



Counter-LRA Mission Challenged by Regional Turmoil

By Kasper Agger, January 30, 2014

Executive summary and recommendations

U.S. military advisors and their African partner forces are facing increased difficulties in their mission to end the threat of the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, and to capture rebel leader Joseph Kony, because of heightened regional instability and insufficient helicopter support.¹ Intensifying conflict in South Sudan and the Central African Republic, or CAR, is diverting military resources from the counter-LRA mission. CAR has experienced widespread intercommunal violence from heavy fighting between local militias and Séléka forces that captured power in a military coup in March 2013. Neighboring South Sudan is facing its worst crisis since independence since fighting broke out on December 15, 2013 when President Salva Kiir accused his former vice-president Riek Machar of attempting a military coup. The 500 soldiers from the South Sudanese army, who were part of the African Union, or AU, Regional Task Force to end the LRA have been redeployed to South Sudan's capital, Juba, and are no longer part of the mission.² Ugandan forces have been deployed to South Sudan and are supporting government forces. The direct involvement of the Ugandan army in South Sudan risks drawing military assets away from the counter-LRA mission. Ugandan forces make up the majority of the AU force, and Uganda is a vital partner for the U.S. advisors. Regional instability is providing an opening for LRA rebels to avoid capture.

U.S. advisors are increasingly embedding with African partner forces, driving up the need for air transport and standby helicopters in case of emergency evacuations. The current number of helicopters provided by the U.S. cannot support multiple simultaneous operations involving U.S. advisors in the field. This severe constraint is becoming more acute with increased regional instability, which is drawing the attention and assets of partner forces to other areas.

The concerted counter-LRA efforts from previous months had recently begun to bear fruit. The largest single LRA defection since 2008 occurred on December 6, 2013, when a group of 19 LRA rebels, including women and children, surrendered to local communities near Zemio village in southeastern CAR.³ The LRA is weaker than ever, and the morale is reportedly at an all-time low among the 250 to 300 remaining fighters. The LRA has an estimated total size of between 500 and 700 people, including non-combatants.⁴ Recent defectors report that LRA fighters roam the forests for months at a time without contact with other LRA groups. Some say they have not received orders from Kony in 18 months and lack a sense of purpose

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to continue fighting.⁵ Many are following orders to remain in hiding and cease the practice of large-scale killings that draw attention.

Local and international support for the counter-LRA mission remains high. The White House and the Pentagon have demonstrated strong support for keeping the approximately 100 U.S. military advisors deployed until the senior LRA command structure has been dismantled and Kony is removed. Local civil society organizations across the region have played a crucial role in encouraging defections through radio messages and safe reporting sites where rebels can surrender peacefully.⁶

Despite turmoil in CAR, South Sudan, and elsewhere in the region, the weakened state of the LRA and sustained efforts by counter-LRA forces have raised the likelihood that the rebel group can finally be dissolved after almost three decades of fighting. The complete removal of the command structure and the apprehension of Kony, however, must remain the ultimate goals. History has shown that the LRA is able to regroup when it is not under pressure. Certain strategic gestures, if taken now, can end the LRA, improve regional stability, and provide protection for vulnerable civilians, including some 320,000 people who remain displaced because of weekly attacks from the LRA.⁷

Recommendations

1. The U.S. should deploy additional helicopters to enhance air mobility.

The LRA operates in a vast and remote area roughly the size of the U.S. state of Arizona with an extremely limited road network. Lack of transportation infrastructure creates a tremendous need for helicopters to transport troops to suspected LRA locations and to resupply deployed troops and advisors. The U.S. should send additional helicopters and U.S. military pilots to provide sufficient air support for the U.S. advisors and their African partner forces.

2. Regional governments and their international partners must strengthen cooperation and remain committed to end the LRA.

The U.N, African Union, European Union, and U.S. should, at minimum, maintain the current level of support for AU-led efforts to end the LRA, even amid escalating violence in the surrounding region. The LRA-affected region has experienced intensified turmoil because of fighting in CAR and South Sudan. While such crises may divert some attention from the LRA, the group must be prevented from finding new safe havens from which to increase its strength.

3. The U.N. peacekeeping mission in DR Congo, MONUSCO, should increase support to the Congolese army in the counter-LRA mission, and the Congolese government should provide additional troops.

A contingent of 500 soldiers from the army of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, continues to conduct operations against LRA groups in northeastern Congo, as part of the AU force. These troops, however, face tremendous logistical challenges. They rely heavily on helicopter support from the U.S. advisors. Additional trucks and land cruisers provided by the Congolese government or by

MONUSCO would increase their mobility and allow them to act quickly to counter the LRA and to protect civilians more effectively. Additional Congolese forces could fill gaps left by the withdrawal of the South Sudanese forces, who made their largest contributions against the LRA by raiding rebel camps in Garamba National Park inside the DRC.

Regional instability: a perfect scenario for the LRA

Since moving from Uganda in 2006, the LRA has operated in the remote and volatile region between South Sudan, Sudan, CAR and the DRC. Conducting counter-LRA operations in such a large, troubled region with a relatively small force has always presented challenges for the AU forces. These challenges have now grown with the scope and scale of intensifying violence in several locations. The heavy armed clashes in key cities, including the capitals of CAR and South Sudan, have taken an especially heavy toll. National military forces that had been pursuing the LRA have been redeployed, creating new opportunities for the LRA to seek new safe havens and obtain vital supplies in under-patrolled areas.

Violence in CAR worsened with a December 5 attack on the capital, Bangui.⁸ More than 1,000 people were killed during a week of intense fighting between Séléka forces and local self-defense militias, called anti-Balaka, which translates to anti-machete in the local Sango language.⁹ French soldiers and African Union peacekeepers have largely failed to contain the situation. Bangui continues to experience daily killings, and close to a million people have been displaced and rely on humanitarian assistance to survive.¹⁰ Haut-Mbomou province, located in the southeastern part of the country where U.S. advisors and Ugandan soldiers are deployed to fight the LRA, has remained largely isolated from the nationwide fighting. Southeastern CAR, with its low population density and long distance from the power base in Bangui, has limited strategic importance for armed actors seeking control of CAR. The remoteness of this LRA-affected region has allowed counter-LRA operations in Haut-Mbomou province to continue without much direct interference.

One crucial obstacle to success, however, is lack of shared information and coordination with local armed leaders in Bangui and throughout CAR. Counter-LRA forces struggle to verify suspected LRA incidents outside Haut-Mbomou province. The northern provinces of Haute-Kotto and Vakaga, which have traditionally provided safe havens and transit routes for LRA groups moving between South Darfur in Sudan and CAR, have been largely cut off from counter-LRA operations and intelligence collection. There are no established points of contact between local commanders and counter-LRA commanders, and both sides are reluctant to share information due to a lack of trust. The provinces are isolated with poor infrastructure and limited communications networks. To address these gaps, U.S. advisors should proactively seek to establish contacts with key commanders and local officials in areas with suspected LRA activity. The advisors and African partners should prioritize regular visits to villages such as Nzako, Akocho, Kotto3, and Sam Ouandja, where there were several reports of LRA mass killings and abductions throughout 2013.¹¹

Kony uses prospects of peace negotiations to obtain vital supplies

An incident in November 2013 illustrates how effectively the LRA exploits political weakness, insecurity, and lack of coordination among military forces to obtain supplies, continue attacks, and roam relatively freely in CAR.

In November 2013, reports emerged that Kony was negotiating with senior government officials in CAR.¹² Then-interim President Michel Djotodia claimed that he had received letters from Kony and had personally spoken with him by phone over a period of two months about a possible surrender and the creation of a safe zone for LRA rebels.¹³ U.S. officials said that the reports were ‘not credible’ and that they had little reason to believe that Kony was directly involved with the alleged communication.¹⁴ Djotodia tasked a trusted commander, General Zakaria Demane, to facilitate talks and organize face-to-face meetings with a group of LRA rebels who had established a camp in the forests around the isolated Nzako village in the southern Mbomou province.¹⁵ Government-aligned troops met with the LRA group on several occasions and provided them with medicine, food, and supplies.¹⁶ Djotodia was likely seeking to boost his credibility and ties with the international community, which had begun to isolate him because of his inability to control his forces and end CAR’s intercommunal fighting. Under heavy international and regional pressure, Djotodia ultimately resigned as president in a December regional summit in Chadian capital N’Djamena and now lives in exile in Benin.¹⁷

When news of the Kony-Djotodia talks first emerged, the degree to which Kony was directly involved, and the extent to which the LRA was indeed considering a negotiated deal, was unclear. Research by the Enough Project has since established that contrary to the reports, it was highly unlikely that either the LRA group camped at Nzako or Kony himself was seeking to surrender. The Ugandan army subsequently ambushed an LRA group near the Vovodo River in southeastern CAR on November 28, killing 14 LRA rebels.¹⁸ Enough Project interviews with army officials with first-hand knowledge of the operation revealed that the very LRA group that had been ambushed was the same one that had camped near Nzako and pretended to negotiate its own surrender.¹⁹ Photographic evidence confirmed that LRA weapons and medicine seized in the November 28 raid matched that of the LRA group in Nzako. Global Positioning System, or GPS, coordinates revealed the movement of the group from Nzako.²⁰ The incident underscores how the LRA carefully exploited the inexperience of the new leaders in CAR to acquire hard-to-obtain supplies. Lack of direct communication between U.S. advisors, local commanders and local officials in the areas outside Haut-Mbomou province enabled the LRA to operate relatively freely and increase their supplies.

Fighting in South Sudan

South Sudan, the newest nation in the world, is facing its most severe crisis since seceding from Sudan, in 2011. Fighting broke out in the capital, Juba, on December 15, when President Salva Kiir accused army forces loyal to former vice-president Riek Machar of attempting a military coup.²¹ Violence has since spread to other

parts of the country. Some 646,400 people have been displaced and as many as 10,000 people may have been killed.²² The U.N. peacekeeping mission in the country has evacuated non-essential staff, and it is struggling to stop the killing of civilians and provide sufficient security for humanitarian organizations to operate.²³ The Ugandan government—a longtime ally of South Sudan during the war with the North, and a strategic partner to President Kiir—swiftly deployed soldiers to help evacuate Ugandan citizens from South Sudan who were trapped in the fighting. Uganda also sent special forces to secure the international airport in Juba. The Ugandan army is now fighting alongside forces loyal to President Kiir and on January 13 clashed with Machar’s forces in an incident with casualties sustained on both sides.²⁴ Reports estimate that 1,600 to 2,000 Ugandan soldiers, including air defense and heavy armor tanks, have deployed, and some of them were backing government forces retaking the strategic oil town of Bentiu, in Unity state.²⁵ At least 42,000 refugees have crossed into Uganda since the fighting broke out.²⁶

The involvement of the Ugandan army in support of president Kiir and extensive fighting with forces loyal to Machar is draining resources from an army that is already stretched thin.²⁷ Uganda is the main troop contributor to the AU-led counter-LRA mission. An estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Ugandan soldiers are deployed to LRA-affected areas in CAR and South Sudan, and Uganda serves as a crucial partner for the U.S. advisors.²⁸ Should Uganda become further engulfed in a long-running and costly military campaign in South Sudan, it is likely that troops will be pulled from counter-LRA operations, resulting in a severe blow to regional efforts, supported by U.S. military advisors, to end the LRA.

Conclusion

Regional and international counter-LRA efforts face heightened challenges because violence in South Sudan and CAR has diverted troops and attention from LRA-affected areas. The LRA has breathing space to regroup and find new areas to hide. Senior LRA commanders have exploited the situation by obtaining vital medical and camp supplies from inexperienced authorities in CAR. There is an urgent need to strengthen communication between U.S. advisors and officials in the capital, Bangui, and with local authorities in villages outside the Haut-Mbomou province where the U.S. and Ugandan troops are based.

Insufficient helicopter support is also constraining the operational capabilities of U.S. advisors and their partner forces. Additional helicopters would speed up troop deployments needed to gather timely intelligence, protect civilians in imminent danger, and keep pace with highly mobile LRA rebel groups that operate in vast and isolated areas. Moreover, additional helicopters would enable multiple missions with U.S. advisors embedded in the field to provide direct support to local forces tracking the LRA.

The Ugandan army, a key partner for the U.S. advisors and the largest troop contributor to counter-LRA efforts, has become heavily involved in the war in South Sudan, and the diversion of troops could harm the counter-LRA mission.

The LRA rebel group has operated for close to three decades now, and rebel leader Joseph Kony has avoided capture, largely by remaining mobile, hiding in isolated areas and exploiting locations with limited regional cooperation. The recent fighting in South Sudan and CAR is a dream scenario for the group and allows it to survive, avoid attention, and regain strength. Counter-LRA efforts must therefore be sustained despite an uptick in regional conflict. Only a complete removal of the senior command structure and the capture of Kony will bring a final end to the rebel group.

Endnotes

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¹⁴ Ibid. See also Paul Ronan, “The back story on Kony’s surrender talks,” *The Resolve*, November 21, 2013, available at <http://www.theresolve.org/2013/11/the-backstory-on-konys-surrender-talks/>.

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