



The LRA's Final Chapter

*Progress demobilizing the Lord's Resistance Army,
the continued threat of child abductions, and
the future of Joseph Kony*



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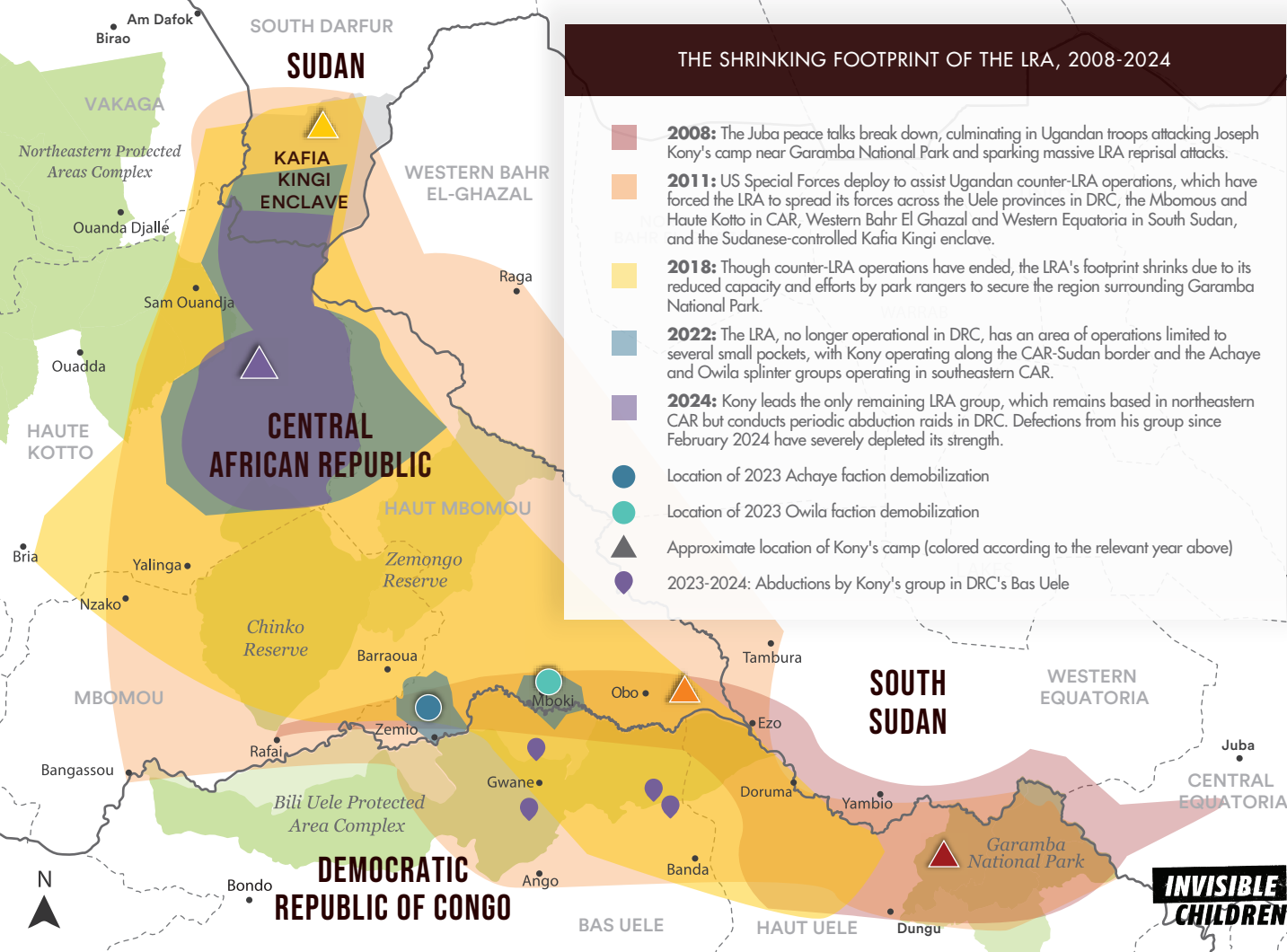
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since March 2023, Once one of the most famous and widely feared rebel groups in east and central Africa, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is now weaker than it has ever been. In 2023, two splinter LRA groups peacefully demobilized in the Central African Republic (CAR), cutting the LRA's force capacity by more than half. Long-time rebel leader Joseph Kony leads the last remaining active LRA group, which operates primarily along the remote border region of northeastern CAR and the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave, while periodically launching attacks into Bas Uele province in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Kony's grip on this last group is weak. In 2021 and 2022, two of his eldest sons, who served as his chief logistics and chief operations officers, defected following disputes with their father. Since February 2024, at least 51 others have escaped from Kony's group, including several more of his immediate family members. Their journeys are part of a larger story of the long, slow decline of the LRA from a peak of approximately 2,700 combatants in 1999 to its current size of less than 100 members, primarily women and children. Defection campaigns, improved early warning and early response (EWER) networks, military operations, shifting regional alliances, and its own inability to sustainably recruit and develop senior officers have all played a role in the LRA's decline.

The steady attrition of the LRA's fighting capacity has been matched by a sharp reduction in violence: the group killed 974 civilians and abducted 3,587 others between 2010-2014, while only killing one civilian and abducting 282 others during attacks from 2020-2024. Still, the LRA remains a threat, particularly in DRC's Bas Uele province, where Chandit, one Kony's younger sons, led raids between February 2023 and March 2024 in which 74 Congolese children and youth were abducted. Thirty have since escaped, while 43 remain missing and presumed in captivity, including 24 women and girls. The remaining boy was executed for trying to escape Kony's group.

Options for bringing Joseph Kony out of the bush remain limited. Regional governments and civil society leaders establish contact with senior LRA commanders and attempt to negotiate the group's disarmament and demobilization. Negotiations would be complicated by the active arrest warrant for Kony from the International Criminal Court (ICC), but even if Kony is reticent, negotiators could convince other senior commanders to defect - and bring Kony with them by force. Military options are an alternative approach, though multiple operations launched in 2024 failed to capture Kony. It is unclear whether any force in the region has the capability and interest to launch a successful operation. Military operations also bring the risk of harm to women and children currently held captive by the group and of triggering Kony to order a fresh wave of abductions to replace members that are killed or escape.

Efforts to demobilize Kony's group must be complemented by a comprehensive approach to addressing continued insecurity in eastern CAR and DRC's Uele region. In eastern CAR, fighting involving government-aligned security forces and non-state armed groups now poses the greatest threat to civilians, highlighting the need for expanded EWER networks. In both CAR and DRC, investments in peacebuilding initiatives are also needed to strengthen social cohesion, particularly between Azande farming communities and Peuhl pastoralist communities. The Central African and Congolese governments should also invest in community-based transitional justice initiatives to address past legacies of conflict and prevent new outbreaks of violence.



I. THE DEMOBILIZATION OF LRA SPLINTER GROUPS

Internal tensions and abuses by Kony have long been a source of division within the LRA. For decades, Kony's grip on the LRA was so powerful that rivals and disillusioned fighters were either executed or defected to Ugandan authorities. However, by 2014, Kony's ability to assert control over the LRA's command structure had weakened so much that several commanders began splintering off and operating their groups independently. These groups, one led by Achaye Doctor and other by Owila and Oloo, gradually settled in southeastern CAR. However, between July and September 2023, 160 combatants and dependents peacefully demobilized from these LRA splinter groups in a collaboration between local civil society leaders, an international aid organization, the Central African and Ugandan governments.¹

Dominic Ongwen's domino effect: The splintering of the LRA

In 2014, the LRA remained a formidable force in eastern CAR and northeastern DRC, but its command structure was under pressure from Uganda Peoples' Defence Force (UPDF) military offensives and a rash of executions ordered by Kony. Several LRA commanders, including Achaye Doctor and Dominic Ongwen, began planning to defect from Kony's group, which was based in Kafia Kingi at the time. In November of that year, Achaye and nine other Ugandan combatants defected from the group and traveled south into a remote forested region of Bas Uele province in northeastern DRC, where they operated independently from Kony's command.²

Between 2014 and 2016, the newly formed Achaye faction abducted children and youth in Bas Uele and attacked Congolese security forces to acquire more weapons and ammunition. In 2016, the US-supported Ugandan military forces, which had been based in Haut Mbomou prefecture of neighboring southeastern CAR, began winding down counter-LRA operations, eventually shutting down the mission completely in early 2017. As that process unfolded, the Achaye faction shifted their operations into Haut Mbomou, which was experiencing a power vacuum following the withdrawal of the Ugandan forces. From there the group continued to carry out abductions and lootings in both CAR and DRC. By 2020, the Achaye faction established a permanent camp in the bush outside of Tamboura, Haut Mbomou.³

Between 2017-2018 another group of Ugandan LRA commanders and their dependents also splintered off from Kony's leadership with approximately 14 other Ugandan combatants and moved into Bas Uele and Haut Uele provinces of DRC, where they began operating independently.⁴ The group, which was led by Owila and Oloo, operated out of a camp near Nambia, DRC. Then between late 2019 and early 2020,

¹ [The situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa](#), Report of the UN Secretary General, S/2023/934, 30 November 2023.

² Paul Ronan, [Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect: How the Fallout from a Former Child Soldier's Defection is Undermining Joseph Kony's Control Over the LRA](#). Crisis Tracker, 2017.

³ *Fresh Opportunities to End the LRA Crisis: Engaging Sudan and Encouraging Defections in CAR and DRC*, Invisible Children, June 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

the faction moved into southeastern CAR and established a permanent camp south of Mboki, approximately 110 km east along the CAR-DRC border from Achaye's camp.

The LRA splinter factions were in contact with each other and carried out joint operations in DRC, engaging in poaching, looting, and abductions. The splinter factions also cooperated with the *Union pour la paix en Centrafrique* (UPC), the Peuhl-dominated Central African armed group which then controlled the areas of Haut Mbomou where the LRA factions established their base camps.⁵ The LRA factions conducted lootings and poaching in the neighboring DRC, then trafficked the goods back to southeastern CAR, where they bartered and sold them in UPC-controlled communities. They also provided reinforcements to the UPC in 2021, including when the UPC attempted to seize control of Bangassou.⁶

Following the establishment of camps in Haut Mbomou, the Achaye and Owila factions gradually reduced attacks on civilians. In 2020, the groups largely stopped carrying out attacks on civilians in nearby communities in southeastern CAR, abducting a total of 37 civilians in 2020 and 2021.⁷ In 2022, the groups paused abductions of new captives, but did attempt, and in some cases, succeed, in recapturing previous captives who escaped from their camps. This gradual reduction in violence was likely due to efforts to normalize relations with the UPC and local communities, leading the groups to shift towards more sedentary livelihood strategies such as farming and trading with local communities.

Demobilization process

By 2021, this transition into a less violent survival strategy led the Achaye and Owila groups to engage with local authorities and community leaders, including local Peace Committees, about the prospect of demobilizing. In 2022, both groups participated in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts led by the Central African government and supported by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) and local authorities, which also targeted UPC groups. The DDR negotiations were frequently delayed and drawn out over the course of 2022 and early 2023, leading to frustration within the Achaye and Owila groups.

In July 2023, there was a joint effort between the governments of CAR, DRC, and Uganda to rapidly demobilize the LRA splinter factions.⁸ Following meetings between government officials, a joint-government delegation traveled to Zemio, Haut Mbomou to negotiate the demobilization of the LRA

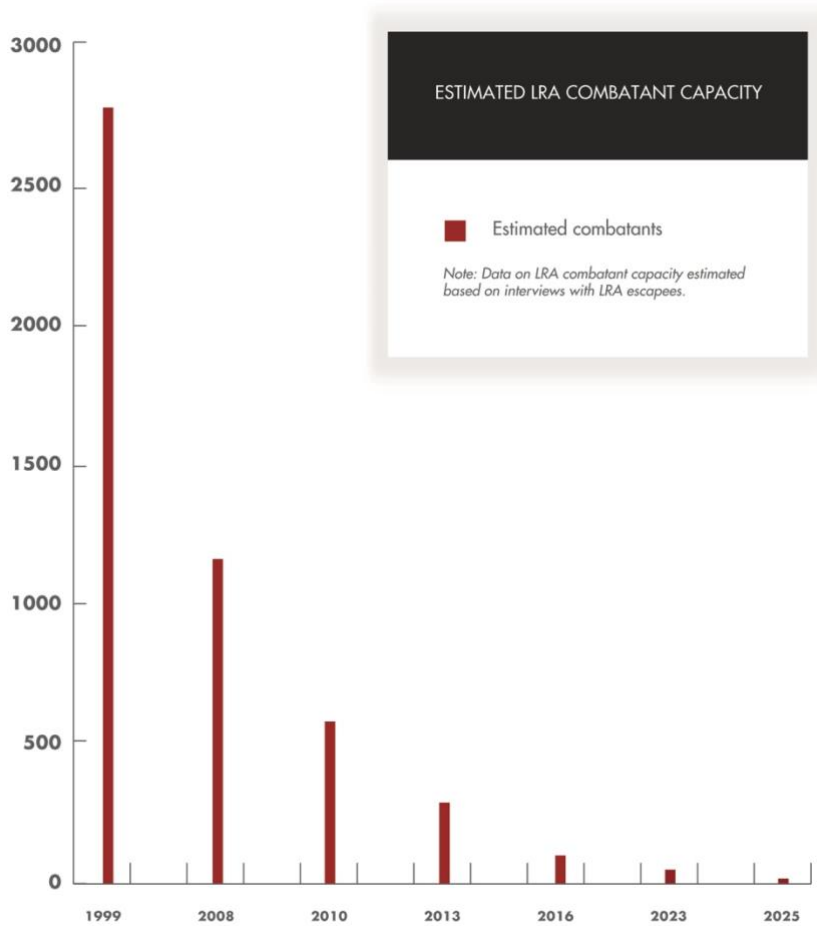
⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Interviews conducted with civilians in Haut Mbomou and with LRA escapees, 2021-2022.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics concerning LRA attacks, abductions, killings, force capacity, and returnees are attributable to the Crisis Tracker, a project of Invisible Children, and accurate as of 6 September 2025. Data can be accessed at <http://www.crisistracker.org/>.

⁸ This was largely distinct from the previous DDR engagements with the LRA splinter groups, which were conducted as part of the national DDR program. The 2023 DDR initiative arose out of an agreement by the three governments, brokered by an INGO which had programs supporting former LRA members in Uganda and DRC, but was not active in CAR. The Central African government decision to speed up the demobilization process was reportedly motivated in part by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's desire to improve his standing with voters in advance of the constitutional referendum held on July 30, 2023.

Achaye faction. The LRA Achaye faction, comprised of over 70 combatants, women, and children peacefully demobilized to the delegation in Zemio on July 20, the first successfully negotiated demobilization of an LRA group. It represented a significant reduction of LRA forces - larger than any previous mass defections from the group.



The DDR delegation was also in contact with the Owila group during their mission in July. However, the remote location of their camp and poor road conditions prevented a demobilization mission at that time. A small subset of the group, led by a commander nicknamed Langa Langa, traveled from Mboki to Zemio and underwent demobilization on August 4. Shortly after, the remainder of the Owila group agreed to demobilization after seeing that the other groups had been welcomed back in Uganda without prosecution. On September 23 the remaining combatants, women, and children in the Owila LRA faction began demobilizing to the DDR delegation in Mboki.

II. KONY'S LAST STAND

The splintering and then defection of the Achaye and Owila/Oloo groups have not been the only threats to Kony's command over the LRA. Over the past decade, Kony has been the target of internal assassination attempts and weathered the onset of old age and various illnesses and injuries. He also suffered the loss of his most important benefactor, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Over time, he began to increasingly rely on his two oldest sons, Salim and Ali, to help him manage control over the rebel group. However, since 2021, both Salim and Ali have had fallings out with their father and defected, leaving Kony increasingly isolated and reliant on his younger, less experienced sons to manage day-to-day operations of the LRA.

Kony's increasing isolation

Kony has always ruled with an iron fist, utilizing executions, beatings, and demotions to punish internal rivals, consolidate his position, and instill a sense of fear and discipline.⁹ But by the mid-2010s, with LRA combatants suffering harsh conditions as military operations and defection campaigns reduced their number, such tactics were causing a rising tide of dissent within the rebel group. A string of executions ordered by Kony in 2013, including one of his most feared and loyal enforcers, Otto Agweng, made clear that no LRA commander could be assured of their safety from Kony's whims.¹⁰ Achaye's bold move, to defect from Kony's command and (successfully) bet that Kony lacked the capacity to capture and punish him, marked the beginning of the end of Kony's control over the LRA.

Soon after Achaye's defection, Dominic Ongwen, who had been "imprisoned" within the LRA on Kony's orders, escaped and defected with the help of sympathetic LRA commanders, eventually ending up in the custody of the ICC.¹¹ In May 2015, a group of seven bodyguards responsible for protecting Kony and his inner circle defected. In an unprecedented move, they tried to kill Kony in a hail of gunfire as they escaped, but were unsuccessful.¹² Kony sent a group to hunt down the defectors, but they succeeded in fending off the attack, even recovering some supplies from their pursuers during the assault. Additional Ugandan combatants defected from Kony's group in subsequent years. Kony attempted to rebuild his group's capacity via abduction campaigns in CAR, most dramatically in 2016 when his forces abducted dozens of children in eastern CAR.¹³ However, Kony's failure to promote non-Ugandan combatants into the LRA's officer ranks meant that such efforts failed to address gaps in the LRA's senior command structure.

⁹ For example, in 1999, Kony executed his second-in-command, Otti Lagony, after learning that he planned to kill him and lead a mass defection. In 2007, Kony ordered the execution of his chief deputy, Vincent Otti, and several Otti loyalists after growing increasingly concerned about Otti's popularity and willingness to consider demobilizing the LRA. Ronan, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*, 2017.

¹⁰ Ronan, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ledio Cakaj, *Joseph Kony and Mutiny in the Lord's Resistance Army*, The New Yorker, 3 October 2015.

¹³ Ronan, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*, 2017.

As Kony was losing his grip on the LRA, he was also weathering the loss of his long-time benefactor, the SAF. The SAF provided the LRA with safe haven, training, and substantial military supplies from 1994-2002, part of a larger proxy war in which the Ugandan government provided support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).¹⁴ This relationship waned as part of Sudan's rapprochement with Uganda and its eventual withdrawal from South Sudan, which helped trigger the LRA's relocation to DRC's Garamba National Park in 2005. By 2009, however, the LRA had been pushed north by Ugandan military offensives, into areas of eastern CAR bordering Sudan's South Darfur State and the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave. In 2009, the LRA established contact with the SAF near the town of Dafak in Kafia Kingi, and in the next several years the SAF provided limited supplies to Kony's forces, provided them with safe haven from Ugandan military offensives, and facilitated their introduction to Sudanese traders in Kafia Kingi. These introductions provided the LRA with a foothold in local licit and illicit trade networks, on which Kony and his sons utilized to purchase food, medicine, and munitions in return for ivory, produce, and honey procured by the LRA.¹⁵ However, by the mid-2010s, the SAF had withdrawn its support for the LRA, though they allowed the Kony's group to maintain camps in Kafia Kingi and continue trading with local businessmen.

Kony's eldest sons defect, only to be replaced

As Kony's isolation in Kafia Kingi grew and long-time commanders were either executed, defecting, or splintering off, he began to increasingly rely on his two eldest sons, Salim and Ali, who assumed the roles as his chief logistics and operations officers. Among other responsibilities, they coordinated in trafficking more than 70 pieces of elephant ivory poached from DRC's Garamba National Park to Kafia Kingi, where they would sell pieces to traders there for weapons, ammunition, and other supplies.¹⁶ Kony wisely buried ivory along the border between Kafia Kingi and northeastern CAR,¹⁷ and though he has sold pieces in subsequent years, he still had some remaining caches as of early 2023. Ali was one of the few people who Kony trusted to manage the process of burying ivory, documenting the GPS coordinates of the caches, and periodically selling pieces to traders in Kafia Kingi. He also negotiated non-aggression agreements with other armed groups in the region.¹⁸ Salim followed in his father's footsteps, gaining a reputation as an enforcer who executed LRA members who were captured after planning to defect.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ledio Cakaj, *The Lord's Resistance Army of Today*, Enough Project, November 2010. Philip Lancaster, Guillaume Lacaille, and Ledio Cakaj, "Diagnostic Study of the Lord's Resistance Army," International Working Group on the LRA, World Bank, June 2011.

¹⁵ Paul Ronan and Michael Poffenberger, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Sudan's Harboring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009-2013*, The Resolve, April 2013.

¹⁶ The two brothers were sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in August 2016 for their role in supporting their father. See [Treasury Sanctions Lord's Resistance Army Commanders Salim and Ali Kony](#), US Treasury Department, 16 August 2023.

¹⁷ Ledio Cakaj, *Tusk Wars: Inside the LRA and the Bloody Business of Ivory*, The Enough Project, October 2015.

¹⁸ Kristof Titeca, *Ali Kony and the twilight of the Lord's Resistance Army*, The New Humanitarian, 24 February 2025.

¹⁹ [Treasury Sanctions Lord's Resistance Army Commanders Salim and Ali Kony](#), US Treasury Department, 2023.

THE UNRAVELING OF KONY'S CONTROL OVER THE LRA, 2012–2025



Salim, the older of the two brothers, defected from Kony's group, possibly in late 2022, though the details remain unclear.²⁰ By this point, Kony's group was reportedly operating in northeastern CAR, near the border with Kafia Kingi and South Darfur. One of the factors leading to Salim's falling out with his father was, ironically, Kony's decision to put him in internal LRA detention in order to appease other members of the group who were upset at Salim's decision to execute three commanders. Salim, likely fearing for his own life, escaped and fled towards Kafia Kingi, though his whereabouts since then remain unknown.

In 2021, Ali also had a falling out with his father and defected. Though the full details remain unclear, he was reportedly upset with how Kony was treating his mother, feeling that he disrespected her in favor of his younger "wives." Ali eventually defected with his mother, wife, and four children, successfully executing a plan to secretly leave his father's camp with his loved ones. They made their way first to the town of Songo in Kafia Kingi, where Ali had established relationships with traders during his time as Kony's focal point for exchanging ivory for ammunition, weapons, and food. Ali and his family members stayed in Songo until 2023, where he survived as a middleman for transactions involving gold and cannabis and even worked as a taximan.²¹ In mid-2023, they fled the outbreak of war in Sudan, travelling by road to Juba, South Sudan and eventually to Gulu, Uganda, where Ali had been born decades before. They eventually surrendered to Ugandan authorities, who announced Ali's defection to the press in August 2023, along with reports from Ali that Kony was "weak and unable to fight."²²

The defection of Salim and Ali left a power vacuum with Kony's group that has since been filled by two of Kony's younger sons, including Chandit Joseph (known as Yaya Ousmane with Sudanese contacts) and John.²³ Chandit is now the eldest of Kony's sons remaining in the group and the highest ranking officer under Kony. He is responsible for supervising the group when Kony is not present, and frequently relays orders from Kony to John, who manages their implementation amongst other members of the group. Both Chandit and John share the same mother, a Ugandan abductee. The two brothers have taken over, at least partially, Ali's role as an interlocutor with Sudanese traders.

Nowhere to run: Kony's most recent location

Though Kony's group most often operated in Kafia Kingi and South Darfur since 2010, he also frequently crossed into Haute Kotto and Vakaga prefectures in neighboring CAR. Since the outbreak of civil war in Sudan in April 2023, security in Kafia Kingi and South Darfur has deteriorated sharply, forcing Kony's group to shift his primary area of operations in CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture. Defectors most often report his camps to be in the remote region to the east and south of the mining community of Sam Ouandja, including in an area known to have a hot springs water source. In early 2024, he was reported

²⁰ His full name is Salim Saleh, the latter name being a tribute to Salim Saleh, the brother of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. Ledio Cakaj, *The Lord's Resistance Army of Today*, The Enough Project, November 2010.

²¹ Kristof Titeca, *Ali Kony and the twilight of the Lord's Resistance Army*, The New Humanitarian, 24 February 2025.

²² Hellen Mukiibi, [President Museveni meets Joseph Kony's son, pledges support](#), The New Vision, 25 August 2023.

²³ Kony has at least one more son still in the group. Nicknamed "Bush", he is younger than Chandit and John and has a different mother. He is not as prominent in the group's hierarchy as his two older brothers, but remains close to them.

to have a camp 15-18 km southeast of Yemen, a settlement approximately 70 km southeast of Sam Ouandja that was established by a Sudanese trader named Alico. It is a hub for armed groups, pastoralists, and the illicit cannabis trade and is reachable only by motorcycle or by foot.²⁴ Defectors report Alico frequently traded with Kony's group, and that Kony himself reportedly visited Yemen. Kony's group itself reportedly grew cannabis and bamboo as cash crops to be sold to Sudanese traders, and they also traded with Peuhl pastoralists travelling through this remote region.²⁵ As of early 2025, Kony had reportedly moved his camp away from Yemen into another remote region of Haute Kotto. However, he has continued to send members of his group to Yemen for trade, and his sons continue to manage trade relations with Alico.

Kony's decision to flee the conflict in Sudan and establish his camps closer to communities in Haute Kotto likely contributed to a sharp rise in defections from his group. The defection of Kony's sons, Ali and Salim, who were among the top leaders of the group, notably weakened the command structure of the group. Between 2024-2025, at least 51 people escaped or defected from the group,²⁶ including several more of Kony's immediate family members, illustrating notable internal tensions among those closest to him. Two military operations against the group in 2024 put Kony on the run again, presenting easier opportunities for abductees to escape.

Of the 51 escapees, 40 were boys or male youth, while 11 were girls or female youth. During this period, young men and boys would often escape in groups ranging from three to upwards of 10, while young women and girls would escape on their own or with one other female. The gender disparity in rates of escape likely reflects several factors. Kony's camp is isolated, in a remote region several days walk from the nearest settlement, and abducted boys may have relatively more freedom of movement, more opportunities for collaborative planning, and better access to supplies needed to make the long journey. Girls and female youth are subject to forced marriages to senior commanders, resulting in the isolation of domestic labor, pregnancies, and children that create additional barriers to and risks from attempted escape.

²⁴ *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2693*, Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, 10 June 2024, P.18.

²⁵ At least two sources have reported that LRA abductees also worked in artisanal mines, though it remains unclear how LRA leaders made arrangements for this with the armed groups that control the mines.

²⁶ An additional 10 escapees from Kony's group who had fled into South Darfur, Sudan in previous years made their way back to CAR in 2025. Invisible Children has documented several cases of LRA escapees being stranded in remote areas of Sudan, without access to critical transit and reunification support, which has been further exacerbated by the conflict.

III. MISSING PERSONS: THE THREAT OF LRA ABDUCTIONS IN DRC

The LRA's capacity for violence against civilians has declined along with its combatant force, and Kony has made a strategic decision to avoid attention-grabbing massacres in favor of survival strategies that kept him off the international radar. The group killed 974 civilians and abducted 3,587 others between 2010-2014, while only killing one civilian during attacks²⁷ and abducting 282 others from 2020-2024.

Kony's transition to less violent survival strategies failed to address one existential challenge: the steady stream of defections that was hollowing out the group's capacity to work in the fields, perform domestic labor, and guard the camp and created a need for new recruits. In 2023, Kony tasked Chandit, one of his younger sons, with the responsibility of forcibly abducting children and youth to replenish the group. Chandit led a small team of Kony's fighters on a walk of more than 300 miles across the border deep into DRC's Bas Uele province, where they raided the community of Banda in late February 2023 and the communities of Kombomu and Babile in early March 2023. In total, they abducted 44 children and youth.²⁸ Almost exactly a year later, Chandit returned to Bas Uele, leading raids on the communities of Digba and Gwane that culminated in the kidnapping of 30 children and youth.

These attacks are the only four documented LRA attacks since January 2022, and each of them followed a similar template: small LRA groups conducting late-night abduction raids targeting children and youth in small, remote communities in DRC's Bas Uele province. In both cases, neither local communities nor international observers were able to immediately identify the perpetrators, and there was skepticism that Kony's group could be responsible given that his camps were more than 300 miles away.²⁹ However, the similarity to the LRA's historic modus operandi raised suspicions they were responsible, and all of the targeted communities were also heavily targeted by LRA groups between 2009 and 2020.

Definitive evidence of the LRA's culpability began to emerge in April 2024, when children and youth abducted in the attacks in Bas Uele began to appear in Haute Kotto after escaping from Kony's group. Their testimony confirmed that they had been trafficked across the border into CAR and enslaved within Kony's group, the boys and male youth most often worked as guards and in fields. Girls and female youth performed a wide range of duties, including field work, domestic labor at the camp. Many girls and female youth were sexually abused by senior LRA commanders who held them as 'wives'.

Of the total 44 boys and male youth abducted in Bas Uele between February 2023 and March 2024, 24 have escaped, while one was executed on the orders of LRA commanders for attempting to escape.

²⁷Killings and executions within the LRA of abductees and commanders has been a common practice, regularly employed by Kony and also reported within the Achaye and Owila/Oloo factions. While the practice has been confirmed by escapees and defectors, the identities of those killed in addition to those who died while in captivity has not been well documented. A recent initiative by Invisible Children documented the identities of 157 individuals who were killed or died while in captivity, including 15 who were killed between 2020-2024.

²⁸ At least one of the abductees, a young boy, had also been previously abducted by the LRA.

²⁹ Kony may have ordered the abductions to take place in DRC to avoid violating non-aggression pacts agreed to with Central African armed groups, one of which, in 2019, reportedly included an agreement that the LRA would not abduct more civilians in Haute Kotto prefecture. Crisis Tracker data shows there have been no LRA abductions there since January 2019.



Nineteen remain missing and presumed in captivity. Of the total 30 girls and female youth abducted, six have since escaped, while 24 remain missing. The fate of the 43 missing children and youth remains unclear.³⁰

Many of the missing are presumably remaining in captivity with Kony's group. In addition to the boy who was executed, others may have also since died, either in captivity or in the bush after attempting to escape.³¹ Others may have escaped and returned home without being documented or may have

fled to remote communities in the Kafia Kingi/Darfur region where they remain stranded. Still others may have escaped and been taken into captivity by another armed group, as happened with four LRA youth who escaped from Kony's group and were imprisoned by a Central African armed group in April 2023.

Despite the frequency of defections from Kony's group in 2024, Chandit did not return to Bas Uele to abduct more children and youth in early 2025. This may have been due to the group reportedly fleeing further north towards Kafia Kingi following military operations targeting Kony led by the UPDF in August 2024. However, recent LRA escapees have reported that with Kony reportedly back in northeastern CAR in 2025, there is a high risk of renewed LRA abductions in Bas Uele in the next dry season in late 2025 or early 2026.

³⁰ The lack of clarity on the fate of these 43 abductees is part of a broader pattern of missing persons from LRA abductions. The fate of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people abducted by the LRA in CAR, DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda remains unknown, and in many communities there has not yet been comprehensive documentation of the identities of missing persons.

³¹ According to escapees, one of the boys was executed soon after the 2023 abduction raid for trying to escape. In addition, in June 2024, four boys who escaped from Kony's group reported that two girls who had tried to escape with them were killed by LRA combatants who pursued them, though it is unconfirmed whether they were among the 2023-2024 Bas Uele abductees.

IV. KONY'S FINAL CHAPTER: DEMOBILIZING THE LAST LRA GROUP

Though the threat posed by the LRA has clearly diminished in recent years, the continued risk that Joseph Kony and his sons will try to rebuild the group's strength via abductions necessitates renewed efforts to demobilize remaining members and bring Kony himself to justice. Kony's weakening grip on the LRA provides the best opportunity to negotiate the demobilization of Kony and his remaining group members since the failed Juba Peace Talks of 2006-2008. Immediate steps should be taken to establish communications with Kony or his remaining deputies and negotiate a disarmament and demobilization, as well as to revive "Come Home" defection messaging encouraging lower-ranking abductees in the group to defect. Such efforts should be complemented by coordinated efforts to conduct family tracing, repatriation, and reunification of remaining LRA members, most of whom are abductees. The alternative, a military operation to arrest Kony, remains a less attractive option given the lack of a credible and willing military force in the region and the risk of Kony ordering further abductions to replace any loss in group strength.

Negotiating the disarmament and demobilization of Kony's group

Joseph Kony's last known, substantive contact with government authorities or the international community to discuss demobilization was during the Juba Peace Talks, which took place from 2006-2008 in South Sudan while Kony and the LRA were based just across the border near DRC's Garamba National Park.³² The talks faced severe obstacles, including Kony's refusal to participate directly in the talks or appoint credible representatives, uneven commitment to the process by the Ugandan government, and a mediation team led by Riek Machar that neither side fully trusted. Kony also feared that any peace deal would result in him being handed over to the ICC to face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity stemming from a 2005 indictment.

Though the parties reached a Final Peace Agreement in April 2008, the talks collapsed over the next seven months, when Kony refused on multiple occasions to sign the settlement and launched massive abduction raids on Congolese and Central African communities. In December 2008, the Ugandan government, which had never fully committed to the talks, launched an aerial and ground assault on LRA bases in DRC's Garamba National Park. "Operation Lightning Thunder" not only failed to apprehend Kony and other LRA leaders, but also left nearby civilians unprotected from a subsequent wave of LRA reprisal attacks that killed more than 865 civilians.³³

Following the collapse of the Juba talks, there have been no credible attempts to restart negotiations with Kony. In 2013, media outlets reported that Kony was engaged in talks to surrender to the then-President of CAR, Michel Djotodia, but in reality Djotodia's representatives were talking to one of Kony's lieutenants who manipulated the process to receive much-needed supplies before disappearing back

³² For an analysis of earlier attempts at peace negotiations between the LRA and the Ugandan government, see [Northern Uganda: Understanding and Solving the Conflict](#), Crisis Group, April 2004 and [Behind the Violence: Causes, Consequences, and the Search for Solutions to the War in Northern Uganda](#), Refugee Law Project, February 2004.

³³ [The Christmas Massacres: LRA attacks on Civilians in Northern Congo](#), Human Rights Watch, February 2009.

into the bush.³⁴ In 2015, additional reports of Kony seeking to initiate contact with negotiators were determined to be a hoax.³⁵

Despite the history of failed attempts at peace, recent developments give hope for a more successful outcome. Establishing contact with Kony has been nearly impossible since the Juba Peace Talks collapsed, but, despite his falling out with his father, Ali Kony could likely help the Ugandan government re-establish contact with Kony. In addition, LRA defectors report that Kony's group periodically communicates with non-state armed groups in eastern CAR, opening up the possibility of backchannel communications through them. The Ugandan and Central African government officials recently established high-level coordination mechanisms to facilitate the demobilization and repatriation of the LRA splinter groups that could be redirected to facilitate negotiations with Kony's group.³⁶

Perhaps the most significant challenge will be convincing Kony to disarm. The ICC arrest warrants are likely still his greatest fear, but he may see facing trial as less risky than eking out a living in the remote forests of CAR without access to healthcare or other services. Alternatively, negotiators could also seek contact with other senior LRA commanders in Kony's group who are not indicted by the ICC. Ali may have suggestions for how to contact them and convince them to lead a mass defection and force Kony to accompany them out of the bush.

The military alternative

Military operations targeting Joseph Kony have long been seen as an opportunity to decisively defeat the LRA, only to fail to catch or kill Kony himself. Following the failure of Operation Lightning Thunder in 2008, Ugandan military forces continued to pursue Kony until 2017, when US officials decided to end logistical and operational support that had been coordinated by US Special Operations Forces (SOF) as part of a high-profile initiative initiated by officials under US President Barack Obama.³⁷ Despite success in killing or capturing several high profile LRA commanders and several close calls on Kony himself during that time period, Joseph Kony emerged weakened but still free. In the following years, no military operations were launched against Kony's LRA group, as neither the *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA) nor MINUSCA have the willingness or capacity to launch operations against Kony's group in the remote forested region of Haute Kotto prefecture in which his group frequently operated.

In mid-2024, the lull in efforts to capture or kill Kony abruptly ended with two separate sets of operations targeting his camp. The first, led by forces operating in support of the FACA, attacked Yemen in April

³⁴ J. Dana Stuster, [Don't Believe the Hype: Joseph Kony Isn't About to Surrender](#), Foreign Policy, 21 November 2013.

³⁵ Ledio Cakaj, [Gawker got pranked. Kony isn't looking for peace. Here are the facts.](#) Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog, 5 November 2015.

³⁶ Broader bilateral cooperation between Uganda and the CAR includes a military cooperation pact signed in January 2024 and a three-day visit of Central African President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to Uganda in October 2024. See [CAR and Uganda enter military co-operation agreement](#), DefenceWeb, 19 January 2024 and [Ugandan, CAR leaders discuss transport infrastructure development](#), Xinhua, 9 October 2024.

³⁷ Paul Ronan, *The Kony Crossroads: President Obama Chance to Define His Legacy on the LRA Crisis*, The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, August 2015.

2024 soon after they assumed custody of 14 abductees who had recently escaped from his group.³⁸ However, Kony was not there, and it remains unclear whether the forces targeted his nearby camp location. On August 20, 2024, the official X account of the Ugandan military posted that its forces had “launched an operation against three camps belonging to Joseph Kony in the Central African Republic, East of Sam Ouandja.”³⁹ The post stated that “all camps were destroyed, and equipment was captured,” and included photos of burning huts. It also said the operation was conducted in coordination with the FACA and the South Sudan People’s Defense Force (SSPDF) and that “remnants of the LRA” would “be hunted down” unless they surrendered.

It remains unclear how close either of the April or August 2024 operations came to actually capturing or killing Kony, though they did destabilize his group enough to allow more abductees to plan and execute their defections. Since August 2024, there has been no publicly-available reporting of renewed military operations targeting Kony’s group.

In a sign of the LRA’s weakness relative to previous years, Kony did not order any retaliatory attacks on civilians following either of the military operations in mid-2024, and there have been no documented abductions by the LRA since then to replenish their ranks with fresh recruits. Still, should any future operations materialize and be launched, they should include more comprehensive measures to mitigate the risk of LRA retaliatory atrocities and prepare for the possibility that, if Kony escapes, he would flee with his group to a new location and carry out abductions and lootings to restore supplies and rebuild his strength. These efforts should build upon existing, locally-led risk mitigation strategies utilizing the EWER networks that have proven effective at reducing civilian vulnerability to LRA atrocities.⁴⁰ Kony is no longer directly engaged in the group’s operations outside of their camps so any military operation against him would need to target the group’s camp. These camps are largely comprised of captives, including women and children, and military operations present a notable risk to their safety. As such, operations should also prioritize the safety of women and children within LRA groups, all of whom were abducted or born into captivity.

Family tracing, repatriation, and reunification of remaining LRA members

In addition to Kony, less than 100 men, women, and children comprise the last remaining LRA group. Though some have Ugandan nationality, like Kony, most of the younger members are either Central African or Congolese who have been abducted over the last 10-15 years. Many other such abductees who have escaped captivity in recent years have been left stranded far from home with few resources

³⁸ For more details, see Mac William Bishop, [Russian Mercenaries Hunt the African Warlord America Couldn’t Catch](#), Rolling Stone, 27 April 2024.

³⁹ See August 20, 2024, [X post](#) by @MODVA_UPDF.

⁴⁰ For more details on the use of EWER networks to reduce civilian vulnerability to LRA violence, see: Maya Moseley, [We Come Together: Community-based Protection in the Tri-border Region of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan](#), Invisible Children, January 2022.

to return, with boys and male youth escapees also vulnerable to re-recruitment by other armed groups in CAR.⁴¹

Should Kony's group be demobilized, Central African and Ugandan authorities, as well as international actors such as MINUSCA and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), should be prepared to offer immediate services to escapees, including medical care (e.g. pre- and post-natal care), temporary housing and nutrition, and emergency psychosocial services. They should also work with civil society partners, including local Peace Committees, to conduct family tracing for escapees, provide "welcome kits" with basic toiletries and other basic goods, and provide repatriation and reunification transport to those who wish to return to their families.

These efforts should be informed by lessons learned from the demobilization of LRA splinter groups in mid-2023. In particular, more efforts are needed to ensure that women and girls who were forced into sexual relationships with Ugandan LRA commanders and have children with them are given adequate protection, time, and resources to decide into what communities they and their children will be reintegrated.

⁴¹ In recent years, the Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG) has sought to recruit former male LRA escapees, seeing them as experienced combatants due to their time with the LRA. Previously, armed groups such as The Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (FPRC) have recruited LRA escapees. Ben Anderson, [*Children are being kidnapped to fight in the Central African Republic's brutal war*](#), VICE News, 13 July 2018.

V. REINVESTING IN COMMUNITY PROTECTION AND RESILIENCE IN LRA-AFFECTED AREAS OF CAR, DRC, AND SOUTH SUDAN

Though the threat of LRA violence in the tri-border region of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan has faded over the last decade, the region still faces myriad security threats that include armed group violence, predatory government-aligned forces, and intercommunal tensions. Invisible Children's Crisis Tracker project documented 749 armed group attacks on civilians and 42 incidents of intercommunal violence in the tri-border region between January 2021 and June 2025.⁴² Regional governments and the international community should capitalize on the peace dividend offered by recent progress in demobilizing LRA splinter groups to reinvest in community protection and resilience programming in the tri-border region.

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) networks

Many civilians in the tri-border region are isolated from regional trade hubs by poor roads and the absence of basic communication systems such as mobile phone and FM radio networks. While mobile phone network coverage in the region is slowly expanding, many communities still lack coverage as the economics of the telecommunication industry often prevent the extension of networks to small, remote villages where there is little hope of cost recovery. The presence of state services and institutions is also limited in LRA-affected regions of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan.

Armed groups exploit the lack of state presence and telecommunications networks, including by crossing borders with impunity. In recent years, communities in eastern CAR have witnessed particularly high levels of violence despite the reduction in LRA attacks. Civilians in southeast CAR have been targeted in the conflict between the Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG) and the predominantly Peuhl UPC, which has also drawn in state security forces.⁴³ Haute Kotto prefecture, where Kony's group is located, has been a longtime stronghold of the UPC, as well as other ex-Seleka armed groups who largely profited off of artisanal mines in the region, as well as cross-border trade, transhumance, and trafficking. However, offensives by security forces have weakened the groups in recent years and in April 2025 the UPC rejoined the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR), laying the way for the group's DDR. In total, the Crisis Tracker has documented 171 attacks on civilians by non-state armed groups in eastern CAR between January 2024 and August 2025.

Civil society-led EWER networks have helped fill the gap left by the lack of telecommunication networks and state security services. At the community-level, programming provides resources and capacity-building to local Peace Committees, including participatory community mapping of security risks and the

⁴² From CrisisTracker.org, data accessed 2 September 2025.

⁴³ Before demobilizing in 2023, the Owila LRA faction was particularly active in supporting the UPC, fighting alongside the group during attacks launched on the UPC by the AAKG militia in May and June 2023 and managing roadside barriers and checkpoints on behalf of the UPC. The demobilization of the Owila faction weakened UPC capacity in Mboki, and by mid-2024 AAKG forces backed by state security actors had largely pushed the UPC out of Haut Mbomou.

development of localized risk mitigation strategies.⁴⁴ Focal points within the community share information with communities throughout the EWER network via mobile phone, High Frequency (HF) radio, and, in some communities, HF radios that allow app-based messaging with mobile phone users. EWER networks played a crucial role in allowing communities to share information about the movements and activities of LRA groups, develop risk mitigation strategies, and reunifying LRA escapees with their families. Continued investment is needed in such cross-border networks, including in emerging technologies that connect communities with mobile phone access with those that do not.

Support for victims and survivors

Hundreds of thousands of civilians in the tri-border region are direct victims of LRA violence, including those who were displaced by violence, were looted of food and essential household goods, or were temporarily abducted. In particular, there are thousands of women and children in the region who spent extensive periods of captivity, missing essential education and suffering acute trauma.⁴⁵ Many women and girls were also subjected to sexual violence and returned home with children fathered by LRA commanders, leading to stigmatization in their communities. Many victims of LRA violence have also suffered as a result of violence by other armed groups in the region, enduring multiple instances of displacement and/or looting. Programs to provide medical and psychosocial support to victims, particular women and girls, should be paired with assistance to rejuvenate livelihoods disrupted by conflict.

Transitional justice and accountability

In addition to direct support for individual victims and their survivors, there is also a need for collective transitional justice activities. Several communities in northeastern DRC, where security has improved significantly in recent years, have organized commemoration ceremonies that incorporate local cultural traditions in order to memorialize and collectively grieve the trauma of LRA violence. Other activities, such as documenting the sites of mass graves and the identities of missing persons who were abducted by the LRA and never returned home, are critical for the long-term memorialization of the conflict's impact. Advocates have also made progress in attaining recognition of LRA atrocities by the provincial governments of Bas Uele and Haut Uele in the form of planned edicts that would commemorate victims and survivors of LRA atrocities. However, civil society leaders need additional support and resources to expand communal activities into more activities and explore other transitional justice initiatives, such as reparations.

While most remaining members of the LRA are abductees who should be reunified with their families and provided support to reintegrate into their home communities, there must also be accountability for commanders responsible for the LRA's worst atrocities in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan. However, neither

⁴⁴ Maya Moseley, [*We Come Together: Community-based Protection in the Tri-border Region of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan*](#), Invisible Children, January 2022.

⁴⁵ Paul Ronan, [*At Risk, Yet Still Resilient: Violence against Women and Youth in Eastern CAR and Northeastern DRC*](#), Crisis Tracker, September 2019.

Joseph Kony nor any other LRA commanders have ever been charged for atrocities in those countries.⁴⁶ In addition, other senior commanders responsible for mass atrocities should be formally investigated and charged for crimes in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan as appropriate.

Strengthening social cohesion

LRA violence has exacerbated existing intercommunal tensions in the tri-border region, particularly those between the Muslim Peuhl pastoralist communities and ethnic groups such as the Azande that are primarily Christian and practice farming, hunting, and fishing. Though the LRA did collaborate with the Peuhl-dominated UPC, it often looted pastoralists from the wider Peuhl community when encountering them in the bush. Nevertheless, some people accused the wider Peuhl community of collaborating with the LRA. Though the demobilization of LRA groups in CAR's Haut Mbomou removed one contributing factor to tension between the Peuhl and Azande communities, lasting progress in strengthening social cohesion will require sustained attention and investment. Priority targets for funding and support should include reducing the spread of hate speech and misinformation and economic assistance that reinforces livelihoods and mutually beneficial trading relations (i.e. between Peuhl pastoralists and Azande farmers).

⁴⁶ The 36 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity the ICC has charged Kony with perpetrating are all related to LRA activities in northern Uganda between 2002-2005. In May 2021 the ICC found Dominic Ongwen guilty for a total of 61 crimes comprising crimes against humanity and war crimes, all committed in northern Uganda between 1 July 2002 and 31 December 2005. The only other LRA commander to be tried in court is Thomas Kwoyelo, a more junior commander who was convicted by the International Crimes Division (ICD) of the High Court of Uganda on 44 counts of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious crimes in northern Uganda in August 2024.

VI. CONCLUSION

The end of decades of LRA violence is within tantalizing reach. The Central African and Ugandan governments, with assistance from multilateral actors, should seek to build on this momentum by demobilizing indicted LRA leader Joseph Kony and the last remaining active LRA group. Less high-profile, but even more important, is the need for sustained investment in programming in the tri-border region of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan to strengthen EWER networks and other mechanisms to protect civilians from other armed group threats, assist survivors and victims of violence, and strengthen social cohesion between communal groups that has been frayed by decades of conflict.