

Fuelling Fear

THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY AND SMALL ARMS



In Obalanga, northern Uganda, 46 bodies are exhumed from the bush for burial in June 2005. The incursions of LRA rebels into Teso sub-region in 2003 left thousands of people dead. © AFP/Getty Images

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a non-state armed group that forces children to fight a war using small arms. The war is directed, for the most part, against the civilian population of northern Uganda.

This chapter, which is based on field research conducted with former LRA fighters, explores the LRA's dependence on small arms; how it acquires, stores, and maintains its weapons; and how weapons and ammunition are used by the group.

The following are among the main findings of this chapter:

- The LRA depends on small arms to conduct its operations.
- The LRA requires few resources other than small arms and people to use them.
- Children are easily captured, indoctrinated, and trained to use small arms.
- Small arms facilitate a deliberate policy of terrorizing the civilian population.
- The LRA acquires small arms constantly and keeps them in good repair.
- Weapons have been cached throughout northern Uganda and southern Sudan.
- Plentiful arms stocks mean the LRA is far from finished as a fighting force.

The scale of the problem

The LRA commits massacres and atrocities, and abducts children,

using extreme violence to force them to become soldiers. An estimated 25,000 to 30,000 children have been abducted since 1987. Some have escaped; others have died from violence, disease, hunger, and exhaustion. Children now constitute between 80 and 90 per cent of the LRA's fighting force.

In the past 19 years, the fighting has killed thousands of people and displaced close to 1.3 million within northern Uganda. Although people are often attacked with knives and agricultural implements, small arms remain the fundamental facilitators of violence. They are used to corral people and to prevent them from escaping.

The Ugandan army has not been able to defeat the LRA militarily. It fights the LRA with armoured personnel carriers, aircraft, and around 40,000 troops, thereby curtailing some of the LRA's activities and disrupting its supply lines. But, although the LRA has declined in numbers, has few resources, and has difficulty moving equipment, it is able to continue fighting, killing, and abducting. Because it is well equipped with small arms, it is able to attack the local population and the Ugandan army in both Uganda and neighbouring Sudan.

The LRA and small arms: a snapshot

Small arms are the most suitable weapon for the LRA's operations, and the group consequently uses few larger weapons. The supply and maintenance of small arms is therefore a crucial gauge of the LRA's capacity to continue fighting.

Table 11.2 LRA weapon inventory: past and present

Frequently used:

Kalashnikov derivatives (particularly Chinese Type 56/56-2 rifle)
Type 81/RPK light machine gun
PKM light machine gun

Less frequently used:

B-10
RPG
60 mm mortar

Past inventory/rarely used:

FN-FAL/SLR
G3
81 mm mortar
12.7 mm anti-aircraft gun
SPG-9
SA-7

Note: The LRA also stocks hand grenades and landmines.

Sources: Interviews with a wide range of persons in Gulu and Kampala, 21–27 May 2005

Holdings: For the most part, the LRA uses assault rifles and light machine guns, reserving the use of larger weapons, such as RPGs, for attacks on light armoured vehicles. Even when the Sudanese government supplied heavier weapons, the LRA used mainly small arms because it needed to be highly mobile. Current weapon holdings reflect this, with the LRA stocking very few heavy weapons.

Acquisition: Northern Uganda and the surrounding countries are awash with small arms. The LRA is able to capture and trade weapons amid this plentiful supply. In many cases, it is able to do so because it is well armed. In short, as has been the case with armed groups elsewhere, arms beget arms.

Stocks: The LRA has two broad and connected systems in place for storing arms and ammunition: large caches of potentially hundreds of weapons buried in the far north of Uganda and southern Sudan, and small, local caches scattered throughout Uganda. While the LRA's care of weapons is often rudimentary, it appears to be effective. Not only are the weapons currently used by the LRA serviceable, but many of those cached are also likely to be so for many years to come.

Prospects: The LRA is unlikely to be short of either arms or ammunition, even though recent UPDF operations have made it more difficult for the LRA to resupply. A simple equation determines the future of the LRA: if it has weapons, it can abduct, and, because it can abduct and arm fighters, it can continue fighting. Solving this equation requires either removing sources of small arms or stopping the LRA from abducting.

The chapter concludes that the current military approach to the conflict adds to the small arms problem in northern Uganda. Largely due to government and military policies of arming sections of society against the LRA and other armed groups, levels of armament among the civilian population in the region have risen sharply. This situation contributes to a cycle of insecurity and further armament, of which the conflict with the LRA is but a part. ▀