

Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda

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The legacies of conflict and violence have beleaguered much of Uganda before and after independent periods. From Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 to 1986 when Yoweri Museveni took power at least fourteen insurgencies have been registered. In real terms violence in Ugandan politics took centre domain in 1966 with an attack on the residence of the Kabaka and subsequently, the abrogation of the 1962 independence constitution by Obote. The attack constituted what is now referred to as the Kabaka crisis which brought the quasi-federal arrangement under the 1962 constitution to an end and forced the Kabaka to flee to the United Kingdom. The failure to address Uganda's national questions as regards governance continues to haunt past and present governments. The most protracted of these conflicts has been the continuing conflict in northern Uganda, which has lasted nearly 23 years. The northern conflict has encompassed five different insurgencies and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. In addition, the war displaced over 1.8 million people and all but destroyed northern Uganda's agriculture, its economic base. Beginning in 1986 when Museveni captured power from General Tito Okello Lutwa, the northern conflict was initially a popular revolt by Okello's ousted army troops and their numerous civilian supporters who formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Both these rebels and their successors, who came together to form the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Auma "Lakwena", received massive popular support in the north and thus seemed to act on behalf of the northern Uganda population that was both alarmed by, and angry at, the new Museveni regime. Fear of national marginalisation by a government they perceived to be dominated by western Ugandans, as well as resentment against what were believed to be NRM-sponsored atrocities and devastating cattle raids, were at the heart of the early insurgencies. These rebellions ended, in 1987 by the signing of the Gulu Peace Accord in 1988. However, Joseph Kony had in 1987 begun what later become known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and the northern conflict entered an entirely new phase. What was unusual is that although the grievances of the original war remained unaddressed, Kony's LRA did nothing to mobilise support on this basis but rather turn against the local population.

Background

The Lord's Resistance Army was a creation of little known Joseph Kony born in 1961 in the village of Odek, Lalogi division, Gulu district. He is an Acholi by ethnic origin in northern Uganda. Joseph Kony's worldview has for long been drenched in apocalyptic spiritual beliefs. He has successfully applied use of fear and violence to retain control within the LRA as well as sustain the conflict to date. It should be noted that the Northern Uganda conflict is actually two conflicts in one: the long-term fundamental grumbles in the north and the persistent, damaging activities of the LRA. Both are relevant today, and each necessitates focused attention by policymakers if the situation is to be successfully resolved. It's important to note as well that the Northern Uganda conflict has four core characteristics. First, it has been a struggle between the government and the LRA. Secondly, the conflict has been predominantly LRA and the wider Acholi population, who bore the impact of violence that included indiscriminate killings and the abduction of children to become fighters, auxiliaries, and sex slaves. This violence was aimed at bullying the Acholi and demeaning the government. Thirdly, the conflict has been fuelled by the acrimony between Uganda and Sudan, who supported rebellions on each other's territory. Finally, the conflict is an outcome of the North-South conflict that has marked Ugandan politics and society since independence and to date continues to be perpetuated by most government.

The situation in northern Uganda then created the LRA and these included the followings; The Uganda Peoples Defence Army peace deal with Government of Uganda, Holy Spirit Movement's Alice defeat by Museveni's forces in Jinja eastern Uganda and Severino Lukoya's failure left a significant power vacuum in northern Uganda – a vacuum that was rapidly filled by Joseph Kony in February 1987. He convinced a few soldiers to join him and proceeded to kidnap the rest. He later incorporated a small number of UPDA fighters who

refused to give up their arms following the 1988 Gulu peace accord . Initially Kony targeted mostly government fighters, however he later turned against the local population, especially when government the “Arrow” boys as a civil defence militias in Gulu and Kitgum in 1991-1992. Besides, the Government of Uganda launched the brutal ever “Operation North”, which apparently impaired LRA capacity considerably but also generated significant resentment after the arrest of several popular northern politicians who were later charged with treasons in the High Court of Uganda.

Numerous efforts were employed to end the conflict at its initial stage, however, notwithstanding achieving ceasefires and extensive face-to-face talks with Joseph Kony, all these initiatives failed due to apparent vested interests of military officers and other leading politicians from Acholi sub region. On the other hand, President Museveni’s stringent deadline of seven days then for negotiations and the LRA’s recourse to Sudan for rearmament. The LRA conflict has dragged on for another twenty five years now despite the window of opportunity during the Juba Peace process. Earlier negotiations in Bigombe were without significant hope of resolutions. Brief talks were held in Rome in 1997 with exiled businessmen claiming to be the LRA’s political wing, but failure ensued after the principal negotiator was almost killed by Kony during their first meeting in the bush (see below). After considerable lobbying by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), the government introduced the Amnesty Act in 2000, which gave a blanket amnesty to all LRA fighters who returned from the bush. Early in 2002, however, Operation Iron Fist was launched, in which Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) troops attempted to drive the LRA out of southern Sudan; this eventually worsened the humanitarian situation and dramatically increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northern Uganda. The LRA conflict eventually spread to eastern part of Uganda including Lango and Teso regions that later formed government backed militia referred to as “Arrow and Rhino” groups spread. However efforts by the then-Minister for the Pacification of the Northern Uganda, Betty Bigombe never yielded results due to uncoordinated efforts of various stakeholders

The LRA rebel movement however, can be sketched back to a woman called Alice Lakwena. In the 1980s, Lakwena believed the Holy Spirit spoke to her and ordered her to overthrow the Ugandan government for being unjust to the Acholi. Lakwena and her followers, later to be known as the Holy Spirit Movement, gained momentum as resentment towards Museveni’s government increased. When Lakwena was exiled and no clear leader of the movement was left, Joseph Kony, who claimed to be Lakwena’s cousin, took control and transformed Lakwena’s rebel army into the LRA.

Kony's LRA did not receive the initial popular support as the Holy Spirit Movement from the Acholi people. The LRA therefore began registering sustained diminishing endorsement for their cause amidst intensified government onslaughts, the rebels resorted to abducting children and indoctrinating them into their ranks. It is to date projected that more than 90 percent of the LRA’s fighting force is majorly comprised of children. This therefore compounds the issue of accountability in pursuit of justice for the victims. It is as well argued that LRA commander Joseph Kony during earlier consultations during the Juba peace process put his defence to the effect that incase of possible indictment to the ICC, he will plead innocence based on the fact that he too was abducted by Holy Spirit Movement in early 1987. In the 1990s massive displacement of over 1.8 million people as a result of the LRA insurgency, referred to by Jan Egeland as the worst ‘biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world . From 1996, Government of Uganda responded to LRA attacks in the villages by forcibly evicting the local population from their homes and relocating them into what later became known as “protected villages” though in real terms the Government forces used this strategy to launch an earth-scotched policy against the LRA forces. On the other hand these camps were meant to provide protection for the local

population. For close to fifteen years later, over 1.8 million people were displaced and continued to live in camps with negative outcomes of humiliating poverty, rampant disease, and near starvation.

International attention in the LRA crisis was fully drawn in 2001 when the US Patriot Act officially declared the LRA as a terrorist organization. This move by the US Government drew attention to the Northern Uganda conflict and the alleged atrocities committed by the LRA. The Government forces as well have been accused by the local population for committing atrocities like Bucoro and Mukura massacres among others. The US Congress in 2004 passed the Northern Uganda Crisis Response Act, which became one of the initial American laws to address the Northern Uganda conflict. The International Criminal Court (ICC) later in 2005 issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and four of his top commanders. Of the top four one is confirmed dead and Vincent Otti allegedly dead. Pressure from the international community in particular coupled with a solid desire to secure peace propelled the Government of Uganda and the LRA to the negotiating table on numerous occasions, though to date no clear path for a peaceful resolution have been reached. The recent Juba peace talks that commenced in July 2006 concluded five agenda items but the Final Peace Agreement remained stalled to date. No clear reason explains the stalled Juba peace process to date.

The LRA Today

LRA conflicts have spread from northern Uganda to cover an expansive territory including eastern DR Congo, the Central African Republic, and southern Sudan. Much of this territory is outside the day-to-day control of governments in the region. This remoteness of LRA explains challenges that the countries in the Great Lakes region face to resolve this conflict. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continues to remain a destabilizing factor in the Great Lakes region, with the capability to upset the lives of many people. It should be noted that the LRA remains a lethal force in "endurance mode" though at present is not seen as a major military threat. However, the scattered LRA clusters continue to restock the force through new abductions in the DR Congo. The LRA presence in the woods of DR Congo, parts of South Sudan and Central Africa remains to instill constant fear in local populations, thus preventing them from cultivation and other economic activities. During the past 21 months, food production has been hindered in an area that was once the bread basket of southern Sudan for example. Locally-based paramilitary forces (Arrow Boys/Home Guards) have been welcomed by local populations and supported by the Government of South Sudan. However, humanitarian agencies are worried about the implications of "out-sourcing" security and defense to civilians. The earlier case with Arrow Boys in Northern Uganda is clear testimony and the epitome of LRA retaliation in terms of cutting lips of the local population. The combination of limited rule of law, weapons proliferation and civilian vigilante squads in the LRA affected areas is beginning to have awful magnitudes. Ever since Operation Iron Fist was launched, the LRA have become more perilous as a regional insurgent force than before. This can best be explained from the various countries that have experienced their onslaught on the civilian population at present.

LRA activities continue to be reported in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), southern Sudan and Central African Republic (CAR). According to the report compiled by the UN Office Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Sub-Regional Office for Eastern Africa, Nairobi, an estimated 148 attacks were reported in the first five months of 2011, resulting in 93 deaths, 261 abductions Majority of the attacks continue to be reported in DRC, which also has had the highest number of deaths and abductions. At present, new caseloads of about 11,035 people have been displaced internally (IDPs) since April 2011, bringing the total number of IDPs in the affected countries to 359,514 people .

Country involvements in the current military operations

The LRA as an insurgent group continues to internally reinforce its survival strategy by heavily dependin on looting of properties and caches of arms from MONUC forces in the DR Congo. However, unconfirmed reports continue to point accusing fingers on the Gorvernment of Sudan, which have for long had proxy conflict with the Government of Uganda. As far as the Government of Uganda is concerned the follwing countries continue engage in military operations against LRA; Uganda continues to take lead of the command operations against LRA. However; alongside Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Central African Republic, continues to coordinate operations against the LRA with Uganda. The United States of America House of Congress passed a recent legislation titled: . It should be noted that US Government initiated and funded prevoius operation code named “Lightening Thunder” The US Congress last year in May passed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act which strategically aim to 'support stabilisation and lasting peace' in Northern Uganda - the site of conflict between the Ugandan government and the rebel group Lords Resistance Army (LRA) since 1986. The Act as well calls for an assessment of options through which the United States, continue to work with regional governments, to facilitate multilateral efforts to eliminate the threats that to date is posed by the Lord's Resistance Army in the region. Uganda continues to lead the direct military operations alongside other countries as mentioned. The key focus of the joint efforts is to bring an end the LRA insurgency which has reained obscure for over two decades.

Financial sources of the military operations

The US Government through its Strategy to Support the Disarmament of the Lord's Resistance Army,” in fulfillment of the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 have pledged financial sources to implement its strategy on LRA conflict. At present the US Government is providing a comprehensive framework to guide policy responses moving forward. These are all aimed at facilitating regional and international actors and how they could play a critical role in ending one of Africa's longest-running and most violent conflict. This new strategy by the US involves expansion of engagement, protecting civilians from violence, helping the abducted escape from the LRA, stopping senior LRA commanders, and assisting conflict-affected communities to survive and rebuild. Amidst all these, the UN as well continues to ensure that MONUSCO and UNMIS deploy additional peacekeepers and air mobility assets in the LRA-affected areas and should take effective practical measures to protect communities vulnerable to LRA attack. Through the United States LRA strategy for the Great Lakes region there are commitments to continue support to the Ugandan military to accomplish the LRA operations. How effective this strategy is remains embedded within the framework for durable solutions and sustainable peace.

Beneficiaries from the operations

While the LRA operations are meant to destroy the strength of the LRA in the region, its important to note that Uganda for quite along time has been a direct beneficiary of the donor support and sympathy. For many a times just the use of the concept LRA affected areas singly continued to lay credibility on Uganda globally especially as regards arms procurement and direct donor funding for Northern Uganda in what is referred as Peace, Recovery and Development Plan which is a post-conflict northern Uganda recovery plan. The DR Congo will as well have benefits if the operations against the LRA succeeds. To date through the MONUC deployment in the Eastern DR Congo, demands for transport infrastructure has increased with the Chinese government spearheading the inittives in exchange for mineral concessions.

Security impacts of the military operation in the East Africa region

The vulnerability of the population to food insecurity and to related nutrition risks has increased due to LRA in the region. Livestock ownership is generally low, resulting in a higher dependency on agriculture. Years of recurrent attacks and sustained fear of further LRA attacks have resulted in a drop in production as well. As a consequence, food insecurity attributed to the constant fear of irregular LRA attacks, continues to undermine cultivation and food production in the affected areas.

Internal displacement of persons as a result of the conflict has generated ethnic tensions that potentially may be seen as a potential source future conflict in the region. The emergence of IDPs across the Great Lakes region has therefore, not only accentuated emotional state of economic and political marginalisation, but as well demonstrated a complex stress on relationships among diverse communities in the region. The consequences of the war to date between the LRA and the government continues to become additional causes of political conflict between the government and northerners in general given that since 1996 Presidential election, President Museveni has never won the general confidence of the people of northern Uganda. Northern Uganda is seen by the Museveni's government as anti-government.

Litanies of human rights abuses or stories of atrocities have been very pronounced in the main public arena. There exist complex dynamics that explains the LRA conflict and how it has been in position to sustain itself through various ways are a prominent part of the public discourse on the war. There exist varied explanation as to the way this conflict has persisted by those directly affected by the war and those who make reference to it. The conflict in Northern Uganda is seen by many analysts as a proxy that reinforces Great lakes regional and international power scuffles. Within the Great Lakes region Uganda has been directly involved in logistical military hardware and sanctuary support to the SPLA. In vengeance, the Sudan government as well provided sanctuary and military support to the LRA. At the international level, both the government of Uganda and the SPLA received military and political support from the US, and other European countries as a means of responding to the war on terror as well as limiting the impact of the Khartoum regime on Uganda. The perceived view that the conflict had become a lucrative clandestine income generating project for prominent military and government officials alongside other racketeers. Besides, the indisposition of the government and the LRA to genuinely pursue a negotiated settlement explains to date the ongoing conflict. It should be noted that atrocities committed by the LRA against unarmed civilians as well as Government forces alleged atrocities continues to sustain this conflict.

The political economy of the LRA conflict is complex in the sense that conflict entrepreneurs have been in position to benefit from abnormal profits ranging from arms supply profiteering from illegal trade. Accusations have been made against the UPDF forces as using the LRA conflict as a ploy to engage in illicit exploitation of the Congolese resources. This manifested itself in the UN Security report on the plundering of DR Congo resources. The conflict has destabilized other parts of Uganda and continues to affect other regional conflicts in the Great Lakes. The LRA conflict therefore should not be viewed as a humanitarian crisis but rather in the dimensions that accommodate political, social, economic and humanitarian aspects. It's no longer a northern Uganda issue but a regional challenge that require effective durable solutions that best shall contain the challenges at play.

The LRA conflict continues to register undesirable consequences of displacement in the DR Congo, South Sudan and Central Africa Republic in the same way that the local population of Northern Uganda encountered. Northern Uganda at present still nurses psychological feeling

of economic and political disempowerment among its population. This discernment by the local population on the other hand is seen as part of the roots of the conflict

The local population in northern Uganda continues to live in persistent fear of LRA return again. Though relative peace exists, the fact that the LRA conflict has never been effectively resolved continues to impact on all post- conflict reconstruction in Northern Uganda. There exists no guarantee for sustainable peace at the moment. There are strong suspicions among the community that the issue of economic and political exclusion best explains the complex linkages with emergence of conflict entrepreneurs that are strategically embedded on war profiteering. The perspective of the population from Northern Uganda remains divided in terms of dilemmas of physical securities and national identity as looked at by different state actors. Failure to address the root causes of the current conflict were LRA is an outcome shall further reinforce the apparent gap of governance deficit in Uganda's body politik

Conclusion

The current views of people from northern Uganda - to whom most of the LRA recruits, belonged attest to the fact that the only way to end the LRA conflict was through dialogue and p The LRA/Uganda conflict and the stalled peace process should be set in a broader bilateral and international context. Previous efforts at attaining peace have for many a time botched because one party was not seen as credible, attacks continued to occur, or deadlines were too unrealistic and were followed by immediate military action. The Juba Peace Process, despite its limitations and impediments, was an opportunity to negotiate a peace agreement that could address issues comprehensively. The peace process, in real terms highlighted problems within Sudan that ought to be addressed in order to ensure sustainable peace and stability in the Great Lakes region in general. Peaceful strategies, which can deprive LRA of recruits and political support while providing them with realistic settlement is most paramount. Therefore, a successful strategy to handle the LRA conflict will majorly depend on a genuine effort to address Northern Uganda grievances as stated in Juba Peace agreement, agenda Item No.2 on Comprehensive solutions . The people of Northern Uganda ought to be made to feel more a part of Uganda. The current NRM Government has the greatest challenge of dealing with governance gap in the country ever since the weak foundation of statehood crafted by colonial policies of ethnic division and decades of armed conflict. Remediating this situation requires specific political, economic and social ingenuities that should aim at rebuilding the North's stake in the central government and enhancing effective local decision making processes. It is in the interest of the people of Northern Uganda initiate and develop mechanisms for articulating these views without fear of compromise. It is as well in the best interest of President Museveni and the NRM to promote effective post-conflict reconstruction and development in Northern Uganda.

The role of the international community has been key to the LRA conflict and will be central to achieving a resolution. At present the government needs to be attentive to the advice of donors, from whom it receives approximately half its budget. The International Community has been very responsive on issues, such as AIDS prevention, which has portrayed the international community positively towards it. However, the LRA conflict in the region continues to undo the open goodwill. Uganda as a country in the region continues to register pressure on the humanitarian tragedy produced by the continuation of the LRA insurgency. The current U.S. initiative, however, would have greater promise if Washington also worked more closely with the governments in the Great Lakes region, civil society groups as well as the local communities in the region. Thus the northern conflict has continued for nearly 18 years and has only spread in its reach. While the LRA is seen as potentially weakened by Operation Lightning Thunder as well as the stalled Juba peace process, there is no warranty LRA's isolation in the DR Congo jungle in itself will end the conflict. It should be noted that the LRA has demonstrated its capacity to endure under very hostile environments. Caution

should be made to the extent that it could potentially on a wider scale continue to dispense terror across the Great lakes region ad infinitum. Whether the current US initiatives may succeed depends on critical analysis of past efforts to put an end to the circle of violence. Success depends on two factors: the political and military will of African partner nations, and whether the United States and its partners will provide sufficient resources and coordinate international efforts. More emphasis should not be laid on countering and defeating the LRA, rather more effective political solution so that the LRA combatants are reintegrated and the core governance grievances addressed

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