LRA CRISIS TRACKER

MIDYEAR 2016
SECURITY BRIEF

INVISIBLE CHILDREN

THE RESOLVE
LRA CRISIS INITIATIVE

"In November 2015, the commanders of our group received orders from Kony to abduct young boys and transfer them to Awila's group for training. In early 2016, we began abducting boys in Central Africa [CAR]. When we attacked, we gathered large groups of people. Then we would pick strong, healthy boys between the ages of 11–14 and keep them."

- LRA combatant defector, April 2016

"The LRA set up a roadblock on the road to Bria. Every traveler was stopped and escorted into the bush where there were LRA fighters who spoke very little Sango. They only issued commands like, "sit", "stand", and "you run, we kill." The LRA searched each person looking for five things: gold, diamonds, phones, money, and food. At approximately 18:00, the LRA chose 7 boys and men from the group and told them to stand to the side. They kept those boys and then allowed the rest to go."

- Eyewitness to LRA attack near Aza, CAR, on 10 January 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony has proven capable of outmaneuvering internal rivals and external military threats for nearly three decades, but his once firm control over the group's command structure is eroding. LRA groups are scattered across a vast territory, and Ugandan fighters are defecting at a slow but steady rate, demoralized by Kony's harsh disciplinary measures and lack of vision for the future. At least one group of LRA officers led by Achaye Doctor has splintered and is operating independently of Kony's command.

Regardless of its inner turmoil, the LRA remains a persistent, and even resurgent, threat to civilians, particularly in eastern Central African Republic (CAR). The group abducted 344 people there in the first six months of 2016, more than it has in the first six months of any year since 2010.[1] Most abductees were adults forced to porter looted goods towards LRA camps before being released, but LRA defectors report that in December 2015 Kony also ordered officers in CAR to abduct several dozen children and integrate them into the rebel group. By the end of June 2016, the LRA had abducted 65 Central African children, 39 of whom remain in captivity or are otherwise unaccounted for. However, at least 15 teenage boys abducted in previous years have defected so far in 2016, making it unclear if the overall number of child soldiers within the LRA is rising or falling.

LRA violence in northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was lower in Quarter 1 of 2016 (January–March) than it was in comparable periods of the previous two years. However, LRA attacks and abductions in DRC more than doubled in Quarter 2 (April–May), in part due to the arrival of an LRA group in Garamba National Park tasked with poaching elephants.

### LRA abductions at midyear point, 2009–2016
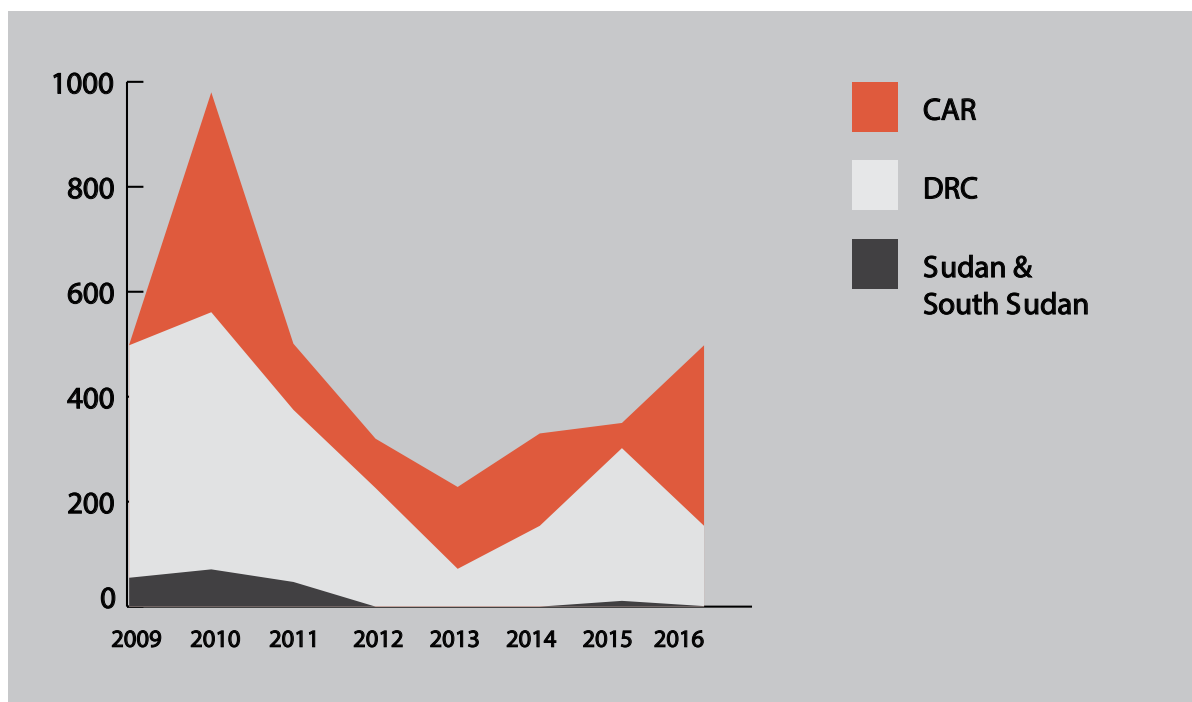
In total, the LRA abducted 498 civilians and killed 17 others during 122 attacks from January–June 2016, with nearly all attacks in eastern CAR and northern DRC. The exceptions were two attacks in Sudanese-controlled areas of the Kafia Kingi enclave, the first credibly reported LRA attacks on civilians there since the group established a presence in the area in 2010.

LRA violence against civilians, January–June 2016
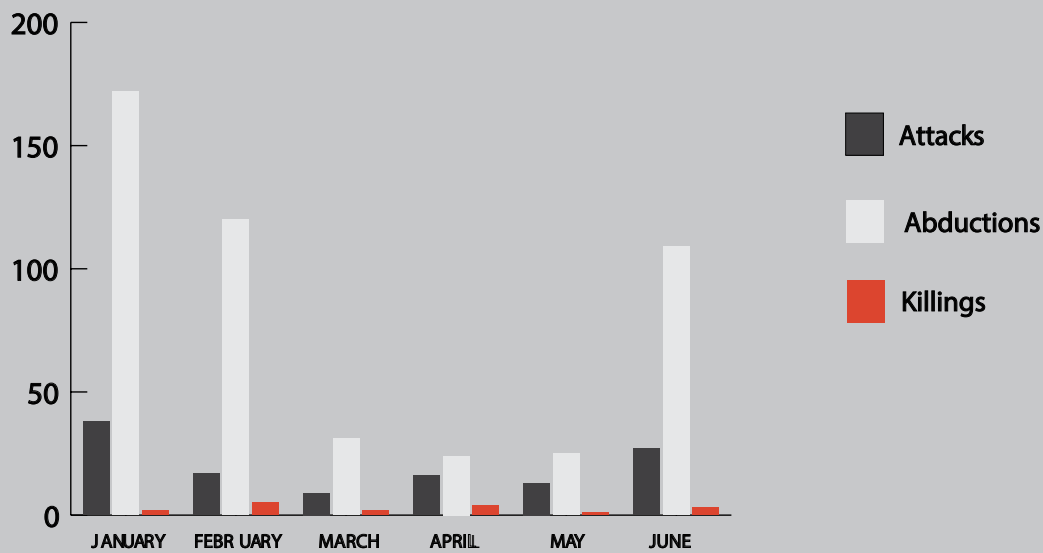
LRA attacks, January–June 2016
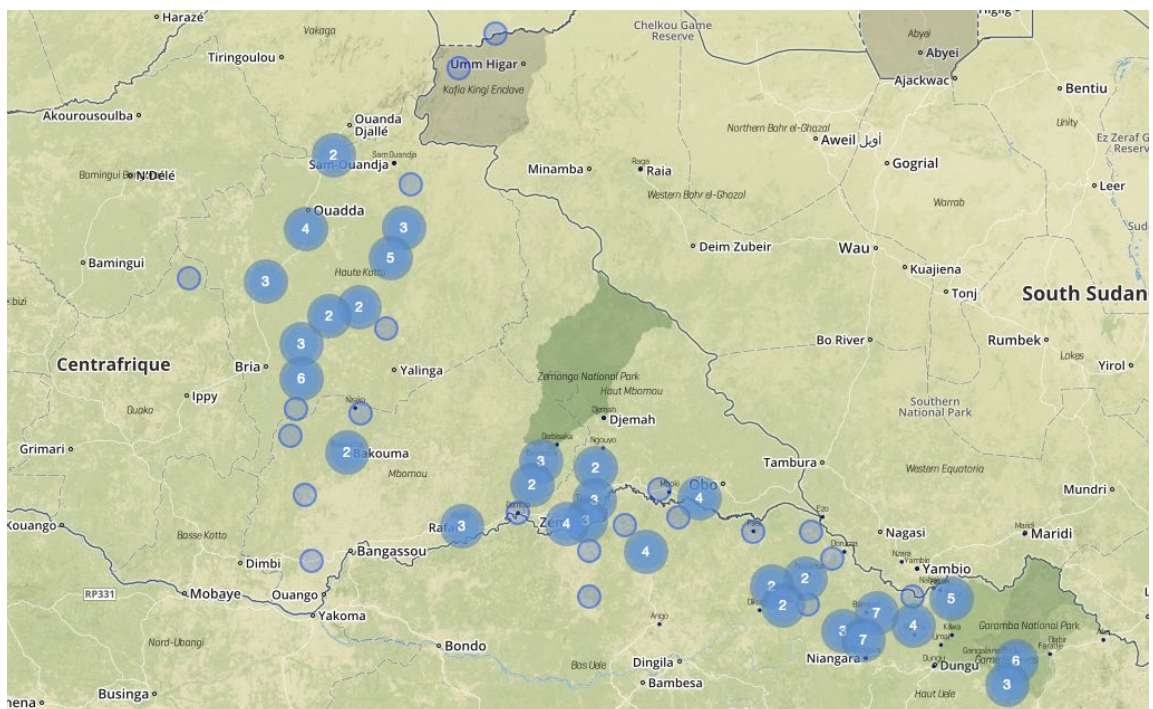
CAR: KONY LOYALISTS AND LRA SPLINTER GROUPS TARGET CIVILIANS

LRA groups went on a spree of violence in eastern CAR in Quarter 1 2016 unprecedented since their move into CAR in 2008. Between January and March 2016 the LRA abducted 278 people across Haute Kotto, Mbomou, and Haut Mbomou prefectures, including dozens of children. The attacks displaced thousands of people in Haute Kotto before the country's historic presidential elections and highlighted the inability of forces from the national military, UN peacekeeping force in CAR (MINUSCA), and African Union Regional Task Force (AU RTF) to adequately protect civilians in remote villages and artisanal mining locations.

The patterns of LRA attacks in eastern CAR in Quarter 1 suggest they had three strategic goals: increase reserves of food, collect easily-transported valuables, and forcibly recruit children. Interviews with Central Africans abducted by the LRA reveal that a small number of LRA groups carried out clusters of large-scale abductions in Haute Kotto and northern Mbomou prefectures in Quarter 1, looting more food and other supplies than such groups could consume in the short-term. Most abductees were adults released after being used as porters, but the LRA also abducted and retained dozens of children, which the group had never done before in eastern CAR. LRA assailants also explicitly sought to loot gold, diamonds, and cash from victims during several of these attacks.

The strategic purposes of these attacks were likely dictated in part by Kony, who LRA defectors claim issued orders in December 2015 to abduct 60 children and integrate them into the rebel group. LRA defectors have also testified that gold, diamonds, and cash looted in eastern CAR are most often transported to Kony's group, which operates along the border between eastern CAR and the disputed Kafia Kingi enclave.

"The LRA commander who captured me asked, 'Why do you people refuse to give us food? We are out here in the bush protecting you, and all we ask in return is that you reserve some food and other things to give us when we come to your village. When we come to your village, do not shout Tongotongo! and run away.[2] Just give us your food and we will leave you in peace.' He then asked me which villages are closest to our location and have large amounts of food."

- Eyewitness to LRA attack near Akpo, CAR, on 12 February 2016

In Quarter 2 2016, LRA violence dropped sharply, particularly in Haute Kotto, indicating LRA groups were surviving on supplies collected in previous months. Still, the LRA abducted 66 civilians across the three prefectures, a higher total than in any single quarter in 2015. Most attacks in Quarter 2 were concentrated along the road from Rafai to Mboki that stretches along CAR's southern border. LRA abductees who escaped in this region in Quarter 2 testified that the Achaye Doctor splinter group was responsible for several of the attacks along this road. The Achaye Doctor group split from Kony's command in late 2014 and operated for most of 2015 in DRC's Bas Uele province, which lies directly south of the Rafai–Mboki road. However, recent defector testimonies indicate they may have established a new camp in eastern CAR in 2016.

"Late in 2014, I was transferred to the LRA group led by Achaye Doctor. There were nine Ugandan officers in our group, plus abductees from Congo [DRC] and Central Africa [CAR]. Later, the Ugandans told us we were no longer taking orders from Kony. They said we were independent of Kony and would fight any LRA soldiers Kony sent after us."

- Central African LRA escapee, January 2016

Achaye Doctor's group is likely responsible for several particularly bold attacks in eastern CAR in early 2016, including attacks on Tabane (5 March) and Agoumar (17 April). Such attacks were part of a broader pattern of activity in which the LRA group "demonstrated increased boldness, by attacking larger or less isolated population centres, deviating from its long-standing low-profile posture."[3] From 2014–2015, LRA attacks in CAR most frequently occurred "in the bush", often targeting hunters or fishermen in remote forested areas where security forces were unable to patrol. However, in the first half of 2016 the number of LRA attacks on towns and settlements increased dramatically, forming a higher proportion of overall LRA attacks in CAR.

Included in these LRA attacks on towns and settlements were distinct clusters of assaults on mining camps or communities. Over the course of two weeks in late January, LRA forces looted seven mining locations east of Bria in Haute Kotto prefecture. In late June, LRA forces looted the mining camp near Karmadar in CAR's Mbomou prefecture twice, temporarily abducting 15 civilians in the first attack.

LRA attacks by location in CAR
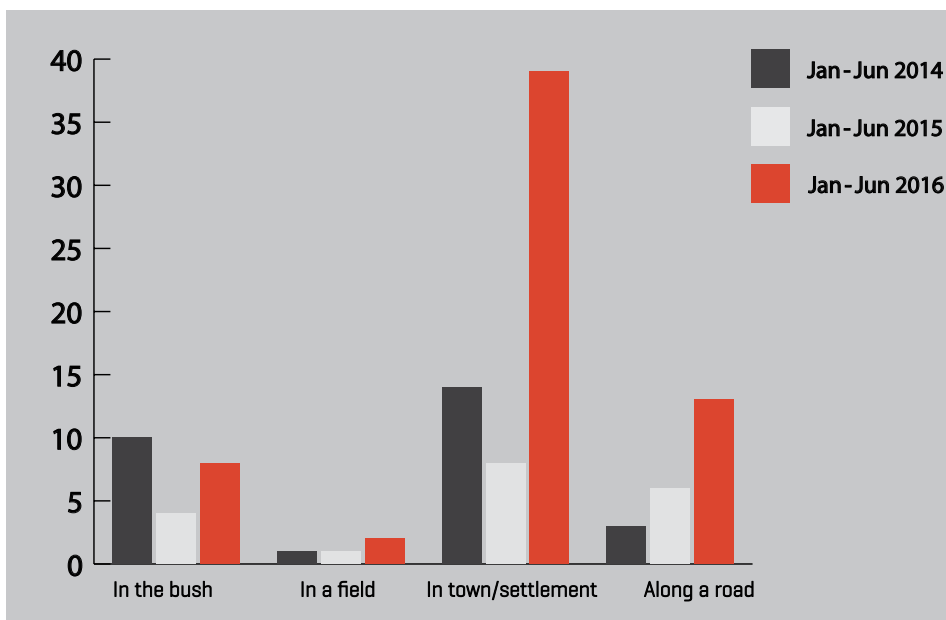
DRC: LRA VIOLENCE EXPANDS IN QUARTER 2 2016

LRA attacks and abductions in DRC in the first six months of 2016 were more scattered than those in eastern CAR. In Quarter 1, LRA violence was clustered in two areas. The first was the Bangadi-Ngilima-Niangara triangle in Haut Uele province, a historic hotspot of LRA activity, where LRA forces abducted 13 people in nine attacks. The second cluster was in Bas Uele province near the border with CAR, which included the temporary abduction of 2 girls, 1 boy and 7 men near Pangu on 9 January.

In Quarter 2, LRA violence expanded in scale and scope in DRC. In Haut Uele, LRA forces continued to target the Bangadi-Ngilima-Niangara triangle, abducting eight people in 11 attacks. LRA violence also expanded to communities to the west and south of Garamba National Park, where LRA lootings spiked between mid-April and late May. Rangers in the park clashed with an LRA poaching group at least once during that period. This was the first time an LRA group was reported in the park since mid-2015, when an LRA group led by Aligatch departed Garamba after collecting ivory tusks.

In Bas Uele, one LRA attack cluster in Quarter 2 centered around the town of Banda in the month of May. In June, LRA groups committed four scattered attacks on communities further west and north in Bas Uele, including the abduction of 35 civilians from the village of Gumbu on 4 June.

LRA attacks near Garamba Park, January–June 2016
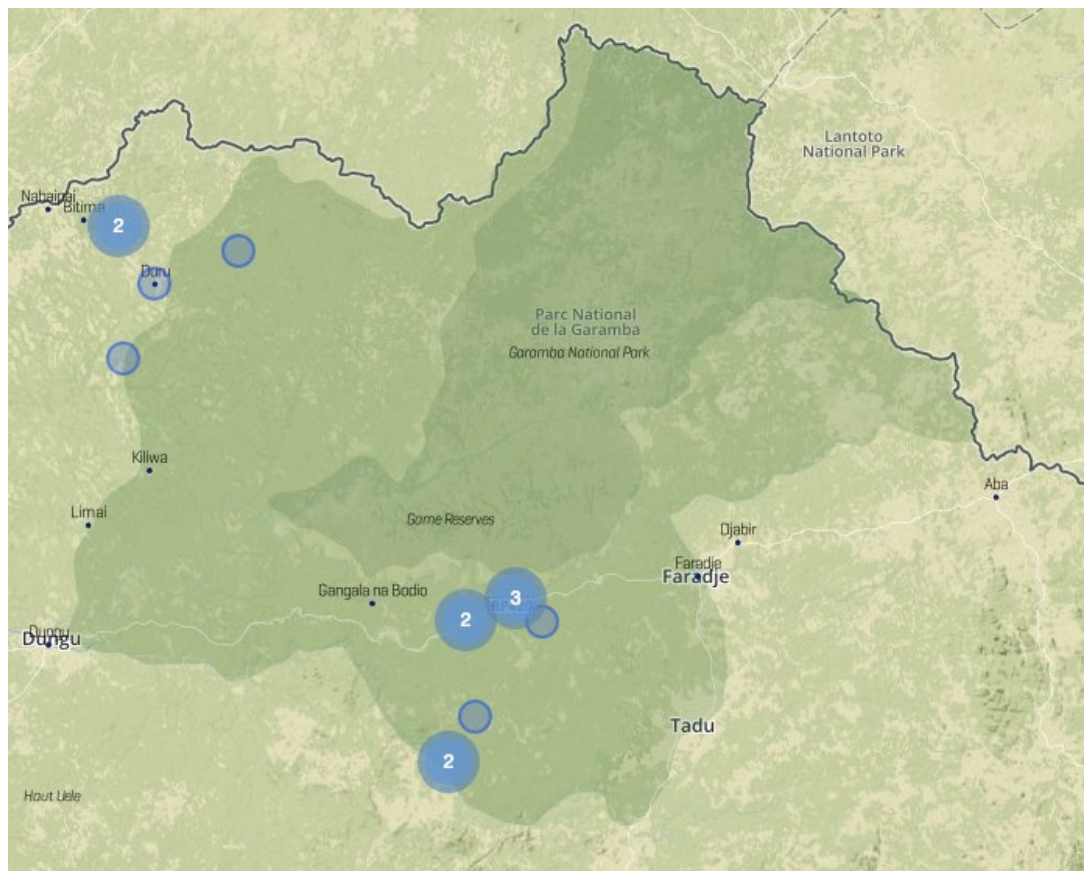
LONG-TERM DEPENDENTS ESCAPE, OFF-SETTING CHILD RECRUITMENT

Long-term dependents—women and children who have spent at least six months in LRA captivity—bear the primary burden in ensuring the LRA's day-to-day survival. In the first six months of 2016, 38 long-term dependents returned from LRA captivity, including 15 teenage boys who had likely received some military training. Consequently, though the LRA scaled up its recruitment of children in early 2016, it remains unclear if the overall number of long-term dependents and child soldiers within the LRA is rising or falling.

Some women and young children who returned home from long-term LRA captivity in the first six months of 2016 escaped during the chaos of attacks on civilians or clashes with military forces. Others were released intentionally by the LRA, including 12 women and children released near Bangadi, DRC, on 9 June because they were widows or children of LRA commanders who had defected or been killed. LRA officers have periodically released groups of women and young children under similar circumstances since 2013.

Long-term teenage boy abductees who left the LRA were not released intentionally by the LRA, indicating their scarcity and value within the rebel group. Instead, most escaped on their own initiative, often risking severe punishment if they were caught. Some female abductees also risked punishment by deciding to escape on their own initiative.

"Once our group arrived in Congo, our commander told us any person caught trying to escape would be killed. In December [2015] we had a feast for Christmas, and the Ugandan commanders allowed us low-ranking abductees to eat amongst ourselves. During the feast, we talked about our memories of home, and this was my final motivation to escape. Eleven days after the feast, I took a chance to escape with one other boy."

- Teenage boy LRA escapee, January 2016

"In October [2015] I became pregnant by the LRA commander who I was forced to marry. I was afraid the LRA would kill me when I became too pregnant to keep up with the constant walking. In the days before Christmas, our group looted food and alcohol to prepare a Christmas feast. I helped prepare a large feast, and encouraged the men to eat and drink very much. That night as they slept deeply, I got up with a flashlight and ran away. When I came to a village, they helped me reach safety."

- Young female LRA escapee, February 2016

TRENDS IN ATTACKS BY UNIDENTIFIED ARMED GROUPS

A number of non-state armed groups are active in LRA-affected areas, including loosely affiliated Seleka rebel factions in eastern CAR, localized bandit groups in northeastern DRC, and armed pastoralists and poachers that move cross-border between the two countries as well as South Sudan. Incomplete reporting of some attacks on civilians in the region makes it difficult to ascertain the identity of the perpetrator, particularly in attacks where no people are abducted and the assailants are all adult males. To maintain data credibility, LRA Crisis Tracker analysts adhere to a consistent methodology when assessing the perpetrators of attacks in LRA-affected areas, logging attacks by both LRA and non-LRA armed groups, as well as attacks by "unidentified armed groups" for incidents in which information is missing or inconclusive.[4]

The LRA Crisis Tracker recorded 49 attacks by unidentified armed groups in the first six months of 2016. Concentrations of these attacks overlap significantly with concentrations of LRA attacks, indicating that some attacks coded as being committed by "unidentified armed groups" may have been committed by LRA forces. Numbers of attacks on civilians have remained fairly consistent in the first half of each year since 2013, ranging from 110–120 LRA attacks and 46–56 attacks by unidentified armed groups.

There were three attacks in LRA-affected areas in the first half of 2016 in which the perpetrator was identified clearly as being a non-state armed group other than the LRA, all of which involved armed pastoralists. This is the lowest number of such attacks recorded in the first half of a year since the LRA Crisis Tracker began recording such attacks in 2012.

Attacks on civilians in LRA-affected areas of CAR and DRC (January–June only)
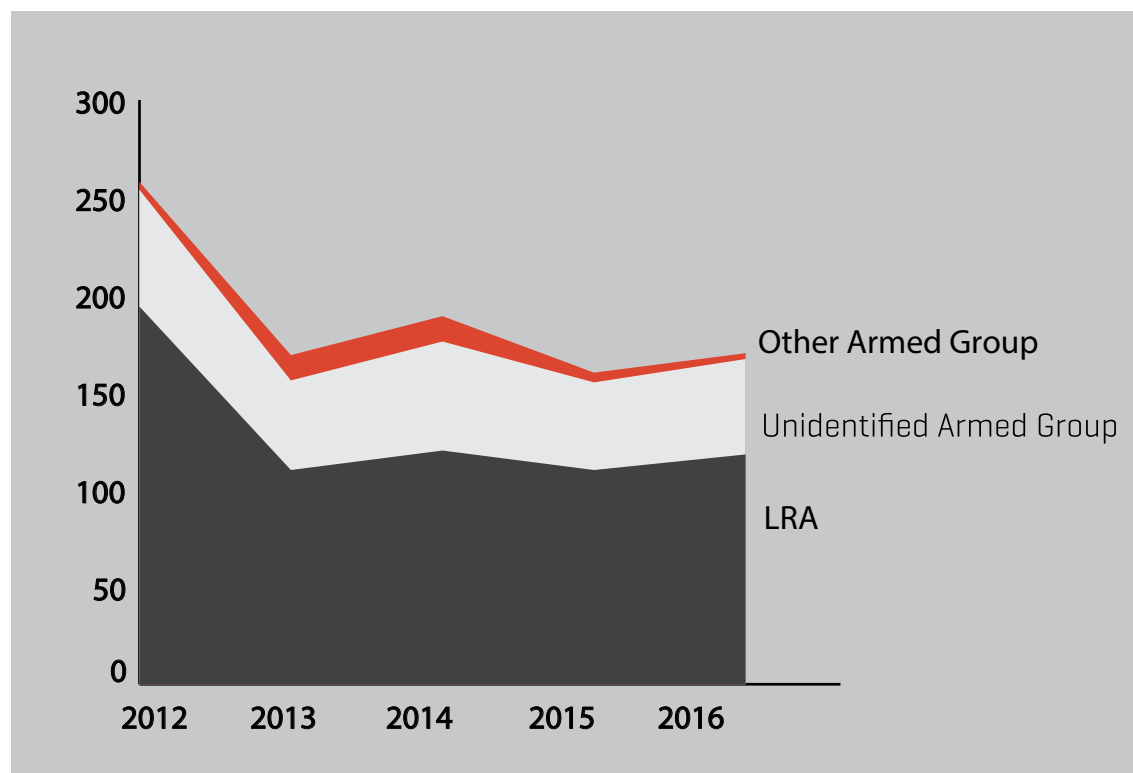
END NOTES

1   Unless otherwise stated, information about LRA violence, activity, and internal dynamics is taken from the LRA Crisis Tracker (www.LRACrisisTracker.com) and interviews conducted by personnel from The Resolve and Invisible Children. LRA Crisis Tracker statistics cited in this report are accurate as of 10 July 2016.

2   "Tongotongo" is a term used to refer to the LRA in some areas of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan.

3   UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa," S/2016/482, 25 May 2016.

4   The perpetrator of each attack is categorized as either "LRA," an "unidentified armed group," or an "other armed group." "Unidentified armed group" is used for attacks for which sources do not provide enough details to accurately identify the perpetrator. The assailants in these attacks could be rogue security forces, poachers, armed Mbororo herdsmen, LRA, or a different armed group. "Other armed group" is used for attacks for which there are enough details to definitively identify the perpetrator as an armed actor other than the LRA. Incidents of abuses against civilians in which state security forces are clearly identified as the perpetrator are recorded separately and not included in these three categories. See more on the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology here.

ABOUT THE LRA CRISIS TRACKER

Data reflected in this brief was collected as part of the LRA Crisis Tracker, a project of Invisible Children and The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative. The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in areas of central Africa affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Through publication of regular reports and open-source sharing of collected data, the LRA Crisis Tracker aims to help overcome the current deficit of relevant and timely information related to the LRA crisis and to support improved policy and humanitarian responses. For a comprehensive guide to the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit LRACrisisTracker.com

In the interest of continually strengthening the LRA Crisis Tracker dataset, The Resolve and Invisible Children welcome new sources of current or historical reports of LRA activity. To contribute information to the LRA Crisis Tracker project, please contact spoole@invisiblechildren.com or paul@theresolve.org.

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