Following War in Uganda: Lessons from “Kony 2012”

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The release of “Kony 2012” by the organization Invisible Children in February 2012 set off one of the strangest episodes in the recent history of humanitarian aid, foreign policy, and mass communications. *Los Angeles Times* writer Tony Perry summarized the events of last spring and current follow-up plans in an October 2012 article:

First came the sensation: an activist video that captivated tens of millions of viewers in just a few days with its plea for the capture of African warlord Joseph Kony and an end to his mass abductions of children for use as soldiers and sex slaves.

Then came the scandal: the video’s creative director running naked through the streets of San Diego, talking gibberish, all caught on cellphone video by a bystander and splashed onto TMZ.

Six months later, the San Diego-based group Invisible Children is attempting to recapture the lost momentum of the spring with a new video -- explaining the naked escapade and trying to refocus public attention on bringing down the messianic Kony and his Lord’s Resistance Army.

The new 30-minute video, "Move," was posted on YouTube on Sunday night.

Invisible Children plans a Nov. 17 rally in Washington to lobby the White House and leaders in Africa and Europe to redouble efforts to catch Kony, who fled Uganda in 2006 and is believed to be hiding in central Africa.¹

Perry has actually understated the amazingly rapid dissemination of the 30-minute February video. It was uploaded and made available on Youtube on March 4, and within one week, according to a web-tracking news service, it had already been viewed 112 million times, surpassing the record for rapid dissemination.² The follow-up video logged 93 million visitors in its first three weeks on line. “Going viral” has become a media catchphrase, and commentators observe with dismay that the bombing of Syrian cities, country music songs, and clips of

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members of the royal family sunbathing topless have become interchangeable units of internet entertainment, powered by tweets and Facebook “like” ratings into global awareness.

Invisible Children carried its campaign forward in what was projected to be a massive public demonstration in Washington, DC, on Nov. 17, 2012—a gathering of hundreds of thousands of “millenials” who would demonstrate their passion for global justice, it was hoped. Publicity videos posted during the weeks before the event promised a line-up of 25 major entertainers and cultural leaders, along with ten representations of national and international government, as headliners at a massive rally. In the end the event drew only about 12,000 participants, far below the organizers’ predictions and hopes. Speakers at the rally included a handful of celebrities, and the nation of Uganda, the African Union, and the United Nations sent designated representatives. News coverage of the event, thus far, seems to have been limited to videos posted on the Invisible Children site and several articles in campus newspapers. Evidently the attention of 100 million viewers had moved elsewhere.

What this means about changing perceptions of reality, the power of social technology to move public opinion, and citizens’ diminishing attention spans I leave for others to puzzle out. I want to explore what the “Kony 2012” episode tells us about war, and the morality of war, in the 21st century.

In this essay I will begin by setting the background for “Kony 2012” in recent Ugandan history, then pose some questions about the lessons that can be drawn about the nature of war in the 21st century and the moral framework within which we assess its practices.

What was the LRA conflict and how did it arise?

To understand the roots of the northern Uganda conflict that is highlighted in the recent video we need to delve briefly into colonial and post-colonial history. The region of East Africa now known as Uganda has been a contested zone for several centuries. Conflicts arose from the exploitation of its people and resources by outsiders, including Arab slave traders as well as European explorers, and from internal ethnic and political divisions as well. The people of northern Uganda are predominantly Nilotic, members of the Luo ethnic and linguistic group, and they have often felt that they were surrounded by unfriendly neighbors. The Bantu kingdoms to the south, such as the Buganda and Bunyoro, and the Sudanese to the north, the source of Nubian soldiers who accompanied Arab ivory and slave traders, used the people and the resources of northern Uganda for their own purposes. (Angucia, 2010, pp. 1-4)

Uganda was a British protectorate, not a colony like its neighbor Kenya, from 1894 until its independence in 1962, and Britain’s “indirect rule” was administered with the help of compliant traditional authorities. Traders and missionaries came to British East Africa from South Asia and Europe, respectively, but there were very few European settlers. The British found the Buganda royal family of central Uganda more amenable to their interests than their rivals the
Bunyoro, and they deputized southern Ugandans to keep order and block German colonial ambitions in the accessible north. Northerners from the Acholi and West Nile regions enlisted in large numbers in British military units, however, and many served in the Asian theater with the King’s African Rifles in the Second World War.

Rivalries and resentments from the time of the protectorate and from earlier regional conflicts fueled later political divisions and created the conditions for one of the most brutal periods of post-colonial independent rule in all of 20th-century Africa. The transformation of Idi Amin Dada from eccentric but respected military commander – early British diplomatic cables welcomed his ouster of the Obote government – to brutal dictator is a story widely known in the West, thanks in part to a popular book and film. (Foden, 1999) (MacDonald, 2006) Less known are the periods of turmoil and repression that preceded and followed his regime. The Ugandan Bush War of 1981-86 began with Amin’s overthrow by former president Milton Obote, and many observers rank the second Obote administration as even more cruel and corrupt than Amin’s. Obote was ousted in turn by Tito Okello, a development that was welcomed by Ugandans and by most international observers, but fighting continued. The Ugandan People’s Democratic Army tried to keep rebellion in the south in check, but it was a poorly disciplined and ineffective force. (Dowden, 2008, pp. 11-50)

Okello’s government was driven from power by the National Resistance Army (NRA) under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni in 1986. Former presidents Obote and Amin had been northerners, their ascent to power facilitated by large numbers of soldiers from the Acholi, Karamoja, and West Nile Districts. Museveni’s home was in southwest Uganda, in the Rwenzori region near the Rwandan border, and the NRA victory represented a triumph of southern over northern Ugandan interests. Northerners recount many stories of atrocities committed by NRA forces against both soldiers and civilians of the north. Moreover, United Nations reports have confirmed that the first abductions of children to serve as soldiers were carried out by NRA forces during the bush war. (Angucia, 2010, pp. 14-17)

Museveni continues to serve as president in 2012, having persuaded Parliament to amend the constitution in order to remove limits on his term. In contrast to the pervasive corruption of Kenya’s three presidents and the virtual collapse of effective government in neighboring countries to the west, Museveni’s administration is given credit by many Ugandan and international observers for facilitating steady economic growth and improving national infrastructure. Yet transparency and accountability are in short supply, and a president who came to power at the head of a rebel army, then won strong electoral support, has long outlived his mandate but refuses to step aside. Political opposition is more vigorous and more open than in many African countries. Opponents of the regime experience harassment and sometimes arrest, but not the mass killings of the Amin and Obote years. Uganda’s government can be considered effective by some measures, but its light shines moderately brightly only because so many of its neighbors have effectively snuffed theirs out through autocracy and repression.
Residents of the Acholi region of northern Uganda feel they have received short rations from post-1962 governments, as from the British authorities. Their dissatisfaction has fueled not just political opposition but also armed insurrection, motivated by a blend of political, ethnic and religious factors. Alice Lakwena formed the Holy Spirit Army in the mid-1980’s as a religiously motivated military force, and for a time portions of Okello’s Uganda People’s Democratic Army transferred their allegiance from their newly deposed government to her. She called for the overthrow of the Museveni government, claiming that Jesus Christ had appointed her to usher in his millennial reign. Her soldiers were smeared with shea butter and ochre before battle, supposedly rendering them immune from injury. They were taught that they must not aim their own rifles at the enemy but simply fire them into the air, because spirits would take control of their bullets and direct them to those who deserve to die. A series of highly unequal battles led to a crushing defeat by the National Resistance Army in 1987. The Holy Spirit Army disbanded, and its prophetess-general fled to Kenya. (Behrend, 1999) (Eichstaedt, 2009)

In the same year a young Acholi man named Joseph Kony followed Lakwena’s example by forming his own religious army, initially called the United Holy Salvation Army, later renamed the Lord’s Resistance Army. For a time he helped to disarm other military forces still fighting rearguard actions against the Museveni government, while proclaiming that God had appointed him to reform Ugandan society and restore respect for the Ten Commandments. His soldiers seized cattle and crops from northern villages, but as they did so they claimed to be seeking better living conditions, expanded health care, and an end to historic discrimination against the north. The LRA enjoyed some popular support in this period, particularly in response to the Museveni’s indiscriminate attacks against anyone suspected of being an LRA supporter. Government soldiers recently returned from service in the Congo continued the practices of plunder, rape, and torture that had become commonplace in that theater. Kony’s claim that he was protecting the Acholi people against the national government’s agents had a measure of plausibility. (Van Acker, 2004)

Within a few years, however, Kony began a campaign that was to last for a quarter-century: capturing young boys for training as soldiers, seizing young girls and keeping them captive as companions for LRA officers, and terrorizing the entire Acholi region through wave after wave of brutal attacks. Village residents who were not kidnapped or killed were savagely assaulted, their faces and limbs hacked by machetes. From the late 1980’s until the early 2000’s, LRA violence dominated the lives of large regions of northern Uganda.

In its the first decade, the LRA abducted village residents only for short periods, in the context of appropriating cattle and grain. But heightened conflict in the region in the early 1990’s, during which government troops committed many atrocities in its campaign against the LRA and its South Sudanese allies, gave rise to a mistaken perception on the part of LRA leaders that Acholi villagers were lending assistance to government soldiers. LRA violence expanded into a strategy of mass kidnapping and killing. Government attempts to defeat LRA forces and capture Kony
failed repeatedly, but the toll on the local population was heavy. Agricultural production dwindled because farmers feared to go out into their fields. Schools closed, trade came to a virtual halt, and the entire Acholi region lived in an atmosphere of fear. By the late 1990’s, virtually the entire population of the region, some 1.7 million people, had abandoned their villages and moved to camps for internally displaced persons.

Nearly every family suffered losses to kidnapping, rape, murder, and mutilation. For protection, young boys and girls began walking into the larger towns of the region each evening, sometimes covering ten miles or more from their home villages and later from the IDP camps, sleeping on the porches and in the grounds of churches and schools. This phenomenon caught the attention of media, initially in Uganda and then more widely, and it elicited a remarkable response from bishops, pastors, school headmasters, and other community leaders, who began laying out their own sleeping mats each night alongside the children. Yet the LRA continued to operate freely, and government troops were unable to wrest control of the Acholi region. Regions such as the West Nile and Karamoja districts, not directly under LRA control, suffered nearly as dire effects when essential transport routes passing through the Acholi region became too dangerous to use.

The civil war in northern Uganda took on greater international importance after the LRA was declared a terrorist organization in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States. In 2002 Uganda and Sudan launched “Operation Iron Fist,” a major military campaign to defeat the LRA and dislodge its leaders from the camps where they were now headquartered in southern Sudan. Several hundred were killed, including many abducted soldiers that the campaign sought to set free, but as a military operation the effort was a failure. LRA leaders remained at large, and attacks inside Uganda accelerated, driving nearly the entire population of the Acholi region to seek refuge in camps for internally displaced persons. These provided much-needed protection, and abductions were less numerous than when the population was dispersed in unguarded villages. But with no land to till and no work to do, Acholi families had little to do but collect the meager food rations that arrived in UN trucks—if they had not been stolen on the way. Health conditions in the camps were very poor, and death rates from malaria and AIDS were alarmingly high. When the LRA attacked the camps, poorly armed and undisciplined government troops were often unable to turn them back.

Yet this very period, the early 2000’s, was a time when Museveni’s Uganda was widely viewed as an island of peace and order in a tumultuous continent. Andrew Rice, author of an important account of the northern war and its aftermath, has written:

By the time I went to live there in 2002 . . . Uganda was known the world over as a rare African success story. Most of the country was at peace, though a couple of low-intensity rebellions flickered in the distant north. The economy was thriving, engorged by massive amounts of foreign aid. Museveni was hailed as one of a “new breed” of
African presidents, a rebel leader who’d reputedly turned into a benevolent autocrat, wise, witty, and tolerant of dissent. (Rice, 2009, p. 9)

**Was the LRA conflict a war?**

If war is an organized and sustained use of military force to achieve territorial or political objectives, then the conflict between LRA and government forces from 1986 through the first decade of the 21st century was indeed a war. The objective of the LRA was to attain control over the Acholi region of northern Uganda. Although Joseph Kony and others who occasionally issue statements of LRA goals continue to employ the rhetoric of a campaign for moral reform and holiness, its military and terrorist actions have never reflected this in any discernible fashion. The LRA conflict was a war for control. Its instigators succeeded in taking nearly complete control from the Kampala government for more than two decades.

The means employed by the LRA were means of warfare at its most brutal. Kidnapping, rape and bodily mutilation were the principal elements in LRA strategy. Direct confrontation between opposing forces in the field was very infrequent. When the Ugandan army and its allies initiated direct attacks on LRA strongholds, LRA units and their leaders would go into hiding for a week or two until the soldiers gave up the search. A summary of the Iron Fist initiative is instructive:

President Museveni himself has directed some of the Iron Fist campaign from a base in the north. With US logistical support, an estimated 10,000 Ugandan troops have been involved. LRA bases in Sudan have been destroyed and hundreds of people killed. Understandably, the Ugandan government has called those who died “rebels” but it is clear that many have been abducted people, including children. Kony and almost all his senior commanders, however, evaded capture. Some retreated deeper into Sudan while others divided into small units and moved south of the border. As fast as abducted people died or were captured/freed, more were taken. (Allen, 2006, p. 51)

War is normally waged over competing priorities. War comes to an end, whether in conquest and defeat or in a negotiated settlement, when each side reaches the conclusion that continuing the conflict is not worth the anticipated benefits of doing so. But the LRA had no declared or discernible objectives except domination. It inflicted daytime and nighttime raids on villages in order to feed and populate its army and to prey on local women. Senseless brutality was employed to keep the population in fear and suppress any impulse to fight back or to cooperate with the Ugandan government. Children in some villages were given the choice between killing their parents and being killed in front of their parents. This war of the late 20th and early 21st century was a modern war in some respects, with automatic rifles as well as machetes as favored weapons, and a no-holds-barred brawl in other ways. It was a war that followed no rules, respected no limits, and seems to have derived its sustaining force from nothing more than a
leader’s hatred of his perceived enemies in the Ugandan government and his lieutenants’ loyalty to their depraved leader. (Eichstaedt, 2009).

**Has the northern Uganda civil war ended?**

In the aftermath of the Iron Fist military initiative, LRA leadership crossed into the Garamba Forest region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yet attacks continued in northern Uganda, and most residents remained in conditions of poverty and squalor in IDP camps. International pressure for an end to the civil war mounted, and in 2006 the governments of Uganda and Sudan, assisted by the religious community of Sant’Egidio, persuaded an LRA delegation to participate in negotiations at Juba in what is now Southern Sudan. The talks continued for two years, with several ceasefire agreements announced but quickly violated by renewed LRA attacks. Several times Joseph Kony announced that he would travel to Juba to sign final terms, under a special grant of immunity from prosecution by international courts, but each time he failed to appear. The peace talks collapsed in 2008 without a ceasefire agreement.

Despite the lack of any formal resolution of the conflict, during this period LRA operations in northern Uganda became less and less frequent. By the late 2000’s many of the residents of the Acholi region had returned to their home villages and resumed their traditional work of growing crops and raising livestock. The population of IDP camps declined rapidly, and in 2010 and 2011 most of the camps closed. It was reported that, even after organized LRA violence had ceased, gangs of armed men held up travelers on the roads, particularly at night; but greater stability and security were eventually restored. By the time I traveled with a group of US college students to the Acholi and West Nile regions of Uganda in January 2012, travel on all of the roads in the region was safe, for visitors as well as residents. The signs of a quarter-century of war were evident in neglected fields, destroyed homes, ruined churches, and missing limbs, but village residents no longer needed to seek refuge from nightly attacks.

And yet the brutal conflict that subjected these regions of Uganda to two decades of terror has not ended. Joseph Kony and other leaders of the LRA movement did not surrender to Ugandan government forces or return to civilian life, even when most of their conscripted soldiers and abducted women did so. Instead they continue to operate in South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Congo. It is in these regions that Invisible Children has undertaken to track their continued activity of kidnapping children and attacking villages, using newly available cell phone networks as a means of communication. About 2,000 soldiers from the African Union, advised and assisted by 100 Special Forces personnel from the United States to Uganda for regional deployment, are currently involved in military operations in the Congo, seeking to locate and disarm LRA units—with very little success thus far. “Kony 2012” calls on the Ugandan national army to assist in these efforts, but this is not possible: Ugandan army troops
are banned from operations in the Congo as a result of their own rampant misconduct in the past. Kony has reportedly spent several years in hiding remote forested areas of Uganda’s neighbors.  

Sporadic violence of the worst sort continues—kidnapping, rape, and mutilation—in remote areas of the Congo. It is this continuing conflict that captured the passion of Invisible Children founder Jason Russell and induced him to create the famous video. On a succession of well-designed and visually arresting maps and graphics, the Invisible Children website now tracks incidents indicating continued LRA activity and locates them on a map. Nearly all have taken place along a band stretching from 200 to 500 kilometers west of the point where the borders of Uganda, South Sudan, and the Congo meet. Some are minor: “Four suspected LRA forces were seen attempting to steal sugar cane from a field.” Others recall, on a smaller scale, the worst abuses of LRA rule in Uganda: “LRA forces released 9 of the 10 people they had abducted; the 10th person was killed.” As of October 22, 2012, Invisible Children reports 47 civilian deaths and 409 abductions in 2012. In total, since the organization began monitoring the region in 2009, 1172 civilian deaths and 2871 abductions have been reported.  

Civil war in Uganda has at last come to an end. But the war of the LRA against its enemies continues. This is the message that Invisible Children seeks to disseminate through its videos, publications, and web resources. The campaign against the LRA is a struggle to end a protracted and brutal war. But it is a war that escapes all the usual categories by which we have learned to assess the morality of war. 

**The rules of war and the northern Uganda war**

By the widely accepted rules of morality in the initiation and conduct of war, the civil war waged by the LRA was flagrantly unjust in its conduct, even if not wholly unjust in its cause. Longstanding subjugation of the Luo ethnic groups of northern Uganda by Arab slave traders, Nubian soldiers, and British vice-regents fueled the resentment of residents of the northern districts. Military misconduct and excessive violence by Museveni’s army before and after his accession to power were an important factor in the rise of the LRA, which initially claimed to be seeking a fairer distribution of government services. But its tactics from the beginning violated all the established rules for just conduct of war. Where the rules of war demand that civilians be spared direct harm, LRA forces targeted civilians for abduction, rape, mutilation, and killing. The rules of war require that prisoners taken in a legitimate military encounter be detained in humane conditions until their release can be negotiated, but the LRA pressed its captives into military service and killed any who refused to cooperate. 

Use of children as soldiers is a tactic seldom specifically mentioned or proscribed by theorists of just war, but it is a particularly egregious violation of the principle that noncombatants must not

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4 [www.lracrisistracker.com](http://www.lracrisistracker.com) consulted 10/22/2012
be directly harmed. When it occurs, as in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980’s, it draws harsh international condemnation. In Uganda this moral threshold was first breached by Ugandan government forces, for a brief period during the bush war of the 1980’s, and its violation became, and continues to be, a routine practice for the LRA. Observers estimate that approximately 30,000 children were kidnapped and pressed into service as soldiers during the twenty years that LRA raids occurred. An additional requirement of justified warfare, as it is understood by leading ethicists and applied by international authorities, is the limitation of means of war in proportion to the ends sought and the readiness to conclude the conflict through negotiation when possible. The LRA has repeatedly and flagrantly violated these two requirements. (Johnson, 1999)

There is an institution whose responsibility includes the enforcement of the rules of war, and it has announced its intent to bring Kony and his associates to justice. This is the International Criminal Court, where charges were lodged against the LRA and its leaders by the Ugandan government in 2004. The charges against Joseph Kony fall into two categories:

“Twelve counts of crimes against humanity (murder - article 7(1)(a); enslavement - article 7(1)(c); sexual enslavement – article 7(1)(g); rape - article 7(1)(g); inhumane acts of inflicting serious bodily injury and suffering - article 7(1)(k)); and,

“Twenty-one counts of war crimes (murder - article 8(2)(c)(i); cruel treatment of civilians – article 8(2)(c)(i); intentionally directing an attack against a civilian population – article 8(2)(e)(i); pillaging - article 8(2) (e)(v); inducing rape – article 8(2)(e)(vi); forced enlistment of children - 8(2)(e)(vii)).”

Similar charges have been entered against three other LRA leaders. (A fourth was indicted in 2004 but died in 2006.) These cases are “currently being heard before pre-trial Chamber II,” according to the ICC website. But all four of those indicted are still at large, and there is little likelihood of their apprehension. The criminal case lodged at the ICC is a clear and authoritative summary of the gross violation of the rules of war that characterized the civil war in northern Uganda. But the ICC is powerless to put an end to the continuing violence inflicted by LRA remnants in Sudan and the Congo, and it cannot even require the apprehension of those under indictment but must depend on the voluntary cooperation of police or military authorities in the region.

The civil war initiated by the LRA in northern Uganda was by anyone’s reckoning a grossly unjust war, and the tactics employed repeatedly and systematically violated all the major requirements of just military conduct. Military action to defeat the LRA and release the residents of the Acholi region from its control failed repeatedly. International pressure succeeded in relocating the conflict and reducing its scale: from tens of thousands of abductees to a few

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5 [http://www.icc-cpi.int/Menus/ICC/Situations+and+Cases/, consulted 10/22/2012; details of indictment are under “Situation in Uganda”](http://www.icc-cpi.int/Menus/ICC/Situations+and+Cases/)
hundred, from entire regions under attack to isolated villages. But the military actions also led
the LRA to relocate to a region where there is no effective national government and little
possibility of coordinated action to defeat it. Condemnation by an international court in the
Hague seems an empty gesture when there are no mechanisms in place to bring the accused
before the court. It is just this circumstance, where forthright condemnation by international
authorities has led to no effective action and no measures likely to stop the continuing violence
are in place, that has motivated Jason Russell and the supporters of Invisible Children to try a
fundamentally different mode of stopping a continuing and flagrantly unjust war.

Invisible Children and the new rules of war
The video that achieved worldwide circulation so quickly early in 2012 has been criticized on
several counts. Its account of Ugandan history and politics is simplistic, and it gives more
emphasis to the small-scale violence that continues to this day in the Congo than to the two and a
half decades of suffering endured by Ugandans. There is no mention of the abuses committed by
Ugandan army forces or of the devastating wars that have raged in Congo since the 1990’s,
which according to authoritative international sources caused as many as five million deaths
from violence and starvation. The solution to the continuing threat of LRA violence, Invisible
Children insists, lies in more effective military intervention.

The video offers little historical or political analysis but a generous measure of emotional appeal,
and some see in it a neo-colonial attitude of condescension toward ignorant rural Africans who
wait helplessly to be rescued by young white humanitarians. Later videos released by the
organization, including the one mentioned above that sought to enlist participants in a November
2012 demonstration in Washington, D. C., have addressed some of these criticisms. Later videos
and statements on the website also emphasize the efforts of Invisible Children to build long-term
infrastructure even while mobilizing support for a campaign against the LRA. But the later
videos remain quirky, emotional, and very personal.

The weaknesses and omissions of the Invisible Children videos are of limited relevance,
however, to our topic in this discussion: what we can learn from this episode about war in the
21st century and how we can assess it from the standpoint of international morality. I will
suggest six lessons that we can draw from the northern Uganda civil war and the Invisible
Children campaign to root out its instigators.

Lesson One: Armies are ineffective against ideological movements but effective in
promoting and protecting illegal trade

Twenty years of military initiatives by the Ugandan government in its northern districts not only
failed to defeat or disarm the LRA; worse than that, they served to inflame hostility and increase
the level of abduction, murder and mutilation. The Ugandan national army—Museveni’s
National Resistance Army, later renamed the Ugandan National Defense Force—conducted itself
with such indiscriminate brutality against the LRA that many northerners believe its leaders
should also have been indicted for war crimes in the Hague. Its efforts to root out the rebel forces only drove them deeper into hiding and increased the suffering of Acholi civilians. But even the best-trained and best-equipped military force would have found it very difficult to pin down an irregular force willing to slip into hiding in neighboring countries when attacked, then send forces back across the border to abduct and terrorize civilians as soon as the troops withdrew.

The civil war in Uganda, beginning in the 20th and continuing in the 21st century, exhibits features that are characteristic of many of the most damaging and long-lasting wars now raging around the globe. Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan travel freely from one country to the other when conditions become difficult for them. The outbreak of civil war, or the threat of its outbreak, in several countries of North Africa has been fueled by an influx of irregular soldiers from neighboring countries: from Mali and Chad to Libya, from Sudan to Egypt, from Algeria to Tunisia. Borders are porous, and conflicts give them little respect. In this regard the Invisible Children’s campaign calls attention to an important new truth about warfare: in the 21st century fewer wars than ever before are either waged between nations or wholly contained within nations. The world has seen ever more frequent and more destructive wars, even as fewer and fewer of those who wield the weapons of war wear the uniforms of national government or conduct their campaigns by conventional military means.

Perhaps the most dangerous falsehood that is put forward by Invisible Children in its video campaign is the claim that better-coordinated military efforts by regional armies, with weapons and technical assistance from the United States, could quickly destroy the remnants of the LRA movement once and for all. The military forces now on the ground in Uganda and in its neighbors have launched campaign after campaign, at great expense in funds and in disruption of the social fabric of the region, but they are no closer to apprehending Kony than they were in previous campaigns inside Uganda or in the Sudan.

But these armies have achieved remarkable successes in another activity: securing enormous profits for those who exploit the region’s rich mineral resources illegally, taking advantage of weak governments and porous borders. It is estimated that Ugandan gold exports exceed its gold production, for example, by a factor of 1000 to one. East African mines are a major global source of Coltan, a rare mineral used in electronic devices such as cell phones, which appears mysteriously on world markets in quantities vastly exceeding officially reported production, while the spending capacity of police and army officers vastly exceeds, for equally mysterious means, their government salary. Ivory poachers operate freely in and around national parks in Congo, with the apparent cooperation of military officers.6

Calling on national and international authorities to bring about the conclusive defeat of the LRA by heightened and coordinated military action is no more than a fantasy – a highly dangerous and

destructive fantasy. Worse yet, the international publicity campaign in support of greater military presence provides a convenient cover story for black-market profiteers wearing uniforms. Even the best-disciplined army in a well-governed state would have enormous difficulty achieving victory over a force as irregular and unconventional as the LRA. In the circumstances of present-day East Africa, more troops will only mean an even higher degree of chaos and and exploitation.

Lesson Two: International adjudicatory agencies have extensive rhetorical but little practical power to end unjust wars

The indictments in the Hague symbolized the world’s unanimous and unqualified condemnation of LRA tactics in the Ugandan civil war, confirming the judgment of the Kampala government that requested their issuance in 2004. But they brought no discernible change in the conduct of the war. LRA forces continued to terrorize northern Uganda for several years more. There is no effective international police organization able to serve notice to those indicted and bring them to trial. No multilateral military force has been dispatched to the Congo to capture Joseph Kony or his associates. If local police and military wish to implement the indictments handed down in the Hague, they are free to do so, and indeed this is what has brought several indicted war criminals from the former Yugoslavia to the Netherlands to stand trial. If they prefer to stand aside and do nothing, whether for lack of sufficient intelligence or personnel or simply because someone slips large bills into the pockets of their uniforms if they turn a blind eye, they are free to do that too. The Pope has no divisions, Stalin is reported to have observed; correspondingly, international condemnation has no enforcement agents and no handcuffs.

Even when a defendant is handed over for trial, the wheels of justice grind exceedingly slowly. Since the International Criminal Court was established in 2002, it has issued 22 indictments and arrived at just one conviction. Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga, indicted in 2006 for abduction of child soldiers and other war crimes, was brought before the court in 2009. Three years passed before his conviction and a 14-year sentence were handed down in March 2012. International courts have an essential role in articulating and disseminating the rules of war and the moral demands on national leaders, but the threat of arrest and conviction is so remote that it has little deterrent effect on war criminals such as Joseph Kony.

“Kony 2012” gives the impression that the International Criminal Court’s accusations would long ago have led to the capture and trial of Joseph Kony if only his crimes had been widely known. Hence Invisible Children’s arresting slogan in calling for mass rallies and demonstrations: “Make Joseph Kony famous.” In its videos, the founders of the organization express their hope that someday everyone in every nation of the world will recognize Kony’s face and know of his crimes, and then he will be unable to hide from justice. But this is only wishful thinking. Notoriety does not translate into vulnerability to arrest or capture. Perhaps a global movement to publicize and condemn Kony’s crimes would compel foreign governments to dispatch more troops to the region, but there is no reason to expect that they would succeed in
breaking the pattern of corruption and exploitation, or in smoking Kony and his commanders out of their hiding places. The rebel conquest of the city of Goma in eastern Congo in November 2012, followed by ceasefires made and broken, promises of withdrawal made and violated, and evidence of Rwandan complicity, provided another window into the ways in which ethnicity, economics, and politics are intertwined in east Africa, with ordinary citizens repeatedly caught and crushed between opposing forces.\(^7\)

Many northern Ugandans regard the action of the International Criminal Court as an illustration of the blindness and partiality of Western powers in the African context. Their family members suffered nearly as much from the cruelty of Ugandan government forces as from the LRA raids, after all; but no indictments have been issued either domestically or internationally against the officers of the Museveni forces in the 1980’s or the Ugandan national army in the conflicts of the 2000’s. Invisible Children exhibits the same partiality and insensitivity, making no mention of the atrocities committed by the opponents of the LRA. And such partiality may be built into the very nature of the International Criminal Court: as a joint creation of the member nations of the United Nations (with the conspicuous exception of the United States), it is far more likely to investigate and publicize the misconduct of anti-government forces than of those operating under government authority. A recent exception, indeed, may prove the rule: the 2008 indictment of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir for genocide and crimes against humanity was the first accusation of a sitting head of state, and its target was already an international pariah with few friends or defenders.\(^8\) While the ICC continues its vital work of uncovering flagrant misconduct by state and nonstate actors around the globe, one cannot help but wonder whether its actions are influenced to some degree by the cynical version of the Golden Rule: those who have the gold make the rules.

**Lesson Three: War thrives where international media do not penetrate**

War thrives where government is weak—this truth is so obvious it hardly need be stated. Violence often fills the vacuum when the rule of law no longer obtains and central governments cede control to local warlords and private armies. The LRA conflict brings home a related lesson: war thrives today in regions of media darkness. When the civil order breaks down in full view of international journalists and Western expatriates, corrective and preventive measures are likely to be attempted without delay. When no one carries reports of the breakdown to the outside world, and few besides residents of the region are affected, forceful action is far less likely to ensue. To paraphrase the classic philosophical conundrum: if a government falls in the depth of the forest, and only forest-dwellers are destroyed in its collapse, will the sound of distress be audible to the outside world? Probably not.


The risks to journalists traveling in the north of Uganda during LRA dominance were so grave that few ventured into the Acholi region. The West Nile region to its west, not directly involved in the conflict, was virtually cut off from all trade and travel because the transit through the Acholi region from central Uganda was too dangerous for either public or private transport to attempt, while its other neighbors, Congo and Sudan, were mired in conflict at the same time. Few international news agencies regarded the region as important enough to warrant extensive efforts to obtain information through other sources. Even national media in Uganda gave the conflict very little attention, not only because networks of communication had been disrupted but also because it served the interests of the Museveni government to keep the conflict out of public sight. The result was a quarter-century reign of terror, little known even to Ugandans and other East Africans and virtually unremarked by the rest of the world.

Invisible Children has taken up the task of bringing the last stages of this civil war to worldwide attention—too late to be of benefit to tens of thousands abducted or kidnapped since 1986, yet in time to assure the survivors and returnees that their stories are now being heard. Exposure of brutal repression is an important step toward its defeat and its future recurrence. Just why it has selected the campaign against Kony’s few remaining forces as the most important global campaign for justice is difficult to understand, however. Its videos scarcely mention the decades of suffering and tens of thousands of abductions inflicted by the LRA while it held control of northern Uganda, focusing instead on isolated incidents and small-scale raids in Congo and Central African Republic. The shadow of the first and second Congo Wars waged in the 1990’s, which caused the death of five million with virtually no attention from international media and NGO’s, is hardly acknowledged. We should not fault the organization for its persistent efforts to bring international attention to festering conflict in East Africa, but those long involved in the region, like its residents, are frustrated by the narrowness of its focus. A broader campaign exposing the numerous recent conflicts of East Africa, and narrating their roots in colonial and post-colonial political and economic structures that continue to favor the interests of the wealthy and powerful over those of the poor and marginalized, would be a catalyst for more effective and more lasting change.

Lesson four: **Global media networks are highly effective in mobilizing opposition to unjust wars—for a short time.**

This is the new reality that “Kony 2012” both exemplified and helped to create. Thousands of non-profit organizations publish and distribute materials on the destructive effects of war and conflict and seek to shape popular opinion and influence global leaders. Their publications and email updates reach large audiences. The US branch of Amnesty International, the most widely recognized human rights advocacy organizations, has about 250,000 members in 2012, for example. Within a few weeks’ time, by way of contrast, the Kony video was viewed more than 100 million times. Suppose that half of these were repeated viewings; this would still mean that a single video reached 200 times as many people as a newsletter or email sent to every current Amnesty USA member.
Global electronic media may create awareness that is widespread but ephemeral, however. In March 2012 it was difficult to open a newspaper or look at an on-line news site without encountering some coverage of the Ugandan conflict, thanks to the dissemination of Invisible Children’s video. But by April and May the news stories had slowed to a small trickle. Invisible Children released its October 2012 video in hopes of rekindling interest in its “Move DC” mass rally on November 17. The organization’s website invites a comparison of this effort with past mass marches for civil rights and against apartheid. But turnout was far below expectations, as has been noted. Estimated crowds for the March 2010 rally for immigration reform – and also for the October 2010 “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” staged by Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart – were twenty times larger.9

Invisible Children identifies its goals under four headings: “Media, Mobilization, Protection, and Recovery.” Without question it has uncovered, and advanced, the potential of interactive media to facilitate mobilization. Books, articles, television broadcasts, direct mail campaigns, and personal communication cannot begin to reach as many people with a message of opposition to an unjust war as can an on-line video that catches fire with audiences across the country and around the world. What has not been demonstrated yet is whether it is possible to use on-line video and social media to translate concern into effective action.

Invisible Children has been highly effective at fundraising, and it disburses substantial sums to African partners to improve education and sanitation as well as security in rural East Africa. But if we take participation in a long-anticipated mass rally as an initial sign of active engagement in the effort to put an end to a brutal military campaign, the results must be judged a failure. The world’s fastest-growing internet video audience – a virtual crowd of more than a hundred million – descended on Washington in numbers that would have filled only an eighth of the seats at the Redskins’ FedEx Field.

**Lesson five: Emotional appeals and personal stories are more effective than principled arguments.**

Mindful of the print campaigns of many international child welfare agencies, we may call this the “look at my face or just turn the page” appeal. The power of the “Kony 2012” video arose from heartrending stories narrated by Ugandan boys, who had watched siblings killed before their eyes and had been forced to participate in unspeakable atrocities. Moreover, the video’s appeal gained effectiveness from the persona of its narrators: they were not suave and invisible voice-over authorities but a small crew of young men in T-shirts and blue jeans, recounting their personal encounters with the victims of the Uganda war. Their awkwardness and informality enhanced the sense of genuine passion and engagement that attracted so many viewers.

I make this observation not to discount the seriousness of the organization’s efforts against continuing LRA violence but simply to call attention to the way in which emerging

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communication media call for different means of conveying information. Every nonprofit advancing the cause of human rights understands this lesson. In an Amnesty International newsletter, personal stories appear alongside fact sheets. In a newspaper editorial decrying Syrian attacks on civilians, victim’s voices give weight and specificity to journalists’ tallies of recent bombing raids. Popular opinion writers on global economic and social issues, such as the New York Times’s Nicholas Kristof, know how to convey the realities of poverty and exploitation by telling the stories of individuals they meet. In electronic media such as on-line video, this balance is tipped even farther toward the personal. An article in Foreign Policy and a Congressional hearing may each contribute something important to the discussion of atrocities committed in war, but the global reach of popular interactive media enable a few impassioned young people to have immeasurably greater impact on world opinion.

Lesson six: Moral unanimity is sometimes powerless to motivate effective action

From the early 1990s, when the LRA launched its campaign of exploitation and terror on the people of northern Uganda, down to the present, its military campaign has been unequivocally condemned by the Ugandan government, the governments of neighboring countries (except when the LRA was allied, briefly, with the Sudanese government against the Museveni regime), and international authorities. Relatively few first-hand reports appeared in international media, to be sure, but church groups and NGO’s documented the cruelty of LRA tactics. Seldom has any side in any modern war been so roundly condemned by all observers, on the grounds that it flouted the rules of war and inflicted needless and unjustified suffering on the entire population of a region.

What punitive or corrective action resulted from this global consensus? The answer is: for the most part, none whatever. The Ugandan military periodically launched campaigns in the north, but they were marred by grave misconduct and achieved little. Regional and international agencies took no action to support or sustain Uganda’s efforts. Not until the war had raged for more than twenty years were serious efforts made to negotiate its cessation. The civil war came to an end in Ugandan territory shortly thereafter, and the restoration of government control to northern Uganda made it more difficult for the LRA to continue to operate there. But its leaders simply downsized their forces, permitting most conscripted soldiers to return home, and then moved their base of operations to more inaccessible locations in neighboring countries.

The system of international law is built on the assumption that the moral force of world opinion will serve as a powerful deterrent to violence and an effective means of bringing unjust wars to an end. The example of the Ugandan civil war shows vividly that this assumption is unwarranted.

One of the factors that may have inhibited effective action to stop LRA atrocities was the immunity to any moral appeal that comes with an utter refusal to calculate means and ends in a rational way. Joseph Kony claimed initially to be seeking a religious and moral revival, and he
and his representatives have invoked the language of holiness and obedience in occasional public statements. At times LRA campaigns were directed at Museveni government forces in retaliation for their excesses and brutalities. But for most of its duration the purpose of the LRA war seems to have been nothing more than preservation of Kony’s power to terrorize and dominate. The leaders of most civil wars have an objective in mind: restoration of regional control, removal of oppressive taxes, or the overthrow of the party in power. Kony and the LRA identified no such objectives, and their overarching purposes in waging a cruel war seems to have been simply to continue waging a cruel war.

In this context traditional standards for justified and unjustified means of warfare have no power to persuade. Winning recognition of the justice of one’s cause in the eyes of outsiders is important to most belligerents; to the LRA it seems to have been unimportant. This does not mean that moral condemnation of a war such as the LRA civil war is unjustified, but only that the invocation of moral standards is likely to be a pointless exercise with no practical effects.

**Concluding comments: report from an Acholi village**

In January 2012 the residents of several small villages in the Acholi region welcomed a group of 18 students from Calvin College, together with my wife and me, to meetings at which they spoke of what it meant to them that several decades of LRA occupation had at last come to an end. As we sat in a clearing on plastic chairs and rush mats, the villagers told of being reunited with brothers or sons who had been snatched from their villages at age 6 or 8, now returning after two decades of forced military service and no formal schooling. They told the students that their children, raised in IDP camps, had no idea how to plant or harvest crops, since their food had always come from trucks. Some of the residents, young and old, had lost limbs or been disfigured by machete attacks. A young mother saw her husband and her sons dragged away by LRA fighters and did not know whether they were still living until two of the three walked out of the bush and surrendered their arms 15 years later. The other son, she assumes, is no longer alive.

But the village residents did not want to talk about these matters for long. Instead they spoke of the new school buildings they were putting up and the promise that a government teacher would soon arrive. They showed us fields where they had built irrigation systems and built contoured terraces. They welcomed us to their newly rebuilt church on Sunday and gave thanks for God’s goodness in delivering them from a long time of suffering and allowing them to return to their villages and fields and rebuild their lives. In a clinic a group of women living positively with AIDS told the students how difficult it had been to gain acceptance from their families when their disease was first diagnosed. But then the educational efforts of pastors and health workers gradually overcame the stigma against them, they told us, while anti-retroviral drugs restored their health and strength.
While the LRA held the Acholi region in its grip, residents had lived in perpetual fear and their lives had been uprooted by the constant threat of abduction and attack. But that threat was now lifted, and the difficult task of rebuilding communities had begun. The people of the villages we visited welcomed visitors who wanted to learn from them about the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility that even the most cruel and protracted war will come to an end. How was it possible for you to hold onto your faith in God, one of the students asked through a translator, when you were undergoing such terrible suffering? The question puzzled the women. It is the men of the LRA who did such terrible things to us, they answered, and not God. No matter what men may do, God is always faithful and full of mercy. We depended on God to protect us when the soldiers came, and we depend on God today to sustain us while our bodies fight off the disease of AIDS. We know the disease will cause us to die sooner than we might wish, but God will take care of us until then and receive us into his presence when our time is over.

War continues to snatch away the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe. The end of wars currently raging, and the prevention of future wars, must be among the highest priorities of both citizens and governments everywhere. When wars do come to an end, as did the LRA conflict in Uganda in the late 2000’s, their effects on homes, crops, and hearts may linger for decades. Education is a powerful tool for broadening horizons, and an effective education helps to make visible, even from a great distance, the devastation wrought by war. We cannot be moved to action by what we do not see and do not know, but greater knowledge can bring a willingness to reach out in compassion and solidarity to rebuild lives blighted by violence.

The bizarre story of the LRA, an army that claimed to be fighting for morality and justice while subjecting an entire region to a quarter-century reign of terror, reminds us of the limits of our understanding of war’s causes and the inadequacy of our legal and moral tools to block its progress. A war whose instigators respect none of the traditional limits on the means of war, fought for no discernible purpose except their own continued domination, drew unqualified and universal condemnation from the community of nations – or at least from those few outsiders who were aware of its existence. Yet moral outrage generated no effective action. And when military action was initiated in Uganda and in the region – a move eminently justifiable under just war standards – it degenerated into exploitation and profiteering. The morality was entirely on one side; but so was the opportunity to wrap one’s pursuit of illegal resources in a shroud of supposed virtue.

Yet in spending a week talking with those victimized by the LRA conflict, as they now rebuild their communities and their lives, the resilience of the human spirit was powerfully evident. War destroyed homes, maimed children, and devastated crops; but it could not quench the determination of Ugandan traders and farmers to reclaim the region that has long been their home and to return to their fields and shops.
Their resourcefulness and patience of ordinary Ugandans engaged in this task are almost invisible in the videos produced by Invisible Children. They cherish the hope of a peaceful and prosperous future for the region, of swords beaten into plowshares and automatic rifles melted down into tractor parts. If that day arrives, “Kony 2012” may in retrospect have made a small contribution to its achievement by expanding global awareness of the needs of the region. Far more important, however, will be the daily work of men and women whose faith in God and in the future of their communities has been shaken but not destroyed by a quarter-century of oppression and violence.

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