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CHILD SOLDIERS IN UGANDA:
EFFICIENCY AND POTENTIAL NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF KONY 2012 VIDEO
ON SOLVING THE CURRENT HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN UGANDA

Zuzana Balcová *

Introduction

Child abuse in its various monstrous forms has always been an inseparable part of the history of human civilization. It has been occurring worldwide, in all cultures, states and all time periods. Throughout history, there have been many records proving the existence of child abuse of different variants. One of them, probably the oldest and the cruellest one, has been a military use of children. Generally, children – as easy and vulnerable targets – were used in wars in order to facilitate achieving certain military goals. Children at the age of hardly ten years were often used as soldiers that fought in bloody civil wars directly on the battlefields or, if they were too weak perhaps to carry guns, they served as a support or aid to an organizational structure of the combatant's group. That means that boys, but girls, too, in that case most often served as cooks or spies, but even as sex slaves, largely suffering from torture and mistreatment. The prove of the existence of child soldiers from the early times of our history, is perhaps a notable example of military use of children in Ancient Greece, especially in Sparta, where boys were taken from their homes at the age of seven and since that time, permanently trained to become capable soldiers. On the other side, in relatively recent times during the Second World War, a considerable instance of how children could become a significant part of a country's military force, is embodied in Hitler's Youth. As it was emphasized, child soldiers are not a new phenomenon, nor a one that could be once overcome. Moreover, even in a current, highly developed, civilised and socialised world, the phenomenon of child soldiers still exists. When speaking about child combatants nowadays, we might automatically imagine black-skinned African boys angrily carrying guns in their hands. This imagination is not so far from reality, however, this kind of humanitarian problem appears not only on the African continent, but in other parts of the world, where wars take place for whatever purpose, as well. The alarming fact is, that currently, according to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), there are approximately 300,000 children keeping as

* International Relations M.A., Metropolitan University, Prague.

child soldiers in more than 30 worldwide clashes. (UNICEF, 2012). Still, in this essay, we will focus on African Uganda, where the problematic of military use of children became extremely visualised last year, in 2012, by the so called Invisible Children campaign and its video KONY 2012.

The main objective of this work is to analyse, to what extent has the KONY 2012 film impacted solving of the crucial humanitarian crisis in Uganda, child soldiers abusing. Alternatively, whether the mentioned video could be considered efficient and successful or whether there could be found some eventual side effects, that the video could have had on the former child combatants and Acholi people of Northern Uganda, in general. Basically, the essay is divided into several chapters. The principal goal of the first chapter is to introduce fundamental causes of child soldier's permanent existence in Uganda, concentrating on the activity of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), with the leadership of Joseph Kony. Consequently, the second chapter is supposed to be the core of the work. It aims to focus on the continuance of promotion of KONY 2012 video, together with analysing the validity of criticism of this campaign in basic points. In the third and the last part of the work, the writer of this essay depicts one case study and attempts to apply chosen theory on that case, which is the social-psychological theory of overcoming military traumas.

Principal causalities responsible for producing child soldiers in Uganda

Generally, humanitarian crisis in Uganda has, from moral perspective of view, been considered one of the worst ever. The moral emergency of the humanitarian crises is rising primarily because of the presence of child combatants on the battlefields of Northern Uganda's territory. Fundamentally, when discussing constant existence of child soldiers in Uganda, it is inevitable to shed some light on the officially accepted definition of child soldiers by the UNICEF. This institution identifies child soldiers as "any child – boy or girl – under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried, weapons." (UNICEF, 2012).

This is not to deny, that there are several central reasons, why the phenomenon of child soldiers still exists in contemporary Uganda. Generally, from the child abusing perpetrator's

point of view, use of child soldiers in armed conflicts can be very effective primarily because children can be easily manipulated. Moreover, “in combat, children can be daring and tenacious, particularly when under the influence of drugs – a common practice – or when compelled by political or religious zeal. Child units can greatly add to confusion on battlefields, slowing opposing forces’ progress.” (Kaplan, E., 2005). Not only boys, but even girls can serve as soldiers fighting on the battleground. Otherwise, however, girls usually play role of constantly raped sex-slaves and “wives” of leaders and man-combatants, gradually even mothers of children born from rape. These are all undoubted arguments but concerning specifically Northern Uganda’s case, it has to be pointed out, that almost all reasons are stemming from the activities of the LRA, that were carried out during more than last two decades within a civil war in Uganda. Although this chapter is not to be descriptive, before turning to certain arguments, it should be noted, that the LRA is a rebellious guerrilla organization against the Ugandan government, that is led by Joseph Kony, who proclaimed himself prophet guided by the God and the spirits. In fact, LRA has no specific ideology and its political program is indefinite. However, in the video from 2006, where Kony was interviewed by English journalist, he claimed, that the LRA’s ideology came from the Bible and he was fighting for democracy and against Ugandan’s president Yoweri Museveni. “I’m a freedom fighter in Uganda, but I’m not a terrorist.” (Joseph Kony, Exclusive Interview, 2011). In the mentioned video, he also categorically denied executing massacres and mutilations of Acholi people, as well as abducting children. Regardless, the facts proved the opposite. When discussing abducting children, it is essential to note, that LRA permanently commits all six brutal cruelties that can be perpetrated on children in wars. These points were designated by the Security Council and Secretary General and include “killing or maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; attacks against schools or hospitals; denial of humanitarian access for children; abduction of children.” (The Lord’s Resistance Army and Children, 2012). To prove this, based on the facts from 2004, the LRA’s “fighting force is made up in large part of abducted children. Up to 95 per cent of the population in these areas have been forced from their homes by the war. Nearly two million Ugandans, out of a population of 24.7 million, now live in refugee camps for fear of being attacked and killed in their villages.” (Judah, T., 2004). Some children joined the LRA voluntarily, mostly because of bad social and economic conditions, displacement, pressure or no other option, but the great majority of them was abducted from their families or forced to recruit in order to survive. Leatherman argues, that “girls and boys are abducted into child soldiering, and forced to kill their friends or family members to become battle-

hardened” (Leatherman, J., 2011, p.156). That means that after recruiting, children are usually psychically brutalized by being forced to commit violations, torture, sexual exploitation or murder on their own families or neighbours. Unlimited bloody brutalities sometimes contain even cannibalism as a method for torture and causing fear and psychological trauma. “Children have told how they had been forced by the rebels at gunpoint to abduct and murder other children and to drink their blood. A former commander of the rebel group explained that he had forced villagers to chop up, cook and eat their neighbours before he killed them, too.” (Judah, T., 2004). There are many records of violent massacres like this, from which the children but whole families, too, are attempting to escape. Then, the obvious result is a displacement. According to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, “the LRA is the primary cause of internal displacement for the 440,000 persons affected by the armed group.” (The Lord’s Resistance Army and Children, 2012). This kind of forced diffusion of people started in 1999, when the Ugandan Government could not defeat LRA and protect its inhabitants, so Acholi civilians were moved to “protected camps”, where they had to face inhuman living conditions together with fear from the spread of diseases like AIDS/HIV infection. (Wegner, P., 2012). As Wegner further argues, “according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs the camps violated several rights of the displaced and nearly all UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.” (Wegner, P., 2012). However, the horrific conditions in camps were not the only alarming factor for Acholi. Indeed, the most frustrating aspect was that soldiers attacking camps, but villages, too, were usually much younger than victims. At the same time, the LRA created the so called “night walkers”, too. In nights are these “night walkers” Acholi people forced to run from their villages to near towns and sleep in hospitals or schools because of the fear from being abducted or killed by the LRA’s soldiers.

KONY 2012: Attempt to support awareness

Until recent times, all these horrors committed on children and Acholi people in general, had been hidden and forgotten by the international community. Hardly could many people beyond the Ugandan borders know, what a great slaughter was going on in Northern Uganda. In 2004, even the UN’s Undersecretary Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland argued: “Northern Uganda to me remains the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world.” (Jones, I. J., 2004). According to Egeland, the international community devoted

almost no attention to this crisis. He found the situation as a “moral outrage.” (Judah, T., 2004). Consequently, eight years later, in 2012, the situation has markedly altered.

Preceding this crucial alteration, the KONY 2012 video emerged and was posted on the social server youtube.com by Invisible Children charity in March 2012 and it shortly became the most viral video ever. KONY 2012 was produced by Jason Russel and his colleagues and the main objective of this short film was to shed light and bring awareness of the rest of the world on the brutal crimes and violations against humanity committed by Joseph Kony and the LRA soldiers, focusing on the child soldiers. In other words, the aim was to make “invisible children” visible again and to move the world to action. (The Invisible Children, 2012). The major efficient outcome of the international awareness should have been firstly to find, then arrest and accuse Kony by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and thus make an end to atrocities in Uganda. It is needed to mention, that the KONY 2012 de facto boosted the level of worldwide “boom” on the subject, but as might be apparent, the mission has not been completed yet, whereas Kony is still free and alive. Does it mean that we can therefore consider KONY 2012 unsuccessful and ineffective? The official initial intention of the video producers was undoubtedly generous, but the fact is, that too many unclear subjects can come to mind while watching it. Also for the sake of that, grave criticism emerged against the video. So here comes also the question, if the criticism of this video is really valid and, secondly, what is the real political and humanitarian situation in Uganda?

Some of the main aspects of the criticism of KONY 2012, that arose short after posting the video, were concerning the possibility of explicitly marketing nature of the video with the principal aim of the producers to make money from the suffering and unhappiness of others. It is just to mention, that the video was constructed in the way to touch people’s hearts and might have been too ideological, naive in its objectives or might “narcissistically focus on the filmmakers themselves over their African subjects”. (Morrison, D., 2012). Some of the critics also claimed, that the purpose of the video is naive, because it is hard to believe, that revolution led through social media and by external actors, not directly involved in the matter, could achieve notably positive and desired movements to stated goals. But on the contrary, the fact is that because of this catching way of construction, the video succeeded in gaining desired popularity and bringing awareness and actually, that was the predominant pursuit of it.

Another essential argument of critics and probably the most serious one, was the eventual manipulation of the facts and simplifying a widely-complex issue. This aspect of criticism is considerably relevant and can be agreed to, as more facts can be found misleading in the

video. First of all, KONY 2012 focuses exclusively on LRA and its leader Kony, being the cruellest and most wanted criminal in Africa. But the fact is, that the LRA and Kony are only a peak of the iceberg, whereas within Africa, there are many other dangerous criminals committing grave crimes against humanity and thus also the phenomenon of child soldiers do not only exists in Uganda and in countries that are controlled by the LRA. Caryl Stern, the president and CEO of U.S. Fund for UNICEF, claims: “Yes, Kony is doing something horrific, but there are many others enabling that and supporting it and we have to look at this as a global issue.” (Kony 2012: UNICEF Urges Child Soldier Advocates To Fight For Victims In All Countries, 2012). Moreover, some of the critics argue, that KONY 2012 video does not effectively display the current situation in Uganda. According to Adyanga, who wrote a book about Acholi education, “Kony 2012 is heavily laden with old clips that do not in any way represent the situations in northern Uganda at the moment.” (A Ugandan (Acholi) Perspective on Joseph Kony and Stop Kony 2012, 2012). The basic fact is, that the LRA is not present in Uganda since 2006, instead, it is believed, that currently, Kony is in South Darfur in Sudan, but more probably, the LRA operates in three Ugandan border countries – DRC, South Sudan and Central African Republic. (Invisible Children, 2012). Actually, as stated in Telegraph: “Uganda was on the UN blacklist, but signed an action plan in 2007. Now they have been delisted and are at the forefront of fighting the LRA.” (UN: hundreds of thousands of child soldiers kept in slavery, 2012). Adyanga further claims, that “currently, Acholiland, which was the epicentre of the LRA–UPDF rebellion for over two decades is dealing with multiple post-conflict challenges. The most pressing is the problem of nodding disease that has affected over 3,000 school children. Over 200 kids are known to have died from the disease.” (A Ugandan (Acholi) Perspective on Joseph Kony and Stop Kony 2012, 2012). That shows, that nowadays, the main issue in Uganda is therefore primarily not fighting against Kony and the LRA to stop his atrocities against innocent children, but rather physical rehabilitation of the child soldiers, who were released from the army and slavery. On the other hand, based on the statistics, nowadays is the LAR still believed to keep from 150 to 300 soldiers with hundreds of abductive children and adults. (Q&A on Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army, 2012). These numbers are still alarming, however, it is needed to admit, that some facts in the KONY 2012 video are obsolete, not actual and therefore misleading.

Likewise, only to add, the reliability of the video was negatively marked also by the personal failure of Jason Russel, one of the founders of KONY 2012, who did not manage to face the

public pressure resulting from the criticism of the video. Accordingly, the rest of the videos by Invisible Children were more or less focusing on the defence against criticism.

Thirdly, from the political aims achieving perspective, the Invisible Children campaign is suspected of making political conspiracy with the major goal to support American „colonial“ armed involvement in Uganda. As Ugandan journalist R. Kagumire claims: “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].” (Scalea, D., 2012). This blame might be too grave, but the Ugandan reality shows, that a complex situation in the KONY 2012 is not described appropriately. However, the awaiting outcome was reached in 2010, when Barack Obama’s Cabinet accepted a “Strategy to Support the Disarmament of the Lord’s Resistance Army.” This policy aimed to promote the creation of a safe environment for the citizens as well as stability of the region. (Dagne, T., 2011, p.3). From the very recent happening, another goal was achieved by the Invisible Children only few days ago, on the 15th January 2013, when “president Obama signed Rewards for Justice legislation. In the shortest of explanations, this is legislation that will strengthen efforts to locate and arrest Joseph Kony by enabling the U.S. State Department to offer financial rewards for information that directly leads to his arrest.” (Groth, A., 2013). It is obvious, that the Invisible Children prefer stopping the LRA actions by military tools, though, Richard, director of the Ugandan institution Friends of Orphans claims, that Ugandan people prioritize the continuation of peace talks with Kony and the LRA. He goes on arguing, that: “It is also well known that a majority of the LRA’s soldiers are abducted children, and that he uses these abducted children as human shields. As a result, any attack will be on the abducted children. Instead of campaigning for military action as a means to end this war, I suggest a continuation of the failed peace talks. I would urge everyone involved in the process to examine what made the peace talks fail and how can we improve and reinstate the process.” (Morrison, D., 2012).

As the previous paragraph proved, there might be certain latent causalities of publicizing KONY 2012 video, but on the other hand, consequential resultants can widely be considered more positive than negative.

Case study and theory application: Perspectives of possible reintegration and assimilation of former child soldiers into social community and the impact of KONY 2012 video on this process

As already mentioned in chapter two, in Uganda, the presence of the LRA and child soldiers physically, has belonged since 2006 more to recent history than to the current reality of the country. Intrinsically, the LRA has already released from slavery thousands of Ugandan child soldiers, but here comes the significant question, if the released children did actually manage to escape from the horrors of military use. Can the moral damages be effectively eliminated? In order to show the impact of brutal military experience on the internal psychological balance of former child soldiers and their ability to reintegrate to society, a brief case study and social-psychological theory of overcoming military traumas application through the KONY 2012 video is presented.

As Adyanga argues, popularizing world widely the KONY 2012 video, had shed the light on the country's scars, that want to be forgotten. Brutalities experienced in wars, can definitely lead to grave psychological damages. "We are now focusing on post conflict rehabilitation, reintegration of former combatants and this exercise is achieving results. Repeated portrayal of the ugly past, as is being done by Invisible Children, re-criminalises former combatants who have given up rebellion, been given amnesty, and peacefully reintegrated into the community. These portrayals pose serious risks of trauma by ex-combatants and feelings of responsibility for crimes they committed out of forced compliance." (A Ugandan (Acholi) Perspective on Joseph Kony and Stop Kony 2012, 2012).

The application of the social-psychological theory of overcoming military traumas shows, that former child soldiers can achieve efficient reintegration to their families and society in general, and become valuable citizens again. However, the moral damages can never be efficiently eliminated entirely, but they can become less strong by integrating former child soldiers to community and accepting them as victims, who were forced to commit crimes against humanity, in order to survive, not as perpetrators. Accordingly, the indisputable fact is, that "the child that has been instilled with anger and poisoned, remains as a cultural landmine, that lives for a long time as a cause of any instability." (Child soldiers banned by UN law, 2002).

Conclusion

The KONY 2012 video can undoubtedly be considered an innovative approach to solving humanitarian crisis in Uganda. This Invisible Children campaign showed, how immense the power of social media and the so called “digital revolution”, can be. Though, on the contrary, the video also uncovered relevant difficulties when attempting to implement the “social network movement” to real life, as the LRA with the leadership of J. Kony, still exists and operates.

Concerning the video, the international community can be distinguished into the supports and the critics of the action. Many critical arguments were drawn against the relevance of the video, mainly because of misleading character and manipulation of facts, that were moreover out-of-date. Revealing these in greater depth, helped to clarify the most essential subject of this essay, whether the KONY 2012 actually helped to overcome this humanitarian crisis in Uganda and managed to eliminate the military use of children in this area. The fact is, that despite Uganda is still facing many political and social issues, the situation in Uganda have already altered into better long before the video was publicized last year. In that sense, the initial intentions of the video producers might be considered counterproductive and stay at least controversial. However, the video managed to reach its substantial aim, to bring universal awareness of the atrocities committed by the LRA and J. Kony in the mentioned African area, and make the issue global. From this perspective, KONY 2012 can be critically judging as successful and effective.

Generally, to conclude, in spite of the evidence, that from the humanitarian and social perspective, the situation have altered in past decade in Uganda to more positive, the consequences of savage and inhuman political development will remain recorded in the country’s core forever, perhaps in the form of psychological traumas of former child soldiers and all the ones who were affected by the cruel actions of the LRA and Joseph Kony.

Because of the assigned relatively short length of the final essay, the problematic of Ugandan humanitarian crisis and KONY 2012 video was not entirely fulfilled, but at the same time it gives alternatives for further researches on the subject.

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