



## Who is Joseph Kony?

### Questions and Answers on the Lord's Resistance Army

March 2012

#### 1. Who is Joseph Kony and what is the Lord's Resistance Army?

Joseph Kony is the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group that originated in 1987 in northern Uganda among ethnic Acholi communities. The Acholi suffered serious abuses at the hands of successive Ugandan governments in the turbulent 1970s and 1980s. Kony, an Acholi himself, and the campaign against the government of Uganda initially had some popular backing, but support waned in the early 1990s as the LRA became increasingly [violent against civilians](#), including fellow Acholi. The group abducted and killed thousands of civilians in northern Uganda and mutilated many others by cutting off their lips, ears, noses, hands, and feet. The [brutality against children](#) was particularly severe.

Various military campaigns against the LRA eventually pushed the group across the border into southern Sudan (now South Sudan) and, in 2005 and 2006, into the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#). The LRA has crossed in and out of the Central African Republic (CAR) since 2008. Although the LRA is no longer based in northern Uganda, the group continues to commit abuses against civilians in the remote border area of Sudan, CAR and [Congo](#).

In 2005 the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague issued an arrest warrant for Kony—along with four other senior LRA leaders—for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in northern Uganda.

#### 2. What is the LRA fighting for?

According to former LRA fighters, Kony's stated goal is to overthrow President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and create a state based on Kony's interpretation of the biblical Ten Commandments. Since the LRA no longer operates in Uganda, the group's current political goals are not clear. Kony's current tactics appear solely aimed at ensuring his and other senior leaders' survival.

### 3. How big is the LRA?

At its height, the LRA numbered in the thousands, although the core of well-trained and experienced Acholi fighters may not have been more than a few hundred. Currently the LRA is estimated to have 150 to 300 armed fighters plus hundreds of captive children and adults.

Although the number of LRA fighters is small, the LRA has proven capable of carrying out horrific attacks with a relatively small number of fighters. In December 2010, for example, an estimated 30 fighters killed at least 345 civilians and abducted 250 others during a four-day killing rampage in the Makombo area of northern Congo's Haut Uele district. It was one of the [worst massacres](#) in the LRA's bloody history.

### 4. Does the LRA target children?

The [abduction of children](#) is one of the LRA's hallmarks. [The LRA abducts children](#), who are easier to manipulate than adults, to replenish its ranks and forces them into combat. Although the LRA also abducts adults, they are predominately used as porters and rarely become combatants.

Abducted children are almost immediately separated from adult abductees. Through mind-control methods that instill fear, and sheer brutality, the LRA initiates children into the group and forces them to undergo what they call "military training." Children are often forced to kill adults or other children who fail to obey the LRA's strict rules or try to escape. The killings frequently have a ceremonial nature, with children surrounding the victim in a circle and each taking a turn beating the victim with a large wooden club until the victim dies. Refusal to participate is a death sentence. Girls abducted by the LRA undergo "military training" but are also forced to become "wives" or sexual slaves of LRA fighters. They usually stay with the same fighter during their entire time in captivity.

A few of the LRA's leaders were themselves abducted children, most notably Dominic Ongwen, one of the LRA commanders being sought by the ICC.

### 5. How many people have been affected by the long war with the LRA?

The human toll has been most severe in northern Uganda. Between 1987 and 2006, at least 20,000 Ugandan [children were abducted](#). More than 1.9 million people were displaced from their homes into camps and tens of thousands of Ugandan civilians died. Nearly the entire population of Acholiland was [displaced](#) due to a combination of LRA actions and the Ugandan government's forcible resettlement of people in camps. Living conditions in the camps were horrific, and for years communities were largely cut off from basic necessities. The death toll from cholera and other diseases was often higher than from the conflict itself.

Since 2006, when the Uganda armed forces pushed the LRA into Congo and what is now South Sudan, relative peace has returned to northern Uganda, with a dramatic improvement in security. Addressing the aftermath of the war and displacement, however, remains a massive challenge. The vast majority of displaced people, more than 80 percent of the population of the camps, have returned home, though [few have received government assistance](#).

The LRA remains an immediate menace for the people of South Sudan, Congo, and CAR. Since September 2008 the LRA has killed more than 2,600 civilians and abducted more than 4,000 other people, many of them children. More than 400,000 people have been displaced from their homes; [very few have any access to humanitarian assistance](#).

## **6. Where is Kony now?**

Kony and two senior LRA leaders also sought on ICC arrest warrants—Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen—are believed to be in the Central African Republic. They and their forces are highly mobile, and it is difficult to know their exact whereabouts. Kony and other LRA leaders move on foot in small separate groups with their fighters and abductees through remote bush terrain between the borders of [Congo, CAR, and South Sudan](#). They do not have permanent camps, avoid roads and often make great efforts to cover their tracks. The LRA leaders used to communicate by satellite phone and two-way radios but no longer do so for fear their locations will be identified through monitoring. Instead they send messages via runners, letters posted on trees or left under rocks, or occasional face-to-face meetings at pre-determined locations in isolated areas.

## **7. Why is it so hard to apprehend Kony and the other LRA leaders?**

LRA fighters are well-trained and highly disciplined. The leadership has evaded capture for 25 years, despite often being in close proximity to the Ugandan army or other armed forces, raising questions about the Ugandan army's capabilities and aims. Currently, the LRA operates across a large and extremely remote area with poor infrastructure.

Despite successive military campaigns against the group over the years, the LRA has proven remarkably resilient and able to regroup to continue attacks against civilians. In 2006 the United Nations Peacekeeping force in Congo, MONUC, deployed Guatemalan special forces to capture one of Kony's deputies, Vincent Otti, also wanted by the ICC, but they were unsuccessful and eight Guatemalan peacekeepers died. The serious loss discouraged UN peacekeepers from further operations against the LRA.

In 2008 peace agreements were negotiated in Juba, South Sudan, but Kony repeatedly failed to sign them. In December the governments in the region, led by the Ugandan army, with

intelligence and logistical support from the United States, launched a military campaign against LRA bases in Garamba National Park in northeastern Congo. The campaign, called Operation Lightning Thunder, was put into action with a surprise aerial strike on the main LRA camp where Kony was believed to be located. The strike failed to neutralize the LRA leaders, who escaped.

Although the exact location of the LRA's leaders is difficult to pinpoint, much about the LRA's structure, capabilities, and the leaders' approximate locations is often known to governments in the region, the UN, and nongovernmental organizations active on the issue. What has been lacking are the appropriate means and will to put this information to use in a timely and effective manner by countries capable of conducting a law enforcement operation to apprehend the LRA's leaders.

#### **8. What can be done to stop LRA abuses?**

The arrest of LRA leaders sought by the ICC, including Joseph Kony, is a central element of any strategy to end LRA atrocities in the countries where the rebel armed group operates. But enhanced arrest efforts and broader and more effective measures to protect civilians endangered by the LRA—including those who may be at heightened risk from an arrest operation—are also needed. The following steps are critical to ending LRA abuses:

- **Deploy well-trained, capable troops in the numbers needed to protect civilians and arrest LRA leaders.**  
Better protection of civilians in LRA-affected areas requires deploying sufficient forces, including UN forces, and ensuring that these forces have sufficient transport capacity, including helicopters, to reach threatened civilians quickly. To apprehend LRA leaders wanted by the ICC—while minimizing risks to civilians held captive by the LRA—the capabilities of troops involved in arrest operations will need bolstering with military special forces or specially trained police units. Ensuring that these UN and other forces respect international human rights and humanitarian law is crucial.
- **Enhance early warning and intelligence gathering.**  
Intelligence gathering should be stepped-up to focus on LRA movements and to identify communities vulnerable to attack. Coordination, planning, and information-sharing should be improved to allow for timely and appropriate responses to new intelligence.
- **Improve communications, including by building cell phone towers.**  
The United States should quickly implement its commitment to build cell phone towers that will provide mobile phone coverage in LRA-affected areas. Efforts to

ensure that high-frequency radios are available in all key population centers should be supported.

- **Assist LRA fighters seeking to defect.**

Provide greater support to efforts to help LRA fighters seeking to defect. This includes increasing the number of “assembly points” where defectors can safely go when they flee, and expanding community radio and leafleting to provide this information to LRA fighters.

- **Ensure fair trials for serious crimes.**

Governments prosecuting war crimes and other serious offenses committed by LRA commanders should ensure they receive fair trials in accordance with international standards. Uganda’s amnesty act should be amended so that those responsible for war crimes and other crimes in violation of international law are not immune from prosecution.

Taking these actions should be part of a broader effort that focuses on other important tasks, including improving coordination and cooperation between the Ugandan army and other national armed forces, UN peacekeepers, and the US military advisers, and developing an outreach strategy to better inform people in the region about ongoing operations and areas at risk of LRA attack. Efforts should be strengthened to ensure that victims and LRA-affected communities have access to humanitarian assistance.

## **9. What should governments in the region do?**

Since December 2008 the national armies of Uganda, Congo, CAR, and South Sudan have been jointly involved in military operations against the LRA, with Uganda playing a leading role. Efforts are under way for the African Union (AU) to play a greater role and to transform the existing campaign into one led by the AU, though this is unlikely to change the composition of the troops. But the current operations have failed to apprehend Kony and other LRA leaders, and have not stopped attacks on civilians.

The soldiers involved in the military operations often lack appropriate training and equipment and have minimal or no experience in apprehension operations. Soldiers from some of the armed forces involved in the operations have also committed human rights abuses against civilians. For instance the Congolese armed forces, the FARDC, have killed, looted, and raped Mbororo nomadic cattle herders in the border area between Congo and CAR. The soldiers raped at least 35 Mbororo women and girls in late 2010 and early 2011. Some were held in army camps and raped repeatedly. At least 12 Mbororo civilians were shot dead by Congolese army soldiers—and possibly many more, although reports have been

difficult to verify. Soldiers also looted thousands of heads of livestock from the Mbororo, and forcibly evicted many Mbororo from their homes.

Human Rights Watch and local civil society groups have also raised concerns with the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) about reports of 40 alleged cases of rape by its soldiers against women and girls in and around towns and villages in northern Congo in 2010 and 2011. Some of the women and girls were raped while travelling with Ugandan soldiers for security on the road as they made their way to Southern Sudan; others were raped in their homes or fields near areas where Ugandan soldiers were deployed.

All armed forces involved in operations in LRA-affected areas should take all necessary measures to ensure full respect for international human rights and humanitarian law.

#### **10. What should the United States do?**

The United States has provided the most support of any government in the effort against the LRA by countries in the central African region. In May 2010 President Barack Obama signed into law the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act, which calls on the US government to develop a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians and to work with the governments in central Africa to "apprehend or otherwise remove from the battlefield" the LRA leaders. In November 2010, [President Obama published his strategy](#), which outlined four primary goals for US engagement with the LRA crisis, including stopping LRA leaders, protecting civilians from LRA attacks, encouraging escape and defection from the LRA, and providing humanitarian assistance to affected communities.

Initially the US assistance was mostly logistical and intelligence support to the Ugandan armed forces. In 2011 the US also trained a battalion of Congolese army soldiers, which is now participating in counter-LRA operations. The US announced in October 2011 that it would send 100 US Special Forces personnel as military advisers to the Ugandan army and other armed forces in the region to assist in apprehending LRA leaders.

In addition to military support the US has provided humanitarian assistance to communities affected by the LRA, both in northern Uganda and other countries where the LRA operates. It is supporting the development of early warning networks and infrastructure rehabilitation such as erecting mobile phone towers in key town centers in northern Congo's Haut Uele and Bas Uele districts, although progress on this initiative has been lagging.

Any US support for regional military forces involved in the operation should be accompanied by efforts to ensure that international humanitarian law is respected and any unlawful conduct is investigated and prosecuted.

### **11. What should the European Union and its member countries do?**

The European Union (EU) and its member countries have provided humanitarian assistance to communities affected by the LRA, though such support could be dramatically scaled up. The EU is also providing financial support to the African Union secretariat for its LRA initiative. The UK has supported the UN's efforts to demobilize LRA fighters, including distributing leaflets. The Belgian government is supporting a rehabilitation center for former LRA abductees in Dungu, northern Congo. France has provided support to the army of the Central African Republic, though not specifically for counter-LRA operations or protection of civilians in the affected areas. These countries can and should be doing more.

### **12. What should the UN do?**

The UN has peacekeeping missions in Congo (MONUSCO) and South Sudan (UNMISS), a peacebuilding mission in CAR (BINUCA), and a new Central Africa office to coordinate peace efforts in the region (UNOCA). All do some work on the LRA, though it is not the priority issue for any of the missions.

Although MONUSCO has been the most active of any of the UN missions in LRA-related activities—partly because of the LRA's activities in the Congo since 2006—fewer than five percent of MONUSCO's peacekeepers are deployed to LRA-affected areas. MONUSCO peacekeepers have conducted joint operations with the Congolese army to help protect civilians but have not been involved in efforts to apprehend LRA leaders since their failed attempt in 2006. MONUSCO's Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, Repatriation, and Resettlement (DDRRR) program has encouraged LRA fighters to leave the LRA's ranks through FM radio broadcasts and leaflet distribution, among other tactics. As a further step MONUSCO and the Congolese army plan to begin "Operation Bienvenue" (Operation Welcome) in the coming weeks to urge LRA fighters to surrender by setting up and publicizing five assembly points in northern Congo's Haut Uele district to which fighters can go.

In South Sudan, UNMISS has a mandate to protect civilians in LRA-affected areas. But with competing priorities and challenges, the mission's efforts have been focused elsewhere. Some efforts have been made by UNMISS to support MONUSCO's demobilization efforts in South Sudan.

In the Central African Republic, BINUCA has no mandate to protect civilians and has no personnel in LRA affected areas. In December the UN Security Council asked BINUCA to report on LRA atrocities. The mission is planning to deploy two officers to Obo, in eastern CAR.

In March 2011 the UN opened a regional office for Central Africa, UNOCA, based in Gabon, to help consolidate peace in the region and prevent future conflict.

The UN's various initiatives regarding the LRA have lacked coordination and impact. While the UN missions have attempted to respond to LRA threats to civilians, it has rarely been a top priority for any of the missions and resources are often directed elsewhere. More UN peacekeepers, enhanced resources, and improved coordination between UN missions and with national armed forces are urgently needed in LRA-affected areas if the UN is to improve its impact and play a greater, more effective role in protecting civilians from LRA attack.

### **13. What can the African Union do?**

In late 2010 discussions began with the African Union, governments in the region, and other key partners about a more active AU role in coordinating and leading counter-LRA efforts. Progress has been extremely slow. The AU appointed Francisco Madeira of Mozambique as its special envoy on LRA issues on November 23, 2011. Plans are also being developed to combine the current military operations into an AU effort, with a Regional Intervention Force (RIF) made up of up to 5,000 soldiers from all of the regional armies currently fighting the LRA and with Uganda as the "lead nation." The combined force is not yet in place. The AU has recently set up a regional office in Bangui, CAR, to work on the LRA issue and says it is working to develop a joint AU-UN regional strategy for addressing the LRA.

### **14. What is the role of the International Criminal Court?**

The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) began to investigate alleged LRA crimes in July 2004 following a request from President Museveni. In July 2005 the ICC issued sealed arrest warrants for the LRA's then-top five leaders: Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo, Raska Lukwiya, and Dominic Ongwen for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Two of them have since died: Lukwiya in 2006 and Otti in late 2007, killed on orders from Kony.

As the ICC prosecutor has made clear, ICC investigations in northern Uganda are not limited to crimes committed by the LRA. In their counterinsurgency campaigns against the LRA, Ugandan army soldiers committed serious abuses (see below), although probably on a lesser scale than those by the LRA. While the ICC prosecutor has indicated that investigations in northern Uganda are ongoing, his office has not brought charges against any members of the Ugandan army. ICC investigations may have shown that alleged war crimes committed by the Ugandan army fall outside of the court's jurisdiction, perhaps because they may have occurred outside the time period over which the ICC can act. But the



ICC prosecutor has not provided a [sufficient public explanation](#) about the status of these investigations.

#### **15. What is known about Ugandan army abuses?**

Human Rights Watch has documented serious abuses by the Ugandan armed forces over the course of its 25-year armed conflict with the LRA, [including torture](#), rape, arbitrary detention, unlawful killings, and forced displacement of its citizens into camps with [no protection](#) and [minimal humanitarian assistance](#).

The Ugandan army was also responsible for [serious violations](#) of international humanitarian law when its [forces occupied eastern Congo](#) and assisted armed groups there between 1999 and 2003.

Domestically the Ugandan armed forces have a [poor human rights record](#) in counterterrorism operations and in [disarmament operations](#) in Uganda's northeastern Karamoja region. Ugandan soldiers also shot and killed peaceful protesters and bystanders during anti-government demonstrations in September 2009 and April 2011, including in Gulu in northern Uganda.

#### **16. Have there been efforts in Uganda to prosecute war crimes by the LRA or the Ugandan army in northern Uganda?**

In 2000 the Ugandan government enacted an amnesty for Ugandan citizens, including LRA fighters, involved in an armed rebellion against the state if they renounced their involvement. Since 2000 more than 12,906 people affiliated with the LRA have been granted amnesty, including a number of former high-ranking LRA commanders. Amnesties for war crimes and crimes against humanity violate international law, which rejects immunity from prosecution for the gravest crimes.

In 2011 Uganda established an International Crimes Division to try war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other crimes. Although national trials could make an important contribution to securing justice for crimes committed during the conflict in northern Uganda, serious legal obstacles have emerged that call into question whether the division can fulfill its potential as a meaningful forum to [ensure accountability](#). To date, only one case related to the conflict in northern Uganda has been brought before the International Crimes Division, that of [Thomas Kwoyelo](#), a former LRA member captured in Congo in March 2009 who is charged with war crimes. Kwoyelo's case was stopped after Uganda's Constitutional Court concluded that he had been treated unequally under the country's Amnesty Act and ordered his release. He remains in prison while an appeal against the Constitutional Court ruling is pending.

The Ugandan army has said that soldiers who committed abuses in the course of the LRA conflict have been prosecuted and convicted, though it has been unwilling to provide details of such cases to Human Rights Watch or others. Human Rights Watch is aware of several instances in which soldiers were executed after being found guilty of crimes against civilians during the LRA conflict, following a verdict in a summary field court martial proceeding. Defendants had no right to appeal these verdicts, and Uganda's Constitutional Court has ruled such executions unconstitutional. Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances.

### **17. What armies and armed groups besides the LRA use child soldiers?**

The use of child soldiers extends far beyond central Africa. Currently, child soldiers are fighting in at least [14 countries worldwide](#): Afghanistan, Burma, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Iraq, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, and Yemen.

The United Nations has identified over a dozen so-called “persistent perpetrators”—governments and armed groups, such as the LRA, that are known to have used child soldiers in active conflict for over 10 years. The FARC rebels in Colombia, for example, have recruited children as young as seven and forced them into combat. It executes fighters who try to desert.

The situation in a few countries is becoming notably worse. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has stepped up its use of children for suicide attacks. In Somalia, the Islamist armed group al-Shabaab has increasingly targeted children for forced recruitment, often abducting children as young as 10 from their homes or schools.

### **18. What is being done globally to end the use of child soldiers?**

In recent years 144 countries have ratified an international treaty pledging not to conscript or use children below age 18 in armed conflict, but [59 countries have yet to join](#).

In the past five years the UN has negotiated action plans with 17 governments and armed groups in 10 countries to end their use of child soldiers. Since the mid-1990s the number of countries where child soldiers have been used has dropped from approximately 30 to 14. The UN Security Council has imposed sanctions against several individuals for recruiting and using child soldiers and established a special working group on children and armed conflict to pressure perpetrators to end their use of child soldiers.

In 2008 the United States adopted a law to prohibit some forms of military assistance to governments that recruit or use child soldiers or support militias that do so. Since the law was enacted in 2010 President Obama has invoked national security interests to continue US military aid to several countries still using child soldiers, but in 2012, he acted to withhold US\$2.7 million in foreign military financing from the Congolese government until it stops recruiting children into the ranks of its army and [demobilizes its child soldiers](#).

On March 14 the ICC found a Congolese rebel leader, Thomas Lubanga, guilty of war crimes for recruiting and using child soldiers in Congo, making him the [first convicted ICC war criminal](#). The verdict will hopefully send a strong message to child soldier recruiters everywhere that using children in conflict could result in their prosecution and imprisonment. Another notorious recruiter of children is Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, who is awaiting a verdict from the Special Court for Sierra Leone on charges of recruiting child soldiers and other crimes. The Special Court has already convicted eight others for recruiting and using child soldiers. However, individual commanders who recruit and use child soldiers are rarely punished by their home countries.

#### **19. Can the Kony2012 video help to change the situation and end the LRA's abuses?**

Kony2012, a 30-minute video about Kony and the LRA, has received unprecedented interest and attention. To date over 100 million people have clicked on it. The video has also sparked a lot of debate. While some of the criticisms may be valid, the film's central message is also valid: Kony and his LRA continue to commit horrific abuses at a terrible human cost in central Africa. He and other LRA leaders should be arrested and brought to justice.

The video has significantly increased public awareness about Kony and the LRA's crimes and led many people to ask questions about how to end the abuses. Watching a video about the LRA will not, on its own, result in Kony's apprehension or end LRA abuses. But the massive interest generated by the video could, and should, be harnessed to transform good intentions into concrete and effective action. Human Rights Watch will use its [in-depth research on LRA atrocities](#) and advocacy outreach to press policymakers in central Africa and around the world to apprehend those wanted by the ICC, protect civilians from further attacks, and assist in the rehabilitation of affected communities.