

My name is Jolly Okot and I'm an Acholi from Uganda who has seen the effects of war firsthand. I grew up with Joseph Kony as children in the same village, not knowing what he would one day turn into.

In 1986, as a teenager, I was walking the 10 miles home from my boarding school in northern Uganda, and came across a roadblock set up by a group of rebels. They detained me, and I began to hear gunshots. I turned to see a commander draw a pistol and shoot two people in their feet. This was my introduction to what was then called the Holy Spirit movement, and what soon after took shape as the Lord's Resistance Army. That day, I myself was abducted.

I spent the next two years with the rebels, forced to fight, forced to steal from my own people at gunpoint, and repeatedly raped by commanders.

When I finally managed to escape, the LRA retaliated by going to my village and killing my uncle. A year later, they returned to my village and killed 21 of my cousins in a single night.

What was done to my family is still happening today in central Africa. The LRA started out as a popular rebellion in northern Uganda to overthrow the government, but they quickly lost support as Kony attacked our own people, abducting children as young as 5 to join his ranks. Since 2006, the LRA has been pushed out of Uganda, which is now peaceful. Yet Kony continues to terrorize communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan.

As a Ugandan who grew up with Kony, it is especially painful to witness this conflict now impacting Uganda's neighbors. Kony has no achievable political agenda; he and his top commanders are fighting only for survival, and they are doing it at the expense of the local population. Since 2008, the LRA have killed over 2,400 people in central Africa, and abducted over 3,400 others. Nearly a half a million people are currently displaced in the region, still living in fear. These people are living in the remotest parts of the countries, and their own governments have done little to stop the LRA. Late last year, I heard testimonies from many local leaders during a civil society workshop held in Dungu. People came from DRC, CAR, and South Sudan, and nearly all of those in the workshop are part of one ethnic group, the Azande. Because of the inaction of regional government on the issue, delegates expressed the feeling that the LRA war is an attempt by their governments to eliminate the Azande people. It is being perceived by the local population as an attempt at genocide.

I have dedicated my life to working with communities affected by LRA violence. After I escaped abduction, I went back to school, realizing that education is the key to creating change. I began supporting Sudanese refugees and started working with organizations such as Oxfam, MSF, InterAid and UNHCR before

meeting the founders of Invisible Children and taking on the role as the director of Invisible Children's programs in Uganda. For the last two years, I have helped to expand programs in DR Congo and CAR to work directly with the currently affected population.

This past December, I was in the town of Dungu, DRC meeting with women's groups from South Sudan, Congo and Central African Republic. In the meeting, most of them discussed the level of atrocities committed by the LRA in their different villages. I met with several girls who had just returned from abduction, and when they talked to me about what they had gone through -- being given forcefully as wives to commanders -- it broke my heart. It was a fresh reminder of exactly what I had gone through, and what we in Uganda suffered for two decades. I met a young Congolese girl of 14 years who had been abducted by the LRA. Coming from Uganda, we don't share even a single word in our languages, so normally having a translator is necessary to communicate. But when I met this young Congolese girl, I found that she spoke my language perfectly, as a result of her time with the LRA. It was shocking to be in a foreign place, seeing such a high level of trauma, and realizing that the language spoken by the LRA had been exported to innocent young people in Congo. It made me realize that these people from South Sudan, Congo and Central African Republic are my brothers and sisters, just as much as my Ugandan brothers and sisters. They are suffering the same terror that we suffered for so many years. Although Kony has moved out of northern Uganda, he is still terrorizing innocent victims and we must join together and stand up for them.

Despite recent advances by the African Union, there has been little cooperation between the countries that have been affected by the LRA on a joint solution. Victims and local leaders are asking for the intervention of the international community -- and especially the US government -- to encourage better regional coordination, and to pressure President Kabila to acknowledge the threat of the LRA and allow regional forces the opportunity to pursue them in DR Congo. Likewise, the LRA should not be given safe haven in Darfur, or anywhere else in the region, and the US should help diplomatically to ensure this.

As we focus on bringing LRA atrocities to an end, we should embrace a holistic approach to bringing to an end to this war that has been going on for the past 26 years. Since peace came to northern Uganda in 2006, we have seen a rapid increase in development. Poverty rates dropped from 65% in 2004 to less than 45% today. I acknowledge the great support of the US government and the American people on the ground. There is a lot that has been done to support the victims of the LRA directly through USAID, US-based NGOs and private funding from young people across the country who have supported Invisible Children and our local partners to carry out life-changing work. Recently, young Invisible Children supporters have raised funds for the expansion of 27 high frequency radios that provide an early warning of LRA attack to communities in the countries where the LRA now operates. Young people have funded the region's

first rehabilitation center in DR Congo, and they have helped us to fund construction of community-led FM projects that encourage safe LRA defection. Young people -- particularly young Americans -- are changing the landscape for LRA affected communities, and they should be commended for their dedication and enthusiasm.

The US has been at the forefront of international efforts, and we have welcomed this leadership. But progress has been slow to reach the ground, and in some areas altogether absent. More efforts are needed, especially in currently affected areas like southeast CAR.

Defeating Kony requires more than just seeing his arrest. LRA forces survive by exploiting the remoteness and lack of infrastructure in the areas of operation. Addressing this requires a multifaceted approach. I speak on behalf of the victims in central Africa to call for four things in particular. One, increased civilian protection, including early warning systems and infrastructure projects like the rehabilitation of key roads. Two, expanding demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) efforts, particularly in CAR, where FM radio broadcasts and leaflet distribution can be effective at encouraging peaceful LRA surrender. Three, increased support for rehabilitation and reconstruction initiatives, ensuring that the highest levels of trauma can be addressed. And finally, strengthened intelligence and logistical support to the regional forces pursuing top LRA leadership. The deployment of advisors has been a positive development in this regard, though we have received numerous reports that there should be fewer restrictions in their mobility to provide better support to regional efforts in the field.

Now, words have to translate into results. The solutions being discussed should be acted upon swiftly and courageously, so that peace can be restored to the region. The world is watching and waiting to see what will happen this year, and we have the opportunity to join together, after 26 years, to deliver the results.