

THE RESOLVE

L R A C R I S I S I N I T I A T I V E

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Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing: *Ridding Central Africa of Joseph Kony: Continuing U.S. Support*

September 30, 2015

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for convening this timely discussion. I would also like to express gratitude for the bipartisan leadership this subcommittee, and Congress as a whole, has shown in support of efforts to stop atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group. I am honored to be on this panel with Sasha Lezhnev, a long-time advocate for a resolution to the LRA crisis, and Francisca Thelin, whose expertise on this issue is matched only by the hospitality her family has shown visitors to LRA-affected areas of Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo), including myself.

I have been traveling to LRA-affected areas as part of my work with The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative since 2005, and returned from my most recent trip in July of 2015. I will focus my comments on the trends in LRA activity and the US counter-LRA response since the passage of the bipartisan *LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act* in May 2010. In particular, I wish to both affirm subsequent measures to address the crisis, and also draw attention to how the Obama Administration and Congress can reinforce existing efforts to bring LRA leader Joseph Kony to justice, demobilize remaining LRA fighters, and help affected communities rebuild.

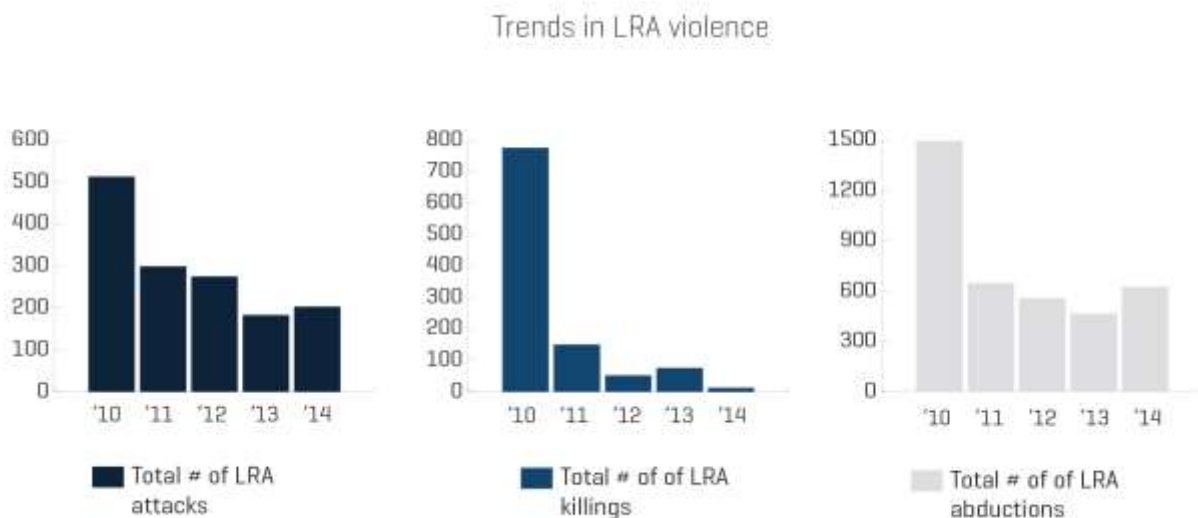
Progress following the passage of the LRA Disarmament Act

The LRA Disarmament Act was passed into law in the midst of one of the worst spikes of LRA atrocities since Joseph Kony formed the rebel group in the late 1980s. Kony had 400 fighters at his disposal, and was actively training abducted children to expand his fighting force. In the 18 months preceding the bill's passage, his LRA forces killed a staggering 2,300 civilians and abducted 2,650 more across a vast swath of territory encompassing parts of the Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, and South Sudan.¹

¹ LRA Crisis Tracker, statistic calculated September 24, 2015.

The 2010 LRA legislation, co-sponsored by a bipartisan coalition of 64 US Senators and 201 Representatives, required that President Obama deliver to Congress a comprehensive plan to deal with the LRA crisis. The White House boldly took up Congress' mandate, releasing an ambitious strategy that aimed to protect civilians, dismantle the LRA's command structure, encourage defections from the LRA, and assist affected communities. Its release had a catalyzing effect on the African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN), both of which subsequently issued counter-LRA strategies aimed at improving coordination among regional governments, UN peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian agencies active in LRA-affected areas.

In October 2011, President Obama revealed the flagship initiative of his counter-LRA strategy with the announcement that the US would deploy approximately 100 military advisers to assist regional forces authorized under the AU's counter-LRA Regional Task Force (RTF). In what became known as Operation Observant Compass (OOC), the US advisers have worked primarily with Ugandan forces, the most capable and equipped of the RTF contingents, deployed in eastern CAR. They have also trained national contingents from the CAR, Congo, and South Sudan, and collaborated with civil society actors on innovative "Come Home" defection campaigns using leaflets, radio messages, and aerial loudspeakers.²



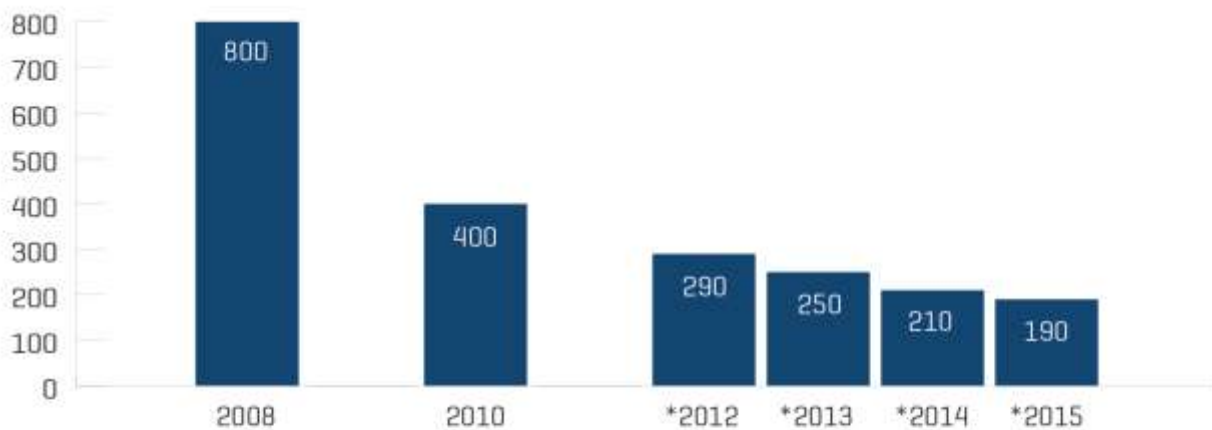
I would also like to highlight the work of field representatives from the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.³ They have not only played a critical role in fostering inter-agency cooperation within the Administration, but have also served as a key link between the US military and civil society groups on initiatives ranging from civilian early warning networks to Come Home defection campaigns.

² US State Department, "Fact Sheet: US Support to Regional Efforts to Counter the Lord's Resistance Army," 24 March 2014.

³ Note: The LRA Crisis Tracker is the source of the data for all graphs and maps depicted in this statement.

Since the 2010 legislation was passed, combined counter-LRA initiatives have made significant progress against the rebel group. Mass child abductions have dropped dramatically and more than 350 women and children have escaped long-term captivity within the LRA.⁴ The LRA killed 13 civilians in 2014, compared to 776 in 2010.⁵ Several notorious commanders, including International Criminal Court-indictees Dominic Ongwen and Okot Odhiambo, have either defected or been killed. The total number of fighters at Kony's disposal has dropped from approximately 400 in 2010 to about 190 today.⁶

Several recent defections give us some hope that the LRA command structure, with Kony at its head, is eroding. When LRA commander Dominic Ongwen defected in December 2014, he did so with the assistance of fighters who defied Kony's orders not to allow him to escape. In May 2015, seven fighters who served as bodyguards to Kony or his inner circle defected and subsequently fended off several attempts by Kony loyalists to recapture them. Such a large defection of fighters from Kony's entourage is unprecedented in recent years.⁷



Estimated # of LRA combatants
[Ugandan and non-Ugandan]

*Estimated number of combatants as of 1 January

I had the opportunity to talk with several of these defectors in July. They told me that instead of simply defecting to the nearest town, they walked through remote forests and savannahs for an entire month to reach the US military base in eastern CAR. These young

⁴ LRA Crisis Tracker, statistic calculated September 24, 2015.

⁵ LRA Crisis Tracker, statistic calculated September 24, 2015.

⁶ Paul Ronan, "The Kony Crossroads: President Obama's Chance to Define His Legacy on the LRA Crisis," The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, August 2015.

⁷ Ronan, "The Kony Crossroads," August 2015.

men knew Kony would punish them severely if he caught them attempting to escape. Their daring is a clear sign that the US-supported defection campaigns are having a positive impact.

Remaining challenges

As encouraging as this progress has been, let there be no mistake: the LRA is not finished. As more fighters have left the LRA, those who remain have become more and more difficult to track down. Joseph Kony has outlasted three US presidents already, and without renewed attention to this crisis he will outlast both President Obama and the 114th Congress.

Kony still maintains significant control over a weakened but coherent command structure, and LRA groups still attack civilians across vast swaths of the CAR and Congo with little risk of being pursued. The number of LRA attacks and abductions has fluctuated considerably in recent years, indicating that counter-LRA efforts have not made irreversible progress in addressing the crisis. LRA forces have already abducted 417 Congolese civilians so far this year - more than they abducted in any of the previous four years.⁸ This has led to an increase in civilian displacement and humanitarian needs, including in the areas where the family of my colleague Francisca lives.⁹

In the meantime, Kony and his immediate entourage operate largely from South Darfur and the neighboring Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave.¹⁰ As my colleague Sasha will explore in more detail, LRA forces are maintaining food and munitions stores by trafficking ivory from elephants poached in the LRA's Congolese safe havens to illicit markets in South Darfur and Kafia Kingi. These opportunistic relationships allow Kony's group to resupply without committing attacks that could give pursuing forces intelligence on their location.

US and Ugandan RTF forces face significant diplomatic constraints in accessing these safe havens, particularly in Kafia Kingi and South Darfur. In addition, the US military has not dedicated the appropriate mix of flexible, context-appropriate intelligence and airlift capabilities needed to pursue LRA commanders there. Though these challenges have been recognized and well-publicized for years, too often Administration officials have been slow to respond.¹¹ This has reduced the effectiveness of military operations – US and RTF forces have not had a significant battlefield victory against the LRA since June 2014 – and allowed senior LRA commanders to evade capture and minimize the flow of rank-and-file defectors.

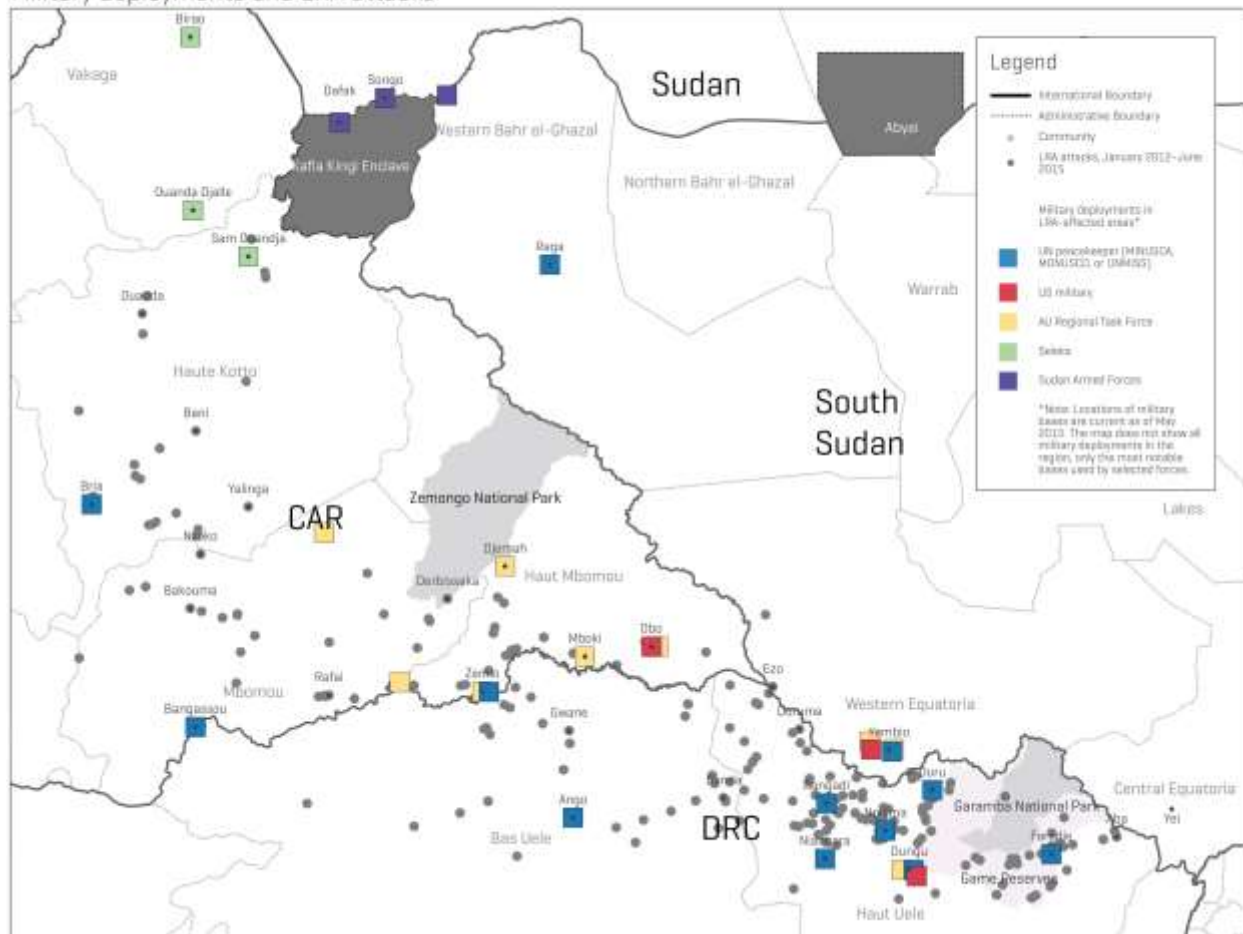
⁸ LRA Crisis Tracker, statistic calculated September 24, 2015.

⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "LRA Regional Update (January – March 2014)," 14 April 2014.

¹⁰ Ronan, "The Kony Crossroads," August 2015.

¹¹ Paul Ronan and Michael Poffenberger, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Sudan's Harboring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009- 2013," The Resolve, April 2013.

Military deployments and LRA attacks



Permanently ending LRA atrocities

The President and US Congress, along with the AU RTF and US troops working admirably in the theater of operations, deserve credit for reducing the LRA to a shadow of its former self. But renewed leadership is needed to move beyond mitigation of the crisis and achieve a definitive resolution. We cannot rest until Kony is captured, his command structure is dismantled, and the LRA no longer poses a significant threat to civilians.

A renewed effort to reach this goal must be centered on diplomatic and military initiatives that disrupt LRA safe havens in Kafia Kingi, South Darfur, and northeastern Congo. US advisers and their RTF partners must have consistent access to LRA safe havens, without which the counter-LRA effort cannot be successful. The US military must also adjust its priorities to put more emphasis on proven and promising defection campaigns. We recommend that within the next six months the US military double – literally – the saturation level and geographic scope of defection messaging targeting the LRA.

Congress can continue to play a galvanizing role in ending LRA atrocities for good. The Resolve is supportive of House Resolution 394, introduced in July by a bipartisan coalition of 14 Representatives. The resolution urges the President to reauthorize the deployment of US military advisers and expand efforts to bring Kony to justice and encourage his

remaining fighters to defect. In addition, we urge members of the House to use the power of the purse to ensure that our troops on the ground have more flexible, context-appropriate intelligence and logistical resources.

Beyond Kony

We also urge Congress to ensure that the Administration is adequately preparing for a post-Kony world. The 2010 legislation called for a comprehensive response to the LRA crisis, and the President's subsequent counter-LRA strategy emphasized the importance of humanitarian and recovery assistance to LRA-affected communities. USAID and other US agencies have invested heavily in northern Uganda, helping to generate significant post-conflict recovery gains there. USAID has also launched several innovative protection and recovery programs in LRA-affected areas of the CAR, Congo, and South Sudan, including a public-private partnership with Vodacom to expand mobile phone coverage in northeastern Congo. The \$300,000 project provided nearly 50,000 civilians in four LRA-affected communities with access to mobile phone networks.¹² However, most communities in LRA-affected areas outside of northern Uganda have been severely underserved by the US and other donors. Too often, programming in these areas has been underfunded, delayed, or hampered by a lack of coordination and vision. For the US counter-LRA strategy to bear lasting fruit, USAID must have the resources and leadership needed to invest in programs that spur longer-term economic recovery, reinforce community resilience, holistically reintegrate LRA escapees back into their communities, and address governance and human rights concerns.

In particular, I would like to reiterate the need for reintegration assistance to people who have escaped LRA captivity. I have interviewed dozens of men, women, and children who risked starvation, inhospitable terrain, and Kony's wrath to escape the LRA. Most were abducted as children, and each of their courageous attempts to reunite with their families is testament to the strength of the human spirit. Once they return home, most dedicate their energy to making up for lost schooling and pursuing livelihoods to support their families. Still, many struggle to overcome the poverty, medical problems, and mental trauma inflicted by years in captivity.¹³ The international community has largely abandoned these brave souls, providing little or no support beyond what their families can give.

Conclusion

The LRA has long preyed on communities that are marginalized by their governments and vulnerable to violence from other armed groups. These challenges will remain long after Kony is finally brought to justice, but a decisive defeat of the LRA and boosted assistance to LRA returnees and affected communities would have a stabilizing effect and allow hundreds of thousands of people to return home. The successful execution of President Obama's counter-LRA strategy could also provide valuable lessons to his Atrocities

¹² USAID, "Cell Towers Strengthen Security in DRC: Mobile Phone Technology Increases Communication and Safety," July 2014.

¹³ Dr. Emilie Medeiros, "Back but not home: supporting the reintegration of former LRA abductees into civilian life in Congo and South Sudan," Conciliation Resources, August 2014.

Prevention Board and future US Administrations about how strong interagency cooperation, investments in early warning mechanisms and community cohesion, and light-footprint military deployments can help prevent and respond to atrocities.

The alternative is more sobering. Should the fragile counter-LRA coalition disband and US and Ugandan RTF troops prematurely withdraw from LRA-affected areas, Kony's forces will continue to attack, abduct, and displace civilians across central Africa. Though Kony is integral to the LRA's current command structure, he eventually could seek to bestow authority on a younger generation of Ugandan LRA fighters that includes his sons and former bodyguards. If given the chance to rebuild, the LRA could metastasize: deepening ties with armed groups involved in illicit trafficking networks, further integrating non-Ugandan abductees into the officer ranks, and resuming mass atrocities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about these issues. I look forward to your questions.
