



Field Dispatch: Chasing the Lord's Resistance Army

Challenges faced by Ugandan soldiers pursuing the LRA

Kasper Agger November 2012



enough

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

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On the cover:

Obo, Central African Republic: Ugandan soldiers load water, food, and other basic supplies onto one of the U.S.-contracted helicopters, which supply the tracking teams that are pursuing LRA senior leaders in the Central African Republic.

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Approximately 1,500 Ugandan soldiers based in central Africa form the backbone of the forces pursuing Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA. The Enough Project embedded a researcher with these troops in August to get a close-up view of the challenges they face in the effort to defeat the LRA. The deployment of 100 U.S. special forces advisors has helped address some of the Ugandan troops' issues, but our researcher still identified continuing needs for better access to LRA-affected areas, enhanced human and aerial intelligence, increased air support, and improved road infrastructure. A more robust role for the U.S. advisors than is now provided for by the Obama administration would additionally allow them to operate in the field with regional forces and could speed the successful conclusion of the mission.

Introduction

At the end of August and into early September 2012, the Ugandan army had two consecutive military engagements with the same group of fighters from the LRA. This was unusual: The common pattern is that the highly mobile LRA rebels manage to escape following their rare encounters with Ugandan military forces. Usually unwilling to directly confront trained troops, the decentralized LRA bands more typically attack undefended civilian villages for supplies and captives.

The first of these two unusual clashes with the Ugandan People's Defense Force was on August 24 in the dense forests of the Central African Republic—70 kilometers southwest of Djema, an area with regular LRA activity in 2012. Official Army spokesman Colonel Felix Kulayigye indicated that the Ugandan Army was on the trail of Dominic Ongwen, a top LRA commander who is wanted by the International Criminal Court. The second clash followed a few days later on September 4, when the Ugandan forces attacked the Ongwen camp. Three rebels were killed and two others—a 6-year-old child and a 19-year-old boy—were rescued, and military items were recovered. The Ugandan Army, eager to publicize this rare event, was quick to present a picture of Col. Joseph Balikudembe, overall commander of the Army's operations in central Africa, proudly showing off his capture: several rounds of ammunition, three AK47s, two solar panels,

seven rifles, a walkie-talkie, and a rocket-propelled grenade round.¹ In the press release, the Army officials explained that Dominic Ongwen had survived, but made it clear that, “The Ops squads maintain pressure to capture Dominic alive or dead.”²

Interviews with the captured rebels and with recent defectors confirmed that the group was indeed headed by Ongwen, who was wounded, and that his escape from the attacks had been narrow.³ Since those military encounters, though, the Ugandan Army appears to have lost track of Ongwen. The unfortunate fact is that the escape of the Ongwen group is the norm in the hunt for the LRA rather than the exception. The fight against the LRA is not going well in part because the Ugandan soldiers on the ground in central Africa face multiple logistical and intelligence challenges, which severely hamper their ability to locate and fight the rebels efficiently.

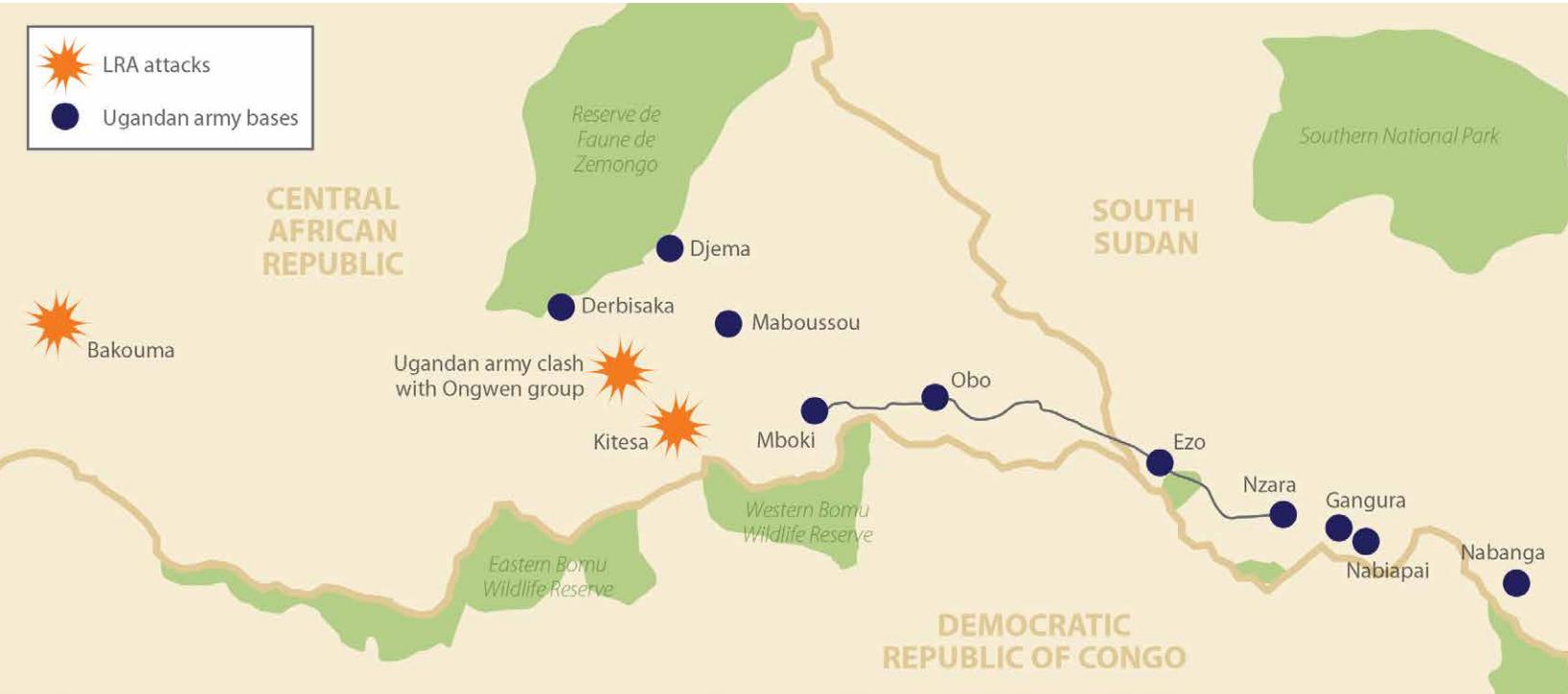
This report details those challenges and is based on the Enough Project’s recent embedding with the Ugandan Army. It draws on interviews with commanders and soldiers and their military and civilian partners in South Sudan and the Central African Republic.⁴

Military operations in the remote jungles of central Africa are a logistical nightmare

The prefectures of Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou in the Central African Republic and Western Equatoria State in South Sudan are the center of gravity for the Ugandan mission against the LRA. The Ugandan forces maintain a permanent military presence in Obo, Djema, Mboki, Derbisaka, and Mabousso in the Central African Republic, and in Nzara, Ezo, Gangura, Nabiapai, and Nabanga in South Sudan. The LRA has also been seen in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the Ugandan Army has been barred by the Congolese government from entering the country based, at least in part, on allegations of civilian abuse and looting. There are credible reports that the LRA goes into South Darfur in Sudan, but the Ugandan Army is also not able to enter that country due to the strained relationship between the Sudanese and Ugandan governments.

The Ugandan Army has a total of approximately 1,500 troops deployed in this region, with 800 soldiers in the Central African Republic and 700 in South Sudan.⁵ The soldiers operate out of military bases, which each house between 50 and 150 soldiers and consist of simple mud huts with grass-thatched roofs. The soldiers conduct regular patrols mainly by foot on the main roads and paths surrounding their bases. The Ugandan forces also have 20 mobile tracking teams, each with 20 to 40 soldiers who are deployed deeper in the forest in the Central African Republic. These tracking teams carry supplies and can sustain them for up to two weeks. They are generally resupplied every 10 days at strategic locations in the forest, either by helicopters or trucks.

LRA Attacks and Ugandan Army Bases



The major rains—the rainy season usually ranges from July to October—increase the challenges of this already-difficult operational environment. This year is no exception. The Nzara-Obo road, used to transport vital supplies from the main logistical hub in South Sudan to the forces in the Central African Republic, was completely flooded from late July through late September, which increased transportation time from a few days to more than a week. This slowed the military operations and raised operational costs. The main road from Obo further into the Central African Republic via Mboki was blocked for at least four weeks during July and August, when the river flooded and trapped two Ugandan Army trucks. One Army commander explained to the Enough Project that,

The trip from Nzara to Obo usually takes two to three days. Now, because of the rains we use seven to nine days on the road before reaching Obo. Right now we are even flying food and water from Obo to Mboki and then drive from Mboki towards Djema and further into the jungle to deliver supplies to our soldiers.⁶

In addition, these logistical challenges have resulted in some troops out in the bush going without food and other supplies for several days. According to a Ugandan Army Commander in the Central African Republic:

Before this supply [mid-August 2012] some of our soldiers have been without any food for four days, simply because we were not able to get them any supplies. Roads had become inaccessible, bridges washed away, and they were too deep in the jungle to reach by helicopter.⁷

The United States has provided funding to allow the Ugandan Army to lease two Mi8 transport helicopters since mid-2010 to increase the Army's air mobility. The aircraft, including pilots, are leased from the British-based AYR-Group. The Ugandan Army determines their movement, with contractual limits on flight hours and locations. The helicopters are not authorized to stay overnight outside the main barrack in Nzara, which severely limits their reach into the LRA-affected areas.

The use of helicopters to transport supplies between the barracks is not only costly, but more importantly, it also means less flight time for the rapid movement of troops to locations where LRA groups are hiding—which would be the preferred use for these helicopters. Such rapid movement is crucial to ensuring civilian protection and enabling the successful real-time pursuit of LRA groups based on fresh intelligence reports. Immediate tracking and pursuit remain the most effective ways to find and fight the LRA. Without sufficient transport options, the Ugandan Army will continually be a step behind in the hunt for LRA.

The rains across central Africa will end around late November, and the dry season will last until March, with the gradual return of the rains in July. Unfortunately, the end of the rains will not end the logistical difficulties of the Ugandan Army operations. The area in which the LRA is hiding is too vast to be covered effectively by the relatively small number of soldiers deployed by the Ugandan Army. Permanent roads through the forest are very limited, and large areas can only be reached by helicopter, making it difficult to track the small, dispersed bands of rebels.

Most of these areas have little local or national government presence. This lack of governance, including the presence of security forces, provides the opportunity for the LRA to roam unhindered. Much more, therefore, needs to be done in the medium and long terms to improve the local infrastructure and open up new roads. Investments in infrastructure, interregional trade, and general development initiatives, including building schools and hospitals, are preconditions for long-term peace and security in these remote areas of central Africa.

Catching up with the fast pace of the LRA

"We do see their tracks in the jungle, but we rarely encounter the LRA directly. We are always a few steps behind and chasing an enemy that will do everything possible to avoid fighting, unless they choose to fight."⁸ – Ugandan soldier from one of the tracking teams in the Central African Republic

The general consensus among analysts and military commanders is that the LRA usually tries to avoid contact with local military forces, preferring instead to prey on civilians. This is standard practice for hit-and-run guerrilla rebel movements and does not

indicate a weakening of the LRA. Throughout 2012, however, the LRA has staged a few daring attacks that deviate from the way the group normally operates.

On June 24, a large group of at least 30 LRA rebels attacked a field base of Areva, a French company that mines uranium near Bakouma in Mbomou prefecture in the Central African Republic, and looted food, clothing, and laptop computers.⁹ A few months later, on September 10, a convoy of four vehicles carrying Central African Republic soldiers was ambushed by a group of 30 to 40 well-armed LRA rebels near Kitesa on the main road from Zemio to Obo. One soldier from the Central African Republic army was killed, and six others were wounded.¹⁰ Interviews conducted by Enough revealed that the LRA fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the convoy. The armed Central African Republic Army soldiers fled when the LRA attacked, and the rebels captured an undisclosed number of AK47s and rounds of ammunition.¹¹

These two incidents show that the LRA is currently conducting two main types of attacks. Most common are those carried out by small groups of rebels against unprotected and vulnerable civilians, from whom they mainly loot clothes and food. The rebels now kill fewer civilians than they did in the past, but they often beat them and abduct them to serve as short-term porters. Civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been told by some LRA rebels that, “They are not going to kill the population but are only looking for food.”¹²

The second type of attack is when large LRA groups conduct strategic and well-planned operations against other armed forces or large settlements. These attacks are used to resupply communications equipment, arms, and ammunition. This is a newfound strategy and is the type of attack used twice this year, as mentioned above.

The LRA is able to move around and conduct attacks relatively freely because the Ugandan and other armies are not able to locate and keep up with the LRA in real time. The Ugandan Army tracking teams pursuing the LRA generally communicate by walkie-talkie or satellite phone. They are given orders and tracking coordinates from their commanders based on available intelligence about LRA movements. But locating and catching up with small fast-moving LRA groups in vast swaths of territory is a highly challenging task. One Ugandan soldier confessed to Enough that,

*We can even walk for several weeks without any clear trace of the LRA. Sometimes I feel like we are hunting a ghost.*¹³

The senior LRA fighters have lived in the dense central African forests and savannas for up to a decade now and are well-skilled in survival and hiding from hostile forces. A U.S. advisor told Enough that, “If the LRA wish to travel quietly and avoid attention, then they are very capable of doing that.”¹⁴

The effort is further complicated by the fact that the LRA is not the only group that is moving through these remote areas. Poachers from across the region, local hunters, Mbororo herders who range across the region from Cameroon, Chadian raiders, and Sudanese Darfuri Janjaweed militiamen are all known to be traversing in and out of the Central African Republic as part of their trade in—and exploitation of—that country. A professional wildlife hunter from the Central African Republic described the area to Enough:

This is the badass highway of central Africa, where militias and bandits can move freely. They basically go and loot in Congo and [the Central African Republic] and then move towards either Sudan or Chad to sell their valuables.¹⁵

Back in May 2010, at least 10 Ugandan soldiers were killed by the Janjaweed militia in a firefight north of Djema in the Central African Republic.¹⁶ Ugandan soldiers told Enough of instances where they would follow tracks for several weeks only to learn that they were chasing one of these other groups instead of the LRA.¹⁷

In an attempt to increase the likelihood of tracking the LRA successfully, the Ugandan Army integrates LRA defectors into their tracking teams. The former LRA members contribute vital intelligence and an understanding of the mode of operation of the group. One of the tracking teams is headed by Patrick Opio Makasi, former chief of operations for the LRA, who defected in 2007. An international journalist who embedded with the Ugandan Army estimates that between 50 and 70 former LRA are working in this way with the Ugandan forces.¹⁸ Civilians and community leaders in South Sudan have expressed concerns about this practice. One local priest in South Sudan said:

The inclusion of former LRA into the [Ugandan Army] has created some mistrust among the local population, who question how reliable former LRA can be in fighting their former allies. The use of former LRA sends wrong signals to the civilian population; one day that person is a rebel, the next day the same person is a [Ugandan] soldier. This can be very confusing.¹⁹

Ugandan journalists told the Enough Project that some former LRA rebels have been put under severe pressure to join the Ugandan forces and might have been reluctant to refuse out of fear for how they might be retaliated against by the Army. The journalists also believe that some defectors could be reluctant to fight and pursue their former comrades in the LRA aggressively.²⁰ Enough was not able to verify these claims since we did not manage to interview any former LRA rebels who are currently with the Ugandan Army. When asked directly, the Ugandan forces in the Central African Republic and South Sudan denied the practice, and said that, “No one is forced to serve with the [Army], but some of them [LRA defectors] chose to remain with the [Ugandan forces], because they know no other life than the bush, and they also wish to see an end to the LRA.”²¹

Despite the Army's efforts to locate and strike the LRA, the rebel group continues to prey on civilians. Of particular worry is the LRA's renewed capacity to attack armed convoys in order to resupply scarce arms and ammunition. Should this trend continue it will likely result in an increase in deadly attacks on civilians across the region.

The need for improved human intelligence about the LRA

Intelligence about LRA movements is mainly gathered from defectors and civilians, combined with information from limited aerial reconnaissance and the tracking teams chasing the rebels. The deployment of U.S. advisers raised hopes for an increased capacity to "find" the LRA from the sky with manned and unmanned aircrafts, but the results have been modest. Military experts and diplomats close to the mission have told Enough that they are not getting the results they were hoping for, and that their equipment is not able to "see through" the dense triple canopy forest.²² One international military expert said:

Aerial reconnaissance needs to be applied in-motion with mobile forces on the ground to act upon the "view from the sky." Unless you know where to look, then you have to be extremely lucky to discover anything, and unless you have forces in the right locations, then you won't be able to act upon the things you see.²³

The U.S. advisors have consistently denied that any U.S. intelligence contributed to the capture of high-ranking LRA commander Caesar Acellam on May 12, 2012, or to the recent encounters with the Ongwen group. Aerial reconnaissance plays an important role in surveying areas with suspected LRA activity and confirming the locations of their main bases.

The aerial surveillance provided by the United States has helped to identify the main areas with regular LRA activity, but pinpointing the exact locations of the rebels in those areas remains the fundamental challenge. The technology is simply not able to find small groups and individuals in the dense forest. Furthermore, actually distinguishing the LRA rebels from other people in the jungle is practically impossible from the sky. The United States does have more sophisticated surveillance technology that could be applied to the mission, but even high-resolution satellite images will not be able to find individuals in such conditions.

The key to the successful pursuit of the LRA ultimately depends on a combination of aerial surveillance, intelligence from defectors and civilians in the LRA affected areas, and adequate numbers of effective forces on the ground to track and chase the rebels over prolonged periods of time. A military planner from the African Union told Enough that:

Human intelligence remains the most important and effective form of intelligence. In this regard, the plan to establish community-based early warning systems should also feed into the [Ugandan forces'] HQs.²⁴

A fundamental precondition for reliable human intelligence is trust between the people who provide the intelligence and the security forces that will apply the intelligence. A senior military officer explained to the Enough Project that:

Trust does not come out of nowhere. You must earn and build your trust by doing what you promise and report back to the civilians. You need to make people trust that the information they provide will not come back to hurt them.²⁵

Civilians across the LRA-affected areas continue to express frustrations about the fact that they provide substantial amounts of information, but rarely hear anything back from the UPDF and other forces, including the U.S. advisors. Meanwhile, many people in these remote areas feel neglected, as there are very few agencies working to help meet their material needs given the impact the LRA has had on their communities.²⁶ Small-scale development projects like health clinics, boreholes, simple road repair and schools are desperately needed in the communities that the LRA terrorizes.

The U.S. advisors are increasingly taking part in collecting human intelligence and working directly with local community leaders across the LRA-affected areas. This is encouraging. But the advisors are only deployed for six months before they rotate out. That does not allow sufficient time for an advisor to build the personal relationships that are crucial to developing trust with the locals. The short deployment time is also very frustrating for their local partners, including the local community leaders, priests, nongovernment organization workers, and traditional tribal chiefs, who have to rebuild relations with new advisors every six months. Some advisors have told Enough that they would prefer to stay longer to do their work properly, saying that, “It’s only after a couple of months that you are starting to understand what is actually going on here and who you can work with.”²⁷

Conclusion

Despite severe logistical and intelligence challenges, the Ugandan soldiers on the ground appear to be committed and capable. Commanders and foot soldiers have multiple years of experience with counter-LRA operations; some intelligence officers have worked on the LRA for more than 10 years, and know its mode of operations very well. The inability of the Ugandan forces to find and defeat the LRA is not due to limited capability on the ground. There are too few Ugandan soldiers pursuing the LRA over too large a territory without adequate transport, technology, and intelligence or the necessary access to all the areas where the LRA roams.

The foot soldiers that are deployed to the tracking teams are fit and can walk for several days with limited supplies and very little rest. A Ugandan soldier told Enough that,

Of course it's tough to walk through the jungle, but when you have that interest, you do your best to track down the LRA, and you get that motivation. When we captured Acellam, it was a big victory for us and gave us so much morale that we could bring in such a big commander.²⁸

The inconvenient truth is that the top LRA commanders remain at large, and the recent attack on the Central African Republic military convoy serves as a reminder of the groups' ability to conduct successful attacks, even against armed forces. This gives reasons for worries about an increase in deadly attacks on civilians across the region.

The Ugandan soldiers on the ground in central Africa remain behind in their chase for the LRA rebels, who continuously manage to escape and hide from the trekking teams because of their fast pace and ability to live off the land. Despite U.S.-provided air mobility, the difficult operating environment forces the Ugandan forces to spend unnecessary resources on logistics and transport, rather than on operations aimed at the rebels.

This situation is not sustainable. Neither the Ugandan troops nor the U.S. advisors will be deployed by their governments indefinitely. There is need for a new strategy in the hunt for the LRA's senior leaders, which will ensure that adequately trained and equipped troops can be deployed rapidly on the basis of fresh, actionable intelligence about where the leadership is hiding.

Endnotes

- 1 Francis Kagolo, "UPDF captures ammunition from Kony," *The New Vision*, August 28, 2012, available at <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/634630-UPDF-captures-ammunition-from-Kony.html>.
- 2 UPDF, Press release, September 6, 2012.
- 3 Personal interview with UPDF commander and U.S. military advisor, Gulu, Uganda, October 10, 2012.
- 4 Research for this report was done in Nzara, Yambio, and Juba in South Sudan; in Obo and Mboki in the Central African Republic; and in Kampala, Kitgum, and Gulu in Uganda between August and October 2012.
- 5 The Enough Project previously estimated that Ugandan forces have approximately 1,000 soldiers deployed in the LRA-affected areas. We recognize that this estimate was on the low side. No additional Ugandan soldiers have been deployed since our previous estimate; rather the current 1,500 estimate is based on our recent research and discussions with African Union officials and U.S. military advisors, who also estimate that the Ugandan Army has 1,500 soldiers deployed. Ugandan Army officials have publicly claimed that they have deployed 2,000 soldiers and have not been willing to provide any further details or discuss the 1,500-soldier estimate.
- 6 Personal interview with senior officer in Ugandan army, Obo, Central African Republic, August 20, 2012.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Personal interview with Ugandan Army soldier, Obo, Central African Republic, August 20, 2012.
- 9 Human Rights Watch, "Central African Republic: LRA attack near hunting reserve," Press release, July 19, 2012, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/09/central-african-republic-lra-attack-near-hunting-reserve>.
- 10 "LRA rebels ambush army convoy in Central Africa," *The New Vision*, September 12, 2012, available at <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/635144-LRA-rebels-ambush-army-convoy-in-Central-Africa.html>.
- 11 Telephone interview with the Ugandan army, Obo, Central African Republic, October 5, 2012; personal interview with U.S. military advisor, September 2012.
- 12 Personal interviews with community leaders and security forces from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kampala, Uganda, September 2012.
- 13 Personal interview with Ugandan army soldier.
- 14 Personal interview with U.S. military advisors, Yambio and Nzara, South Sudan, August 13 through August 24, 2012.
- 15 Personal interview with professional wildlife hunter, Bangui, Central African Republic, March 28, 2012.
- 16 Herbert Ssempogo, "Sudanese militia killed UPDF soldiers," *The New Vision*, June 14, 2012, available at <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/12/722745>.
- 17 Personal interview with Ugandan soldier.
- 18 Personal interview with international journalist, Kampala, Uganda, August 28, 2012.
- 19 Personal interview with priest, South Sudan, August 18, 2012.
- 20 Personal interviews with Ugandan journalists, Kampala, Uganda, October 2012.
- 21 Telephone interviews with the Ugandan army in Obo, Central African Republic, and Nzara, South Sudan, October 2012.
- 22 Personal interviews with several international military experts and international diplomats, September 2012 and October 2012.
- 23 Personal interview with international military expert, October 2012.
- 24 Email correspondence with military expert from the African Union, August 2012 through October 2012.
- 25 Interview with MONUSCO officer, Kampala, Uganda, August 29, 2012.
- 26 Interviews with at least 30 to 50 different civilians from the LRA-affected areas of South Sudan and the Central African Republic, March 2012 and August 2012.
- 27 Confidential interviews with U.S. military advisors in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Uganda, August and September 2012.
- 28 Personal interview with Ugandan Army soldier.

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.

