

The downside of the Kony 2012 video

What Jason did not tell Gavin and his army of invisible children

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A 30-minute [documentary](#) about Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony has been watched by tens of millions online. But will this mobilization of millions be subverted into yet another weapon in the hands of those who want to militarize the region further?

Only two weeks ago, Ugandan papers carried front-page reports from the highly respected Social Science Research Council of New York, accusing the Uganda army of atrocities against civilians in Central African Republic while on a mission to fight Joseph Kony and the LRA. The Army denied the allegations. Many in the civilian population, especially in the north, were skeptical of the denial. Like all victims, they have long and enduring memories.

The adult population recalls the brutal government-directed counterinsurgency campaign beginning 1986, and evolving into Operation North, the first big operation that people talk about as massively destructive for civilians, and creating the conditions that gave rise to the LRA of Joseph Kony and, before it, the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena.

Young adults recall the time from the mid-90s when most rural residents of the three Acholi districts was forcibly interned in camps - the Government claimed it was to 'protect' them from the LRA. But there were allegations of murder, bombing, and burning of entire villages, first to force people into the camps and then to force them to stay put. By 2005, the camp population grew from a few hundred thousand to over 1.8 million in the entire region - which included Teso and Lango - of which over a million were from the three Acholi districts. Comprising practically the entire rural population of the three Acholi districts, they were expected to live on handouts from relief agencies. According to the Government's own Ministry of Health, the excess mortality rate in these camps was approximately one thousand persons per week - inviting comparisons to the numbers killed by the LRA even in the worst year.

Determined to find a political solution to enduring mass misery, Parliament passed a bill in December 1999 offering amnesty to the entire leadership of the LRA provided they laid down their arms. The President refused to sign the bill.

Opposed to an amnesty, the President invited the ICC, newly formed in 2002, to charge that same LRA leadership with crimes against humanity. Moreno Ocampo grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Joseph Kony became the subject of the ICC's first indictment.

Critics asked why the ICC was indicting only the leadership of the LRA, and not also of government forces. Ocampo said only one step at a time. In his words: 'The criteria for selection of the first case was gravity. We analyzed the gravity of all crimes in northern Uganda committed by the LRA and the Ugandan forces. Crimes committed by the LRA were much more numerous and of much higher gravity than alleged crimes committed by the UPDF (Uganda Peoples Defense Force). We therefore started with an investigation of the LRA.' That 'first case' was in 2004. There has been none other in the eight years that have followed.

As the internment of the civilian population continued into its second decade, there was another attempt at a political solution, this time involving the new Government of South Sudan (GOSS). Under great pressure from both the population and from parliament, the government of Uganda agreed to enter into direct negotiations with the LRA, facilitated and mediated by GOSS. These dragged on for years, from 2006 on, but hopes soared as first the terms of the agreement, and then its finer details, were agreed on between the two sides. Once again, the only thing standing between war and peace was an amnesty for the top leadership of the LRA, Joseph Kony and Vincent Otti in particular. In the words of Vincent Otti, the second in command: '... to come out, the ICC must revoke the indictment... If Kony or Otti does not come out, no other rebel will come out.' Yet again, the ICC refused, calling for a military campaign to get Kony, joined by the Ugandan government which refused to provide guarantees for his safety. Predictably, the talks broke down and the LRA withdrew, first to the Democratic Republic of Congo and then to the Central African Republic.

The government responded with further militarization, starting with the disastrous Operation Lightning Thunder in the DRC in December, 2008, then sending thousands of Ugandan troops to the CAR, and then asking for American advisors. The ICC called on AFRICOM, the Africa Command of the US Army, to act as its implementing arm by sending more troops to capture Kony. The US under President Obama responded by sending an unspecified number of advisors armed with drones - though the US insists that these drones are unarmed for now.

Now Invisible Children has joined the ranks of those calling for the US to press for a military solution - presumably supported by a mostly children's army of over 70 million viewers of its video, Kony 2012. What is the LRA that it should merit the attention of an audience ranging from Hollywood

celebrities to 'humanitarian interventionists' to AFRICOM to children of America?

The LRA is a raggedy bunch of a few hundred at most, poorly equipped, poorly armed, and poorly trained. Their ranks mainly comprise those kidnapped as children and then turned into tormentors. It is a story not very different from that of abused children who in time turn into abusive adults. In short, the LRA is no military power.

Addressing the problem called the LRA does not call for a military operation. And yet, the LRA is given as the reason why there must be a constant military mobilization, at first in northern Uganda, and now in the entire region, why the military budget must have priority and, now, why the US must send soldiers and weaponry, including drones, to the region. Rather than the reason for accelerated military mobilization in the region, the LRA is the excuse for it.

The reason why the LRA continues is that its victims – the civilian population of the area – trust neither the LRA nor government forces. Sandwiched between the two, civilians need to be rescued from an ongoing military mobilization and offered the hope of a political process.

Alas, this message has no room in the Invisible Children video that ends with a call to arms. Thus one must ask: will this mobilization of millions be subverted into yet another weapon in the hands of those who want to militarize the region further? If so, this well-intentioned but unsuspecting army of children will be responsible for magnifying the very crisis to which they claim to be the solution.

The 70 million plus who have watched the Invisible Children video need to realize that the LRA – both the leaders and the children pressed into their service – are not an alien force but sons and daughters of the soil. The solution is not to eliminate them physically, but to find ways of integrating them into (Ugandan) society.

Those in the Ugandan and the US governments – and now apparently the owners of Invisible Children – must bear responsibility for regionalizing the problem as the LRA and, in its toe, the Ugandan army and US advisors crisscross the region, from Uganda to DRC to CAR. Yet, at its core the LRA remains a Ugandan problem calling for a Ugandan political solution.

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* This article was first published on the website of the [Makerere Institute of Social Research](#).

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I am also appalled at the publicity the kony2012 video has received. I heard about it from my 14 yr.old who takes it as 'news'!
I also understand the need to prosecute, and not just offer amnesty to inhumane brutes/ criminals against humanity.
Is this a problem that continues today? (Sorry for my ignorance!)
What do we need to do to help a political solution, without giving up the possibility of prosecuting in the future?

Tracy

What a pity that this article will not reach the millions who bought the dangerously simplistic 'Invisible children' film.

Dr. Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, Fahamu Refugee Programme