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# **The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Democratic Republic of Congo: (Un)Invited guests?**

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## The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Democratic Republic of Congo: (Un)Invited guests?

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**Abstract:** *While much has been written about the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), hardly any analyses focus on the rebel group's activities in (northeastern) Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – although the rebel group conducted some of the biggest massacres in its history in the country, and continues to be active there. This analysis focusses on a consistent claim which is made among many actors in the DRC: that the LRA was invited, and supported, by the Congolese authorities. This analysis reviews this claim, by zooming in on the available evidence, such as the circumstances in which the rebel group arrived in the country. It concludes that, while freelancing individuals indeed might have brokered such an agreement, institutional Congolese government support to the LRA was (most probably) not the case. Yet, it shows the murky circumstances which allowed such claims to emerge, involving war entrepreneurs, freelancing government officials, ineffective protection, and a government more interested in state security rather than human security.*

### 1. Introduction

Much has been written about the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, which started its rebellion against the regime of President Museveni in the second half of the 80s. The movement became particularly notorious through its abduction of child-soldiers, and its brutal violence against the civilian population. The LRA was for a long time active in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan (later the independent state South Sudan), but in late 2005, shifted its activities to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where it remains active until today. A number of reports describe the massacres which were conducted against the civilian population in north-Eastern DRC (Human Rights Watch 2009, 2010); and how the rebel group remains active in the DRC up to today (Ronan and Titeca 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Yet, there is little to no in-depth analysis of the LRA's activities in the country. This is very different from the LRA's activities in Uganda and South Sudan, which have been analysed in a wide range of excellent books (Allen 2006, Allen and Vlassenroot 2010, Atkinson 2009, Baines 2017, Branch 2011, Dolan 2009, Dubal 2018, Finnstrom 2008, Porter 2016). This paper wants to address this gap, by focussing on one particular question, circulating prominently among actors directly and indirectly involved with the LRA conflict in the DRC: was the LRA supported by the Congolese authorities? By addressing this question<sup>2</sup>, this paper also shows the way in which the LRA's actions are understood by different categories of actors: the affected population, political and military elites, and LRA combatants themselves.

Many believed that there was an alliance between the LRA and the Congolese authorities: while details vary, more generally it is assumed that the arrival of the LRA on Congolese territory in September 2015 was the result of an invitation by the Kinshasa government. Moreover, the lack of action against the LRA over the next years – which was residing in Garamba National Park - was also understood as illustrating the alliance between the LRA and the Congolese authorities.

Concretely, many (former) LRA combatants claim they were invited by Kabila (senior), and how Vincent Otti – the LRA's second in command responsible for bringing the LRA into DRC – was carrying

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<sup>1</sup> See also the work of the LRA crisis tracker, which maps the LRA violence in Central Africa: <https://crisistracker.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Also, while much attention has been given to the support by the Sudanese authorities to the LRA, much less attention has been given on support (or links) with other authorities. This paper aims to fill this gap.

a letter to this extent. The affected population in north-eastern DRC – particularly those in the Aba area, where the LRA entered the DRC – argue how the LRA's entry into the country was directly facilitated by the Kabila government. Further fuelling these understandings were alleged deals between a US-based war entrepreneur, advisors in the circle of President Kabila, and the Congolese Ministry of Defence – something raising the suspicion of elite actors in Kampala and Kinshasa.

This paper discusses the probability of the assertions. It does so by discussing the available evidence, and by particularly zooming in on the arrival of the LRA into the DRC, in the town of Aba, near the Congo-Sudan border in September 2005.

The paper is based on intensive fieldwork from 2012 up to 2020 in the affected areas in north-eastern DRC, in particular Aba (where the LRA arrived), and the region's main towns (Dungu and Faradje). Interviews were conducted with local authorities, local civil society actors, international humanitarian actors, ex-LRA, and so on. Research was also conducted in Kinshasa and Kampala with relevant political and humanitarian actors; and in Gulu (Northern Uganda) with former LRA combatants; and in Washington, London, Brussels and The Hague with other relevant actors. On top of this, documentary research was conducted among diplomatic cables, such as US diplomatic cables (through Wikileaks), and MONUC/MONUSCO documents.

## **2. Context: the LRA in the DRC**

The Lord's Resistance Army started its activities in 1987 in Northern Uganda in response to marginalization and alleged abuses to the Acholi people of Northern Uganda under the regime of President Museveni (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Branch 2011; Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Finnstrom 2008; Van Acker 2009). The LRA arrived in the DRC in September 2005 from South Sudan. From December 2005 onwards, the movement settled itself in Garamba Park, where it refrained from attacking the civilian population. Reports suggest how the time in Garamba park was used to strengthen the LRA, and prepare for war: it established major farms in the area. In January 2006, MONUC peacekeepers made a secret operation, conducted by Guatemalan special forces, but which ended badly: eight Guatemalan UN peacekeepers were killed in a battle with the LRA (HRW 2009: 17). From late 2007, the LRA started abducting civilians again to strengthen its force: most of these abductions took place across the border in southern Sudan and Central African Republic. (HRW 2009: 16). Also in this period, the LRA started small-scale attacks against the Congolese population, something which escalated towards November/December 2008 (Human Rights Watch 2009: 24). On 14 December 2008, 'Operation Lightning Thunder' started, in which the LRA camps in Garamba Park were attacked (Van Puijenborek and Plooijer 2009).

In theory, this was a joint intelligence-led military operation, with participation from Uganda, South Sudan, DRC and CAR (and supported by US advisers); but in practice it was clearly led by the Ugandan army (Van Puijenborek and Plooijer 2009). The LRA escaped practically unharmed only to launch a series of massacres. Between 24 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, at least 815 Congolese civilians and 50 Sudanese civilians were killed by the LRA during attacks which were to be called the 'Christmas Massacres'. The killings and abductions continued throughout 2009, culminating in large-scale killings between 14 and 17 December 2009: in a well-planned operation, the LRA killed over 321 civilians and abducted over 250 others, including 80 children (Human Rights Watch 2010). The last – but largely underreported – massacre that took place on 22 February 2010 in the village of Kpanga (MONUSCO 2010). From this moment onwards, the LRA violence reduced drastically, as the movement limited

itself to survival attacks for food, and short-term abductions. Violence and abductions reached an all-time low in 2012, remaining constant to date. From June 2009, Kony and sections of the LRA crossed the border with CAR and remained there until the present, and it is likely that Kony moved to South Darfur in 2012, and periodically operated in the Kafia Kingi enclave on the border between Sudan and South Sudan (The Resolve 2013). Sections of the LRA remain active in the DRC. However, the LRA changed its mode of operation drastically: with a dwindling number of combatants – only a 100 to 150 combatants are left - the group does no longer rely on intimidation, but mainly relies on survival. For example, abductees are no longer used to strengthen the group, but to carry foodstuffs – and are released quickly (Ronan and Titeca 2020).

### 3. The LRA's arrival and governmental (in)action?

#### 3.1 The arrival of the LRA in the DRC

This section discusses the arrival of the LRA in the DRC, and will particularly zoom in on a number of key-meetings and their consequences.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2005, the LRA arrives in the DRC: The LRA arrives from southern Sudan, and crosses the border around 11am, establishing themselves around 9km north of the town of Aba, in the village of Mamuru. Interviewed civilians from the area argued how “they didn’t hurt anyone, they greeted politely, they stayed away from the people.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, generally, the population was concerned: they had heard about the atrocities of the rebel group. “We had heard the things they had done, and we didn’t want them around.”<sup>4</sup>

*Picture 1: The LRA delegation upon arrival in Mamuru (copyright unknown).*



<sup>3</sup> Interview, civilian, Dungu, 16-07-13

<sup>4</sup> Interview, trader, Aba, 07-08-12

*From right to left, seated: Major Santo Alit; Brigadir Buk Abudema; a Congolese collaborator; Lt. Col. Ben Accellam; Brig. Opuk Mickman aka Abugada; Maj. Gen. Odhiambo.*

The local authorities went to meet the LRA on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September. They agree to meet the next day.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, a first formal meeting takes place between the local authorities and the LRA. The latter delegation is led by Vincent Otti, and 3 others. The LRA emphasises how they do not come with bad intentions, how they don't have anything against the DRC, how they asked for asylum with the Congolese government, and how they did not have any problems with the civilian population. The local authorities – and the FARDC in particular - ask the LRA to disarm. The LRA states they have to consult their hierarchy, and are given 48 hours by the local authorities. The latter still confiscate the weapons of two LRA soldiers, as “no guns can be carried in a meeting with civilian authorities”<sup>5</sup>. According to local authorities present at the meeting, it is after the end of the meeting, that the first particularity happens: they “soon were ordered to give these guns back to the LRA by the national authorities”<sup>6</sup>. As a result the local authorities feel that, by giving back the guns, “Kinshasa forced us to listen to the LRA”, and they were forced to accept the presence of the LRA. A few days after the LRA's arrival, a peaceful demonstration was organized in Aba: the population asked the LRA to hand in their weapons, or to leave the territory. In the meantime, the local authorities feel how the issue is “above their heads” and wait for higher-level actors to arrive and conduct these meetings.<sup>7</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2005<sup>8</sup>, a high-level Congolese delegation went to meet the LRA: the Ninth regional commander of the FARDC, General Padiri, as a representative of President Kabila; accompanied by 3 other FARDC commanders. A significant delegation of the UN peacekeeping force MONUC also joined (13 in total), as well as local authorities (such as the local MP and local chiefs). The LRA delegation consisted of 3 persons, Col. Tabu Makosa, who acted as the ‘LRA national spokesperson’, and 2 other commanders (MONUC, Bunia HQ undated). Vincent Otti (the LRA's second in command, in charge of the move to the DRC) was ill and not present. The following account is based on a wide range of interviews (with eyewitnesses and other involved actors), and documentary evidence.

*Picture 2: Newspaper article on the meeting of the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, with picture of the meeting (photograph taken by author in Aba, DRC)*

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<sup>5</sup> Interview of the old chef de site of Aba, 10-08-12

<sup>6</sup> Interview of the old chef de site of Aba, 10-08-12

<sup>7</sup> After the meeting, the LRA started dispersing in two sites: a ‘civilian base camp’ and a ‘headquarters’. Around 288 combatants were noted. Meece, ‘LRA update: MONUC/FARDC Mission likely this weekend’. 23 September 2005. Wikileaks, 05 Kinshasa1559.

<sup>8</sup> Ross, Will (2005) ‘UN officials meet Ugandan rebels’, BBC News, 25 September 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4281424.stm>



First, the FARDC representatives firmly communicated how the DRC cannot act as a safe haven for the group; but how they could be hosted as refugees. If not, they should leave the territory. Padiri offers three options to the LRA: repatriation to Uganda, return to Sudan, or full disarmament. Otherwise the LRA will face armed opposition.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the response of the LRA is particularly interesting: they explicitly stated how they were invited by the Congolese authorities, and particularly by the (at the time) Minister of Defence Onusumba.<sup>10</sup> A (satellite) phone call was made to (a person claiming to be) Joseph Kony, who argued that the LRA's entry into Congo was a result of negotiations between LRA's representative in Washington, and Congolese officials. He referred all questions about their entry in the DRC to this Washington intermediary – a Ugandan named Jongomoi Okidi-Olal. The LRA commander in Aba made another call, and handed over the phone to the FARDC commander. According to eyewitnesses, it was a high-level Congolese regime figure in the vicinity of President Kabila who told the FARDC commander that 'these are our friends'. "When the Congolese commander disagreed, he was told how 'you don't have to

<sup>9</sup> Meece, LRA update: Congolese would like LRA out. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1579. Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579_a.html)

<sup>10</sup> ICG (2007: 14) makes a similar claim.



worry, we stroke a deal, they won't hurt the population'. Padiri [the FARDC commander] was furious, but he couldn't do much, as it already was agreed upon"<sup>11</sup>. Continued attempts at discussion in the afternoon are also deferred to the Washington-based intermediary.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the local authorities could not take any further action against the LRA.

### 3.2 A 'war entrepreneur' and his links with the Congolese administration?

A number of important questions arise: first, who was this high-level Congolese regime figure, and second, was there really a deal with the Congolese authorities?

With regards to the first question, a number of names are mentioned: sources pointed at Presidential National Security Advisor Samba Kaputo, the Minister of Defence, Adolophe Onusumba, and President Kabila's private secretary, Kikaya bin Karubi – the latter is also suggested in leaked US diplomatic cables<sup>13</sup>. Second, the Ugandan Washington-based intermediary, Okidi Jongomoi was claimed to have arranged the entry of the LRA in the DRC, through a deal between the LRA and the Congolese authorities- both Onusumba (the Minister of Defence), and Kikaya (the personal secretary to President Kabila), as well as the US authorities, more particularly Yamamoto, the US deputy secretary of state for African Affairs.<sup>14</sup> In a phone interview with a journalist, Onusumba argued how Okidi-Olal claimed that MONUC had given him permission to arrange for the LRA to disarm.<sup>15</sup>

Jongomoi Okidi-Olala is a controversial figure. He is a Ugandan who became an investment banker, and a soldier in the US Army reserve (Schomerus 2012). In 1999, Okidi-Olal played a major role in a peace initiative between the LRA and the Ugandan government, by involving the Carter Centre as a mediator, and having also the Sudanese government involved (Neu 2002; UN Security Council 2006: 7). He also showed up as part of the LRA delegation during the Juba peace talks (Schomerus 2012). In a document he submitted for these negotiations, he identifies himself as "an advisor to the Chief Mediators, President Salva Kiir and Vice President Machar"<sup>16</sup>. During meetings with Joseph Kony during the peace talks (in LRA assembly points), Okidi-Olala was having private meetings with Joseph Kony.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, Okidi-Olala did not seem very credible, as he was trying very hard to show off his links with the US government. For example, during the Juba Peace talks, Jongomoyi was wearing polo shirts with the words 'Joint Chiefs of Staff/ Pentagon' prominently visible. He was distributing business cards identifying himself as employed by the 'U.S. Department of the Army'<sup>18</sup>; the card itself bearing the seals of the US and US army (including a US military email address).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview eyewitness, Kinshasa, 13 June 2012

<sup>12</sup> Meece, LRA update: Congolese would like LRA out. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1579. Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579_a.html)

<sup>13</sup> Meece (2005) LRA Update: Presidency official says Okidi not wanted. 27 September 2005.

05KINSHASA1585\_a [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585_a.html)

<sup>14</sup> Okidi did not respond to emails from the author; but he did confirm this to other sources.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, Carolyn (2007) 'U.S. sends wrong signal on Uganda', The Philadelphia Inquirer, 05 June 2007. [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special\\_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605\\_U\\_S\\_\\_sends\\_wrong\\_signal\\_on\\_Uganda.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605_U_S__sends_wrong_signal_on_Uganda.html)

<sup>16</sup> Lwo Development Incorporated (2006) 'Acholi leaders unity and cooperation conference'. Proposal by Lwo Development Incorporated Chairman. Washington D.C., July 14 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Hume (2006) Southern Sudan: Violence flares before LRA talks. 27 December 2006. 06Khartoum 2650\_a, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KHARTOUM2916\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KHARTOUM2916_a.html)

<sup>18</sup> Hume (2006) Sudan/Uganda/Drc: Preparations for Un U/S Egeland, Tuesday, 14 November 2006, 06Khartoum2666.

<sup>19</sup> Hume (2006) Sudan/Uganda/Congo: LRA peace talk recess, combatants fail to return to assembly areas. 9 November 2006 06Khartoum 2650\_a, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KHARTOUM2650\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KHARTOUM2650_a.html)

Similarly, interviews with Ugandan diaspora actors mentioned how he would present himself as working for the CIA. As a London-based Acholi said: “he would come to our meetings, dressed in a black suit with black sunglasses, and he would say he was working with the CIA”<sup>20</sup>.

Equally interesting – and particularly relevant for this paper was his involvement in a bogus uranium deal in Kinshasa, which is described in Box 1 below.

**Box 1: Okidi’s bogus uranium deal<sup>21</sup>:**

Okidi had been in Kinshasa shortly after the transition began in 2003, at which time he told Presidency officials (notably Kikaya) that he, Okidi, was representing a private U.S. firm interested in purchasing the Shinkolobwe mine (the source of the uranium used by the U.S. in World War II). He also told Congolese officials at that time that he was an “informal envoy” of the USG [the US government], which was deeply concerned about the potential for terrorist use of the uranium, and that consequently the USG was prepared to offer the DRC a \$30 million loan to help secure the Shinkolobwe site. 2. (C) According to Kikaya, the Congolese expressed interest in the idea and asked Okidi to develop an offer. After several months, Okidi contacted Kikaya again and said that he and a group of investors would come to the Congo but he wanted the GDRC [Congolese government] to pay for the trip, put them up in the Grand Hotel and then fly them to Katanga province (where the Shinkolobwe mine is located) in the President’s plane. Kikaya claims that at this point the GDRC got wise to what seemed to be some sort of scam and backed out of the deal.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the uranium deal was considered too shady by Congolese government officials, and was called off – making him a not very welcome figure in Kinshasa.

This also had an impact on the way the above context (on the LRA) was handled: President Kabila found out that Jongomoi had contact with members of his government, he reacted very angrily: Jongomoi Okidi had become a ‘persona non grata’ person for the Congolese presidency after the bogus uranium deal. In reaction, Kabila had his private secretary call the US embassy to complain about Okidi’s contacts with the government (as Okidi had presented himself as a US envoy).<sup>23</sup> Also MONUC strongly denied any contacts with Okidi.<sup>24</sup> In sum, Okidi was involved in a number of shady dealings; and therefore did not seem very credible. Yet, was this really the case? In order to shed more light on this, let’s have a closer look at the broader geopolitical context of the LRA’s move, and Jongomoi’s role in this.

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This connection was strongly denied by US government representatives.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, London, 08 August 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Meece (2005) LRA Update: Presidency official says Okidi not wanted. 27 September 2005. 05KINSHASA1585\_a [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585_a.html)

<sup>22</sup> Meece (2005) LRA Update: Presidency official says Okidi not wanted. 27 September 2005. 05KINSHASA1585\_a [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585_a.html)

<sup>23</sup> Meece (2005) LRA Update: Presidency official says Okidi not wanted. 27 September 2005. 05KINSHASA1585\_a [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1585_a.html)

<sup>24</sup> Davis, Carolyn (2007) ‘U.S. sends wrong signal on Uganda’, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 05 June 2007. [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special\\_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605\\_U\\_S\\_\\_sends\\_wrong\\_signal\\_on\\_Uganda.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605_U_S__sends_wrong_signal_on_Uganda.html)

### 3.3 The geopolitical context of the LRA's move

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), ending the Second Sudanese Civil War. This also had an impact on the status (and presence) of the LRA in South(ern) Sudan. The Khartoum support to the LRA had reduced since the 2001 listing of the LRA as a terrorist group by the US; but it particularly was the CPA which stopped this altogether - at least officially (Sudan HSBA 2011: 3). The move of the LRA to the DRC has to be understood in this framework: foreign threats to security, such as the LRA, were no longer welcome on the Sudanese territory. Shortly after the signature of the CPA, John Garang – the leader of SPLA/M - argued in reference to the LRA how "We will not be putting down our arms (...) We are going to defend our country and we don't want any foreign armed groups within our territory."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the fate of both northern Uganda and southern Sudan – which had the prospect of becoming an independent state after the CPA – were intertwined: both had an interest in ending the LRA conflict at this point (Titeca 2019a). Also Khartoum had an interest in doing so. In the words of a Uganda government official: "the CPA changed the calculus for Khartoum (...) it no longer wanted, or could, be interested in supporting the LRA's activities in South Sudan. It therefore helped to clear the path for the LRA to relocate to Garamba."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, right before this – in the second half of 2004 - there had been intense military pressure on the LRA by the Ugandan army, with significant numbers of LRA rebels making use of Uganda's amnesty act. A number of cease-fires were negotiated<sup>27</sup>, and there were ongoing attempts to establish peace talks, led by Betty Bigombe, and with engagement from Vincent Otti and Sam Kolo from the side of the LRA.<sup>28</sup>

In the meantime, the newly established Government of South Sudan (in which the SPLM held the majority), also tried to establish contact with the LRA; and Riek Machar, who had become vice-president of the GoSS offered to negotiate. In February 2006, a first contact was established; in April 2006 a first meeting took place between Otti and Machar; and in May 2006 between Kony and Machar. The Juba Peace Talks began on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2006 (Schomerus 2007: 28).

This is the general context in which the LRA moved to the DRC: having lost its support from Khartoum and no longer welcome in South(ern) Sudan, continued military pressure, and an opening for peace talks. A range of actors therefore had an interest in finding a haven for the LRA: certainly the LRA itself (having lost its bases) and South(ern) Sudan (who no longer wanted negative elements on its territory).

The conventional view is that, in the words of one analyst, how the LRA "exploited the DRC government's weak control over that part of the country to set up its new bases"<sup>29</sup>. Yet, more was at stake here. Before its move, much geopolitical groundwork had been done already. According to an actor who was closely involved in these peace efforts at the time, "Riek Machar was in contact with

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<sup>25</sup> IRIN 'Sudan-Uganda: SPLM/A leader pledges to help Ugandan peace', 31 January 2005, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-uganda-splma-leader-pledges-help-ugandan-peace-effort>

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Kampala, 23 August 2012.

<sup>27</sup> IRIN, 'Uganda declares ceasefire with LRA rebels', 14 November 2004, <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-declares-ceasefire-lra-rebels>

<sup>28</sup> New Vision, 'Bigombe talks to Kony, Otti', 3 January 2005, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1133846/bigombe-talks-kony-otti>

<sup>29</sup> Email Interview LRA analyst, 6 September 2012.

the LRA, and he was looking for a place for the LRA. (...) this was because of the CPA, because of which no other armed forces were allowed in Sudan.”<sup>30</sup> Important for this paper, this concretely meant negotiating with the Congolese government in the years directly leading up to the CPA: “Riek Machar was negotiating with Kinshasa, as part of an unwritten understanding. But this was because Khartoum had confidence in Machar, still up to now. Machar was not seen as a bad person by Khartoum. So it basically Machar which took the word of Khartoum to Kinshasa, to negotiate with them.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, both Khartoum and the SPLA/M were looking for the LRA to relocate in the run-up to the CPA. Riek Machar was the right person to do so, having worked with both Khartoum and the LRA in the past.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, these efforts also involved us another actor: Jongomoi Okidi-Olal. The interviewee involved in these negotiations confirmed Jongomoi’s presence was pivotal in making the DRC a safe haven for the LRA: he was the “physical foot soldier doing all these negotiation. He was the one who travelled to Kinsahsa, Juba, Uganda, and so on. And he was the one who assured the LRA that it would work. He had the permission of the American forces to do this. *Q: He had permission from Washington?* I wouldn’t say ‘Washington’ per se, he rather was working with the military side; with the American military in the US embassy. To us, he was whispering in our ear he was part of the CIA. He was deployed by the US. (...) The US wanted someone the LRA would trust, and would help the movement to be away from Uganda.”<sup>33</sup> Another actor argued how “I don’t think Jongomoi worked for the US government, but he worked with individuals of the US administration. And in the move to Garamba, the US embassy certainly played a role in this. And they used Jongomoi for this.”

Jongomoi’s connections with US officials do seem well-documented: he was said to have direct access to US State Department staff – such as Donald Yamamoto, the deputy assistant secretary of state for African Affairs.<sup>34</sup> Ex-LRA described him as being extremely well connected. As an ex-LRA rebel, who was in charge of political affairs, told the International Criminal Court during the trial of (ex-LRA) Dominic Ongwen: Okidi was “dealing directly with the State department and the Pentagon on issues about the LRA. So he would bring proposals what the Americans say and what the Americans want LRA to do”<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, Okidi introduced him to “various assistant secretaries of state who have served in Africa; Rogers, Winter, Yamamoto, and many others”<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, London, 07 August 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, London, 07 August 2014.

<sup>32</sup> After the split of the SPLA, he founded the South Sudan Independence Movement in 1994, which allied both with Khartoum and the LRA.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, London, 07 August 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, Carolyn (2007) ‘U.S. sends wrong signal on Uganda’, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 05 June 2007.

[https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special\\_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605\\_U\\_S\\_\\_sends\\_wrong\\_signal\\_on\\_Uganda.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605_U_S__sends_wrong_signal_on_Uganda.html)

<sup>35</sup> ICC Trial Hearing, ICC-02/04-01/15, WITNESS: UGA-D26-P-0018, p.52. Downloaded from: [https://www.icc-cpi.int/Transcripts/CR2018\\_05467.PDF](https://www.icc-cpi.int/Transcripts/CR2018_05467.PDF)

<sup>36</sup> ICC Trial Hearing, ICC-02/04-01/15, WITNESS: UGA-D26-P-0018, p.52. Downloaded from: [https://www.icc-cpi.int/Transcripts/CR2018\\_05467.PDF](https://www.icc-cpi.int/Transcripts/CR2018_05467.PDF)

While it is not uncommon for foreign nationals living in the US to have this access, becoming “government favourites, even if they are unreliable”<sup>37</sup> – this seems rather interesting for someone like Okidi-Olal. For example, the Ugandan government in turn wanted Okidi-Olal arrested and handed over to the International Criminal Court, accusing him of being the “real brain behind the LRA leadership”<sup>38</sup>. In this context, the following characterisation of Okidi-Olal seems accurate: a press article portrays him as moving “in the shadows of this [LRA] conflict. He might be working for peace. He might be helping to perpetuate the war. He might be trading on U.S. ties to build his own clout”<sup>39</sup>

A couple of other factors are worth mentioning here. First, as argued by a substantial number of interviewees, the DRC had a political interest in hosting the LRA. As an analyst argued: “It mainly was because of their mistrust of Uganda: they had their rebel activities in Congo, and had basically been pillaging Congo’s resources”. Indeed, up to that point, Uganda had been involved in the extraction of natural resources in the DRC, either directly or through proxies. Allowing the LRA to stay in north-Eastern DRC seemed like a tit-for-tat game.<sup>40</sup>

Second, it was argued how there was a de facto agreement between Kinshasa and Khartoum on the LRA issue: Khartoum and Kinshasa have longstanding relations, and share a mutual distrust of Uganda. In the words of a Ugandan analyst: “Khartoum and Kinshasa had an agreement in this way: the aim was to get the LRA out of Sudan, or South Sudan, but to still be able to keep an eye on them. It was a backup plan: if things with South Sudan went wrong, they could still be able to count on the LRA – Khartoum did expect things in South Sudan to remain tricky.”<sup>41</sup> Another analyst summarized this: “For the Congolese, it was pure opportunism to allow the LRA, also against Uganda. From Khartoum’s side, this was more of a political calculus: they wanted the LRA to stay for a bit longer, and if necessary use them”<sup>42</sup>. Ruhakana Rugunda, long-time negotiator of the Ugandan government with the LRA, who led the Ugandan delegation of the Juba peace talks and was Minister of Internal Affairs at that time, made a similar statement: “there were major suspicions that Kinshasa allowed the LRA on its territory”<sup>43</sup> and how “there probably was an agreement between Kinshasa and Khartoum on this”<sup>44</sup>. Yet, he did not want to provide concrete evidence, or respond to further questions on this.

In sum, the above evidence suggests that there indeed was a strong possibility of a deal on the LRA’s entry into the DRC: first, there is the strong likelihood of a deal made between Jongomoi Okidi-Olala and freelancing individuals in the Congolese administration, such as the private secretaries highlighted

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<sup>37</sup> Davis, Carolyn (2007) ‘U.S. sends wrong signal on Uganda’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 05 June 2007. [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special\\_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605\\_U\\_S\\_\\_sends\\_wrong\\_signal\\_on\\_Uganda.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605_U_S__sends_wrong_signal_on_Uganda.html)

<sup>38</sup> Emmy Allio (2006) ‘Uganda, US clash on Kony rebels’, *New Vision*, 9 April 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, Carolyn (2007) ‘U.S. sends wrong signal on Uganda’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 05 June 2007. [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special\\_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605\\_U\\_S\\_\\_sends\\_wrong\\_signal\\_on\\_Uganda.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/jennifer/20070605_U_S__sends_wrong_signal_on_Uganda.html)

<sup>40</sup> One source mentioned how also financial interests played a role here. A journalist – close to the Ugandan military – argued how in particular Congolese Minister of Defence Onusumba had been paid a substantial amount of money (in the range of 2 million USD) for this. (Interview Kampala, 17 February 2013). This could not be verified or confirmed.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Kampala, 23 August 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Interview journalist, Kampala, 12 March 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Kampala, 28-08-2012.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Kampala, 28-08-2012.

above. This kind of practice is not exceptional in the DRC: The Congolese administration can best be characterized by the privatisation of state positions or the drawing of “personal benefits ... from the appropriation of public office” (Lemarchand 1988: 153), a process which came to be known as ‘Article 15’. In the words of Petit and Mutambwa (2005: 467), “all the state’s usual attributes have been influenced by informal privatisation ... public officials – or those pretending to be – have taken over the customary functions and prerogatives of the state, selling their services to their ‘customers’”<sup>45</sup>. Someone like Jongomoi is a perfect customer for this kind of environment: building on the clout of his involvement in an earlier peace initiative, and on his contacts within the US administration, allowed him to strike deals such as the one above. Second, the geopolitical context did seem favourable for such a deal, as the interests of a range of actors collided in having the LRA in the DRC for a while: Juba (and Machar in particular), Khartoum, US interests, and the LRA itself.

Yet, how did this translate on the ground – how did Kinshasa act vis-à-vis the LRA? Did the Congolese government’s actions reflect such a (potential) agreement? This is discussed in the next section.

#### **4. The Congolese government and the LRA**

##### **4.1 The Congolese government’s reaction to the LRA’s arrival**

Many people in the affected region are convinced that the lack of military action against the LRA was a deliberate move by the Congolese authorities. This viewpoint was also shared by some international actors. Was this the case? Interviews, and US diplomatic cables, allow some further insights as to why no firm military action took place.

As a pretext, it is important to mention that at the point the LRA entered the relevant region (Haut- and Bas-Uélé), there was no military capacity – neither from the FARDC or MONUC. MONUC officials in the wider region were worried about the incursion of the LRA: they were preparing the elections, and communicated both to their MONUC headquarters and Kinshasa that more troops were needed, in order to counter the LRA threat.<sup>46</sup> Local MONUC officials therefore suggested to have a small base in the area (a small base in Dungu and a refueling base in Isiro), as the LRA stay away from military presence. This did not materialize: MONUC officials on the ground felt the organization didn’t take the LRA seriously – as the LRA wasn’t violent at that point, and as MONUC had much more urgent issues to deal with, such as the FDLR. Similar feelings were felt among FARDC officials on the ground: while local FARDC representatives considered the LRA a threat, they felt that this was not the case for their headquarters: it was felt that the Kinshasa government did not want to send troops, or did not want the local troops to take action (as was illustrated above). Similar concerns about the FARDC inaction were voiced by MONUC officials.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, the above interview data - both in Kinshasa and the affected area - was clear: they suggest a clear unwillingness from the national level to act against the LRA.

Yet, when we look at data from diplomatic cables (through wikileaks) which document the politico-military maneuvering, the picture gets more complicated.

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<sup>45</sup> See also De Herdt and Titeca (2016, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Interview MONUSCO official, Kinshasa, 11-06-12.

<sup>47</sup> Interview MONUC officials, Kinshasa, 30/08/11; 11/06/12; 13/06/12

First, these cables show high-level actors within the Congolese government insisted that the LRA should leave. For example, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, President Kabila (after meeting with the Supreme Defence Council) insisted that the “LRA elements are promptly disarmed and ‘neutralized’, using any and all measures necessary, including force”<sup>48</sup>. The same day, the Congolese vice-president argued how the LRA should be disarmed, and how the “government would like the LRA gone, preferably through repatriation to Uganda”<sup>49</sup>. Similar statements were made in the following weeks.

Second, Box 2 below gives an overview of the (attempts at) military operations against the LRA, in the first days and weeks after its arrival – again based on diplomatic cables on this issue.

*Box 2: military deployment against the arrival of the LRA in DRC*

- 25<sup>th</sup> of September: an FARDC commando element is supposed to leave from Kinshasa, but does not leave “due to lack of fuel for the aircraft”.<sup>50</sup>
- 26<sup>th</sup> of September: plans to deploy the commando continue.<sup>51</sup> The commando troops are still not gone, and Kabila orders the Air Force commander to have them leave the morning of September 27, ‘whatever means necessary’<sup>52</sup>.
- 27 September: 200 Commando’s out of 500 leave Kinshasa. The Congolese authorities promise to send more.<sup>53</sup>
- 28 September: 200 FARDC troops reach Aba.<sup>54</sup>
- End of September/ early October: a build-up of Congolese troops in the area; they are ferried out from the wider region.<sup>55</sup> A problem is the remoteness of the region, with Aba hard to reach: the nearest airstrip where planes can land (Aru) is about 130 kms from Aba, which is 9-10 hours by a (badly maintained) road.
- 05 October: Problems such as continuing lack of fuel, or the crash of an aircraft (both pilots were killed, and a dozen soldiers injured).<sup>56</sup>
- 05 October: In the meantime, concrete plans are made for military action against the LRA: the plan was for the FARDC to push the LRA to the Sudanese border, where SPLA and UPDF will capture/disarm or kill them, with MONUC air cover.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Meece, ‘LRA update: Kabila personally engaged, Ugandan [sic] troops in DRC?’ 27 September 2005. Kinshasa 1584 [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1584\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1584_a.html)

<sup>49</sup> Meece, LRA update: Congolese would like LRA out. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1579. Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579_a.html)

<sup>50</sup> Meece, ‘LRA update: MONUC mission arrives in Aba, FARDC deployment delayed’. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1567, Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567_a.html)

<sup>51</sup> Meece, LRA update: Congolese would like LRA out. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1579. Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1579_a.html)

<sup>52</sup> Meece, ‘LRA update: Kabila personally engaged, Ugandan [sic] troops in DRC?’ 27 September 2005. Kinshasa 1584 [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1584\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1584_a.html)

<sup>53</sup> Meece, LRA update: Congolese troops move toward Aba. Kinshasa 1596, Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1596\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1596_a.html)

<sup>54</sup> Meece, LRA update: 200 FARDC troops in Aba, another 650 en route. 30 September 2005; Kinshasa 1626.

<sup>55</sup> Meece, LRA Update: FARDC deployments, contacts with Kampala, Pretoria and the EU. 3 October 2005, Kinshasa 1641, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1641\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1641_a.html)

<sup>56</sup> Meece, LRA Update: over 300 FARDC in Aba but no mission before weekend. 5 October 2005; Kinshasa 1662, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662_a.html)

<sup>57</sup> Meece, LRA Update: over 300 FARDC in Aba but no mission before weekend. 5 October 2005; Kinshasa 1662, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662_a.html)

- 06 October: While the FARDC insisted to attack the LRA alone, as a key opportunity to “prove the worth of FARDC”<sup>58</sup>; the EU and US insisted on having support from MONUC ground troops. The Congolese government on the other hand, requested MONUC to assist in the capture of Vincent Otti, as per the ICC arrest warrant.<sup>59</sup>
- 06 October: According to the FARDC commander in charge, a ‘last chance meeting’ will take place on 7 October, military action could start on the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>60</sup>
- 7 October: MONUC and FARDC travel to Aba for the ‘last chance’ disarmament proposal, but the LRA has already left – according to the population heading North to Sudan. Yet, it is unclear if they have really gone back to Sudan: the UPDF and SPLA are waiting for them on the other side of the border, and the border area is very remote, and heavily forested – much of the area occupied by Garamba National Park.<sup>61</sup> Interviews with local actors, former combatants, and international actors involved show how the increased military pressure did push the LRA to the border with southern Sudan – according to one military actor, they were pushed back in a ‘friendly way’<sup>62</sup>. However, upon reaching the border, the LRA did not cross back ; but instead walked north-west on the Sudanese side of the border and slipped back into the DRC (in the sparsely populated Duru area in Dungu district, north west of Garamba). (ICG 2007: 14).<sup>63</sup>
- 25 October: FARDC and UPDF agreed that the LRA is no longer in the DRC.<sup>64</sup>

Particularly remarkable from the above timeline are the difficulties with which military personnel and equipment were dispatched to the area. On the one hand, this is clearly related with the remoteness of the region (around 1800 km from Kinshasa) and the lack of infrastructure. On the other hand, these difficulties also feed into the above suspicions, and could point at an unwillingness from the national level to take action. Yet, it could also be caused by another factor: the particular functioning of the Congolese administration, with its myriad networks and command lines. In other words, even if there was a clear willingness from the highest political level to intervene (as the cables seem to indicate), this might still get stuck in the machineries of the administrations (both military and civil). This blockage could be caused by a variety of incentives: not only a lack of interest, but also a lack of political or financial incentives to do so. Importantly, and in line with what was discussed in the previous section, the Congolese government and military do not need to be considered as a unitary actor: the fact that President Kabila urgently wanted the LRA to leave does not preclude a deal with other members of his administration – something which probably explains the apparent contradiction between on the one hand a willingness to act, and indications that a deal was made.

<sup>58</sup> Meece, LRA update: FARDC mission possible Sunday/Monday, 7 October 2005. Kinshasa 1677, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677_a.html)

<sup>59</sup> Meece, LRA update: FARDC mission possible Sunday/Monday, 7 October 2005. Kinshasa 1677, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677_a.html)

<sup>60</sup> Meece, LRA update: FARDC mission possible Sunday/Monday, 7 October 2005. Kinshasa 1677, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1677_a.html)

<sup>61</sup> Meece, LRA Update: Back in Sudan? 8 October 2005, Kinshasa 1686, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1686\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1686_a.html)

<sup>62</sup> Interview 13 January 2013, Kinshasa.

<sup>63</sup> From then onwards, the LRA started coming in, and by mid-2006, 700 more had entered, including Joseph Kony (ICG 2007: 14).

<sup>64</sup> Meece, FARDC: LRA forces believed no longer in DRC; military deployments continue, 26 October 2005, Kinshasa 1784, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1784\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1784_a.html)



## 4.2 The Congolese government's consequent actions

In sum, the above explains as to why the local population perceived the LRA as being supported by, or even created by, the Congolese authorities. Yet, was this the case? After the higher-level delegations arrived (described below), it was also felt how the higher-level delegations didn't do much: the LRA was not attacked or disarmed, but was instead allowed to settle itself in neighboring Garamba National Park. Moreover, according to a number of accounts, medicines, food and cattle were also given to the LRA, during their stay in Aba; and a local chief was ordered to give cattle.

A constant factor throughout this episodes, and continuously influencing the context in which the Congolese government operated on the LRA-issue is their deep suspicion of the Ugandan government's intentions, ultimately influencing the actions of the Congolese authorities. The area – Haut Uélé – has for long been a terrain which foreign actors have invaded for economic motives (Titeca 2019b; Titeca and Edmond 2019; Titeca et al. 2020). Uganda has invaded, occupied and looted significant parts of Eastern Congo from 1998 onwards, leading to a 2005 International Court of Justice ruling, ordering Uganda to pay \$10 billion in reparations.<sup>65</sup> Uganda, and more specifically Ugandan military officials, were strongly involved in the economic exploitation of eastern Congo (such as illegal trade and the exploitation of natural resources), and have been training and supporting armed groups in the region (Titeca 2011). For example, the rebel group 'Armed Forces of the Congolese People' (Forces Armées du Peuple Congolais, FAPC), were used as a proxy by Ugandan military from February/March 2003 until April 2005 in the nearby border towns of Aru/Ariwara – where it was profiting from the smuggling business in gold, cigarettes and other commodities (Titeca 2011). In other words, up to a few months before the arrival of the LRA, Uganda had been using armed forces as proxies for economic profit – also in the close vicinity of affected region.

Starting from the initial weeks and months of the LRA's presence, there were many rumours about the Ugandan army entering Congo – something which President Museveni himself eagerly threatened with. For example, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, Museveni "warned that his army would again enter DR Congo unless Ugandan rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army (...) were disarmed"<sup>66</sup>. A few days earlier (on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September), a US diplomatic cable mentioned reports of 3,000 Ugandan troops entering the DRC; and in March 2006 there were increasing press reports of Ugandan unilaterally pursuing the LRA in DRC; leading to strong reactions from the Congolese government.<sup>67</sup> The Ugandan kept denying these reports (for example in discussing with Congolese commanders or MONUC).<sup>68</sup>

Yet, this understanding did have an impact. For example, in an interview around the period of the LRA's arrival, Congolese officers argued how Uganda was using this as a pretext to invade the DRC: "They just want to enter and loot our wealth, like they did in the past. LRA is not in Congo"<sup>69</sup>. Also, the Congolese felt uncomfortable with a visit of President Museveni to Kinshasa.<sup>70</sup> In the consequent

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<sup>65</sup> Rory Carroll (2005) Court orders Uganda to pay Congo damages, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2005.

<sup>66</sup> BBC, 'DR Congo militia deadline expires', 30 September 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4296948.stm>

<sup>67</sup> Meece, GDRC terms Ugandan threat to intervene 'unacceptable', 24 March 2006, Kinshasa 488, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA488\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA488_a.html)

<sup>68</sup> Meece, 'LRA update: MONUC mission arrives in Aba, FARDC deployment delayed'. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1567, Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567_a.html)

<sup>69</sup> Allio, Emmy and Els de Temmerman (2006) 'Congo targets UPDF' *New Vision*, 30 May 2006.

<sup>70</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer holds a teleconference with Joseph Kabila on the issue; President Museveni suggests a visit to Kinshasa. The Congolese

weeks, months and years to follow, the actions of the Congolese army and government officials continued to be inspired by this understanding (Titeca and Costeur 2015).

As a result, the Congolese authorities purposefully minimized the LRA threat in order to make sure that the Ugandan army would not enter the DRC, as Uganda had a recent history of engaging in exploitation of Congolese natural resources, and of supporting armed groups in Eastern DRC (Titeca and Costeur 2014). This is a different rationale for minimizing the LRA than creating and/or supporting the movement. Also, whereas the army leadership, and some soldiers, denied the existence of the LRA; many other soldiers did fight against the LRA. Other issues, such as the lack of response by the army, can be explained through institutional problems in the Congolese army, largely engendered through a lack of payment. In other words, while it cannot be doubted that the army, and the authorities', response to the LRA was largely insufficient and even disastrous, this response can be explained through their internal functioning.

## **5. The LRA's stays peaceful.. and starts attacking again**

After the LRA left Aba, they settled in and around Garamba National Park. What do these actions tell us about a potential link with the Congolese government?

### 5.1 The stay in Garamba

During their initial stay in Garamba National Park (October 2005 – mid-2007), the LRA did not harass the population, but – as a civilian for example argued “they didn’t hurt anyone, they greeted politely, they stayed away from the people.”<sup>71</sup> The only manifestation of violence was the abovementioned confrontation with the MONUC Guatemalan special forces<sup>72</sup>, in which 8 Guatemalan soldiers were killed, and 5 injured; and 14 LRA rebels<sup>73</sup> were killed.<sup>74</sup>

The LRA rebels were engaging in agricultural activities and hunting; and there were limited trading relations with the population: the LRA rebels were selling their products on the markets of neighboring villages, and used the profits to buy manufactured products (such as drinks). They were particularly selling poached meat. Civilian traders were supplying goods to the LRA, in return for poached meat or ivory. There were no indications of any interaction with the Congolese government.

*Picture 3: LRA base in Garamba (copyright unknown).*

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do not feel comfortable with this suggestion, but don't reject it Meece, 'LRA update: MONUC mission arrives in Aba, FARDC deployment delayed'. 26 September 2005, Kinshasa 1567, Wikileaks:  
[https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1567_a.html)

<sup>71</sup> Interview civilian Dungu

<sup>72</sup> The Guatemalans were in an intelligence gathering mission for the past two weeks in Garamba, in order to determine the location of LRA soldiers in Garamba park. On the morning of the 23th of January, they encountered an LRA camp near the DRC-Sudan border. The engagement lasted for about four hours. Meece, Eight UN Soldiers, 14 LRA killed in fire fight. 23 January 2016, Kinshasa 105, Wikileaks,  
[https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA105\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA105_a.html)

<sup>73</sup> Meece, Eight UN Soldiers, 14 LRA killed in fire fight. 23 January 2016, Kinshasa 105, Wikileaks,  
[https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA105\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KINSHASA105_a.html)

<sup>74</sup> For MONUC, this was “a serious loss that discouraged MONUC from further operations against the rebel group” (HRW 2009: 17).



What did the LRA combatants themselves think about the interaction with the Congolese authorities? Interviews with a wide number of LRA ex-combatants (who were active in the DRC) were very clear about this: they were in the DRC upon invitation by the Congolese government. Concretely, Vincent Otti - the second in command of the LRA, responsible for bringing the LRA into the DRC – carried a letter to this extent, which circulated within the LRA. Some combatants claimed this letter was from President Joseph Kabila, others claimed how this was an invitation from his father – Kabila senior. Most commonly, it was expressed how Kabila sr. wanted to take revenge towards Museveni for Uganda’s activities in the DRC during the war – and therefore had invited the LRA. Regardless of whether it was true, it was something which circulated strongly within the LRA. And, it also was given as the reason as to why in the first years of their presence, no attacks against civilians took place. In the words of a former LRA-commander: “We were there upon invitation by the government, which is why we came in peace: we didn’t harass the population, but lived there peacefully.”

#### 5.2 The LRA’s actions in response to the ‘betrayal’ of the Congolese government.

Yet, this behavior started to change in late December 2007 – a change which also informs us about the potential link with the Congolese government. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, the LRA did not start attacking the population after Operation Lightning Thunder in December 2008. Instead, it started its attacks about a year earlier, in response to what it saw as betrayal by the Congolese government – something which is discussed in this section.

In mid-2007, border tensions between Uganda and the DRC in Lake Albert threatened to escalate into a full-blown war: four UPDF members were arrested by the FARDC after having been accused of driven their patrol boat in Congolese territory. A week later, a Uganda-registered barge was attacked by the FARDC, again accused of having entered Congolese waters (killing a UK oil worker). In September, skirmishes continued, leading to fatalities on both sides. Under strong international pressure, a Uganda-DRC summit took place in Ngurdoto, Tanzania, leading to the ‘Ngurdoto Agreement’. <sup>75</sup>Apart of establishing a joint border commission, the agreement also dealt with the LRA. As a newspaper report entitled, the agreement stipulated that Congo had to ‘flush out’ the LRA

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<sup>75</sup> Reliefweb, DRC/Uganda: Lake Albert spat imperils wider region, May 29, 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/drcuganda-lake-albert-spat-imperils-wider-region-may-29-2008>

in 90 days<sup>76</sup>. Concretely, an ultimatum was put to the LRA: the agreement called for the “apprehension, disarmament and demobilization of negative forces including the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels” within 90 days.<sup>77</sup> The meeting, witnessed by the Tanzanian President, argued how this should be done through joint military operations – not only between Uganda and the DRC, but also with the UN peacekeeping mission MONUC.<sup>78</sup> In other words, notwithstanding that peace negotiations were ongoing with the LRA in Juba, the military threat became more eminent – not only from Uganda, but also from the DRC. Over the coming months, the military language became more aggressive – particularly from the Ugandan government. In December 2007, Ugandan defence officials argued how in case no peace agreement was reached by late January 2008, a military operation would take place. Uganda’s defence minister, Crispus Kiyonga, argued how military plans were already in place: “The Congolese authorities [have given] us a security plan which they will execute if Kony does not turn up and conclude the talks in Juba (...) The DRC minister and I will meet to look into this plan and agree.”<sup>79</sup>

The Uganda-DRC military rapprochement was not the only relevant politico-military event level during this period: In July 2007, the UN peacekeeping force MONUC created a base in the area, with 200 to 350 peacekeepers. It also rehabilitated Dungu airport in view of an eventual military intervention (Van Puijenbroek and Plooijer 2009: 15). According to a MONUC actor involved in these processes at the time, this was done for DDR exercises, but also to “neutralize the LRA as a political and military force if Juba would collapse”: the idea was to have joint UN-FARDC operations.<sup>80</sup>

Around this time, also within the LRA important changes had taken place. Vincent Otti, the second in command of the rebel group, had been killed by Joseph Kony in October 2007, probably on October the 2<sup>nd</sup>. While a variety of versions circulate as to why this happened, a common theme was the growing distrust of Kony vis-à-vis Otti, and particularly his leading role in the peace negotiations: Kony feared Otti would sign a peace agreement, even without Kony (Schomerus 2012: 178). The killing of Otti meant a severe blow to the Juba peace process – which was still ongoing at this point. It also meant the LRA had less to lose by engaging in violent attacks.

These geopolitical-military manoeuvres, combined with internal dynamics in the LRA, did have an effect: from late 2007, they started attacking the Congolese population again. The LRA explicitly stated the ‘betrayal’ by the Congolese government as a reason for renewed attacks in the DRC. During this period, the LRA was distributing handwritten messages in which they threatened to attack the Congolese population in case they were attacked; and how the DRC was betraying them. And indeed, they started ambushing the population. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2007, a parish in North-Eastern Congo was attacked, in which they threatened the priests and sisters, and looted the parish and health centre. Before leaving, they declared to the priests how

“Since our arrival here in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we have not attacked the Congolese, we have sought to live in peace with them, we are outraged that the Congolese

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<sup>76</sup> Felix Osike (2007), Congo to flush out LRA in 90 days, New Vision, 10 September 2007.

<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1219858/congo-flush-lra-90-days>

<sup>77</sup> Emma Mutaizibwa, ‘LRA under pressure to back peace plan’, IWPR ICC, 20 December 2007.

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/lra-under-pressure-back-peace-plan>

<sup>78</sup> Felix Osike (2007), Congo to flush out LRA in 90 days, New Vision, 10 September 2007.

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<sup>79</sup> Emma Mutaizibwa, ‘LRA under pressure to back peace plan’, IWPR ICC, 20 December 2007.

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/lra-under-pressure-back-peace-plan>

<sup>80</sup> Interview ex-MONUC actor.

government works together with Monuc against us. Even more, the government has installed Monuc in Dungu territory to track us down and arbitrary arrest and recover our officers while we have not yet signed a peace agreement with the Ugandan government. (..) It is this anger which forces us to carry out reprisals against the local population, and this is only the begging, we will come back as long as Monuc seeks to bother us in collaboration with the Congolese government. We ask you to transfer this message fully to the Congolese authorities.” (Diocese du Dungu-Doruma 2007)

In other words, and importantly, the attacks of the LRA didn't start in revenge for Operation Lightning Thunder (as is commonly accepted), but instead in late 2007 in response to a military buildup, and the changing attitude of the DRC government - more attacks followed such as the one just mentioned. Although these attacks were relatively small-scale, they were sending a political message to the population and authorities. Interviews with former LRA-combatants showed how within the LRA, there was a feeling of betrayal by the Congolese government, and how the group changed its attitude towards the local population because of this. Handwritten messages to this extent were distributed to the population, stating how the “DRC is betraying them, and collaborating with Uganda. If they [the LRA, KT] are being attacked, they will also attack the population.”<sup>81</sup> During this period, Kony gave orders to abduct 1,000 new persons (age 25 and below), and acquire new weapons. Targeted attacks against local authorities took also place: in 2008, local authorities were asked to cooperate with MONUC for demobilisation exercises, in order to get LRA fighters out of the bush. In response to this, the LRA started targeted attacks against these local authorities, civilians and priests (HRW 2009: 20).

Moreover, through these attacks, they were exploring the area (mapping the territory and preparing escape plans), and preparing for the incoming war – Operation Lightning Thunder. In doing so, they acquired a knowledge of the area, which neither the UPDF or FARDC had – the Congolese army had been largely absent from the area.

In sum, the above shows how LRA combatants felt that they first were invited by the Congolese authorities, and ultimately betrayed by them – which started a series of attacks. But, does this also mean that this is true? The LRA leadership has a history of projecting narratives upon its combatants which are not necessarily correct (such as for example that those who dared to surrender would be killed by the Ugandan army). Moreover, there is no proof of the Congolese authorities delivering material support to the LRA (other than, as will be discussed below, rogue soldiers selling ammunition to the LRA). The main message of the above is therefore how the ‘Congo invitation’ legitimated the move to the DRC within the LRA. In the next section, the paper further analyses the probability of this narrative, by discussing how the local population perceived the LRA.

## **6. The dog bites, but who is the master: community perceptions of the LRA**

On 14 December 2008, ‘Operation Lightning Thunder’ started, in which the LRA camps in Garamba Park were attacked. As described above, this unleashed large-scale violence of the LRA against the population of Haut Uélé, killing many in late 2008 and 2009.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview ex-LRA rebel; interview international actor, Kinshasa, 12-06-12.

For the population, the LRA was difficult to understand: the group suddenly appeared, without links with the area. After staying peacefully for a few years, it suddenly started attacking the population. Moreover, there was little to no communication with the population, and certainly not about their political goals<sup>82</sup>.

The main feeling was a of lack of understanding, and the feeling that there were more things going on, which it could not all understand – it realized that the actions of the Congolese government, and the presence of the LRA were determined by other factors, which it could not comprehend. Very few people knew the history of the LRA, and no one could understand the (in)action of the Congolese government. A common answer during interviews was for example how “the LRA conflict is very complex, and I can only answer what I know”<sup>83</sup>; “there is a game at a higher level [ongoing] which we cannot understand”<sup>84</sup>, or “the revolt of the LRA is very complex, and I can only talk about what I know”<sup>85</sup>. These statements are reminiscent of Doom and Vlassenroot’s (1999) statement on the perception of the LRA conflict in Northern Uganda, in which the “people at grassroots level can easily identify the dog that bites, but cannot see its master” (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999: 30). In other words, while atrocities took place, they failed to make sense of these. The population therefore consistently looked for clues, which showed only one thing, i.e. that the Congolese government was responsible for the LRA’s actions.

Key was that the population felt neglected by the Congolese government, a feeling which had started from the moment the LRA had entered the DRC. As described above, the population felt they were forced into allowing the LRA to enter, and stay, on their territory. These feelings were further enhanced by suspicions that the Congolese army was supplying food to the LRA after it had entered the country. And indeed, diplomatic cables<sup>86</sup> show how food rations were shared by the Congolese army: they feared not doing so might provoke an attack by the LRA, who claimed to be hungry, and lacked access to food. In other words, although this was done, it was not to ‘support’ the LRA, but to stop them from attacking.

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<sup>82</sup> There were small notes or oral messages, through which they communicated for example “we don’t want you to use pangas’ or guns in the bush”, or “give us food. We don’t want to hurt you, but you have to give us food”. “The population does not have to fear, we are only looking for food. If we kill, this is only because there are military involved.” Interviews civil society actor, Dungu, 04-08-12, 06-08-12.

<sup>83</sup> Interview traditional chief, Dungu, 04-08-12.

<sup>84</sup> *‘il y a un jeu à un niveau supérieure qu’on ne peut pas comprendre’* Interview traditional chief 2, Dungu, 03-08-12.

<sup>85</sup> Interview customary chief, Dungu, 04-08-12.

<sup>86</sup> Concretely, on the 28th of September 2005, the LRA members complain that they are hungry, and ask if the Congolese authorities or MONUC can provide food. MONUC fears to do so, as it might encourage them to stay; the Congolese army fears not doing so might provoke an attack on Aba. Eventually, the supply trucks for FARDC shared their rations with the LRA (in order to encourage them to remain in place, and to avoid predation on the town). This is later denied by the FARDC, after the Ugandans accused them of encouraging the LRA to stay in the DRC. Sources: Meece, LRA Update: troop movement continues, LRA hungry. 29 September 2005, Kinshasa 1613, Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1613\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1613_a.html); Meece, LRA Update: over 300 FARDC in Aba but no mission before weekend. 5 October 2005; Kinshasa 1662, Wikileaks, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1662_a.html); Meece, DRC, Uganda agree to coordinated patrols against LRA elements, 24 October 2005, Kinshasa 1770, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1770\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05KINSHASA1770_a.html)

This was perceived differently by the local population. As one customary chief summarized: “With regards to the presence of the LRA, and the first dangers, the authorities did not do anything! They argued how their actions were a military secret, or they gave a diplomatic answer. The effect was that nothing happened on the ground!”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, many felt the LRA was an actual creation by the national government to punish the population in the affected areas in Haut- and Bas-Uélé. Concretely, the Congolese national authorities have consistently minimized and denied the LRA threat during its presence on Congolese soil. In certain instances, citizens warning army units about LRA attacks have been arrested for spreading false rumors, as these army units denied any presence of the rebel group. In other instances, Congolese soldiers stopped, and forbid, the population from fleeing from the LRA.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, reports emerged of individual soldiers selling ammunition to the LRA (Titeca and Costeur 2015).

In this situation, the population – led by the customary chiefs - started organizing themselves in self-defence groups. In a context in which people felt largely abandoned by the state, and with an absent or ineffective army, they were deemed an important mechanism of protection, which in a number of occasions managed to stop LRA attacks. Ultimately, while the self-defense units proved to be very effective in protecting the LRA, they were considered a political threat by the Congolese government: it was feared that they might turn themselves against the government, or might become militias. In other words, while being effective for human security, they were considered a threat to state security, and declared As a traditional chief – who was largely responsible for organising these groups – argued “the military said I was organising a rebellion!”<sup>89</sup> The leaders and organisers of the self-defence groups – in particularly customary chiefs - had to flee, fearing arrest by the army.

This further enhanced the feeling of abandonment of the population; and that the government was somehow involved with the LRA: “We really don’t understand why the government is doing this. But this means it is involved somehow, and that they have an advantage in the continuation of this rebellion.”<sup>90</sup> In the affected areas, many are convinced that the government has decided to commit a genocide on the Zande – the dominant ethnic group in the area, by using the LRA as its instrument. In other words, the LRA is being supported by the government to exterminate the population.

## **7. Conclusions: ‘the fog of war is thick’**

When discussing the potential links between the LRA and the Congolese authorities, a Kampala-based analyst summarized the situation as “The fog of war is thick, on this one”<sup>91</sup>. In unpacking the various aspects of the LRA conflict, and the role of the Congolese authorities, it indeed can be concluded that there is much fog. Yet, a couple of conclusions can be made, which do shed some light in this fog.

First, the arrival of the LRA in the DRC, and the events which consequently unfolded at various levels were particularly insightful. It was shown how both local authorities, and local & regional representatives of the Congolese army encountered difficulties in pushing back the LRA, and were forced by higher-level authorities to – at least initially – tolerate the LRA’s presence. A Washington-based Ugandan intermediary, Jongomoi Okidi-Olal, played a key-role in this situation. For example,

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<sup>87</sup> Interview traditional chief, Dungu, 04-08-12.

<sup>88</sup> Interview data Haut and Bas Uélé 2011-2016.

<sup>89</sup> Interview traditional chief, Dungu, 04-08-12.

<sup>90</sup> Interview, civil society representative, Dungu, 07 July 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Interview, analyst, Kampala, 03-07-12

Congolese army representatives and other authorities were directed to him by the LRA, and he in turn directed them to Kinshasa officials – confirming the LRA’s authorization to stay in the DRC. By analyzing both the figure of Okidi-Olal and the geopolitical context in which this presumed deal took place, the following observations can be made: on the one hand, the figure of Okidi-Olal is rather controversial. He did gain credibility through his role in the 1996 efforts at peace-negotiations with LRA through the Carter Center. Yet, he also was involved in a number of rather unclear deals – such as a failed uranium deal in Kinshasa. On the other hand, evidence suggests how he had leverage within the US administration, and how the Congolese administration itself is receptive to these kind of deals. The geopolitical context was also pushing for such an agreement: the CPA, strong military pressure, and initial efforts at peace negotiations, meant that the LRA had to look for a (new) safe haven. The available evidence suggests that particularly Riek Machar was pushing for this, and how Jongomoi was used as a ‘foot soldier’ in these negotiations. On the basis of this evidence, it can be suggested that the ‘LRA-Kinshasa’ deal was made between freelancing individuals – Okidi, working for the LRA on the one hand, and a range of Congolese high-level figures on the other hand – rather than between the ‘Congolese government’ and the LRA. The latter point has to be emphasized, as evidence (such as diplomatic cables or interviews with involved international officials) for example suggests how other high-level Kinshasa political figures – such as President Kabila – insisted on take action against the LRA; actions which however largely failed.

Second, the actions of the LRA in the DRC did hold (some) political meaning: it was shown how the group started attacking the Congolese population again in late 2007, because it felt betrayed by the Congolese government. From mid-2007 onwards, the geopolitical context had changed again: after border tensions between Uganda and the DRC, an agreement was signed between the two countries (the Ngurdoto Agreement), which also stipulated that the Congolese government had to take action against the LRA. This, in combination with more aggressive military language from Uganda and rapprochement between Uganda and the DRC, led the LRA to attacking the Congolese population. Does all of this count as hard evidence of a deal between the LRA and Kinshasa? Not necessarily. On the one hand, there indeed was a firm belief among many LRA that they indeed were invited by the Congolese government. Many ex-combatants talked of a letter written by Kabila Sr. to this extent, which Vincent Otti - the LRA commander in charge of bringing the LRA into the DRC – carried around. On the other hand, the LRA is well-versed in projecting particular narratives on its combatants to legitimise its actions, and which are not necessarily true (see e.g. Titeca 2010). In other words, narratives such as these can be used for organisational-military objectives (i.e. to motivate the combatants), and do not necessarily hold factual truth.

Third, there was lack of action by the Congolese authorities, which led many among the affected population to believe that the LRA were indeed used by Kinshasa government. Yet, and as shown elsewhere in more detail (Titeca and Costeur 2015), this (in)action was primarily driven by the animosity and suspicion towards the motives of the Ugandan government, who until recently had been involved in the exploitation of natural resources in Eastern DRC.

In sum, the above shows how the actions of the LRA and the Congolese government have to be understood at a number of levels and time-scales: there indeed is the local level, where the meeting between the LRA and Congolese authorities did raise a number of questions. This meeting in itself was influenced by the broader geopolitical context, in which the LRA was pushed to look for a safe haven, which involved interacting with a variety of actors, e.g. middlemen such as Jongomoi Okidi-Olal. The



ways in which the LRA was acted upon in the DRC was also strongly influenced by the national context, i.e. the way in which the Congolese administration functions, and the broader social contract – as the example of the self-defence groups shows, state security was deemed more important than human security.

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