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Women and children displaced by LRA violence, Niangara town, DRC
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam, September 2010



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Ghosts of Christmas Past

Protecting Civilians from the LRA



Josephine, a former LRA abductee, Haut-Uélé district, DRC.
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam, September 2010

Almost daily, a small band of rebels known as the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, kills, abducts and attacks people across a vast area of central Africa.

The LRA has become the most deadly militia in Democratic Republic of Congo, with Christmas time over the past two years marked by appalling massacres. Since 2008, more than 400,000 people have fled their homes after the LRA rampaged across remote villages in Sudan, Central African Republic and DR Congo. Attacks came in retaliation to an ill-planned military offensive against the militia by regional armies.

The African Union and US government have recently announced initiatives to address the threat posed by the LRA. Renewed attention is welcome and vitally needed, but international and regional governments must learn the lessons of the past and ensure that future efforts provide effective security for local people. Women and men must be able to tend to their fields, children go to school and families sleep in their homes free from fear.



Summary

On Christmas Eve 2008 and over the following three weeks, 865 women, men and children were savagely beaten to death and hundreds more abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in a remote corner in the north-east of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and in southern Sudan. The attack was a murderous backlash in response to Operation "Lightning Thunder", a military offensive launched some 10 days before against the LRA by Uganda, DRC and southern Sudan. Less than a year later, between 14 and 17 December 2009, LRA commanders oversaw the killing of more than 300 people, again shattering communities in a remote corner of northern DRC.

Today the LRA continues to attack marginalised communities in Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and DRC almost four times a week. The militia now operates across an area 20 times bigger than it did before the "Lightning Thunder" offensive. Since September 2008, the LRA has killed more than 2,300 people and abducted more than 3,000. It has raped women and forced abducted children to commit horrific crimes. Over 400,000 people have fled from their homes for fear of attack, 260,000 of them in DRC. New figures show that over the last two years the LRA has become the most deadly militia in DRC.¹

In southern Sudan, a further 42,400 people have fled from LRA violence this year alone – one fifth of all those displaced in 2010. In all, an estimated 87,800 southern Sudanese have fled their homes as a result of LRA attacks since late 2008.² In southeast CAR, the LRA displaced at least 20,000 people in the first three months of 2010.

The acute suffering and mass population displacement the LRA has generated across international borders is undermining stability in an already fragile region, where southern Sudan is preparing to hold a landmark referendum on secession in early 2011.³

From its origins in northern Uganda, the LRA has morphed into a clear regional threat. It deliberately preys on people living in some of the most remote areas of central Africa, where there is very limited government presence, little or no functioning justice or police apparatus, and almost no road networks, phone coverage, electricity or essential services such as health clinics.

International efforts to address the LRA: the need to prioritise civilian protection

2010 has seen intensified, if long overdue, international momentum to address the threat posed by the LRA, with the African Union (AU) and the United States (US) government advancing specific courses of action to deal with the group.⁴

Encouragingly, both initiatives include commitments to enhancing civilian protection, improving humanitarian access, and encouraging the defection, disarmament and reintegration of LRA fighters. Such measures are desperately needed to reduce civilian suffering and will require concerted international support from the United Nations Security Council, regional governments, peacekeeping missions and donors.

The AU and US initiatives also refer to apprehending the LRA leadership. Without a doubt, a hardcore group of senior commanders is responsible for appalling atrocities. The international community should seek ways to prevent these commanders from orchestrating further attacks against innocent civilians – but for the sake of those civilians, much more thought is needed as to how this can be done.⁵

A long history of military action against the LRA has repeatedly failed to capture its leadership or to contain it as a threat to communities. In fact, it has had the opposite effect, dispersing the LRA and prompting horrific retaliatory attacks against civilians. Moreover, large numbers of the LRA are abducted civilians, many of them children, who may be placed in greater danger by a purely military approach. At the local level, authorities, civil society and churches, often with support from the UN and donors, have had some success in encouraging returns from the LRA. But much more must be done to promote the return and reintegration of rank and file and mid-level LRA fighters.

It is equally critical that UN peacekeeping missions and regional governments, with support from international partners, step up efforts today to protect civilians from the LRA. Despite the severity of the threat, the UN peacekeeping missions in the region – among them, the largest mission in the world in DRC – have failed to prioritise protecting civilians from the LRA. This must urgently change.

Survivor of December 2009 atrocities in the Makombo area of Haut-Uélé district, DRC.
Photo: Pierre Peron/Oxfam, September 2010



Claude, 21 (name changed)

"The LRA crossed the river near my house and went from village to village, killing and kidnapping people as they went. They arrived at my house at six o'clock in the morning and tied me up. They ransacked the house... They then tied me to other boys in our village and we were forced to carry the goods they were stealing from us..."

We walked three kilometres to the next village, where the LRA men did the same thing, kidnapping more than 100 people. This time though, they counted out 20 people, tied them up, and killed them by hitting them on the back of the head. They told us to move on and we continued walking, still tied to each other and carrying the heavy loot.

Every few kilometres we would stop and they would count out another 20 people and walk them into the bush. After a while, I was among the group that the LRA separated from rest. They tied our arms together behind our backs and forced us to kneel down. They took hammers, machetes and heavy sticks and began killing people one by one. One of the LRA men took a big stick and hit me hard on the back of my head. I blacked out.

When I woke up, I was still tied up and had several dead bodies piled on top of me. I spent four days drifting in and out of consciousness, tied up and bleeding in that stack of bodies. When people arrived to bury us, they discovered that I was still alive. They untied me and carried me to the nearest hospital, where I took six months to recover."