, including Western Equatoria, are experiencing an extremely volatile security environment in which the LRA has become one more serious destabilizing factor. This volatility underlines the urgent need to find a solution for the LRA conflict.

In Western Equatoria, divisions between local state residents and Southern Sudanese government representatives in Juba run deep. Locals feel that the central government and a lack of communication about the peace process has left them exposed to LRA attacks.

People here are very disappointed in the process. What people are saying around negotiations is that the expense of life, they can't tolerate. That anger was seen during the last [LRA] attack. That dead body of an LRA was put up to town and everybody came to it and cut their knives or they lashed or beat it with a stick. Here in Western Equatoria we really had that high expectation because they came and our government mediated, we saw food taken to them.

Several people interviewed expressed their anger with a Southern Sudanese leadership they see as biased along ethnic lines. They have "bad memories" of war, said one Western Equatorian who used to work with an international organization:

Most people have a lot of horrible tales from our own soldiers, rape, beating, young girls raped with bottles and their organs opened with a razor blade to penetrate. Also, people do not now differentiate between SPLA and SPLM [the political wing of the SPLA]... Trying to repair it means if [the SPLA] is the army, let it not only be one tribe. Every roadblock you find, it is the same people. It needs to be a truly mixed army and both soldiers and civilians need to be held accountable.

Another ongoing security concern has been the presence of armed pastoralists, the Ambororo, in both Western Equatoria and Bas and Haute Uélé districts in the DR Congo. This nomad tribe owns large herds of cattle and has been seen with sophisticated communication equipment and modern weaponry, fuelling suspicion that the government in Khartoum is equipping them in order to foster instability.

The Ambororo are considered a threat to the local agricultural lifestyle: "They are destroying the livelihood by grazing their cattle, taking the water and destroying beehives," said a local aid worker, adding that,

such a number of animals destroys Western Equatoria farms, it destroys livelihoods. If they can find better grazing lands, they should go there. Western Equatorians don't know what they really are doing, they are deep in the forest. We are concerned. LRA and Ambororo, we never know what they do. We don't know if they are connected.

During several meetings, Western Equatorians say, the Ambororo chiefs agreed to leave the area, even signing a ceasefire and an agreement to leave the state by the end of July 2008. But local residents and officials say they have failed to do so. While some Zande spokespeople have stated publicly that they believe the LRA and the Ambororo are working in conjunction, this seems to be little more than an assumption. Others believe there is no coordination, but that the tactics behind their presence are the same: "The LRA is a threat and also the Ambororo, they are indirectly linked because they have the same boss in Khartoum. But they have not carried out coordinated attacks." Even if the connection is not direct, the presence of the two groups makes people wonder if they do not, after all, support each other: "The Ambororo are like bulldozers to the LRA," said a local government official in Yambio. "They take their cattle along the road and then the LRA take that road. Ambororo are intruders. There is a very big question about their presence here. They were not here during the war. Only since the CPA are they here." Others state categorically that "the Ambororos are far away, I have never seen them here with LRA." LRA returnees report that they had experienced clashes between LRA and Ambororo. Yet even if a direct connection is hard to establish, the double threat from two armed groups with unclear aims makes it impossible for residents to feel they have gained anything from the CPA.

5.1 Obstacles to a return to dialogue

Despite the success of Operation Lightning Thunder in damaging LRA command structures and rescuing abductees, its overriding failure was not providing adequate civilian protection. While the command structure of the LRA may have been hurt, its capacity to attack and kill in small groups has not. The threat posed by the LRA to civilians is now greater than before. This has caused local frustration with the military attempt to end the conflict, and has made reviving a political process more difficult. It seems unlikely that military force will result in any deal being signed, and any trust that had been built between negotiating parties in Juba – however fragile – has gone.

The Ugandan government has signalled it is not prepared to revive the Juba process in any way, although it is not clear whether the same applies to any kind of political process. The LRA is once again a force that cannot be reached or communicated with, making it very hard for anyone – UN, civil society or NGOs – to envision how a process could be restarted. Communicating with the LRA remains a crucial problem, even more so since they have significantly reduced their use of satellite phones. While returnees say that many LRA commanders listen to the radio news, it will be difficult to reach the many LRA soldiers who do not have access to a radio.

There are other obstacles. During the Juba talks, the LRA delegation was largely drawn from the Acholi diaspora and serious rifts developed during negotiations, repeatedly undermining the process. It is unclear how close communication is now between the LRA and the diaspora supporters. Even if credible outside representation for the LRA was to emerge, it is unlikely that the Ugandan government would accept another process of proxy negotiation after the experience of Juba.

The legacy of international involvement presents further challenges. Intense international involvement, unprecedented in previous initiatives, had contradictory effects. On one hand, it made the peace talks possible through international funding and advocacy for a political solution. On the other, it created a tremendously complex environment that was hard for the LRA to navigate. For example the LRA was required to trust a number of actors, some with very conflicting views on international justice procedures, that they would not be extradited once they had signed the agreement. In the final meetings, Kony cited problems understanding the framework on justice and accountability, drawn up to fulfil the ICC's requirements that local justice procedures protect the interest of the victims sufficiently. The obstacles created by the complex international machinery can perhaps only be overcome by a smaller, civil society driven process.

5.2 The mood for a political solution

Citizens of Southern Sudan and DRC state clearly that they have been left exposed and vulnerable by their governments and the international community. Yet despite huge frustration with the current situation, they also express an understanding about what the negotiators had tried to achieve: "It was not a mistake, it was a good initiative," said one Yambio resident about the peace talks with the LRA. "There is no peace talks which is perfect, mistakes can be corrected later. It is always better to do something than nothing."

Yet some Sudanese locals are no longer prepared to offer their support for peace talks: "Anybody who is talking of negotiation should relocate the negotiations to their own country," said one member of the SPLA. "When the SPLA negotiated in Kenya, we did not kill Kenyans while we were talking. Who wants to negotiate with Kony should not come to Southern Sudan. Enough is enough."

Others felt that all sides were to blame for the failure of the peace negotiations. The LRA, while officially still at the negotiation table, continued and intensified attacks and abductions. The UPDF on several occasions broke the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. "In Sudan, government of Southern Sudan has talked and also prepared to fight," said one youth leader, referring to the SPLA's agreement to also pursue the LRA while the peace process was ostensibly still alive:

Uganda did the same. This is never sincere peace talk. We need pure and true peace talks. Uganda and the government of Southern Sudan need to show their true colours. If you want to negotiate, don't fight me. Either there needs to be a proper military response or you have to negotiate better with DRC and Southern Sudan.

While stressing the importance of implementing what had already been signed in the Juba process, a member of the Southern Sudan government said that it was impossible to believe that Kony would ever trust Uganda's President Museveni with regard to his own safety, but also that the option of staying in Sudan for safety,

was never conveyed. The international community should have just said 'sign and go wherever'. When Museveni sees opportunity for peace, his rhetoric changes from 'partner in peace' to 'victor in peace'. You need to concede pride and ego that you are the victor. If you don't, I will think your peace deal is bait.

A senior SPLA figure expressed his disappointment that in the end, the promise of peace proved weaker than the

threat of an international warrant: "Nobody could give Kony strong enough guarantees," he said. "Ultimately, that is why it failed."

5.3 Seeking new opportunities

Despite the challenges it has become clear that in order to move towards a resolution of the conflict, strategies that go beyond military operations are necessary. The military option, aimed at achieving an outright victory against the LRA, has remained the Ugandan government's favoured approach. Yet there is a litany of failed attempts to secure a decisive blow against the LRA. In March 2002, the Ugandan government embarked on a military operation against the LRA in Sudan with the encouragement of Sudanese government. They had calculated that attacking the LRA from the rear would result in a decisive victory. Almost eight years after the launch of Operation Iron Fist, the Ugandan forces operating in Sudan have not defeated the LRA. Instead the operation resulted in increased abductions and had severe humanitarian consequences, including over 1.8 million internally displaced persons in northern Uganda. Operation Lightning Thunder has equally resulted into devastating consequences for the local population in DRC and Western Equatoria State.

Continuing on a path to peace is necessary if an extended regional humanitarian crisis with low-level conflict is to be avoided. Abandoning the institutions of the peace talks and opting for a military strategy has worsened the situation for the communities. Lacking a credible path to a negotiated alternative, communities have a bleak outlook on the future. To avoid prolonged deterioration, channels of communication with the LRA leadership need to be re-established. The Juba process made an attempt at inclusivity, calling for the participation of civil society actors, but it focused almost exclusively on Ugandan representatives. Recent developments seem to suggest that a peace process needs to include civil society from all affected countries and that cooperation between civil society actors across borders needs to be strengthened.

Strategically, Operation Lightning Thunder marks a new era of regional military cooperation. Paradoxically, given the devastating security and humanitarian effects of the operation, the cooperation it signifies may have opened doors for increased regional dialogue if a political process can be started on the back of it.

The recognition that the LRA conflict is part of the complex web of violent conflicts in the Uganda, Sudan and DRC border regions is an essential step towards protecting the civilian populations of these areas. Community leaders from all three countries stress that a comprehensive regional approach to conflict resolution is necessary. Communities also see urgent need to improve civilian-military relations in order to establish a sense of trust vis-à-vis their own army. The regional approach needs to extend to the involvement of civil society. Community leaders in all three countries have expressed a wish to engage more

with their counterparts across the border and to have a more united voice when talking to governments, for example when discussing the impact of military operations on communities.

Community leaders have called for government representatives from Uganda, the DRC, and the Sudanese governments in Juba and Khartoum to come together specifically to discuss issues of civilian protection. The mandates of foreign troops need to be discussed and conveyed in a clear manner to the affected populations, possibly through permanent community representation on a regional security committee. Such cooperation would enable civilians to establish better relationships with their own armies, using the information to identify whether soldiers were moving on command or were rogue soldiers posing a threat. Such a relationship of trust was also seen to be potentially beneficial to improved security networks in which local representatives would agree on early warning signals to avoid surprise attacks by the LRA.

5.4 Prioritizing support for communities

In addition to the humanitarian and protection challenges for refugees and IDPs, the current situation also brings to light many of the long-term problems that local communities will face. Congolese refugees interviewed in Sudan said that the last six months had forever altered their communities. "The number of men is now reduced because they have killed so many people," explained one chief. Furthermore, relatively few supposed escapees from the LRA have returned, reporting there might be as many as 500 abducted Sudanese and Congolese still with the LRA.

A local community centre in Yambio is currently used to house returnees while their families are traced, but it is understood that this is not a workable long-term solution, especially if the numbers of returnees increases. In addition to establishing suitable accommodation, the local authorities are preparing to put into place the mechanisms needed to trace and prepare families. An environment needs to be established that facilitates return and reintegration, both for returning young men and for young women who in some cases might come with babies born in the bush, fathered by their LRA husbands. Local churches in the DRC have developed a strategy of 'foster families'. While this is only meant to be a temporary strategy, it is difficult to find families to foster children returning from the LRA. Tracing family is often impossible in the current volatile situation where most families are displaced.

Yet local authorities are already looking ahead into future tasks, said Western Equatoria's Social Development Minister:

Real support is needed for LRA abductees, but we need long-term projects, looking into dealing with the trauma of these people and their families.... We need packages, we need to come up with a

system to follow-up. We need to deal with trauma, particularly mothers who have been carrying the babies of these guys.

Local leaders expect a growing need for reintegration support structures. Communities, one man in Maridi said, are simply not prepared for the tremendously difficult task of reintegration, and the ongoing security threat and danger to livelihoods means that anger is expected to

be aimed at returnees: "You can see the stigma now," explained a senior church leader. "A person of nine to ten years old is captured and comes back. They will hear people say that they are rebels. Some of us here will also need to be counselled."

Recommendations

6

6.1 On the peace process

- All parties should renew their commitment to ending the conflict by ending violence and re-establishing communication. This includes the LRA, the Ugandan government, other affected governments as well as the UN Special Envoy, but also donor governments.
- In order to re-establish communication with the LRA, its supporters and all governments concerned, a regional civil society committee should be established as a permanent regional body for conflict resolution. While focusing on reviving the LRA/Uganda peace process, it should be mandated to address long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation in the volatile border areas in conjunction with governments and security forces.
- The signed agreements of the Juba process need to be honoured by the Ugandan government through implementation of the comprehensive solution as negotiated in Juba. An assessment of achievements and failures of the Juba process will help in advancing the peace process and learning from past mistakes.

6.2 On security

- Civilian protection is a priority. Governments of the affected areas need to work together to ensure that their security forces enhance community security.
- Humanitarian efforts by the international community need to be stepped up to provide food and shelter for those recently displaced in Sudan and DRC.

- The local communities need to develop early warning mechanisms and communication to be better prepared for attacks. This needs to be facilitated, with an emphasis on communication at the community level rather than community militarization.

6.3 On reconciliation and reintegration

- The respective governments need to establish a forum in which cross-border issues can be addressed on a regular basis. Consistent mechanisms for cross-border dialogue and interaction are needed to make the borders more secure, stabilize the region and start on the path to reconciliation, particularly on the Sudan/Uganda border.
- In communities expecting returnees from the LRA, mechanisms should be established to receive those who have been with the LRA and reunite them with their families. This includes safe accommodation for returnees, preparing families before reintegration, and reliable follow-up procedures.

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All photos by Maireke Schomerus.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo
FPA	Final Peace Agreement
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MONUC	United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force

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