



# Blind Spots

Gaining Access to Areas Where the LRA Operates

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By Kasper Agger

November 2013



**enough**

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

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**COVER PHOTO**

Francisco Madeira, African Union special envoy for the Lord's Resistance Army issue, gives a soldier from the Central African Republic a ceremonial African Union livery as part of the launch of the African Union Regional Task Force in Juba, South Sudan, in March 2012. AP/MICHAEL ONYIEGO

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## Introduction

The Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, has grown weaker in the past two years as the Ugandan-led and U.S.-supported counter-LRA African Union Regional Task Force, or AU-RTF, has pursued its mission to eliminate the rebel group. The regional force, however, lacks the logistical capacity and authorization to access key areas where LRA groups operate in remote parts of three countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC; the Central African Republic, or CAR; and the Kafia Kingi enclave in South Darfur, Sudan.

The endgame of removing LRA leader Joseph Kony from the battlefield and neutralizing the LRA is imperiled by the lack of access to wide swathes of Central Africa where the group still hides. The AU forces must secure access to those areas as well as additional helicopter assets to increase rapid force mobility in order for the mission to succeed.

A fully operational AU-RTF that can access these key areas within the context of a regional agreement would allow greater progress in the counter-LRA mission. More robust international support from the United States and the European Union for the diplomatic efforts of the AU special envoy on the LRA issue and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, or UNOCA, could advance efforts toward a regional access agreement. Stronger coordination among U.N. peacekeeping and support missions in the region would also enhance the operational effectiveness of the AU-RTF. Finally, to complement more robust diplomatic and military measures in support of the mission, the international community should also support local-level civil-society institutions that promote regional cooperation through exchange visits and cross-border defection programs.

Because of important advances over the past couple years in the counter-LRA operation, the LRA is down to perhaps 250 core fighters.<sup>1</sup> The LRA, however, has shown a capacity over its 25-year history to survive in a shrunken state and then expand rapidly when circumstances and external support allow. That is why eliminating its safe havens is essential.

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## Access challenges for the counter-LRA forces

The AU-RTF faces challenges in accessing certain key areas where LRA forces operate. LRA rebels are able to hide and survive in the northeastern part of the DRC, the northern and eastern parts of CAR, and in parts of the Kafia Kingi enclave in South Darfur, Sudan. These areas are largely off-limits to the AU-RTF forces for the specific political and logistical reasons described below. The AU-RTF has made progress in eliminating some of the LRA's safe havens over the past six months through recent South Sudanese cross-border missions into the LRA's longtime stronghold in Garamba National Park in the DRC,<sup>2</sup> a raid by Ugandan armed forces on an LRA camp in Kafia Kingi,<sup>3</sup> and a Congolese army attack on at least one LRA camp in the Bas Uélé district in the DRC.<sup>4</sup> Low-cost, high-impact diplomatic investments by the European Union, the United Nations, the U.S. government, and the African Union to forge a regional agreement providing access to all areas with LRA activity could eliminate this impasse and allow the mission to make a major breakthrough.

Though weakened, the LRA continues to kill and abduct civilians across Central Africa and has displaced at least 350,000 civilians.<sup>5</sup> Military pressure and defection programs have reportedly reduced the number of LRA fighters to approximately 250 and largely pushed the group into hiding.<sup>6</sup> The dispersed LRA groups are able to survive by growing crops, hunting, looting civilians, and poaching ivory, which they exchange for vital supplies.<sup>7</sup> The LRA can easily cross international borders to escape military pressure. The LRA is drawn to and also creates destabilized areas characterized by a very limited presence of national security forces, poor infrastructure, and heavy dependence on humanitarian aid and subsistence farming. While the humanitarian conditions of LRA-affected areas may be similar, the access challenges the AU-RTF troops face in reaching each of these areas are varied.

### The access challenge in the DRC

Areas of the Bas Uélé and Haut Uélé districts in the DRC's northeastern Orientale province have long been safe havens for LRA groups<sup>8</sup> because Congolese, Ugandan, and U.N. forces lack the authority or capacity to pursue the LRA there. Congolese forces based in these districts rarely pursue the LRA because of limited logistical capabilities to cover the large areas where the LRA roams and limited political backing from Kinshasa—its capital—to prioritize the fight against the LRA.<sup>9</sup> U.N. peacekeepers avoid direct confrontations and limit their military operations to patrols on the major roads, mainly because of a limited willingness to conduct potentially risky offensive missions and a strictly civilian-protection, nonoffensive interpretation of their mandate.<sup>10</sup> Ugandan forces have not been allowed access to the DRC since September 2011, when they were ordered to leave, as their presence became politically controversial during the presidential election. A 2005 International Court of Justice ruling

documented atrocities committed by Ugandan military forces in the area,<sup>11</sup> and in 2011, political opponents accused DRC President Joseph Kabila of continuing to allow Ugandan forces to loot the country.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a robust military or security presence, defectors from the LRA and civilians report that LRA groups reside in the area, maintaining permanent camps and growing crops.<sup>13</sup> LRA fighters use the area as a place to regroup and escape pressure from the Ugandan army, which lacks the authorization to enter the DRC but has bases across the border in CAR.

### The access challenge in CAR

Counter-LRA forces face access challenges in CAR because LRA fighters move through remote parts of the country where government authorities exercise limited control. Loosely aligned Seleka rebel groups dominate these areas, and some of their local commanders are reluctant to share security information with AU forces.<sup>14</sup> The complex and chaotic security situation in CAR is deteriorating at an alarming rate.<sup>15</sup> The fragile Seleka alliance<sup>16</sup> is gradually disintegrating into autonomous rebel chiefdoms with limited central command and control.<sup>17</sup> The relationships between local Seleka groups and the counter-LRA forces in CAR are complex and can shift rapidly. The top leaders in the capital of Bangui have continuously expressed support for the AU mission, whereas some local Seleka commanders—around Bria and Nzako, for example—have been far more reluctant to cooperate and share information, leaving large areas of CAR largely unmonitored by counter-LRA forces.<sup>18</sup> U.S. advisors and Ugandan troops exercise some degree of control over the southeastern province, Haut-Mboumou, with permanent bases in Dembia, Mboki, Djemah, and Obo. Large areas north and east of the province, however, are largely out of reach. Offensive operations are only conducted on a case-by-case basis in this area because it is extremely remote, lacks permanent military bases, and some Seleka commanders in the area have shown little interest in collaborating with counter-LRA forces.<sup>19</sup>

### The access challenge in South Darfur

The AU-RTF forces do not currently have authorization from the Sudanese government to pursue LRA fighters in the Kafia Kingi enclave in South Darfur, in part because the Sudanese government denies the LRA's presence in that area and also because of difficult bilateral relations between Sudan and Uganda. During most of 2012 and into early 2013, groups of LRA rebels, including leader Joseph Kony, were present in the Sudanese-controlled areas of Kafia Kingi.<sup>20</sup> Despite diplomatic engagement from AU, U.N., and U.S. leaders, the Sudanese government has shown little interest in supporting counter-LRA efforts.<sup>21</sup> LRA defectors, by contrast, reported that some Sudanese army officers have provided bullets, food, and medicine to LRA groups based in Kafia Kingi.<sup>22</sup> Reports recently emerged about a Ugandan army raid on an LRA camp inside Kafia Kingi in March.<sup>23</sup> The Sudanese government has not made any public references to the raid, perhaps for fear of

international condemnation. This potential concern could mark a new shift in Sudanese policy and suggests that the Sudanese leadership is seeking to distance itself from the LRA. In October, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir held their first official meeting in more than three years in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. They agreed to improve bilateral relations and pledged to end support for foreign-based rebel groups.<sup>24</sup> These are encouraging signs and present Sudan with an opportunity to provide support for the AU mission. The Sudanese government could demonstrate its commitment to this effort by granting the AU and U.N. missions access to Kafia Kingi in order to conduct further investigations into alleged LRA activities. The Sudanese government has previously denied access to such investigation teams.<sup>25</sup>

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### The RCI-LRA: A diplomatic and military mechanism to counter the LRA

The Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army, or RCI-LRA, was designed to provide a regional diplomatic and military mechanism to address the LRA crisis.<sup>26</sup> The goal of the RCI-LRA is to increase regional military cooperation, facilitate cross-border operations, and increase political commitment from the LRA-affected countries.<sup>27</sup> The African Union appointed Ambassador Francisco Madeira as special envoy on the LRA issue in November 2011.<sup>28</sup> Madeira's office is partly financed with funds from the European Union, and it has received considerable logistics support from UNOCA, led by the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General Abou Moussa. The two seasoned diplomats remain at the forefront of efforts to enhance regional cooperation and secure political support for the mission.

Despite resource constraints and a somewhat slow start, the RCI-LRA has seen progress over the past six months on both the diplomatic and military fronts. The concerted diplomatic efforts from Moussa and Madeira, including multiple trips to capitals across the region, are starting to bear fruit. Their extensive personal networks and ability to meet with top political officials in all of the LRA-affected countries have been critically important in the effort to negotiate military cross-border operations and convince the Congolese government to contribute soldiers to the AU mission.<sup>29</sup> Their persistent diplomacy following the March military coup in CAR and their meetings with former Seleka rebel leader-turned-interim president Michel Djotodia were instrumental in containing confrontations between the Ugandan soldiers deployed in the eastern part of the country and hostile Seleka rebels advancing from Bangui. Moussa and Madeira worked with Djotodia to secure an official agreement to cooperate with the Ugandan forces operating under the AU mandate. This agreement provided the framework for the resumption of counter-LRA operations in CAR, which had been suspended following the coup.<sup>30</sup>

Behind-the-scenes negotiations and sustained diplomatic efforts from Madeira and Moussa have increased regional governments' political investments and paved the way for AU-RTF cross-border military operations. The Congolese government, for example, has become more involved in the regional response, after previously downplaying the extent of the LRA crisis.<sup>31</sup> The AU-RTF is composed of 1,000 to 1,500 soldiers from Uganda;<sup>32</sup> 500 soldiers from South Sudan; 500 soldiers from the DRC; and a contingent of 30 commanding officers based in Yambio, South Sudan.<sup>33</sup> Until recently, however, the forces from South Sudan and the DRC had been largely inactive—they did not deploy outside their barracks, and the officers in Yambio did not issue commands. The AU-RTF has, however, gradually increased its operational capability in the past six months as the U.S. advisors have begun conducting intensive training for the South Sudanese and Congolese troops. South Sudanese soldiers, closely assisted by U.S. advisors, have conducted a limited number of targeted cross-border operations against LRA groups in the DRC since late August. Equally encouraging, Congolese AU-RTF troops recently conducted at least one offensive operation against an LRA camp in the northern part of Bas Uélé.<sup>34</sup>

The United States is a major military and diplomatic player within the counter-LRA mission. U.S. efforts have centered mainly on providing logistical support to the Ugandan army and deploying U.S. military advisors to encourage LRA defections and provide military training to enhance the capabilities of African partner forces fighting the LRA.<sup>35</sup> U.S. military support is balanced with a political-outreach effort driven by U.S. State Department officials based in American embassies across Central Africa who ensure close coordination between the military and political functions of the diplomatic missions. The on-the-ground presence and outreach of American diplomats strengthen relationships with local partners and provide a bridge between the different teams of military advisors, which rotate out every six months. The U.S. government does not provide direct financial support for the AU initiative, but it does engage diplomatically through joint meetings with policymakers in the affected countries, and there are regular meetings between U.S., AU, and U.N. officials. A senior U.S. diplomat explained:

*The AU provides this overall diplomatic hat. This provides a regionally supported mandate and enables us to do things we could not do alone. The AU has more leverage over the countries and has sustained relationships and cultural similarities that we do not have. We are seen as part of the AU, which is hugely important for this mission since it cuts across so many different countries. Our presence on the ground is secured through the AU mandate.”<sup>36</sup>*

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## Recommendations to enable access and bolster counter-LRA efforts

There is a growing realization within the international community that regional forces must strengthen their cooperation to successfully contain the LRA, protect civilians, and promote long-term regional stability that extends to the isolated corners of Central Africa.<sup>37</sup> Several recommendations, described below, could facilitate such regional integration, promote stability, and provide a more effective counter-LRA strategy. Expanding cooperation among the multiple national, regional, and international actors that combat the LRA could lay the groundwork for a long-term, post-LRA, cross-border security-integration effort in one of the least-developed regions of Central Africa.

### International actors should forge a regional agreement to allow the AU-RTF to operate in all LRA-affected areas

AU, U.N. and U.S. diplomats should work to forge an agreement between the leaders of Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, the DRC, and CAR to ensure access for AU-RTF troops and general support for counter-LRA efforts within their territory. If regional heads of state and foreign and defense ministers prioritize the counter-LRA mission and work together to address their common threat, they can develop their military cooperation in a sustainable way and bring security to an otherwise chronically unstable region.

### The European Union should urgently reconfirm its commitment to the A.U. special envoy for the LRA issue and increase financial support to keep the envoy operational

The European Union should increase the level of funding for—and the speed of the funding’s dispersal to—the AU envoy’s office, which operates on a small budget and faces significant challenges due to the slow transfer of funds. The AU envoy relies on funding from the European Union and logistical support from the United Nations to carry out its mission, particularly in reaching the remote LRA-affected areas. Significant delays in fund transfers from the European Union have forced the African Union to prefinance the envoy’s budget internally for several months, creating an unsustainable situation that jeopardizes the mission. The European Union must urgently reconfirm its commitment to the special envoy and transfer the funds to keep the envoy operational. The support will allow Madeira and his staff to avoid losing momentum in their effort to expand regional cooperation and increase political commitment for the mission.

The international community, building on leadership from the European Union and the United States, should increase funding and logistical support to fully operationalize the AU-RTF

The international community should provide additional funds, communications assets, and logistical support to the AU-RTF. The positive developments outlined in this report clearly demonstrate the impact the AU-RTF is making—and the impact it has the potential to continue making if it is allowed to expand. If supported in this way, the AU-RTF will have an increased ability to combat LRA rebels who escape military pressure by crossing international borders or hiding in remote areas that national armies do not have the capacity to reach.

The African Union should redeploy AU-RTF officers outside Yambio to key counter-LRA areas

The AU-RTF should redeploy some of the officers from the headquarters in Yambio to military suboffices in Dungen, DRC, and Obo, CAR. This would greatly improve cross-border intelligence sharing and help strengthen regional military cooperation.

The U.N. Security Council should increase funding and support for UNOCA

UNOCA, charged with preventive diplomacy and cross-border conflict mitigation across Central Africa,<sup>38</sup> needs additional financial and staff support in its expanding role coordinating the activities of U.N. and AU actors, as well as the diplomatic missions and non-governmental organization representatives that focus on the LRA issue. UNOCA plays a crucial role in supporting the AU efforts and convenes biannual information-sharing and coordination meetings that bring together international stakeholders. Additional support for UNOCA could enable the office to strengthen coordination internally among U.N. agencies and externally with other key civil-society and military actors.

International security forces in CAR should strengthen their coordination

U.S. military advisors and AU-RTF troops should strengthen their coordination with the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic, or MISCA, which is gradually being deployed to help secure the country.<sup>39</sup> The AU-RTF force should also work to identify liaison officers in the Seleka alliance with whom they can share information and coordinate movements to avoid clashes with undisciplined Seleka factions. Better coordination among forces in CAR could improve operational effectiveness.

### The international community should coordinate to pursue diplomatic engagement on the LRA issue with Sudan

The international community should, despite the difficulties, continue to collectively engage the Sudanese government diplomatically on the question of LRA activity in Kafia Kingi. Khartoum's support for counter-LRA efforts and access to Kafia Kingi for joint AU and U.N. investigations teams are crucial. Such support would close off a vital safe haven for the LRA.

### The international community should increase financial support for local-level civil-society programs that promote regional cooperation

The international community should strengthen its financial support for local civil-society organizations across the region to conduct exchange visits and promote regional cooperation. Church communities and cultural leaders from the LRA-affected regions have already established working relationships to promote defections and have joint meetings, but they need additional support to continue and expand their work. Increased donor support for such groups would enable them to spearhead regional cooperation and build cross-border networks.

### The World Bank, supported by other international donors, should establish a separate funding mechanism to finance infrastructure developments to facilitate access to isolated areas where the LRA operates

Infrastructure developments will increase access to areas where LRA groups hide, bring down operational costs, speed up ground mobility for counter-LRA forces, and expand the reach of humanitarian aid. The LRA-affected areas are characterized by limited and poor infrastructure. It is possible to fly for hours over parts of CAR and the DRC without seeing any roads or signs of permanent human settlements. The area is sparsely populated and thickly forested. The roads that do exist are in extremely poor condition.<sup>40</sup> Expanding and improving the road system will also increase civilian protection by providing access to isolated villages and expanding opportunities for ground patrols along the major roads.

## The U.N. Security Council should explore opportunities for directly integrated, cross-border cooperation among the U.N. peacekeeping missions in the LRA-affected areas

The U.N. peacekeeping missions in the LRA-affected areas are poorly designed to share information and protect civilians from highly mobile rebel groups that cross international borders frequently. The U.N. missions struggle to coordinate their efforts because of a centralized nation-state focus. The U.N. Security Council should spearhead innovative measures to increase cross-border coordination and information sharing by exchanging officers between the missions, designating officers to coordinate U.N. responses to cross-border security threats, and decentralizing the decision-making authority in each peacekeeping mission. Success in this effort could create momentum for a more integrated and collaborative U.N. peacekeeping approach among the regional missions based on the counter-LRA model.

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## Conclusion

The LRA is becoming weaker as support for the counter-LRA mission increases. The African Union and regional governments, despite their fragility, have provided some diplomatic and political support for the effort and contributed troops that are undergoing training and building their capacity to effectively pursue the LRA in remote locations. Direct integration among the U.N. missions in the region would allow the bodies to share more information and provide greater support and coordination. The interventions of two key diplomats—AU Special Envoy Francisco Madeira and Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General Abou Moussa—have paid dividends in the counter-LRA efforts and could continue to gain momentum with more robust support from the European Union and other donors. The U.S. government’s diplomatic clout and contribution of military advisors and technical assistance has been a lynchpin in the counter-LRA effort as a whole. Consolidating and increasing the support from many sources for the mission could galvanize a last push in the decades-long effort to eliminate the LRA. A fully operational, fully equipped AU-RTF that has sufficient intelligence capabilities, logistical assets, communications equipment, and access to all areas that harbor LRA groups could put an end to the rebel group that has wreaked havoc across Central Africa for years and resulted in the deaths and displacements of thousands of innocent people. Moreover, the mission could serve as a model for how to secure the long-term security of remote border areas in Africa.

## Endnotes

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- 38 U.N. Department of Political Affairs, "Central Africa," available at [http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/central\\_africa](http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/central_africa) (last accessed October 2013).
- 39 Xinhua, "Cameroonian commander to lead int'l stabilization mission in Central African Republic," October 23, 2013, available at [http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2013-10/23/c\\_132823515.htm](http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2013-10/23/c_132823515.htm).
- 40 Author travels through LRA-affected areas of the DRC and CAR throughout 2012 and 2013.

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Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org).

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