

The effects of counterterrorism on the Lord's Resistance Army

Introduction

One of Sub-Saharan Africa's longest fought conflicts has been between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and a coalition of various nations from across the globe. This organization has committed numerous atrocities during the course of its existence, such as mutilation, murder, and infamously the abduction and enslavement of children. There are many theories as to when the LRA came to prominence, but most scholars agree that the organization first arose somewhere around the 1980's. The LRA has primarily been held together by a few key commanders, with the self-proclaimed 'chairman' Joseph Kony as the face of the organization. The LRA's longevity is astounding given that there have been several international anti-terrorism campaigns against organization, each which has failed to capture Kony or end the organizations reign of terror. The question that arises is how has the movement of the LRA been impacted in response to various military campaigns against them?

There have been many international actors that have tried their hand at attempting to eliminate the LRA with various levels of success. Locals often attribute the LRAs ability to avoid capture to Josephs Konys mystical nature as he is believed to be a medium through which spirits guide him away from harm.¹ Even international observers have struggled to determine how exactly the LRA has managed to survive as long as it has despite war attrition and a lack of state support in recent decades. Many have accredited Konys ability as a gifted guerrilla fighter to the group's ability to evade extermination.² However, this alone is not sufficient in explaining

¹ Paul Sturges. The Role of Spirit Messages in African Conflicts the Case of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda.

² Kevin Dunn. 2004. "Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army" Review of African Political Economy. 139

their longevity as various skilled guerrilla forces in the past have failed to sustain themselves to the same degree.

With the purpose of finding a clearer explanation of the conflict, this article will examine the spatial movement of the LRA through Sub-Saharan Africa. The more strategic reasoning's behind the organizations success will be examined in the article using geographical models exhibiting their movement following various anti-terror campaigns against them. The article will ultimately conclude that the LRA is capable of surviving their numerous conflicts due to their use of neighboring sanctuary states, local knowledge, and the coerced support of the communities they control.

Methodology

Due to the organizations enigmatic structure, there is very little data available on their numbers, location, or arsenal. The main source of information that will be utilized in this paper is sourced from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED), which provides detailed data on the location, actors, and fatalities of all political violence around the world. In order to track the movement of the organization, this article utilizes geographical data on the location of all primary roads within the necessary countries provided by Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOTOSM). The borders and all administrative zones used during this article were developed by the global Administrative area database (GADM).

One of the main geospatial tools used in this article is the buffer zone around certain borders and lines. Using the roads provided by HOTOSM, a buffer zone was created to determine what percentage of attacks carried out by the LRA are within close proximity of primary roads in all countries. The main three zones created around the primary roads are 1km,

5km, 10km, and 20km away. These zones were selected to determine whether attacks were carried out directly near a primary road or if the LRA forces ventured further away from the road in order to carry out their violence. If attacks were committed within 5km of the primary roads, then the mobility of the group may be attributed to their adherence of the road network. However, if attack occurred further from the roads, then the group's mobility may be more reliant on off-road trails rather than established road networks. The main limitation to this logic is that it excludes the possibility of secondary roads that may branch off from the primary network which may assist fighters in reaching further away from the roads in a timelier manner. This problem is addressed when acknowledging that there are very few paved roads within central Africa, for instance, there is less than 2000km of paved roads within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).³ Therefore, it is unlikely that reliable and efficient roads will branch off from the primary road system.

This article will also utilize the directional distribution of LRA attacks during various time periods which will be determined based on when several anti-terror campaigns began or started. The location of each attack with additional data on fatalities, time, and mode of violence are provided by ACLED from 1997-2021. Each period will be given a mean centre which provides the most central location in relation to every event during that time. A standard deviational ellipse will be drawn around each mean center which will show the directional response the LRA has following each campaign. If the LRA sees a small and circular ellipse around a centre, then fighting remains persistent in a small concentrated area. However, if the ellipse begins to stretch in a given direction then violent events may be moving in response to an

³ Ulimwengu, John M.; Funes, Jose; Headey, Derek D.; You, Liang. 2009. *Paving the Way for Development: The Impact of Road Infrastructure on Agricultural Production and Household Wealth in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. 36

outbreak of fighting between the LRA and government forces. A challenge in interpreting this data arises due to the possibility that attacks may be carried out independently to the main forces. Therefore, the ellipse may be skewed by attacks that may not be representative of the main forces movement.

The interpolation method will be applied using the inverse distance weight tool (IDW), which will visualize the concentration and similarities of attacks while pinpointing which attacks may be outliers in the data set. This in theory will address the challenge of outliers skewing the movement of attacks while using the standard deviational ellipse. If there attacks are equally geographically distributed, the attacks may be considered erratic and without reliable direction. Attacks may also be distributed in concentrated areas along the ellipses paths as well, which would further confirm that the movement of the LRA is intentional. The precision of this method may not be exact on its own, but it will provide a level of support when used in conjunction with a standard deviational ellipse.

Periods of military response

There have been numerous campaigns by several governments over the last three decades that have aimed at dismantling the LRA and bringing its commanders to justice. Most had only various levels of success, with the most common effect being either the elimination of top LRA commanders or subsequent movement of the LRA into neighboring states. Each period used in this article will have defined periods that showcase the movement of the LRA during and after every conflict.

Operation North: January 1997- February 2002

One of the first large-scale military operations against the LRA, Operation North, took place in 1991 and aimed at containing and eventually eliminating the organization. This only succeeded at temporarily halting the LRAs activities in Northern Uganda and unfortunately the only data available on the group begins in 1997 so the aftermath of the campaign immediately

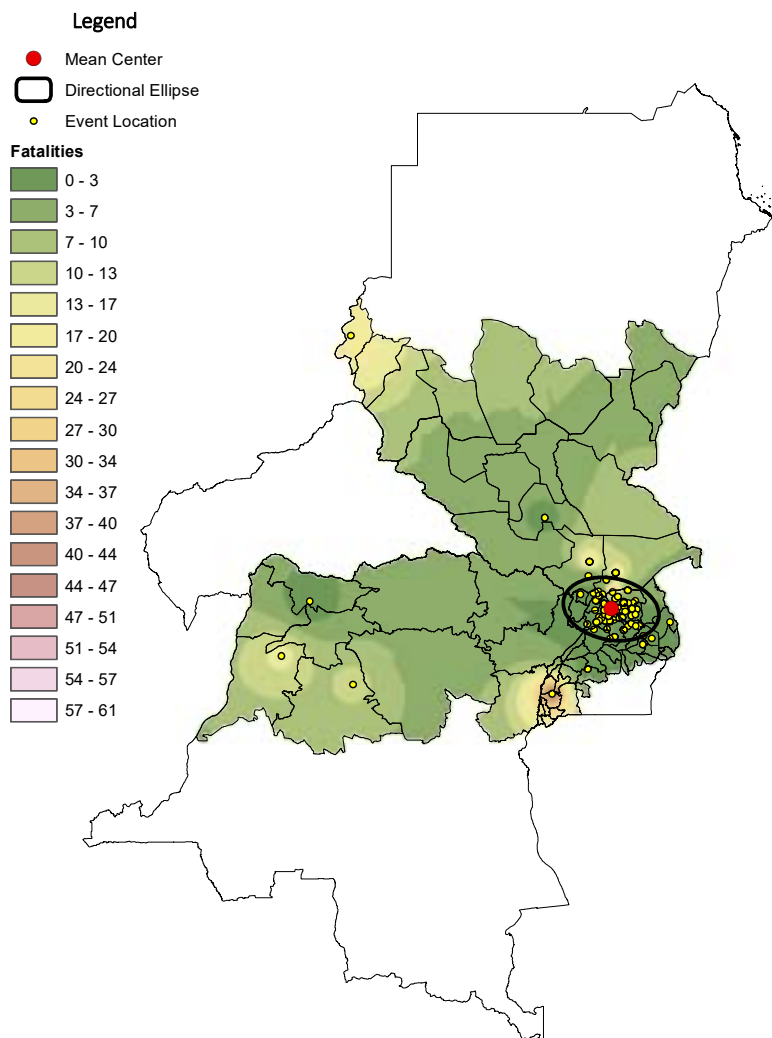


Figure 1 - Violent events following Operation North. Sourced from ACLED

following its conclusion cannot be displayed.

Following this campaign, the government was largely unresponsive to its citizen's safety which garnered resentment from the local Acholi people as the Ugandan Peoples' Defense Force (UPDF) was largely incapable of responding to LRA attacks.⁴

According to ACLED, from 1997 until March 2002, the LRA carried out 352 attacks across the region with 327 of those attacks occurring within Uganda.⁵ Figure one displays that the deviational ellipse emanating from the mean centre of attacks during this time was small with a slight east-

⁴ Cline, Lawrence E.. *The Lord's Resistance Army*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central. 76

⁵ Releigh, Clionach, Andrew Linke, Havard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen. ACLED, (2022). "*Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook*"

west direction and remained almost exclusively within Northern Uganda. This can be considered surprising given that the mean centre of attacks is just over 50km from the South Sudanese border which remained relatively permeable for parties that wished to cross. The interpolation method backs up the previous results, with the few attacks occurring outside of Uganda having little correlation with the more concentrated domestic attacks.

During this time, the Khartoum government provided both sanctuary, weapons, and aid to the LRA in response to Ugandan support for southern Sudanese separatists.⁶ Additionally, the Ugandan government's current ineffective UPDF did not have the means to place any meaningful pressure on LRA force until 2002.⁷ The lack of motive to attack international targets while having relative domestic security ensured that the LRA remained staunchly in Northern Uganda. During this period of time evidence shows that the LRA was mostly stationary due to lack of intensive military response.

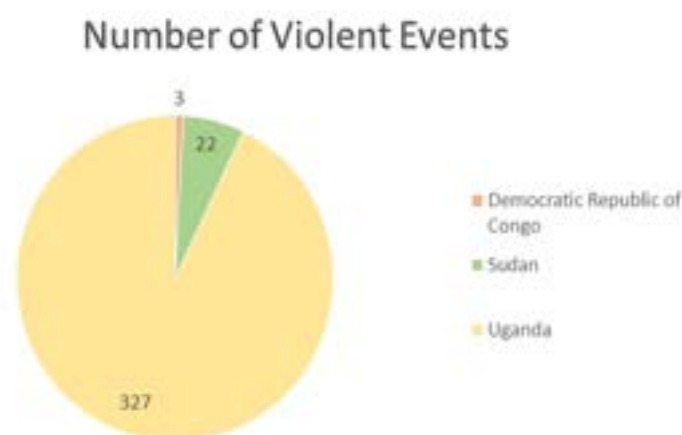


Figure 2 - Violent events by country

⁶ Cline, Lawrence E.. *The Lord's Resistance Army*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central. 81

⁷ Mason, Sarah B. *The Uganda People's Defense Force: Portraying regional strength while perpetuating internal instability*, Georgetown University, Ann Arbor, 2010. 94

Operation Iron Fist: March 2002- June 2008

In the early 2000's the UPDF began to reorganize itself to more effectively deal with insurgencies which allowed it to exert more pressure on LRA forces. Despite support from

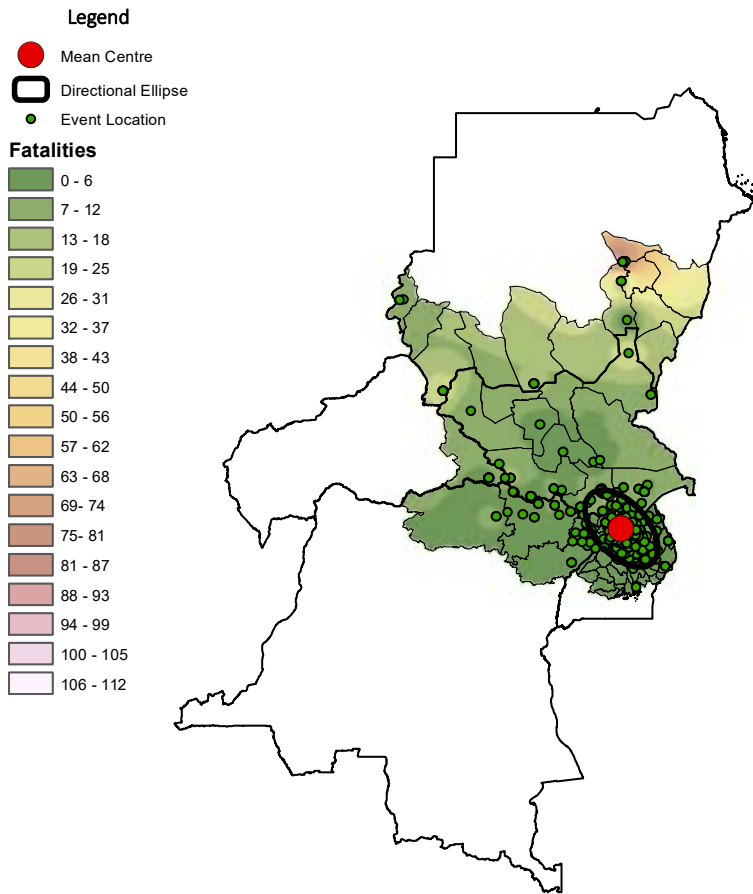


Figure 3 - Violent Events following Operation Iron Fist. Sourced from ACLED

Khartoum which provided sanctuary for the LRA, tensions began to rise as more insurgents crossed the border in the face of significant pressure from the UPDF. Uganda and Sudan soon found that it was in both their best interests to resolve their diplomatic row to focus their attention to quelling local insurgencies. Despite some levels of mutual distrust, starting in 2001 Khartoum eventually began to cut the LRA off from the once steady supply of food, weapons, and medicine. This triggered an outbreak of a series of attacks against both military and civilian targets in retaliation. These attacks pushed Sudan to its

limit and motivated cooperation between Uganda and Sudan, culminating in a series of agreements where Ugandan troops would be stationed in Southern Sudan to pursue insurgents that wished to seek refuge across the border.⁸ Dubbed Operation Iron Fist, this incursion evolved into a protracted slugging match between government forces and the LRA.

⁸ Kevin Dunn. 2004. "Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army" Review of African Political Economy. 141

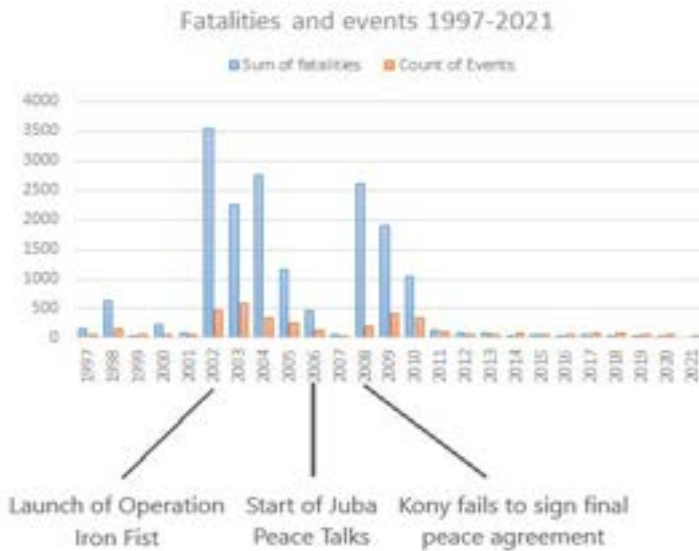


Figure 4 - Fatalities and events from 1997-2021 with time line. Source from ACLED

Figure three displays the location of LRA attacks during and following Operation Iron Fist. In relation to figure one, there is a noticeable shift in the directional movement of the LRA. Although the mean centres of the attacks are astoundingly close, the deviational ellipse begins to stretch into a longer north-south direction. Following Operation Iron Fist, the LRA began to take retribution against the

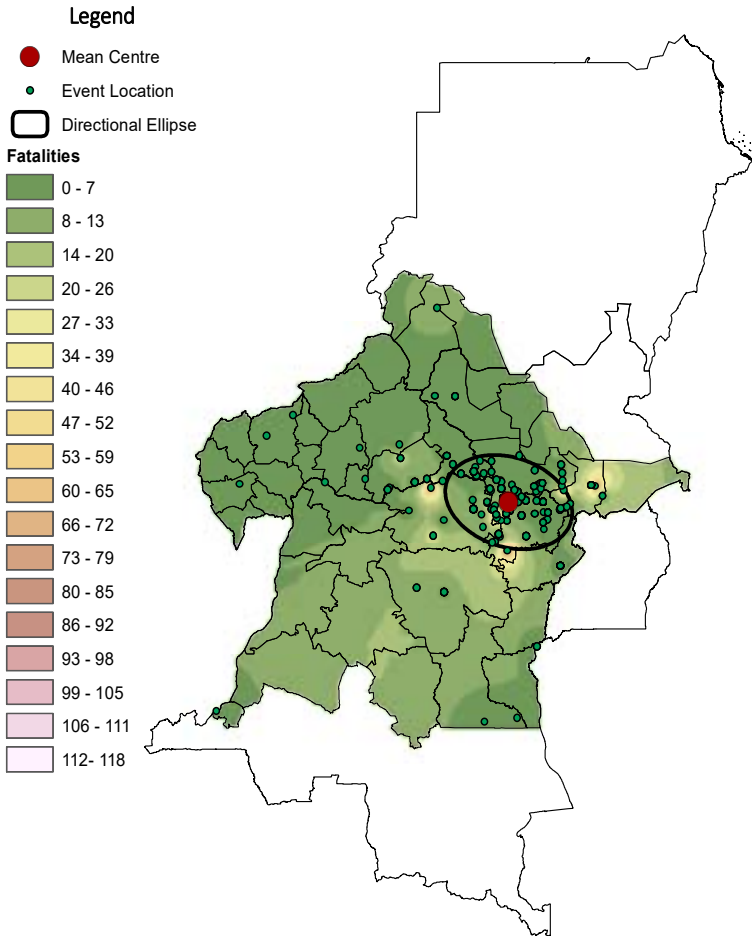
Sudanese government which resulted in a larger portion of the attacks taking place in Sudan. With this in mind, the north-south deviational ellipse most likely indicates a northward movement by the LRA.

Using the IDW tool on ArcMap's, figure three also visualizes that LRA attacks across the borders into the DRC and Sudan became a more intense and a consistent part of the organizations operations. Due to the porousness of the regions borders, insurgents began to cross into the DRC to avoid government forces. This in turn brought another government into the fold, further complicating the situation. Following prolonged assault on various LRA encampments and the assassination of several key commanders such as Vincent Otti, recruitment began to dwindle and Joseph Kony was forced to the negotiation table in 2006.⁹ This became known as the Juba peace talks which lasted from July 2006 till April 2008 and was marked by various ceasefires which failed to result in any meaningful progress. When Kony failed to sign the final peace agreement and began to resume attacks in April 2008, a new series of anti-terror

⁹ Bøås, Morten. 2004. "Uganda in the regional war zone: meta-narratives, pasts and presents"

campaigns began to take place albeit against an LRA that was now constantly on the offensive with its previous place of sanctuary in South Sudan at their disposal.

Operation Lightning Thunder: July 2008 – February 2010



The failure to reach a final peace settlement resulted in a new anti-terror campaign coordinated by Uganda, South Sudan, and the DRC, with more direct involvement from the United States classified as Operation Lightning Thunder. The LRA had largely reorganized themselves in the Garamba National Park in eastern DRC since their previous bases of operation were under constant pressure by Ugandan and Sudanese forces. The power vacuum left in the eastern DRC due to decentralized and weak government

Figure 5 - Violent events following Operation Lightning Thunder. Sourced from ACLED

authority provided the ideal setting for the

LRA to control communities for their defense. Operation Lightning Thunder was originally planned to be a swift and decisive blow to the LRA but instead transformed into prolonged chase of insurgents across the Congo.¹⁰ The abysmal state of the Congolese military enabled Kony and

¹⁰ Cline, Lawrence E.. *The Lord's Resistance Army*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central. 83

his soldiers to terrorize communities and conduct massacres against various villages and IDP encampments. However, because of the relentless pursuit by government forces the LRA began to splinter into various cells and spread their forces across a wide geographic area.

Despite the failure of the Juba peace talks to disarm and demobilize the LRA, fighting was entirely phased out of Uganda due to the Kampala's offer of amnesty for insurgents. Since Kony could no longer rely on Acholi people to fill his ranks, he took advantage of the power vacuum in the east DRC to abduct child soldiers into his force.¹¹ The combination of Operation Lightning Storm and the desperate strategies of the LRA to preserve their strength resulted in a high intensity of attacks as evident in figure five.

After over a decade of attacks taking place in northern Uganda, the mean center of events dramatically shifted to what is now known as the Haut-Uélé province. Additionally, the deviational ellipse returned to its east-west orientation while covering a much larger area than in previous periods. The expansion of the ellipse suggests that attacks are becoming less concentrated as the LRA relies on hit-and-run tactics moving westward. This can be attributed to the LRA splintering into various cells while being pursued by government forces instead of facing the forces head on as they had done in the past. The IDW tool visualizes how the organization has become more dispersed, with several high intensity attacks taking place in South Sudan and the Congo. With attacks within South Sudan remaining consistent while the rest of the LRAs attacks being less predictable and correlated across the Congo.

¹¹ Anthony Vinci (2005) *The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 361

Post Operation Lightning Thunder and the International Response: March 2010 – December 2021

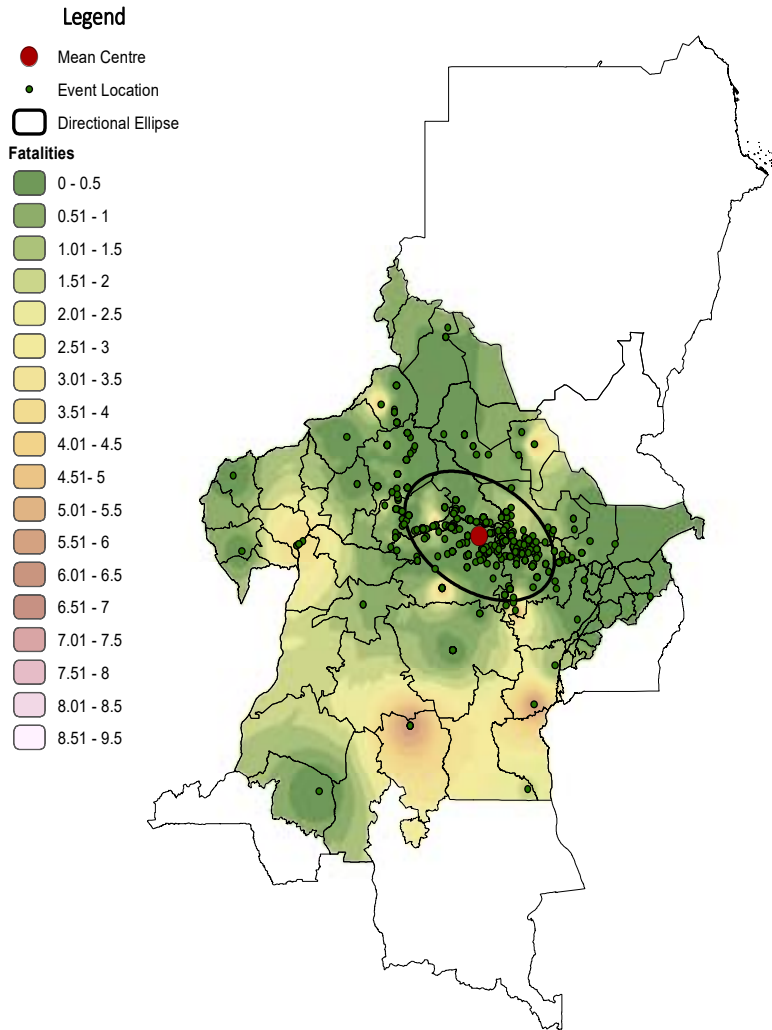


Figure 6 - Violent events following international response. Sourced from ACLED. One data point was removed since ACLED grouped a series of attacks into one point from the Haut-Mbomou province from January to April, skewing the average layer using the IDW tool.

Although Operation Lightning Thunder did not achieve its initial goal of swiftly eliminating the LRA and its leaders in Congo and Sudan, it managed to severely weaken its ranks and capabilities. A study sponsored by the U.S. legislative found that the “LRA’s numbers have greatly declined from thousands of fighters in the late 1990s and early 2000s to a reported 150-200 ‘core combatants’” as of 2015 with other unofficial reports puts estimates at around 300-400 combatants.¹²¹³ However, the lack of coherent containment strategy by the UPDF, Sudanese, and Congolese forces had enabled the LRA to continue to commit numerous atrocities across the region.

¹² Alex Arieff & Lauren Ploch. 2012. “The Lord’s Resistance Army: The U.S. Response”. Congressional Research Service

¹³ U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson, U.S. Institute of Peace, December 7, 2011.

Due to horrendous human rights abuses taking place in the Congo gaining mainstream media attention, the U.S. government and other international organizations were pressured into military action in order to decapitate LRA leadership and disarm its insurgents. In May of 2010, the “Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament Northern Uganda Recovery Act” was signed into law after it passed unanimously through both the U.S. House and Senate, showcasing the political pressure mounted on politicians.¹⁴ The goal of the bill was to provide security to local villages, provide logistical coordination for local forces, decapitate LRA leadership, and re-integrate disarmed LRA insurgents. Although U.S. troops refrained from engaging in direct military action, their presence boosted security in the region while promoting cooperation between the various circumspect governments. Other international actors such as the United Nation (UN), the African Union (AU), and French peace keeping forces further supplemented security in the region.

Following security assurance from the United States and other international forces, the effectiveness of the LRA was severely reduced. Although there was only a relatively minor decrease of attacks in the region, the interpolation in figure six reflects how the intensity of each attack dropped significantly, with the upper bound of fatalities dropping from the 112-118 per event during Operation Lightning Thunder to 8.51-9.5 per event. Figure seven supports these results, with the average fatalities per event which hovered around four per attack the past decade to zero as of 2021. The average mean centre also continued its trend of moving westward, settling near the point where the borders of South Sudan, the DRC, and the Central African Republic (CAR) meet. This is mostly likely caused by the various LRA cells crossing the various borders to evade government forces while being pursued. The directional ellipse also greatly

¹⁴ State Department, U.S. Support to Regional Efforts to Counter the Lord’s Resistance Army, October 14, 2011

expanded, encompassing a larger area while shifting to a more north-west orientation. During this period the CAR was experiencing wide spread political turmoil as various militias began fighting for control of the government. LRA forces most likely took advantage of this situation and began to operate in the CAR to evade

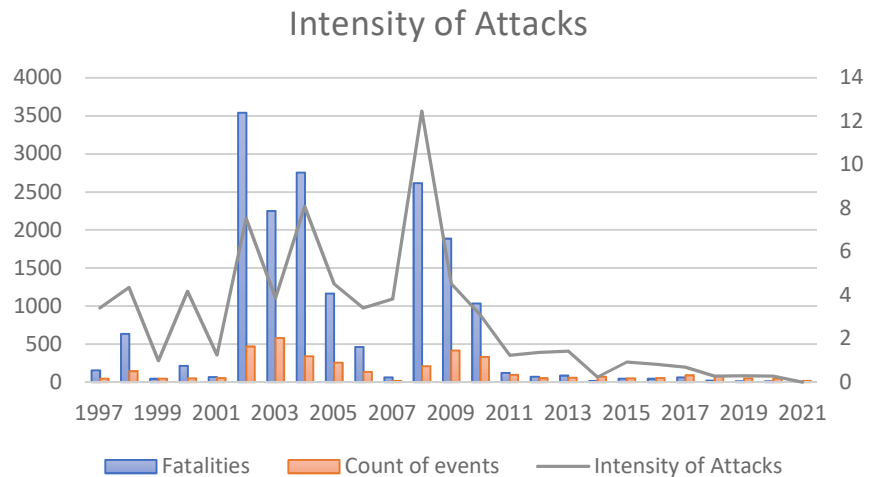


Figure 7 - Intensity of LRA attacks from 1997-2021. Sourced from ACLED

international forces. The directional ellipse also likely expanded as the now extremely mobile LRA moved across five separate nations to carry out their attacks and abduct children to replenish their ranks. In an interesting note, the single event reported in Uganda during this time was not an active attack but rather an explosive from the pre-Juba peace talk's era that had detonated.

LRA Movement & Strategy

The LRA has continuously evolved since its inception three decades ago, originating as a domestic militia aiming to establish themselves in the Ugandan government to an international terrorist organization that senselessly abducted and massacred innocents to preserve Kony and his lieutenants. Their longevity is surprising given that plenty of other terrorist organizations have faced lesser responses while quickly collapsing in the face of organized military campaigns. Two key factors that may have contributed to the perseverance of the LRA is the use of a rural base and the use of the primary road system. Regions with rough terrains and poor road service

which is situated far from the center of state power provide insurgents with the perfect conditions to hide from state forces.¹⁵ Central Africa’s lack of extensive road networks makes moving around the country difficult. Utilization of any present road networks automatically puts insurgents at an advantage as they perform hit-and-run attacks while evading anti-terror security forces.

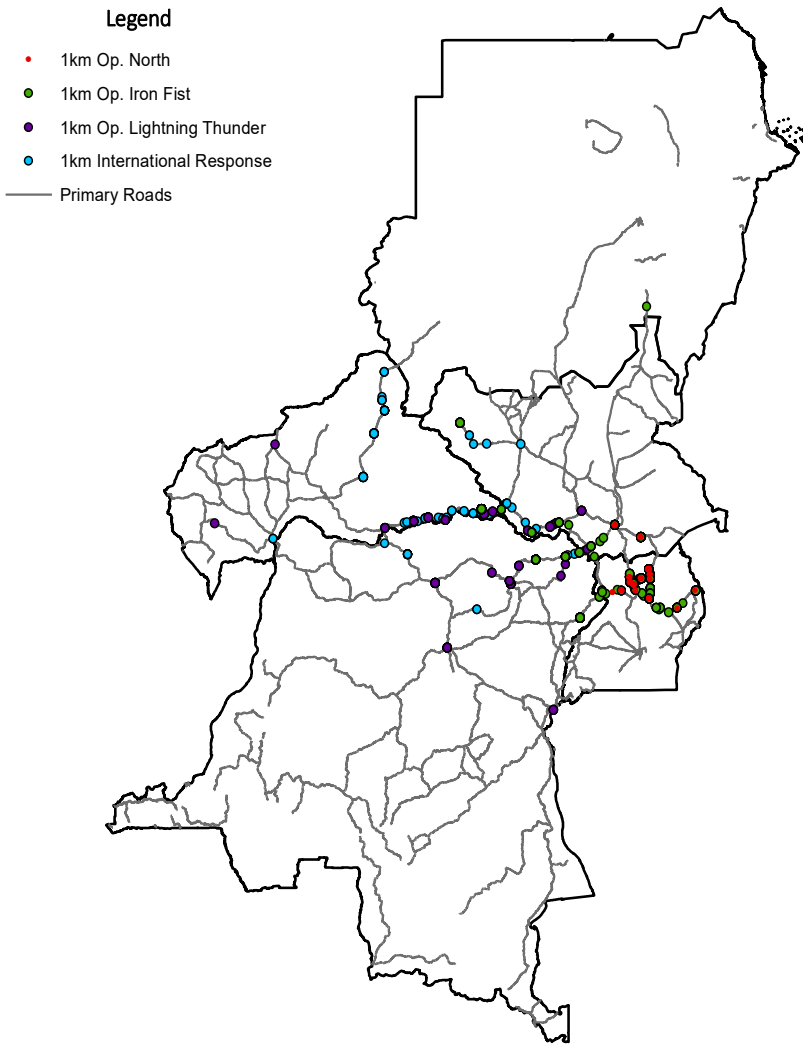


Figure 8 - Violent Events within 1 kilometer of a primary road. Sourced from ACLED & HOTOSM

Despite a lack of extensive infrastructure in central Africa, the LRA made substantial use of primary roads in every targeted state. Primary roads are state-maintained roads usually present in a highway system. Approximately 44% of all LRA attacks that occurred from 1997-2021 occurred within just one kilometer (km) of a primary road. There is a significant drop off in violent events past the one km buffer around the primary roads. Only 7.6% of events happening between 1-5 km and 2.3% of events occurring 5-10 km from a primary road. However, violent events begin to pick up again with 10.5% of events occurring 10-20 km from a primary

¹⁵ Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War.” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2003, pp. 75–90

% of Events and Fatalities by distance to primary roads

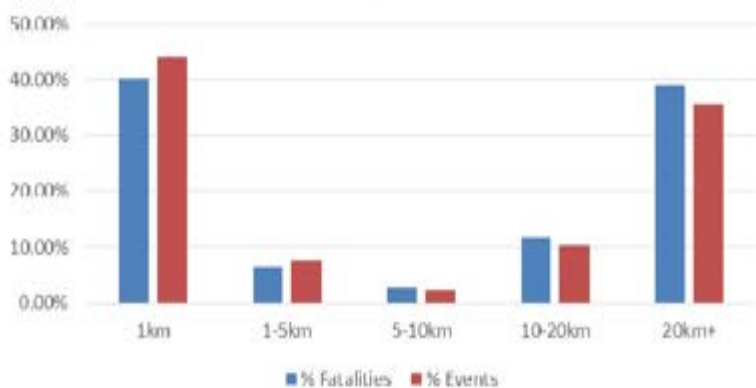


Figure 9 - % of events and fatalities by distance to primary roads from 1997-2021. Sourced from ACLED

road and 35.6% occurring past 20 km. Attacks from 2002-2021 began to cluster along the *Route Nationale 2* (RN2), which runs along the border of the DRC, CAR, and South Sudan. One likely explanation is that LRA forces used the RN2 to quickly move between the states when being pursued by government forces, quickly taking sanctuary in another nation by traveling along the road.¹⁶ The sudden drop

off past 1 km as seen in figure nine when calculating violent events proximity to primary roads suggests that the primary road network is an integral factor when predicting the movement of the LRA attacks in response to anti-terror campaigns

Attacks within proximity of a primary road varies between each period of time as the tactics and objective of both the LRA and government forces began to evolve. Figure 10 exhibits that during Operation North, the LRA made extensive use of the primary road system to carry out their attacks with 67.3% of attacks occurring within one km of a primary road. In later periods the number of attacks occurring within one km of a primary road dropped, consistently hovering around 40%. There are two possible explanations for this decline. The first is that the LRA was forced to remain in mostly rural

% of Events proximity to primary roads by period

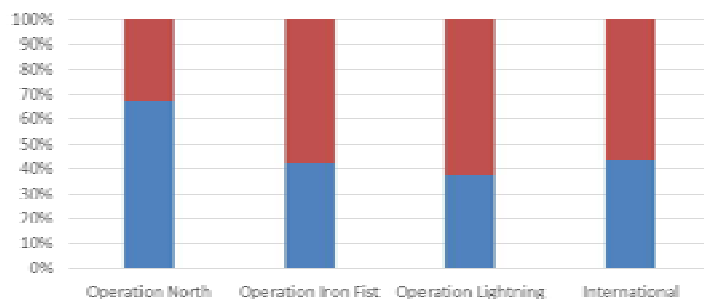


Figure 10 - % of Events proximity to primary roads by period. Sourced from ACLED

¹⁶ Idean Salehyan, "Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (January 2007)

and less developed territories to hide from government forces since insurgents could be easily identified while traveling on a public road. A second likely explanation is that following Operation North the LRA was pushed into the Congo and South Sudan, which has significantly less government infrastructure than their initial location in Uganda.

Joseph Kony and his troops are considered to be legend among communities in Central Africa, with many individuals believing that they must be guided by spirits since they are able to quickly disappear following their attacks. Myth aside, following their expulsion from Uganda the

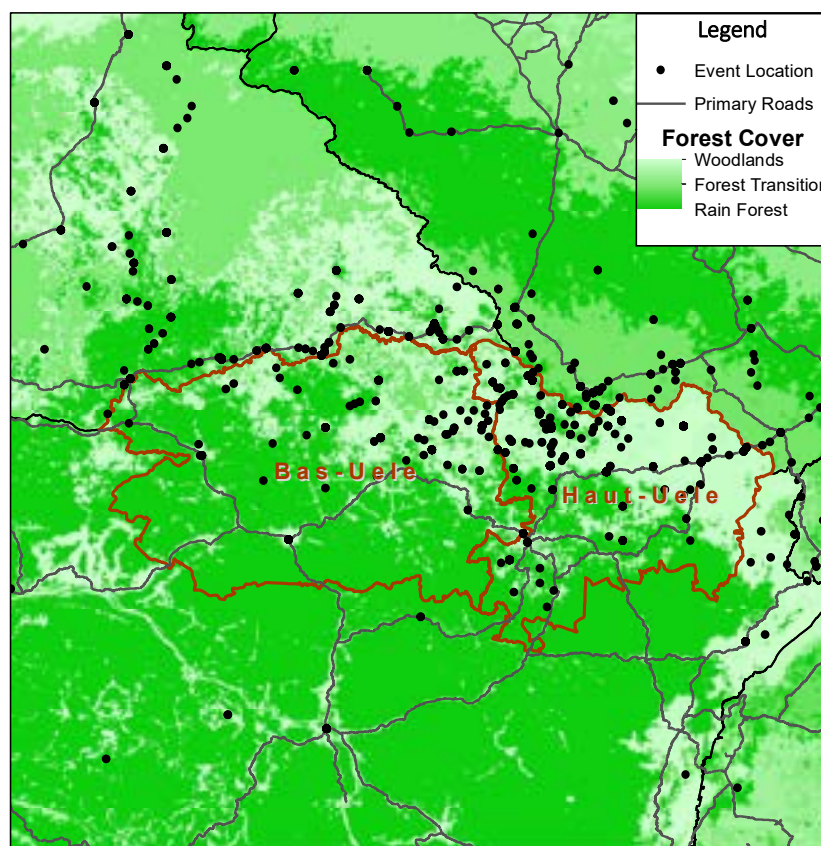


Figure 11 - Land cover in Central Africa and Violent Events in Bas-Uélé and Haut-Uélé. Sourced from ACLED, DIVA, and HOTOSM

LRA began to operate in one of the most under developed and tropic regions in the world, the Congo Basin which is the second largest rainforest in the world. A rainforest provides insurgents with a landscape to hide from aerial surveillance and is difficult for military personnel to track and travel through because they lack the local knowledge of the region and cannot use motorized

vehicles. A large portion of LRA attacks in the DRC occur in the northern segments of the provinces of Bas-Uélé and Haut-Uélé (which translates to lower and upper Uélé). As displayed in figure 11, the north segments of these regions are primarily woodlands which is far more accessible than rainforests and thereby easier to track insurgents. However, this is due to populated communities not being located in rain forests but rather more habitable woodlands. The LRA may possibly be attacking these locations and quickly retreating back into the rainforest to obtain cover. A major limitation of this explanation is that there is no available data on the location of LRA bases or movement following attacks, so all explanations are just theoretical possibilities which may not be accurate.

Conclusion

The LRA has been one of Africa's greatest tragedies of the last century, being a potential factor in the instability of various states and uprooting millions of families from their communities. Many military responses aimed at eliminating the organization by multiple states yielded various levels of success over the last few decades. State weakness and distrust between the Central African states lead to their military responses only temporarily forestalling LRA attacks and merely resulted in the expansion of LRA activities into neighboring states. The inability to quickly eliminate insurgents and capture Joseph Kony lead to a game of cat-and-mouse that ultimately did more harm than good by expanding violence in regions incapable of defending themselves from abductions and massacres. Only after powerful international actors such as the U.N. and the United States sent small contingencies to ensure security in the region did LRA attacks begin to falter in both intensity and frequency.

Adaptation to their geography was a key factor in the resilience of the LRA since its inception in the 1980s. Primary roads allowed the organization to quickly carry out attacks and retreat from the scene before government forces could intervene. As the LRA moved into less developed regions they were discouraged from using these roads as they were less common than in Uganda and could easily expose their position while being pursued by government forces. Although this article was not able to conclusively determine whether the LRA made use of rainforests to evade government forces, their proximity to attack sites suggest they could be used as a base of operations to be harder to detect.

American involvement in the peace keeping mission in Central Africa sets an important precedent for future anti-terror campaigns in more rural settings. Military operations aimed at pursuing insurgents and decapitating leadership have only limited success in containing violence. If the military operation is not capable of entirely eradicating every insurgent and eliminating its leadership, then it may only result in the organizations movement into less accessible regions which will only prolong and expand the conflict. Furthermore, a military response may incite unrest among local communities that may sympathize with the organization or suffer unintentional grievances and create a more difficult setting to restore security too in a post-insurgency period.

A more effective strategy to deal with rural insurgencies is for powerful international actors to provide low level of peace keeping troops to ensure security for afflicted communities and work towards reintegration of insurgents into society. Ugandan offers of amnesty for insurgents was effective at entirely removing violence from the nation even following a failed peace negotiation with Joseph Kony. Additionally, evidence shows that once the U.S. and other international powers supplied relatively small contingencies of peace keeping troops to protect

communities and were instructed to not pursue insurgents, the intensity of attacks dropped significantly in the following decade. To this day the whereabouts of Joseph Kony and his followers are unknown, leaving the door open for the possibility of a revival of the organization. Past experience will hopefully leave the international community wiser to dealing with insurgencies if there would be a resurgence of the LRA.

Word Count: 4305

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