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Invisible Children: Advocating an interventionist policy in Africa

By Alex Bookbinder

Synopsis

Activist organisation Invisible Children is calling for American military cooperation to arrest notorious war criminal Joseph Kony in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is poorly conceived policy, is a misuse of resources, and may be potentially destabilising for global supply chains.

Commentary

INVISIBLE CHILDREN Inc, an activist and development organisation based in San Diego, California, has, through its documentaries and social media campaigns, successfully raised awareness of the atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda, in the United States and other countries.

Its latest video, entitled 'Kony 2012,' uploaded to YouTube on 5 March 2012, has been viewed by more than seventy-five million people in its first week online. The video depicts Kony as a tyrannical human rights abuser whose crimes pose a serious threat to regional stability and security.

LRA: A credible threat?

Invisible Children advocates that the United States support a Ugandan-led expedition into the Democratic Republic of Congo to arrest Kony and bring him to trial. In doing so, Invisible Children grossly exaggerates the alleged threat posed by Kony and the LRA, while the policies it favours are misguided and potentially risky for regional security and stability. The organisation's agenda, informed by past events, does little to address the important issues faced by the region today and which need to be understood in the context of Sino-American competition in the region. While the presence of US advisers may encourage better practices by Ugandan troops, it will not address the more fundamental dynamics at play in the region.

Although the LRA was a vicious and predatory organisation at its peak, it has already largely been defanged. Kony has been unable to operate in Uganda since 2006 because the LRA's capabilities were severely compromised by a series of Ugandan military offensives between 2002 and 2005 and the collapse of peace talks in 2006.

Forced into the lawless hinterlands of the northern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR), the LRA enjoys hardly any popular support. Although estimates vary, the group is believed to comprise a few hundred loyal fighters at most, and is not known to collaborate with other non-state

armed groups or national armies.

The serious war crimes cited by Invisible Children are no longer occurring. Although the Ugandan military has been acclaimed by Invisible Children as a trustworthy partner, it too has been accused of committing human rights violations and systematically profiteering from the spoils of war in the DRC and CAR.

Misplaced energies

Since October 2011 the Obama administration has been offering technical assistance and Special Forces to Uganda to help root out the LRA. Thus, it would appear that the policies Invisible Children supports are already in motion, even if Kony himself has not yet been captured.

Invisible Children, which stands to raise millions of dollars through the Kony 2012 campaign, claims that the donations it receives will pressure the US government into continuing to support the Ugandan military's efforts against the LRA.

This appears to be a rather curious decision on its part, especially given that the region is faced with far greater problems. The LRA has found safe haven in the two aforementioned Central African states precisely because they are weak, lawless and conflict-ridden, structural conditions that will need to be addressed if comprehensive peace is to be achieved.

Central Africa is fast becoming an important node in the global economy and a site of increasing superpower competition. In 2006, significant oil reserves were discovered in Uganda, the largest such find in Central Africa to date. The DRC possesses 64% of the world's known coltan reserves, a mineral essential for the production of mobile phones and other electronic devices, as well as significant deposits of tantalum, tin, copper, cobalt and gold.

In 2008, the Congolese government announced a Chinese-funded development package totalling US\$6 billion, amounting to roughly half the country's GDP. The same year, the US created a separate African command (AFRICOM), charged with maintaining military relations with all African states except Egypt.

Irresponsible advocacy

Increasing the intensity of military campaigns against a largely weak and powerless enemy – as Invisible Children wishes to see – may further destabilise what is already an extremely unstable region, with attendant negative consequences for both human and economic security and future prospects for their development. It is irresponsible to advocate increased militarisation without taking into account the dynamics of superpower competition that have come to define Central African politics in recent years.

The millions of dollars raised by Invisible Children and the critical public support it has mobilised would be better channelled towards advocating policies and practices that help reduce the structural impediments to peace throughout the Great Lakes subregion. The issues range from the continued role played by conflict minerals in catalysing violence to endemic corruption and the impunity enjoyed by state militaries. Focusing on such issues would arguably do more good than advocating a potentially destabilising expedition in the name of bringing one war criminal to justice.

Invisible Children is uniquely positioned to put its agenda into the American public consciousness and influence American security policy in Central Africa at the highest levels. For this reason, it should not obfuscate facts or exaggerate its claims. Viewers of Invisible Children's latest video would be forgiven for thinking that Joseph Kony and the LRA continue to pose a profound threat, when the reality is otherwise.

Claiming that American policy in Central Africa should revolve around the moral issue of arresting Kony is ineffective and wasteful, and at worst, may serve to precipitate existing patterns of regional violence in entirely new ways, with effects which would be felt worldwide.

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