What can we do about Uganda and the LRA?

Many of the millions of people who watched the Kony 2012 video were touched by the Ugandan children it portrayed and the need for an end to the wars and violence involving the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). But what are the most effective – and least potentially damaging – ways we can respond?

The Kony 2012 video has been widely criticized by many Ugandans, who fear more military intervention and believe the video misrepresents them, their situation, and their pressing needs (see: http://ugandaspeaks.com/). Africa experts also have criticized it for being overly simplistic, out-of-date, and too narrow in focusing on capturing Joseph Kony of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). It also has been criticized for contributing to stereotypes of Africans as needy and unable to solve their problems and of Africa as a continent in perpetual conflict. Invisible Children, which produced the video, has been scrutinized as well; much of its budget goes to the U.S. “awareness” campaign – for showing the video across the country and product merchandising. And Invisible Children is only one of many organizations with projects in Uganda and surrounding countries, and it has obtained more funding than most.

1. Learn about Uganda & Central Africa

Before advocating that the U.S. government adopt a particular policy or deciding to donate to an organization, it is important to learn more from a variety of sources, especially people from the countries involved.

⇒ Consult resources produced by many individuals and organizations about both Uganda and Central Africa listed on the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (ACAS) website: (http://bit.ly/GVGURP)

Here are some issues to learn more about.

• What are the conditions in northern Uganda today, and what support are its people seeking from us? Children are no longer in danger of being abducted in northern Uganda, and the LRA has not operated there since 2006. Today, northern Ugandans are focused on post-conflict reconstruction, renewing farming, and health issues such as nodding disease that emerged during the war in the resettlement camps where the Ugandan government forced them to live. And, as people have returned to their land from the camps, their rights to land ownership have been challenged in some areas.

• Where is this conflict and the violence now? The LRA is no longer in Uganda, and its forces have been reduced to only a few hundred, but their brutal attacks have continued in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan.

• Why does this part of Africa seem so conflicted? There are powerful competing international, national, and local interests that seek advantage and that are prepared to initiate and support violence. Multiple militias and armies have disrupted the CAR, DRC, and South Sudan for many years. And national governments often have not given priority to ending the violence and protecting their populations. (Resources for learning more about this conflict are on the ACAS website.)
2. What should we urge the U.S. government to do?

The Kony 2012 video calls for an expanded military effort to capture LRA leader Joseph Kony, arrest him by the end of 2012, and bring him before the International Criminal Court (ICC). But increased cooperation between U.S. Army Special Forces, Ugandan, and other armies in the region to find and arrest Kony is highly likely to have dangerous consequences for civilians. Often in the past, they have been caught in the crossfire or become targets of retaliatory attacks by the LRA. Most people want to end the violence, find justice for the victims, and reintegrate the LRA soldiers into society. But how can that be achieved, and are foreigners far from the region in the best position to know how to make this happen? An end to these wars needs to be negotiated by the local people directly affected by the conflict – recall the long negotiations of South Africans for ending that conflict and for seeking justice through their Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

➔ Here are some policy recommendations from ACAS.

- **Urge President Obama and the Congress:**
  - To focus primarily on *negotiated, not military, solutions*. In March 2012 the peace-building organization Conciliation Resources reported from its study of the impact of the LRA on local communities in the DRC, CAR, and South Sudan: “Those who bear the brunt of the LRA’s violent retaliations are... all too aware of the risks of a renewed military strategy... An overwhelming majority of those consulted expressed a desire for a solution based on protection and political engagement.” [http://ow.ly/9Qfpo](http://ow.ly/9Qfpo)

Similarly, in June 2009, Ugandan Acholi Religious Leaders Initiative (ARLPI) said, “The military option has been explored numerous times in the past... Military strategies launched against the LRA have time and again led to severe reprisal attacks on the innocent civilian community... [We] advocate for dialogue and other non-violent strategies to be employed so that long term sustainable peace may be realized. Let us learn from the past experiences where we have seen that violence only breeds more violence.” [http://ow.ly/9Qg4S](http://ow.ly/9Qg4S)

- To cooperate closely with the *African Union (AU)* and *United Nations (UN)* for a negotiated settlement and give them the financial and logistical support needed to support negotiations and to increase security for civilians of the affected regions without further escalating violence.

- To actively seek an effective *United Nations Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)* <http://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/ArmsTradeTreaty> to end trade in weapons, munitions, and other military and policing equipment that often inflict misery and carnage on civilians, especially in Africa.

- To take a strong stand against child soldiers by fully enforcing without exceptions the *U.S. Child Soldier Prevention Act*, unanimously passed by Congress in 2009, to prohibit military assistance to governments not taking action to demobilize child soldiers. <www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/childrens-rights/child-soldiers>. *Amnesty International* has campaigns on both child soldiers and small arms. Use of child soldiers and raping of women and girls are common horrors of war, not just by the LRA – and not only in Africa.

3. Do you want to donate for urgent human needs in Uganda and this region of Africa?

Research what organizations are doing, how they work with the people who are affected, and how much of their donations go to activities on the ground. Many people urge providing support to locally-based organizations.

➔ As a start, two international agencies have focused on the child soldiers and displaced people in Central African Republic, Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda. They are very short of funds to care for and rehabilitate the injured. These are:

- **UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)** - Addressing urgent needs of children, women, and men affected by insecurity and chronic conflict in the four countries. <http://donate.unhcr.org/>

- **UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF)** – Working with former child soldiers, refugees, rape and abuse victims, and displaced by the LRA, other militias, and national armies. <http://www.unicef.org/>