



Statement of Francisca Thelin
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At 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*

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My name is Francisca Thelin. I want to sincerely thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the entire Subcommittee for this opportunity to speak today on behalf of those suffering from the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA.

Though I have lived in the United States for 26 years and am a U.S. citizen, I grew up in Dungu Territory in Democratic Republic of Congo, a region deeply affected by the violence of Joseph Kony and the LRA. I am the founder of a small non-profit called Friends of Minzoto, which supports local community efforts in the Dungu area to recover from LRA violence. My dear friend, Lisa Shannon, authored a book entitled *Mama Koko and the Hundred Gunmen*, which tells my family's story of experiencing the LRA crisis firsthand.

Since 2008, 28 members of my family have been murdered by the LRA. Most were chopped with machetes; many in front of their own loved ones. Six children in my family were abducted and forced to become LRA sex slaves or child soldiers. Although one eventually escaped, he came home so psychologically damaged that he is a danger to our other children and cannot live at home. We can only assume that the others, who have not returned home, have died.

At age 69, my mother spent months at a time hiding in the bush with no blankets or supplies, taking care of multiple babies and teenagers, and getting sick with pneumonia, before coming back home to nothing. The LRA had looted everything.

For five years, my family -- and every family in Dungu Territory -- lived in total terror because of the LRA; unable to go to their fields to grow their crops. Everyone was hungry. Many who didn't die at the hands of the LRA died of starvation and malnutrition. Even now, the situation is not fully back to normal. Thousands of internally displaced families that took refuge in Dungu years ago still live there, with no land of their own, barely surviving day-to-day. Many of them live in meager homes next to the river, the only place where they could settle, and they are regularly flooded out of their homes

when the rains come. Life for them is so difficult, but they are afraid to go home to their villages, and with good reason. Many of those who did go back to their villages were killed, or many are still being forced to give all of their crops and belongings to the LRA when they attack.

When I was in Dungu in 2010, interviewing survivors of the LRA, I would ask them, "What do you want from the U.S. government?" Their answer was always the same: *we want peace. We want Kony out!* I promised to share their message with my government in the United States, but I wasn't sure exactly how I would do that.

Today, I am finally able to deliver on that promise. And I am very grateful for this opportunity. So I am here today to ask you honorable members, in the strongest possible terms, to continue to support the African Union and the U.S. advisors in their efforts to end LRA violence. Please do not allow this mission to lose strength until the LRA is stopped, and Joseph Kony and his leaders have been held accountable for their horrific crimes.

Why is continued support from the U.S. so important when the LRA threat seems diminished? LRA attacks are still taking place. Particularly in Congo, abductions by the LRA have increased over the past year, which further traumatizes the population. In the minds of the communities, the LRA rule the bush. But the bush is our bank. It is where we find food, where we clear land to cultivate our crops in order to feed our families and to earn a livelihood.

I have story after story of my connections to people attacked by the LRA, but it would take days to tell them all, and they are very painful to share. As I close, I want to emphasize that these communities targeted by the LRA are severely neglected. They do not have the resources on their own to get rid of the LRA, and they have suffered long enough. The commitment of the U.S. is critical to their survival and to lasting peace.

Please do not give up before the crisis is actually over. I am speaking for all Congolese enduring LRA violence when I thank you for all that the U.S. government has already done to help bring this crisis to an end. In light of how far we have come, and how precious these lives are, I urge you and every member of Congress to stay committed to seeing LRA violence finally ended. Specifically, I ask you to support House Resolution 394, which reinforces the U.S. government's commitment to ending LRA violence. Secondly, I urge you to provide funding in the U.S. budget that will support local recovery initiatives in LRA-affected communities; and lastly, I ask you to use your positions of influence to help promote free and fair elections in Congo. This is necessary to help make sure that communities like Dungu do not continue to be so marginalized and vulnerable to groups like the LRA in the future.

I want to thank you again for your care for families like my own who have suffered from this crisis, and thank you for this opportunity to fulfill my promise to them and represent their voices here in Washington.