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## As world awaits ICC's verdict on Dominic Ongwen, 108 children and youth abducted by the LRA since 2018 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. (1 February 2021) – On February 4th, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is scheduled to issue a verdict on Dominic Ongwen, a former commander of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) charged with 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. While the world awaits the verdict, an early warning system (EWS) managed by international aid organization Invisible Children and its local partners has documented a spree of abductions by remaining LRA commanders in eastern CAR and northern DRC, including indicted LRA leader Joseph Kony. The rebel group has abducted at least 138 children and youth since January 2018, including 27 since January 2020. 108 of the children and youth are still missing and presumed in captivity, including 20 of those abducted since January 2020.

"Dominic Ongwen defected from the LRA in 2014, but the rebel group has continued to abduct children and youth, including 27 since 2020," said Camille Marie-Regnault, Invisible Children's Deputy Country Director in the CAR. "As the world awaits the ICC's verdict on Ongwen, more efforts are urgently needed to prevent further abductions and assist women, children, and youth who have escaped captivity."

The information was documented as part of Invisible Children's Crisis Tracker project, which has been recording attacks, abductions, and killings of civilians in the region for 11 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. In addition to the 20 missing children and youth from 2020, the Crisis Tracker has documented the identities of an additional 88 missing children and youth abducted by the LRA from 2018 and 2019. In total, the Crisis Tracker has documented 236 attacks by LRA groups since 2018, including dozens by commanders formerly aligned with Ongwen. 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 112 escapees, including 73 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.”

### **Background information on LRA atrocities and other activity**

*Note: Please see page 4 to view a map showing LRA child abductions and approximate commander locations.*

**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 8,300 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. Since January 2020, the LRA has abducted 180 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 at least 138 children and youth since 2018, 108 of whom remain missing:** Though the LRA has abducted fewer children than adults in recent years, the rebel group has been more likely to keep them in captivity. Of the 138 children and youth abducted since 2018, 108 remain missing and presumed in captivity. Children abducted by the LRA are often held in captivity, with females being subjected to sexual abuse including 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, farming, and setting up camps.

**Joseph Kony’s location:** As of mid-2020, LRA leader Joseph Kony was operating in the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave along the border with South Sudan and northeastern CAR. His group reportedly survives primarily via subsistence farming and bartering goods, such as honey, in local markets. Kony was also indicted by the ICC 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 Kafia Kingi.

**LRA splinter groups torture children:** Several LRA splinter groups led by Ugandan commanders that no longer report to Kony are currently operating along the border between eastern CAR and northern DRC, periodically abducting both children and adults. Recent evidence points to violent punishments within the factions, including executions by some splinter group commanders, highlighting continued grave abuses against children by the LRA. These groups include one led by a commander who was formerly allied with Dominic Ongwen, and who split from Joseph Kony’s command shortly before Ongwen’s defection in 2014.

**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 transports 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 73 children, as well as 39 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 encourage 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.

### **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* ([www.CrisisTracker.org](http://www.CrisisTracker.org)) 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](mailto: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.

# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

## SUDAN

**Kony group:** As of mid-2020, Joseph Kony's group was continuing to operate in the same area of Kafia Kingi that he has been based in since 2011.

KAFIA KINGI ENCLAVE

## SOUTH SUDAN

HAUTE KOTTO

WESTERN BAHR EL-GHAZAL

Zemongo Reserve

**LRA splinter faction:** One LRA splinter faction maintains a base in CAR from where it periodically launches attacks into DRC.

Chinko Reserve

HAUT MBOMOU

Bili Uele Protected Area Complex

## DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

## OVERVIEW OF LRA ACTIVITY

January–December 2020

LRA groups abducted more than 180 people in 2020, primarily adults used to porter looted goods for less than a week before being released. However, 27 abductees were children and youth, 20 of whom remain missing, indicating that some LRA groups continue to forcibly recruit. An additional 88 missing children and youth abducted by the LRA from 2018 and 2019 also remain missing. Increasing brutality within LRA splinter factions has contributed to a surge of escapes in 2020, including 77 women, children, and youth. Escapees have indicated that Ugandan commanders have expressed interest in defection, highlighting the need for renewed defection messaging efforts. Further support for the reintegration of LRA escapees is also needed in many communities.

- ◆ Attack in which LRA forces abducted children and/or youth, 2020
- ◆ Other LRA attack, 2020
- Escape or release of women, children, and/or youth from the LRA, 2020
- Location of Joseph Kony's group, as of mid-2020
- Location of CAR-based LRA splinter faction, as of early 2021
- Location of DRC-based LRA splinter faction, as of mid-2020
- Defection of Dominic Ongwen, 2014
- Defection of Ugandan LRA combatant, 2018-2020

Statistics on LRA activity are based primarily on data collected via an Early Warning System (EWS) funded by the USAID Community Resilience in Central Africa (CRCA) Activity and the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

**LRA splinter faction:** Another LRA splinter faction operates independently out of a camp in northern DRC, near the CAR border.

**INVISIBLE CHILDREN**