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U.S. troops moving slowly against Kony

Central Africans grow increasingly frustrated at failure to seize his militia

By Sudarsan Raghavan, Tuesday, April 17, 12:46 AM

OBO, Central African Republic — Behind razor wire and bamboo walls topped with security cameras sits one of the newest U.S. military outposts in Africa. U.S. Special Forces soldiers with tattooed forearms and sunglasses emerge daily in pickup trucks that carry weapons, supplies and interpreters — as well as the expectations of a vast region living in fear of a man and his brutal militia.



Joseph Kony's brutal militia has eluded militaries in central Africa

“The Americans have captured Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein,” said Bassiri Moke, a tribal chief. “Surely they can catch Joseph Kony.”

In this far-flung nook of central Africa, the United States has assumed a small but vital role in one of Africa's most vexing military challenges: to capture Kony and dismantle his Lord's Resistance Army. For nearly three decades, Kony's forces have [eluded the region's militaries](#), abducting tens of thousands of children, turning them into killers and sex slaves, and operating brazenly across a swath of territory the size of Texas.

But in the four months since the United States set up the outposts for the 100 soldiers dispatched to assist

regional militaries, frustration has mounted, particularly in this sprawling, densely forested country, where Kony is thought to be hiding.

Local and regional military officials had hoped that the United States would swiftly deploy its satellites, surveillance drones and other sophisticated technology to track Kony's whereabouts. But that hasn't happened, the officials said.

Instead, the LRA has continued to commit abuses. Although thought to be severely fractured, the militia has staged 11 attacks near Obo and 13 in neighboring Congo after a nearly year-long lull in violence.

"The LRA has reappeared," said Martin Modove, the head of the Catholic diocese in Obo. "The presence of the Americans has not changed anything. We just see the Americans driving or walking in town. We don't see what they are doing to catch Kony."

The several dozen U.S. soldiers deployed to Obo are providing support not only to troops from the Central African Republic, but also to a contingent from neighboring Uganda, whose continued pursuit of the Ugandan warlord has spilled into the Central African Republic and other neighboring countries since the militia leader was driven out of Uganda several years ago.

In addition to those posted in Obo, the U.S. soldiers dispatched to the Central African Republic include some in the town of Djema, to the north. Others in the region include small groups sent to Uganda, Congo and South Sudan.

Hilary Renner, a State Department spokeswoman, said that the American forces were serving only as advisers and that obstacles to finding Kony remain significant despite the capabilities of the U.S. military. Since being pushed out of Uganda several years ago, the LRA has terrorized villages in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Congo. The militia is now moving in small groups in dense jungle terrain in one of Africa's least developed regions, with no basic road and telecommunications infrastructure.

"These conditions help Joseph Kony and other top LRA commanders to evade military forces," Renner said in an e-mail.

According to Human Rights Watch, Uganda's military has committed [numerous abuses](#) in its quest for Kony in the north of the country, including killings, routine beatings, rapes, and prolonged and arbitrary detention of civilians. Olara Otunnu, a former U.N. undersecretary general, has publicly described the Ugandan army's role as tantamount to genocide.

In Obo, a Ugandan officer reportedly killed a teen over a dispute involving a cellphone. Another soldier is said to have tried to force tribal chief Moke's daughter to marry him at gunpoint. In nearby areas, communities have ordered the Ugandans to leave.

"Nobody here trusts the Ugandans," said Clement Rutebol, the head of Jupedec, a local aid agency assisting LRA victims. "I don't understand why the Americans are partners with them."

Renner said the United States believes that "the Ugandan government is committed to apprehending Joseph Kony and top LRA commanders and ending the LRA's atrocities." She said Uganda has responded publicly to recent allegations of abuses by its soldiers and has pledged to act against those responsible.

Fears of LRA regrouping

The arrival of the U.S. military contingent comes at a time when the [LRA is at its weakest](#) since Kony created it in the 1980s to overthrow Uganda's government. The United States has designated the militia a

terrorist organization; the International Criminal Court wants to put Kony on trial on charges of crimes against humanity.

Today, the militia numbers no more than a few hundred fighters. The LRA has fragmented; many commanders and fighters have defected. It is no longer abducting children in large numbers and is staging attacks mostly to steal food and supplies.

“The LRA is in survival mode,” said Jean Sebastien Munie, a senior U.N. humanitarian official in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. “To refuel their insurgency with kids is not a target anymore of the movement.”

When asked why the United States wants to hunt down a severely weakened militia that poses no real threat to America, U.S. officials said the LRA remains a threat to regional peace and security and to their African partners. “In the past, the LRA has exploited any reduction in military or diplomatic pressure to regroup and rebuild their forces,” Renner said.

To be sure, Kony and the LRA are uncontroversial targets. Unlike others wanted by the ICC, such as Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, Kony has virtually no allies because of his unique brand of brutality. In Washington, there is strong bipartisan support for the U.S. role in the hunt for Kony, and in recent weeks, that quest has gained new prominence with the release of [videos](#) by the advocacy group Invisible Children that have gone viral on the Internet.

Some analysts say the main U.S. priority in the region is to maintain a vital counterterrorism partnership with Uganda and its president, Yoweri Museveni, whose forces form the bulk of an American-backed African Union force fighting al-Shabab, the Somali militia linked to al-Qaeda.

Since 2008, the United States has provided nearly \$50 million in logistical support and nonlethal equipment to Uganda’s military to fight the LRA and nearly \$500 million to support LRA victims in northern Uganda.

Critics say such monetary support helps explain Uganda’s failure to capture Kony despite many opportunities. Several official investigations in Uganda have showed that military officers profited from the protracted conflict.

“Kony was a golden chicken for Museveni’s UPDF. And he still is,” said Munie, referring to the Ugandan military. “Museveni is instrumental for the U.S. geopolitically in this part of the world.”

‘I am still afraid’

When the U.S. Special Forces soldiers arrived in Obo, local officials said, the villagers sang welcome songs. Some lyrics spoke of how God had sent the Americans to free them of Kony. Today, the songs have stopped.

Of the 100 soldiers sent to the region by the Obama administration, about 30 are thought to be in Obo. Every day, in a building steps away from their outpost, the soldiers hold meetings with local military, police and the Ugandans.

The Americans have brought photos of Kony and intelligence on his whereabouts in the past, said officers from Uganda and the Central African Republic who have attended the meetings. But they have yet to provide satellite images or any real-time intelligence on which to mount an assault on Kony, the officers added. The Special Forces soldiers, they added, never enter the forests to track down Kony.

A Washington Post reporter requested an interview with the soldiers but was turned away. U.S. officials

described the American role in hunting Kony as in its early stages.

But the U.S. presence has brought one change here, community leaders say: The Ugandans appear to be showing more restraint.

Eveline Nalayanga, a refugee who was driven from the nearby village of Nguili by an LRA attack two years ago, said it doesn't matter that Obo is home to soldiers from the world's most formidable military.

"I am still afraid to return to my village. The LRA can attack anytime," she said. Then she paused before adding: "I am waiting for the Americans to catch Kony."