

THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group led by Joseph Kony, originated in Northern Uganda as a movement to fight for the interests of the Acholi people. Kony rapidly lost support, and for the last 24 years has led a terrifying regime targeting attacks on innocent civilians, kidnapping children and forcing them to fight in his rebel forces.

Driven out of the country by the Ugandan army, the LRA's rebels are now scattered across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and southern Sudan, where brutal attacks continue on remote villages that can take months to be reported.

How did it all start?

The Lord's Resistance Army began life in the early 1980s as the Holy Spirit Movement, led by a woman called Alice Lakwena who claimed the Holy Spirit had ordered her to overthrow the Ugandan government, which was accused of treating the Acholi people of the North unfairly. As resentment towards the Ugandan government intensified, supporters flocked to Lakwena and the Holy Spirit movement gathered momentum, until a battle won by the government led to Lakwena's exile.

With no clear direction for the movement, a man claiming to be Lakwena's cousin, Joseph Kony, took over as leader and rebranded the movement in 1986 as the Lord's Resistance Army. Kony initially stated that the LRA's mission was to overthrow the government and rule Uganda based on the Ten Commandments. He rapidly lost support, however, and in frustration Kony began abducting thousands of children to swell its ranks, turning them into killers and unleashing them on villages.

How does the Lord's Resistance Army operate?

The rebels often masquerade as military soldiers, or pounce as villagers gather together for occasions such as church services. They launch vicious attacks, killing the weak and the old with machetes, swords or stones, and cutting off people's ears, lips and noses to serve as a warning to others. The rebels capture those who can be useful to them, including children strong enough to carry weapons. The captives are tied together and marched to camps where they are violently indoctrinated and turned into soldiers, porters, cooks, or sex slaves. Captives are often forced to kill or rape family members, making it impossible for them to think about returning home. Those who do resist or try to escape are tortured and killed.

Why hasn't the conflict been resolved?

Numerous attempts to reach a peace agreement were made between the LRA and the Ugandan government, but Kony withdrew each time. The Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) – i.e. the Ugandan army continues its pursuit of the rebels and claims that they have substantially weakened the LRA, but the ongoing attacks suggest otherwise. In the DRC, the UN mission MONUSCO is under-resourced and unable to protect civilians or contain the LRA's

activities. Communication is also a severe problem; attacks are happening in extremely remote regions, and news of incidents can take weeks, even months, to come to light.

Why does the LRA target innocent civilians?

By attacking villages and carrying out its notorious vicious attacks, the LRA defies claims that the group is weakening. Rebels also loot villages for food and supplies, and abduct adults and children to fight for them. The attacks also serve to divert military resources towards defending civilians instead of pursuing the rebels.

Who are the key players?

Joseph Kony is the founder and leader of the LRA. His top commanders, wanted alongside Kony for war crimes, are Okot Odhiambo, Dominic Ongwen, and Raska Lukwiya. Kony's deputy, Vincent Otti, was executed on Kony's command in 2007 for his role in peace talks. Another high profile commander, Bok Abudema, was killed in battle in early 2010.

How have children been affected?

Children have been affected the most acutely by this conflict, with thousands abducted, used as [child soldiers](#) and sex slaves, beaten and forced to torture and kill friends, family and innocent people. Those lucky enough to escape the clutches of the LRA deal with ongoing psychological trauma from their experiences, and face huge problems reintegrating back into their communities. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced from their homes and are forced to live in camps with poor sanitation and health facilities. Even those not directly in contact with the LRA suffer the consequences of poor education due to schools being destroyed by rebels and not being able to afford fees.

How has the international community responded?

The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in 2005 for Joseph Kony and his top level commanders, but regional and international agents have failed to apprehend them.

Kony 2012 - a personal response from the field

20 Mar 2012

We've asked our staff in Uganda to watch the Kony 2012 video and let us know what they thought of it. It's fair to say that some were pleased that the LRA were being put in the media spotlight, whilst others had more reservations and concerns about it. Since people living and working in northern Uganda don't get much of a platform to get their voices heard, we're providing one here.

These are the personal thoughts of Katharine - our Programme Support Coordinator.

KONY 2012, created by Invisible Children, has now been viewed by at least 100 million times since its youtube debut only a few weeks ago. It's an incredible confirmation of the power of social media and has created quite a statement about the willingness of youth to get involved in issues regarding Africa. It is true that Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army that young people are now "trying to make famous" needs to be captured and held fully accountable for his crimes against humanity, but the solution does not end there.

I have been working in northern Uganda for the past 2 years. It started with a plan of visiting the country for 6 weeks as a journalist, and after being immensely touched by the inconceivable stories about the conflict through conversations with community members, researchers and individuals from the development sector, it has now developed into a full time commitment to providing support to the children, women and men who have survived the conflict through the development work of War Child UK.

I was recently in Gulu Town, a former site of the conflict and one of the main towns that offered rehabilitation for former child soldiers at rehabilitation centres. In an internet cafe I witnessed a group of youth watching the KONY 2012 video. At first they were viewing patiently, allowing the slow internet to load the video in 3-4 minute increments, chatting about the content at every break and then leaning in toward the dusty screen to watch more of the film featuring their Ugandan brothers and sisters. With each new loaded fragment of the film that revealed itself the mood quickly changed. The initial excitement of watching a video about Uganda changed to sadness, to confusion and then to anger. With tears in his eyes one young boy asked, "What is this? Make him famous. He has killed my brothers. He has killed my sisters. Now he is no longer here. Why are they making him famous now? Why don't they speak of what people were not doing while this was all happening. Why are they not letting any of the Ugandans speak unless they are crying? If they want to help us now, help pay for my school fees!"

"Making Kony famous" and putting the LRA to an end may be one step toward preventing any further destruction that the LRA may cause, but for those truly concerned with peace, security and access to human rights for all in the region, only further development and accountable leaders can bring that kind of change.

Instead of making Kony famous, I wish we could make some of the survivors of the LRA famous. There are endless stories of the strength and resilience of young people in the war affected areas of northern Uganda that are demonstrated by their determination to bring peace and prosperity back into their communities.

Just the other day a recent Harvard University graduate who is currently teaching English lessons at one of the War Child UK supported vocational school for war-affected youth shared some profound words with me that a student had told her earlier that week. As the volunteer talked about peace to the class, the student shared his story about his forced conscription into the LRA and his struggles at home after learning he had lost his father to the war. When it came time for the students to ask questions about the Peace Club the volunteer had started in the community the young man had a powerful question.

“Excuse me, Madame, I understand what you are saying, but you see, for me, I cannot have peace for myself until I know I can have a future. And I cannot know I will have a good future until I find a way to afford an education. Without an education, the children I will someday have will suffer just like I did. So how can you help me find peace?”

There is a lot of significance in that student's statement.

The volunteer asked herself, “How could I expect this student to feel peace if he does not believe he stands a chance at making a livable income to afford his own needs and those of his dependents? If another terrorist militia swept through the North with promises of a better future for Acholis who chose to join, would that student pick up a weapon?”

When the audience to the film 2012 considers how to make a difference in a post-conflict zone I hope they question if it really is as simple as capturing one dangerous leader, or if a more holistic approach is needed to address the real challenges and solutions for those who have been affected by the LRA conflict. On a daily basis I'm seeing NGOs such as WC UK transforming the lives of war-affected youth, their families and their community through programmes involving access to education, promotion of sustainable livelihoods and the formation of Child Rights Clubs to further empower youth.

As someone who has personally devoted my efforts to improving the situation for Ugandan youth and their families, I hope that other young people devoted to this issue will take the time to further educate themselves about the conflict and development in the region. There has been much criticism surrounding the film regarding the over simplistic approach and misrepresentation of the facts and it is my highest hope that young people will view this video as critically as possible and question what information they are presented with, what information is missing and what may be high impact, lasting solutions to improving life for those in the LRA affected region.

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