LRA
CRISIS
TRACKER

THE STATE OF THE LRA IN 2016

MARCH 2016

INVISIBLE CHILDREN

THE RESOLVE
LRA CRISIS INITIATIVE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) forces were active in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo), South Sudan, and in Sudanese-controlled areas of South Darfur and the disputed Kafia Kingi enclave. The LRA abducted 612 people in 203 attacks in 2015, a slight reduction compared to 2014, though the number of abductions was higher than in both 2012 and 2013.[1]

Section I of this report looks beyond overall levels of LRA violence, analyzing how LRA attacks and abductions trends have varied within CAR and Congo. Local variations in attack patterns reflect how the LRA's survival strategies have evolved under the direction of leader Joseph Kony and his depleted fighting force. Though LRA groups still loot food to survive, they have shifted away from killing or injuring people during most attacks. Where possible, they employ less violent survival strategies, such as extorting food and supplies from communities and using illicit ivory and cash to acquire needed supplies. However, a surge in more aggressive attacks in eastern CAR in early 2016 disrupted this trend, once again highlighting the grave threat LRA fighters pose to civilians.

Section II of the report examines the membership of the LRA, including evidence that several commanders are now operating independently of Kony. It also analyzes trends in the number of defections of Ugandan combatants, who form the core of the LRA. Finally, it contrasts the LRA's continued recruitment of children to become soldiers and camp laborers with the group's periodic releases of very young children and their mothers.

Section III puts the LRA within the broader national context in the countries in which it operates, examining how the rebel group both creates and feeds off of instability in CAR, Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan. Finally, the report's Conclusion projects what communities affected by LRA violence may expect to see in 2016.

Trends in LRA violence against civilians, 2009–2015
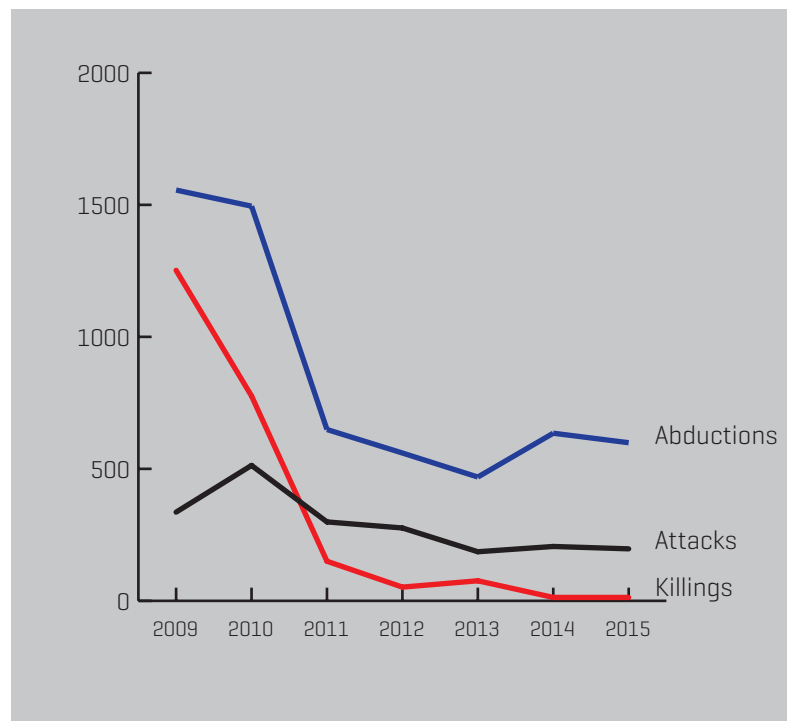
SECTION I: EVOLVING LRA SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

A. VARIATIONS IN LRA ABDUCTION TRENDS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The relative consistency in overall levels of LRA violence in recent years masks considerable variation in the number of LRA attacks and abductions at national and local levels. In eastern CAR, LRA forces abducted 113 civilians in 2015, by far the lowest number since the LRA first established a consistent presence there in 2009. LRA abductions dropped dramatically compared to 2014 in each prefecture the group operated in, with the exception of western Haute Kotto prefecture.

The fragility of improved civilian protection in eastern CAR was exposed in early 2016. In a string of bold assaults, LRA forces abducted 217 people there, nearly doubling in two months the total number of LRA abductions in eastern CAR in all of 2015. As in 2015, many of the attacks targeted the mining areas east of Bria in western Haute Kotto prefecture. However, several large-scale assaults targeted villages in Mbomou prefecture, where very few LRA abductions were recorded in 2015.

In contrast to eastern CAR, LRA abductions in northeastern Congo rose significantly in 2015 compared to 2014, and have since dropped significantly in the first weeks of 2016. The LRA abducted 485 civilians in Congo in 2015, the highest number there since 2010, mostly to use for short periods of time as porters of looted goods. Within Congo, abduction patterns fluctuated considerably. LRA abductions in Congo's Haut Uele province rose considerably in areas south and east of Garamba National Park in 2015 compared to 2014, while dropping (less dramatically) in areas of Haut Uele west of Garamba Park. This reversed trends in 2014, when LRA abductions west of Garamba National Park rose significantly compared to 2013, but dropped significantly south and east of the park.

Such reversals in LRA abduction patterns are common. The unpredictability of LRA attacks from year to year helps explain why, despite its greatly reduced fighting capacity, the LRA has a disruptive effect on such a vast area encompassing parts of four nations.

Even after months or years of relative peace, one LRA attack can discourage farmers from planting crops in rural areas and hinder traders, government officials, and humanitarian groups from traveling to certain towns.

Trends in LRA abductions, 2013–2014
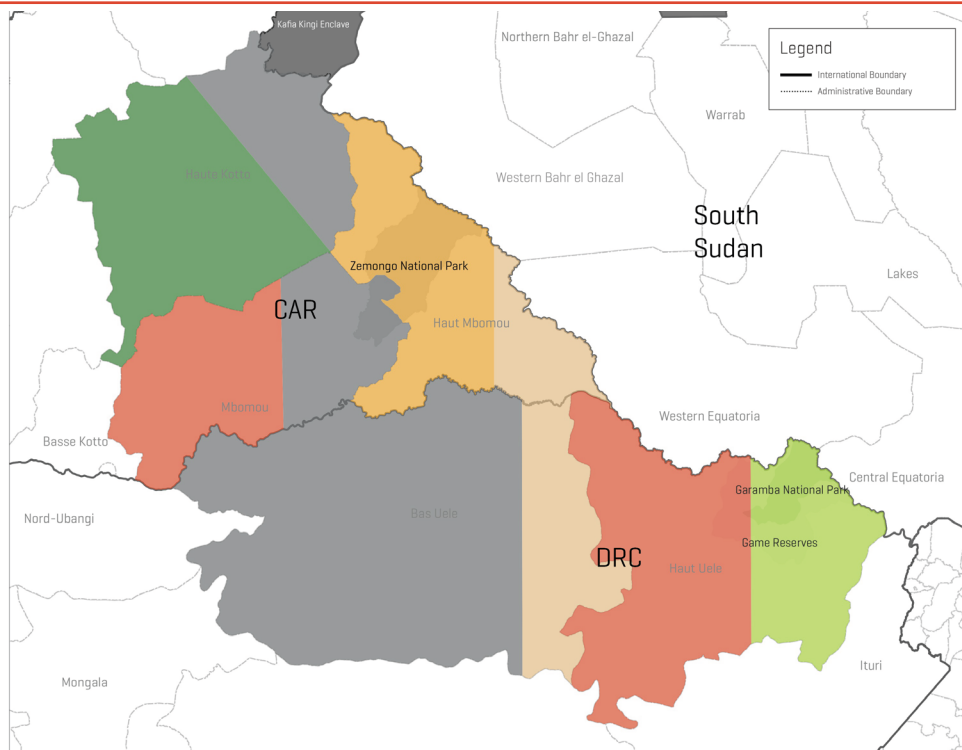
In 2014, LRA abductions rose significantly in five out of 10 geographic units in CAR and Congo compared to 2013.

Change in # of LRA abductions from 2013–2014

| Decrease of 100 or more | Decrease of 50–99 | Decrease of 10–49 | Increase or decrease of 0–9 | Increase of 10–49 | Increase of 50–99 | Increase of 100 or more |
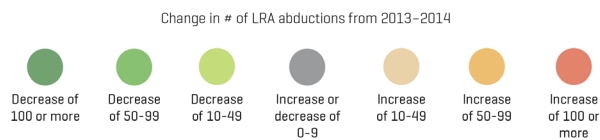
Trends in LRA abductions, 2014–2015

In 2015, however, LRA abductions dropped significantly in four of the five units in which they had risen in 2014 (see above).

In comparison, LRA abductions rose in 2015 in the two geographic units where they had dropped significantly in 2014.

Change in # of LRA abductions from 2014–2015

| Decrease of 100 or more | Decrease of 50–99 | Decrease of 10–49 | Increase or decrease of 0–9 | Increase of 10–49 | Increase of 50–99 | Increase of 100 or more |
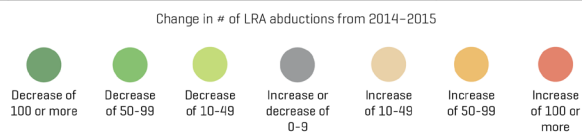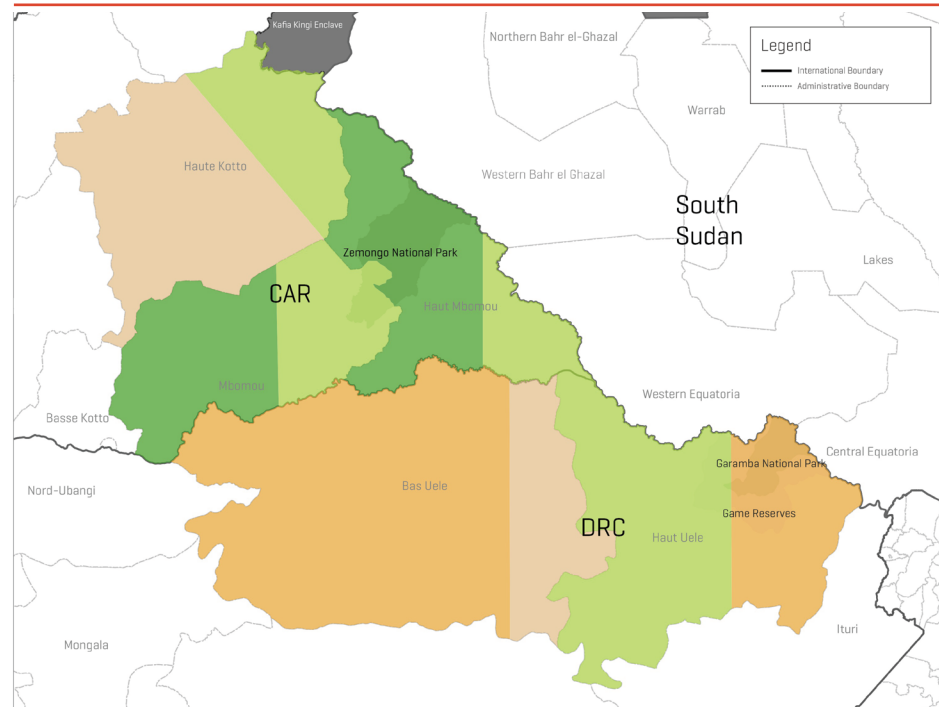
B. DISRUPTION OF LIVELIHOODS BY LRA LOOTINGS

LRA attacks disrupt affected communities not only because they are unpredictable, but because they target civilians engaged in nearly every common livelihood in central Africa: hunting, farming, fishing, mining, cattle-herding, and trading goods between population centers using motorbikes and lorries. LRA groups operating in eastern CAR and northeastern Congo have long relied on looting civilians by force to acquire needed supplies, and in doing so they further impoverish people already living on the margins of struggling economies. In many cases, victims suffer the added indignity of being forced to carry their hard-earned possessions towards remote LRA camps. In 2015, at least 224 of 612 LRA abductees were used as porters.

The LRA Crisis Tracker records details about the locations of LRA attacks whenever possible in order to differentiate between attacks that take place in forests, in villages or homes, along roads, and in mining camps. That information was recorded for 334 of the 410 LRA attacks from 2014–2015, revealing patterns that can be useful in helping communities develop strategies to mitigate the risk of attack.

LRA attack locations in CAR, 2014–2015

In a field
4%

16.5%
Along a road

17.5%
Mining camp/
Community

34.2%
In the bush

27.8%
In town/In a home
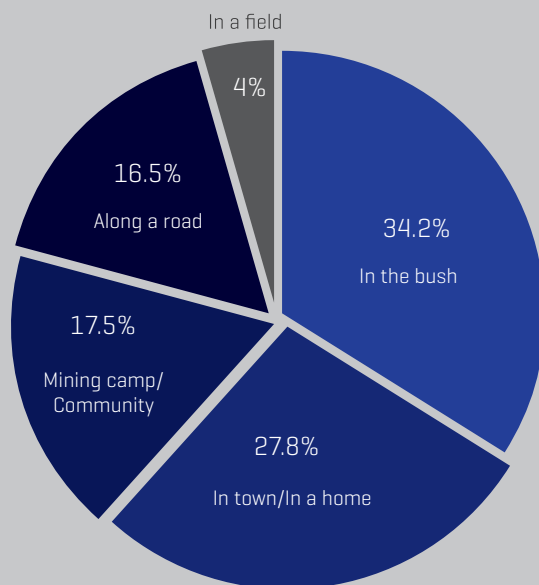
LRA forces were twice as likely to commit attacks in more remote forested areas in CAR as they were in Congo. This was especially true in Haut Mbomou prefecture, where 47% of all attacks took place in forested areas. This tactic may reflect the LRA's desire to keep a safe distance from the most capable force in the region, the Ugandan military, which has its primary base in Haut Mbomou. The Ugandan force is one of four national contingents that have comprised the African Union's counter-LRA Regional Taskforce (RTF) since 2012. The other four contingents include troops from CAR, Congo, and South Sudan, though the contingent from CAR has never been effectively operational.

In Haute Kotto prefecture, where diamond and gold mines are concentrated east of Bria and near Sam Ouandja, 43% of all LRA attacks took place in mining camps, targeting food, cash, electronics, tents, and periodically diamonds and gold. LRA groups also targeted such mining sites in the surge of LRA attacks in early 2016.

C. HOW LOOTINGS IN CONGO SUSTAIN LRA POACHING OPERATIONS

In Congo's Haut Uele province, much LRA looting in 2015 was done to sustain a particular LRA group that had been tasked by Kony to collect 100 ivory tusks from Garamba National Park. Led by commanders Aligatch and Otto Ladere, this group of approximately 50 people camped from January–September 2015 in Garamba National Park, near the historic Camp Kiswahili site senior LRA commanders occupied from 2006–2008 during the Juba Peace Talks. Teams of poachers, consisting of between two and four men each, rotated in and out of the main camp, ensuring that at least three teams were poaching at any given moment. Each team hunted elephants for approximately one week, or until they killed an elephant. If a team did kill an elephant, it would remove the tusks and immediately leave without collecting the meat, in order to ensure they avoided confrontation with park rangers or larger groups of armed poachers who may have heard the gunshots. Once they returned to the main camp, Aligatch or another senior commander ensured the tusks were hidden in locations kept secret from most members of the group. In late 2015, LRA commanders transported dozens of tusks poached from Garamba Park to Joseph Kony's group, which was operating along the border of CAR and the Kafia Kingi enclave.

While poaching teams targeted elephants in the park, other small groups of LRA fighters looted food from travelers along the Dungu-Duru road and Dungu-Faradje road, returning to replenish the poaching teams and other group members with supplies. LRA forces periodically set up roadblocks and looted multiple travelers over the course of several hours. Such attacks are frequently timed for busy market days when travelers are more likely to have large amounts of money and supplies with them.

LRA attack locations in Congo, 2014–2015

In a field 7.3%
In the bush 16.8%
Along a road 45.7%
In town/In a home 30.2%
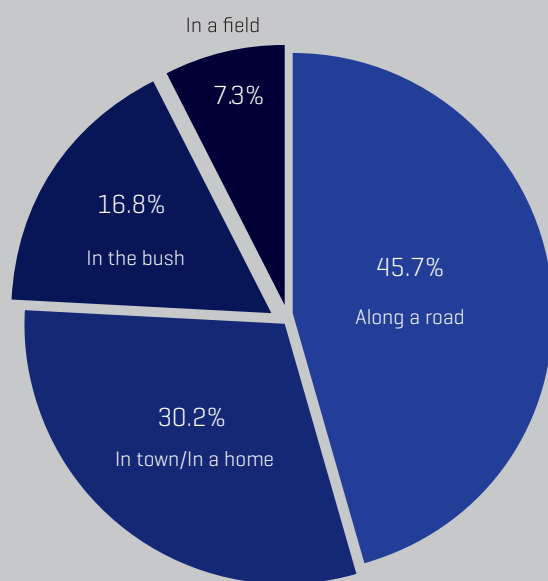
In July 2015, LRA fighters adjusted their tactics to be less violent. As one LRA defector who later escaped from that group explained:

In July 2015, our group received orders from Kony that we should not violently loot civilians. One new tactic we used was to ambush a small group of civilians traveling together, such as a husband and wife. We would then give money to one person and force them to go into the market to buy goods and return with them. Only then would we release their companions.

Just weeks after Kony's order was given, early warning networks in northern Congo began to report this new tactic. In one incident recorded in August 2015, near the community of Kpaika, just west of Garamba Park, LRA rebels took five cyclists captive. They then gave one of the captives several hundred dollars in cash and told him to travel to Dungu, the largest town in the region, and return with supplies, holding his companions hostage for two days until he returned.

Aligatch's group's strategy of targeting travelers near Garamba Park helps explain why LRA attacks in Congo were nearly three times more likely to occur along roads in 2015 than LRA attacks in CAR. In Haut Uele province, where the park is located, more than 50% of all LRA attacks from 2014–2015 took place along a road.

D. THE LRA'S SHIFT TOWARDS TRANSACTIONAL SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In recent years, as its fighting strength has diminished, LRA groups have evolved to avoid detection by troops from the AU RTF, US military, and UN peacekeeping missions. Large LRA groups have fragmented, and LRA commanders have increasingly sought to combine traditional looting attacks with less violent and therefore less conspicuous survival strategies.

In some cases, LRA forces simply use their reputation for violence to intimidate civilians into providing them with supplies without having to actually commit acts of violence. LRA groups also frequently loot valuables such as ivory, gold, diamonds, and cash only to later peacefully trade for or purchase needed supplies. Looted cash is used in incidents where LRA forces use hostages as leverage to force people to buy supplies for them, as happened in the August 2015 incident near Kpaika, Congo.

In other cases, LRA forces ask local authorities to allow them safe access to markets (Tadu, Congo, February 2015) or compensate looting victims with materials looted in previous attacks, such as motorcycle batteries (Yangou Pendere, CAR, July 2015). LRA groups may believe that civilians are less likely to report their presence to military forces if they benefit from their interactions. However, even as the LRA relies on civilian populations for trading activities, it ultimately must extort other individuals in those same communities for the resources to engage in such transactions.

In the border area between Sudan's South Darfur State, the Kafia Kingi enclave, and CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture, LRA groups have succeeded in establishing regular transactional relationships with several actors. Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) stationed in South Darfur and Kafia Kingi helped introduce LRA combatants to traders in that area as early as 2010, and LRA bodyguards who defected from Kony's group in June 2015 reported some traders made regular visits to LRA camps to purchase ivory. Former LRA combatants report that while LRA forces usually seek to avoid dangerous groups of armed Sudanese riders, who they refer to as Janjaweed, they have on occasion traded ivory or gold to them for supplies.

Beginning in late 2013, LRA forces established informal relationships with several ex-Seleka commanders near the Central African towns of Nzako and Bria.[2] Since then, ex-Seleka commanders have supplied LRA groups on at least ten occasions. In some cases, Seleka officers have reportedly worked with community leaders to offer LRA groups food simply in an attempt to encourage them to minimize looting raids on civilians. One such arrangement was brokered by Seleka officers in mid-2014, resulting in communities along the Bria–Yalinga axis providing LRA groups with food. Seleka officers reportedly brokered a similar agreement in April 2015 to provide an LRA group operating along the Bria–Ouadda axis with food.

Despite quieter stretches, LRA groups periodically launch a series of attacks reminiscent of their more violent past. The LRA attacks in eastern CAR in early 2016 included an attack in which LRA forces burned down most of the village of Zabe, as well as an attack in which they looted a Catholic mission in Bakouma and harassed several Latin American nuns.

LRA area of operations and trafficking routes

Legend

——	International Boundary
····	Administrative Boundary
•	Community
	LRA area of operations, 2012–2015*
→	Approximated route used by LRA groups use to traffic ivory, gold, and diamonds
■	Attacks in 2014 and 2015 in which LRA forces looted more than $500 in cash
■	Markets or locations where LRA members reportedly trade for food and other supplies, and possibly sell ivory
■	Areas where LRA forces loot gold and diamonds from artisinal miners
■	LRA forces illegally harvested 150 tusks from poached elephants in Garamba National Park between 2012–2015
■	Meetings between Seleka and LRA, some of which involved Seleka facilitating the transfer of food and supplies to LRA groups

* Note: Between December 2014 and February 2015 LRA groups abducted at least 14 people from the village of Morobanda in the CAR's Nana-Gribizi prefecture, which lies 200km west of Bria and is not shown on this map.

SECTION II: INSIDE THE LRA

A. JOSEPH KONY'S USE OF ILLICIT TRADE TO AVOID DETECTION

The LRA has yet to form a strategic alliance with ex-Seleka factions or any other armed group, limiting their interactions to sporadic meetings and exchanges. Still, the ability to resupply via illicit trade networks in the Sudan–Kafia Kingi–CAR border area has an important strategic value for the LRA groups that operate there, including Kony's group. LRA attacks on civilians elsewhere are often quickly reported to Ugandan and US forces, forming a crucial stream of intelligence on the location of LRA groups. But access to markets for illicit materials in South Darfur and Kafia Kingi allows Kony's entourage to acquire needed supplies while minimizing attacks on civilians. This provides senior LRA officers with an additional layer of security from Ugandan and US forces trying to gather intelligence on their location. Kony also orders LRA groups operating further south in CAR and in Congo to bring him supplies, further ensuring that there is little overlap between his area of operations and where LRA attacks are most frequent.

Kony's reported locations, 2011–2015
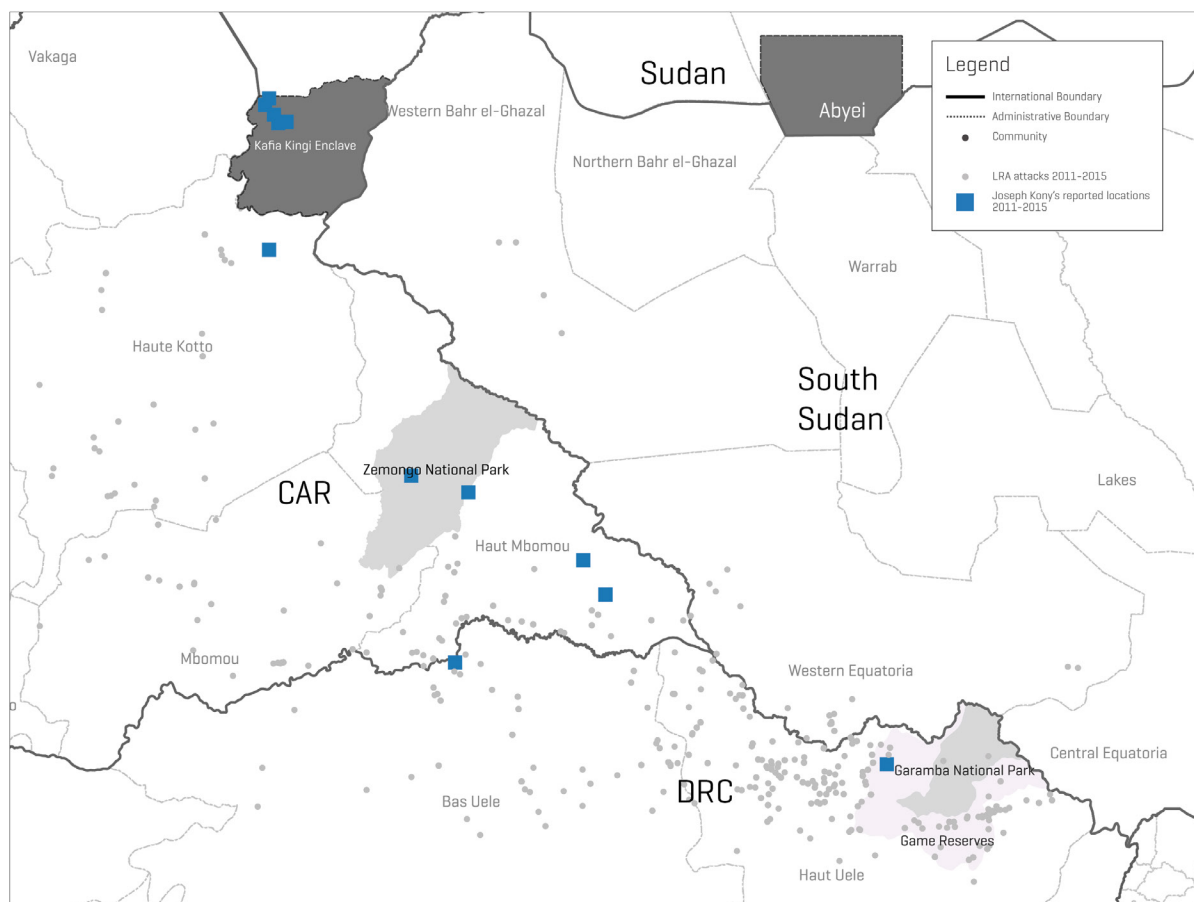
B. THE LRA COMMAND STRUCTURE BEGINS TO SPLINTER

Kony's decision to fragment LRA groups and disperse them across eastern CAR and northeastern Congo has helped minimize the chances of detection by Ugandan and US military forces. It has also made it more difficult for him to maintain control over the LRA command structure. To do so, he has created an inner circle of loyalists that includes his two eldest sons (Salim and Ali), several former bodyguards (Aligatch), and even several of his "wives." He punishes combatants who disobey or disappoint him, either demoting and beating them or ordering them executed. In 2013, Kony personally ordered the execution of as many as five LRA officers who displeased him.

Such harsh and exclusionary measures periodically backfire. In January 2015, senior LRA commander Dominic Ongwen defected after being beaten and threatened with death on Kony's orders. Ongwen had long had a complicated relationship with Kony, periodically defying his orders with an audacity few other LRA commanders dared to show. LRA defectors report that Kony was finally driven to such drastic measures with Ongwen after learning Ongwen was involved in a plan to defect with other LRA commanders, including Achaye Doctor. In November 2014, Achaye Doctor deserted with eight other Ugandan LRA combatants, as well as several non-Ugandan fighters and women. After learning of Ongwen's role in the plot, Kony ordered Ongwen punished, leading to his eventual escape.

Though Achaye Doctor's group separated from Kony's control, it did not defect. Instead, the group established a camp near the town of Gwane in Congo's Bas Uele province. Throughout 2015 the group looted civilians in towns such as Bili, Bakpolo, and Digba. In April 2015, it demonstrated its strength by ambushing a FARDC unit, reportedly killing several soldiers and looting their weapons and uniforms.

The fallout from Ongwen's defection continued in May 2015, when seven bodyguards in Kony's group defected with unprecedented boldness. Instead of escaping covertly, they fired on Kony and other senior LRA officers as they made their escape, and later repelled an attack by an LRA group Kony sent to capture them. They cited Kony's harsh treatment of Ongwen and other fighters as part of the reason for their escape.

Seven LRA combatants who defected in eastern CAR in May 2015, pictured with US military and AU RTF troops. (Photo credit: New Vision Uganda)

Though Ongwen is now facing judicial proceedings at The Hague, his defection continues to reverberate within the LRA's inner circle. In February 2016, senior LRA commander Okot Odek defected in eastern CAR, allegedly after Kony accused him of helping Ongwen escape. Odek is a former brigade commander in the LRA, and more recently was one of Kony's most trusted bodyguards.[3] Though Odek was able to escape, Kony allegedly oversaw the recent execution of Jon Bosco Kibwola, another senior LRA commander who he accused of assisting in Ongwen's defection.

In eastern CAR, at least one other LRA group, led by Onencan Unita, has been isolated from Kony's control. Unita was formerly close to Kony and was a senior-ranking officer in the LRA's spiritual wing, but he fell from Kony's favor sometime after the collapse of the Juba Peace Talks.[4] Along with several other officers, he was demoted and "imprisoned" within the LRA. He was reportedly released in early 2014, but he and several other LRA officers were separated from their larger group in April 2014 following an attack by Ugandan RTF troops near Bakouma, CAR. The military operations also resulted in the capture of a junior LRA officer, Charles Okello, and helped spur the defection of Opio Sam and several other LRA commanders.

In June 2015, Unita's group established independent contact with ex-Seleka officers near Bria to acquire food, demonstrating how relationships with external groups can help weaken the dependence of LRA commanders on Kony's leadership. As of late 2015, it remained unclear whether Unita's group was still disconnected from Kony and the formal LRA command structure. Other Ugandans in this group include Olworo, Watmon, Bosco Loriada, and Langoya, as well as several female Ugandan abductees.

LRA commanders Olworo (seated, red cap) and Onencan Unita (seated, purple sleeveless shirt) during a meeting with community leaders and ex-Seleka representatives near Bria, CAR, in June 2015. (Photo credit: available upon request)

C. STABILIZATION OF THE LRA'S CORE FIGHTING FORCE SINCE 2014

Despite unhappiness with Kony, the rate of attrition in the LRA's core fighting force of adult Ugandan males has declined sharply in recent years. In the 20 months between November 2012 and June 2014, the LRA lost at least 51 Ugandan combatants: 32 defected, 14 killed or captured in battle, and five executed on Kony's orders. In the 20 months between July 2014 and February 2016, only nine Ugandan combatants defected to external forces, though some others have separated from Kony's control.

The decrease in LRA combatant defections is particularly troubling for counter-LRA initiatives, and is likely linked to several factors. Ugandan RTF forces frequently attacked large LRA groups in 2013 and 2014, particularly in eastern CAR and Kafia Kingi. Such incidents created opportunities for LRA members to defect and reinforced the risks of remaining within the LRA. Since July 2014, RTF clashes with LRA forces have dropped, allowing LRA commanders to tighten control over their groups and making escape a less urgent priority for individuals interested in defecting.

The decrease in defections may also be linked to changes in defection messaging. Between 2011 and 2014, counter-LRA actors consistently targeted LRA groups with myriad defection messages, delivered via airdropped fliers, aerial loudspeakers, FM and shortwave radio, and interactions with civilians, particularly hunters. These messages help counter the internal propaganda used by LRA leaders to dissuade rank-and-file fighters and mid-level commanders from defecting. Between late 2014 and late 2015, the combined efforts carried out by NGOs, the US military, UN peacekeepers, and local communities continued, but the frequency and geographic reach of the messaging was reduced. The reduced volume of messaging, the LRA's increasingly remote area of operation, and the difficulty of targeting fragmented groups have all likely contributed to the slowdown in defections. Conversely, in light of multiple testimonies from recent LRA defectors indicating strong disillusionment within LRA ranks, an increase in the frequency, coverage, and dynamism of defection messaging may catalyze more defections of long-term LRA combatants.

The LRA's attrition of male Ugandan combatants, 2012–2015
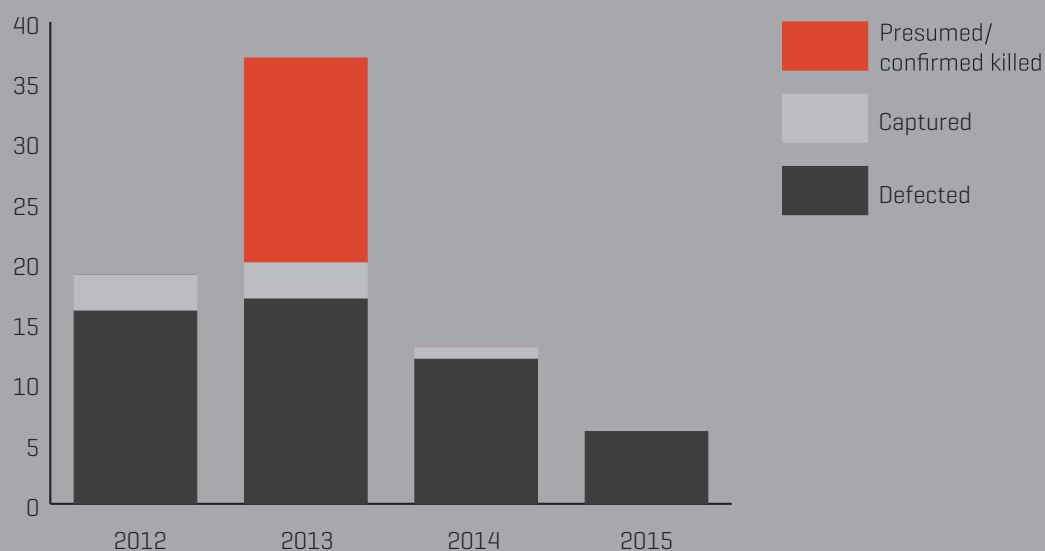
D. CONTINUED ABDUCTION AND RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN

Even the most notorious senior LRA officers are dependent on abducted women and children for their day-to-day survival. Women and children collect food and water, cook, carry possessions from camp to camp, and serve as forced "wives" and occasionally as combatants. Kony and other senior commanders particularly value long-term women and children abductees (those who have spent at least six months in LRA captivity) because they understand the LRA's day-to-day logistical requirements. The LRA is also unable to recruit Ugandan males to replace those who defect or are killed, making the group increasingly reliant on abductees from CAR and Congo to fill in the lower echelons of its ranks.

The prevailing wisdom in recent years has been that the LRA is too weak and disorganized to recruit and retain new abductees, creating the perception that the group is consistently decreasing in strength. And indeed, most LRA abductions since 2012 have been intentionally temporary, usually targeting adults that are forced to porter looted goods towards remote LRA camps before being released. However, since mid-2014, LRA commanders have launched several raids targeting children, dozens of which have since been incorporated into the group.

One of the bolder recruitment drives occurred from October 2014–February 2015, when LRA forces abducted 17 children and youth from Ouaka and Nana-Gribizi prefectures in eastern CAR that are further west than the LRA's typical area of operations. The first three were abducted in October 2014, when Onencan Unita's group abducted and integrated two young women and one boy near Atongo-Bakari in Ouaka. Between December 2014 and February 2015, an LRA group abducted 14 additional children from the village of Morobanda in Nana-Gribizi, hundreds of kilometers from the group's normal area of operations. One year after the Morobanda raids, LRA forces have succeeded in retaining most of their forced recruits, with the exception of six children and one woman who have managed to escape after months in captivity.

In Congo, Achaye Doctor's splinter group launched a similar recruitment drive in early 2015. In a series of attacks on towns in western Bas Uele province, his group abducted approximately 15 Congolese boys and 11 young Congolese females. The boys have since received firearms training and many have been assigned as bodyguards to specific Ugandan commanders. Most of the girls and young women were distributed to the Ugandan combatants as "wives," while one was reportedly given as a "wife" to a Congolese fighter who was abducted in 2008. It is very rare for non-Ugandan fighters to be given "wives" in the LRA, but Achaye Doctor may have relaxed such rules when he separated from Kony's control.

The LRA's targeting of children has intensified during the surge of attacks in eastern CAR in early 2016. LRA groups have abducted 54 children in eastern CAR so far this year, 41 of whom remain in captivity or are otherwise unaccounted for. These 54 children comprise an unusually high proportion of the total 217 people abducted by the LRA in eastern CAR so far in 2016. In all of 2015, the LRA abducted 113 people in eastern CAR, only 16 of whom were children.

It is too early to tell if LRA commanders will try to integrate the children abducted in recent weeks into the group as child soldiers and camp laborers or simply release them after a longer-than-usual period of transporting looted goods. The recruitment drives by LRA groups in late 2014 and early 2015 suggest that the LRA will seek to train at least some of the recent abductees.

E. TRENDS IN WOMEN AND CHILDREN RETURNING FROM THE LRA

The LRA's recruitment of children stands in contrast to the group's intentional release of long-term women and children abductees on several occasions in recent years. In March 2013, Kony ordered the release of 28 long-term women and children captives near the remote village of Digba in Ango Territory of Congo's Bas Uele province. In August and September 2014, Kony ordered the release of more than 70 additional long-term abductees near Digba. In August 2015, LRA fighters released 24 long-term women and children captives in Congo, though it remains unclear whether they did so on Kony's orders.

The apparent contradiction between parallel recruitment and release of long-term abductees is likely linked to their specific demographics. 42 of the dependents released in the incidents mentioned above were children below the age of 10, and many of the girls and women released were pregnant or mothers of young children. All would have had trouble keeping pace with highly mobile LRA groups. Newer recruits are usually older (between 10-20) and more capable of arduous treks, performing exhausting camp labor, and participating in looting raids.

Historically, LRA commanders frequently arranged meetings in which they transferred abductees between groups in order to balance the ratios of dependents to fighters in each group. The fragmentation of the LRA in recent years has made it more difficult for different LRA groups to meet, meaning that some may have a need for additional recruits while others have too few fighters and must release dependents to stay mobile.

Nationality of long-term women and children returnees from the LRA, 2012–2015
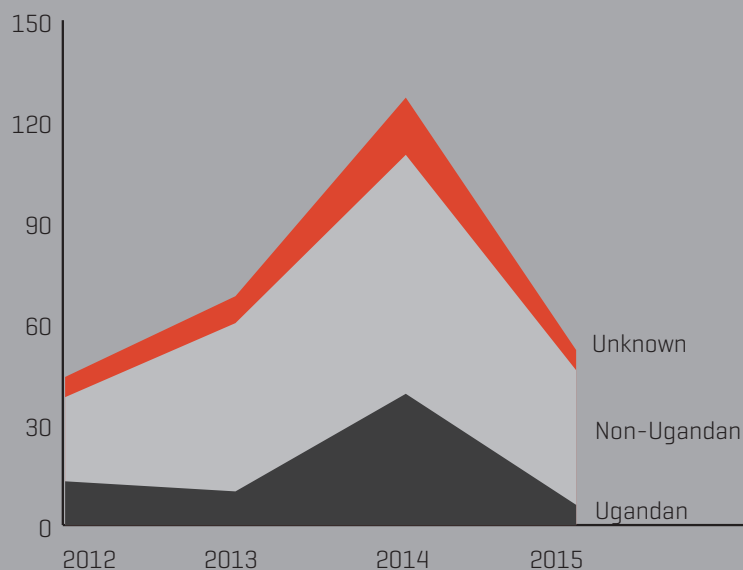
The decrease in the number of captives released in 2015 relative to 2014 may also reflect the low rate of Ugandan combatant defections since mid-2014. With the number of LRA combatants relatively stabilized, there may be less pressure to release women and children than there was in mid-2014, which followed a 20-month period in which the LRA suffered extensive losses to its fighting capacity.

SECTION III: THE LRA IN CONTEXT

Since 2006, the LRA has operated in a vast swath of territory encompassing eastern CAR, northeastern Congo, western South Sudan, and parts of South Darfur and the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave. This region is among the most remote and marginalized on the continent, with sparse infrastructure and a limited formal economy. The people living there are not a notable constituency in any of the four national capitals, giving ruling elites little incentive to directly respond to LRA violence or request more robust international interventions. The explosion of civil conflict in CAR and South Sudan since 2013 has further sidelined the crisis, while continued geopolitical tension between Kampala and Kinshasa and between Kampala and Khartoum has inhibited cross-border coordination in closing off LRA safe havens. Meanwhile, LRA violence has exacerbated sectarian tensions between agricultural and herding communities and political tensions between affected communities and their governments—ripple effects that may outlast Kony himself.

A. LACK OF STATE PRESENCE IN EASTERN CAR

The Central African government has long had a limited presence in eastern CAR, exposing a relatively ungoverned space to be exploited by various non-state armed groups. The LRA launched its first major attacks in eastern CAR in early 2008 when they abducted dozens of people in several attacks near the town of Obo with complete impunity. In 2009, following the Ugandan military's attack on their bases in Congo's Garamba National Park, Kony and other senior LRA officers fled to eastern CAR, hoping that they could escape military pressure.

Former Central African President Francois Bozizé had little interest in protecting civilians in the far southeastern corner of CAR, but he did allow Ugandan troops to enter the country to pursue the LRA. This permission evolved into an outsourcing of all counter-LRA operations to Ugandan RTF troops, who operated across a broad swath of eastern CAR from 2009–2012.[5] To escape the Ugandan RTF troops, LRA forces moved further north in 2010, clashing several times with fighters from the UFDR rebel group, to whom Bozizé had ceded control of Sam Ouandja and other diamond mining areas in Haute Kotto prefecture in return for promises not to threaten his regime in Bangui.

Despite that arrangement, Bozizé's continued marginalization of eastern CAR contributed to the decision of the UFDR and several other rebel groups to briefly unite as the Seleka coalition and overthrow his government in March 2013. The subsequent explosion of sectarian tensions not only further relegated the LRA crisis to the geopolitical sidelines, it also created more space for the LRA to operate. The coup shuttered counter-LRA operations for several months and forced the US to abandon a newly constructed base in the town of Djemah and consolidate their military advisers in the more secure town of Obo. In late 2013, LRA commanders capitalized on the renewed insecurity to establish contact with ex-Seleka forces near the town of Nzako, leading to the periodic provision of food to LRA groups.

LRA members John Garang, Bosco Loriada, and Odong Lubela, part of an LRA group led by Otto "Sam" Ladere that met with community leaders and Seleka representatives near Nzako, CAR, in September and October 2013.
(Photo credit: available upon request)

LRA-affected areas of eastern CAR continue to be governed by a patchwork of state, non-state, and international armed groups. Ugandan RTF troops and US advisers, with authorization from the AU and Central African government, have effective responsibility for security in Haut Mbomou prefecture and parts of Mbomou prefecture. Troops from the peacekeeping mission in CAR (MINUSCA) control several major towns in Mbomou prefecture and Haute Kotto prefecture, such as Bangassou and Bria. Ex-Seleka forces are present primarily in northern and eastern Haute Kotto prefecture, including Ouadda and Ouanda Djalle.

The LRA continues to exploit the gaps in this patchwork of security forces, using eastern CAR to transport illicit ivory, gold, and diamonds and loot food and other necessary supplies. With the Central African government and international troops so far failing to adequately protect civilians in eastern CAR from LRA attacks, in recent months ex-Seleka forces have launched several unilateral deployments against LRA groups. Though little has come of these deployments so far, they could potentially boost the credibility and legitimacy of ex-Seleka forces among local populations and undermine efforts to expand effective and credible state presence in eastern CAR.

B. TENSIONS ESCALATE INTO FIGHTING IN WESTERN EQUATORIA

LRA rebels first entered South Sudan's Western Equatoria State in 2005, en route to establishing new bases in Congo's Garamba National Park. Sporadic attacks continued for several years, peaking in 2009 and 2010 when Operation Lightning Thunder scattered LRA groups from their safe haven in the park. Unlike in Congo and CAR, LRA attacks in South Sudan have plummeted since then, with only five since 2012.

The drop in LRA violence in South Sudan is due to a variety of factors, including the presence of Ugandan RTF and UN peacekeeping (UNMISS) troops, an engaged local government, and relatively developed road and mobile phone infrastructure. Local self-defense groups dominated by the Zande ethnic group, referred to as Arrow Boys or Home Guards, also proved to be effective at quickly responding to LRA attacks, creating the strongest deterrent to LRA incursions in many villages.[6]

The self-defense groups arose amid frustration that troops from the South Sudanese military (SPLA) were unwilling to protect community members from the LRA. Zande frustration with the SPLA's lack of response to LRA violence is set in the context of a longer history of sectarian tension between Zande communities and the SPLA (which many Zande see as a force dominated by Dinka troops), as well as Dinka herdsmen that many Zande believe encroach on their agricultural territory.[7]

Until 2015, Western Equatoria had remained relatively unaffected by the killings and massive displacement in other areas of South Sudan that erupted following the fall-out between rival factions of the SPLA in December 2013. However, the civil war exacerbated political and ethnic tensions in Western Equatoria, and in mid-2015 clashes between armed youth and SPLA soldiers began throughout the state. In August 2015, President Kiir ordered the dismissal and detention of Joseph Bakosoro, the popular elected governor of Western Equatoria.

In the meantime, at least two armed groups have started operating in areas of Western Equatoria formerly affected by the LRA: the South Sudan People's Patriotic Front (SSPPF) and the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM).[8] Both groups include former Arrow Boys in their ranks, though neither group has received the degree of support from local government and community leaders as the Arrow Boys did from 2009–2012.[9] Both groups have said that one of their reasons for taking up arms is because the central government failed to effectively protect civilians from the LRA and then didn't recognize or reward the Arrow Boys for their success in repelling the LRA.

The two armed groups, particularly the SSPPF, began to attack civilians with increasing frequency in September 2015, primarily to loot supplies and forcibly recruit young men into their ranks. The SPLA's heavy-handed response has included the burning and looting of civilian neighborhoods in several communities, including Yambio, as well as alleged extrajudicial detention and killings of Zande men accused of associating with the rebel groups.[10] Thousands of civilians from Yambio, Ezo, and other towns have periodically fled the fighting, taking refuge with host families in Western Equatoria or in LRA-affected areas of Congo.

The conflict has severely disrupted the ability of Western Equatorians affected by the LRA crisis to resume their livelihoods, send children to school, and reintegrate former LRA abductees. It has also raised concerns that the LRA will seek to exploit insecurity in Western Equatoria, as they have in areas of eastern CAR, by looting villages in areas where state authorities and international military forces have limited access.
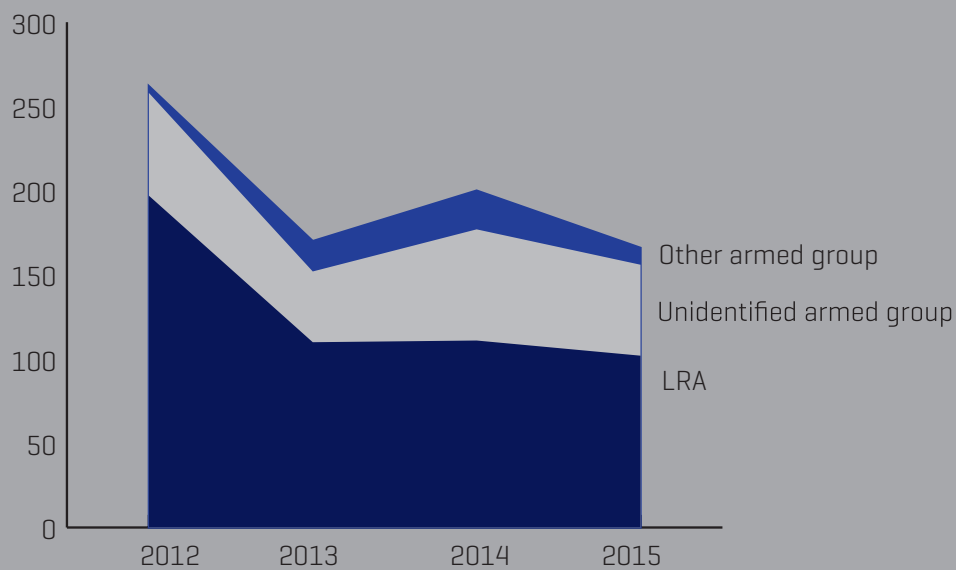
C. ATTACKS BY UNIDENTIFIED ARMED GROUPS IN CONGO

LRA-affected areas of Congo's Haut Uele and Bas Uele provinces lie more than 1,500km from Kinshasa, and Congolese government officials have never made responding to violence there a priority. The Congolese military has regular troops deployed in the Ueles and a contingent dedicated to the AU RTF. Though these troops protect major towns and periodically clash with LRA groups, they have been unable to consistently protect most civilians. At times, Congolese government officials have minimized or denied that the LRA still has a presence in the country, suggesting that reported LRA attacks are actually perpetrated by local bandits or poachers.[11] Such statements are a source of frustration for affected communities and create a politicized atmosphere for reporting on violence by armed groups.

This dynamic has been exacerbated in recent years as the LRA has begun attacking civilians in smaller groups and abducting and killing fewer people per incident, a modus operandi that more closely resembles that of bandits, rogue security forces, and poachers. To maintain the credibility of its reporting, LRA Crisis Tracker analysts adhere to a consistent methodology when assessing the perpetrators of attacks in LRA-affected areas. Due to the increased difficulty of identifying perpetrators, over the past three years an increasing proportion of perpetrators have been marked as "unidentified armed groups" for attacks in which information is missing or inconclusive.[12]

In LRA-affected areas of Congo's Haut Uele province, 59% of all attacks in 2015 recorded by the Crisis Tracker were categorized as LRA attacks, falling between the 55% figure in 2014 and the 64% figure in 2013. Attacks by "unidentified armed groups" and known "other armed groups" comprised 23% and 6% respectively of all attacks in Haut Uele in 2015, both slight decreases from 2014. The difficulty of determining the perpetrators of armed attacks in Haut Uele suggests the need for the Congolese government, and international partners such as the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo (MONUSCO), to take greater steps to protect civilians from all armed groups, regardless of their identity.

LRA forces also clashed with troops from the Congolese military (FARDC) along roads on four occasions between November 2014 and March 2015. In total, the LRA killed more than 20 FARDC soldiers between November 2014 and December 2015, more than the total of the previous three years combined.

Attacks in LRA-affected areas of Haut Uele province, 2012–2015

Other armed group

Unidentified armed group

LRA

D. THE LRA'S PRECARIOUS FOOTHOLD IN SUDAN

In 2009, with LRA groups under intense pressure from Ugandan military offensives in CAR and Congo, Kony sent a delegation of LRA officers to establish contact with the SAF near Dafak, a small garrison in the disputed Kafia Kingi enclave perched between Sudan and South Sudan. After an initially tense reception, SAF officers provided the LRA groups with supplies and a promise to consider more robust support in the future.

The SAF ultimately decided against outfitting the LRA with extensive supplies and armaments, but provided support equally critical to the LRA's survival. Beginning in 2010, the SAF allowed Kony and other senior officers safe haven in Kafia Kingi, where Ugandan troops face significant restrictions to access.[13] The SAF also intervened with local chiefs to ensure the LRA could safely enter trading hubs in Kafia Kingi and nearby South Darfur, such as the village of Songo. Traders in this area have since become the LRA's primary outlet for bartering Congolese ivory in exchange for supplies.

Sudan's harboring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi enclave is the latest upswing in a cycle of opportunistic collaboration between the two parties that dates back to 1994. The military training, safe haven, weapons, and supplies the Sudanese government provided to the LRA from 1994–2004 were critical to the group's growth into an increasingly deadly rebel force. By 2004, Sudanese support had waned, leading to a period of prolonged disengagement before the LRA reestablished contact with the SAF in Kafia Kingi in 2009.

The cycles of Sudanese support to the LRA are closely tied to the status of Khartoum's relationship with the Ugandan government. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Sudan's support to the LRA was countered by Uganda's support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The drop in Sudanese support to the LRA occurred as the Sudanese civil war drew to a close and South Sudan moved closer to independence, creating hope for a lasting détente between the two regional rivals. However, the geopolitical jockeying continued, with Kampala supporting South Sudan in disputes with Sudan and periodically allowing the leaders of Darfuri rebel groups safe haven in Uganda. Sudan's tacit support to the LRA provides it with a bargaining chip in return, albeit a minor one.

The separate visits of the AU's LRA envoy and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni to Khartoum in September 2015 sparked some speculation that Sudan's tolerance of the LRA could come to a close. Though there has been no public evidence of change in Sudan's position towards the LRA, there are signs that the LRA's foothold there may be under threat. Unconfirmed media reports in January 2016 indicated that tensions between the LRA and peoples along the border between South Darfur and Kafia Kingi had culminated in local calls to expel the LRA from the area.[14] Other unconfirmed reports have indicated professional Sudanese poaching rings may be targeting LRA groups in the region for their ivory.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE LRA

For nearly three decades, the LRA has proven to be a remarkably resilient organization, skilled at evading military forces and capable of exploiting remote and poorly governed spaces in order to survive. Though the LRA is greatly weakened and unlikely to ever attain its peak fighting strength, Kony and his inner circle should not be underestimated. If given the chance, they are capable of clinging to survival while reconstituting their command structure and slowly training new recruits to replace lost fighters.

In the absence of a substantial disruption to the LRA's command structure, trends from recent years shed some light on what the group's impact on human security in central Africa may be in 2016. From 2011-2015, annual LRA attacks varied between 187 and 299, abductions between 474 and 649, and civilian killings between 13 and 150. During that time, LRA groups became less violent and increasingly targeted civilians living and traveling in remote areas of CAR and Congo, while also integrating themselves into networks trafficking illicit ivory, diamonds, and gold. Affected communities may see similar patterns of LRA activity in 2016.

Still, the volatile history of LRA violence cautions against overreliance on previous trends to predict future activity. The surge of LRA attacks and abductions in eastern CAR in early 2016, unprecedented in scale over the past several years, highlights how sudden changes in LRA violence affect communities. In lieu of predictions, we analyze and provide context for the major questions that will have bearing on the LRA's future:

Will the LRA fighting force continue to stem losses or even rebuild? LRA commanders have dramatically reduced losses from defections and military operations since mid-2014. Should they continue to minimize the loss of core Ugandan fighters and integrate non-Ugandan abductees from Morobanda and other locations, the LRA could slowly rebuild a fighting force that has dropped significantly, if unevenly, since 2008.

Will Kony be able to reassert control over LRA splinter groups? Though few Ugandan LRA defectors have returned home since mid-2014, an LRA group led by Achaye Doctor, and possibly another one led by Onencan Unita, have broken away from the LRA leadership and are operating independently. Unless Kony can reassert his authority over these groups, it may encourage other satellite LRA groups to splinter, leaving the LRA's inner circle increasingly isolated.

Will the LRA maintain its position in illicit trafficking networks? In recent years, Kony and his inner circle have increasingly relied on ivory collected in Congo's Garamba National Park to barter for supplies. Stiff competition from other poachers for a dwindling number of elephants, as well as enhanced anti-poaching initiatives, could limit the LRA's share of the ivory trade. In eastern CAR, the LRA's recent surge of violent attacks could spur ex-Seleka forces to pursue and attack LRA groups in order to gain local popularity and reopen valuable artisanal mines. Combined with the expansion of MINUSCA, AU RTF, and US military forces into Haute Kotto prefecture, the LRA could find it more difficult to loot diamonds and gold from artisanal miners.

Can the LRA continue to rely on Kafia Kingi as a safe haven? Kafia Kingi and South Darfur have been critical to Kony's survival since 2010, providing access to traders willing to buy ivory and a relative safe haven from Ugandan RTF and US troops. To maintain this strategic foothold, the LRA must avoid conflict with the more robust armed groups that operate there, particularly armed herders and Sudanese poachers that may see LRA groups as easy targets to acquire ivory. Should LRA leaders be forced to leave Kafia Kingi and South Darfur, Kony could seek refuge in Congo's remote and unprotected Bas Uele province.

END NOTES

1 Unless otherwise stated, information about LRA violence, activity, and internal dynamics is taken from the LRA Crisis Tracker (www.LRACrisisTracker.com) and interviews conducted by personnel from The Resolve and Invisible Children. LRA Crisis Tracker statistics cited in this report are accurate as of 23 February 2016.

2 Author interviews with civil society leaders and Seleka representatives, Bria, CAR, 29 June–3 July 2015. See also UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, "Letter dated 28 October 2014 from the Coordinator of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2127(2013)," S/2014/762, UN Security Council, 29 October 2014.

3 Ledio Cakaj, "On Okot Odek – a guide for journalists," When the Walking Defeats You, 10 February 2016.

4 Ledio Cakaj and Phil Lancaster, "Loosening Kony's Grip: Effective Defection Strategies for Today's LRA," The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, July 2013.

5 Bozizé occasionally restricted the Ugandan military's access to sensitive, mineral-rich areas such as Sam Ouandja and the Bakouma–Nzako corridor. Not by coincidence, the LRA has committed most of its large scale abduction and looting raids in the CAR in those same areas, including a daring attack on a French-owned uranium plant in Bakouma and the abduction of 70 people in several nearby raids in mid-2012. Paul Ronan, "The Kony Crossroads: President Obama's Chance to Define His Legacy on the LRA Crisis," The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, August 2015.

6 Author interviews with community leaders, government officials, and Arrow Boy leaders in Yambio, Ezo, Nzara, and Tambura, South Sudan, 2010–2016. See also Danish Refugee Council and Danish Demining Group, "Armed Violence and Stabilization in Western Equatoria," April 2013.

7 Author interviews with community leaders, government officials, and Arrow Boy leaders in Yambio, Ezo, Nzara, and Tambura, South Sudan, 2010–2015.

8 In October 2015, President Salva Kiir announced the division of South Sudan's 10 states into 28 states. Western Equatoria was divided into three states: Amadi, Gbudwe, and Maridi. The division has not yet been practically implemented. LRA activity in Western Equatoria following 2008 was concentrated primarily in the counties that now comprise Gbudwe State: Ezo, Nagero, Nzara, Tambura, and Yambio.

9 Author interviews with community leaders in Yambio, South Sudan, January 2016.

10 Author interviews with community leaders in Yambio, South Sudan, January 2016.

11 Ronan, "The Kony Crossroads," 2015.

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[12] The perpetrator of each attack is categorized as either "LRA," an "unidentified armed group," or an "other armed group." "Unidentified armed group" is used for attacks for which sources do not provide enough details to accurately identify the perpetrator. The assailants in these attacks could be rogue security forces, poachers, armed Mbororo herdsmen, LRA, or a different armed group. "Other armed group" is used for attacks for which there are enough details to definitively identify the perpetrator as an armed actor other than the LRA. Incidents of abuses against civilians in which state security forces are clearly identified as the perpetrator are recorded separately and not included in these three categories. See more on the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology here.

[13] Paul Ronan and Michael Poffenberger, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Sudan's Harboring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009-2013," The Resolve, April 2013.

[14] Radio Tamazuj, "Lord's Resistance Army sheltering and trading on Sudanese soil," 14 January 2016. Radio Tamazuj, "Fallata chief demands expulsion of LRA from Sudan's South Darfur state," 18 January 2016.

ABOUT THE LRA CRISIS TRACKER

Data reflected in this brief was collected as part of the LRA Crisis Tracker, a project of Invisible Children and The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative. The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in areas of Central Africa affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Through publication of regular reports and open-source sharing of collected data, the LRA Crisis Tracker aims to help overcome the current deficit of relevant and timely information related to the LRA crisis and to support improved policy and protection responses. For a comprehensive guide to the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit LRACrisisTracker.com

In the interest of continually strengthening the LRA Crisis Tracker dataset, The Resolve and Invisible Children welcome new sources of current or historical reports of LRA activity. To contribute information to the LRA Crisis Tracker project, please contact The Resolve at paul@theresolve.org.

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Invisible Children and The Resolve would like to recognize and thank the community-based Peace Committees and Local Protection Committees in eastern CAR and northeastern Congo whose invaluable contributions to the early warning network make the LRA Crisis Tracker project possible.