Katherine Gottlieb is a graduate of Oak View Academy. At NIU, Kate majors in family and child studies with an emphasis in child development. She hopes to someday work for a non-profit organization such as Compassion International or Invisible Children, as she is passionate about social justice and helping others. Kate wrote this essay to better understand the LRA movement in Uganda. She says, “I strongly believe that the people of Uganda deserve any aid we can give them so that they can finally live in freedom from fear.”

Kate wrote this case study in Stephanie Kummerer's English 104 course.
Lives Disrupted: The Effect of the LRA in Uganda and the US Involvement

MLA Format

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For the last two decades, Uganda and parts of central Africa have been embroiled in a kind of civil war. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has been making its way through Uganda, Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, murdering, raping, pillaging, and displacing hundreds of men, women, and children. There is no end in sight for the LRA’s reign of terror.

Joseph Kony was born in 1961 and inherited power in his tribe through his aunt who was the tribe’s mystic (“Lord’s”). For two years, Kony served in the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA), an army of formerly government-sanctioned soldiers created to force the National Resistance Army (NRA) out of power (“Why”). Once a peace agreement was signed, however, the UPDA soldiers were to be reinstated as government-sanctioned fighters. Kony refused to serve the government and he, with several of his fellow UPDA soldiers, broke off and created the Ugandan Christian Democratic Army, which later became known as the Lord’s Resistance Army.

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), originally stated that their purpose was “to create a government based on the Ten Commandments” (“Lord’s”). (The Ten Commandments, found in the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible, are that you shall keep the Sabbath and honor your parents, and that you shall not worship anyone other than God, make idols, use God’s name in a curse, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or be envious of others.) According to The Resolve, an advocacy website dedicated to reporting on the issue of the war in Uganda, the LRA has murdered over 100,000 people since 1986 when it began and has abducted over 66,000 Ugandans between the ages of fourteen and thirty since the 1990s (“Key”). The LRA has since moved into the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, and the number of casualties they leave behind and citizens they take with them has only risen. The LRA has clearly strayed from its original intent to “create a government based on the Ten Commandments” (“Lord’s”).
In May of 2010, due to the relentless campaigning of various human rights organizations, President Obama signed into law a bill that was proposed in 2009. This bill, called “Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009” required that:

Not later than 180 days after the date of this Act [24 May 2010], the President shall develop and submit to the appropriate committees of Congress a strategy to guide future United States support across the region [Africa] for viable multilateral efforts to mitigate and eliminate the threat to civilians and regional stability posed by the Lord’s Resistance Army (United 1).

This act, entitled “Strategy to Support the Disarmament of the Lord’s Resistance Army,” was officially created on 24 November 2010 and began the US involvement in this crisis.

When hearing of the US involvement in Africa, the minds of many Americans jump back to the involvement in Somalia in the early 1990s. During the 1980s and 1990s, Somalia was embroiled in a civil war, forcing its civilians to live in a state of starvation. The original extent of US involvement in this difficulty was sending food to the country to aid its starving civilians. However, according to Military History Online, a database for articles on the military history of America, the warlords and their underlings were taking the food as it came off the boats and trucks and using bribes, thus ensuring the loyalty of their followers (Parker). American citizens were enraged at this injustice against the helpless Somalian citizens and voiced their opinion for the need of US intervention. In 1992, responding to this overwhelming reaction, President George Bush, Sr. sent a team of special forces operatives to Somalia to reduce the power of the warlords and ensure that the citizens were receiving the food being sent (Parker).

It quickly became apparent, however, that the alleviation of hunger would not remain the mission because, “in a country where the United States, perhaps naively, expected some measure of gratitude for its help, its forces received increasing hostility as they became more deeply embroiled in trying to establish a stable government” (“United”). The results of this involvement and increasing hostility were horrifying. While the losses suffered by the United States were few in comparison to many other wars, they have forever left a mark on its citizens due to the graphic photographs and footage of dead, half-naked US soldiers being dragged through the streets of Somalia that were shown on international television. In March of 1994, President Bill Clinton, successor to George Bush, Sr., pulled the
US troops out of Somalia, and the United Nations was soon to follow (“United”).

The troubles of Africa continued when, only a month later in April of 1994, the plane carrying President Habyarimana of Rwanda was shot down over an airport in the Rwandan capital Kigali. President Habyarimana was a member of the clan known as the Hutus. According to the BBC, “When the Belgian colonists arrived [in Rwanda] in 1916, they produced identity cards classifying people according to their ethnicity” (“Rwanda”). Two ethnic groups were established, the Hutus and the Tutsis. The only difference between these two groups was that those who were deemed to be Tutsis were taller and had thinner noses than those who were Hutu and that, while the Hutus were the majority, the Belgians considered the Tutsis to be superior and thus afforded them better opportunities for education and employment. Understandably, this blatant favoritism served only to cause resentment in the hearts and minds of the Hutus (“Rwanda”).

When Belgium relinquished its power in 1962 and granted independence to Rwanda, the Hutus quickly took their place as the country’s leaders. According to the BBC, the economic situation in Rwanda began to worsen, and the Hutu president soon fell out of popularity. A group of Tutsi refugees from Uganda began to form what was called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), whose goal was to take power from Habyarimana and to gain the right to return to their homeland. While no one knows exactly who it was that shot down President Habyarimana’s plane or what group they were affiliated with, the Hutus blamed the Tutsis, specifically the RPF, and countrywide violence erupted, pitting neighbors, brothers, sisters, friends, and colleagues against one another.

The situation quickly escalated into a nationwide extermination of Tutsis by the Hutus, more commonly known as genocide. Genocide is defined as “the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group” (“Genocide”). To invoke the term “genocide” is a serious political event: “all nations who were signatories of the 1948 convention on genocide would have been obligated by the terms of that treaty to condemn the slaughter and act to stop it” (Omaar and de Waal 4). In light of the experience in Somalia, the US was reluctant to send aid and so, to avoid the obligation, instead of invoking “genocide,” the struggle in Rwanda was referred to as a “state of disaster” and characterized as tribal killings (4). As a result of these “tribal killings” in Rwanda during this “state of disaster,” 800,000 men, women, and children were systematically murdered, raped, kidnapped, and brutally beaten (“Rwanda”). The choice by the US to avoid this issue is one that is understandable, but not necessarily one of integrity.
Again, when speaking of becoming involved in Uganda today and of sending merely 100 troops there to aid, while most Americans go back to the issue in Somalia, it is necessary also to remember the issue in Rwanda and to be aware of the issue at hand. According to Pentagon spokesperson Captain John Kirby in October of 2011, the US troops’ mission is limited to helping Ugandan soldiers and the armies of other nations to stamp out the Lord’s Resistance Army (Ramirez). Kirby said in the interview, “The mission for these 100 or so special operations forces is really just advise and assist, and help train local forces to deal with that threat. That is the scope of what they are going to be doing. That is the limit to what they are going to be doing” (Ramirez). Kirby’s statement is right in line with that of President Obama in his letter to congress in October: “These forces will act as advisors to partner forces that have the goal of removing from the battlefield Joseph Kony and other senior leadership of the LRA. Our forces will provide information, advice, and assistance to select partner neighbor forces” (“Letter”). Finally, these statements are corroborated by the president of Uganda, President Museveni himself: “When you call them troops you are saying that they are coming to fight on our behalf. We shall never have troops coming to fight for us. I cannot accept foreign troops to come and fight for me. We have the capacity to fight our wars” (Olukya).

Regardless of the reserve that may be felt by millions of Americans upon hearing of the US involvement in Uganda, the fact remains that this involvement is a wise move politically. While thousands of people vividly remember the horrors of the battle of Mogadishu, more vividly remember the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. Terrorism is a very real threat to America and its citizens today, and Somalia, a neighbor to Uganda, is home to an Al-Qaida-linked group that has recruited dozens of Americans. Currently, the US is supporting 9,000 troops, some of which are from Uganda, who are stationed in Somalia to combat that group (“US”). With the Lord’s Resistance Army terrorizing the country, Uganda can hardly afford to keep its troops in Somalia for the benefit of another country (the US), when its own people are in such great need of protection. According to Jason Straziuso in his article “LRA: Rebels Worth Sending US Troops to Africa?” for CBS News, the US involvement in Uganda is “political payback for the quiet sacrifices of Uganda’s troops in Somalia.”

In addition to keeping the Ugandan forces free to combat the terrorist threat in Somalia, Emira Woods, the co-director of Foreign Policy in Focus, said the US involvement “goes back to one thing: oil. Lets [sic] remember Uganda has oil. It changes the calculus always with US foreign
policy when it is a country that seems to be rich with this resource that has become almost an addiction for the US and global economy” (qtd. in “Uganda”). Millions of Americans have surely noticed, the drastic changes in gas prices over the last few years. This increase is due to the rising need for crude oil world wide. ABC News tell us that it is “more difficult and more expensive for refineries in the US to get oil. That makes it more costly for consumers at the pump” (Hartman). In addition to benefiting the US, protecting Uganda as a source of oil also benefits other nations around the world.

In addition to the political reasons behind the US involvement in Uganda, there are those of a more humanitarian kind. The Executive Summary section of the “Strategy to Support the Disarmament of the Lord's Resistance Army” states that the strategy will “seek to reduce the vulnerabilities of civilian populations and to increase their access to humanitarian assistance where needed.” After having seen the genocide in Rwanda, how could anyone help but wonder if any of it could have been prevented had the US stepped in? The same need not be true of Uganda.

Throughout the years, the LRA has plagued Uganda by killing thousands, forcing children into their service, and tearing families and lives apart. In May of 2010, when President Obama signed into law the “Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009,” and when in November of that same year Congress passed the “Strategy To Support the Disarmament of The Lord's Resistance Army,” the US announced its intention to support Ugandan troops in their battle against the LRA's ruthless dictator, Joseph Kony. While the issue remains complex, “the vision remains simple: people in central Africa are free from the threat of LRA violence and have the freedom to pursue their livelihoods” (“Strategy”).

America has long been said to be the “home of the free,” so how can we, in good conscience, refuse that right to anyone else? Freedom is a right that is to be enjoyed by everyone regardless, of race, creed, or status. If we refuse to aid others in the pursuit of a right that is intrinsic to our country, we have no right to it ourselves.
Works Cited


