

## Expert meeting Report

# *The Lord's Resistance Army: in Search for a New Approach*

Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute, 25 June 2010

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### **Background**

Northern Uganda became the scene of armed conflict after President Yoweri Museveni took power in 1986 by overthrowing a military regime dominated by the Acholi, the largest ethnic group in Uganda's northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. In the wake of this coup, and amid fears of political and economic marginalisation, several protest movements emerged in the North challenging the newly established leadership. Out of these movements, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was born. Infamous for its brutal methods, the LRA has been in conflict with the Ugandan government ever since.

The people of Northern Uganda initially suffered the greatest burden of LRA activity and the movement's warfare with the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF), with both parties committing grave human rights violations. Over time, however, Joseph Kony's small but resilient guerrilla army has turned into a regional menace. At present, Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) host its key operational bases.

Despite various attempts to address the LRA conflict, both through peaceful and military means (see Annex II and III), the movement is still active today. This poses a serious security threat to the communities inhabiting the Southern Sudan-DRC-CAR border area, as recent atrocities in Haute Uele district in Northeastern DRC demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> Hence, there is an urgent need to recapture the multifaceted problem the LRA poses, and to think about new and innovative approaches to contribute to a durable solution.

To this end, the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit (CRU) organized a closed meeting on 17 May 2010, bringing together a divergent group of leading experts and experienced practitioners. The participants gathered to discuss lessons learned and current challenges, and to identify possible ways forward in dealing with the LRA (see Annex I). Among the participants were representatives from AFRICOM, the Clingendael Institute, Cordaid, the Egmont Institute, EURAC, the Government of Uganda, IKV Pax Christi, the Leiden Africa Studies Centre, London School of Economics, the Institute for Security Studies, the International Criminal Court, the International Crisis Group, the United Nations Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC), the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, the Office of the EU Special Representative for the Great Lakes, Oxfam Novib, the United Nations Department for Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO), and the University of Antwerp.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Trail of Death. LRA Atrocities in Northeastern Congo*. March 2010.

This report provides a brief overview of the meetings' most important findings and points of discussion.<sup>2</sup>

**Key observations made** include the following:

- Scholars and experts engaged in the search for solutions to the LRA problem strongly disagree about what the problem actually *is*, generating widely divergent approaches in what appears to have become a conflict amongst themselves. Arguably, the existence of many different and sometimes conflicting LRA narratives lies at the very heart of the apparent inability to create effective strategies for ending the movement's insurgency.
- The general inability to protect civilians from LRA reprisal attacks - carried out in response to an ongoing Ugandan-led military operation against the group - starkly contrasts with the generally held view that safeguarding them should be the main priority. This prompts the question as to whether a continuation of current military activities is acceptable when the safety of the population inhabiting the area cannot be guaranteed, particularly given the extensive timeframe and low success rate of these activities thus far.
- MONUC and the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) struggle to live up to the high expectations of what they can and should do to prevent the killing of civilians. Even with all the appropriate political and institutional caveats in place, securing the vast and desolate Southern Sudan-DRC-CAR border area seems unfeasible given the available means. Nevertheless, there remains ample room for improvement, especially in how and the extent to which the two peacekeeping missions and other stakeholders share information and coordinate their actions.
- Given that military action alone is unlikely to resolve the conflict, the door for engaging the LRA through dialogue should be kept open at all times, even when the prospect of reaching a lasting settlement seems remote. The LRA should be seen and understood as part of a set of interwoven problems, which cannot be solved by a one-sided peace enforcing strategy.
- Talking and fighting do not have to be mutually exclusive pathways. Aside from pre-empting attacks and protecting civilians, military action should ultimately serve the purpose of making the LRA's continued stay in the bush as unattractive as possible. Meanwhile, some form of dialogue will likely be necessary to negotiate the conditions of surrender.
- Past peacemaking efforts have shown that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets. In searching for solutions to the LRA problem, maintaining an appropriate degree of prudence is required – a recommendation that applies equally to those who advocate military action, those who pursue dialogue and those who support a combined approach.

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Ms. Esther Marijnen for her invaluable help in organizing the LRA expert meeting and for her contribution to the establishment of this report. Please note that while the report greatly benefits from the input of the speakers and the lively discussions between the various participants, the authors remain fully responsible for its content.

## Part I – Recapturing the LRA Problematique

During the two-decade long search for solutions to the LRA problem, it has become apparent that those involved in this search strongly disagree about what the problem actually *is*. Perceptions of ‘the LRA’ and ‘the LRA conflict’, and subsequently views on how to approach them, vary widely, as was evident during the discussions. The steady increase of actors dealing with the LRA has further politicised and complicated this debate. Indeed, those who follow the activities of the LRA appear to be embroiled in a conflict amongst themselves, as was aptly observed by one of the participants. Arguably, the existence of many different and sometimes conflicting LRA narratives lies at the very heart of the apparent inability to create effective strategies for ending the movement’s insurgency.

Throughout the years, common representations of the LRA have oscillated between two extremes. One is of a group of religious fanatics who randomly indulge in maiming and killing innocent civilians, and the other view is a collective of freedom fighters who aim to protect the interests of the marginalized population of Northern Uganda. Neither representation corresponds well with the complex reality on the ground – arguably, this discord has hindered the formulation of appropriate strategies and policies. Various participants stressed the need to recognize the many layers of the LRA problem and unravel the myriad of constantly changing factors that contribute to its persistence.<sup>3</sup>

While there was disagreement as to whether they ever had one in the first place, consensus arose that the LRA at present does not seem to have a political agenda. Due to the fact that the LRA is far removed from its homeland and has not set foot on Ugandan soil in years, any claims to be fighting the Museveni government over North-South disparities increasingly lack credibility. The same holds true for alleged ambitions to overthrow Museveni and alter Uganda’s religious order. Combined with the use of violent methods, religion and spirituality do continue to be important tools for the movement’s leadership to instil its fighters with fear and create a sense of unity so as to keep potential dissidents in line. In this regard, the gradual decline of Acholi filling the ranks is a real concern for Joseph Kony and his deputies. This trend and its associated language and loyalty problems challenge the movement’s cohesion and once highly centralized command structure.

In the absence of any clear and consistently articulated demands or objectives, the LRA muddles through in survival mode. This naturally reinforces its image as an irrational terrorist group or a criminal gang that can only be brought to a halt by military means. This line of reasoning was questioned by several participants, however, who pointed at the (geo)political and socio-economic dimensions of the LRA problem and pleaded for a more holistic approach. In their view, the endurance of the LRA should not be isolated from, for example, the competing interests between and limited governance capacity of the states composing the LRA-affected region. Nor should the understanding of the LRA problem be divorced from the inequities perceived by the people in Northern Uganda, an area that remains to be a breeding ground for rebellion. While agreeing that political and socio-economic disparities in Uganda are vital to address in their own right, it was noted that the LRA could hardly assert to be a legitimate bearer of this agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent and comprehensive account of the LRA, see Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (ed.) (2010). *The Lord’s Resistance Army. Myth and Reality*. London: Zed Books.

## Part II – Enforcing Peace

In the context of failing peace talks, the launch of Operation Lightning Thunder on 14 December 2008 signalled the beginning of a new chapter in dealing with the LRA (see Annex III).<sup>4</sup> Up until now, the core objective of the UPDF-led operation – to kill or capture Joseph Kony and his top commanders – has not been met. Past military efforts to neutralize the LRA have not been successful; and while some participants remained confident that, with the right logistical and technical help of the international community, enforcing peace is possible, many others expressed doubts as to whether the current attempt will ultimately produce more satisfactory results.

Military efforts are inherently challenged when they operate in an area that is exceedingly vast, extremely volatile, politically unstable, practically ungoverned, riddled with other irregular groups and delineated by porous borders. These difficulties are exacerbated by the high mobility of the now scattered LRA groups and their comparative familiarity with the terrain. The absence of effective cooperation between the UPDF and the allied armies of Southern Sudan and the DRC – due to mutual mistrust and a lacking sense of political urgency and limited capacity on the part of the latter two states – has further hampered the achievements of the current operation.

During the meeting there was disagreement over the role of the government of Sudan, which is known to have trained and equipped the LRA in the past. Some participants were convinced that ruling elites in Khartoum are still the movement's most important external sponsor; others argued that the evidence to substantiate this accusation is flimsy.

The general inability to protect civilians from LRA reprisal attacks starkly contrasts with the generally held view that safeguarding them should be the main priority. This prompted the discussion considering whether a continuation of current military activities is acceptable when the safety of the population inhabiting the area cannot be guaranteed, particularly given the extensive timeframe and low success rate of these activities thus far. The UPDF, the only involved army thought capable of taking serious protective measures, has been preoccupied with the hunt for senior LRA fighters, giving much lower priority to the humanitarian implications. However, some examples of positive engagement by the Ugandan army with local communities – who are not merely potential victims, but also a key source of intelligence on the LRA – were presented throughout the meeting.

Both MONUC and UNMIS are mandated to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. However, the missions struggle to live up to the high expectations of what they can and should do to achieve this. Even with all the appropriate political and institutional caveats in place, securing such a vast and desolate area seems unfeasible given the available means. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that there is ample room for improvement, especially in how and the extent to which the two peacekeeping missions and other stakeholders share information and coordinate their actions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Jort Hemmer (2008). *The Lord's Resistance Army: tackling a regional spoiler*. The Hague, Clingendael Policy Brief: [http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2008/20081224\\_policy\\_brief\\_8\\_lord\\_resistance\\_army.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2008/20081224_policy_brief_8_lord_resistance_army.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The latest International Crisis Group report offers several recommendations on how to work towards such a harmonized, regional strategy: *LRA: A Regional Strategy Beyond Killing Kony*. April 2010.

In response to the security vacuum in the Southern Sudan-DRC-CAR border area, various local self-defence groups have emerged to protect their communities against the LRA, generally to greater effect than the armies and peacekeeping missions in the region. However, the existence of these groups poses a dilemma to the acting governments, who struggle to monopolize the legitimate use of force and therefore have tended to be hesitant to endorse, let alone encourage, their formation. Yet devoid of any viable alternatives, different approaches to engaging civil self-defence groups could be worth exploring.

Aside from offering a more fundamental critique on today's almost exclusive focus on a military solution to the LRA problem, several participants questioned the virtue of arresting or killing Joseph Kony. Given the uncertainties of whether Kony will be replaced and if surviving commanders will carry on and pursue their own agendas, participants warned that Kony's capture or death would not automatically imply the disintegration of his movement, let alone an end to the crisis. They emphasized that the LRA should be seen and understood as part of a set of interwoven problems, which cannot be solved by a one-sided peace enforcing strategy.

### **Part III – Negotiating Peace**

Difficulties during the Juba process and Kony's reluctance to sign the Final Peace Agreement (see Annex III) have been taken by some as evidence that talking to the LRA does not work and that the option of negotiating peace is no longer on the table. Indeed, past peace talks have proven to be difficult to establish and sustain. The LRA's inability to clearly express its demands further hampers the prospect of fruitful negotiations. Nevertheless, given that military action alone is unlikely to resolve the conflict, several participants stressed that the door for engaging the LRA through dialogue should be kept open at all times, even when the prospect of reaching a lasting settlement seems remote.

As in Juba, the risk that future talks will be misused is real. Yet some participants argued that this risk of misuse is not confined to the LRA, and that it should be seen as a reason to invest in a careful management of the process, rather than be used as an argument against having talks in the first place. Lessons from Juba include the importance of avoiding excessive internationalization of the process; of restricting the number of actors involved so as to prevent a cacophony of voices; of using (primarily Northern Ugandan) track-two negotiators; and of maintaining direct contacts with the LRA leadership, rather than communicating through intermediaries. This fourth lesson stems directly from the problem of representation, which was a key obstacle during the last talks, particularly on the LRA side.<sup>6</sup>

According to a number of participants, the intense emphasis on LRA leader Joseph Kony is misplaced, even more so now that the movement is scattered into small, semi-autonomous groups. One of the accomplishments of the Juba process was that the LRA opened-up and exposed itself to the outside world, displaying elements within the movement that had an interest in bringing the conflict to an end. Efforts to work around Kony and engage lower ranked commanders are ongoing, and a number of participants voiced optimism that these might yield results.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more elaborate assessment of the Juba peace process, see Conciliation Resources (2010). *Initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda. 2002-09 and the Juba process*. London: Accord series.

Talking and fighting do not have to be mutually exclusive pathways. Many participants agreed that, aside from pre-empting attacks and protecting civilians, military action should ultimately serve the purpose of making the LRA's continued stay in the bush as unattractive as possible. Meanwhile, some form of dialogue would likely be necessary to negotiate the conditions of surrender. Such an approach requires a careful analysis of existing (dis)incentives for the LRA to continue the struggle. Inevitably, at some stage, issues of justice and accountability will have to be readdressed and clarified. Kony and his deputies are highly concerned about their personal wellbeing, and while the ICC warrants initially encouraged them to accept a seat at the negotiating table, the indictments later proved to be an important deterrent to inking the peace deal.

Past peacemaking efforts clearly show that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets. Therefore, in searching for solutions to the complex and multifaceted LRA problem, maintaining an appropriate degree of prudence is required – a recommendation that applies equally to those who advocate military action, those who pursue dialogue and those who support a combined approach.

## The Lord's Resistance Army: in Search for a New Approach

### Programme

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- 13.00-13.15** *Arrival and coffee*
- 13.15-13.30** *Welcome and introduction rounds* by the Chair, Ms. Louise Anten, Head of the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit.
- 13.30-13.40** *Opening Address* by Mr. Jort Hemmer, research fellow for the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit.
- 13.40-14.00** **Part I: Recapturing the LRA Problematique**  
Speaker: Ms. Mareike Schomerus, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics.
- 14.00-14.15** *Discussion*
- 14.15-14.25** - Coffee break -
- 14.25-14.45** **Part II: Enforcing Peace**  
Speaker: Mr. Simon Mulongo, strategic security analyst, Office of the President, Republic of Uganda.  
  
Discussant: Mr. Hans Hoebeke, senior research fellow for the Central African Programme, Egmont Institute.
- 14.45-15.35** *Discussion*
- 15.35-15.50** - Coffee break -
- 15.50-16.10** **Part III: Negotiating Peace**  
Speaker: Mr. Warner ten Kate, former advisor to the UN Secretary General Special Representative for the LRA affected areas.
- 16.10-17.00** *Discussion*
- 17.00-17.10** **Concluding Reflections - The Way Forward** by Ms. Mareike Schomerus.
- 17.10-17.15** *Closing Remarks* by the Chair, Ms. Louise Anten.
- 17.15-18.00** - Drinks -

## **LRA Timeline**

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**Jan 1986** Yoweri Museveni (a southerner) becomes President of Uganda after a coup ousting a government dominated by northerners.

**Aug 1986-1989** Various rebel groups fight government forces in protest of the political and economic marginalization of Northern Ugandan. The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, is born out of these movements.

**June 1988** The Ugandan army starts major operations against the rebels.

**March 1991** Launch of *Operation North*, a Ugandan military operation aimed at defeating Kony's forces.

**Nov 1993-Feb 1994** Negotiations between the LRA and the Ugandan government do not lead to an agreement. The LRA crosses into Southern Sudan (see Annex III).

**1994** The government of Sudan starts supporting the LRA. In retaliation, the Ugandan government backs the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

**Oct 1995** Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea and the SPLA launch a joint offensive against the LRA and troops loyal to Khartoum in Southern Sudan. The LRA sets up bases deeper into Southern Sudan.

**Dec 1999** Establishment of the *Nairobi Agreement* between Sudan and Uganda, stating cessation of supporting proxy rebels.

**March 2002** Launch of *Operation Iron Fist* (see Annex III).

**Dec 2003** President Museveni requests the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Northern Uganda.

**Jan 2005** The *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* formally ends Sudan's 1983-2005 civil war.

**Sept-Nov 2005** The LRA moves into Garamba National Park, DRC.

**Oct 2005** The ICC issues arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and four of his key commanders.

**Jan 2006** MONUC clashes with the LRA in Garamba National Park. LRA fighters and eight Guatemalan peacekeepers are killed.

**July 2006-Nov 2008** The Juba peace talks (see Annex III).

**Oct 2007** As part of the Juba peace talks, Museveni initiates the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) for Northern Uganda.

**Oct 2007** LRA second-in-command, Vincent Otti, is killed. LRA Deputy Army Commander, Raska Lukwiya, had been killed a year earlier. ICC arrest warrants had been issued against them.



**Feb 2007** The LRA briefly enters the south-east of CAR.

**Dec 2008-March 2009** Launch of *Operation Lightning Thunder* (see Annex III).

**24 Dec 2008-17 Jan 2009** *The Christmas Massacres*. Approximately 1.000 civilian casualties result from coordinated LRA attacks.

**Dec 2009** *The Makombo Massacres*. The LRA kills at least 321 civilians in Northeastern DRC.

**March 2010** Reports abound that LRA rebels have moved into Darfur.

**May 2010** US President Obama signs the LRA bill, reinforcing the US Government's commitment to ending the LRA rebellion.

## Key events

### **1993-1994: Peace talks led by Betty Bigombe**

Ugandan government minister, Betty Bigombe, starts peace talks with the LRA in November 1993. Amidst the peace efforts, army operations continue. The talks centre on issues related to accountability for crimes committed by the LRA and the return of LRA fighters. In February 1994, before an agreement can be signed, the government gives the LRA a seven-day ultimatum to surrender or face military attacks. The rebels ignore the ultimatum and cross into Southern Sudan a few weeks later.

### **2002-2005: Operation Iron Fist**

In January 2002, the government of Sudan authorizes the Ugandan army to pursue the LRA in Southern Sudan. *Operation Iron Fist* is launched in March 2002 and initially intended to last a couple of weeks. Instead, it is extended on numerous occasions well into 2005. Although there is a reported increase in the number of LRA rebels reporting to the Amnesty Commission (the Ugandan government passed in 2000 and amended in 2003 an Amnesty Act granting amnesty to all LRA fighters with the exception of key commanders), the operation does not succeed in capturing or killing Joseph Kony or his key commanders.

### **July 2006-Nov 2008: Juba Peace Talks**

After several failed peace attempts following the first round of talks in the early 1990's, the peace process is reignited in May 2006, and mediated by the Vice-President of Southern Sudan, Riek Machar. The Ugandan government and the LRA agree upon five agenda items: Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Comprehensive Solutions, Accountability and Reconciliation, DDR, and Agreement on Implementation and Monitoring Mechanisms. In August 2006, the parties sign the first agreement: the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. Shortly after, both sides fail to adhere to the agreement and deadly clashes and attacks occur. The talks reach a stalemate, but are revitalised in mid-2007, producing an agreement on Comprehensive Solutions as well as on general principles of accountability and reconciliation. Between April and November 2008, Kony fails to show up three consecutive times to planned signing ceremonies of the Final Peace Agreement.

### **Dec 2008-March 2009: Operation Lightning Thunder**

On 14 December 2008, the armies of Uganda, DRC and Southern Sudan launch a joint offensive against the LRA. With American resources supporting the preparation phase, *Operation Lightning Thunder* leads to the death of approximately 100 rebels and the rescuing of an estimated 300 abductees. However, the operation does not succeed in forcing the LRA to sign the Final Peace Agreement; nor does it result in the capture or death of either Kony or his key commanders. In March 2009, the UPDF involvement in the operation officially ends, leaving it in the hands of the Congolese army who rename it *Operation Rudia*. The UPDF however continues to lead the operation and pursues LRA fighters into the DRC, CAR and Southern Sudan.