

The Voice of Peace

News and views from areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army in Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Uganda

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Crisis in the Central African Republic; Why Uganda needs the amnesty law; LRA conflict overshadowed as DRC battles new rebel group



REGIONAL SITUATION REPORT

Jan–March 2013: LRA still active in CAR and DRC

The security situation across LRA affected areas remains fluid with around 85 people either killed or abducted between January and March 2013, mainly in CAR and DR Congo. Last year around 200 people were attacked or killed, indicating a rise in violent attacks in 2013 so far.

The situation has been made far more complicated with the Seleka victory in CAR and the ousting of Bozize. How will the new regime approach the LRA issue?

DRC has redeployed forces from LRA areas to deal with the new rebellion, detracting from current initiatives against the LRA.

In South Sudan's Western Equatorial state and Northern Uganda LRA activity has been non-existent giving communities much needed space to rebuild their lives, although several other challenges abound.

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	DRC			CAR			S Sudan			UG			Total
	J	F	M	J	F	M	J	F	M	J	F	M	
2013													
Attacks	14	7	6	6	8	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
Abductees	25	3	2	12	14	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	67
Killed	4	0	1	3	4	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
Newly displaced	0	130	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	130
Returnees/rescued	10	3	3	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22

Editorial-Opinion: *The Voice of Peace* Father Ernest Sugule, Editor in Chief



"With the new government in Bangui, will UPDF and American advisors in Obo still collaborate with the CAR authorities?"

"Our hope is see all the people we lost in the war return home alive. To do this we need the amnesty law...."

"We... appeal to the... government to act as fast as possible to restore the amnesty act..."



Bishop of Kitgum Diocese, MacLeod Baker Ochola, who shares his thoughts on the lapse of Uganda's Amnesty Act

This first edition for 2013 of *The Voice of Peace* focuses mostly on the impact of Seleka coalition rebellion in CAR, and the M23 rebellion in DRC as it impacts national responses to conflicts, including those on the LRA.

The LRA conflict is becoming more complicated in CAR especially with the Seleka coalition taking Bangui. With the new government in power, will UPDF and American advisors in Obo collaborate with the CAR authorities? Will the Seleka regime try and establish functioning institutions? Will they continue to fight the LRA? With

uncertainty continuing over this new situation, it may bring more confusion than solution to the LRA problem.

With the transfer of Bosco Ntaganda in ICC, is it the end of war in DRC? Probably not. The root causes of the conflict should be addressed through inclusive dialogue with all key stakeholders including the civil society.

LRA activities during this first quarter are mainly occurring in Central African Republic and in Democratic Republic of Congo. We're happy to South Sudan and Uganda remain calm.

Bring back amnesty law, says Ugandan bishop

'Born free, raised captive, lived captive and will probably die captive'. This is the life story of some of our brothers and sisters who might feel life has dealt them the wrong card.

and – when they are eventually able to return home – the very government that failed to protect the child wants to put the same person in state penitentiary. Do you think that's fair?

Typically victims are abducted from their families by the LRA at a young age, taken to the bush, indoctrinated and forced to carry out atrocities. If they survive and are returned or captured by state security services they will most likely end up in jail rather than integrated back into society.

Amnesty was introduced as a moral imperative to open the way for these victims to be reintegrated into society. With the lapse of Uganda's amnesty law in 2012 they are liable to prosecution. This closed one of the tools that had been used to entice individuals away from the LRA, with the threat of prosecution now a disincentive for defection.

A recent Q & A session with the retired Bishop of Kitgum diocese and one of the founding members of ARLPI (Acoli Religious Leader's Peace Initiative), MacLeod Baker Ochola, helped unravel this perplexing quagmire.

Q: Imagine a child who was born in a home, raised in the bush against his will

A: It's not fair and it's unjust because this child is just a victim of circumstances. First of all this child has been torn apart from their family and their community. Secondly the child was abducted by the LRA and forced to commit atrocities destroying the child's humanity such as killing his own family and community members. When a child returns, we should provide support to them in order to successfully reintegrate them in to their community. Immediate arrest and punitive action creates more tension by criminalizing victims.

Q. Is there an Amnesty Act in Uganda?

A. Yes but it expired last year in May 2012. It was partially renewed, but Part II, which was the amnesty-granting provision, was not. This has in effect removed the amnesty. This is the wrong strategy as LRA are still active in DRC and CAR and it has removed one of the most successful means to end the rebellion peacefully. Many people came back due to the Amnesty.

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Regional situation report: continued from page 1

CAR: The security situation in CAR is far from stable, with instability culminating in the ousting of Bozize on 24 March and the taking over of CAR by the Seleka rebels. From January to March 2013, 18 attacks have been attributed to both LRA and other unidentified criminal armed groups. This resulted in 13 people being killed, 37 abducted of whom 6 are confirmed returnees.

Before the Seleka victory fighting occurred in Bangassou and Bakoma after moving from Bria, Yalinga and Zako. Most of the time, FACA (Central African Armed Forces) fled these villages without fighting, exposing civilians to Seleka and LRA atrocities.

It is worth noting that there has not been fighting between the Seleka coalition and UPDF nor between Seleka and LRA, as those geographic areas were avoided.

One worrying issue is what will happen now to the AU joint military Task Force, as the former FACA were part of the AU initiative fighting the LRA? This may complicate the struggle against the LRA and thus allow the LRA to find a surviving alliance with Seleka, although this is not yet there. Another troubling factor is the security vacuum created by Seleka coalition's victory. Looting and pillaging has followed by various actors. The danger is that banditry and criminalisation will take even greater hold if the authorities remain unable to maintain order. *For an eyewitness account of the rebellion see p. 6*

DRC: DRC is still experiencing most of the recorded attacks. Reportedly there were 27 in total for the first quarter of 2013 although all these attacks cannot be attributed solely to the LRA. As a result of these attacks 30 people have been abducted, 5 killed, 16 returned and 130 displaced. There are renewed LRA activities in villages around Garamba National Park, Bangadi and Niangara area and Ango, Banda and the border of DRC and CAR.

Poaching is also occurring in Garamba National Park, blurring the activities of armed actors. The tension between FARDC and Mbororo in Bas Uélé district

complicates the security situation, with danger that the killing of some FARDC by Mbororo could lead to further tensions or violence.

On a positive note, the recent surrender of Bosco Ntaganda, nicknamed « The Terminator », to the United States Embassy in Rwanda on 18 March was celebrated by the majority of the by people from North Kivu and South Kivu in particular, and many Congolese in general. This gives an opportunity for the Congolese government and international bodies to engage with local actors, to end impunity by the vast number of different armed groups, and find a lasting solution to the DRC crisis.

South Sudan: In South Sudan, specifically Western Equatoria State (WES), which has been affected by the LRA insurgencies, has experienced relative peace since last year. Apart from the 2 South Sudanese hunters who were killed in the extreme borders with Central African Republic by suspected LRA, there are no other reported cases of LRA attacks and lootings in WES.

Other emerging issues revolve around land conflicts, boundary disputes and cross-border criminalities (real or perceived).

UGANDA: Although in Northern Uganda counter-insurgencies operations have ceased, issues related to conflicts remain. The Peace Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP), was a government initiative to reconstruct the war ravaged region of Northern Uganda. Recent findings have shown that this well thought out plan has been mismanaged by some unscrupulous government official especially in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).

In light of this, members of Parliament from the Acholi sub region under their umbrella body, The Acholi Parliamentary Group (APG) have mobilised likeminded leaders to complain to the President.

This meeting aimed to end the embezzlement of funds earmarked for Northern Uganda as well as advocating for the reinstatement of the Amnesty.



The addition of the Seleka coalition rebellion is adding to a confused security situation in LRA-affected areas, increasing the threats to civilians

Crisis in Central African Republic: one woman's story of meeting the Seleka rebels

"It's important for the world to know what women are going through in CAR"

"There were so many I couldn't count. Some were older women with innocent faces, and boys aged 15 years and older"

"We all cried because there was so much destruction; it looked like a war zone"

I am a lady of 23 years old and narrate what I witnessed for publication. It is important for the world to know what women are going through in CAR.

On 10 March 2013 I left Bangassou in the morning on board a lorry to Bangui; after hours of driving in the bush at about 24 KM to Grimari town; we met with a group of Seleka rebels.

They were many. I couldn't count them. Among them were mature women with innocent faces and young boys from about 15 years old and upwards.

The soldiers were all wearing new uniforms. They were on board four vehicles. Their leaders that approached us were all very tall. I'm not sure where they were from but they spoke Sango but with difficulty or a strange accent.

They searched the lorry, emptied the fuel tank and searched all the bags. They took four pieces of cloth from my bag. For others, they asked everybody to pay a sum of 2000 CFA. Then they burned some goods of traders and loaded some in their vehicles. They used traditional alcohol as a fuel to burn the goods.

They told us that they were heading to Bangassou to deal with the FACA and the population.

When the rebels allowed us to go we were all relieved we had escaped alive.

We were not abused or beaten but we were still shaken from the experience.

But as we reached a place with mobile phone network to call and inform our relatives in Bangassou it was too late because the rebels disconnected all the telephones wires.

We all became sad and start praying for our dear ones back home in Bangassou.

As we moved from Grimari until we got to Sibut we all cried because there was so much destruction; all the places looked like a war zone.

I felt depressed by what I saw as we were moving to Sibut. About 17 km into the bush we found the body of a pregnant woman on the ground. Both her and her unborn child were dead.

We could not stop for long and help her because we were terrified that more Seleka rebels would find us. We supposed she was trying to give birth alone and dies during the birth.

The driver met some men and informed them about the situation we saw. They told us there had been attacks in Dekoua for the past few days and people fled in the bush. They said that the woman might be the victim of long distance fleeing and they accepted to go to the place and bury the women and her child.

After witnessing this horrible incident I developed an uncontrolled fever and stomach pains.

I keep on seeing the dead woman and the unborn child.

Returnees' Stories

Members of the Regional Civil Society Task Force have been carrying out trauma healing workshops in South Sudan. In follow up interviews three weeks after the workshops, which helped 120 former women abductees in the counties of Ezo, Nzara and Yambio, this is what one of the participants had to say about her experience, in the bush and subsequent return. Having participated in the trauma-healing workshop in Yambio county she expressed hope of positive change in her situation.

Q. How do you feel after the workshop?

A. I feel relieved, especially after all the sufferings, all kinds of inhuman mistreatment and abuses that I have undergone – although it is unforgettable in my memory. I still believe that there will be an end to the LRA atrocities in my area. In fact in the whole region.

I am a mother to two children, their father is an Acholi from Uganda and I their mother a South Sudanese.

I now feel sadness and concern for those still in captivity with the LRA, especially the female abductees. Life by the time of my escape from the LRA camp was very hard and difficult. I hope one day the women still in the bush will get chances to escape and come back home, so that they get to see their families again.

On my return I found family support and I am now happy because I can go to school and study and I also hope that one day I will find ways of getting my children to school and I hope God will bless them.

Despite the bad memories of being in the bush, I am slowly coming to my normal senses after counselling, prayers and by joining a women's group that has raised my hope for good life in the future.

Seeing and speaking to others with similar experiences was a great comfort

and relief. It provided me with new strength to go on with my life.

Q. What made you tear the symbolic towel at the workshop?

A. The reason that caused me to tear the towel was that I considered it to symbolise an LRA fighter who mistreated me in the bush. So with all the anger I have against them, I could have destroyed them just as I destroyed the towel.

Q. Can you forgive any of LRA fighters?

A. Yes, I can forgive because now I know they were abducted like me – what I used to have to do in captivity was due to them having being abducted too, and is also what is happening to those still in captivity. I pray that the need for national reconciliation is considered so that the fighters of the LRA and the fathers of these children should come out to embrace peace rather than war.

Q. Tell me why were you crying at that particular moment at the women's group?

A. I was crying because of the memories and pain that I encountered during my captivity with the LRA.

Q. Do you have any thoughts for communities who receive these children?

A. Let our parents know that the children who return are innocent because we were kidnapped and abused, and through that abuse we got pregnant and gave birth to these children. We just want to go home.



"Seeing and speaking to others with similar experiences was a great comfort and relief"

"I feel sadness and concern for those still in captivity with the LRA – especially the women"

"Despite the bad memories I am slowly coming to my normal senses after counselling, prayers and by joining a women's group that has raised my hope for a good life in the future"

DRC troops join regional military task force as criticism mounts over lack of impact

The AU/UN Joint Task Force has entered its second year. On 13th February one battalion of 500 Congolese soldiers were transferred to the authority of the African Union-led Regional Task Force. Currently the African Union-led Regional Task Force has a total number of 3,350 soldiers from the four affected countries, which are Uganda (2,000 soldiers), Democratic Republic of Congo (500 soldiers), Central African Republic (350 soldiers) and South Sudan (500 soldiers) under the leadership of Colonel Dick Prit Olum from Uganda.

Has there been an impact on the ground, especially given the size of this initiative? It's still unclear. The impact should be effective coordination on the ground as well as increased support from partners to strengthen the operational capacity of the troops to eliminate the LRA and ensure the stability of the region. This is far from the reality in the DRC.

This is because there is no proper strategy put in place on issues such as civilian protection. There is no clear collaboration with local communities. There are serious shortcomings on logistics, funding and support mechanisms. Perhaps most critically, significant differences remain between force capability and force doctrine amongst

countries contributing troops. The new regime in Bangui is a further complication. Will they cooperate?

In DRC, LRA atrocities and other criminal poachers have not diminished but instead they continue as the rebels still operate with impunity, with the most affected villages being in the vicinity of Garamba National Park, Bangadi and Niangara areas and Ango territories. The 500 FARDC were taken from villages where they were already protecting local people. Now these villages remain without any protection and are thus further exposed to the LRA and attacks from other criminal groups.

The FARDC troops are also confronted by a serious logistics problem, making them unable to collect timely information and share with their counterparts in South Sudan or CAR.

Their response to LRA attacks is equally limited. These FARDC are now only based in Dungu, which already has a large concentration of forces. What impact on the broader affected areas will they bring from Dungu? Time will tell but it seems that the impact will be limited with the current (non)strategy.

Bring back amnesty law, says Ugandan bishop ...continued from page 2

In recognition of the effectiveness of Part II of the Amnesty Act, a team of Religious Leaders, Cultural leaders and members of Civil Society Organizations from Northern Uganda has petitioned the Parliament of Uganda to reinstate it. We received feedback from the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs that they have received our petition and they are working on it.

Combatants are still coming back but now they are viewed as perpetrators. So we the religious leaders in Northern Uganda appeal to the government of Uganda to act as fast as possible to restore the Amnesty Act that was passed in 2000 in its entirety.

Q. What's your message to those involved?

A. We appeal to all parties to prioritize civilian protection. To do this we need the amnesty and other peaceful means. They have been abandoned once before; we shouldn't repeat such a mistake again. Our hope is to have all the people we lost to the war back home alive.

Our message to Joseph Kony is that people of Uganda, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic and the entire region want peace. We appeal to the LRA to stop abducting and killing innocent children of God in the region.

We also appeal to the regional governments to stop using military means to end the war because that will not bring lasting peace in the region.

LRA fighters returning to DRC as troops redeploy against M23 rebels

Locals say growing violence in Haut and Bas Uélé districts

"The LRA conflict is no longer on the agenda of the Kinshasa government or the media"

"The Congolese government needs to treat LRA problems with more commitment"

"By only negotiating and engaging with armed groups the government of DRC is sending a signal to people in Haut and Bas Uélé that the government listens only to people who have guns in their hands"

The districts of Haut and Bas Uélé have had various conflict problems in the past including LRA killings, abductions, lootings etc since 2008. The M23 rebellion has just added to the people's sorrows in Haut and Bas Uélé districts.

The first immediate impact of the M23 rebellion is the redeployment of all FARDC commandos trained by the Americans to fight LRA into the North Kivu to fight M23. This immediately creates a security vacuum in Haut and Bas Uélé districts.

The second impact is that districts of Haut and Bas Uélé are no longer a humanitarian priority for most donors or international NGOs such as MSF, MEDAIR, OXFAM GB, etc which have also closed and left the Haut and Bas Uélé districts for North Kivu.

The LRA conflict is no longer on the agenda of the government in Kinshasa or in the media.

M23 dominates the media and the government of DRC that even when President Kabila was addressing the nation at the end of the year he never mentioned the conflict of LRA in Haut and Bas Uélé.

The third impact is growing insecurity and the LRA regaining their former bases. Villages such as Tadu, Sambia, Faradje, Sessenge, etc to name few which enjoyed relative peace, are now the theatre of LRA attacks and abductions.

Uncontrolled armed groups are now reigning in Bas Uélé districts. In December 2012 alone these uncontrolled armed groups have killed 5 FARDC and 7 fishermen. The insecurity is regaining the terrain of Haut and Bas Uélé districts but yet the government is not even concerned.

The fourth impact is the growing number of military road barricades where everybody has to show the election card. If someone does not have an election card he/she is thrown in jail or made to pay some money to FARDC. It has become practically impossible for people to travel to Ariwara and buy goods as usual, worsening the condition of these vulnerable people. If one does not have an election card don't even dare to travel because you will be accused of spying for M23 and be thrown into jail.

Any unlawful torture or arrest is done in the name of collaboration with M23.

In light of these problems, the Congolese government needs to treat LRA problems with more commitment. Haut and Bas Uélé districts have more than 300,000 displaced people who cannot return to their villages due to growing insecurity.

The Congolese government must be more proactive in the search for a lasting solution to the LRA problem, in the same way as they are now trying to find a solution to the M23 problem.

By only negotiating and engaging with armed groups the government of DRC is sending a signal to people in Haut and Bas Uélé that the government listens only to people who have guns in their hands.

The Congolese government should participate more actively in African Union initiatives and other regional efforts to end LRA conflict and must engage with Congolese civil society to improve conditions in LRA affected areas.

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CAR: Root causes must be addressed when rebuilding

On 23 March 2013, the Seleka coalition took power in Bangui and forced president Bozize out of the country.

Early in 2013, the Economic Community of Central African States had tried to stop the crisis by hosting peace talks between the rebels and the government in Libreville. The peace talks lasted only two days and did not allow extensive consultation and discussion. The implementation of the power-sharing agreement, proved to be both unrealistic and unsustainable. The coalition government never took off. Seleka grew impatient, and president Bozize became more isolated from his population and regional powers. The power vacuum was rapidly seized by the rebels.

The Seleka coup has raised several key issues, which need to be addressed in the short term.

Security vacuum. Looting is still taking place, The police and army still not officially (re)deployed and staffed mainly by Seleka.

Political legitimacy. Following the coup, the AU suspended CAR and imposed sanctions on their leader. Other governments and donors followed and the country is on the fringe of (economic) collapse. In country, particularly in Bangui, voices are raised against the proposed 'transitional authorities'.

Causes of the conflict. While, security and political issues are high on the agenda, attention must be on addressing the root causes of the conflict – such as reintegration of ex-combatant, governance issues, marginalization, national dialogue, ethnic/community tensions...

In January a coalition of several civil society organizations accompanied the peace talks and worked to sensitize the population on peacebuilding challenges. This group is working across divide. Their role is crucial in accompanying the political and peace process, and stimulating national dialogue on the future.

About our network...

This newsletter is produced by local organisations who are all members of the Regional Civil Society Task Force – a network of groups working on LRA issues.

They are:

ARLPI – The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, Northern Uganda

The Interchurch Committee for Western Equatoria State, South Sudan

JUPEDEC – Jeunesse Uni pour la Protection de l'Environnement et le développement Communautaire, CAR

SAIPD – Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies, DRC

CDJPR-ARU – Commission Diocésaine de Justice, Paix et Réconciliation, DRC,

CR – Conciliation Resources is an independent UK organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence. We've been working on the LRA conflict in support of local partners since 1997.



Next Edition: Defections Special



SAIPD-RDC

FEMME ACTION PLUS

(FAR)