



enough

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

Uganda

Roots of the Crisis

Under current President Yoweri Museveni, Uganda has made a remarkable recovery from the horrors that the country experienced under late dictator Idi Amin. However, much of northern Uganda has remained marginalized and neglected. It is this sense of marginalization that helped spawn multiple rebel movements in northern Uganda, the most serious of which is the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA. The conflict between the government and the LRA is the longest running civil conflict in Africa, and the LRA has become notorious for being one of the most brutal guerilla forces in the world.

Idi Amin and Post-Colonial Uganda

Uganda gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, and the country experienced five years of multiparty democracy under President Milton Obote before his regime began a slide toward violent dictatorship. Obote was ousted in 1971 by a non-commissioned army officer, Idi Amin Dada, whose coup was initially welcomed with widespread enthusiasm.

Amin, however, quickly dissolved parliament and altered the constitution, granting himself absolute power and eliminating all opposition. His eight-year rule was epic in its violence. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people were killed during his regime. Amin particularly targeted the Acholi people of northern Uganda, partly because of their support for his predecessor, but also because they traditionally composed the bulk of the army, and thus posed a potential threat to his reign. Amin's government devastated the country and its developing economy, in part by expelling all Asians from Uganda and essentially destroying a growing merchant class.

A victim of his own excesses, Idi Amin was overthrown in 1979 and forced to flee into exile by a Tanzanian-backed rebellion that included Museveni. Rigged elections in 1980 returned Milton Obote to power, prompting Museveni to launch a guerrilla war in 1981.

Museveni's Ascendance

Obote's regime committed massive human rights abuses in an effort to crush Museveni's insurgency. As tensions escalated, Obote was overthrown in 1985 by a group of ethnic Acholis led by General Tito Okello. Exhausted by the war and internal divisions, the Okello government entered into negotiations with Museveni's rebel group, the National Resistance Movement. Museveni's National Resistance Army, however, continued its push to Kampala, seizing the Ugandan capital in 1986, and installing a "no-party democracy," which allowed individuals, but not political parties, to contest elections.

Museveni is credited with leading Uganda's emergence from the violent and abusive periods under Amin and Obote, and with laying the groundwork for the development of one of Africa's more successful economies. But Uganda's security deteriorated in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and Uganda joined Rwanda in intervening militarily in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1996 and 1998. During this period, a major war unfolded in Congo involving militaries from six African countries and a broad array of rebel groups. While much of the fighting was directly linked to the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and the presence of Hutu militias seeking safe refuge in Congo, all of these military forces also sought to exploit the rich natural resources in eastern Congo for their own benefit. Through its support for various militia groups, the increasingly ill-disciplined Ugandan army was actively involved in widespread human rights abuses in the gold-producing district of Ituri.

The Lord's Resistance Army

Uganda also faced a challenge at home. Beginning in 1986, several rebel movements sprung up in the economically and socially marginalized north of the country. The most notorious of these is the LRA, an exceedingly violent mystical movement led by a self-proclaimed messiah, Joseph Kony. While claiming to defend the rights of Acholis, the LRA's extreme brutality against fellow Acholis in northern Uganda included murder, torture, mutilations, rape, and widespread child abductions. The civilian population of the north was caught in the crossfire between the government and the LRA and increasingly became alienated from both.

Over the years, the LRA has had few genuine political objectives and has relied heavily on the Sudanese government for military support. (The Sudanese government has always viewed the LRA as a useful force in its efforts to keep southern Sudan and northern Uganda destabilized, and as a means to punish Uganda for its support of the rebel Southern People's Liberation Army, or SPLA, in Sudan.) Since 1986, the LRA has abducted as many as 40,000 children, forcing them to serve as soldiers, porters, or sex slaves. In an effort to prevent looting and abductions, the Ugandan government created "protected villages." Sadly, these were often over-crowded, unsanitary, and dangerous camps for the internally displaced, and most were forced by the government to enter these camps against their will. In 2002, Uganda launched Operation Iron Fist in an attempt to definitively defeat the insurgency, but the operation sparked more intense and violent attacks by the LRA—and instigated the LRA's return from southern Sudan to northern Uganda. The failed operation dramatically increased the number of internally displaced people, and failed to end the war. At the height of the conflict, nearly 2 million northern Ugandans were living in displaced camps.

Throughout late 2005 and early 2006, the LRA shifted their base of operations into northeastern Congo, near Garamba National Park, underscoring the regional dimensions of the conflict. Around the same time, the International Criminal Court, or [ICC](#), unsealed arrest warrants for five senior LRA leaders, including Kony. The ICC investigation began after the Ugandan government referred the LRA situation to the Court in late 2003. The ICC's actions coupled with pressure on the battlefield, pushed the LRA to agree to peace talks with the Ugandan government, and these negotiations began in July 2006 in [Juba](#), southern Sudan. While many Ugandans, activists, and diplomats were hopeful that a deal might be struck, talks fell apart late in 2008, with Kony repeatedly refusing to sign a deal that his delegation had helped draft.

'Operation Lightning Thunder' and its Aftermath in Congo

In December 2008, the armies of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and southern Sudan launched 'Operation Lightning Thunder,' a joint military offensive against the LRA in northeastern Congo. Though the offensive weakened the LRA by cutting off food stores and other supplies and destroying some of the main rebel camps, it failed in its ultimate goal of apprehending the LRA's senior leadership. Instead, the LRA has scattered across vast, treacherous terrain, and in retaliation for the offensive and to survive on the run, they have launched a series of ruthless attacks against civilians in northeastern Congo and southern Sudan. According to Human Rights Watch, in December 2008 and January 2009, the LRA brutally killed more than 865 civilians and abducted at least 160 children in eastern Congo alone. Since September 2008, over 180,000 people in Congo have been displaced by LRA attacks, as well as another 60,000 in southern Sudan.

The LRA remain a significant destabilizing presence in Orientale province and an acute threat to civilians. Despite the attempts of 'Operation Lightning Thunder,' the LRA's high command remains intact. Unless these essential leaders are either captured or killed, the LRA's regional campaign of terror will not end. The more time that passes, the stronger Kony's ranks will grow, and the harder it will be to restore peace to this impoverished and war-weary region.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

