

Open Statement on the Lord's Resistance Army

One year ago today, over the course of four days, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) slaughtered 300 people in Haute Uele province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The prior year, beginning on Christmas day 2008, 620 civilians were massacred over two days in this same region. Today, the people of these villages are no safer. Despite its 2005 commitment to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, the international community has still not improved its ability to protect populations from the LRA's reign of terror. Nor is it any closer to bringing the LRA commanders responsible for heinous mass atrocities perpetrated against civilians to justice. The United Nations (UN) Security Council must now prioritize working with the governments of the Great Lakes region to protect populations in the DRC, Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) from the LRA.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued a warrant for the arrest of Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, along with other top LRA commanders on the grounds that the atrocities committed by the LRA constitute crimes against humanity, one of the four crimes that the responsibility to protect was created to prevent and halt. The LRA directly and repeatedly target the most vulnerable populations, attacking remote, unguarded villages in a brutal manner designed to instill abject terror. Since 2008 the LRA has massacred more than 2,000 people and abducted over 2,500 more, the majority of them children who have been recruited to fight on behalf of the militia, often being forced to kill or maim their own relatives. Abducted women and girls often become the wives of LRA leaders, suffering repeated rapes and sexual assaults. Over 400,000 people have been displaced as a result of LRA attacks. Even worse, such attacks appear to be on the rise.

Over the past two decades the LRA has mutated from a Ugandan insurgent group to a regional menace requiring a regional solution. The governments of Sudan, the DRC and the CAR bear the primary responsibility to protect their populations from the crimes committed by the LRA. Some of them, particularly the government of Uganda where the LRA originated, have launched numerous military campaigns in an effort to end the threat posed by the LRA. But these have proved unsuccessful and in some cases have led to retaliatory attacks against civilians. It is clear that without significant international assistance, the governments of the region are unable to address the threat posed by the LRA.

In recognition of this, international actors have taken steps to prevent atrocities and protect people but more must be done. There are UN peacekeeping missions on the ground in those countries where the LRA has been most active to date. Yet these missions operate across vast swaths of territory and have been ineffective at deterring or halting LRA attacks, in part because their mandates are not specifically focused on protecting civilians from the threat posed by the LRA as well as because the missions are not adequately resourced. There has also been little or no effective coordination among the respective missions despite the regional nature of the LRA threat. Additionally, efforts to apprehend those LRA leaders for whom ICC warrants have been issued have thus far been unsuccessful.

What is now needed is for the UN, AU and governments in the region to pursue a coordinated regional strategy to tackle the problem of the LRA and end the appalling cycle of atrocities once and for all. This should include:

- Improving capacities for gathering information about LRA movements and composition, and developing a mechanism for information sharing amongst regional governments and peacekeeping missions.
- Translating this information into well targeted preventive deployments in areas at risk of LRA attacks and, combined with effective communication networks between peacekeeping and armed forces and vulnerable villages, reduced response times when attacks are reported.
- Strengthening programs to encourage the desertion of soldiers from the LRA and to assist such soldiers, many of whom are victims of LRA abductions, in leaving the group and reintegrating into their communities
- Serious, coordinated military efforts to apprehend LRA leaders and to end the threat posed by the LRA. Any such efforts must be designed in such a way as to mitigate the risk of civilian casualties including by protecting civilians from potential retaliatory attacks by LRA fighters.

In light of the clear threat to civilians posed by the LRA, United Nations member states must take action to uphold their responsibility to protect populations and prevent further atrocities. The time to end the cycle of massacres and abductions has come. The Security Council must make this a priority in the New Year to ensure that 2011 doesn't see more lives lost and communities devastated.

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