

# **Advantages and Limits of Protracted Low-Intensity Civil War: Northern Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army**

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***Abstract:** This paper argues that a primary reason for protracted, low-intensity civil war in Uganda during the last two decades is that the NRM government of Yoweri Museveni and rebel insurgent movements alike have benefited from such a situation. While there have been over twenty known insurgencies in Uganda since Museveni came to power in 1986, this paper focuses on the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda, arguing that Museveni's government gained political dividends while the LRA gained personal benefits so long as the conflict continued. A shift in the geopolitical landscape, coupled with the diminishing returns of a long-duration, low-level conflict, may explain why both sides have recently renewed and intensified their efforts to negotiate a lasting peace. The paper concludes by identifying two elements – personal security for the rebels, and northern development and integration – that will be critical in order for a negotiated peace to hold.*

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This is an extremely early draft. Feedback is most welcome!

## INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom holds that rebel movements are a threat to political elites and a burden to the state. Thus, it is in the best interests of state functionaries to bring a swift end to such conflicts. A growing body of literature turns conventional wisdom on its head, however, showing that protracted, low-intensity civil war can provide state and rebel actors with the grounds and the means for accumulating short-term benefits. Much of the discussion has focused on extreme examples – the so-called failed states of Liberia, Sierra Leone, or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>1</sup>

This study aims to broaden the literature by examining the case of Uganda, where the persistent but controlled threat of insurgency over a period of more than two decades has served the interests of both political elites and rebel insurgents, while at the same time producing steady growth in the national economy. President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) government enjoyed significant political, economic, and military advantages so long as hostilities with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continued. The NRM's domestic war on terror proved to be a highly effective mode of production, in which political opposition in northern regions of the country was silenced through counter-insurgency measures, economic growth (primarily in the southern regions of the country) was stimulated and national debt curtailed through foreign development assistance and relief aid, and military strength was bolstered through US support. Likewise, prolonged insurgency gave the LRA a reliable and relatively safe method of reproducing itself. LRA members engaged in political, economic, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzschke, *The Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation* (Berghof Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2005); Neil Cooper, "State Collapse as Business: The Role of Conflict Trade and the Emerging Control Agenda," in *State Failure, Collapse and Reconstruction*, ed. Jennifer Milliken (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003); Jeffrey Herbst, "Economic Incentives, Natural Resources, and Conflict in Africa," *Journal of African Economies* 9, no. 3 (2000); J. Peter Pham, "Making Sense of a Senseless War," *Human Rights and Human Welfare* 7 (2007); William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Ingrid Samset, "Conflict of Interests or Interests in Conflict? Diamonds and War in the DRC," *Review of African Political Economy* 93, no. 94 (2002); Manuela Travagianti, "The Role of the State in the Natural Resources and Civil War Paradigm," *Jean Monnet Working Papers in Comparative and International Politics*, University of Catania, October 2006.

military activities in order to strengthen and defend the group's continued existence, thereby securing private benefits for themselves and ensuring their own survival.

After identifying factors that have prolonged the conflict, the second section of the paper briefly considers the question of why peace now seems to be within reach. It argues that recent willingness on the part of both the government of Uganda and LRA rebels to settle the conflict may be explained in terms of an erosion of benefits previously ensured by sustaining low-level hostilities contained in the north. Building on observations about the political economy of violence and its driving mechanisms in Uganda, the paper concludes by suggesting that the peace process must capitalize on recent conditions that have restricted the flow of private and political benefits, making the continuation of civil war unprofitable for both parties at the moment. Given the high level of instability in the Great Lakes region, the fickleness of international donors, and the UN's hesitation to commit further resources toward resolving this conflict, peace negotiators should make every attempt to broker a deal before these strategic advantages evaporate.

## A PECULIAR INSTITUTION – THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE IN UGANDA AND THE ADVANTAGES OF WAR

The northern conflict between LRA rebels and the government, prolonged for more than two decades, has become something like Uganda's own peculiar institution. Popular media, the Ugandan government, and even some scholars have promoted what Rosa Ehrenreich has characterized as "the insanity theory."<sup>2</sup> Such accounts are usually devoted to graphic descriptions of the LRA's brutality against Acholi citizens, suggesting that the only possible explanation for such violence is that Joseph Kony is insane. Others have seized upon ideological elements that make the LRA equally sensational or exotic to western readers, such as the group's initial claim that it wished to establish a new government in Uganda based on the Ten Commandments. It is difficult to read news coverage of the conflict without encountering stock quotes like this one by

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<sup>2</sup> Rosa Ehrenreich, "The Stories We Must Tell: Ugandan Children and the Atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army," *Africa Today* 45, no. 1 (1988), provides a good summary of the various theories used to explain the durability of the LRA conflict. Also, Adam Branch, "Neither Peace nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998," *African Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2005), discusses possible reasons for the Ugandan military's failure and reviews the literature regarding the LRA's motives.

Farmer: “The LRA have combined the fanaticism of a cult with ruthless military efficiency, and while its apparent aim is to impose the Ten Commandments on Uganda its means could scarcely have been more evil.”<sup>3</sup> Implicit in such evaluations is the notion that Joseph Kony and the LRA are exemplars of illogical and amoral African violence. The problem is that statements like Farmer’s, ubiquitous in the popular media, obscure the underlying motivations and interests that perpetuate the conflict. Furthermore, insanity, barbarism, and religious fanaticism suggest irrationality, making negotiations unlikely if not impossible. Such impressions of the rebels as “irrational actors” serves the interests of the Ugandan government, letting Museveni and other high-ranking NRM officials off the hook, since neither Uganda’s citizens nor international observers can blame them for failing to make deals with such people.

Speculation by the popular media on the question of why the LRA continues to fight without any hope of removing Museveni and the NRM from power echoes debates within the academic literature over the agenda of the LRA. Some scholars have taken the position that the LRA has no clear political agenda or strategy. This is the position of Vinci, for instance, who writes that “throughout the conflict neither Kony, nor any other member of the organization, has produced a clear and sustained description of the realistic goals of the organization.”<sup>4</sup> Vinci makes a compelling case for the existential nature of the LRA’s motivations. However, the weakness of his argument is that he denies the influence of the political, economic, and Sudanese factors on the LRA in order to bolster his point. This is because he frames his analysis in terms of motivations rather than benefits, thus failing to see that the political, economic, and Sudanese factors serve as useful strategies to accumulate private benefits. Van Acker, meanwhile, focuses on the LRA’s religious motivations. He suggests that their activities constitute a kind of “religious terrorism,” which does not so much seek “political gains” as it does the rejection of “the rules of society” through violence, which is “divinely decreed, and hence morally justified, almost as a sacramental act.”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, Van Acker’s analysis makes an important contribution to the literature by acknowledging the importance of religious ideology in mobilizing radical social movements and justifying acts of violence. On the other hand, Van

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Farmer, “Uganda Rebel Leader Breaks Silence,” BBC News Online, 28 June 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Vinci, “Existential Motivations in the Lord’s Resistance Army’s Continuing Conflict,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007), p. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Van Acker, “Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army: The New Order No One Ordered,” *African Affairs* 103, no. 412 (2004), p. 349.

Acker's comments also reflect the problem with much of the literature on the LRA. By focusing on the violence rather than the results it produces, analysts fail to grasp the LRA's simple logic and the strategic value of terrorizing its own people.

This paper takes a different explanatory approach by focusing on benefits, suggesting that there are logical reasons why the fighting has continued in northern Uganda, where violence is an engine of economic goods. This approach builds upon the work of David Keen, who, in developing his argument for civil war's economic functions, has shown that conflicts can provide rebel groups and state functionaries with the cover they need to extract valuable resources.<sup>6</sup> The main point is that war can be a lucrative production strategy, not only for a rebel group, but for the state as well.

The following sections will demonstrate that for both Museveni's NRM government and Kony's LRA, low-intensity war provided the justification and the means by which both sides engaged in cheap and easy resource extraction. Meanwhile, the social costs of the conflict – that is, of the LRA's material reproduction and the NRM government's political reproduction – have been paid by the northern Acholi peasantry. In short, the war has continued because the two parties with the most power to end it are the same ones who have the most to lose because they derive benefits from it.

### **Joseph Kony's LRA and the Personal Benefits of War**

Before discussing the benefits gained by the LRA through the perpetuation of war, it is important to say a word about the nature of such benefits. It has sometimes been argued that Joseph Kony's LRA is little more than an armed group of venture capitalists, who use violence and the threat of violence to sustain their way of life and accumulate wealth. Such characterizations, while overly simplistic, point to the fact that for a rebel group like the LRA, the individual interests of its members are tied inextricably to the group's success and survival.

It is important to understand what benefits, if any, the LRA gains by fighting a war it knows it cannot win. I argue that the LRA is not so much concerned with winning as it is with reproduction; that is, the continuation of its existence as an autonomous political community. Because it is an exclusive community sustained through violence against those outside of itself,

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<sup>6</sup> David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998).

the potential for LRA members – especially those born into the organization – to return to wider Ugandan society is foreclosed. Members of the LRA find their *raison d'être* within this alternative community, one with its own hierarchy, cultural and religious institutions, and criteria for assigning rewards, punishments and status. Thus, the LRA has continued because it provides a kind of existential motivation to its members that skews the normal cost-benefit analysis undertaken when considering alternatives to war. The LRA is a relatively small community, perhaps not more than 3,000 persons in all,<sup>7</sup> and because it operates independently of the state, the benefits secured through violence or coercion need not be shared with those outside the organization (e.g., with the Acholi people for whom the LRA claims to be fighting). Furthermore, the personal costs of leaving the organization or giving up the fight are high. Many LRA soldiers now have wives and children in the bush who rely on the LRA's continued activities for their daily provision. Deserters are killed if caught, and those who receive amnesty from the government often endure humiliation and hardship upon returning to their local communities. Work is scarce in northern Uganda, even more so for demobilized rebel soldiers with little education and no technical skills aside from warfare.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Strategies of personal benefit***

For these reasons, the terms “personal,” “private,” and “existential” are used throughout this paper to characterize the kind of benefits received by LRA members in a situation of protracted war. And while it is important to acknowledge that the LRA regularly engages in politics, commerce, and warfare – all ostensibly public endeavors – this does not contradict the fact that the benefits it seeks are of a personal nature. That is, the LRA's public activities – such

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Gersony, *The Anguish of Northern Uganda*, report submitted to the US Embassy, Kampala and USAID mission, Kampala, August 1997, p. 35, gives a figure of between 3,000 – 4,000. A more recent report by Tim Allen, *War and Justice in Northern Uganda: An Assessment of the International Criminal Court's Intervention* (London: Crisis States Research Centre and Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, 2005), p. iii, estimates the total number of people with the LRA, including women and children, to be between 1,000 – 2,000.

<sup>8</sup> These factors all come under what Vinci refers to as the “existential motivations” of the LRA. It is also important to note Blattman's research in northern Uganda, which found that economic disadvantages created by the loss of education and training were the single most significant barrier to the reintegration of former child soldiers. See Christopher Blattman, “The Consequences of War and the Determinants of Successful Reintegration of Youth Combatants in Africa” (paper presented at the African Studies Association Conference, 2006).

as village raids, abductions, attacks on the government's Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) soldiers, and even peace negotiations – are reoriented toward private ends.

In order to understand the logic of LRA violence, it is necessary to recognize that prolonging the conflict actually creates political, economic, and military opportunities, which the group in turn uses to reproduce and preserve itself as an independent organization. Violence and the restraint of violence has been used as a strategy to exert political influence over Ugandan citizens and against Museveni's government that would accrue personal benefits to LRA members. In 1996, for instance, the LRA declared a ceasefire in order for northerners to vote in the presidential elections. Museveni's opponent, Ssemogerere, was the clear winner in Acholiland – in some locations receiving up to ten times more votes than Museveni. Despite this, Museveni carried the more populous southern provinces, giving him the national victory. After Ssemogerere's defeat, Kony again stepped up his attacks.<sup>9</sup>

Even in the absence of a clear and sustained articulation of political demands by a rebel group like the LRA, the use of violence against civilians has a "political rationale" directed ultimately at self-preservation.<sup>10</sup> Excessive force combined with the unpredictability of LRA attacks gave LRA field commanders a logistical advantage beyond their actual capabilities. Abductees were forced to kill, or witness the killing of, friends and family members, identifying them with murder and preventing them from leaving the LRA.<sup>11</sup> Through strategic use of violence, a relatively small group of LRA rebels exercised control over a vast population. At one point, over 2 million civilians were living in so-called "protective villages" or IDP camps. Importantly, the result was not only fear of the LRA, but also widespread criticism of the government's inability to provide security for its citizens.<sup>12</sup> More research is needed on the political strategies employed by the LRA. However, it is clear from these examples that the LRA has benefited from over twenty years of conflict in the region, using violence as a means of exerting its own political pressure and safeguarding its private interests.

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<sup>9</sup> Branch, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot, "Kony's Message: A New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda," *African Affairs* 98 (1999), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> For an evaluation of the extent and nature of displacement generated by the civil war in northern Uganda, see Paul Omach, *Civil War and Internal Displacement in Northern Uganda: 1986-1998* (Kampala: NURRU Publications, 2002).

In addition to using political strategies to achieve its interests, the LRA has also pursued what may be called economic strategies of personal benefit. Indeed, one of the most basic explanations for the LRA's continuation of the conflict is that it serves as a profit-making enterprise for those involved. Interviews with various aid workers, officials, and analysts in northern Uganda all point to the fact that the LRA's primary source of supplies is through raiding operations in the region. "Trucks carrying valuable goods are regularly looted, especially for anything that can easily be sold in the trading centers, such as bicycle tires or farm tools. Similarly, the LRA will loot villages, IDP camps, and, to a lesser extent, World Food Programme food aid."<sup>13</sup> The insecurity in northern Uganda spawns its own type of informal, wartime economy from which the LRA is more easily able to siphon off revenue. There is an extensive literature on how international interventions such as humanitarian aid can be used by rebels to prolong the conflict. Even the peace process itself, can be used by rebel leaders as a vehicle for their own personal enrichment, "it should come as no surprise, therefore, that African transition elites do all they can to prolong these transitions for as long as possible."<sup>14</sup> Like other groups in the Great Lakes region, the LRA has learned that rebellion can be a legitimate and lucrative business. By prolonging the conflict, LRA members are able to make a better livelihood for themselves and for their families than if they returned to civilian life.

The use of military force is a third, and obvious, strategy deployed by the LRA to strengthen and defend its continued existence and secure for its members private benefits. One frequently cited explanation for the protracted conflict is that the LRA has acted as proxy for the government of Sudan, which armed the LRA in order to punish Uganda for supporting the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) insurgency in Southern Sudan.<sup>15</sup> Assistance from the northern Sudanese government has not only allowed the LRA to continue their lifestyle of rebellion, it has also legitimized and professionalized their activities – they became well-paid mercenaries fighting against the government of Uganda and the SPLA. With rear bases in Sudan, the LRA has until recently operated with a free hand, taking advantage of the protection, security, and immunity that a wealthy patron offered.

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<sup>13</sup> Vinci, p. 343.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Englebert and Denis Tull, "Flawed Assumptions about State Reconstruction in Africa" (paper presented at the African Studies Association Conference, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Prunier, "Rebel Movements and Proxy Warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986-1999)," *African Affairs* 103, no. 412 (2004), p. 359.

In summary, the political, economic, and military activities of the LRA are first and foremost, instruments of reproduction – strategies whose ultimate goal is the continued existence of the LRA and the personal benefit of its members. This section has shown how each of these three “strategies of personal benefit” has been deployed by the LRA. Contrary to the insanity theorists, there is, in fact, compelling evidence to suggest that rational calculations guide the LRA’s actions and shape their agendas. Continuing the insurgency has made logical sense because it served the LRA’s private interests.

### **Museveni’s NRM Government and the Political Benefits of War**

The central aim of this section is to analyze why Museveni has failed to resolve the conflict in the north; is it because he is unable or unwilling? According to Van Acker’s analysis, the government has taken a “three-pronged strategy” against the LRA: “applying substantial military pressure on the insurgents, thinning out their ranks with offers of amnesty, or reviving the political process through negotiations.”<sup>16</sup> He argues that the NRM makes use of and reverses these policies depending on present circumstances and perceptions, but that there have been “many missed opportunities for peace.”<sup>17</sup> By this account, Museveni and the NRM have made serious and strategic efforts to resolve the conflict but have simply been unable to do so.

Others, like Doom and Vlassenroot,<sup>18</sup> Reno,<sup>19</sup> and Mwenda and Tangri,<sup>20</sup> take a more critical view of the government’s actions and intentions. This paper argues similarly by exploring the ways Museveni and his government have benefited from the conflict and the way incentive structures evolved to favor continuation of the conflict. Such an approach draws upon Reno’s observation that in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the former Zaire, leaders of weak states continued to function through the adoption of warlord politics, consolidating political power through control over markets and private accumulation by means of personal networks of

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<sup>16</sup> Van Acker, p. 337.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot.

<sup>19</sup> William Reno, “Uganda’s Politics of War and Debt Relief,” *Review of International Political Economy* 9, no. 3 (2002); “War, Debt, and the Role of Pretending in Uganda’s International Relations,” *Occasional Paper*, Centre for African Studies, University of Copenhagen, July 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew M. Mwenda and Roger Tangri, “Patronage Politics, Donor Reforms, and Regime Consolidation in Uganda,” *African Affairs* 104, no. 416 (2005).

affiliation.<sup>21</sup> The importance of Reno's work here is the notion that political figures, entrusted with overseeing institutions intended to deliver public goods, may also use their privileged access as state functionaries to manipulate these institutions, thereby giving them political advantages. Although Uganda can hardly be classified as a warlord state, the same principles may be observed. The following discussion considers three categories of benefits that Museveni and the NRM received by prolonging the conflict in northern Uganda – political benefits, military benefits, and economic benefits. While these factors are inextricably interconnected, they shall be discussed separately for the sake of organization.

### ***Political benefits***

The Acholi are of little political significance to the NRM. They are one of several dozen ethnic groups in Uganda and a minority at that. This means that while conflict in Acholiland undermines Museveni's popularity in the north, he does not need Acholi support to stay in power. As long as the violence is contained to the north, most southerners do not bother about the conflict and even perceive it to be an inter-Acholi war.<sup>22</sup>

As his re-election in 2006 demonstrated, Museveni's reluctance to resolve the northern conflict has worked to his direct political advantage in at least two respects. First, his primary constituents in the southern provinces, who are also beneficiaries of NRM policies, have little reason to pressure his government to make a peace deal with the LRA.

Second, Museveni's most formidable political opposition, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), is strongest in the north.<sup>23</sup> Encouraging a situation of instability and insecurity in northern Uganda is an easy way for NRM leaders to disenfranchise thousands of Ugandan citizens and effectively hamstring the opposition. Known for his hostility against multi-party democracy and opposition leaders, Museveni has often used the northern conflict to crack down on potential political opposition by tying opposition groups to the LRA and attacking rivals who question his government's actions in the north.<sup>24</sup> As Bøås points out, "the government's attempt

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<sup>21</sup> Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

<sup>22</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> FDC presidential candidate Kizza Besigye received 37% of the vote to Museveni's 59% in the last election.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence E. Cline, "Spirits and the Cross: Religiously Based Violent Movements in Uganda," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14 (2003), p. 124.

to link main opposition politicians to armed rebel movements such as the LRA ...is a message to the population at large about what constitutes the alternative to Museveni's NRM."<sup>25</sup> Neighboring Rwanda has also been accused of seeking to destabilize Uganda through involvement with the LRA.<sup>26</sup> Museveni's rhetoric reveals a pattern in which the conflict in the north is used as a stick to beat people into loyalty to the NRM. Cline summarizes the point well: "Clearly, in various ways the continued existence of the northern insurgencies has been of some political use to the government in cracking down on potential political opposition."<sup>27</sup> Museveni's frequent criticism of grassroots and non-governmental institutions (NGOs) working to negotiate a peace settlement only underscores the political benefits he has gained by perpetuating the conflict.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Military benefits***

Closely related to the political benefits of the conflict are the military benefits. The proper maintenance and administration of a disciplined military sector is essential to citizens' security, and Uganda's bloody history illustrates the importance of control of the army for accessing power in Ugandan politics.<sup>29</sup> As a "successful" guerrilla leader himself, one would expect that Museveni should be able to eradicate the LRA by military means. Yet, there is significant evidence to show that the army has contributed to the continuation of the conflict and that some in the military benefit from it. Bøås says it best:

The durability of the rebellion is, however, also a creation of the Ugandan army. The peace attempt in 1994 could have succeeded. Kony clearly indicated that he wanted to come out of the bush with all his fighters. Negotiations towards this end started, but stopped when the NRA commanders insisted that the only thing to

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<sup>25</sup> Morten Bøås, "Uganda in the Regional War Zone: Meta-Narratives, Pasts and Presents," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 22, no. 3 (2004), p. 297.

<sup>26</sup> A. Murunga, "Who is Fuelling the Conflict in North Uganda?" *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, February 7, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Cline, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> See Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, *Soldiers and Kinsmen in Uganda: The Making of a Military Ethnocracy* (London: Sage, 1975); Dan Mudola, "The Role of the Army in Society: Lessons from Uganda," in *The Quest for Constitutionalism in Africa: Selected Essays on Constitutionalism, the Nationality Problem, Military Rule and Party Politics*, ed. Asmeleash Beyene and Gelase Mutahaba (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

negotiate was the total surrender of the LRA. ... The consequence was that the LRA left the negotiations and struck a deal with Khartoum instead. Years of war and terror were to follow ... Through cell phones, the LRA commanders continue to talk to key Acholian leaders almost on a daily basis, but unfortunately most of these attempts at rebuilding trust between the Acholian elders and their 'lost boys' in the LRA have failed due to misunderstanding or have been sabotaged by elements within the Ugandan army.<sup>30</sup>

The blatant subversion of the peace talks in 1994 makes it obvious that elements within the NRM and UPDF wanted the LRA to continue to exist. Museveni's refusal of Kony's request for six months to gather his troops and to leave the bush under the protection of UN observers, together with his public announcement that Kony had seven days to come out or be annihilated, reveals less about his certainty in the capabilities of the military than his concern to keep Kony and his followers in the bush. Thus, while Branch notes that Museveni has used the military "to repress political organization among the Acholi to ensure that they could not effectively demand an end to the war," it is also the case that Museveni has at times used the UPDF to cripple or wreck the peace process.<sup>31</sup>

As an organization, the UPDF itself may be to blame for perpetuating the conflict. Poor administration and a low-grade war economy have cropped up around the conflict, allowing senior officers to profit from allowances, cattle rustling, and trafficking in army fuel and goods, among other revenue-generating practices.<sup>32</sup> Thus, and with no real political reason to resolve the conflict, Museveni has given public lipservice to ending the war while privately encouraging its continuation in part because it keeps the army loyal by benefiting high military officials who might otherwise threaten his power to rule.

The government of Uganda has long given the impression that it and the UPDF can do little unless the LRA decides on its own to give up the fight, and the international community has obediently delivered development and humanitarian aid. However, it is worth pointing out that "Uganda's military ... has shown considerable capacity to control territory and accumulate resources." During the height of Uganda's occupation in eastern Congo in the late 1990s, Uganda had about 10,000 soldiers and occupied an area larger than Uganda itself.<sup>33</sup> The irony of

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<sup>30</sup> Bøås, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> Branch, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Van Acker, p. 354.

<sup>33</sup> Reno, "Uganda's Politics of War and Debt Relief," p. 416.

the situation is clearly recognized by northern Ugandans, who rightly ask the question: “How can the president support the SPLA, the RPF and Kabila and still pretend that he is lacking the means to protect the Acholis from the LRA, a first step towards peace?”<sup>34</sup> The ability to exert such military power in the DRC while claiming to be unable to deal with an insurgency of a few thousand people over twenty years, even considering Sudan’s damaging interference, makes the NRM’s protestations difficult to believe. Something else must be at play.

### *Economic benefits*

In addition to political and military benefits, Museveni and his government reap economic benefits from the northern conflict. Northern Uganda has no natural resources of commercial interest, so economic plundering was not the impetus for conflict as it has been elsewhere in Africa such as in Sierra Leone, the DRC, or even Nigeria. Nevertheless, because of the continued military presence and insecurity in the region, a low-level war economy has sprouted and become deeply entrenched. It is hardly surprising that various actors – from national leaders all the way down to local officials – have come to rely on these new economic arrangements and do whatever necessary to sustain them. This is what Doom refers to when he states that “some government agents or officials are blocking the peace process in the pursuit of a private agenda.”<sup>35</sup> There is also some question of the government’s motives in setting up the controversial protective villages to which many Acholi have been forced to move at the army’s coercion. Considering the north’s colonial history as a labor reservoir for southern commercial endeavors, some have even suggested that the effort to move Acholis off their farms into camps amounts to little more than forced proletarianization.<sup>36</sup>

International development assistance also plays a significant role in any discussion of economic benefits that may come as a result of perpetuating the LRA conflict. A large portion of Uganda’s federal budget and private sector operations rely on foreign aid. The conflict in the north, but particularly the specter of child soldiers and protective villages, provides the government with a powerful bargaining chip in its negotiations with donors. After all, what aid agency or western government wants to cut funding to a government that is trying to save its

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<sup>34</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Van Acker, p. 343.

people – especially its children – from abduction, mutilation, rape, and other brutalities? And while Museveni’s government does an excellent job of using the conflict with the LRA (and Uganda’s reputation as structural adjustment’s success story) to keep the aid flowing, many analysts now believe that such assistance actually weakens “internal incentives to build effective administration.”<sup>37</sup> The bottom line is that Museveni’s government depends on foreign aid for its economic and political survival, and any means of securing aid that does not pose significant disadvantages will be used. The northern conflict certainly fits the criteria, making foreign assistance another means of profit-generation for Museveni’s government.

***Summary remarks on the benefits of prolonged, low-intensity conflict***

This analysis has aimed to bring together evidence of the major ways that both parties to the conflict in northern Uganda seem to use the war to their advantage for political, economic, and military benefits. It does not argue that the LRA or Museveni’s NRM instigated the conflict for the sake of accumulating benefits. Instead, it supports the observation that “the longer a civil war, the more likely it becomes that people will find ways to profit from it,”<sup>38</sup> which suggests that the reasons for continuing a conflict are often different from the reasons that a conflict began. In the case of the LRA’s insurgency, fought over such a long duration, the structures have become entrenched and self-sustaining and therefore dependent on the conflict’s continuation. Thus, both sides have had incentives to perpetuate the war. For ordinary soldiers, it is a means of ensuring regular income and provision for them and their families. For Museveni and regional and international leaders, it has been a way to bolster political positions and serve their own political agendas.<sup>39</sup> And for Kony and his commanders, profiteers in the business and military sector, and even government officials, it has been an opportunity to accumulate wealth, power, and a certain degree of prestige.

SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS AND DIMINISHING RETURNS OF WAR –  
LIMITS TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE IN UGANDA

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<sup>37</sup> Reno, “Uganda’s Politics of War and Debt Relief,” p. 419.

<sup>38</sup> Keen, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Doom and Vlassenroot, pp. 35-6.

As noted above, war can be a lucrative production strategy for both parties involved, but it is difficult to sustain over an extended period of time. Renewed efforts at peace negotiations between Museveni's NRM and Kony's LRA suggest that there are, in fact, limits to the benefits gained through sustaining violence and instability. The following section identifies several possible reasons for the current transformation in the political landscape – namely, factors which formerly made it advantageous for each party to sustain a low-level conflict have now changed. Taken together, these factors have resulted in diminished resources for both the LRA (e.g., personal wealth, security, and arms for making a livelihood of fighting) and Museveni's government (e.g., diminished political credibility inside Uganda, which weakens the NRM's monopoly on political power, and diminished political credibility abroad, which threatens the flow of essential foreign aid). Such geopolitical changes have simultaneously threatened to starve the Ugandan economy and undermined Museveni's political hold, as well as hampered the LRA's ability to sustain itself as an autonomous and “untouchable” political community. In short, the conflict is now “ripe for resolution.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Kony's LRA and the Personal Costs of Continuing the War**

There are several factors that make continuing the war personally costly to Kony and the LRA. One such factor is due to political shifts in the region. As part of the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed between the northern Government of Sudan (GoS) and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Khartoum agreed that it would no longer fund LRA operations, which had formerly been directed at destabilizing northern Uganda and weakening the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). In fact, the LRA has found itself in opposition to its former patron. As early as 2004, it was reported that the LRA began fighting GoS troops and raiding GoS villages.<sup>41</sup> In an interview Kony threatened the Sudanese government, saying, “I want to tell the Sudanese lords to keep away from us because if they

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<sup>40</sup> See William I. Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> Vinci, p. 344.

attack us as they have done this month [March], we will fight and set their villages on fire.”<sup>42</sup>

The GoS has responded to such threats by actively combating the LRA, as well as forming an alliance with the SPLA and UPDF to do the same. The result has crippled the LRA, significantly reducing its funding, access to arms, and ability to sustain itself, including its women and children. Most recent reports by MONUC forces operating in DR Congo suggest that the LRA has broken into several smaller groups, resorting to banditry for daily survival.<sup>43</sup>

A second factor that has eroded personal benefits enjoyed by LRA members is the comprehensive Amnesty Act, enacted by Uganda in January 2000. It has helped to sap support for the LRA, as fighters (some commanders as well as child soldiers) have trickled out of the forest and returned home to receive social and economic reintegration benefits provided by the legislation. The promise of amnesty and financial packages makes it more difficult for the LRA to retain its fighting force and weakens morale. On the government’s side, there is little to lose. The DDR program has been funded largely by international donors, not by the government of Uganda, reinforcing the old pattern that the NRM is only willing to settle with the rebels so long as it does not cost anything.<sup>44</sup>

A final factor to consider is the reduction in personal security felt by LRA leaders. The International Criminal Court has issued warrants for the arrest of the top five LRA commanders. Such action has raised the stakes for Kony and his commanders, since they now risk being captured by MONUC forces in DR Congo or by other government forces elsewhere, which would be obliged to hand them over for ICC prosecution for crimes against humanity. There is little doubt, then, that the ICC indictments have combined with the other factors mentioned above to push the LRA into its present talks with the NRM.

## **Museveni’s NRM and the Political Costs of Continuing the War**

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<sup>42</sup> IRIN News, “Sudanese Militia Vow to Fight LRA Rebels,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, April 20, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Albert Caramés, Vicenç Fisas and Eneko Sanz, *Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Report: Uganda* (Barcelona: School for a Culture of Peace, Spanish International Co-operation Agency, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> See Caramés, *et alia* for further detailed evaluation of the DDR process in Uganda.

If there are compelling arguments to suggest that the LRA now stands to benefit from a peace settlement, the evidence that exists for the government of Uganda is even greater. The constellation of factors comprising the old system that for so long provided the NRM with political and economic benefits has undergone a shift. New developments at the national, regional, and international level have converged to hold the government of Uganda more accountable to the northern Acholi and to the international community. The costs to Museveni for prolonging the conflict and the benefits to be obtained through peace now outweigh the advantages of a war-time economy.

Museveni has come under increasing external pressure to solve the northern conflict, and to develop the north. The United Kingdom alone has pulled \$36 million in aid for the second year in a row, directing it instead to northern development efforts. Uganda's average economic growth rate may stand at %6, but such progress has been at the expense of northern development, which donors are hesitant to continue to fund. Museveni has good reason to be concerned about the sustainability of Uganda's economic growth should foreign donors and capital investors pull out.<sup>45</sup> Here are a few of the factors:

1. Museveni needs to attract foreign investment to increase industrialization, which has remained minimal and hurt Uganda's economic recovery. Failure to bring peace and stability in Uganda decreases the likelihood that foreign investors will view Uganda as a safe place to do business.
2. Now that a peace agreement has been signed between northern and southern Sudan, Uganda hopes to take advantage of development efforts and economic growth opportunities generated by an oil-rich southern Sudan, but it can only do this if northern Uganda is itself stable. Uganda's main competitor, Kenya, already has an economic advantage. Insecurity and lack of essential infrastructure due to rebel activities places Ugandan business and government at a distinct disadvantage when

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<sup>45</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Uganda's economy is not, in fact, a glowing success story, and that structural adjustment policies have encouraged government corruption and consolidation of power. See Arne Bigsten and Steve Kayizzi-Mugerwa Bigsten, *Is Uganda an Emerging Economy?* A report for the OECD project "Emerging Africa," May 1999; and Mwenda and Tangri.

competing for lucrative business contracts because Uganda will find it more difficult to provide reliable services to its northern neighbor.<sup>46</sup>

3. Continued civil war with the LRA only tarnishes Uganda's position in the East Africa Community, which is comprised of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and more recently Rwanda and Burundi. Currently, Uganda is the only country to suffer from widely (internationally) publicized insecurity, which puts it at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the other community members. With the fast-tracking of the process toward political as well as economic integration comes increased regional pressure on Uganda to clean up its act.

In addition to external pressures to end the war, there is growing domestic pressure for political liberalization in Uganda. This, combined with Museveni's need to satisfy western donor nations by implementing democratic reforms in order to receive western aid makes his regime vulnerable. Museveni has been forced to implement multi-party elections, which means that he can no longer afford to isolate the north. In the past, marginalization of the north was not only possible but politically advantageous, since it represented the main challenge to Museveni's government. But beginning in the 1990s, northern representation in Parliament was required. In the most recent multi-party elections opponents to Museveni gained significant ground in the north and the east. Museveni's political survival may now hinge upon his ability to bring an end to decades of fighting and work toward northern development and integration.

## PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN UGANDA – DISMANTLING THE SYSTEM

While a lot of emphasis has been placed on negotiations between the Ugandan government and senior members of LRA rebel forces, it will take more than a signed agreement to keep rebels from returning to the forest with their weapons. There are two major factors that will determine whether Kony and his rebels agree to surrender, and whether peace can be sustained in Uganda more generally.

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<sup>46</sup> See John Young, "Sudan's Changing Relations with its Neighbors and the Implications for War and Peace" (paper delivered at *Money Makes the War Go Round? The EU and Transforming the Economy of War in Sudan Conference*, Brussels, June 12-13, 2002).

The first has to deal with their personal security following disarmament. This makes the current indictments of the International Criminal Court a major topic of speculation. The concern of the ICC is to show that there is not impunity for rebels. The Ugandan government must walk a tight line between appeasing the ICC and giving the rebels some assurance that they will not simply be handed over.<sup>47</sup> The most recent report by the International Crisis Group suggests that one way forward may be for the remaining rebel leaders to be given sanctuary in a country that is not party to the ICC agreement.<sup>48</sup> While this is quite a controversial suggestion, everyone involved recognizes the unlikelihood that the LRA leaders will agree to disarm if they are not guaranteed some form of immunity. ICC indictments and international attention, however, may also provide the LRA with the assurance they need that Museveni will honor a peace deal that guarantees their immunity. From this perspective, ICC charges that are eventually withdrawn may not do the job in preventing impunity, but they will have brought peace. Given the enormous cost of prolonged war in northern Uganda, it is likely that few will complain if peace is finally achieved and security returns to the region.<sup>49</sup>

The second factor determining a lasting peace will have to do with northern development and integration. Security must be returned, as it has been the main reason for government-sponsored underdevelopment in the form of “protective villages.” Northern integration and development is a cause which Kony’s LRA has increasingly championed as of late, perhaps in an effort to make claims to legitimacy as a political opposition rather than a self-interested warlord. On this score, it seems that Kony has used international attention to his advantage. Museveni is in a difficult position if he does not make peace with Kony. Now that all the world is watching, Kony has made the wise move of presenting genuine political complaints. Deep cleavages in Ugandan society will need to be addressed in order for peace in the north to last. Mechanisms to ensure more equal development and north-south integration will go a long way in addressing the

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<sup>47</sup> Tim Allen, *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord’s Resistance Army* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), “Northern Uganda: Seizing the Opportunity for Peace,” Kampala/Nairobi/Brussels: ICG Africa Report No. 124, April 26, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> The ICC’s role in facilitating peace is hotly contested. Critics claim that their indictment ruins hopes of Kony agreeing to a peace. Proponents of the ICC have argued that the ICC (if given a free hand) will discourage future abuses by rebels or dictators - they credit the ICC indictments for bringing Kony and his cronies to the negotiating table in the first place.

ethnicization of politics and social inequalities and turmoil that have plagued Uganda since its independence.

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