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Kony Is Not the Problem

By ANGELO IZAMA

IN northern Uganda, the dry season is used to burn bushes; the fire drives snakes and other predators away. On the Ugandan side of the border with South Sudan, below a mountainous ridge along the Nile, is a village called Odrupele by locals. It is a place teeming with snakes.

Until a few years ago, children walking along the village's paths were stalked by a greater threat lurking in the bushes — possible abduction by members of the Lord's Resistance Army, whose leader, Joseph Kony, started a brutal campaign in the late 1980s to overthrow Uganda's government by using child soldiers. The dry season was better; but like serpents, L.R.A. fighters returned with the rains.

That cult of fear was immortalized earlier this month when the film "Kony 2012" went viral on the Internet. But long before Mr. Kony, people in northern Uganda were preyed upon — by the armies of King Leopold of Belgium, the dictator Idi Amin, and later Ugandan governments. Violence is an enterprise that does not involve one man or his organization alone, no matter how cruel.

The village of Odrupele (also called Dufile), near where I went to primary and secondary school, once served as an inland port for cargoes of ivory and slaves. By a twist of history, Mr. Kony is now in the Democratic Republic of Congo, King Leopold's old playground, having relocated there in late 2005. Carving his own bloody path with rope, knives and guns, he is surviving on low-tech methods while 100 members of the world's most advanced army have joined the effort to kill or capture him.

While the evil methods of men like Mr. Kony are easily understood by millions, the politics so crucial to sustaining their brutal campaigns are harder to grasp. Mr. Kony sees himself as a liberator and he's always had allies in unlikely places.

Mr. Kony, like other villains in the region who have been indicted for war crimes, has thrived most as an agent of other interests. In the 1990s, he was adopted as a proxy by the Sudanese government in Khartoum, which was then fighting a war with the Sudan People's Liberation Army in southern Sudan. Uganda supported the S.P.L.A. and considered northern Uganda as collateral in a bigger war. When the two Sudans signed a peace deal in 2005, Mr. Kony's license almost expired.

Campaigns like "Kony 2012" aspire to frame the debate about these criminals and inspire action to stop them. Instead, they simply conscript our outrage to advance a specific political agenda

— in this case, increased military action.

African leaders, after all, are adept at pursuing their own agendas by using the resources that foreign players inject and the narratives that they prefer — whether the post-9/11 war on terror or the anti-Kony crusade. And these campaigns succeed by abducting our anger and holding it hostage. Often they replace the fanaticism of evil men with our own arrogance, and, worse, ignorance. Moreover, they blind us by focusing on the agents of evil and not their principals.

Mr. Kony has continued to benefit from the patronage of Sudan's president, [Omar Hassan al-Bashir](#), but even more so from the rivalry between Congo's president, [Joseph Kabila](#), and the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni. That rivalry can be traced to the late 1990s, when Uganda occupied Congo before being forced to finally withdraw in 2003 under international pressure and accusations of plunder and rape. Mr. Kabila has turned a blind eye to the L.R.A. because it serves as a counterweight against Ugandan influence in eastern Congo.

Mr. Kony's relocation to Congo followed many failed attempts to uproot him, including Operation Iron Fist and the establishment of the Ministry for the Pacification of the North. Meanwhile, accusations abounded of members of the Ugandan Army's top brass enriching themselves, including through the padding of payrolls with dead "ghost soldiers," as billions were spent on defense.

A scorched-earth policy that drove Mr. Kony's victims into camps for "internally displaced persons" led to thousands of deaths from disease while L.R.A. fighters snaked back during the rainy season, under bush cover, to abduct and kill.

When "Kony 2012" was shown in northern Uganda, people reacted to it with anger, frustration and fear. Aside from the fact that Mr. Kony was no longer in the country, many Ugandans did not want to be reminded of him.

The locals never forgot that Mr. Kony's nine lives were licensed by the politics of the posse that has been hunting for him. Some northern politicians accused the Ugandan government of criminal negligence or settling old political scores. Others, outraged by the conditions the government had subjected them to, sympathized with Mr. Kony. Most were simply tired of war and supported peace talks to end the conflict. If America backed an ambitious regional political solution instead of a military one, it is quite possible that the L.R.A. and other militant groups would cease to exist. But without such a bargain, the violence won't end.

Killing Mr. Kony may remove him from the battlefield but it will not cure the conditions that have allowed him to thrive for so long.

Angelo Izama, a Ugandan journalist, was a 2011 Knight Fellow at Stanford.

