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Too Many Players, Too Few Solutions?

The aid and military support that the international community offers to Central and the Horn of Africa may be stifling 'local solutions to local problems'.

By Fawzia Sheikh for ISN

Both Central and the Horn of Africa secure regular spots in the headlines, but not for coveted reasons - simmering violence, religious radicalism and piracy are among the biggest draws. The international community's aid, advice, military support and diplomacy to the states of the region have achieved some success, failed in certain instances or are evolving as strategies. But on the sidelines, ordinary Africans are still clamouring for a bigger political stake - and a little peace.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Uganda and its environs. Hiding out in the African bush, the Lord's Resistance Army - a rebel group guilty of terrorizing the communities of the Great Lakes for decades - encountered a new wave of notoriety in the spring. A San Diego-based NGO known as the Invisible Children produced a video in March highlighting the LRA's longstanding practices of recruiting child soldiers and raping girls. It was a project which earned widespread internet attention and arguably, for the first time, propelled the problem of the LRA into the mainstream of Western consciousness.

The latest interest in the vicious gang underscored that groups with "a megaphone" can galvanize attention toward an issue with the capacity to shock policymakers in Washington, D.C., Brussels or at the UN "out of their complacency," argued Philippe de Pontet, Africa director at the Eurasia Group in Washington, D.C.

Empowering Great Lakes' Militaries

Even before the video became an online hit, the U.S. government was tackling the LRA phenomenon following the advocacy community's efforts to raise it as a human rights issue, de Pontet said. The United States passed legislation in 2010 aimed at stemming the 20-plus-years' conflict. Previously, [Congress](#) has provided millions of dollars in logistical support, training and equipment to the security forces of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan to counter the rebels and protect their populations. Last fall, the Obama administration enhanced its counter-LRA strategy by dispatching special-forces to the "thick of the jungle to help security partners . . . close the noose around Kony once and for all," de Pontet told the ISN. The latest deployment of American military advisers is part of a [multi-pronged strategy](#) in the wide territory to support projects boosting civilian protection, improving early warning capabilities, providing

humanitarian relief and strengthening communities.

While the Pentagon was always engaged with the continent through its special operations units, it created [U.S. Africa Command](#) after realizing that it was not paying heed to Africa's complexity. Washington's latest regional military headquarters became fully operational in 2008 with the aim of protecting American national security interests and bolstering the capacity of Africans.

Today, Special Operations Command-Africa, probably the smallest of the elite-force outfits, is balancing three major theatres of operation: helping African forces to contain the ongoing situation in Somalia; supporting border armies in Uganda, DRC and South Sudan; and lending a hand in Mali and throughout the Sahel.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, former U.S. President George W. Bush was determined to beef up the African military apparatus (previously trimmed in the march toward democracy) in order to fight al Qaeda in the Central African and Horn of Africa nations. In doing so, this strategy has arguably created one particular "beacon" in East Africa -- a more professional Ugandan army. Over the past few months the Uganda People's Defence Force has achieved notable success in whittling down the LRA to a few hundred fighters surrounding Kony. The Uganda military has also made a significant contribution to the African Union (AU) forces battling the al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia.

Intractable Somalia?

Yet despite concerted efforts to stabilize Somalia, international actors have been hard-pressed to lessen the despair produced by an intricate blend of government stagnation, radical Islamism and food insecurity. But minimizing coastal vulnerabilities appears to have been relatively successful. Accounts of Somali pirates brazenly attacking ships off the Horn of Africa and demanding hefty ransoms in a coastal free-for-all emerged after the 1991 demise of the central government. In recent years, international naval forces have launched patrols to protect the nearby waters. Yet this may have resulted in the shifting of problems associated with piracy to new geographical areas. Foreign intervention has also relocated previously Europe-bound refugees further inland to African countries, with Kenya becoming a major destination, adds Thomas Kwasi Tiekou of The Centre for International Governance Innovation. In other cases like Darfur or the CAR, the tight policing of borders by more powerful African forces hunting for terrorists have forced many seeking sanctuary to remain trapped in their homelands.

However, the Atlantic Council's Peter Pham argues that it is up to the Somalis rather than the international community to rebuild their country following 20-plus years of 15 transitional governments. "Somalis can get their act together," he noted, pointing to autonomous regions like Somaliland and Puntland as evidence. The trouble is that Somalia's official political leaders remain suspected of stealing most of the country's bilateral foreign assistance and allowing weapons to be sold to al Shabaab. Accordingly, Somalia's official leaders lack legitimacy among their citizens "and the international community...can't make people be virtuous," adds Pham.

Ironically, Somalia's pirates may offer a 'local' solution to the country's well-documented problems. A [Chatham House report](#) released in January indicated that pirates do indeed contribute to urban development, with a considerable portion of the stolen funds reaching the poorer inland areas. This has led to the creation of small businesses, mosques and community centres, in addition to covering salaries for local guards, drivers, caterers and construction workers. Yet, enthusiasm for this 'solution' needs to be tempered by arguments that most ordinary Somalis never enjoy the bulk of the prize. According to Pham, the vast majority of the bounty flows to financiers living abroad or who invest their money overseas.

Refugees' Greatest Hope

Amidst the large players operating in this swath of Africa have been interstate NGOs supplementing four UN missions in Sudan and DRC. Over the past six years, aid groups have intensified their presence on the ground, with the smart ones delegating some responsibilities to local counterparts, says Tiekou. Uganda and Kenya have become hotbeds of NGO activity partly because of a refugee influx from neighbouring countries, while dysfunctional Somalia has transformed into “more or less an NGO state,” he explained. “Without the NGOs occupying the local space, the set of conflicts in Africa would have been really horrible.”

The involvement of global aid workers in Africa has had its drawbacks, though. Describing the “CNN effect,” Tiekou explained how the development community has converged on conflicts dominating the media such as genocide-plagued Darfur. This has often resulted in the mobilization of significant funds to a particular region that nevertheless lack coordination with respective national governments. He criticized the myopic approach to aid delivery for sidelining less-captivating humanitarian crises until they reach a breaking point.

Miles to Go

No doubt there are sparks of hope across this immense territory: security forces targeting Kony, activists embracing the power of social media to enlighten broader audiences and Western NGOs shoring up African counterparts to directly mend their unravelling countries. But there are still problems. For one, the international practice of putting out long-smouldering fires instead of proactively offering concrete solutions seems likely to linger. The Institute for Security Studies' Paul-Simon Handy in particular criticized international actors' preference for “quick fixes” to contend with Africa's refugee flows, piracy, ethnic tensions and radical Islamism. He also lamented their lack of attention to state-building and poverty alleviation on which African organizations tend to focus.

Another problem is that many Westerners have favored a top-down approach involving local governments. For instance, American bilateral support to certain “proxy” countries like Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda to tackle regional security challenges is premised on bolstering states even though they lack strong democratic traditions, Tiekou said. However, this approach is unlikely to work in Somalia, where international stakeholders' alienation of local entities has inadvertently prolonged the crisis in the Horn. According to Pham, the only plausible path to peace in Somalia is a “building-block process” embracing many grassroots groups like spiritual leaders who actually have authority and are capable of delivering something.

One proposal that continues to receive consideration is the decentralization of Somalia's political system into a loose patchwork of clans thereby diminishing the relevance of Sudan, which local experts believe is the only way to achieve “minimal governance and start to get basic services to communities.” According to de Pontet, this approach may lead to the empowerment of local leaders in Puntland - the piracy heartland - to take aim at the activity. However, it is likely that the valuable source of money from steep ransoms will influence their decision.

Wrestling for Control

Given Africa's entrenched regimes and persistent conflicts, it is difficult to imagine a dramatic power shift from militaries and elites to civil society and ordinary citizens. On a continent in which [nine leaders have been at the helm for more than two decades](#), instituting lasting, positive change seems doubtful for now. Yet there have been some attempts. Most notably, Kampala was the scene of

massive protests attracting professionals, students and the middle class for several months leading up to last year's re-election of President Yoweri Museveni, a 26-year leader. Unlike in the past, Ugandan citizens are demanding change in "more insistent, sophisticated ways" such as strikes, large protests and social media movements mirroring other corners of the globe, adds de Pontet. The downside of the nearby uprisings in the Arab world, though, has been a cascade of weapons from the Libyan conflict to places like Niger and Mali, the scene of a coup in March. "We're in for a long haul in terms of pockets of wars across East Africa, Central Africa, the Horn of Africa or the Sahel belt," warns Tiekou, a prediction that does not bode well for indigenous-led solutions to regional problems.

Fawzia Sheikh has reported from East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Editor's note:

For more content on the Central and Horn of Africa region, please see our [dossier](#) on the topic.

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