

AN LRA FOR EVERYONE: HOW DIFFERENT ACTORS FRAME THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) became a regional problem in the border area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, involving multiple national and international actors. This article explains why these actors often present diametrically opposed images of the LRA instead of developing a unified vision. More specifically, the article discusses how the Ugandan and Congolese governments and armies, and the US government and advocacy groups, each frame the LRA differently. These various frames are influenced by the actors' interests and by the specific historical development of political relations between them. Politically influential constituencies played a significant role in this endeavour. In the US, lobby groups such as Invisible Children, Enough, and Resolve had an important impact on the way in which the American government framed the LRA. Conversely, the lack of such a powerful constituency in the LRA-affected countries gave these governments ample space to frame the LRA in a variety of ways. The lack of reliable information about the current capacities of the LRA, combined with the LRA's lack of a strong and coherent image, further contributed to this situation. In short, the ways in which the LRA is framed enabled these key actors to pursue goals that may remain distant from the reality of the LRA.

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THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY HAS ATTRACTED major attention in the last few years and a number of major international initiatives have been taken to defeat the LRA. The issue has been relatively high on the international agenda, at least with respect to African issues, even though the threat posed by the LRA in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Sudan is overshadowed by far more troubling armed violence in the region. A wide range of actors are involved in tracking down the LRA. For example, American advisers are assisting the Ugandan army in hunting the LRA; United Nations peacekeepers and the Congolese army are present in the LRA-affected areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo to protect the population and fight the LRA; the African Union has a regional task force that is operating in the three central African countries affected by the LRA. Moreover, a number of American lobby organizations, such as Invisible Children, Enough, and Resolve continuously try to rally attention to these issues.¹

Although the number of LRA attacks has decreased significantly since mid-2010, and the number of defections from the rebel group has increased, the LRA continues to survive and operate over a widespread area in the border zone between the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan.² Moreover, no important LRA officer has been caught since 2011, with the exception of Caesar Acellam, who, according to a number of sources, chose to leave the bush and no longer had a central role in the organization.³ In other words, while an unprecedented range of initiatives have been taken to stop the LRA – certainly in relation to other conflicts in the region – the movement continues to operate.

This article does not aim to give an exhaustive explanation of why these initiatives are failing. Instead, it demonstrates how and why the Congolese and Ugandan governments and armies, as well as the United States government and lobby groups, all have their “own” LRA. We argue that these different understandings of the LRA are weakly connected with the realities of the LRA conflict and the broader security situation on the ground, and that actors frame the LRA in ways that suit their own agendas, such as geopolitical credit or financial profit. Moreover, we demonstrate that these images are not static: not only do they vary between actors, but these actors also present the issue differently at different moments.

Concretely, we argue that two interrelated factors are crucial in determining how different actors frame the LRA: the actor's interests, and the broader political context in which these interests are produced. In other

1. Phil Lancaster and Ledio Cakaj, ‘Loosening Kony's grip: Effective defections strategies for today's LRA’ (The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, Washington, July 2013).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Interviews, policy actors and military officials, Kampala, Dungu, and Kinshasa, 2011–14.

words, and mirroring broader structure–agency debates within the social sciences, the interests through which an image of the LRA is framed are not completely free, but are closely connected with the particular political circumstances. For example, the way in which the Congolese government and army perceive and construct the LRA in their dealings with Uganda is largely influenced by the DRC's historical relations with Uganda, and particularly the latter's recent history of looting Congolese resources: by constructing the image of a largely absent LRA, the Congolese government reinforces its desire for Ugandan forces to leave its territory. Similarly, the way in which the Ugandan government frames the LRA in its conversations with the US is influenced by its relationship with America. In these situations, the construction of particular images is used in a more or less conscious effort to pursue goals that may remain very distant from the reality of the LRA.

Two issues are of particular importance in understanding how the various actors frame the LRA. First, the relative political importance of domestic constituencies advocating for action against the LRA plays a significant role in determining the degree to which particular governments are able to frame the LRA in directions that are less related to the security situation. In the LRA-affected countries, the concerned populations are politically too marginal to have any impact on their government's framing of the issue. This was certainly the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a situation compounded by the fact that the government had much more significant threats to its territory, such as permanent instability in the east of the country more generally, which constituted a much greater menace to state authority than LRA activity in the north-east. This was also the case for other regional governments once the scale of the LRA's operations declined.⁴ Contrary to the directly affected governments, the US government had a powerful constituency demanding action with regard to the LRA conflict. Organizations such as Invisible Children, Resolve, and Enough played a crucial role in bringing the LRA issue to the centre of US attention. This led ultimately to a situation where the imperative of dealing with the LRA (or at least appearing to do so) was imposed on the region by external actors.

Second, the fact that the actual capacities of the LRA were unclear, even for those within the LRA, increased the space for a wide variety of interpretations. The malleable identity of the LRA combined with external pressure and foreign aid made the movement an issue that served a variety of functions and interests. In the words of a Kampala-based donor actor, the LRA

4. The Central African Republic and South Sudan were confronted by a series of armed rebellions in these countries, in the midst of which the LRA was no more than a minor player and did not constitute any threat to state authority. This was certainly the case after the March 2013 takeover of the Central African Republic by the Séléka rebels, the consequent conflict, and the renewed hostilities in South Sudan.

became 'a political football to kick around with rather than an issue as such'.⁵

While the history and activities of the LRA in northern Uganda and southern Sudan have been analysed extensively,⁶ there have been few scholarly appraisals of the latest phase in the conflict, following the LRA's flight in 2006 from Uganda into the DRC.⁷ This article contributes to addressing the gap. The primary units of analysis are the Congolese and Ugandan government and armies, and their interaction with the United States. The article is based on extensive field research in the DRC (especially the LRA-affected districts of Bas- and Haut-Uélé, but also Kinshasa, Bunia, and Kisangani) and Uganda (Kampala, Entebbe, and northern Uganda), as well as in Washington, DC. We conducted over 300 interviews between 2011 and early 2014 with government and military officials; actors from international and official aid agencies; international and local NGOs; various members from the affected population; and former LRA abductees.

Based on this research, the article presents three main arguments. First, we show how the Ugandan and Congolese governments constructed very different images of the LRA. In doing so, we present our first main argument: actors framed the LRA in different ways depending on the audience, in a manner that was not determined by the security situation on the ground, but rather by their particular interests. These interests were in turn based on the pre-existing relations between the relevant countries. Second, we show how the US was an important actor in the field surrounding the LRA, which had a significant impact on how other actors positioned themselves on the issue. The engagement of the US created geopolitical benefits for Uganda while also contributing to tensions on the ground between the Congolese and Ugandan armies. In showing this, we further demonstrate how images were influenced by the audience towards which they were produced. Finally, we show that images created by different actors were not internally consistent. While the Congolese authorities framed the LRA as absent or non-existent, this was not the case for individual Congolese soldiers. This discrepancy was not based primarily on the security situation on the ground, but rather on an

5. Interview, military attaché, Kampala, 12 January 2014.

6. For example Sverker Finnstrom, *Living with bad surroundings* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2008); Chris Dolan, *Social torture: The case of northern Uganda, 1986–2006* (Berghahn Books, New York, NY, 2009); Adam Branch, *Displacing human rights: War and intervention in northern Uganda* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011); Ronald R. Atkinson, 'Afterword: A perspective on the last thirty years', in Ronald R. Atkinson, *The roots of ethnicity* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010), pp. 275–333; Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot 'Kony's message: A new koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda', *African Affairs* 98, 390 (1999), pp. 5–36.

7. A number of policy reports have been written on the issue, nevertheless: see in particular the reports of Ledio Cakaj, such as 'Between a rock and a hard place: LRA attacks and Congolese army abuses in northeastern Congo' (Enough Project activist brief, Washington, 2010).

economic and organizational logic: resource generation played an important role in the Congolese army (both for survival and enrichment), and the fight against the LRA allowed economically profitable abuses to occur.

The relevance of this argument is not limited to the LRA. It contributes to the analysis of the construction of knowledge on rebel groups and conflicts more generally. While a number of analyses have shown how one particular (set of) actor(s) – such as an individual government fighting a rebel group⁸ or international actors⁹ – frames a particular conflict, little to no attention has been given to how different actors frame one and the same conflict in a variety of dynamic ways. As a result, often the wider range of factors that contributed to the construction of particular images has been neglected. Framing cannot simply be understood in terms of a strategy to win a conflict, but should also be analysed as serving interests parallel to or independent of the conflict, including for actors other than the directly warring parties. Moreover, while interests are important in the framing of these images, other factors such as organizational structures or broader historical relations play an important role. An analysis of these issues is important in understanding not only the conflict, but also the impact of various interventions on the ground.

Strategic framing

Why do policy actors approach particular events in different ways? This question has been analysed extensively by a wide variety of scholars in several disciplines, and many terms and concepts have been used to refer to the process of understanding and interpreting events: information processing,¹⁰ sense making,¹¹ analogies,¹² and so on. The literature on framing, or frames,¹³ is of particular relevance to this article. Originating from the cognitive sciences, it quickly became influential in the social sciences, by showing how the way people think influences policy.¹⁴ Frames ‘diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe’: they define the problem, diagnose its cause, offer and justify treatments, and prescribe particular solutions.¹⁵ Frames shape

8. Branch ‘Neither peace nor justice’.

9. See, for example, the excellent analyses of Séverine Autessere in ‘Hobbes and the Congo: frames, local violence, and international intervention’, *International Organization* 63, 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 249–80; and *The trouble with the Congo: Local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010).

10. Yaacov Vertzberger, *The world in their minds* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1990).

11. Karl Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations* (Sage Publications, London, 1995).

12. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1992).

13. Erving Goffman, *Frame analysis* (Northeastern University Press, Boston, MA, 1974).

14. Maurits van der Veen, *Ideas, interests and foreign aid* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011), p. 28.

15. Robert Entman, ‘Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm’, *Journal of Communication* 43, 4 (1993), p. 52.

what counts as a problem and what does not, which events will be noticed and which will not, and how problems and events will be interpreted.¹⁶

Although it is not possible to discuss this literature on frames in detail, a number of issues need to be highlighted. First, a distinction can be made between how frames are, on the one hand, ‘frameworks or schemata of interpretation’, giving meaning to a particular problem;¹⁷ and, on the other hand, a guide to actors on how to take action on the issue.¹⁸ The former aspect particularly refers to earlier analyses of decision-making processes in foreign policy, which relied on the psychology of analogical reasoning – highlighting, for example, ‘knowledge structures’ that people use to ‘order, interpret, and simplify, in a word, to make sense of their environment’.¹⁹ These processes of ‘information processing’ are not solely passive responses to stimuli, but also an active process of constructing reality.²⁰ Particularly interesting for our purposes is the ‘agency’ component of frames, in which frames can be used strategically to achieve particular aims and promote particular interests. In this way, framing is based on ‘conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’.²¹ Benford and Snow call this ‘motivational framing’ or a ‘call to arms’ to engage in particular actions.²²

The idea of strategic framing has been particularly influential in the literature on social movements, which highlights the use of frames to disseminate ideas, mobilize support, and provoke policy change.²³ It has also been used by scholars of political communication or foreign-policy decision making,²⁴ who discuss the use of frames as a political tool to reach goals such as support for policy proposals.²⁵ This focus is also common in studies of the LRA. Sverker Finnstrom,²⁶ Adam Branch,²⁷ and

16. Séverine Autessere, ‘Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences’, *African Affairs* 11, 443 (2012), pp. 206–7.

17. Goffman, *Frame analysis*, p. 21.

18. Robert Benford and David Snow, ‘Framing processes and social movements’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), p. 614.

19. Foong Khong, *Analogies at war*, p. 13.

20. Vertzberger, *The world in their minds*, p. 9.

21. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, ‘Introduction’ in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (eds), *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures and cultural framings* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, NY, 1996), p. 6.

22. Benford and Snow, ‘Framing process’, p. 617.

23. Jackie Smith, ‘Bridging global divides? Strategic framing and solidarity in transnational social movement organizations’, *International Sociology* 17, 4 (2002), pp. 505–28.

24. Zeev Maoz, ‘Framing the national interest: The manipulation of foreign policy decisions in group settings’, *World Politics* 43, 1 (1990), pp. 77–110.

25. Jean Garrison, ‘Framing foreign policy alternatives in the inner circle’, *Political Psychology* 22, 4 (2001), p. 777.

26. Sverker Finnstrom, ‘An African hell of colonial imagination?’, in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (eds), *The Lord’s Resistance Army* (Zed Books, London, 2010), pp. 74–89.

27. Branch, ‘Displacing human rights’.

Ron Atkinson²⁸ have demonstrated how an “official” version of the LRA was presented by the Ugandan regime, emphasizing particular aspects of the “terrorist” group, to demonize the LRA, minimize the destructive role of many Ugandan policies and practices, disqualify opposition, and mobilize international support. Jonathan Fisher built on this idea by showing how the Ugandan government engages in various ‘image management strategies’.²⁹ In this way, the government successfully used the fragile state concept and the LRA conflict³⁰ to achieve a number of advantages, particularly donor resources for regime maintenance, by challenging and reshaping internationally devised narratives.

Second, when thinking about strategic framing, the political context needs to be taken into account. Framing theory shows how political opportunities³¹ play a role in successful framing exercises; while the literature on political mediation and social movements highlights how mobilization strategies take place in ways that ‘fit political circumstances’.³² In the latter case, the political context ‘intersects with the strategic choices that movements make’.³³ In other words, framing is adapted to the political context. We link these insights with the ideas on strategic framing, demonstrating how strategic framing takes place in certain political contexts, such as pre-existing histories of Uganda–Congo and Uganda–US political relations. This institutional context affects the way in which actors understand and frame the LRA.

Third, the framing literature illustrates how a multitude of frames can exist at the same time, both from the perspective of the “presenter” and the audience. On the one hand, framing is not a one-size-fits-all exercise, as actors do not necessarily use only one frame.³⁴ The framing of a particular issue depends on the audience towards which it is directed. Issues are framed ‘to make them comprehensible to target audiences, to attract attention and encourage action, and to “fit” with favourable institutional venues’.³⁵ Actors may use different frames, depending on the audience, in

28. Atkinson, ‘Afterword’.

29. Jonathan Fisher, ‘When it pays to be a “fragile state”: Uganda’s use and abuse of a dubious concept’, *Third World Quarterly* 35, 2 (2014), pp. 316–32.

30. Jonathan Fisher, ‘Framing Kony: Uganda’s war, Obama’s advisers and the nature of “influence” in Western foreign policy-making’, *Third World Quarterly* 35, 4 (2014), pp. 686–704.

31. Hank Johnston and John Noakes (eds), *Frames of protest* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2005), pp. 143–83.

32. Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, and Sheera Joy Olasky, ‘Age for leisure?’, *American Sociological Review* 70, 3 (2005), p. 519.

33. Ryan Cragun and Deborah Cragun, *Introduction to sociology* (Blacksleet River, Tampa, FL, 2006), p. 234.

34. Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for research in constructivist international relations* (M. E. Sharpe, New York, NY, 2007), p. 54.

35. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1998), pp. 2–3.

order to gain greater effect. On the other hand, it is important to note that different actors might use different frames to analyse and present the same situation. This basic insight has received only relatively limited attention. Foreign policy analysis scholars have limited their research to the analysis of contrasting frames between two opposed (sets of) actors, such as between US political advisers,³⁶ between Northern and Southern transnational movements,³⁷ and so on. We want to build on these insights, taking a particular issue – the framing of the LRA – as the starting point of our analysis, and explaining how different actors frame this organization.

Setting the stage: the fragmentation of the LRA and the role of the US

The Lord's Resistance Army started its activities in 1987 in northern Uganda in response to marginalization and alleged abuses experienced by the Acholi people of northern Uganda under the regime of President Museveni.³⁸ The LRA arrived in the DRC in September 2005 from southern Sudan. From December 2005 onwards, the movement settled in Garamba Park, where it refrained from attacking the civilian population. This situation started changing from December 2007 onwards and escalated towards November/December 2008, shortly after the Congolese and MONUC peacekeeping forces started deploying troops in Haut Uélé. On 14 December 2008, 'Operation Lightning Thunder' was launched, in which the LRA camps in Garamba Park were attacked.³⁹

In theory, this was a joint intelligence-led military operation, with participation from Uganda, southern Sudan, the CAR, and the DRC, and supported by US advisers. In practice, however, it was essentially a Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) venture.⁴⁰ The LRA escaped practically unharmed, only to launch a series of massacres. Between 24 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, the LRA killed at least 815 Congolese civilians and 50 Sudanese civilians. The killings and abductions continued throughout 2009⁴¹ until the last – but largely under-reported – massacre that took place on 22 February 2010.⁴² From this moment onwards, the LRA

36. Garrison, 'Framing foreign policy alternatives'.

37. Smith, 'Bridging global divides?'.

38. Doom and Vlassenroot, 'Kony's message'; Atkinson, 'Afterword'; Finnstrom, 'Bad surroundings'; Branch 'Displacing human rights'.

39. Human Rights Watch, 'The Christmas massacres: LRA attacks on civilians in northern Congo' (Human Rights Watch Report, New York, NY, February 2009), p. 24.

40. Joost Van Puijjenbroek and Nico Plooijer, 'How enlightening is the thunder?' (IKV Pax Christi, Utrecht February 2009).

41. Human Rights Watch, 'Trail of death: LRA atrocities in northeastern Congo' (Human Rights Watch Report, New York, NY, March 2010).

42. MONUSCO, 'Dungu special report: Joint mission to Niangara (24–29 April, 2010)' (MONUSCO Report, Dungu, 2010).

violence declined 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 up to the time of writing. In June 2009, Kony and sections of the LRA crossed the border with the CAR and mostly remained there, with Kony moving to South Darfur in 2012 and then periodically operating in the Kafia Kingi enclave on the border between Sudan and South Sudan.⁴³

The reduction in violence had two major and related consequences. First, it reduced the pressure for the DRC and the CAR governments to deal with the problem, marginalizing even more the needs of the affected populations. Second, it became more difficult to judge the capacity of the LRA. Both of these factors enabled actors to form their “own” LRA, as will be explored briefly below.

Operation Lightning Thunder led to a fragmentation of the groups, and the continued military pressure led to an even further splintering. Many fighters defected, and others were killed or captured. In July 2013, it was estimated that there were around 500 people left in the LRA, of whom about 250 were armed fighters. This is a significant drop from its peak in 1999, when it probably had between 2,500 and 3,000 armed fighters.⁴⁴ Yet, the actual strength of the movement remained unclear. Two different visions of its strength emerged. The first argued that the reduction in attacks and fragmentation is a deliberate strategy used by Kony to enable him to lie low until the level of international attention paid to the LRA declines. Another vision contested this interpretation and argued that the LRA were weaker than ever and would disband soon. In a situation in which reliable and up-to-date information was hard to obtain, both points could be defended, not only by outside analysts but also by former LRA combatants, something that clearly emerged in our interviews with the latter group. For example, one former LRA combatant argued: ‘After the attacks in Congo, Kony gave the order not to attack any more. I think he said this because he first wanted to weigh the power of the opponent. He wanted to play it cool.’⁴⁵ Another recently defected rebel concurred: ‘There are so many groups in the bush, which are still ready to fight, and which will continue fighting. ... Kony still is very powerful.’⁴⁶ This vision was supported by the fact that the LRA succeeded in retaining some more long-term elements in their structure. Moreover, given the huge and largely uninhabited area in which they operated, they were able to maintain permanent camps from which small groups could be sent to attack or to loot.

43. The Resolve, ‘Hidden in plain sight: Sudan’s harbouring of the LRA in the Kafia Kingi Enclave, 2009–2013’ (The Resolve, Washington, DC, 2013).

44. Lancaster and Cakaj, ‘Loosening Kony’s grip’, p. 12.

45. Ex-LRA rebel, Gulu, 26 January 2014.

46. Interview, ex-LRA rebel, Dungu, 20 July 2013.

However, other ex-rebels contested this view of the group's strength. They argued that, notwithstanding the remaining long-term elements in the LRA's structure, the movement was very weak. Given the difficult living circumstances, the lack of prospects, and the difficulty of communication, many fighters defected and argued that the movement was only a shadow of itself. As one former LRA combatant put it, 'Most people in the LRA want to leave, they are just hungry and tired of fighting.'⁴⁷ Cut off from its original operating area, without any support from the civilian population, and with significantly reduced numbers, the movement was certainly at one of the weakest points in its history.

In this context, it is crucial to understand the role of the LRA in these framing exercises: how does the LRA frame itself, and how does it try to influence its framing by outsiders? Various scholars working on the earlier phases of the conflict (when the rebel group was still operating in northern Uganda) have described how the LRA was an active participant in framing its identity and agenda.⁴⁸ Written information on the rebel movement was scarce, but existed: manifestos outlining its political and socio-economic programmes were distributed in northern Uganda. On a number of occasions, LRA rebels, including Joseph Kony, called radio stations to give their viewpoints on particular issues, and sometimes the rebels gave 'hasty political lectures' to people they encountered.⁴⁹ Throughout the Juba peace negotiations, the LRA interacted with a variety of actors, and was able in the process to present its political agenda.⁵⁰

After the LRA left Uganda and the Juba negotiations collapsed, this dynamic changed. In the DRC and the CAR, communication with the civilian population was limited to informing people that they were only looking for food, or basic warnings not to resist their attacks. In the most recent period, LRA rebels' pleas for help in defecting were common. No statements about their intentions or political agenda were shared with local actors.⁵¹ As a Congolese teacher summed it up: 'When it comes to the LRA, we are lost. We don't know who they are, what they want, why they are here or why they are doing these things. We don't know anything! We only know their brutality.'⁵² This lack of communication was not only related to the LRA's limited knowledge of Congolese local languages or their presence on foreign terrain, but also to the fragmentation of the

47. Interview, ex-LRA rebel, Duru, 1 March 2013.

48. Finnstrom, 'An African hell'; Finnstrom 'Living with bad surroundings', Chapter 3; Mareike Schomerus, *Even eating you can bite your tongue: Dynamics and challenges of the Juba peace talks with the Lord's Resistance Army* (London School of Economics, unpublished PhD thesis, 2012), pp. 78–86.

49. Finnstrom, 'An African hell', p. 85.

50. Schomerus, 'Even eating'.

51. Fieldwork data, 2011–14.

52. Interview, teacher, Dungu, 7 July 2013.

LRA: the rebel factions themselves had less knowledge about the movement's intentions. While major decisions remain firmly in the hands of Kony and a small number of commanders, communication between the different groups and this central command became increasingly difficult, given their disintegration over a large territory.⁵³ For example, a recently defected group of nineteen LRA members who came out of the bush in December 2013 told us they had not been in contact with the rebel high command for between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half years.⁵⁴ This helps us to understand the above opposed perspectives: as little information of the central command (and particularly Kony) reached the rank and file, most of the individual combatants had limited overview and insights into the actual strength and motives of the organization.

In sum, the extent of the LRA threat was not an objective condition, but something that could be manipulated depending on the interpretation given to the limited available data and the interests influencing these interpretations.⁵⁵ The recent passive attitude of the LRA in framing itself, both among its combatants and to the outside world, was an important factor in further increasing the space for external actors to frame the LRA differently. The fact that contradictory positions could be taken on the status of the LRA meant that the scope for interpretation became even wider, and that actors could use the scarce available information on the LRA to suit their interests in order to construct their "own" LRA. Even actors who were in the LRA had their "own" LRA, as they had strongly different interpretations of the strength and operation of the group.

The scarcity of hard evidence concerning the LRA also had a second consequence. As the LRA became smaller, more fragmented, and less violent, it became an even more peripheral issue for the regional governments. As we show below, after Operation Lightning Thunder none of the concerned governments considered the LRA to be a genuine threat or a political priority. Consequently, the only governmental actor for whom the LRA continued to be a significant concern – or was presented as such – was the United States.⁵⁶ The United States undertook considerable efforts against the LRA and invested substantive resources. In May 2010, the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act was signed into law, pledging direct support for Ugandan counter-LRA operations, including \$30 million annually for logistical support and the dispatch in October

53. Moreover, no radio communication was used for a considerable time, as international forces monitored it.

54. Interviews, ex-abductees, Gulu, January 2014.

55. David Campbell, *Writing security* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1992), p. 1.

56. The African Union and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa also presented the LRA as a threat, but their framing falls outside the scope of this article.

2011 of 100 special operations military advisers.⁵⁷ The Department of Defense spent \$135 million in pursuing the LRA in the 2013 financial year.⁵⁸ On top of these resources, the US put pressure on the affected governments to act on the LRA.⁵⁹ Although this was a limited investment within the vast US security budget, it was an unprecedented and disproportional effort for a conflict that does not pose any direct threat to America, especially in the midst of other (more violent) conflicts in the affected region.

As a result, a paradoxical situation emerged in which the LRA was not a priority for any of the affected African countries, but remained one for an outside actor. Throughout our interviews, American governmental actors admitted that there was little enthusiasm for the LRA issue among the directly affected governments. For example, one US governmental actor noted: 'The LRA issue is not a demand-driven issue, but a mission-driven one.'⁶⁰ Naturally, this situation had an impact on the ground. As the interest of the affected countries was limited, they participated in the mission for a number of other reasons, which were not directly related to the threat of the LRA. The lack of a powerful domestic constituency that could affect the crafting of a particular frame, and the lack of framing by the LRA itself, further allowed for a variety of frames to be constructed.

Different visions of the LRA: Uganda and the DRC

From the moment the LRA entered the DRC, the Ugandan and Congolese governments put forward contradictory visions of the movement. The Congolese government and army consistently denied the LRA threat and argued that it was a minor problem of public security. For example, Congolese army and high-level governmental actors noted on several occasions that the country had more pressing problems, claiming that the core of the LRA threat was eliminated during Lightning Thunder⁶¹ and that the group was reduced to about 20 rebels.⁶² Conversely, in its dealings with the DRC and others in the region, the Ugandan government and army often presented an image of the LRA as a regional threat. For example, in a

57. Craig Whitlock, 'Contractors run US spying missions in Africa', *The Washington Post*, 14 June 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/contractors-run-us-spying-missions-in-africa/2012/06/14/gJQAvC4RdV_story.html> (16 June 2012).

58. Interview data, Washington and Kampala, 2013–14.

59. For example, the US has lobbied the Kinshasa government to prioritize the LRA issue by giving foreign troops (UPDF and SPLA) access to its territory.

60. Interview, American governmental actors, Kampala, 12 November 2013.

61. 'Rapport de la reunion bilaterale de chefs d'Etat-Major Generaux, Kasese, 27 fevrier 2009', published in *Les Coulisses (Beni)*, 204 (20 March–20 April 2009), p. 21.

62. FARDC and UPDF, 'Report of the bilateral meeting of the chiefs of military intelligence of FARDC and UPDF to evaluate the operations against LRA and ADF. Held at Kinshasa' (Unpublished report, Kinshasa, 14 March 2012), p. 2.

bilateral UPDF–FARDC meeting on 30 September 2011 in Kinshasa, the UPDF claimed that ‘the LRA is still a threat since it operates as a terrorist group’,⁶³ while the FARDC argued the opposite: ‘The LRA no longer constitutes a threat to be dealt with by the military in the DRC but a matter of public order, as its strength is estimated at 30 elements.’⁶⁴ The Ugandan government consistently expressed its frustration about the ‘failure by the region to perceive the LRA as a regional threat’.⁶⁵ It also considered the presence of the LRA threat in the DRC as a legitimate basis for intervention.⁶⁶

Why do the Ugandan and Congolese governments present the LRA differently? The Congolese position is particularly puzzling because, for some time after Operation Lightning Thunder, the LRA committed major atrocities in Congolese territory, which the government largely ignored in its official position. Domestic constituencies, such as local civil society groups, who contested the authorities’ position were themselves criticized, as the government claimed they ‘pretend to know better the reality on the ground than the FARDC’.⁶⁷

As introduced above, the first reason is the peripheral nature of the rebel group in the Congo. The LRA was seen as a movement that was only one among many other armed groups, and as more of a nuisance coming from Uganda than an armed threat. As the Congolese Foreign Affairs minister Thambwe Mwamba summarized this view, ‘the Ugandans must be happy to have transferred the annoying LRA issue to the DRC and CAR’.⁶⁸

Importantly, the recent history of Uganda–Congo relations played an important role in the Congolese authorities’ interpretation of the LRA. From 1998 to 2002, the Ugandan army occupied parts of the DRC. A central feature of their presence was the illegal exploitation of Congolese natural resources, which continued, through proxy groups, even after the Ugandan withdrawal.⁶⁹ The renewed presence of Ugandan troops from late 2008, in pursuit of the LRA, was seen through this lens: the Congolese authorities

63. FACA, FARDC, SPLA, and UPDF, ‘Report of the meeting of defence chiefs of FARDC, UPDF, SPLA, and FACA to review the operations against the LRA. Held at Grand Hotel Kinshasa’ (Unpublished report, Kinshasa, 30 September 2011), p. 2.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

65. UPDF, ‘The presentation on LRA insurgency/terrorism to COS MONUC by Gen. W. Katumba, CLF’, 24 November 2006, p. 26.

66. Tabu Butagira and Stephen Otago, ‘Don’t take us for granted, Govt tells United Nations’, *The Daily Monitor*, 7 December 2012, <<http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Don-t-take-us-for-granted--govt-tells-United-Nations/-/688334/1638292/-/pypqgnz/-/index.html>> (11 December 2012).

67. Congolese Minister of Information, 24 March 2010, cited in United Nations LRA Coordination Cell, ‘Joint Report: March–July 2011’ (Unpublished report, Kinshasa), p. 9.

68. During a meeting on 22 March 2011 in Kinshasa. Interview, international actor, Kinshasa, 1 September 2011.

69. Kristof Titeca, ‘Access to resources and predictability in armed rebellion: the FAPC’s short-lived “Monaco” in eastern Congo’, *Afrika Spectrum*, 2 (2011), pp. 43–70.

accused the Ugandan troops of only being there to profit from Congolese resources. There were reports of timber being ferried by UPDF elements to Uganda through Sudan,⁷⁰ and indications that individual Ugandan soldiers were involved in the ivory trade.⁷¹ These reports further strengthened the Congolese government in its belief that the LRA was only an excuse for the Ugandan presence on their soil.

In other words, tensions that had developed between Ugandan and Congolese authorities, particularly as a result of the Ugandan occupation of eastern Congo and the low-level threat posed by the LRA to state security, had an important impact on how the Congolese government viewed the conflict. This in turn led to a distinctive framing of the rebel movement: by minimizing the LRA threat, the Congolese authorities hoped to persuade the Ugandan troops to leave their territory. In other words, the Congolese framing of the LRA conflict occurred as a result of political interests rather than an accurate assessment of the security situation on the ground. This becomes particularly clear when one looks at the dynamic flow of their imaging, because the higher tensions rose between Congolese and Ugandan armed forces, the more Congolese forces minimized the LRA threat.

This was caused predominantly by the continued presence of a large number of Ugandan troops on Congolese territory. Officially, the Ugandan involvement in the DRC ended on 14 March 2009, although there was an informal agreement allowing a limited number of Ugandan forces to stay in the DRC.⁷² These forces turned out to be an estimated 3,000 troops. At the same time, the general LRA threat and large-scale attacks gradually declined. This situation led to large tensions, with the FARDC refashioning its LRA image by highlighting UPDF complicity with the rebel movement. The UPDF was accused of actually being the LRA, supplying the LRA, and of being there only to profit from Congolese resources. Indeed, the Congolese army gave concrete evidence of this during meetings, in which UPDF soldiers were accused of staging the supposed LRA attacks, and directly supplying the LRA.⁷³ In other words, the Congolese

70. See, for example, MONUSCO, 'Ituri Brigade military daily sitrep, period covered: 31800B Jan. 10 to 011800B Feb. 10' (MONUSCO, Bunia, 2010), p. 11. Interviews, Ugandan traders, businessmen, and journalists, Kampala and West Nile, 2012, show how mostly civilian trucks were used by individual UPDF actors to ferry these goods.

71. Jeffrey Gettleman, 'Elephants dying in epic frenzy as ivory fuels wars and profits', *New York Times*, 3 September 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/africa/africa-elephants-are-being-slaughtered-in-poaching-frenzy.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>> (4 September 2012). There are also individual reports of ivory that was brought into South Sudan and Uganda by individual UPDF actors (Interview data, Uganda, 2012–13).

72. FARDC, UPDF, and Monusco, 'Report of the joint verification team of FARDC, UPDF and Monusco held in Dungu from 27 July to 5 August 2011' (Unpublished report, Dungu, 5 August 2011).

73. *Ibid.*

government accused the Ugandan government of using the LRA as an excuse to maintain a presence in its country, for which purpose the UPDF kept the LRA alive. In order to oppose the UPDF presence, the FARDC constructed an opposite image of the LRA, which supported Congolese insistence on a complete withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the DRC, culminating in a threat by the Congolese commander in charge to shoot down Ugandan helicopters.⁷⁴ From October 2011 onwards, no more UPDF elements were present on Congolese territory, and the Congolese government and army consistently opposed any new Ugandan presence on its territory.

In sum, even during the time of the large-scale LRA attacks, the Congolese authorities chose to ignore most of these attacks. Instead, the history of Congo–Uganda relations and the interests produced through these relations played an important role in how Congo chose to frame the LRA: by constructing the image of a minimal LRA, it hoped to force the Uganda troops to leave its territory. In the next section, we build further on these insights, showing how images of the LRA not only changed over time, but also depended on the audience. The position of the United States played a particularly important role in this process.

Uganda and the US in the anti-LRA struggle

The Ugandan government presented the LRA not only as a threat to the DRC but also to the international community, albeit in a slightly more nuanced way. Both the Ugandan government and its army generally argued that although the LRA threat to Uganda had declined, the LRA was still a terrorist group posing a regional danger. In the words of the government spokesperson, ‘The LRA is still a force that has been marauding for survival. As a political force, I would say that, no, it is not a threat, but as a criminal menace in the region, I would also say that it is a threat, especially given that they operate in areas which are hard to reach by governments of DR Congo and Central Africa Republic.’⁷⁵

However, the government’s actions deviated from the above representation. It consistently withdrew troops from its operations against the LRA and redeployed them to other priorities such as the 2011 elections, operations in the Karamajong region, and in particular to the African Union Mission in Somalia.⁷⁶ The government’s reduced interest was mirrored in its budgetary commitments on the issue. In July 2010, Ugandan defence minister Crispus Kiyonga announced that there was ‘no budget for operations against the LRA this year. ... No specific provision has been made for

74. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

75. Interview, government spokesperson, Kampala, July 2013.

76. International Crisis Group, ‘The Lord’s Resistance Army’, p. 4.

the operations against the LRA.⁷⁷ A similar statement was made for the 2011–12 budget.⁷⁸

Moreover, to its domestic audience, the Museveni regime emphasized how it had defeated the LRA, bringing peace to northern Uganda,⁷⁹ while in its interactions with the international community a more nuanced picture emerged. Addressing European donors, the Ugandan government was not very active in promoting the idea of the LRA as a threat. As a European defence attaché put it: ‘If I don’t mention the LRA to the UPDF, they would never mention it to me! They have of course more important issues to deal with.’⁸⁰ Another European military actor added: ‘The Ugandans think the LRA is a dead issue; and they basically think so since Operation Lightning Thunder. Why they continue dealing with it is related with a lot of issues, but none of which are related with the threat of the LRA.’⁸¹ Most of the Ugandan government’s activity in seeking assistance to manage the LRA conflict was not directed towards European donors, but towards the US. In doing so, the government’s main interest in the LRA issue was not the security situation, but rather to strengthen its relationship with the US by being a good ally and police force in the region: ‘a strong regional player, prepared and equipped to engage in future regional conflict scenarios’.⁸²

This was not a new process. For many years, the LRA conflict provided the Museveni regime with the means through which it could position itself as America’s key ally in the region, and through which it received a number of advantages such as military and diplomatic support.⁸³ Even as the situation on the ground changed – and also the Ugandan government’s intrinsic interest in the issue – the LRA conflict continued to offer the government a number of advantages, particularly with respect to the US. This has been the main lens through which the Ugandan government has regarded the conflict, and its actions can be interpreted in this light. By providing strategic support to the African Union Mission in Somalia and the counter-LRA mission, the Museveni regime managed to present itself to the US as a ‘valuable and important part of the worldwide anti-terrorism coalition’.⁸⁴ In short, the Ugandan government no longer saw the LRA as a

77. Joyce Namutebi, ‘No extra budget for LRA says Kiyonga’, *New Vision*, 16 July 2010, <<http://www.newvision.co.ug/PA/8/13/725996>> (11 December 2012).

78. On 5 July 2011, the Defence Minister announced that no money was provided in the budget to fight the LRA.

79. Dennis Ojwee, ‘M7 assures north of peace’, *New Vision*, 22 June 2008, <<http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/13/635057>> (11 December 2012).

80. Interview, European military attaché, Kampala, 15 January 2014.

81. Interview, European military attaché, Kampala, 30 May 2013.

82. Fisher, ‘Managing donor perceptions’, p. 412.

83. Branch, ‘Neither peace nor justice’, p. 3.

84. Fisher, ‘Managing donor perceptions’, p. 415.

threat, but still used it as a foreign policy issue to advance its geopolitical interests.⁸⁵

Moreover, the fact that the US was the main actor interested in the LRA also affected the power dynamics in play. The US needed local actors in the anti-LRA effort, and Uganda had the most disciplined and best-equipped army in the region. This situation gave the Ugandan government a certain leverage, as the US was absolutely dependent on Uganda's participation in the fight against the LRA. Even while not showing a major interest in the issue, and fighting the LRA only on a minimal level, the Ugandan government therefore still played a key role in resolving the issue. This role proved to be crucial in avoiding substantial donor censure for different governance transgressions, such as its increasingly negative democratic and human rights record, and reported corruption.⁸⁶ The government's decision not to provide a budget for LRA operations can be explained by that fact that this decision enabled it to pressure the United States for greater financial support in order to finance operations.

American support and interest not only insulated the Ugandan government from donor criticism with regards to its worsening governance record, but also affected the battlefield. At a local level, US support shaped the relations between Ugandan and Congolese militaries. The UPDF was well-equipped and had good logistics, in stark contrast with the FARDC, which was under-equipped and irregularly paid. In the perceptions of the Congolese military, US assistance to the UPDF played an important role in this difference, as the DRC receives no such support.⁸⁷ Although this concern was never voiced at a political level or through official statements, the strongly visible inequality was a major source of tension between the two armies. FARDC considered that it too deserved strong American support, as the conflict was taking place in its territory. As one FARDC actor commented, 'We were fighting the same enemy, but are treated differently. We want to be treated equally.'⁸⁸ Congolese actors, moreover, considered the American support an important reason for the UPDF's presence in the DRC, in which the LRA was simply used as a mechanism of enrichment. There was a feeling among local and regional analysts that

85. In the words of a US state department official, 'For Kampala, it is still an issue. It is not a threat, but it is a foreign policy issue. But Uganda has more pressing threats. For them, it is not on the top of their priority list.' Interview, state department official, Washington, 25 November 2013.

86. Jonathan Fisher, "'Some more reliable than others": Image management, donor perceptions and the global war on terror in East African diplomacy', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, 1 (2013), p. 14.

87. The US has trained one battalion, and a small number of military and non-military personnel were also sent by the US to Kinshasa (and Bangui), to assist in the regional anti-LRA efforts. United Nations LRA Coordination Cell, 'Joint Report', p. 17.

88. Interview, FARDC actor, Faradje, 8 August 2012.

the FARDC hoped to chase the UPDF out of Congolese territory in order that they might access American funding. Although this was not communicated officially, this feeling was also frequently voiced among individual FARDC actors on the ground.⁸⁹

Finally, the role of the US needs further elaboration. Through its pressure and actions in the affected region, the US presented the LRA as a threat. As with Uganda and the DRC, this image of the LRA was not based primarily on the situation on the ground, but rather on other dynamics. On the one hand, Jonathan Fisher⁹⁰ convincingly shows how the Museveni regime historically has been successful in shaping the nature and direction of this debate by presenting the LRA as a threat to the US government. On the other, the pressure of US advocacy groups such as Invisible Children, Resolve, and Enough caused the LRA to become a domestic American issue.

These advocacy organizations came into existence between 2004 and 2007, in order to raise awareness on the LRA and the crisis in northern Uganda. Invisible Children quickly proved particularly influential. Their ‘melding of *media-mission-movement* and marketing to teens and young adults using edgy media, social networking, and the effective use of celebrity spokespersons’⁹¹ attracted a devoted youth base, which was crucial in its ‘unrelenting grassroots political mobilization’⁹² with what became its main partner organization, Resolve. This strategy, combined with the lobbying of policy makers, raised their profile and proved to be very successful in bringing broader attention to the LRA, in influencing US policy, and in mobilizing and advocating continued efforts of the US government on the issue.⁹³ In doing so, they fed into already existing priorities and interests of the US government. The Obama administration and to a certain extent the previous Bush administration had their own reasons to be interested in the LRA.⁹⁴ Most notably, the insurgency enabled the US to invest in Uganda, which historically was a key player and ally for regional security, for example *vis-à-vis* (South) Sudan and Somalia.⁹⁵ In this situation, the US was able to give in to these lobby groups and present the issue as a

89. Interviews, Congolese soldiers and civil society actors, Haut Uélé province, Congo, 2011–13.

90. Jonathan Fisher, ‘Framing Kony’.

91. Ayesha Anne Nibbe, *The effects of a narrative: Humanitarian aid and action in the northern Uganda conflict*, (University of California Davis, Unpublished PhD thesis, 2010), p. 265. Emphasis in original.

92. Amy C. Finnegan, ‘Beneath Kony 2012: Americans aligning with arms and aiding others’, *Africa Today* 59, 3 (2013), p. 139.

93. Fisher, ‘Framing Kony’, p. 692.

94. Such as the Obama administration’s interest in the prevention of mass atrocities and the focus on regional collaboration to address cross-border threats, and conflict prevention in Africa.

95. Fisher, “‘Some more reliable’”.

priority through a relatively limited investment. As American governmental actors working on the LRA summarized the situation:

the role of the advocacy groups was crucial. They have been raising important awareness in the Congress. The political interest was already there in the administration, but the interest of the Congress made it easier to implement the agenda. And it was particularly the Invisible Children movie which changed things, which raised very much awareness on this issue. ... Our senior decision makers wanted Kony already; so because of the advocacy groups' efforts they suddenly had a constituency cheering along.⁹⁶

Other actors put the agency even more firmly with the lobby groups, for example by arguing that 'Congress only did what they did because of the advocacy groups, and basically it was the groups who wrote the law.'⁹⁷

As a result, a close alliance emerged between these lobby groups and the US government, both personally⁹⁸ and in the implementation of the resulting policies.⁹⁹ Most importantly, it was through these groups that the LRA became an important domestic political issue, and thus the centre of gravity for the LRA policy shifted to Washington. For example, in October 2011 President Obama announced the the deployment of 100 military advisers to help combat the LRA in Washington, rather than in Uganda. According to sources in Washington, President Obama did not directly inform President Museveni about this, further illustrating how the message and wider operation was primarily targeted towards an American audience.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the interventions themselves were driven by internal American dynamics, rather than dynamics on the ground. The bulk of the US interventions happened after the LRA had ceased its large-scale attacks and had become much weaker.¹⁰¹

In sum, it is clear that a range of different LRA images existed and that these reflected the interests of the image makers as well as the audiences to which they were speaking. The United States was a particularly important audience, especially for Uganda, and this increased Uganda's leverage. In the next section, we demonstrate the changeable character of these images, showing how they were not necessarily reproduced at all levels. More specifically, we show how individual Congolese soldiers did not follow the official image of the LRA that was presented by the Congolese authorities.

96. Interview, American government officials, Kampala, 12 November 2013.

97. Interview, US former government official, Washington, 26 November 2013.

98. For example, one of the three founders of Resolve – formerly Uganda Conflict Action Network – was for some time the Special Assistant for LRA Issues at the US State Department.

99. For example, Invisible Children and the US special advisers work closely together on LRA defection strategies, such as the distribution of 'defection flyers'.

100. Individual interviews with government officials, policy advisers, and journalists, Washington, November 2013.

101. Kristof Titeca and Ron Atkinson, 'Why is the US hunting for Joseph Kony?', *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 11 May 2014, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/05/why-us-hunting-joseph-kony-20145716731355345.html>> (11 May 2014).

Congolese soldiers: Militarization and profiting from the LRA

High-level FARDC commanders and the Kinshasa government consistently minimized and denied the LRA threat, but to what extent did rank-and-file soldiers follow suit? To some extent, the lower-level commanders and soldiers in the affected areas followed the official FARDC position. In certain instances, citizens warning army units about LRA attacks were arrested for spreading false rumours, as these army units denied any presence of the rebel group. In other instances, Congolese soldiers prevented the population from fleeing from the LRA.¹⁰² Nevertheless, many local-level soldiers and commanders did not follow the official image, and through their actions, implicitly acknowledged the presence of the LRA. The reasons why are not related to the security situation or tensions with the population, but rather to the political context, and more particularly to how the FARDC as an organization functioned. Salaries were very low and rarely paid, and army units were organized in a largely decentralized manner, which almost forced them to look for survival and profit in situations of conflict.¹⁰³ In other areas of Congo, such as the Kivu's, citing military reasons for deployment proved to be an effective way of legitimizing the extension of control in lucrative mining areas.¹⁰⁴ A similar logic took place in the LRA-affected areas of Bas- and Haut-Uélé districts, although the most profitable resources were not primarily mineral resources but rather people, their possessions, and poaching. This had an impact on how individual lower-level FARDC soldiers and commanders looked at the LRA, whose presence offered access to these resources.

Although FARDC troops deployed in the Bas- and Haut Uélé districts were protecting the population to a certain extent, LRA forces tended to avoid FARDC encampments, and the FARDC soldiers ended up preying on the population.¹⁰⁵ The danger of FARDC actors varied from locale to locale (and particularly from commander to commander). While many people still considered the LRA to be the root problem, they generally considered the FARDC as a major threat to the population.

102. Interviews, civil society actors, internally displaced persons, and international humanitarian actors, Haut Uélé province, 2011–13.

103. For a detailed discussion of these military economic practices, see Judith Verweijen, 'Military business and the business of the military in the Kivus', *Review of African Political Economy* 40, 35 (2013), pp. 67–82.

104. Filip Reyntjens, 'Regulation, taxation and violence: The state, quasi-state governance and cross-border dynamics in the Great Lakes region', *Review of African Political Economy*, forthcoming, p. 8.

105. This is clearly illustrated by data from the protection cluster (humanitarian agencies collecting data on incidents against the civilian population): in 2011, a striking 48 percent of all these incidents were conducted by individual Congolese soldiers, whereas (only) 17 percent were conducted by the LRA. UNHCR, 'Monitoring de protection: Bilan incidents de protection de 2011' (UNHCR, Dungen, 2012), p. 6.

The presence of the LRA not only allowed FARDC troops to be situated close to the population with little external control, but also made it possible for individual FARDC actors to copy LRA attacks. As certain characteristics of the individuals involved were used to evaluate if an attack was committed by the LRA (such as Rasta hairstyle, old clothes, the use of abduction and so on), individual FARDC soldiers could copy these characteristics in order to pin the blame for their activities on the LRA. This strategy was effective given that there was a strong fear of the LRA among the population.

Deployment against the LRA also gave the FARDC access to areas that were economically attractive. For example, their deployment in Garamba National Park allowed FARDC actors to be actively involved in poaching. The ammunition that the FARDC used for poaching was accounted for by making up false reports of 'encounters with the LRA'.¹⁰⁶ A particularly perverse example of these economic dynamics was the 2010 sale of ammunition by a number of FARDC officers to the LRA, using civilian intermediaries to conduct this trade.¹⁰⁷

As a final example of the internal contradictions within the FARDC, we consider the case of Mbororo cattle keepers, who were present in the area from around 2005¹⁰⁸ and estimated to number between 10,000 and 20,000, controlling large herds of cattle.¹⁰⁹ The FARDC in the Uélé districts accused the Mbororo of directly collaborating with the LRA, and this accusation was used to legitimize FARDC attacks on the Mbororo. As a FARDC actor claimed, 'the Mbororo help the LRA and carry weapons for them',¹¹⁰ while another FARDC actor argued that 'the presence of the Mbororo creates confusion with the enemy; and it makes our analysis of the enemy more difficult'.¹¹¹ However, our research indicates that this collaboration did not happen, at least not on a structural basis.¹¹² Nevertheless, by constructing an image of the LRA that included an alliance with the Mbororo, FARDC actors were able to loot Mbororo cattle. The Mbororo conversely accused the military of continuous harassment and a wide range of human

106. Interviews in the area show that FARDC elements either poach themselves, or lend weapons/ammunition to civilians, with whom they cooperate.

107. Interviews, civil society actors and international policy actors, Dungu and Kinshasa, 2011–13.

108. Désiré Nkoy Elela (ed.), 'Les migrations transfrontalières des Mbororo au Nord-Est de la République Démocratique du Congo' (IKV- Pax Christi, Utrecht, April 2007).

109. Abdoulaye Bathily, 'Mission d'enquête sur les migrations des pasteurs nomades Mbororo en RDC, Soudan, République Centrafricaine et Cameroun' (Union Africaine, Département Paix et Sécurité, 2008), p. 5.

110. Interview, FARDC soldier 1, Dungu, 9 March 2013.

111. Interview, FARDC soldier 2, Dungu, 9 March 2013.

112. Interviews, civil society actors, Mbororo-affected population, and international policy actors, Haut Uélé province and Kinshasa, 2011–13.

rights abuses.¹¹³ As a civil society report summarized, ‘since Mbororo have a lot of money in the bush and cows, it has been a very lucrative market for the FARDC. Most FARDC want to be posted where there are Mbororo because in few months’ time they become extremely rich.’¹¹⁴

In sum, although the Congolese army hierarchy wanted its soldiers to uphold an image in which the LRA was absent, individual Congolese soldiers did not follow this image. Instead, individual soldiers primarily viewed the LRA through their organizational lens, which focused on survival and enrichment. The image of an active LRA allowed them to account for the loss of ammunition in poaching, to attack the Mbororo and loot cattle, and so on.

Conclusions

This article examined how the different actors involved in the struggle against the LRA have framed the LRA differently. The LRA was viewed through particular frames, which determined how the issue was presented. Bilateral political-historical relations played a crucial role in determining how the issue was perceived and framed. Both Congo–Uganda relations and Uganda–US relations had an important impact on how the LRA was presented. Similarly, the organizational interests of the Congolese army, based on economic enrichment, also played a central role in how the LRA was perceived. The LRA conflict therefore became intrinsically connected with the interests of the various actors involved, which were more important than the actual physical threat posed by the LRA itself. This represents a fragmented and dynamic situation in which every actor sought to defend its particular interests, and in which particular elements of the LRA conflict were purposefully neglected or emphasized in the construction of a particular image. The fact that the actual fate of the LRA was unclear, and that the US added to the interests at stake, further encouraged each of the affected governments to manipulate the framing of the LRA in its own interests.

Three other issues are worth mentioning. First, all of the above does not mean that no contestation of these images took place. On a number of occasions, the Congolese population tried to challenge the denial of the LRA by its authorities, for example by forcing individual soldiers to go after the LRA. The Congolese Catholic Church was also outspoken on the issue. However, these contestations had little impact on the Congolese government’s acknowledgement of the LRA threat, as other interests were more important. For example, when parts of the Congolese population

113. Comite Mbororos, ‘Letter of the comite Mbororos’, Niangara, 21 December 2010, p. 1.

114. Ernest Sugule, ‘Third analysis on LRA activities in Democratic Republic of Congo’ (SAIPED, Dungu, 4 December 2011), pp. 3–4.

established self-defence units in response to the initial LRA threat and the general lack of protection, these units were quickly forbidden by the Congolese governmental authorities, which considered the units a threat to state security. Contestation also occurred within US policy. The clearest example is the US embassy in the DRC, which considered the LRA threat over-emphasized and preferred to prioritize the problems in the Kivu provinces.¹¹⁵ In other words, the centre of gravity of the LRA policy was clearly Washington, even within American foreign policy structures.

This brings us to the second point. Images were often carefully and strategically constructed at a certain level, but such constructions did not necessarily travel well within hierarchies; instead, they became “contaminated” by other frames and interests. This was most clearly illustrated by the contrast between the framing of the LRA by the Congolese central government and by local Congolese army actors. Political-historical relations with Uganda, which were important at the highest level, were only of secondary importance for individual Congolese soldiers. Much more important for the latter was the army’s organizational logic, in which survival and potential enrichment were the key issues. A similar argument can be made for US policy, in which the US embassy in Congo was under less pressure from domestic interests – the advocacy groups mentioned above. Embassy personnel therefore tended to see the LRA as less of a threat and less important than other problems in the country, and also less of a threat and less important than the Washington representation of the LRA.

Third, the fault lines of the conflict are no longer between the LRA and the various actors arrayed against them. Local agendas peripheral to the LRA became part of the LRA conflict, as the LRA became embedded in local areas, amplifying their dynamics and tensions. Examples are the tensions between the Ugandan and Congolese army, the Congolese army and the Mbororo, and the ambiguous relation between individual Congolese soldiers and the local population. All of these tensions have been magnified and further facilitated by the instrumental framing of the LRA by various actors. While these tensions and conflicts were fought openly, they remained hidden in the way the conflict was approached and understood by external interventions. In this way, the presence of the LRA allowed other forms of violence to occur, such as against local populations and the Mbororo. Indeed, any understanding of the evolution and dynamics of the LRA conflict needs to move beyond an understanding of the conflict as a conventional fight between two sides: the LRA committing a range of atrocities versus a ‘coalition of the willing’ of governmental forces that are hunting down the LRA to stop these atrocities.

115. Interviews, governmental and non-governmental policy actors, Washington, Brussels, Kampala, and Kinshasa, 2011–14.