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Obama must learn from past mistakes in fight against Uganda's LRA

Obama's deployment of 100 American military advisers to Uganda could help defeat Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. But things could also go horribly wrong. That's what happened before. Still, the factors that led to past failure can be clearly identified – and hopefully avoided.

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posted October 26, 2011 at 11:13 am EDT

Washington

If President Obama's deployment of 100 American military advisers to Uganda helps defeat Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army in the ungoverned spaces of central Africa, it will be the fall of yet another 20th-century monster on Mr. Obama's watch. But as similar initiatives have done for over 20 years, it could also go horribly wrong.

That's what happened the last time the United States got involved in a campaign to get rid of Mr. Kony and the LRA – the failed 2008 "Operation Lightning Thunder." But the fate of this next attempt isn't sealed. The factors that led to the failure of Operation Lightning Thunder can be clearly identified, and should be carefully considered, particularly in regard to civilian protection.

The LRA used to be a Ugandan insurgency, but didn't have enough local support to recruit willing volunteers. The LRA leader, Kony, addressed that problem by abducting children and terrorizing those he claimed to be fighting for. Kony's brutality, coupled with an aggressive counterinsurgency on the part of the Ugandan military, put people living in northern Ugandans in a terrible position for many years. Since 2005, however, the LRA has been squeezed out of Uganda and has, in the process, mutated into a different kind of organization, eschewing political and national ideology altogether. It is now just a sick, predatory gang that thrives at the seams, in the cross-border hinterlands of weak and fragile states.

Since the late 1980s, whenever the Ugandan military has gone after Kony and his brainwashed band of traumatized conscripts and sex slaves, the LRA has punished civilians in the most brutal ways imaginable, including with mutilation, forced fratricide, rape, and cannibalism. The most recent example of this occurred under Operation Lightning Thunder. The initiative was launched in late 2008 following the collapse of peace negotiations between the Ugandan government and the LRA, when military forces from Uganda,

Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo coordinated an offensive to take out the menace once and for all.

At the time, an unprecedented level of international cooperation, particularly in this region of wary allies and historic enemies, was heralded as the missing ingredient in past attempts to deal with Kony and the LRA. To further bolster the viability of the operation, and demonstrate international backing for the initiative, the US provided intelligence and logistical support. Unfortunately, the operation failed for four critical reasons.

Unequal forces, unruly soldiers

First, the difficulties of coordinating such disparate military forces proved crippling from the start. While the Ugandan and South Sudanese soldiers benefited from similar training and compatible equipment, the Congolese forces were mostly comprised of undertrained and underpaid foot soldiers, and often preyed on the very civilians they were responsible for protecting. Add to this the lack of a common language, the widely inequitable salaries of the soldiers, and the historic mistrust among the forces and between them and civilians on the ground. The operation was nearly doomed from the outset.

To avoid these pitfalls this time around, American advisers (though in a supporting role) must better facilitate cooperation and discourage human rights violations. The US must also demand that governments in key LRA-affected countries hold their soldiers accountable for any atrocities committed during the course of the operation – a key deterrent to such behaviors taking place at all.

Rough terrain hindered transportation

Second, in Operation Lightning Thunder, basic operational hurdles were further compounded by the difficulties of the terrain's dense jungles, with virtually no roads or bridges for transporting military equipment.

Any military campaign now must heed these logistical lessons and better account for environmental obstacles to access and travel. While the US provides critical logistical and intelligence support, there is also a role for European countries, as well as key African nations like South Africa, Kenya, and Ethiopia, to provide transportation assets in addition to special forces.

A failed peace process

Third, the 2008 operation was tainted by the failures that preceded it. The Juba peace process had not succeeded in inducing Kony and his top officers to surrender peacefully, and there was a basic lack of incentive to compel them to do so. This time around, the US, Uganda, and other central African partners should not rule out diplomatic efforts. To be effective, negotiations with LRA leaders must include clear carrots and sticks – incentives that are actionable for both the LRA and Uganda's allies.

To begin with, the government of Uganda must make a clear distinction, and amend its laws accordingly, to determine who is eligible for amnesty and who is not. As it stands, hundreds of foot soldiers have received amnesty with varying degrees of success at reintegration into Ugandan society, while the amnesty status of mid- and top-level commanders remains ambiguous. This excludes, of course, those currently indicted by the International Criminal Court, including Kony, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Another complicating factor is the current predominance of non-Ugandans in the LRA, including many abducted Congolese and South Sudanese. Any amnesty or prosecutorial effort must take this into consideration. Countries must collaborate to address the cross-regional nature of the problem.

Similarly, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs have stalled in Uganda and not been implemented in other countries where the LRA has abducted civilians. These kinds of programs need to be coordinated by a regional body like the African Union, with the US and other nations serving in an advisory capacity and offering financial support.

Failure to protect civilians

The fourth and most devastating shortcoming of the last coordinated international campaign was its egregious failure to protect civilians. It is imperative that this time troops are properly trained and mandated to protect population centers vulnerable to LRA reprisal attacks, even if that means there are fewer soldiers available to fight the LRA as a result.

For these four main reasons, Operation Lightning Thunder failed. After several botched attempts at killing or capturing Kony, including an aerial bombing campaign in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo that succeeded in destroying an LRA camp but also included significant civilian casualties, momentum for the operation quickly fell apart.

As the LRA realized that both the political will and military capacities of the three armies were eroding, it went on a rampage of raping, mutilating, and killing civilians it suspected of supporting the operation. The Americans, perhaps not realizing the complexities confronting them from the start, were swiftly criticized by human rights organizations for failing to help ensure the protection of civilians and for providing support and intelligence for an operation that led to widespread human rights abuses. By mid-2009, the operation was effectively over, leaving a bitter taste in everyone's mouths.

Lessons for this time around

As a new campaign begins, if Uganda, the US, and other partners heed the lessons of Operation Lightning Thunder, they may avoid its failures as well. From Somalia to the Balkans to Libya, US involvement in the internal wars and conflicts of other nations has proven long and costly. Although the intervention in Libya is hardly comparable to this very limited military engagement in Uganda, it may end up serving as a model for these types of operations.

As President Obama stated in his speech at the National Defense University on March 28, 2011, “In such cases, we should not be afraid to act – but the burden of action should not be America’s alone.... Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all.”

In other words: Learn from your mistakes. Don’t bite off more than you can chew. Lead from behind. But do not be afraid to lead.

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