

Why Uganda Has Failed to Defeat the Lord's Resistance Army

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INTRODUCTION

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was derived from a Christian cult formed by Alice Lakwena to oppose the government of Yoweri Museveni who had seized power in Uganda in 1986. Following several serious defeats in 1987 of the "Holy Spirit Battalion", as her rebels were then known, Lakwena fled to a refugee camp in Kenya. One of her followers, however, Joseph Kony, took the remnants of the force and formed the LRA. They launched raids across northeastern Uganda, abducting numerous children along the way. The captured boys, besides serving as soldiers, were forced to participate in acts of torture as well as execution-style murders of would-be escapees.² Female abductees became abused servants and "wives", and were subjected to forced sexual slavery, with many becoming pregnant and giving birth in the bush.³

Estimates vary widely as to the present-day strength of the LRA, from a few hundred to several thousand. Though relatively small in numbers, their tactics of abducting children instill fear in the population, resulting in approximately 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), essentially destabilizing a significant portion of northern Uganda.⁴

The LRA's original mission of overthrowing the government appears at times to have become subordinate to Kony's mysticism, including his claim to be in contact with certain spiritual forces.⁵ As one newspaper wrote, the LRA "have often seemed more like a bizarre cult than a guerrilla movement because of their seemingly mindless atrocities against civilians and lack of political agenda."⁶ Kony's stated objective remains, however, to depose President Yoweri Museveni. He would replace the government with one based on the Ten Commandments, though how he reconciles his brutality with his religious beliefs is difficult to understand.

In March 2003, Kony announced a unilateral ceasefire. President Museveni initially rejected it but eventually responded with a ceasefire limited to certain areas. All broke down, however, when the LRA killed an emissary of the Presidential Peace Team. Calls

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for additional negotiations between the two sides, especially from leaders of the Acholi, who populate the northern part of the country, and UN Representatives, generally went unheeded for many years.⁷

Despite past failures to reach an accord between the LRA and the Ugandan government, talks begun in July 2006 renewed hopes of peace.⁸ However, approximately three months later, concerns were voiced that they had become bogged down, and that Kony's erratic nature made the prospects for an agreement, as well as adherence to an agreement, tenuous at best.⁹

While the diplomatic aspects of conflict resolution are important to understand, in light of a long-term peace agreement still not being signed, this article will focus only on the military aspects of this protracted struggle. Specifically, it will examine some of the military reasons for the failure to end a war that has dragged on for nearly two decades. Despite their superior numbers, the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF), composed of approximately 60,000 members, has been unable to secure a final decisive victory against the LRA, whom they outnumber by approximately ten to one.¹⁰

UGANDAN ARMY WEAKNESSES

The UPDF shortcomings are numerous, beginning with a general lack of competent, dedicated military professionals. A glaring example of this occurred when LRA rebels attacked the Lira Palwo camp, which contained approximately 6,000 IDPs, on 19 March 2004. Twelve civilians were killed and over 100 thatched hutches burned. Captain Kavuma, a unit commander for the army, was later arrested for failing to protect the camp. It was alleged his team was ill-prepared and that he failed to radio for help in a timely manner. Additionally, eyewitnesses testified that several of his officers were drunk. The arrest, according to an army spokesman, was "a warning to the officers who neglect their duty."¹¹

Numerous other examples exist of competence troubles within the UPDF. Clearly the problem is exacerbated by their use of soldiers as young as 15 years old, some possibly even younger. The difficulties in maintaining professionalism with individuals perhaps better classified as children than men must be daunting.

The army is not the only force exhibiting a lack of quality soldiering. Often a significant portion of a camp's defense is left to auxiliaries, essentially civilians with weapons. These people tend to be both poorly trained and, in comparison to the LRA rebels, poorly armed.¹² Unfortunately some of the auxiliaries, like their UPDF counterparts, have been implicated in human rights violations.¹³

It is possible that the global budget for the UPDF is not sufficient to meet their needs, including the provision of proper military training. However, this is difficult to assess. While the UPDF has stated that it requires more funds for articles such as communications equipment, helicopters, and vehicles, there have been allegations of "ghost soldier" units that never existed except on payrolls, enabling corrupt officers to pocket the money.¹⁴ Perhaps if such corruption were eliminated, adequate funding would exist for additional training as well as the purchase of the requisite new equipment.

Lack of co-ordination by the UPDF with other organizations, specifically the Internal Security Organization (ISO), has also hampered operations. The ISO provides

intelligence to the UPDF, which it is then supposed to act on, hopefully to thwart LRA attacks or, even more ambitiously, to capture LRA commanders. At times, however, they actually appear to be working against each other, as occurred when a rebel who defected to the UPDF was killed by the ISO. In another instance, UPDF soldiers, mistaking ISO operatives for rebels, nearly shot them. The army commander has reportedly reviewed an account of the problems between the two organizations and has implemented changes.¹⁵

Despite the LRA being mainly comprised of ethnic Acholi, who originally supported the rebels in their push to overthrow the government, they turned against the LRA because of Kony's tactics of murder and abduction. However, the LRA's loss has not been completely the UPDF's gain. The military's heavy-handed tactics with the Acholi, as well as others, have resulted in the army alienating the people they claim to be protecting.¹⁶ A March 2004 report from Human Rights Watch accuses the security forces of repeated human rights abuses, including rape, mutilation of male genitalia, and other forms of torture.¹⁷ Other reports are similarly damning, accusing the UPDF of worsening the situation in the North through acts such as torturing and beating to death individuals in the camps established for internally displaced people.¹⁸ The government denies the accusations, but Uganda continues to be perceived by many observers as having a poor record on human rights.

LRA: THE STRENGTHS OF A GUERRILLA ARMY

The LRA is essentially a self-sustaining organization. They have significant stockpiles of weapons but often require very little ammunition for their operations. Food is re-supplied either through local purchases or looting. Though the organization has a high degree of command and control, it operates in a largely decentralized manner, with units as small as six undertaking operations such as ambushes. They aim for soft targets, avoiding confrontation with the UPDF.¹⁹

The army is uncertain as to all the LRA's sources of weapons. During a raid on a camp, the rebels reportedly used anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns. Though Sudan agreed not to supply the rebels, the Ugandans suspect that some Sudanese elements still provided Kony with arms past the agreement.²⁰ This lack of intelligence regarding the weapons flow makes it difficult for the military to interrupt it completely.

Abducted children, as well as ones that have been born and raised in the rebel camps, enable the LRA to readily replenish any losses that might occur through battle or escapes. Though the actual number of rebels may fluctuate, they have never reached a point below which the group could not regenerate.

Kony is also fortunate in that other rebel groups are present, notably the Allied Democratic Front, which has both killed UPDF soldiers as well as forced them to be deployed across an even larger territory.²¹ The LRA has been able to capitalize on this situation, moving in when the UPDF moves out. Rebels have even entered camps disguised in UPDF uniforms, perhaps knowing they will go unchallenged, as the real UPDF soldiers are occupied elsewhere.²²

Another advantage the LRA enjoyed, at least until relatively recent times, was the location of bases in the Sudan which did not allow the Ugandan military to enter. An

agreement between the two countries, signed in April 2001, changed that, allowing the Ugandan soldiers to operate in certain areas of the Sudan. However, the Imotong Mountains, with their numerous caves, offer ideal spots for the LRA to both hide from pursuing Ugandan forces as well as stage ambushes against them.²³ As one newspaper put it, “The public will be excused for being wrong, but common logic tells them that the LRA has in the nearly two-decade long war, mastered the terrain of southern Sudan and the remote areas in northern Uganda far better than the UPDF. That is why they can take the army in circles across the entire region with ease, much to the frustration of the UPDF.”²⁴

POSSIBLE PROGRESS

It is possible that the new-found willingness of the LRA to negotiate may be based on progress made against it by the UPDF. There are several reasons for this reported movement forward by the government soldiers on the warfront:

- The Sudanese government’s willingness to allow the UPDF to pursue the LRA into the southern part of its country. From 1995–1999, Sudan supported the LRA, in part because Kony’s forces were fighting the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), a rebel group which Khartoum felt was aided by the Ugandan government. Diplomatic ties were restored between the two countries in 2000, and eventually the UPDF was allowed to enter Sudan in search of the LRA. In July 2002, the Sudanese President announced his country’s forces would actively cooperate in joint military actions against the LRA.²⁵ Since then the Sudanese army has occasionally initiated attacks on the LRA, often in an attempt to block the rebels from entering Sudan where Kony and his followers not only hide from the Ugandan soldiers but, similar to their actions in Uganda, attack villages and abduct children.²⁶
- A decrease in the number of camps for the estimated 1.5 million internally displaced people.²⁷ While this made it easier for the army to protect their citizens by decreasing the number of camps they must cover, it could backfire. Because there are fewer camps, the remaining ones grow bigger, resulting in more crowding and even worse living conditions for the inhabitants. This could breed further anger against the UPDF. Additionally, by depopulating large areas of the countryside, the military is, *de facto*, turning the land over to the rebels.
- The UPDF battle successes, including possibly wounding at least one senior rebel commander.²⁸ While the UPDF has reported the LRA is becoming desperate for food, resulting in increased engagements with the security forces, it is hard to substantiate these claims.
- Sudan has agreed to hand Kony over to the UN if he is captured in their territory.²⁹
- Efforts are under way to boost the training of the Ugandan auxiliary forces – the armed civilians tasked with defending certain areas against LRA attack.³⁰
- Promises have been made to better co-ordinate the actions of the UPDF and Internal Security Organization, though whether these words translate into actions remains to be seen.

- The conflict in its present form, though retaining some aspects of an insurgency against the government, appears to have evolved into more of a criminal enterprise. Kony's original domestic supporters, the Acholi, have largely abandoned him because of his atrocities against them. While criminal organizations can also be quite difficult to defeat, they are generally unable to draw resources voluntarily from the populace as well as hide among them. These changes can make them more vulnerable than terrorist organizations, such as those present in the Mideast, which draw support from a significant segment of the population.

DOES THE UPDF HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO WIN?

The UPDF and Lord's Resistance Army have essentially reached a stalemate. Kony is unable to overthrow the government and implement a new one based on the Ten Commandments. The UPDF has been unable to defeat Kony.

There is hope that a peace treaty can be signed, but should that not happen, or should the unpredictable Kony renege on the terms, a resumption of fighting could easily occur. Should this happen, several factors could possibly result in improved UPDF performance:

- *An appropriate ratio of troops to guerrillas:* The UPDF would appear to have sufficient troops, given the estimates of the LRA's size, to defeat them. However, other insurgencies in Uganda divert these soldiers, leaving the coverage too thin to be effective.
- *A successful campaign to win the hearts and minds of the people:* While Kony's atrocities have turned many of the Acholi against him, the UPDF's heavy-handed tactics have resulted in the Acholi also being fearful of the army. This is one of the reasons the UPDF has not been completely successful in developing citizens' militias against the LRA.
- *Destruction of the guerillas' financial underpinnings:* One reason the war has dragged on for so long is that many people have found it quite profitable. Kony's loot, through the involvement of numerous merchants, is sold in several places. The inability to deny Kony his finances, to "follow the money," is clearly a significant failure on the part of the Ugandan government.
- *Reliable allies:* As the war was often discounted as not having significant strategic interests for the superpowers, it was, for the most part, not considered a high priority item on their lists. With a new emphasis on combating global terrorism, however, it is quite possible that will change.
- *Mobility:* Though the UPDF could benefit from additional equipment, for the most part it has enough to launch at least some mobile assaults on the guerrillas. However, until relatively recent times, it has been hamstrung by its inability to pursue the rebels into the Sudan.
- *Proactive, not reactive strategy:* Although there have been significant instances when the UPDF has taken the fight to the LRA, it often appears the military is only reacting to an attack on a camp. This lack of initiative, combined with the necessity to stretch out the troops in order to defend the populace, have combined to limit the number of truly effective offensive operations.

- *Competent officers leading able soldiers:* Corruption among the officer corps, with problems such as diversion of funds to create ghost units, appears to be an on-going problem. This lack of effective leadership, combined with soldiers with limited training, has created a force less effective than their total number would suggest.
- *Timely intelligence:* Despite the capture and defection of numerous LRA soldiers, the Ugandan intelligence apparatus and UPDF do not seem capable of translating the information gleaned from these important assets into effective action plans against the insurgents. Though part of the problem can be attributed to the competition between the UPDF and ISO, there also appears to be a general ineffectiveness of the ISO.

SUMMARY

It is a conflict that has been simmering for nearly two decades, with thousands abducted, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered. Approximately 1.5 million people have been displaced, and an entire region has been economically devastated. The UPDF, despite some significant progress in trying to put an end to this fight, has been unable to strike a decisive blow against a very capable, and adaptable, enemy.

The failure of the UPDF to defeat the LRA appears to be multifactorial. Corruption, incompetence, lack of co-ordination between the military and intelligence agencies, heavy-handed tactics by the army that help turn the local populace against them, other rebel movements that divert resources, and an inability in the past to obtain permission to pursue the LRA into Sudan, when taken together create the image of a struggling Ugandan army. This is not to demean the dedication and sacrifice many members of the UPDF exhibit in their battle against the LRA. Indeed, numerous soldiers have paid with their lives in the prosecution of this terrible war. Still, the inescapable fact exists that, despite such efforts, the UPDF has not been able to defeat Kony's rebels.

The UPDF's weaknesses are made all the more glaring when examining the LRA's strengths. Often well-armed and schooled through experience in guerilla warfare, the rebels have proven to be both a formidable and wily foe. The LRA's ability to survive for all these years is a testament to its command, tactics, and almost inexhaustible supply of involuntary recruits.

During the most recent phase of the present peace talks the two sides, for the most part, have stopped fighting. However, despite great hope, a long-term deal remains elusive. Additionally, even if an agreement is reached, the erratic Kony might eventually prove to be an unreliable partner. Thus, the possibility exists that hostilities could break out anew, thrusting the UPDF once more into the dual roles of pursuing the rebels as well as defending the populace against them. Therefore without new tactics, better training in both military operations and in protecting human rights, outside assistance for military improvements, economic development for the Northern region, and significant political reform, the Uganda People's Defense Force could find, if peace does not take hold, that they are once again in a stalemate with the Lord's Resistance Army.

NOTES

1. The views expressed in Foreign Military Studies Office publications and reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government.
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