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Ending the Lord's Resistance Army

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Now is the time to bring an end to the predatory militia known as the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA. Despite years of counterinsurgency operations, numerous peace initiatives, and the passage in 2010 of historic legislation with unprecedented bipartisan support for the U.S. government to lead international action to apprehend the LRA leadership, the LRA continues to terrorize civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, while maintaining the possibility of a return to northern Uganda.

With each passing month, the situation grows direr for Central African communities in the path of LRA units. Joseph Kony, the brutal and messianic leader of the LRA, has taken advantage of the growing security vacuum in LRA-affected areas and appears to be regrouping and reorganizing the LRA, with a large number of senior commanders currently in the Central African Republic.¹ This will likely lead to increased attacks on civilians and abductions of children to be soldiers or sex slaves. If efforts to counter the LRA are not dramatically bolstered, the group could strengthen and become an even greater threat to regional stability. Without bold and sustained U.S. leadership, this nearly 25-year crisis will likely continue for years to come.

What the United States needs to do now: Provide a surge of military, intelligence, logistical, and diplomatic support

The one-year anniversary of the release of the Obama administration's LRA strategy is approaching. The U.S. deployment of military advisors to assist in regional anti-LRA efforts is an important step towards a more effective approach, but more needs to be done. Regional efforts to end the LRA are not working, due in large part to a lack of capable and committed forces deployed to LRA-affected areas and the necessary intelligence and logistical capabilities. The U.S. should provide a surge of military, intelligence, logistical, and diplomatic support. Appropriately trained special forces from Uganda, another African state, or elsewhere need to be deployed to be the prime actor in efforts directed at apprehending Joseph Kony. The United States could further increase

intelligence support if connected to capable special forces operations. And transport and other logistical support from European nations would allow those troops to act on hot intelligence leads to bring Kony and other LRA leaders to justice. President Obama should directly reach out to countries with the most capable special forces as well as to European and other partners to obtain additional logistical assistance.

The African Union, or A.U., is currently finalizing plans for a mission to eliminate the LRA, which would consist of several components, including regional military operations and an A.U. special envoy for the LRA.² The military operations and special envoy position could provide a multilateral and African partner for a surge of commitment and resources from the United States and other countries to apprehend LRA leader Joseph Kony and his top deputies. This could leverage additional resources and galvanize support for accountability. There are many problems, however, with the A.U. mission as currently proposed.³ Without a surge of U.S. diplomacy and resources, and the involvement of additional partners in the search for Kony, this A.U. mission will simply put a new hat on the same old efforts.

A strong American constituency of support exists for greater U.S. action to end the LRA, particularly among student organizations, as well as within the U.S. Congress. If the Obama administration—working closely with other countries and the African Union—acts swiftly to bring to bear the diplomatic, military, and intelligence assets envisioned within its LRA strategy, success is indeed possible.

Role of U.S. advisors: To maximize effectiveness, the new U.S. military advisors deployed to the region should be high-caliber special forces with the capability to work with Uganda and the regional armies to complete the task at hand. With a presence on the ground, these advisors can finally provide a clear picture of counter-LRA operations, which have suffered for years from a myriad of excuses: ghost soldiers; under-motivated troops that do not actively pursue the LRA in the bush; and reports of poor helicopter support and fuel shortages. The advisors should improve U.S. oversight of mission planning and execution, assist in planning and coordinating an effective apprehension strategy, improve strained civil-military relations in LRA-affected communities, and integrate disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, or DDR, efforts as a core competency of their orders. This will be a critical piece in ensuring that the LRA senior leadership is apprehended.

Intelligence and logistical support: The administration will also need to contribute a surge of intelligence resources, logistical support, and operational planning capacity for the overall effort to succeed, particularly if the surge is in support of appropriately trained special forces units able to utilize the intelligence leads. President Obama and senior officials in the administration should directly reach out to European partners to obtain additional logistical assistance.

Key intelligence and logistical support should include establishing night flights by surveillance aircraft, increasing the coverage of affected areas through unmanned aerial vehicles and aircraft, providing helicopters to move combat forces, ensuring real-time intelligence on the whereabouts of Kony and his top commanders, and improving human intelligence networks and analysis. The United States and the militaries involved will need to work more closely with local communities and radio networks to make better use of human intelligence. In addition, increased investments in early warning systems and infrastructure for ground and air transportation would go a long way to strengthen apprehension, civilian protection, DDR, and humanitarian assistance efforts. Such commitments from the United States will undoubtedly secure a greater commitment from regional and other partners.

Congress should ensure proper follow-up to the legislation by providing adequate funding for these efforts and adopting the administration's plan to amend its "Rewards for Justice" program to include incentives for information leading to the apprehension of the LRA senior leadership. This program at present offers rewards for information leading to the arrest of war criminals from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and the administration has proposed extending the program to Kony and his top deputies.

Diplomatic support: Whether part of the A.U. mission or not, new special forces are needed that have the training and experience to carry out counterinsurgency operations against a highly elusive and dangerous target. New special forces could come from other African states such as South Africa, Ethiopia, or Kenya. This should be a key diplomatic objective for the Obama administration. President Obama should directly reach out to the countries' heads of state to deploy these forces. The president and senior officials in the administration should also frequently engage with the regional governments to enhance their willingness and ability to protect civilians and pursue the LRA senior leadership. The two-day conference recently convened by the U.S. Mission in Uganda to plan and coordinate U.S. support for regional efforts is a start.⁴

The Obama administration has successfully persuaded Congo to deploy its 391st battalion to a key LRA-affected area, which was trained by the U.S. Africa Command, but has not pushed Uganda to do the same.⁵ Uganda has elite troops deployed in Somalia, but it also has special forces at home that are not deployed and available for use in operations with the LRA. The Obama administration should make a high-level push to President Museveni to use these forces on the LRA front.

Beyond diplomatic efforts to multilateralize the military operations and get the right forces on the ground, the United States can assist in two other important ways. One, the United States should train the troops deployed to the LRA front. Two, senior U.S. officials should directly engage with the proposed A.U. special envoy on the LRA and the four regional governments to address intra-regional tensions that have inhibited apprehension, protection, and DDR efforts.

The U.S. government should strongly support the appointment of an experienced and empowered A.U. special envoy to improve relations and cooperation among the regional governments. The United States should encourage the naming of a senior official from a country with the type of specialized troops needed to do the job.

In addition, the administration should make the LRA a central part of the mandate for a U.S. special envoy for the Great Lakes. The envoy should have full-time staff dedicated to the LRA and travel regularly to the region and to LRA-affected areas in order to ensure effective interagency collaboration and implementation of the administration's strategy.

The United States must also urge the Ugandan government to fully resume granting amnesty to former LRA, publicly clarify the application of the Amnesty Act, and reinstate formal channels for former rebels to join the Ugandan army.

Shortcomings of the current regional effort: What can we learn?

To date, the United States has relied on an inadequate regional military campaign against the LRA. Uganda, which has forged the backbone of anti-LRA operations for years, has slowly been redirecting its forces to Somalia and back to Uganda. Opportunities have been missed, and much remains to be done.

Eradicating the threat of this highly hierarchical group will require the apprehension of Joseph Kony and several other senior LRA commanders, combined with robust civilian protection and promotion of the defection of LRA officers and fighters. These key counter-LRA efforts are currently foundering, however, due to a severe shortage of will and resources on the part of regional governments and U.N. peacekeepers. Successful counter-LRA operations will necessitate a rethinking of apprehension, protection, and DDR efforts.

Boost in political will and capabilities sorely needed: The status of efforts to end the LRA is alarming: No top commander has been apprehended or removed from the battlefield in nearly two years,⁶ in part due to strained relations within the regional counter-LRA coalition.⁷ In addition, the Ugandan army—arguably the most invested force in the coalition—has cut its presence in LRA-affected areas by approximately 80 percent since January 2009.⁸ Meanwhile, Kony and the two senior commanders wanted by the International Criminal Court, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen, remain at large.

Vast protection vacuums exist throughout LRA-affected areas, and spikes in violence committed by the group have frequently occurred during the last several months.⁹ In June 2011 alone, the LRA reportedly carried out as many as 52 attacks, killing 32 civilians and abducting 39, while looting the villages. The regional armies and U.N. peacekeepers have failed again and again to protect civilians at risk. They are greatly under-resourced and are often unwilling to fulfill their responsibility to protect.¹⁰

Critical DDR programs have been stymied, particularly as Kampala continues to send mixed messages about amnesty for former LRA members.¹¹

Civilian protection and defection efforts must be integrated with apprehension operations:

Ending the LRA crisis requires better integration of apprehension operations with civilian protection and effective DDR programs, rather than viewing them as discrete objectives. In particular, a key lesson from military operations against the LRA, including Operation Lightning Thunder under the previous U.S. administration, is that the consequence of botched operations without clear protection arrangements is reprisal attacks on civilians.¹²

“The current military strategy will not work unless it is tied to effective civilian protection, for two reasons,” said Dr. Philip Lancaster, former chief of DDR/DDRRR with the U.N. mission in Congo, then known as MONUC, retired Canadian Army officer, former senior conflict advisor to the World Bank, and currently a freelance consultant. “First, the LRA will continue to survive as long as they are able to recruit and pillage. Second, one cannot track down the senior leadership without pushing them into a more aggressive response, in which they attack civilians to communicate their displeasure. Indeed, there is a moral responsibility incumbent on all military forces engaged against the LRA to guarantee that innocent civilians are not made to pay the price of ineffective operations. The U.S. should ensure that apprehension is coupled with civilian protection.”¹³

In practice, ensuring that apprehension is coupled with civilian protection would require forces to rapidly pursue the LRA after attacks in order to free abductees and prevent reprisal attacks. Those currently responsible for protection efforts—U.N. peacekeepers and the national armies deployed in LRA territory—have been largely unable and unwilling to adequately protect civilians in the vast areas affected by the LRA. Capable special forces from other African countries should take the lead on threat-specific civilian protection where the LRA is known to be operating and be in place to apprehend leaders, prevent reprisal attacks, and free abductees after attacks. The regional armies and U.N. peacekeepers can offer general protection and other support.

To improve the effectiveness of the U.N. missions in Congo and South Sudan, the United States should push for more active and capable military, police, and civilian contingents.

The LRA is able to continue fighting for three main reasons: its leadership remains intact; it is able to easily abduct its fighters and pillage for sustenance and supplies; and it creates a climate of brutality and fear to discourage abductees from escaping.¹⁴ While apprehension efforts have been inadequate, no one is actively attempting to block the LRA’s access to recruits and supplies. Ensuring that the LRA is not able to continue abducting civilians, blocking their ability to loot, promoting more defections, and better utilizing the invaluable information former combatants can provide about the LRA’s activity and leadership will create openings to apprehend the senior leaders and severely weaken the organization.

Setting Up the A.U. Mission for Success

As presently conceived, the A.U. mission relies upon the same regional armed forces used to date. However, in light of the minimal achievements of those forces, a rethinking of current efforts is urgently needed. Rather than enhancing the existing military operations, the current plans for the mission are more concerned with continuing the status quo while attracting additional funding from governments via the African Union. The A.U. plans duplicate operational structures that do not work while keeping the political and military command in the hands of the regional governments, particularly Uganda. Also concerning are attempts by the regional governments, led primarily by Uganda, to weaken the proposed A.U. special envoy position—a post that could invaluablely address the intraregional tensions which have severely limited cooperation and coordination—and the African Union’s overall ownership of the mission. If these problems are not addressed, the A.U. mission will likely lead to a continuation of the status quo and produce few positive results.

The United States should vigorously engage with partners in and outside of the region to ensure that the A.U. mission is successful. If the mission works out its current shortcomings and becomes an effective multilateral initiative for anti-LRA operations, the mission should be supported internationally.

Conclusion

Without a major enhancement of current efforts, the LRA crisis will likely continue for years, further destabilizing the region and devastating civilian populations. There will be more death, abduction, mutilation, pillaging, and displacement. U.S. and international efforts to create stability in South Sudan and Congo would be undermined. And what President Obama has called a “unique crisis of conscience” will continue to unfold on his watch.¹⁵

The good news is that the LRA leadership can be apprehended and the LRA eliminated—if a more effective military operation is prioritized and bolstered. The task of apprehending the senior leadership is far from impossible. The international community has successfully pursued other wanted criminals including, most recently, Ratko Mladic and Osama bin Laden. In the case of the LRA, the international community—with the United States as a leading partner—can and must apprehend Kony and his top commanders.

The deployment of American military advisors and, potentially, a new A.U. mission present a real opportunity for the Obama administration and broader international community to bring an end to this crisis of conscience. President Obama and his senior officials should work to ensure that the new A.U. mission be a further catalyst for successful counterinsurgency operations and act with all the urgency required to create a robust African-U.S.-European partnership capable of finally ending the LRA.

Endnotes

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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.

