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LRA abducts 43 children so far in 2019, dozens remain missing and presumed in captivity

Atrocities by rebel group led by Joseph Kony documented by early warning system in northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), eastern Central African Republic (CAR)

WASHINGTON, D.C. (2 December 2019) – An early warning system (EWS) managed by international aid organization Invisible Children and its local partners has documented a spree of abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in eastern CAR and northern DRC so far in 2019. The rebel group, led by indicted warlord Joseph Kony, has abducted at least 43 children so far in 2019. Thirty-seven of those children are still missing and presumed in captivity.

“Though the LRA no longer makes international headlines, the group’s continued abduction of children proves that it has not simply disappeared,” said Camille Marie-Regnault, Invisible Children’s Regional Protection and Conflict Analysis Coordinator. “It remains a daily threat to civilians in both eastern CAR and northern DRC.”

The information was documented as part of the organization’s Crisis Tracker project, which has been recording attacks, abductions, and killings of civilians in the region for almost 10 years. Recent expansions of the project have improved its ability to track individual abductions by the LRA and compare them with records of returnees, allowing for unprecedented tracking of which individual abductees remain missing and which have escaped. Both the Crisis Tracker and EWS are primarily supported through the USAID-funded Community Resilience in Central Africa (CRCA) Activity, with additional support from other donors.

Community-based organizations (CBOs), including Bria Londo, Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), and the Dangu-Doruma Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix (CDJP), play a leading role in reducing the risk of LRA violence against civilians via the High Frequency radio EWS, which is operational in more than 140 communities in the border region. CBOs are also on the frontlines of assisting LRA escapees, many of whom escape captivity hundreds of miles from where they were abducted. Invisible Children and its CBO partners have helped reunify 83 escapees, including 56 children, since January 2018. However, little programming is available for reintegration assistance once they return home to their families.

“The early warning system is vital to efforts to document LRA abductions and assist in the reunification of escapees,” said Matar Chaib of Bria Londo, a community organization in CAR. “However, reunification is only the first step in rebuilding a life interrupted by abduction. More resources are needed to support community-based reintegration and education programs to assist those who risked their lives to escape captivity.”

Since 2017, international actors have also largely stopped funding the once robust “Come Home” defection messaging campaigns that encouraged hundreds of LRA combatants and captive women and children to escape. Since then, the number of LRA defections has slowed considerably.

“Previous ‘Come Home’ defection campaigns provide an effective blueprint for weakening the LRA and freeing abductees from captivity,” said Paul Ronan, Invisible Children’s Director of Policy and Research. “Rejuvenating such campaigns is the best opportunity available for ending LRA violence.”



LRA abductions decrease, but continue to pose threat: The LRA has been active in northern DRC and eastern CAR for over a decade, abducting more than 7,500 Congolese and Central African civilians since 2008. LRA abductions have decreased significantly in recent years as the number of combatants under the command of LRA leader Joseph Kony has dwindled. So far in 2019, the LRA has abducted 222 civilians. A majority of these abductees have been adult males forced to temporarily porter looted goods to LRA camps in the bush before being released or escaping within days of their abduction.

LRA abducts a total of 112 children since 2018, 49 of whom remain missing: Though the LRA has abducted fewer children than adults in 2019, the rebel group has been more likely to keep them in captivity. Of the 43 children abducted so far in 2019, 37 remain missing and presumed in captivity. The LRA abducted 69 children in 2018, 12 of whom remain missing. Children abducted by the LRA are often held in captivity, with females entering into forced marriages with LRA combatants. Both boys and girls are forced to do dangerous and difficult manual labor for highly mobile LRA groups, such as portering looted goods, collecting firewood and water, and setting up camps.

Kony gives orders to abduct children: The LRA has forcibly recruited children for decades. Joseph Kony was indicted by the International Criminal Court in 2005 on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including forced enlistment of children. Multiple LRA escapees have reported that in January 2018 Kony gave renewed orders to his commanders to abduct children so that they could be integrated into the LRA. Kony's orders were reportedly motivated in part to forcibly recruit laborers that could work in fields in the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave on the border of eastern CAR, where the rebel leader most often operates. The lack of high-profile defections from the LRA in 2019 has meant there is little recent information on Kony's whereabouts and any recent orders he has given. However, the child abduction patterns in 2019 closely mirror those documented by the EWS in 2018 following Kony's orders.

EWS used to warn communities and reunify LRA escapees: The 141 communities connected to the CRCA EWS utilize it on a regular basis to share information on LRA movements, issuing alerts to reduce the vulnerability of children and other vulnerable groups to LRA attacks. The EWS is also used to document the identities of children who have been abducted. The LRA traffics abducted children across vast distances, meaning that abductees escape hundreds of kilometers from their homes, sometimes in a neighboring country. Upon their escape, communities utilize the EWS to contact the families of escaped children, after which Invisible Children and its CBO partners, such as SAIPED and Bria Londo, coordinate to transport them back to their homes and reunify them with their families. Since 2018, Invisible Children and its partners have reunified 56 children, as well as 27 adults, who have escaped from LRA captivity.

Lack of reintegration services: After they are reunified with their families, returnees need support in order to address psychological trauma, resume their education, establish a livelihood, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Funding for such services has reduced considerably in recent years, leaving escapees with uncertain futures. Girls and women are particularly vulnerable due to the stigma of being associated with LRA commanders and/or having children fathered by LRA commanders.

Defection messaging best strategy to end LRA threat: From 2010-2016, "Come Home" defection messaging initiatives helped encouraged hundreds of LRA fighters and captive women and children to defect. Since 2017, defection messaging targeting the LRA has effectively halted due to a lack of funding. Rejuvenating "Come Home" messaging via FM and shortwave radio, fliers, and direct outreach to LRA groups represents the most effective strategy for reducing Kony's fighting force and ending LRA violence.

BAMINGUI
BANGORAN

Ouanda Djalle

KAFIA KINGI
ENCLAVE

NORTHERN
BAHR EL-GHAZAL

Sam Ouandja

Raga

Ouadda

WESTERN BAHR
EL-GHAZAL

HAUTE KOTTO

Central African
Republic

Zemongo
Reserve

**The LRA's targeted
abduction of children, 2018–2019**

Between January 2018 and November 2019, the LRA abducted 70 boys and 42 girls in eastern Central African Republic (CAR) and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Of these 112 children, 37 boys and 12 girls remain missing and presumed in captivity, while 33 boys and 30 girls have escaped captivity and have been reunified with their families.

-  LRA attack in which children were abducted, but all have since escaped
-  LRA attack in which children were abducted and remain missing
-  Escape of a child abducted by the LRA

Bria

Yalinga

Nzako

Bakouma

Djemah

South Sudan

HAUT MBOMOU

Barraoua

Tambura

MBOMOU

Bangassou

Rafaj

Dembia

Zemio

Gwane

Mboki

Obo

Ezo

BASSE
KOTTO

Bangassou

Rafaj

Dembia

Zemio

Gwane

Mboki

Obo

Ezo

WESTERN EQUATORIA

Lili Uele Protected Area Complex

Ango

Banda

Doruma

Yambio

Bangadi

Ngilima

Dungu

*Garamba
National Park*

Faradje

Aba

NORD-UBANGI

Bondo

Democratic Republic
of Congo

BAS UELE

HAUT UELE

ITURI



MONGALA



Signatory organizations

Bria Londo: Based in eastern CAR, Bria Londo is a CBO with experience in operating early warning systems and assisting escapees and survivors of LRA violence.

Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED): Based in northeastern DRC, SAIPED has extensive experience in community protection programming, including sensitizing communities on the reintegration of LRA escapees via mobile cinema. SAIPED also supports the transit, family tracing, and reunification of LRA escapees in DRC.

Dungu-Doruma Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix (CDJP): Headquartered in northeastern DRC, CDJP is a CBO with extensive experience operating early warning systems and assisting escapees and survivors of LRA violence.

Invisible Children: Headquartered in Washington, D.C., Invisible Children is an international nonprofit organization working to end violent conflict and exploitation facing the world's most isolated and unprotected communities. Invisible Children's current work focuses on developing innovative and sustainable solutions to regional insecurity and armed group violence in central Africa. This includes community-based protection initiatives and conflict analysis to address the intersection of human security and illicit wildlife trafficking in the central Africa region.

The Crisis Tracker is a conflict mapping platform founded by Invisible Children in 2011 and supported today primarily by the USAID-funded CRCA Activity, as well as other donors. In addition to recording attacks against civilians, the Crisis Tracker project now maintains a constantly updated database of individuals who have been abducted and remain missing. Data is provided by the more than 140 communities that participate in the regional Early Warning System. To receive Crisis Tracker email alerts about security dynamics in the tri-border region, please contact paul@invisiblechildren.com.

Journalists are encouraged to note in media publications that USAID funds CRCA and is the primary funder of the regional Early Warning System. The contents of this press release are the responsibility of Invisible Children and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID nor the U.S. Government.