



## **No excuses: the end of the Lord's Resistance Army is in sight Enough Project/Resolve Uganda Statement on 'Operation Lightning Thunder'**

**January 16, 2009 (Washington DC/Kampala)** After nearly four months of renewed attacks on civilians in central Africa by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, efforts to apprehend top rebel commanders responsible for the violence are long overdue. However, 'Operation Lightning Thunder,' the joint military operation against the rebel group launched in mid-December by the armies of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Government of Southern Sudan—with the support of the United States—has been poorly executed to date and has so far only made the crisis worse. However, swift and decisive action by the incoming Obama Administration to protect civilians from further violence and demobilize the LRA can salvage this window of opportunity to end the conflict.

Though the offensive has weakened the LRA by cutting off food stores and other supplies, it has also forced the LRA into a familiar position as a highly mobile insurgent force. With the LRA flushed deeper into the jungle, Ugandan forces have lost an important measure of initiative: the LRA knows the tricky terrain better than their adversaries; LRA fighters are able to move and disperse quickly and in small numbers; and the LRA has shown every willingness to loot and pillage to survive. Kony and his key commanders have ordered their forces to retaliate by committing brutal attacks against Congolese civilians. Neither the regional militaries involved nor the international community more broadly has a coherent plan to apprehend top rebel commanders or protect civilians from LRA atrocities. Urgent action is needed to increase international support for more effective and better designed regional military response to the LRA threat and provide Kony and his inner circle with a clear choice between accepting a negotiated solution and facing decisive military force.

As long as Kony insists on playing a spoiler role in efforts to end the war peacefully, a coordinated, surgical effort to apprehend the LRA leadership, in conjunction with continuing efforts to help speed reconstruction and development in northern Uganda, remains the best way to end the conflict. Well organized and targeted military action to apprehend those key LRA figures indicted by the International Criminal Court in

2005 for war crimes and crimes against humanity became increasingly necessary in late 2008, when over two years of peace talks failed to result in a signed agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA. Since last September, Kony has balked several times at signing a reasonable peace deal, which had been negotiated and explained to him at length, while simultaneously ordering a new wave of attacks and abductions in northeastern Congo. It is intolerable for Kony to endlessly string out talks as a means for the LRA to continue its reign of terror.

Coordination and cooperation amongst regional countries to address the LRA threat is welcome, especially given their antagonistic history. However, the recent Ugandan military effort, carried out in Garamba National Park in eastern Congo, has been operationally flawed and has so far failed in its objective to end the LRA insurgency. This aerial bombardment of LRA hideouts in northeastern Congo and subsequent ground operation have not achieved their initial goal of surprise, and ensuing military incursions have been indiscriminate—endangering children previously abducted by the LRA and creating significant risk for civilians in the region. In the past four months, a spate of LRA attacks killed roughly 500 civilians in northeastern Congo and Southern Sudan, and displaced another 70,000, bringing the total number of displaced in the area to over 100,000. Unless circumstances change, many others are likely to fall victim to a similar fate.

The LRA camps were largely empty of fighters and high-level commanders when struck by Ugandan aircraft, suggesting that either operational security was compromised or the initial intelligence that was used to design the attack was flawed. Moreover, the operation's failure to cordon off the camps, cut off escape routes, or put in place mechanisms to protect surrounding communities from reprisal attacks before the bombing began indicates poor military planning. Scattered LRA units are now stretched across hundreds of kilometers, able to either conduct hit-and-run attacks against their pursuers or make a push toward a tempting sanctuary in southeastern Central African Republic, or CAR. Also troubling is the limited number of LRA fighters who have voluntarily surrendered. Had the bulk of the LRA rank-and-file really been as demoralized and frustrated as many engaged in the peace process had thought, far more would have taken these attacks as an opportunity to throw down their arms. It is possible many are still hiding and intend to turn themselves in if the opportunity arises, but initial signs are not encouraging.

‘Operation Lightning Thunder’ is still salvageable, but it will require an immediate shift from an open-ended counter-insurgency to a much more targeted and focused mission. The following shifts in strategy and execution are therefore essential to the success of this mission going forward, all of which require greater international engagement:

### **1. Prioritize Civilian Protection**

Given the LRA's track record of atrocities, civilian protection must be a critical component of any military operation, and should have been a much higher priority at the outset of ‘Lightning Thunder.’ Now that the LRA has scattered in small units, protecting vulnerable populations has become a much greater logistical challenge.

Recent history in eastern Congo's North Kivu Province demonstrates the immense difficulty of protecting civilians over a wide area from predatory armed groups. LRA units have faced negligible resistance over the past few weeks as they slaughtered defenseless civilians in major Congolese civilian centers in Orientale Province, such as Faradje and Doruma, as well as committed atrocities in South Sudanese communities. Working through the U.N. Security Council, the United States and others should press the Congolese, Ugandan and Southern Sudanese governments to prioritize civilian protection, and press U.N. peacekeepers in Congo to deploy in greater numbers to LRA-affected areas with explicit orders to protect vulnerable populations. The United States and other international donors must also step up to the plate with increased humanitarian assistance for people affected by the violence, many of whom are living in increasingly desperate circumstances.

## **2. Focus on apprehending the LRA's leaders**

The LRA will continue to commit atrocities so long as Joseph Kony and his top commanders remain at large and able to abduct and indoctrinate new fighters. However, the LRA's highly centralized hierarchy is one of the rebel group's key weaknesses. Therefore, it is imperative that the regional militaries focus their efforts on the LRA *leadership*. 'Operation Lightning Thunder' must therefore not devolve further into an open-ended war against the LRA, as tricky as it might be to avoid that scenario given the dispersed nature of the rebels following the aerial assaults. A broader counterinsurgency will almost certainly result in far more non-combatant casualties, as we have already seen, and would place LRA abductees at greater risk.

## **3. Improve intelligence coordination and rapid response capacity**

The Ugandan, Congolese, and Southern Sudanese armies face an enormous challenge in trying to secure the region's vast, difficult terrain with only a relatively small number of troops. The United States, the U.K., and France, as well as U.N. Peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Southern Sudan should provide intelligence and offer technical and logistical support to the regional militaries participating in 'Lightning Thunder.' Greater international support should be conditioned on the operation narrowing its goals to target top leaders, while also showing restraint against abductees and protecting civilians from reprisal attacks. With this support, regional forces will be much more effective in identifying the whereabouts of LRA leaders and deploying rapidly to intercept them. Given U.S. monitoring and electronic communications tracking capacities, it is difficult to believe that the United States could not directly assist in pinpointing Kony's location.

## **4. Block the LRA from finding safe-haven in the Central African Republic**

This operation will not be a success if it simply displaces the LRA from eastern Congo to CAR. In the spring of 2008, the LRA allegedly mapped and practiced its escape route to CAR, where they reportedly buried stockpiles of food and weapons for future use. A number of soldiers were reportedly sent to cut off this corridor from Garamba to CAR, but reports suggest that the fighters deployed were exceedingly ill

equipped and unprepared. Due to its near complete lack of state authority, southeastern CAR is an ideal place for the LRA to take root and establish a new safe haven. Regional actors will have limited means to hone in on the LRA's leadership once in CAR, and their further inadequate planning and execution could allow the LRA to re-group and organize itself for another round of abductions and atrocities.

#### 5. **Encourage concrete steps toward a negotiated solution**

Given that Kony has repeatedly delayed and derailed efforts to find a negotiated solution to the conflict, it would take practical and tangible commitments on his part to pursue a negotiated solution—such as assembling LRA leaders in designated areas by a set time as per previous agreements. Absent such concrete steps, any efforts to revive negotiations would need to move forth in parallel with mounting military pressure on the LRA. In the meantime, UN peacekeepers and regional governments should be more proactive in facilitating the escape and demobilization of scattered groups of rebels interested in laying down their arms.

#### **Conclusion: A special role for the United States**

Given the close U.S. relationship with key actors in 'Operation Lightning Thunder'—in particular Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Southern Sudanese President Salva Kiir—the United States is uniquely placed to support better targeted military efforts. The United States' pre-existing support for the operation gives it an added responsibility to ensure that the consequent spiraling violence comes to an end. Furthermore, resolving this conflict would also advance U.S. interests in the broader region by helping to prevent a return to war in Southern Sudan, where a resurgent LRA could renew its role as a proxy for the Sudanese government, and securing peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where nearly 12 years of warfare has cost an estimated six million lives.

The United States should use its significant diplomatic clout in central Africa and in the U.N. Security Council to make protection of civilians affected by LRA violence a priority, while building momentum and consensus for a strategy to apprehend top LRA leaders and demobilize lower-level members. The United States military has strong ties to the Ugandan military and has assets based nearby at the U.S. military base in Djibouti. The incoming Obama administration should provide greater intelligence and logistical support and should consider direct support to, and collaboration with, Ugandan forces on the ground in direct action against the LRA.

A permanent end to two decades of violence in northern Uganda and other LRA-affected areas will require long-term recovery and reconciliation processes. However, ending the LRA insurgency is a crucial step towards a sustainable peace, and with relatively little U.S. and international investment an immediate halt to the violence is attainable. If the regional militaries and the international community do not alter their hazardous and costly approach at this critical juncture, 'Lightning Thunder' will simply become the latest in a long list of failed attempts to end Joseph Kony's 20-year reign of terror. More lives will have been lost, and the political will to decisively end this conflict will have been squandered once again.

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