

Beyond “Kony 2012”. What is Happening in Uganda? America’s “Invisible” Military Agenda

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Kony 2012 is the title of a campaign launched by the organization Invisible Children Inc., focused for now on the half hour video of the same name, which has had a viral diffusion on the internet reaching in a few days almost one hundred million views (it was published only on the 5th March). The campaign aims at supporting the arrest of Joseph Kony, an Ugandan guerrilla leader accused of “crimes against humanity” by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

The campaign’s stated purpose is to encourage international efforts to arrest Kony, by making his case as widely known as possible. Nothing original here, but it’s interesting that Invisible Children Inc. is trying to rally volunteers on the one hand to lobby dozens of famous people (politicians and show business personalities) to convince them to be spokespeople for the campaign, and on the other hand to buy a kit complete with posters, bracelets and other propaganda material.

In that sense something leaps immediately out. Kony’s story is told hastily and in a trenchant way as that of a brutal man without ideals and supporters, who kidnaps children to make them fight at his service. The reason why many people (who presumably would not have even been able to find Uganda on the map before having watched the video) should rally around the campaign occupies only a relatively short part of the video. A large part of it, on the contrary, is dedicated to extolling the potential of the internet and grassroots mobilization and to showing young photogenic activists spreading the cause and its gadgets, decorated with logos and symbols graphically very well crafted. The messages and

images recall the happenings of the “Arabic Spring” and its interpretation – in my opinion strained [as I’ve argued elsewhere](#) – as the revolt of “Facebook and Twitter users”. And that of the so called “coloured revolts” orchestrated in different countries (Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine) during the last years by the widespread and professional network of US “NGOs”.

Another noteworthy element is that in Kony 2012 the sending of US troops by Obama to Uganda is supported. Indeed the continuation of military support to the Ugandan armed forces is the main goal of the whole campaign: a decision by Congress to disengage from the African country must be prevented. President Obama’s choice is portrayed as the result of grassroots pressure exerted by Invisible Children Inc. during the past years, and as a military mission decided upon “simply because it is the right thing to do”. This interpretation is simplistic just like the superficial and Manichean description of Ugandan situation. Before giving reason for these opinions, a digression on the inventors of Kony 2012 campaign must be made.

Invisible Children Inc. was founded in 2004 with the specific purpose of opposing Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army activity. Its founders, Jason Russel, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, university students at that time, had been affected by what they had seen in Uganda during a journey in 2003. Today Invisible Children Inc. [collects almost 14 million dollars a year](#), with a net profit of almost 5 millions. In 2011, 16.24% of expenditure went on “Management & General”. On the 30th June 2011 the organization declared [assets amounting to a little less than 7 million dollars](#). Jason Russel, director and narrative voice of Kony 2012, [receive a salary of 1% of all organization spending, that is 89,669 dollars a year](#). Similar wages are received also by the co-founder Laren Poole and the executive director Ben Kessey. But these numbers are meant to be outclassed this year. [According to what Jason Russel has just declared](#), Invisible Children Inc. should have already sold 500,000 kits, each one costing \$30, in only a week for a total income of 15 million dollars.



The organization, as it also boasts in the video, was one of the supporters of the [Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act](#) signed by president Barack Obama in May 2010, with which one hundred US military advisers were sent to the African country to support the national army against LRA rebels. Nevertheless, the White House decision, as it’s easy to imagine and in contrast to what seems to be suggested in Kony 2012, was not solely or even principally dictated by humanitarian reasons. But to understand this a digression on the Ugandan situation must be made.



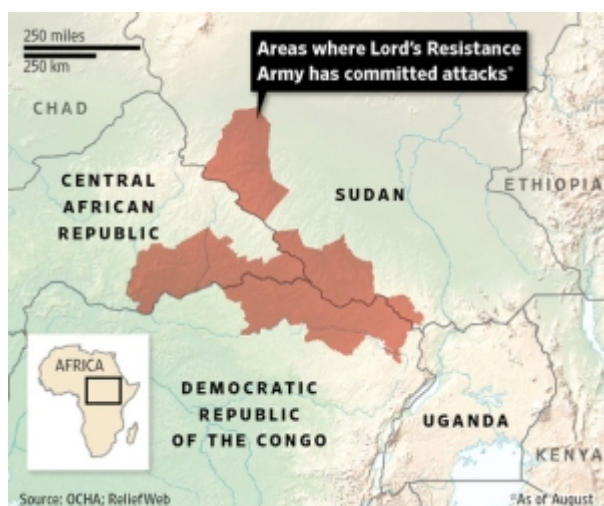
Like many African countries, whose borders were arbitrarily drawn by colonial European states, Uganda is strewn with ethnic conflicts. The most important is that between the Baganda (or Ganda), the inhabitants of the south and east of the country, and the Acholi who live in the north and also beyond the Ugandan border into southern Sudan. Uganda's history after independence (1962) has been marked by coups d'état and civil wars often fought along ethnic fault lines. The first president of independent Uganda, Edward Mutesa, was also Mutesa II the Buganda's king, even though the main powers were held by government chief Milton Obote (belonging to Lango ethnic group, similar to Acholi). In 1966 Obote became president with a coup d'état in response to the parliament's attempt to incriminate him, but in 1979 he, in turn, was overthrown and replaced by his ex-ally, the army commander Idi Amin. In 1978 a war broke out with Tanzania and in 1979, supported with foreign arms, the exiles (mainly Lango and Acholi) succeeded in bringing Obote back to office. Obote's comeback was legitimized by a popular vote, considered lacking in transparency by his opponents however. Yoweri Museveni from the southern Bantu region founded the National Resistance Army (NRA). In fact the conflict was between the NRA, supported by the Buganda, and the government's National Liberation Army (UNLA) of Lango and Acholi. In 1985 Obote was overthrown by a new military coup d'état organized by the Acholi, but in January 1986, despite the intervention of Mubutu's Zaire, the NRA won the war and Museveni became president. He still holds power in a regime where all political parties are banned, and so he has given a certain stability to the troubled country.



Nevertheless, Museveni's long presidency was not all a bed of roses. His neoliberal agenda has inflicted heavy social costs in exchange for economic growth, which in addition has been concentrated mainly in the Bantu regions where its support is rooted, while the Nilotic north has been neglected.

Museveni has shown a certain aggressiveness towards neighbouring countries, culminating in Ugandan intervention in the Somali civil war; an intervention strongly wanted by the United States and that could make one think that the military aid ordered by Obama is granted more to help a military ally which in Somalia has already lost hundreds of soldiers, rather than for humanitarian reasons.

Since its installation, Museveni's government has faced a series of ethnic insurrections and resistance movements. In fact the northern region of the country has been subjected to military occupation by the NRA, noted (also by Amnesty International) for its [commission of war crimes](#). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony, an Acholi Christian soldier, emerged in this atmosphere. The fight between LRA and NRA has been a no holds barred contest: government soldiers have been accused more or less of the same vileness blamed on the LRA, including the exploitation of children, the Kony 2012 Leitmotif. But in 2005 the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants only for LRA leaders. It is worthwhile remembering that the ICC was established in 2002 and at the moment is recognized by 120 countries. Among those states which do not recognize its authority on themselves are the United States, China, India and Russia.



Uganda's domestic struggle soon captured the non-disinterested attention of other countries. The LRA has been supported by Sudan, which wanted revenge for Museveni's support to the nationalists of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Thanks to the SPLA South Sudan has recently gained its independence but great tension with Khartoum remains. In the meantime the LRA has been strongly cut down, and moreover it moved towards South Sudan. The Ugandan government, on the contrary, as already said, has the support of the United States (while Sudan has been and still is close to China). Even before the already mentioned order from Obama, [the United States had sent soldiers and weapons to support Museveni in AFRICOM operations](#), NATO's Africa command instituted a few years ago as a reaction to the political and trading penetration of China in Africa. In 2008-2009 the United States supported the so called Garamba Offensive in Congo, made by Ugandan and Congolese government armies and the Sudanese SPLA against Kony's LRA. The LRA seems, in fact, to have almost disappeared from Uganda. In recent years it showed signs of activity only in neighbouring countries.

Kony 2012 has also been criticised. Ugandan journalist Rosebell Kagumire [has noticed the great simplification of events made in the video](#). This is what a source of undoubted prestige like Foreign Affairs, journal of the Council of Foreign Relations, unanimously considered the most influential think tank in the United States, [has written](#) about organizations like Invisible

Children Inc. which supported the US participation in the Ugandan conflict: “In their campaigns these organizations have manipulated facts for strategic purposes, exaggerating the extent of kidnappings and murders made by the LRA, emphasizing the use of innocent children as soldiers and portraying Kony – without any doubt a brutal man – as the unique personification of evil forces, a sort of Kurtz [main character of Heart of Darkness by Conrad].

They have rarely made reference to the atrocities perpetrated by the Ugandan government or the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (including attacks against civilians and plundering of homes and businesses) or the complex regional politics behind the conflict”. Michael Deibert, a famous journalist who studied in depth the Ugandan situation writing a book about it, [has commented critically on the Kony 2012 campaign](#). Far from defending the LRA leader, Deibert has nevertheless noticed that “the Ugandan government now in office got to power using also kadogos (soldier children) and by fighting together with armies which use soldier children in the Democratic Republic of Congo; all these things seem to be deliberately ignored by Invisible Children”. The argument of a lack of impartiality from the organization seems to be confirmed also by a photo showing the three founders posing with weapons in a hostile stance, together with South Sudan rebels. Glenna Gordon, who took the photo, [has declared that she thinks the three are “colonialists” and are proud of it.](#)



Doubt about the good faith of promoters, activists and Invisible Children’s supporters is not to be raised. But reality is far more complex than how it is described in the half hour video Kony 2012.

Kony, who in the video (and on propaganda posters) is expressly portrayed as a new Hitler and a new Bin Laden, is without any doubt a censurable figure but he is the product of the struggle of a people, the Acholi, who feel oppressed by president Museveni, who surely has not distinguished himself by his liberalism, respect for popular sovereignty or human rights.

The good faith presumption does not save Kony 2012 from criticism when it expressly supports US military intervention in Uganda. An intervention that only out of a certain ignorance of events in Africa and with great naivety could be considered motivated only by the desire “to do the right thing”, as is stated in the documentary.

The United States has intervened in Uganda within the framework of increased militarization in its relationship with the continent, made necessary by the political and trading penetration of China in Africa. The sending of military advisers to Museveni, possibly a prelude to military escalation (maybe what the Kony 2012 viral campaign wants to achieve?), is to be taken in conjunction with drone bombardments in Somalia, intervention in Libya to overthrow Gaddafi, French intervention in Ivory Coast to depose Gbagbo. Julien

Teil's documentary The Humanitarian War has shown the role, not too clear, of NGOs in preparing the ground for NATO intervention in Libya.

Invisible Children emphasizes the need to send US troops to Uganda at a time when the LRA seems weakened and, according to many people, [Kony hasn't been in the country for years](#). At this point it does not seem rash to include also Kony 2012 in the arsenal of US soft power that should support the spread - not necessarily in a peaceful way - of Washington's influence in Africa.

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