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The Lord's Resistance Army and the Threat Against Civilians in Southern Sudan

By Ledio Cakaj

Summary

The cross-border nature of the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA—currently active in northeastern Congo, the Central African Republic, and southern Sudan—is a clear threat to international peace and security, but the United Nations Security Council has yet to take seriously its responsibility to protect civilians from the LRA and marshal the will and the resources to put in place an effective counterinsurgency strategy.

In Western Equatoria State in Southern Sudan, where LRA attacks in recent months have killed at least 135 people and driven 67,000 from their homes, the Government of Southern Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, or SPLA, have been unable and in some cases unwilling to protect southern Sudanese civilians. Unfortunately, U.N. peacekeepers deployed to support implementation of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement have not risen to the direct challenge to peace posed by the LRA. The Government of Southern Sudan and the United Nations must do better, but improved civilian protection is only one element of a comprehensive strategy to address the LRA threat. Civilians in the affected region will not be safe so long as the LRA continues to operate as a transnational terrorist group.

The U.N. Security Council must authorize and member states must resource a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians in LRA-affected areas, identify and sever external lines of support, increase opportunities for rank-and-file fighters to defect, and end the insurgency once and for all through more effective military pressure on LRA leader Joseph Kony and his high command.

Introduction

A spate of brutal attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, in southern Sudan is further evidence of the urgent need for a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians and end the LRA crisis once and for all through an internationally backed counterinsurgency effort. LRA leader Joseph Kony and two of his deputies are wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity, yet his 22-year-old campaign of violence against civilians continues in northeastern Congo, the Central African Republic, and southern Sudan. With mounting anecdotal evidence that Sudan's ruling National Congress Party is again backing proxy

militias—including the LRA—to destabilize southern Sudan in the run up to elections next year and a self-determination referendum in 2011, the regional threat to innocent civilians from the LRA is escalating. The international community must respond accordingly.

The cross-border nature of the LRA is a clear threat to international peace and security, but the international response thus far has been woefully inadequate. The situation in Western Equatoria State in Sudan's southwest corner is but one example among many of the unique challenges that this insurgent group poses to the international community's responsibility to protect. Recent attacks have caused death, displacement, and made an already difficult humanitarian situation much worse. Farmers have stopped cultivating their land for fear of being abducted and killed, while much of the food surplus they have accumulated has been looted by the LRA.

The status quo response to the LRA in Western Equatoria—and other LRA-affected areas in northeastern Congo and the Central African Republic—is failing. Although the responsibility to protect civilians in Western Equatoria rests first and foremost with the Government of Southern Sudan, and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, or SPLA, the SPLA's limited capacity and strained relationship with local populations has made protecting civilians daunting. The United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Sudan, or UNMIS, has also struggled to fulfil its mandate to “protect civilians under threat of imminent violence” from the LRA.

However, a significantly improved effort by the SPLA and UNMIS to protect civilians in Western Equatoria is only one element of what is needed: a comprehensive approach to the LRA threat that protects civilians in these areas and pursues LRA leadership through a properly resourced counterinsurgency effort. Marshalling the will and the resources to put such an approach in place is the responsibility of the U.N. Security Council and U.N. member states. Until the Security Council, working in coordination with the Government of Southern Sudan and other regional actors, takes seriously its responsibility to protect civilians from the LRA and to execute international arrest warrants against LRA leadership, LRA atrocities will continue.

Failing to protect: The case of southern Sudan

In the aftermath of Operation Lightning Thunder—a U.S.-backed joint offensive against the LRA in northeastern Congo by Ugandan, Congolese, and southern Sudanese forces in December 2008—the LRA stepped up a campaign of extreme violence, targeting civilians in northeastern Congo, southern Sudan, and the Central African Republic.¹

While these so-called “Christmas massacres” in Congo received international attention, the suffering of southern Sudanese at the hands of the LRA occurs largely under the radar.² A U.N. report from October noted that the LRA has already killed 205 people in Western Equatoria in 2009 and abducted another 135 people. Over 67,700 southern Sudanese have been driven from their homes.³ However, this is potentially the tip of the iceberg. Given the thin international presence in the area, the real numbers for deaths and abductions are likely higher.

The international responsibility to respond to this cross-border threat to international peace and security rests with the U.N. Security Council, but the Security Council has failed thus far to articulate a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians and end the LRA insurgency. In the absence of strong leadership from New York, the Government of Southern Sudan, U.N. Peacekeepers, and local militias have faltered in their efforts to protect civilians in Western Equatoria.

The Government of Southern Sudan: A perceived lack of will

Enough conducted a series of interviews in and around the towns of Yambio and Nzara during recent field research in Western Equatoria. Most of the people interviewed felt that the SPLA in Western Equatoria cannot protect them because of inadequate troop numbers and limited capacity. A significant number also claimed that the SPLA was unwilling—sometimes refusing outright—to protect them from the LRA. Other witnesses say that SPLA officers have accused local informants of being collaborators, even accusing some villagers of being responsible for the attacks.⁴

Witnesses to LRA attacks said that the SPLA often deployed too late to provide meaningful protection and in some cases failed to act even when they were nearby. One person from the village of Birisi, which is a mile from Yambio, said that in three separate LRA attacks in July and August 2009, SPLA soldiers did not deploy to confront the LRA despite being based in close proximity. According to the same witness, SPLA soldiers told the villagers in Birisi that they did not have the authority to fight the LRA.

Interviewees instead expressed greater confidence in local defence forces called Arrow Boys and the Ugandan army, or UPDF, which has deployed forces to pursue the LRA in southern Sudan. “The UPDF fights the LRA, even the Arrow Boys fight the LRA, but not the SPLA,” said a local chief. The UPDF has made a continuing effort to reach out to the local population for information regarding the LRA. As a religious worker said, “From the level of communications and cooperation it seems as if the UPDF is the local army and the SPLA the foreign one.”⁵ One Nzara resident told Enough that in cases of LRA attacks, people inform the UPDF first, then the SPLA: “Had it not been for the UPDF, we would be displaced or killed by now.”⁶

After attacks on the villages of Ukcuo in August 2009 and Bomu in September 2009, there was allegedly no response from the SPLA. At least 16 people were killed in Bomu and many were abducted in both villages. During three separate LRA attacks in August and September 2009 in the villages of Bureangure, Sakure, and Baikpara, SPLA soldiers turned up many hours after the attacks had taken place. According to testimony from displaced persons from Bureangure, SPLA soldiers arrived on the scene at least eight hours after the attack. Many people were killed and abducted but only the Arrow Boys responded, eventually pursuing the LRA into the bush. The bodies of six people killed in Sakure were collected on August 30 by the local population with the help of Ugandan soldiers.

There have been cases when the SPLA engaged the LRA, but these were mostly instances in which the SPLA was directly attacked. And when the SPLA has been given LRA positions, it often fails to seize the initiative. People driven from the village of Karika told Enough that after the LRA attacked their village in August 2009, they informed a nearby SPLA unit. The SPLA commander told the villagers to follow the LRA fighters and inform him when and where the LRA fighters went to sleep. On October 2, 2009, the village of Karika was attacked again even though the exact location of the LRA fighters was purportedly disclosed to the SPLA.

Community and religious leaders held the same views as the majority of the people interviewed, maintaining that the SPLA was incapable of protecting civilians in Western Equatoria. “It is common practice for the SPLA to turn up five hours after the attacks happen,” said a local pastor.⁷ U.N. staff and local and international aid workers reflected similar concerns about poor responses from the SPLA to LRA attacks.

While the SPLA is still transforming itself from a guerrilla force to a conventional army, the SPLA's failure to protect civilians in Western Equatoria cannot be solely attributed to a lack of capacity.⁸ According to the SPLA spokesperson, Gen. Kuol Diem Kuol, there are at least 3,000 SPLA soldiers in Western Equatoria, compared to a few hundred LRA fighters.⁹

In almost all of the interviews Enough conducted in the field, there was a consistent view that intercommunal tensions between the SPLA and the local population have undermined the SPLA's ability and willingness to serve as a protector. The SPLA force in Western Equatoria is composed mostly of soldiers from the Dinka tribe while the local population is Zande. Intercommunal conflict in 2005 and 2006 between the Zande and the Dinka created a climate of lingering suspicion between the two groups. A local journalist said, "The mistrust has never gone away and this is why the Dinka soldiers refuse to protect people they see as their enemies."¹⁰ A displaced person from Ezo added: "It is very simple: The Dinka does not want to protect the Zande. For the Dinka, the Zande and the Acholi are the same."¹¹ The majority of the LRA fighters are Acholi.

After repeated attempts, Enough was unable to meet with the SPLA force commander or any other official SPLA representatives in Western Equatoria to discuss the crisis of civilian protection. The inability to communicate concerns directly to the SPLA is a constant frustration for local residents as well. A journalist told Enough, "The SPLA still thinks of itself as a guerrilla force. There are no official lines of communications, be it for international journalists who want to report on the situation in Sudan or for the simple peasants who want to report LRA attacks."¹²

U.N. peacekeepers: Simply inadequate

The United Nations appears dangerously behind the curve in dealing with the LRA. As currently deployed in Western Equatoria, the United Nations does not play a significant role in civilian protection. Some 200 Bangladeshi peacekeepers are based in Yambio, the capital of Western Equatoria, but this is far too small a deployment to take the aggressive measures to carry out the United Nations' civilian protection mandate.

Moreover, the local population in Western Equatoria has very little trust in the U.N. presence. "They are not even able to protect themselves," said a local politician, referring to the Bangladeshi battalion.¹³ "The LRA attacked them in 2007 and they did not even respond," he added. Worryingly, the lack of trust has evolved into outright contempt in some cases. "Why are they here in their trucks with their guns if not to protect us" said a community leader referring to the Bangladeshi blue helmets, "to taunt us?"¹⁴

U.N. humanitarian workers are similarly frustrated with U.N. peacekeepers. "If the LRA attacked us, the peacekeepers will be the first to run," a U.N. source told Enough.¹⁵ The peacekeepers spoke very little English and have limited interaction with the local population or even humanitarians. "How can they work in a place where they can't communicate?" asked an international relief worker.¹⁶

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1870 requests that the U.N. Mission in Sudan make full use of its mandate to provide security to civilian population under imminent threat of violence, and as early as 2006 the council urged the U.N. mission to make full use of its mandate against the LRA.¹⁷ U.N. officials in Western Equatoria, on the other hand, argue that their mandate does not allow them to "go after the LRA."¹⁸ Yet protecting civilians from imminent attack and hunting an insurgent group are two very different things.

The reality is that protecting civilians from LRA attacks is simply not a priority for U.N. peacekeepers right now. A U.N. worker put it bluntly, “Unfortunately, in terms of numbers of deaths, the LRA in Western Equatoria ranks low when compared to casualties from conflicts in Jonglei and Unity states. The United Nations can only respond to so many conflicts and Western Equatoria is not a priority for it at the moment.”¹⁹ This is dangerously naïve. Few armed groups in the world can match the LRA’s ability to cause maximum chaos with a minimal number of fighters. The death and destruction will only accelerate if Khartoum accelerates support for LRA operations in southern Sudan.

Signs are increasing that the LRA could be used to disrupt the elections and the self-determination referendum. A recent LRA attack in the town of Nzara in Western Equatoria killed four people at an electoral registration centre. As a Zande paramount chief put it to Enough, “How can you talk about supporting peace when people are being killed?”²⁰

Local militias: Filling the void

The security vacuum left by the SPLA and U.N. peacekeepers has given rise to local defence forces known as Arrow Boys. Though occasionally effective in protecting communities from LRA attacks, these armed groups, like the Mayi Mayi in neighbouring Congo, could themselves become a serious threat to civilians.

Currently, there are at least 10 Arrow Boy groups in Western Equatoria, each with 70 to 80 fighters and operating under a loose umbrella command. The fighters possess rudimentary arms—bows and arrows and locally made guns—and most have little to no military experience. Nonetheless, the Arrow Boys have had some successes against the LRA. Arrow Boys conduct night patrols around their communities and occasionally set up ambushes in areas where the LRA is known to operate. Leaders of groups in Yambio and Nzara stated in interviews that they captured at least 12 LRA fighters in the past few months. A recent U.N. report states that four LRA fighters were killed and one captured by Arrow Boys in one week in October.²¹

Arrow Boys are local militia that have organized to defend communities against the LRA

Source: Ledio Cakaj/Enough



Local residents interviewed by Enough stated that the Arrow Boys were indispensable to providing protection in Western Equatoria. “This is not a perfect solution,” said a local official, “but the Arrow Boys are providing at least the appearance of safety which is making people not panic.”²² A religious leader added, “The Arrow Boys are our only hope. You cannot argue with what they are doing which is essentially protecting their families and communities. No one else is doing it.”²³

The emergence of irregular armed groups in Western Equatoria is, however, cause for concern. Not only is their sustainability questionable—given their disadvantage in weaponry and military training relative to the LRA—the Arrow Boys also have the potential to turn against the very population they claim to protect. The increasing power of the Arrow Boys is evident in the groups’ expanding involvement in administering local justice. Some of these activities border dangerously on vigilante justice. One Arrow Boy leader said, “We are also helping with solving community problems such as apprehending criminals or people who cause trouble.”²⁴

On October 28, a reported clash took place between Arrow Boys in Nzara and a group of Ambororo pastoralists. One Arrow Boy was badly injured and at least one Ambororo was killed.²⁵ There have also been cases where Arrow Boys are reported to have captured and lynched alleged LRA rebels. At least in one case, a person who was caught and badly beaten by Arrow Boys was not a LRA rebel.²⁶

Leaders of the Arrow Boys maintained that they are not soldiers, are uninterested in fighting for money, and fight out of necessity. “We got fed up with being killed, raped, and looted,” said Richard Tambua, the leader of the Nzara section of the Arrow Boys.²⁷ Yet the Arrow Boys have begun to demand ammunition and other supplies from the SPLA to sustain themselves.²⁸ “We are in constant touch with our state leaders as well as the SPLA so that they know what we do,” he added. One of the local priests told Enough that religious leaders were advising the Arrow Boys against being used as private militias by powerful individuals in the region.²⁹ This danger will only increase in the absence of more robust efforts by the SPLA and United Nations to protect civilians.

Protecting civilians in Western Equatoria and beyond

The situation in Western Equatoria is dire and poised to get much worse in the months ahead. The region is on the brink of a major humanitarian crisis, and the Government of Southern Sudan, the United Nations, and international donors must take urgent steps to protect civilians there from the LRA. A successful approach in Western Equatoria has two key prerequisites:

Improved SPLA relationship with the local population: LRA attacks have highlighted the SPLA’s inability to protect civilians and general discontent felt by Western Equatorians toward their national army. The SPLA must urgently gain the trust of the local population and build lines of communication with community leaders to determine civilian protection needs and priorities. Improving cooperation and communication between the SPLA and local communities will require a change in perception between the two ethnically divided groups. Military experts and regional analysts also underscored the importance of communications between the army and the local population. “Gathering information from the local population is of utmost importance in counterinsurgency theory,” said a military analyst. “It is something that the U.S. army has been pursuing vigorously in Iraq and Afghanistan with success.”³⁰

When Enough inquired among the local population about how to improve civilian protection, most of the answers involved integrating Zande and other Equatorian soldiers into the SPLA unit at Western Equatoria. “They should bring our Zande boys here,” said a local chief. “But if that is not possible, we want other Equatorians here, soldiers from the Rotuka tribe for instance.”³¹ Other suggestions included changing the leadership of the SPLA troops. “We need more active leaders in the SPLA here,” said a local journalist. “It might be good to have a Zande force commander here, someone who knows the problems of the community.”³²

Increased troop presence: The SPLA and United Nations urgently need to deploy more forces to Western Equatoria, especially in the towns of Ezo and Nzara, which have been regular targets of LRA attacks. The SPLA and UNMIS can be more effective by increasing patrols, identifying and surveying known LRA incoming routes, and collecting and using intelligence from the local population. With an increased military presence, the United Nations should assume a coordinating role in civilian protection, cooperating and exchanging information with U.N. peacekeepers in Congo as well as the SPLA and the Ugandan army.

Further thought should also be given to helping the SPLA with logistics such as transport and intelligence sharing. Increasing troop presence on the Congolese and Central African Republic borders is also important. A regional military analyst told Enough that because of the cross-border activities of the LRA “a strategy of adequate civilian protection would involve a simple stationing of troops in strategic areas who would actively engage any incoming forces.”³³

However, improved civilian protection is only one element of a comprehensive strategy to address the LRA threat. Civilians in the region will not be safe so long as the LRA continues to operate as a transnational terrorist group. As Enough has argued, the U.N. Security Council must authorize and member states must resource a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians in LRA-affected areas, identify and sever external lines of support, increase opportunities for rank-and-file fighters to defect, and end the insurgency once and for all through more effective military pressure on Joseph Kony and the LRA high command.

Endnotes

- 1 See Julia Spiegel and Noel Atama, "No Excuses: The End of the Lord's Resistance Army Is in Sight," Enough strategy paper (January 2009), available at <http://www.enough-project.org/publications/no-excuses-end-lord%E2%80%99s-resistance-army-sight>.
- 2 See Human Rights Watch, "The Christmas Massacres: LRA Attacks on Civilians in Northern Congo", (February 16, 2009), available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/02/16/christmas-massacres-0>.
- 3 U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Gap analysis for LRA response, October 1, 2009. On file with Enough.
- 4 Villagers of Bomu, for instance, who reported an LRA attack to the SPLA in September 2009, were accused of being LRA collaborators. SPLA soldiers did not go after the LRA, despite 16 people being killed and many abducted. When the Arrow Boys decided to pursue the LRA, SPLA soldiers reportedly stopped them and beat up one badly. On September 5, 2009, the village of Uze was attacked by the LRA. One man was killed and another was cut with machetes. The villagers informed the SPLA of the exact house where the LRA were hiding. According to one witness, the SPLA refused to go near the house arresting instead one of the villagers.
- 5 Interview with religious worker, Nzara, October 9, 2009.
- 6 Interview with Nzara resident, October 9, 2009.
- 7 Interview with local pastor, Yambio, October 8, 2009.
- 8 One local politician told Enough, 'The SPLA fought for 22 years during the struggle [with the Sudanese Army] unpaid and unfed. Why can't they protect their own people now that they have won?'
- 9 Sudan Radio Service, "SPLA to pursue LRA in Garamba," September 3, 2009, available at <http://www.sudanradio.org/viewArticle.php?id=2673> (last accessed November 4, 2009).
- 10 Interview with journalist, Yambio, October 8, 2009.
- 11 Interview with IDP, Duduma VST camp, October 10, 2009.
- 12 Interview with journalist, Juba, October 4, 2009.
- 13 Interview with local official, Yambio, October 6, 2009.
- 14 Interview with paramount chief, October 8, 2009.
- 15 Interview with U.N. worker, Yambio, October 7, 2009.
- 16 Interview with international NGO worker, Yambio, October 7, 2009.
- 17 S/RES./1870 (2009), April 30, 2009, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/count ry,,RESOLUTION,SDN,456d621e2,49fef6032,0.html> (last accessed November 30, 2009) and S/RES./1663 (2006) March 24, 2006, paragraph 7, available at ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docid=34922 (last accessed November 30, 2009).
- 18 AFP, "U.N. says new peacekeeping mandate needed for LRA hunt," August 27, 2009, available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/JOPA-7VBF9Z?OpenDocument> (last accessed November 30, 2009).
- 19 Interview with U.N. worker, Juba, October 5, 2009.
- 20 Interview with paramount chief, October 8, 2009.
- 21 UNMIS incident reports from September 26 to October 8, Yambio. On file with Enough.
- 22 Interview with GOSS official, Yambio, October 8, 2009.
- 23 Interview with religious leader, Yambio, October 6, 2009.
- 24 Interview with Arrow Boy, Yambio, October 8, 2009.
- 25 Email exchange with leader of Arrow Boys, WES. Received on November 3, 2009.
- 26 U.N. Security report. On file with Enough.
- 27 Interview with Richard Tambua, Nzara, October 9, 2009.
- 28 Letter of demands from the leadership of Arrow Boys in Yambio. On file with Enough.
- 29 Interview with priest, Yambio, October 6, 2009.
- 30 Interview with U.S. military expert. Kampala, November 24, 2009.
- 31 Interview with paramount chief, Yambio, October 8, 2009.
- 32 Interview with local journalist, Yambio, October 9, 2009.
- 33 Email correspondence with regional analyst. October 2009.

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