

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION ON CHILD SOLDIERS

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I'd like to begin by thanking Representatives McGovern (D-MA) and Wolf (R-VA) for their leadership of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and for convening this very important discussion about the use of children as soldiers around the globe, and the role of the United States in addressing this abhorrent injustice.

Background

At the outset, I'd like to emphasize that this is a conversation that millions of young Americans would be very encouraged to know is taking place in our nation's capitol.

Since Invisible Children's beginnings ten years ago, we have witnessed the power, creativity, and relentless commitment of young people who were confronted with the crimes of Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army, and the injustices facing young people their own age on the other side of the world.

For the past several years, hundreds of thousands of high school and college students across the country have lobbied the U.S. government, calling for action to help protect children in central Africa from LRA violence. They have held thousands of lobby meetings in their home districts and on Capitol Hill, written tens of thousands of letters, made countless phone calls, rallied in the streets and slept out on the concrete – all to raise the banner for fellow young people being forced to fight and kill as soldiers.

And with the leadership inside Washington from sympathetic members of Congress like yourselves, these dedicated young activists helped advance unprecedented action from the U.S. government to help protect children and their families from LRA violence, return abducted child soldiers to their families, and bring Joseph Kony to justice.

In May 2010, Congress unanimously passed the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act, which required President Obama to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the LRA conflict. In November of 2010, the President released that strategy, and the following year he announced the deployment of 100 U.S. military advisors to central and East Africa to assist regional efforts to address the LRA.

Just to provide a brief update on the situation now: over the past three years, the efforts of the U.S. advisors have helped contribute to a significant reduction in killings and abductions by the LRA. Still, Joseph Kony remains at large, and the LRA continues to be a significant threat to communities in the region. And despite the overall downward trend in LRA violence since the initial deployment of the U.S. advisors, we have actually seen an increase in LRA attacks in areas of DRC and CAR compared to this time last year.

The need remains for sustained, creative, and collaborative efforts to finally end the LRA crisis and ensure that Kony's child soldiers are safely and successfully reintegrated back into society. We at Invisible Children are trying to play our part, not only through robust

advocacy efforts here in the United States, but also through on-the-ground programs and collaborative partnerships with local communities, civil society leaders, and government actors -- including the U.S. military.

My desire today is to contribute lessons learned from Invisible Children's efforts over the past ten years to help stop the abduction and conscription of child soldiers by Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and to support former LRA child soldiers and their communities in the long road of recovery. That said, it's important to note that our experience and observations apply specifically to the context of an illegal armed group, and not the state-sponsored recruitment of children into national armies per se. Still, I hope our work on the LRA issue and lessons learned can add a helpful perspective to this dialogue about increased U.S. engagement on the issue of child soldiers worldwide.

In the hopes that Invisible Children's programs, and the nature of the partnerships behind them, might be a helpful model for other contexts involving child soldiers, I will spend the rest of my time today exploring three main aspects of our work in central and East Africa: (1) encouraging peaceful defections, (2) supporting the reintegration of former child soldiers, and (3) building the capacity of local communities to protect their own children from the threat of abduction and forced recruitment.

Encouraging and Facilitating Peaceful Defections

Given the complexities involved with stopping an armed group comprised almost entirely of combatants who were abducted as children, defection initiatives are both a moral imperative and an effective strategy to peacefully dismantle the LRA from within. To do this, we start by combating the psychological and physical barriers that often keep child soldiers, and their abductors, from leaving the battlefield.

For the past three years, Invisible Children has worked in collaboration with local community leaders and with the U.S. military advisors in the region to create and disseminate defection messages that address the fears, lies, and shame that often keep LRA members from trying to return home. These messages come either in the form of printed fliers that include photographs of LRA defectors safe at home with their families and are distributed aurally over areas of known LRA activity, or they come in the form of recorded audio messages from LRA defectors, personally encouraging their fellow abductees to leave the bush and come home. These audio recordings are then broadcast over FM and shortwave radio stations in the region, or -- with the help of the U.S. advisors -- through helicopter-mounted speakers.

Over the years, we have found that the most effective themes to emphasize in defection messages are home, family, forgiveness and safety -- themes that would resonate with any child afraid that he or she is unworthy of being accepted back home.

As efforts to encourage peaceful defections continue, it is critically important to simultaneously ensure that communities in the region -- which have experienced years of brutal violence at the hands of the LRA -- are properly sensitized, equipped, and

willing to safely receive defectors and support their return home. In doing so, we not only help mitigate the risk that a young LRA defector will be met with hostility and violence from the receiving community, we also help ensure that LRA-affected communities are playing a central role in the pursuit of peace for their own region. Over the past year, as Invisible Children has implemented these sensitization and training programs in DRC and CAR, we have seen multiple communities, once hostile toward LRA defectors, now readily and courageously participating in efforts to support their defection.

Critical to the success of these defection efforts has been the increasing willingness of the U.S. advisors to work collaboratively with NGOs and local communities. While it is not always appropriate for U.S. security forces to be involved in countering the problem of child soldiers, we recommend that a similar model of cooperation and coordination with local communities and NGOs be replicated wherever U.S. forces are present.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Once a child soldier takes the courageous step of leaving the battlefield – often putting his or her life at risk to do so – he or she faces the new battle of reintegrating back into civilian life, establishing a livelihood, and learning how to interact with family, friends, and community in a healthy way. Focused reintegration support is urgently needed for children, young adults, and women coming out of the LRA, as well as the families and communities receiving them home, whose understanding of trauma, social acceptance, and resilience are key to successful reintegration.

Holistic, community-based reintegration programs not only benefit former child soldiers and their receiving communities, they contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region, and they strengthen ongoing defection efforts by showing current combatants that the opportunity for a better life awaits them back home. This concept was confirmed by many former LRA child soldiers and adult combatants interviewed by Invisible Children following their defection.

While Invisible Children currently provides reintegration support to LRA returnees in Uganda, and immediate assistance to LRA returnees in CAR and DRC whenever possible, these efforts only address a small fraction of the need in the region.

Unfortunately, in the case of the LRA conflict, while we are seeing sustained, collaborative investments in *defection* efforts – which should continue -- the international community has largely neglected the reintegration needs of those coming out of LRA captivity in recent years. The United States and other donors should increase support for reintegration programs benefitting former LRA combatants and captives in DRC, CAR, South Sudan, and Uganda, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to the problem.

Equipping communities to protect their own children

Creative defection efforts and holistic reintegration programs are both critically important components to addressing the ongoing use of child soldiers by the LRA. However, I trust that the ultimate desire of everyone here today is to identify effective ways to help prevent this horrible phenomenon from happening in the first place. The abduction, recruitment, or coercion of children to fight as soldiers is an abhorrent injustice – but it also always arises in situations where children and their communities are already extremely vulnerable.

In the case of the LRA, Joseph Kony has and continues to focus his predatory violence and child abduction on marginalized communities -- first northern Uganda, then moving to DRC, CAR, and South Sudan. These are all communities far from their respective centers of government, severely lacking infrastructure and economic opportunities, and thus extremely vulnerable to predatory groups like the LRA. This reality is starkly illustrated in the example of the Makombo massacre in DRC, where there LRA committed a string of consecutive attacks over the course of several days – ultimately killing 321 civilians and abducting 250 others, including at least 80 of children. According to Human Rights Watch, the youngest victim was a 3-year-old girl who had been burned alive. The massacre took place in such a remote area of DRC, lacking any communication mechanisms, allowing the LRA to easily kill and abduct scores of children and families in town after town, and the international community didn't receive word of the tragedy for months.

While it is absolutely necessary to keep states accountable to their duty to administer good governance and protect their own civilians from violence, we have found in the context of the LRA crisis –in places like Makombo -- that it is also critically important to help equip communities to better protect their own children and themselves. After all, these community members are going to be more committed than anyone else to protect their own children from abduction.

One approach Invisible Children has taken to address this need has been the development of an Early Warning HF radio network, in partnership with community leaders in DRC and CAR, which enables communities to alert each other, as well as security forces in the region, of LRA activity. Through a very simple, locally-run system like the HF radio network, communities that have historically been left completely vulnerable to predatory groups like the LRA, now have a way to be central agents in their own protection and the protection of their children. Additionally, the steady stream of timely and reliable information about LRA attacks and abductions, provides an opportunity to increase accountability for national governments failing to protect their own children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

By unpacking a few facets of our experience addressing the issue of LRA child soldiers, I hope this provides some helpful inspiration for what could be done in other contexts to expand the scope of possible U.S. engagement.

Specific to the issue of the Lord's Resistance Army, I want to reiterate the following recommendations for this Commission and your colleagues in Congress:

1. Continue to support the efforts of the U.S. advisors in central Africa, and ensure that they have the resources they need to deploy robust, creative, and rapid defection initiatives.
2. Encourage the Department of Defense to continue to find ways for the U.S. advisors currently working on counter-LRA efforts – particularly defection and civilian protection efforts -- to increasingly work in collaboration with local communities and NGOs in the region.
3. Appropriators should secure funding in the FY15 budget for reintegration support for former child soldiers and others – including women – most severely affected by LRA violence, as well as civilian protection and resilience-building programs in LRA-affected areas of central Africa.

Thank you again to Representatives McGovern and Wolf for the opportunity to share with you all today.