

PUBLIC ANNEX C



VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS IN CIVIL WAR

UNDERSTANDING ATROCITIES BY THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY IN NORTHERN UGANDA

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Abstract

Very little analysis exists on why armed groups commit atrocities against civilians during civil war. This is unfortunate as a deeper understanding of the motivations for such atrocities could probably help prevent or minimise such atrocities in the future. This paper analyses the motivations behind the atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the Acholi civilian population in northern Uganda. The atrocities have often been labelled meaningless because they are targeted against the same civilians that the LRA regards as their constituency. The author argues that these atrocities have a number of different purposes but that they serve in particular as a form of "population control" designed to scare the civilian population away from working against LRA interests. This population control is exercised both against individuals and against whole communities as a form of "collective punishment". As such the violence of the LRA serves specific purposes in the group's attempt to avoid defeat in a highly asymmetrical war.

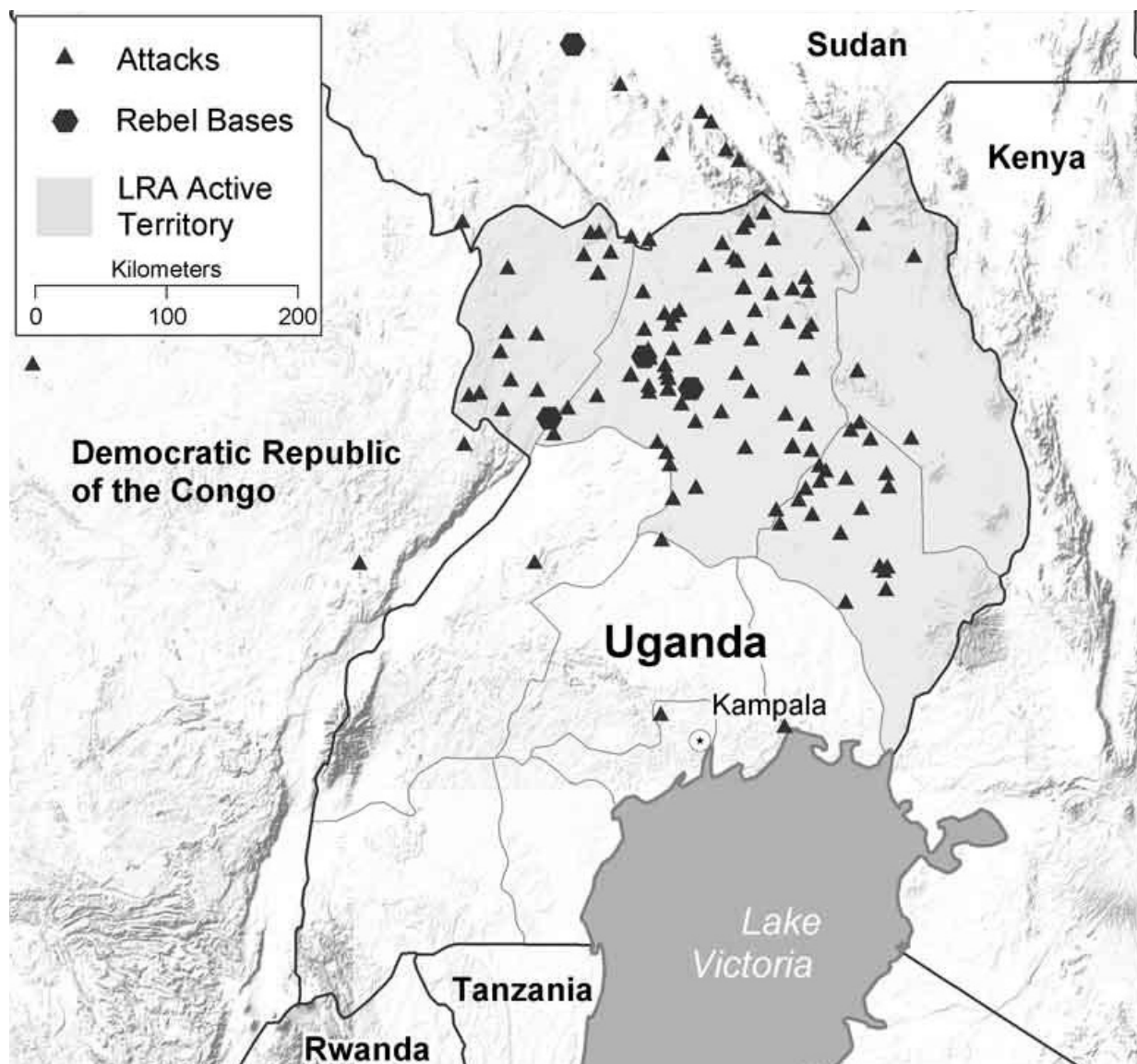
Introduction

Violence is the defining aspect of war. In spite of this, the use of violence in civil wars is often poorly understood. Particularly groups that use violence against civilians are labelled as having no goal apart from inflicting damage and destruction. In recent years one insurgency group has been labelled as exceptionally insane because of the brutality of its interactions with civilians: the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Northern Uganda led by the alleged spirit medium Joseph Kony. This group is the focus of the present paper.

The LRA has repeatedly been called the world's most brutal insurgency group.¹ For 20 years it has terrorised Northern Uganda in its alleged attempt to overthrow the government of President Yoweri Museveni.² For most of this period the campaign has been one of terror, abductions and abuse of civilians to a degree that has made senior UN officials talk about levels of cruelty not seen anywhere else in the world.³ At the high point of the conflict it was estimated that 1.6 million people or 90% of the population

in northern Uganda were displaced because of the conflict. Schools, homes, IDP camps and families were attacked on a daily basis and thousands of people were massacred, mutilated and abducted.⁴ Although the conflict might now draw to an end, with peace negotiations going on in Juba, southern Sudan, the civilian population of northern Uganda still lives in a state of fear, worrying that the LRA fighters might return if the peace talks fail.

One of the most striking elements of the LRA is the seeming arbitrariness with which the extreme brutality has been applied. All rebellions and civil wars make use of violence and often parts of this violence are, purposefully or not, aimed at civilians. However, as Doom and Vlassenroot argue, "*Kony's actions [...] seem to be based on blind terror. They appear, at first glance, counterproductive and unrelated to long-term political aims.*"⁵ Paradoxically the strategy applied by the LRA has been one of attacking civilians from the same ethnic group that they claim to be fighting for; the Acholi population of northern Uganda.⁶



Especially in the early years, the goals of the LRA were closely tied to Acholi nationhood and the restoration of Acholi pride which was destroyed as Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) occupied northern Uganda subsequent to their capture of Kampala in 1986. Even though the group today includes fighters and high ranking commanders from non-Acholi districts, the group is still dominated by Acholi.⁷ Kony also still attempts to construct the LRA as 'the new Acholi community' and even LRA fighters of non-Acholi origin are perceived as members of this community.⁸ This strong Acholi identity makes it particularly puzzling that the Acholi population has become the primary target of LRA atrocities.

This paper aims to disclose why the LRA targets the very same Acholi civilians that they claim to be fighting for. The aim is not to excuse the atrocities of the LRA, but to explain them. As the historical roots of the insurgency have been thoroughly investigated by others the paper will focus on the motivations behind certain acts rather than attempt to explain the wider context of the conflict.⁹

1. The LRA – anatomy of a failed rebellion

Compared to other recent African insurgencies such as UNITA in Angola, RUF in Sierra Leone and RENAMO in Mozambique the LRA is a rather small rebel group. However, in the late 1990s and prior to the Ugandan army's so-called Operation Iron Fist from March 2002, the LRA was still a relatively potent force with a considerable impact on the ground in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. Estimates of their size ranged from 4,000 to considerably more than 5,000 fighters. After the initiation of Operation Iron Fist, however, the LRA's military capacity deteriorated and it is estimated that the group today consists of around 1,500 fighters although observations from the assembly exercise of the current peace negotiations might disqualify these numbers.¹⁰

The militia's mode of operation is highly decentralised and sub-groups have been able to maintain themselves in the bush for long periods of time without contact to the militia High Command. Because of the lack of bases in Uganda, combat units are furthermore highly mobile when on operation inside Uganda and contrary to the conventional belief that the group avoids direct confrontation with the UPDF, surveys on the topic show that a considerable amount of LRA-UPDF clashes are initiated by the LRA.¹¹

Central to the setup of the LRA is its leader, Joseph Kony. He is the political, military and spiritual head of the organisation and to many observers he is the embodiment of the insurgency. Kony's powers revolve largely around his alleged spiritual powers. He thus claims to be possessed by a number of spirits who guides him in military, political and other matters.¹²

LRA recruits almost all of its fighters by force, abducting them from the civilian community.¹³ When new recruits enter the movement they are initiated in a complex spiritual ritual which serves to connect them to the militia. After the ritual it is claimed that Kony will always know where the fighters are and whether they are planning to escape.¹⁴ In highly religious societies, like that of northern Uganda, such alleged spiritual powers can be a very effective tool to increase the informal power of insurgency groups.¹⁵ Whoever is seen to control the spiritual world will also hold some power over the population. Kony's alleged spiritual powers thus serve the purpose of holding the movement together and of increasing its power with the local population. He is therefore paramount to the militia. Whereas many observers have focused on the spiritual element in their analyses of the LRA, this paper argues that spirituality is not the reason behind the group's many attacks on civilians as will be shown later.¹⁶

Thus, although many observers see the LRA as a continuation of the spiritually oriented rebel group, the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (led by Kony's cousin, Alice Lakwena) which fought in northern Uganda from 1986 to 1987, it is primarily people with more conventional military mindsets who have dominated the formulation of the LRA's special variety of guerrilla tactics. Prominent in the development of these tactics have been the former second-in-command, Odong Latek (now deceased) and the current second-in-command, Vincent Otti, who both fought for more conventional guerrilla armies against the government in the beginning of the war.¹⁷

2. Understanding atrocities

This paper will use a qualitative approach to analyse the motivation behind the LRA's atrocities. During most of the conflict it has been impossible to enter into direct contact with the rebel group and I therefore argue that interviews with ex-combatants can be a fruitful way of gaining access to the meaning systems of rebel militias.¹⁸ The primary empirical source of the argument presented here is therefore constituted by interviews with former LRA commanders and regular combatants conducted in northern Uganda on two fieldtrips in July 2005 and January/February 2006.¹⁹

The following pages will address the intended purposes that violence serves for the LRA and its commanders. Because of the limited length of the paper, I will only touch sporadically on the ways in which these intentions have developed over time.

2.1. Explaining LRA atrocities against the Acholi civilian population



In academic circles today it is popular to argue that violence in civil war is a consequence of the economic aspirations of militias. Scholars like David Keen and Paul Collier have thus argued that violence is first and foremost aimed at enrichment of the militias and militia fighters.²⁰ In northern Uganda economics has indeed played a role in the conflict but it has been in a slightly different form than the one presented by Keen and Collier. Although the LRA has received substantial support from the Sudanese government since the beginning of the 1990ies, it has never received enough to sustain all of its fighters. The LRA has undertaken farming and trading from its southern Sudanese bases, but periods of partial starvation have not been unusual in the group.²¹ Voluntary civilian contributions to the LRA are uncommon, and the group have therefore not been able to rely on such contributions when on operation in Uganda. Consequently, the group has felt forced to loot and raid to gain food and other commodities. The vast majority of former LRA combatants described these raids as natural behaviour and my interviewees never questioned their legitimacy. While the classic accounts of economics in civil war focuses on enrichment, much LRA looting can thus rather be seen as a case of mere survival.

While the media tends to portray attacks on camps as pure killing rage, former LRA combatants would thus describe the objective of most such attacks as the obtaining of needed resources.²² In line with such statements the majority of the attacks on IDP camps take place without civilian fatalities.²³ The attacks often happen just after emergency food aid has been delivered to the camps by the WFP.²⁴ Former LRA commanders argue that this is a consequence of detailed planning:

*“They don’t just go in the camp. They have got their intelligence. They are very keen on knowing what goes on in the camp because the people in the camp are being fed by the WFP. [...] They don’t just rush to the camp to get food. They first come and stay around the camp. They abduct somebody and they ask him: Has food been sent there? [...] Then they will tell him to lead them and attack the camp and start taking food”.*²⁵

While much looting is thus caused by the need of food rather than simple greed, it is nevertheless also apparent that there are elements of enrichment in the looting. Looting is thus occasionally a way for local commanders to gain resources for themselves. This tendency was observed by several former combatants:

“If you come back home [in civilian life], you want to have something. You [take] money from the civilians and you keep it in the bush and if you come back you

*get it. [...] If you come back home you will get those money to start your business”.*²⁶

It is important to note that enrichment through looting is exclusively reserved for the commanders and primarily for commanders with high ranks. In cases where the militia succeeds in looting money or other valuable assets these persons are able to put funds aside for themselves (although they risk severe punishment if they are caught by the militia leadership). For the ordinary soldiers, however, looting is purely a way of sustaining themselves.

Looting thus serves a dual purpose. Because of the limited access to food and other resources within the LRA, and because the civilians do not hand over food voluntarily, it is necessary for the group to rely on pillage. At the same time looting is a way to enrich individual commanders who hold the power to reserve parts of loot for themselves. At the same time commanders are often under pressure to bring back food and funds to their families and the militia leadership when they go on operation. As it was said:

*“[The LRA] are not an established kind of force like the UPDF who are being paid salaries. What they get is from the ambushes they make on the road. And they know for sure that their families are there behind in Sudan so when they come here in Uganda they know that they have to carry out some ambushes”.*²⁷

Economics thus plays a role in the violence of the LRA even though “need” seems to be more important than “greed”.

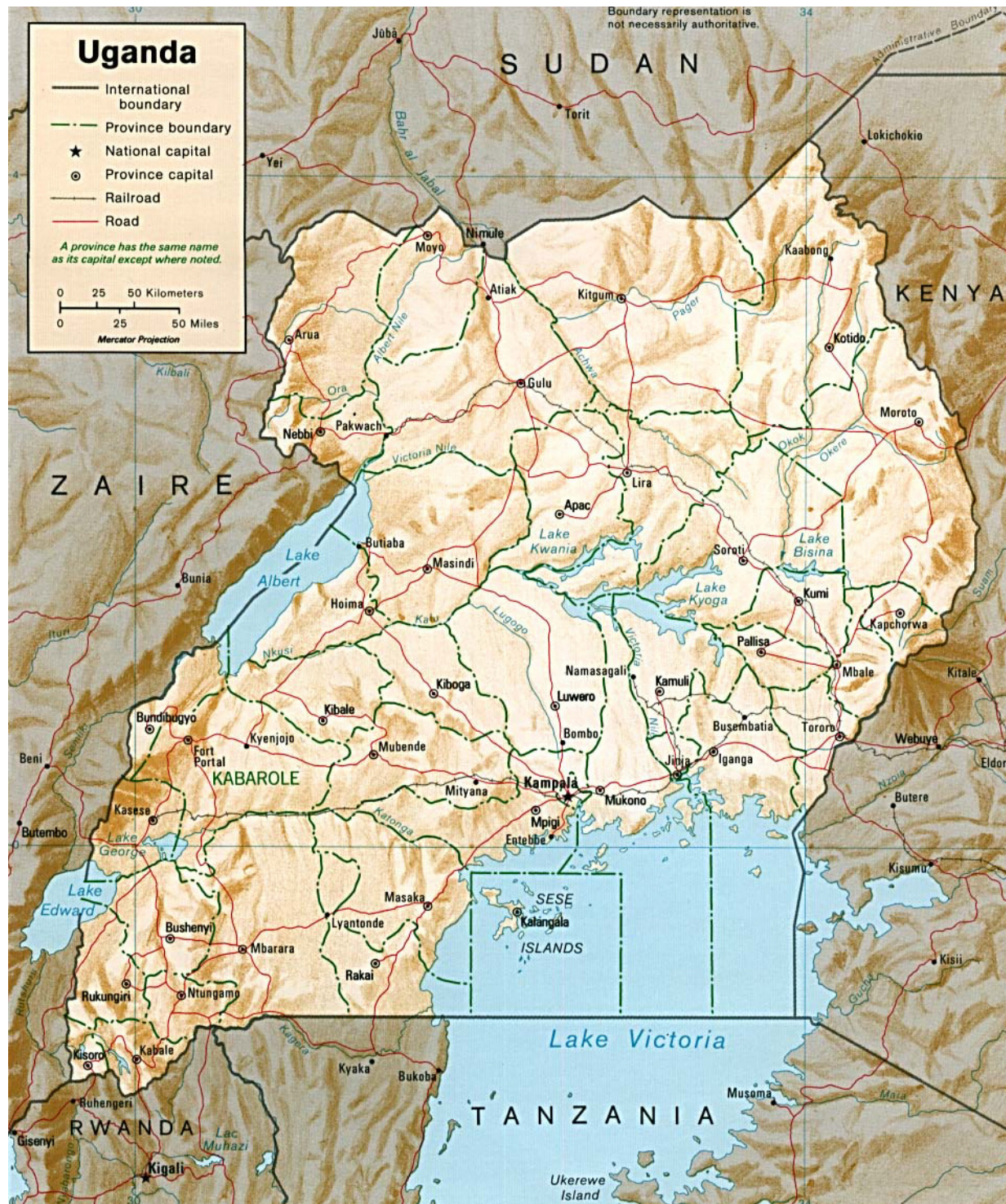
2.2. Violence against civilians as a force multiplier

Violence however also serves a higher strategic purpose than simple looting. This is confirmed by numerous former LRA combatants – and especially the former commanders who had tactical command. Through attacks on civilians the LRA has been able to remain a relevant threat to the government throughout the war. As one former commander who used to have close connections to Kony said:

*“This is guerrilla warfare. [...] When time comes for military action [the LRA] can plan to do something which can spoil the name of the government or which can show that [the LRA] are still there in the bush. [...] You know guerrilla war [...] is very difficult to control”.*²⁸

As it can be seen from this statement the rebels are extremely aware of the power that violence gives them





and they do not shy away from threatening to use it in connection with peace negotiations and in other political circumstances. The peace envoy from the failed peace negotiations in 2004 and 2005 thus explained that, “They told me to my face that “then we will go on a rampage to kill and just kill” – if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time; finish: that’s it for you”.²⁹ The horror inflicted by such accounts of killing rage is intended to maximise the tactical power held by the group or as former commanders argued, “to show that we are still very strong”.³⁰ The indiscriminate

use of violence allows the group to be seen as a threat while only staging few attacks and as such to remain an important player in national politics.

The effects in a political context are significant. The legitimacy of Museveni’s government is built on the argument that it ended the conflict that had plagued Uganda for two decades.³¹ The LRA is denying the NRM this legitimacy in northern Uganda by destroying peace and stability. As such, while the violence seriously alienates



the northern population from the LRA, it also serves to keep the same population alienated from the government and from the army. As one woman living in a camp for displaced persons near Gulu explained it, *"I blame both the LRA and the UPDF for the situation [...] but of the two I probably blame the UPDF more because they are the ones who are supposed to protect us, but they don't"*.³²

This argument has also been brought forward by scholars like Vinci and Kayunga.³³ However, although the political effects of violence are large, very few ex-fighters narrated stories which indicated that these effects were the initial purpose of violence.

2.3. Violence as population control

Based on my interviews with former LRA combatants I argue that LRA violence against civilians is primarily a way of controlling the population and communicating the will of the militia to the civilians.

Being a small militia that does not control territory, the LRA is extremely vulnerable to civilian cooperation with the army. It is therefore crucial for the group to be able to control the actions of the civilians and to dissuade them from working against the group.³⁴ Consequently they have installed a system of retaliation attacks against civilian government collaborators. I have labelled this system *'violence as population control'*. A special risk group in relation to this kind of violence consists of people who openly support the government and the ruling NRM party, political commissioners in the systems of Local Councillors³⁵ and members of the civilian self-defence groups. In these groups the LRA often targets specific persons who have been particularly active in cooperating with the government.³⁶ Among the most prominent examples of this is the killing of Kitgum district's Resident District Commissioner (RDC) in June 2000.³⁷

Apart from serving to stop people from working against the LRA, this practice also sets an example for others who want to work against the group. In other words, such violence does not serve an immediate purpose in relation to winning the war in a conventional way. Rather, in line with a famous quote by Henry Kissinger the aim of the militia is to win by preventing defeat. This is done by controlling the civilian population and preventing their obstruction of rebel activity. While victory by other means is awaited, the civilians must be controlled and this is done through retaliatory attacks.

Many former commanders emphasized that if civilians want the protection of being civilians they should refrain from participating in the struggle on the government side. Statements like the following were not uncommon among my interviewees:

"You [the civilian] want to remain alive and you want me to be killed. [...] It is bad. You are not a soldier. Why do you do that thing? [...] If you are a civilian you maintain being civilian. Don't enter into another persons work. If you are a peasant farmer you just do your farming. If you are a business man you continue your business. But don't involve yourself in the war. Because when you [do that] it means you are supporting one side. You are fighting us so you are also an enemy to us".³⁸

Thus, in a peculiar way the LRA has justified the killings of civilians by arguing that civilians have given up their civilian status by cooperating with the army.

The government strategy of establishing civilian self-defence units in Acholiland (which was initiated around 1990) was particularly important in fostering this perception among LRA fighters and contributed greatly to legitimising attacks on civilians. In the eyes of the LRA leadership the formation of the self-defence units served as a final proof that the Acholi civilian society could no longer be trusted and that they should therefore be treated as part of the enemy force. As one former LRA commander said: *"The formation of the 'arrow boys' was giving reason for LRA to [...] show the civilians that, 'okay you think you can beat us but let us show you that you cannot'"*.³⁹ This pattern of militia behaviour has also been observed in Sierra Leone, where militarisation of civilian communities in self-defence groups also provoked extremely violent reactions from the rebels.⁴⁰

Apart from the formation of the civilian self-defence groups, the government counterinsurgency strategy of *'protected villages'* has also contributed to the alienation of the LRA fighters from the civilian community. The initiative is based on forced encampment of civilians in the war zone. In effect the protected villages are IDP camps created to deny the rebels access to manpower and other resources and as such represent the UPDF's own variety of population control. The camps have gravely impoverished the population and as such do not enjoy much support among the common people.⁴¹ However, the LRA sees it differently. The fact that the camp policy has not met much active (violent) resistance among the civilians has given the rebels the impression that civilian allegiance is with the UPDF. This has frustrated the LRA fighters. As one statement from a former LRA commander shows, the lack of resistance is taken to imply an informal civilian-UPDF alliance:

"The civilians are now one with UPDF. Of course the UPDF are guiding them. In any village you will never enter without fighting. That is what I have seen. Before the small villages did not have soldiers. [Now] all the



*villages have soldiers. [...] UPDF are guiding those people. Everywhere you find soldiers among the civilians. Civilians are a kind of security of the UPDF”.*⁴²

As such the UPDF strategy to ‘claim’ civilian population by asserting to fight for them has contributed to legitimising civilians as a target for the LRA. The LRA’s system of population control has served as a direct reaction to this. In the view of the LRA a person leaves his/her role as civilian the moment he/she starts cooperating actively with one of the parties to the conflict. Paradoxically, violence is then used to force the person back to his/her role as civilian.

The problem seen from a civilian perspective is thus that both the UPDF and the LRA use population control as a strategy in the war. The civilians are therefore caught between two forces which are both punishing them for lack of cooperation. Consequently they will be targeted regardless of whether they work against the LRA or not.

While policies of population control should not be excused, it is still worth noticing that fear is an important factor in shaping such policies. Many ex-combatants argued that killings were necessary to protect the fighters because surviving civilians would have alerted the UPDF and thus have minimised the response time for the army and maximised the risk of getting caught:

*“When you kill it will give you time to go a very far distance before other civilians are coming.[...] When you ambush a vehicle, and leave others to go [spare civilians], then the others will go and report to the UPDF. Immediately UPDF will follow you even before you have gone very far. So you have to kill anybody. It will give you space to move”.*⁴³

In other words, killings can be conducted in a perverted form of self-defence because LRA fighters fear for their own lives. This view is widely echoed among ex-LRA combatants. The consequence is that any civilian that tries to escape during LRA raids is considered an army collaborator that can legitimately be killed. As one former commander said, *“of course the person who is running is dangerous. He should be killed”.*⁴⁴

2.3.1. Collective punishment

While targeted killings are an important part of LRA’s strategy of installing fear in the population, it is a slightly different variant of the system that is responsible for the most abhorrent killings in the Acholi area. In this system, which I have labelled ‘collective punishment’, whole villages

or areas pay for the acts of specific individuals. The system is simple: If civilians inform the UPDF of LRA’s whereabouts or cooperate with the army in other ways, the LRA will respond by using indiscriminate violence. Persons working against LRA interests are therefore not just responsible for themselves. Their actions will also put their family and even their village at danger.

Like in the case of individual killings the main purpose of the system of collective punishment is population control. Violence is perpetrated in apocalyptic and excessively brutal ways to increase the fear in the population. One method used by the LRA is to cook their victims and then force friends and relatives to eat them. Several commanders willingly admitted to have taken part in this practice. As one commander who worked closely with Otti for many years said:

*“A person could be cut into pieces and thrown in a tin and cooked [...]. It was just to sow a kind of destruction. It is a kind of punishment so that all the civilians see [...] the destruction we are sowing”.*⁴⁵

Other combatants talked about killing children or adults in similarly brutal ways:

*“At times when you go for raiding the whole village will be gathered together and will be put in a hut and they are burned. At times younger children are hit on the tree or put in a mortar and then pounded. At times they give you your own child to either hit or maybe put in the mortar and pound. [...] At times they do that after they find out that others from that place had run away or maybe when a person from that family escaped while in captivity. Maybe after abducting a child then the child comes back [to civilian life]. Then after they find out that this is the home of so and so then those things will happen. [It is] a kind of revenge”.*⁴⁶

These practices have seriously contributed to the view of the LRA as a gang of madmen inflicting mindless violence. However, as it should be evident from the argumentation developed here, the behaviour is an intended strategy of sowing fear in the population. Terror is the means through which socio-political control is sought. Battlefield strategies have been replaced by a strategy of atrocities intended to control the population and prevent them from working against the rebels. As a psychological weapon, the system of collective punishment has proved very effective and helped pacify the vast majority of the Acholi civilian population.

As shown in the statement above, the system of collective punishment is also used to keep the LRA fighters from leaving the movement. Especially top commanders risk the



lives of their families both in the militia and in civilian life if they choose to leave the group. Recent examples of such retaliatory operations include the heavy attacks on the areas around the family homes of Sam Kolo (former LRA spokesman) and Onen Kamdulu (former LRA Chief of Operations) in 2005 and the attempted abduction of Kolo's mother in Amuru camp and Kamdulu's mother in Alokolum camp.⁴⁷ Kamdulu and Kolo were among the most important LRA commanders and their surrender in early 2005 had been a great loss to the LRA. The militia leadership ordered the attacks to punish the two former commanders, discourage others from following their example and show the surrounding world that the LRA was still capable of fighting.⁴⁸ Peace workers living in the war zone have similar stories of revenge attacks against the families of other LRA deserters.⁴⁹

Revenge attacks can also be caused by less prominent events. As weapons are extremely important to the LRA, revenge is often taken against people who escape from the group bringing their gun and ammunition. Several interviewees argued that it was a known principle in the LRA that whereas it was sometimes possible to survive an attempt to escape from the group, an attempt to escape with a gun would always result in execution. Successful escapees who brought their gun when they left the movement also risked retaliation attacks against their village. As one former commander said, the order in such cases could be that *"in this particular area don't spare anything. Kill and burn the houses"*.⁵⁰ The same collective punishment would be given to people who stole weapons from LRA or who humiliated LRA in particularly serious ways. One former commander described how his unit conducted a massacre in a village in revenge for the conduct of a former UPDF soldier during abduction.

"It happened one time in Mucwini in Kitgum. [...] They [LRA] were going back [to Sudan] and the abducted people were tied with a line. One former UPDF was in the back of the line. There was a young man [LRA] in front of him with a gun. So the guy [former UPDF] jumped the young man, grabbed the gun and ran away. The guys let him run. But [later] they came back to the area and killed merciless. People were killed like flies. [...] Just because of this one man who removed the gun from them. The gun is very important to the LRA. The whole community in Mucwini is now very bitter with this man".⁵¹

Other examples of retaliatory attacks include attacks on the home areas of former LRA fighters who choose to participate in a programme on the Gulu based radio station, Mega FM, in which former LRA fighters go on-air to encourage their ex-colleagues in the bush to give up the fight. The programme is very popular among Western donor governments as well as in the local community, as it has contributed massively to increasing the number of people

who leave the LRA. However, LRA commanders in the bush often identify the persons speaking out against them and plan retaliatory operations against their home area:

*"When people desert [LRA] and go back to their area, they maybe go to Mega FM and begin making statements: 'I have come out of the bush because I have seen that this war is a meaningless war. Kony has committed massacres, he has got no agenda [...]' In the bush they hear this and they say: 'ok, this is this and this man.' Then the big man [Kony] tells one of his commanders to go to the area where the man on the radio is coming from. It does not matter if he is not there. 'Go and retaliate. [...] Go to the area and kill anybody you see, so they can see that we are still alive'"*⁵²

In line with this, while most killings and instances of collective punishment are conducted on a low-intensity scale, the LRA has also been known to conduct outright massacres throughout the post-1994 period.⁵³ These are well planned operations and many former commanders maintained that massacres were often retaliatory operations meant to discipline the civilian population.⁵⁴ This argument is confirmed by independent reports. Thus, the Atiak massacre in 1995 was primarily targeted against members of the civilian Home Guards.⁵⁵ In the case of the Lukong/Palabek massacre in 1997 the population was gathered before the killings and told that they were being punished because a group of youngsters had revealed hidden LRA arms caches to the UPDF and because people from the area escaped from the LRA more often than people from Gulu District.⁵⁶ While extremely brutal, this policy of collective punishment is widely accepted among the former LRA commanders.

Yet, as evident from the statement on atrocities in Mucwini, retaliatory operations are not necessarily conducted immediately after the event for which revenge is sought. Due to the relatively small size of the LRA, they often have to wait until an LRA unit infiltrates the given area in connection with other operations. The revenge might therefore come up to a year after the event causing it.⁵⁷ This has contributed to the difficulty of outside observers to comprehend the massacres but as shown above the massacres serve to paralyse civilian resistance to the rebellion. This strategy has also been applied in other African civil wars – most notably in Mozambique, where RENAMO used it to paralyse the population and thus prevent civilian resistance to the rebellion.⁵⁸

2.3.2. Mutilations as signalling

Killings, however, are not the only violent way to control the civilian population. One of the ways in which the LRA's



pressure upon the civilian population is exercised is the mutilations that have become a trademark for the group. Like the RUF in Sierra Leone, the LRA has institutionalised a system of cutting off people's lips, noses, ears, hands and fingers.⁵⁹ The bestial mutilations have contributed further to the picture of LRA's violence as the meaningless work of twisted minds. Like the killings discussed above, however, the system of mutilations have been institutionalised for a purpose.

While mutilations have occurred throughout the war, 1991, 1996 and 2005 stands out as years where such atrocities were committed in vast numbers.⁶⁰ Mutilations have thus largely coincided with government initiatives to 'claim' the civilian population as their constituency via initiation of the Local Defence Units and the 'protected villages'. Thus mutilations serve the same purpose of installing fear among the populace as the killings addressed above. They are a powerful information tool and the former LRA fighters demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of this:

"To cut peoples mouth or ear is also to send a message. If your mouth and ear is cut then you will not be killed. You are sent to tell others what they [the rebels] did to you. Then it makes the other civilians or soldiers fear. Then the civilians are afraid to cooperate with UPDF".⁶¹

The LRA members are aware that the communication effect of mutilations is much larger if the mutilated person is kept alive – because the person can tell his/her story and because the daily sight of mutilated people will constantly remind people in the camps of the consequences of disobeying LRA orders. It is thus not the mutilation in itself but the signals it sends that carry importance. Like with retaliatory attacks, mutilations might be targeted both against specific individuals and the population in general.⁶² A story told by Father Carlos Rodriguez of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative is of a boy in Kitgum who had his ears, lips and fingers cut off by the LRA. His ears were then wrapped in a letter and put in his pocket. The letter contained a warning to anyone who was thinking about joining the Local Defence Units; "We shall do to you what we have done to him".⁶³

As such, the brutal disfigurement of civilians serves a central strategic purpose in the pursuance of population control. A hand cut off is used as a punishment for taking up arms against the LRA. The removal of lips and ears is used against people who are thought to have informed the UPDF of LRA movements in the area. The symbolism is clear; without ears you will not be able to hear us and without lips you will not be able to report on us. Judging from the testimonies of my interviewees this symbolic use of atrocious violence is considered a useful tool of war within the LRA. Just as in the case of killings of civilians the intended receiver of the symbolic message is not the

international community but the local population. Seen in this context the group has succeeded in getting its message through.

2.4. Initiation violence

While much focus has been put on LRA atrocities, few scholars have focused on the role that violence plays in socialising new recruits into the militia through initiation rites and forced killings.⁶⁴ Life inside the movement is extremely violent for the recruits and violence serves the dual purpose of introducing fighters to their new *normalcy* and to show them the consequences of an attempted escape.

Many interviewees had identical stories about the violent ways in which abductees and new recruits are treated in the LRA. Reference was usually made to the way in which killings and beatings are used to discourage people from escaping from the group. Most of the interviewees had seen people being killed during the abduction and many had been forced to participate in the killings. Once they had participated in atrocities it was easier for them to accept the LRA as a group because they had now committed the same acts themselves.⁶⁵ Violence thus helps recruits enter the new meaning system of the militia. At the same time violence makes it socially and psychologically harder for them to go back to the communities that they have participated in destroying. This is exemplified by the abduction story of a young ex-commander:

"When a person tried to escape he was taken and tied up. Now the abductees were put 20 meters from him. Then they pick you one-by-one. You get maybe a big stick in your hand. You go and hit and then you pull the hair forcefully and you come with it. I also went. I hit, I pulled the hair and I came with it. Each and everyone [had to do it] to instil the fear in everybody and at the same time to give you that courage when you know for sure now that you have killed. You have that fear of going back home. You say "okay now I am here. I have already killed so why should I go back home"."⁶⁶

Another ex-commander who had similar experiences from his abduction confirmed the logic when asked why he was forced to kill his own family during abduction:

"it is simply because when I have already killed my father, my mother, my sister, my brother then I will have it in mind that if I escape, who will I come back to when now everybody is dead and then I stay there [with LRA]. That is their trick".⁶⁷



By removing the pillars of the abductee's social world in civilian life, the incentive to escape is minimised and many do not see any other opportunity than to stay in the militia. This tendency is increased when the abductees are told that they will be killed by the UPDF if they return to civilian life.⁶⁸ Combined with spiritual initiation rituals this creates a very efficient system of control over the abductees.

However, even in the case of the initiation killings, victims are not randomly chosen. In all cases of such killings narrated by my interviewees, the victims were chosen because they had tried to escape, had broken fundamental LRA rules or disobeyed commanders in other ways or because they were family members of abducted persons.⁶⁹ The vast majority of the violence in the movement is thus not blind although the brutality is frightening.

Time causes most abductees to grow used to life in the movement, start identifying with the group and act in accordance with the logic among the commanders.⁷⁰ As new recruits become socialised into the movement they become a part of the social sphere and start thinking about atrocities in the same way as the rest of the group. This is confirmed by a recent survey among former LRA commanders, which indicates that during their time in the movement few had moral doubts regarding the way in which violence was used against civilians.⁷¹ As one former LRA commander said in relation to the way warfare was conducted:

"A rebel is a rebel. At times you have to be hostile. You have to show your true colour. At times you have to show that you mean it. [...] If you are too polite they take it that you have become weak. You have to do things by force and you will succeed".⁷²

Once the recruits have been socialised into the LRA, violence also becomes a way of proving their loyalty to the group. Commanders often fear that by being soft on civilians they will be accused of not being sufficiently committed to the fight. This can make them order atrocities to prove their worth. At the same time atrocities committed in 'the right way' are awarded with promotions and atrocities therefore also represent a way for the commanders to position themselves within the hierarchy in the LRA.⁷³ As members of the militia are striving for promotions they will seek to satisfy the militia leadership by committing certain forms of atrocities. One former LRA commander explained this logic in this way:

"Now each and every commander wants to show Kony that he is good. So he has to be very cruel, very harsh so that he [Kony] does not think that you are trying to surrender to the government side or that you are trying

to kill him. You are obeying what he tells you. [...] There is a pressure there".⁷⁴

Thus, apart from its strategic purposes, violence becomes a way of showing loyalty. Violence in itself becomes a meaning system by which loyalty is measured. Atrocities then become a self-sustaining spiral in which some strategic killings set the standard which is then copied and multiplied by local commanders who want to prove their worth.⁷⁵ This in turn produces a routinisation and normalisation of violence and further institutionalises the pattern of brutality.

3. Conclusion

As should be evident from this paper, the violence of the LRA has several different aims. There are thus economic as well as strategic and psychological reasons for the violence. Most of the aims, however, can be attributed to the fact that the civilian population has gradually turned away from the rebellion and started to see peace as more important than winning back power and esteem for the Acholi people. Thus, while some violence can be attributed to attempts at personal enrichment by commanders and while some atrocities have been generated by an institutionalisation of violence as a means of communication, the overall reason for the high levels of violence against Acholi civilians is the fact that the LRA no longer feels that they can trust the civilians to support the rebellion and consequently that they have to take needed resources by force and that they have to use violence to control and discipline the civilian population as well as new recruits. Hence, fear is an important factor when trying to understand the numerous atrocities of the LRA. While killings are not always caused by outright panic, fear is an underlying factor in many of the systematised and non-systematised atrocities committed by the rebels.

This is particularly obvious in the case of the policy of population control. This policy is behind the majority of the atrocities committed against Acholi civilians. Terror has been used as a way to paralyse the civilian population and to warn them of the consequences of collaboration with the UPDF. However, if one observes the rationale behind the policy, fear of an alliance between the civilians and the UPDF – which would make life considerably harder for the LRA – stands out as a central factor for the policy. In the same manner, killings of civilians during the LRA's raids of the IDP camps in the war-zone is often a case of perceived self-defence, as fleeing civilians are seen by the LRA as government collaborators. Lastly, initiation violence is seen as a necessity because new recruits might not be adequately convinced of the rightfulness of the rebellion and therefore needs a reason to stay in the militia.



In conclusion, while this paper does not attempt to excuse atrocities, it attempts to remind the reader that one should not underestimate the power of fear and the desire for control as underlying factors when rebel groups like the LRA commit gruesome atrocities against civilians. At the same time one should not underestimate the way a government strategy of population control can provoke a counterstrategy from the rebel group that traps the civilian population in an impossible situation between two forces, that both demand their loyalty.

As Carolyn Nordstrom has wisely noted our understanding of armed conflict is often shaped by predefined notions of what constitutes political violence. When armed groups use violence in ways that differ from these predefined ways, we render it meaningless or insane.⁷⁶ The violence of the LRA is a good example of this. Although we should not accept the violence inflicted against the civilian community by the LRA, we need to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations behind this violence. A thorough understanding of the motivations of violence is the first step in a strategy to counter it. This paper has been an attempt to contribute to this aim.



Endnotes

- ¹ See Carnegie, Marc (2005): *Uganda: 'it's a very, very major crisis'*, Mail & Guardian Online, 11 May 2005; The Independent (2005): *The Lost Generation*, 15 January 2005, Grono, Nick & Terrie, Jim (2004): *Trying Times in Uganda*, The Diplomat, 5 April 2004
- ² On the alleged political goals of the LRA, see Lord's Resistance Army (1997): *A Case for National Reconciliation, Peace, Democracy and Economic Prosperity for All Ugandans: The Official Presentation of the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRA/M)*, by Dr. James Alfred Obita, Secretary of External Affairs and Mobilisation and Leader of Delegation, London, Kacoke Madit Conference, 4-6 April 1997; and Lord's Resistance Army (2005): *Uganda: State Terrorism and Genocide Continue: UPDF Ambushes Civil Population*, The LRA/M Information Bureau, 19 December 2005. See also Branch, Adam (2005): *Neither Peace nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998*, African Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8 (2); Finnström, Sverker (2003): *Living With Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda*, Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis
- ³ Egeland, Jan (2004): *A Ugandan Tragedy*, Washington Post, 10 November 2004
- ⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2004): *Uganda 2005: Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP)*, New York and Geneva, UNOCHA Human Rights Watch (2003): *Abducted and Abused: Renewed Conflict in Northern Uganda*, New York, HRW Amnesty International (1997): *Breaking God's Command: The Destruction of Childhood by the Lord's Resistance Army*, London, AI
- ⁵ Doom, Ruddy & Vlassenroot, Koen (1999): *Kony's Message: a New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda*, African Affairs, vol. 98 (390)
- ⁶ The Acholi ethnic group lives primarily in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader in northern Uganda. The Acholi constituted a majority in the national army that was overthrown by Museveni's forces in 1986 and since then several insurgencies against the current regime have originated from Acholiland.
- ⁷ Nyeko, Balaam & Lucima, Okello (2002): *Profiles of the parties to the conflict*, in Lucima, Okello (ed.): *Protracted Conflict, Elusive Peace: Initiatives to end the Violence in Northern Uganda*, London, Conciliation Resources in collaboration with Kacoke Madit
- ⁸ This attempt of reconstructing identities has only been partially successful and some non-Acholi ex-LRA fighters even claim that their reason for leaving the LRA was that they realised that it was an Acholi project and thus not for them (interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 9 July 2005). See also Dolan, Chris (2005): *Explaining War and Its Continuation: The Case of Northern Uganda*, Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Development Studies Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science
- ⁹ On the historical roots of the insurgency, see notably Allen, Tim (1991): *Understanding Alice: Uganda's Holy Spirit Movement in Context*, Africa, Vol. 61 (3); Behrend, Heike (1999): *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1985-1997*, Oxford, James Currey; Gingyera-Pinyowa, A. G. G. (1992): *Northern Uganda in National Politics*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers; Vincent, Joan (1999): *War in Uganda: North and South*, in Reyna, S. P. & Downs, R. E. (eds.): *Deadly Developments: Capitalism, States and War*, Amsterdam, Gordon & Breach Publishers; and Finnström, Sverker (2003): *op.cit.*
- ¹⁰ See estimates of LRA strength in Gersony, Robert (1997): *The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a Field-Based Assessment of the Civil Conflicts in Northern Uganda*, Kampala, Report submitted to the US Embassy/USAID mission in Kampala; Weeks, Willet (2002): *Pushing the Envelope: Moving Beyond 'Protected Villages' in Northern Uganda*, New York, Submitted to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; International Crisis Group (2005): *Shock Therapy for Northern Uganda's Peace Process*, Kampala & Brussels, ICG Africa Briefing No. 23; International Institute for Strategic Studies (2005): *The Military Balance 2005/2006*, London & Oxford, IISS & Routledge
- ¹¹ Statistics on LRA-UPDF clashes made available from United Nations Field Security Coordination Centre's *UN Security Incidents Database for Northern Uganda*. See also Reagan, Okumu Ronald (2003): *Analytical Proposal for Peace in Northern Uganda*, Gulu, Unpublished report
- ¹² On the spiritual elements of the LRA see Allen, Tim (1991): *op.cit.*; Doom, Ruddy & Vlassenroot, Koen (1999): *op.cit.*; Cline, Lawrence C. (2003): *Spirits and the Cross: Religiously Based Violent Movements in Uganda*, Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 14 (2)
- ¹³ Paul Richards have argued that the difference between such abductions and Western world military conscription is mainly a question of what is accepted as 'normal' (see Richards, Paul (2002): *Militia Conscription in Sierra Leone: Recruitment of Young Fighters in an African War*, in Mjøset, Lars & van Holde, Stephen (eds.): *The Comparative Study of Conscription in the Armed Forces*, Oxford, Elsevier). This view was shared by my interviewees who argued that, "forceful recruitment is the only way for Kony. You cannot expect him to come to a village and say, "ok, tomorrow I will come here and recruit." It is not possible. Forceful recruitment is the only way to fill up his army" (interview with former LRA commander, Gulu 13 July 2005).
- ¹⁴ Various interviews with former LRA fighters, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006
- ¹⁵ On the power of spiritualism see Ellis, Stephen & Ter Haar, Gerrie (1998): *Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 41 (3)
- ¹⁶ The focus on the religious aspects of the LRA can be attributed to the group's predecessor, the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), led by Kony's cousin Alice Lakwena. HSMF was based on a complex set of spiritual beliefs and fought according to religious rules. The LRA originally inherited many of these rules but soon changed their strategy towards more conventional guerilla tactics. For more on HSMF see Behrend, Heike (1999): *op.cit.*
- ¹⁷ Odong Latek and Vincent Otti both brought with them a legacy from the initial northern Ugandan insurgency force, the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA), which was based on the of the former Ugandan army, the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), which was ousted by the current president's forces in 1986.
- ¹⁸ On this methodology, see Minter, William (1989): *The Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) as Described by Ex-participants*, Development Dialogue, Vol. 1989/1. If the current peace negotiations succeed it might be possible to talk directly to LRA fighters in the future.
- ¹⁹ The interviewees included members of all four fighting brigades in the LRA as well as of the Headquarters of the High Command. They also included people with both Acholi and non-Acholi backgrounds as well as both people who had been captured by the UPDF and people who



had surrendered voluntarily. Some of the former commanders had served in important positions inside the LRA High Command. Because of a general amnesty given to all former combatants the interviewees were able to disclose their stories without risking reprisals. To protect the interviewees from reprisals from the army or the LRA they will, however, all remain anonymous in this paper.

²⁰ On the economics of violence, see Keen, David (1998): *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Adelphi paper no. 320, Oxford, Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies; Collier, Paul (2000): *Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective*, in Berdal, Mats & Malone, David (eds.): *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, London & Ottawa, Lynne Rienner Publishers & International Development Research Centre

²¹ Various interviews with former LRA combatants, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006

²² Various interviews with former LRA combatants, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006

²³ This is evident from the statistics made available through the United Nations Field Security Coordination Centre's *UN Security Incidents Database for Northern Uganda*. See also Reagan, Okumu Ronald (2003): *op.cit.*

²⁴ Various interviews with former LRA commanders, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006, see also Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2005): *Uganda: Relief efforts hampered in one of the world's worst internal displacement crisis: A profile of the internal displacement situation*, Geneva, IDMC; p. 40

²⁵ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 26 January 2006

²⁶ Interview with former LRA combatant, Gulu, 21 January 2006

²⁷ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 3 February 2006

²⁸ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 1 February 2006

²⁹ Interview with former peace envoy, Gulu 12 July 2005

³⁰ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 12 July 2005

³¹ On the legitimacy of Museveni's government in the north, see Kayunga, Sallie Simba (2000): *The Impact of Armed Opposition on the Movement System in Uganda*, in Mugaju, Justus & Oloka-Onyango, J. (eds.): *No-Party Democracy in Uganda: Myths and Realities*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers

³² Interview with IDP, Gulu district, 14 July 2005

³³ Vinci, Anthony (2005): *The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army*, Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 16 (3) and Kayunga, Sallie Simba (2000): *op.cit.*

³⁴ It should be noted here that not all parts of Acholi civil society are opposed to the LRA. Especially in the peripheral areas of Acholiland it is possible to find some supporters of the rebellion who help the fighters with supplies, information and practical assistance (New Vision (2006): *Civilians help LRA rebels, says army*, New Vision, 3 May 2006; Sudan Tribune (2004): *Who arms the LRA Rebels?*, Sudan Tribune, 3 March 2004. Available at: http://sudantribune.com/article.php3?id_article=1983; Dolan, Cris (2005): *op.cit.*). While the support for the LRA's violent methods is almost non-existent, there is at least some support for the political message of the insurgency and especially for the resistance to Museveni's rule (see especially Finnström, Sverker (2003): *op.cit.*)

³⁵ The system of Local Councillors is an attempt to decentralise the administrative tasks of the government. Until 2006 Local Councillors were elected within the NRM 'Movement' system. For more on the 'Movement' system see Kayunga, Sallie Simba (2000): *op.cit.*

³⁶ Various interviews with former LRA fighters, Gulu and Kampala, July 2005 and January-February 2006

³⁷ See IRIN (2005): *A Chronology of events in the northern Uganda conflict*, IRIN News, 9 June 2005. Available at: http://www.irinnews.org/S_report.asp?ReportID=47576

³⁸ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 1 February 2006

³⁹ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 2 February 2006

⁴⁰ See for example Keen, David (2002): *"Since I am a Dog, Beware my Fangs": Beyond a 'rational violence' framework in the Sierra Leonean war*, Crisis States Programme Working Paper no. 14; Richards, Paul (2000): *Rain-forest resource conflict: Would stakeholder analysis help pacify labouring casuals in Sierra Leone?*, in Wiersum, K. F. (ed.): *Tropical Forest Resource Dynamics and Conservation: From Local to Global Issues*, Wageningen, Wageningen University and Research Centre

⁴¹ Weeks, Willet (2002): *op.cit.*

⁴² Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 13 July 2005

⁴³ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 15 January 2006

⁴⁴ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 13 July 2005

⁴⁵ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 9 July 2005

⁴⁶ Interview with former LRA combatant, Gulu, 31 January 2006

⁴⁷ For information on this, see United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2005): *Humanitarian Update: Uganda*, February 2005, Vol. 7 (2), Geneva, UNOCHA

⁴⁸ Interview with LRA commander, Gulu, 16 January 2006

⁴⁹ Rodriguez, Father Carlos (2003): *War in Acholi: What can we do?*, Kitgum, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative

⁵⁰ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 3 February 2006



- ⁵¹ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 15 January 2006
- ⁵² Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 12 July 2005
- ⁵³ The list includes the massacre in Atiak trading centre on 22 April 1995 (death toll: up to 220), the Lukong/Palabek massacre from 7 to 12 January 1997 (death toll: approximately 412), the Laponi village massacre on 13 October 2002 (death toll: at least 52), the massacre in Awolo and Latugitugi camps on 21 October 2002 (death toll: around 34), the Alanyi and Awayopiny massacre on 7 November 2003 (death toll: at least 60) and the Barlonya massacre on 21 February 2004 (death toll: over 200).
- ⁵⁴ Various interviews with former LRA commanders, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006
- ⁵⁵ Branch, Adam (2005): *op.cit.*
- ⁵⁶ Gersony, Robert (1997): *op.cit.*
- ⁵⁷ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 26 January 2006
- ⁵⁸ Wilson, K. B. (1992): *Cults of violence and counter-violence in Mozambique*, Journal of Southern African Studies, Vo. 18 (3)
- ⁵⁹ Various interviews with former LRA fighters, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006
- ⁶⁰ Dolan, Chris (2005): *op.cit.*
- ⁶¹ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 8 July 2005
- ⁶² Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 8 July 2005
- ⁶³ Rodriguez, Father Carlos (2003): *op.cit.*, p. 1
- ⁶⁴ Among the few scholars who have focused on this aspect of violence are Ehrenreich, Rosa (1998): *The stories we must tell: Ugandan Children and the atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army*, Africa Today, vol. 45 (1) and particularly Mergelsberg, Ben (2005): *Crossing Boundaries: Experiences of Returning Child Soldiers*, Sydney, draft research report
- ⁶⁵ Various interviews with former LRA fighters, Gulu, January-February 2006
- ⁶⁶ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 3 February 2006
- ⁶⁷ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 15 January 2006
- ⁶⁸ Interview with former LRA combatant, Gulu, 19 January 2006
- ⁶⁹ Various interviews with former LRA combatants, Gulu and Kampala, June 2005 and January-February 2006
- ⁷⁰ Various interviews with former LRA fighters, Gulu, July 2005 and January-February 2006
- ⁷¹ Quaker Peace and Social Witness & Conciliation Resources (2006): *Coming Home: Understanding why commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army choose to return to a civilian life*, Gulu, CR & QPSW
- ⁷² Interview with former LRA commander, Kampala, 29 January 2006
- ⁷³ It should note that some atrocities are not awarded but are instead punished – even by death. Thus, Els De Temmerman argues that commanders can be killed for raping girls during raids on IDP camps (see De Temmerman, Els (2001): *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers)
- ⁷⁴ Interview with former LRA commander, Gulu, 26 January 2006
- ⁷⁵ Interview with former LRA combatant, Gulu, 19 January 2006
- ⁷⁶ Nordstrom, Carolyn (2004): *Shadows of War: Violence, Power and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press; p. 58



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