

Written Testimony of Benoit Kinalegu
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Republic of Congo

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
The Continuing Human Rights Crisis in LRA-Affected Areas

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My name is Father Benoit Kinalegu, and I am a Congolese priest from Dungu, in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. I am here to testify to the horrors the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continues to inflict on my community and to discuss steps that must be taken if we are finally to be free from the menace of the LRA.

1. Brief overview of LRA atrocities in Congo

Since the LRA first crossed the borders from Uganda into South Sudan and Congo in 2005, they have committed unspeakable atrocities against civilians in our communities. In one massacre in towns north of Dungu in September 2008, they murdered 167; in Makombo in a four day rampage in December 2009 they killed 321 and abducted hundreds more;ⁱ in Kpanga in February 2009 they murdered 74 mostly elderly and childrenⁱⁱ – there are too many atrocities to list. My organization, the Dungu-Doruma Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace (CDJP), documented many of them ourselves and helped bring these massacres to international attention. What the numbers cannot convey is the viciousness of the attacks, and the terrible psychological impact they have had on our communities. The LRA do not just kill – they mutilate, rape, pillage, and abduct. They force our children into their ranks and turn them into killers. They use these horrific tactics as a weapon to terrorize, traumatize, and cripple our communities.

The international community, and the United States government in particular, has taken note. Encouraging steps have been taken, including the deployment of U.S. military advisors, which we welcome. But I am here to tell you first-hand that the situation on the ground for our communities remains desperate. The attacks continue and the LRA remains a grave threat, leaving hundreds of thousands displaced and deeply traumatized. The measure of success must be the extent to which civilians can live free from the fear of LRA atrocities, and by that measure much more must be done.

2. Recommendations for the US government

First, we must recognize that the failure to respond to the crisis is in large part a political failure. My government often refuses to cooperate with other regional governments, notably Uganda, and frequently ignores or denies the threat posed by the LRA. Greater cooperation is needed from my own Congolese government to allow the Ugandan army to pursue the LRA in the DRC. U.S. officials have repeatedly encouraged the Congolese government to cooperate with Uganda

and other regional governments, but they have not been successful. Consequently, I call on President Obama and Secretary Clinton to personally call President Kabila and urge him to make regional cooperation to stop the LRA a priority.

Second, and in a related point, the U.S. government should support the urgent implementation of the African Union regional initiative, and put pressure on the AU to prioritize civilian protection. The AU initiative has not yet brought any significant changes to Congo because it has not been implemented. Troop numbers remain the same on the ground and there are no AU commanders in DRC. The AU is not fulfilling its intended role to coordinate, facilitate, and mediate between regional governments. Most importantly, it has not developed and implemented a strategy to protect civilians. It will need the full support of the international community if it is to succeed in these difficult tasks. The US government should urge the AU to quickly implement the regional initiative and ensure that the initiative prioritizes protecting civilians as well as capturing top LRA commanders.

Third, communications and road infrastructure must be improved, including in particular cellular telephone infrastructure. Simple communications devices are extremely effective tools for our communities to warn each other of LRA attacks and take steps to protect ourselves. The United States government has funded a series of infrastructure projects for which we are very grateful. Specifically, it has funded a high frequency radio network in Congo that is already having a real impact on the ground, and USAID has plans to fund cellular towers that will further empower communities to protect themselves. USAID is also funding key secondary roads, such as the one from Ngilima to Bayote that will enable military protection of populations that are completely vulnerable today. The US government should urgently increase its funding of such projects and ensure that planned projects are expedited.

Fourth, armies pursuing the LRA must be professionalized. I call on the United States government to expand its bilateral and multilateral support to improve the capacities of regional armies to protect our communities and pursue the LRA. I have observed that the US trained FARDC battalion in Dungu has had a real impact on the ground – it is an example to replicate. Soldiers must receive their pay and have adequate food, equipment, transport, and means of communication so that their priority remains tracking the LRA and protecting civilians rather than ensuring their own survival by exploiting our communities.

Fifth, all soldiers operating in LRA-affected areas must be trained in human rights and civilian protection. The United States is in a position to provide this training through its advisers on the ground. Untrained regional troops are too often perpetrators of human rights violations themselves, and risk doing more harm than good. Any human rights abuses by armies must be thoroughly investigated and abusers held to account.

Sixth, there must be justice for those most responsible for LRA atrocities. The arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Joseph Kony and the most senior LRA

commanders must be acted upon. In addition, there must be some form of accountability for high-level commanders most responsible for atrocities but not indicted by the ICC. Amnesty for rank-and-file LRA is essential to encouraging defections, but senior commanders responsible for so much suffering must face fair and impartial justice.

Finally, as my friend Sister Angelique has illustrated, the international community must invest in and support local civil society with training, infrastructure, and equipment so we can rehabilitate members of communities through psychosocial assistance, education, and socioeconomic assistance. Investing in support to civil society organizations in our community is an investment in a sustainable and lasting peace.

ⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/03/28/dr-congo-lord-s-resistance-army-rampage-kills-321>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/05/20/dr-congo-new-round-lra-killing-campaign>