

At the end of March, four Air Force Special Operations Command CV-22B Ospreys departed the US-operated base at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, accompanied by two MC-130P Combat Shadows and a lone KC-135. The aircraft were headed south.

The small task force's destination was Uganda's Entebbe Airport. The aircraft were detailed to US Africa Command for an operation against one of the most notorious rebel groups in Africa: the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

In May 2010, President Barack Obama signed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act into law. At the time, Obama said the legislation "crystallizes the commitment of the United States to help bring an end to the [LRA's] brutality and destruction," a group that "has no agenda and no purpose other than its own survival."

The law defined counter-LRA operations (or C-LRA as it's been known inside the Pentagon) by four lines of effort. The priorities are to increase civilian protection, apprehend or eliminate LRA head Joseph Kony and his senior commanders, promote defection and disarmament of remaining LRA fighters, and provide humanitarian relief to affected areas of Africa.

US military help to capture or otherwise neutralize the group's leadership was a key component of this strategy. The aircraft at Entebbe were part of this mission, and the Ospreys were to help African troops hunt down the remaining guerrillas and search for Kony in particular. (He is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.)

The Department of State describes the LRA as "one of Africa's oldest, most violent, and persistent armed groups." Since the 1980s, LRA fighters have waged a brutal campaign of violence across the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Uganda, and most recently, South Sudan.



AP photo by Stuart Price

Kony created the LRA in the late '80s after the rebel faction he had previously aligned with signed a peace agreement with the Ugandan government. Fighters were largely recruited from the Holy Spirit Movement, a rebel group run by Kony's relative Alice Auma that also fell apart in the late 1980s. Kony and Auma both claimed to have mystic powers and blended Christian dogma with local religious traditions, steadily building a cult of personality. The LRA's stated goal was to fight for the Acholi people who lived in Uganda's north, as well as in Sudan. Rebels led by now current Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, a member of the Banyankole ethnic group, deposed Ugandan President Tito Okello, an Acholi, in 1986.

Over the past three decades, as the rebellion against the Ugandan government has waned, the shrinking LRA has built an infamous legacy for horrendous and arbitrary atrocities. These have included mutilations and executions, often with rudimentary weapons, such as machetes. The guerrillas have wiped out entire villages, looting anything of value. The rebels have also kidnapped more than 60,000 children and youths between 1986 and 2005, according to a 2006 study funded by the United Nations Children's Fund

Air Force Special Operations Command has a key role in the small and secretive war against Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army.

USAF photo by SSgt. Ryan Crane

THE HUNT FOR KONY

By Joseph Trevithick



Top left: Joseph Kony answers journalists' questions in 2006. Defectors from the Lord's Resistance Army say they haven't seen Kony himself in quite some time. Here: A photo illustration of a C-17 on the flight line at Entebbe Arpt., Uganda. The US and Uganda share information on various security threats in the region.



USAF photo by MSgt. Scott Wagers

USAF Rivet Joint aircraft such as this one support AFRICOM by tracking signals intelligence. Intercepting Sigint data is critical to the fight against the LRA.



USAF photo by SSgt. Erik Cardenas

Burundi soldiers prepare to board a USAF C-17 at the Bangui Arpt., Central African Republic. The US, in cooperation with France and the African Union, has provided military airlift support to the CAR, to help quell sectarian violence in the region.



USAF photo by TSgt. Samuel King Jr.

Non-US built aircraft, such as this PZL Mielec M-28 (C-145 Skytruck), belong to AFSOC's Nonstandard Aviation Fleet. Many NSAv aircraft are specifically designed or modified for short takeoff and landing on unimproved airstrips and rough terrain.

(UNICEF). Hundreds of thousands in the region have been displaced by LRA violence.

The Air Force and AFSOC have been combating the LRA for years: The Ospreys and their tanker aircraft were just the latest contribution to a broad interagency program that began in earnest in the mid-2000s. “Airlift and intelligence support are consistently identified as the most-needed enablers to help regional forces,” said Sgt. 1st Class Jessica Espinosa at US Special Operations Command, Africa.

The Pentagon’s mission to support the hunt for the LRA is nicknamed Operation Observant Compass and formally began in October 2011. Special operations forces established their main base of operations in Uganda to help the African Union’s Regional Task Force. From the beginning, USAF personnel played a critical role providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aid for the mission.

SIGINT

The exact details are a delicate matter, but the sorties are known to include manned and unmanned aircraft from operating sites both on and surrounding the African continent.

Since standing up in 2008, AFRICOM has received regular RC-135 Rivet Joint support, tracking signals intelligence. USAF’s Air Combat Command has also since tasked U-2s and C-130H Senior Scout aircraft for AFRICOM operations, according to SOCAFRICA officials.

By 2011, two Beechcraft King Air 200 series aircraft had deployed to Entebbe Airport and were quickly set to work on the C-LRA effort among other missions in the region. The aircraft fed information into Uganda’s Kampala Combined Intelligence Fusion Center, which was established two years earlier. The US and Uganda had agreed to set up the node to help share information on various security threats in the region.

In 2012, DOD also helped establish a C-LRA Operations Fusion Center in Obo, located in the Central African Republic. This facility was run in cooperation with personnel from the Uganda People’s Defense Force and the Forces Armées Centrafricaines.

Many details remain classified, but the aircraft on the hunt for Kony are outfitted with a variety of sensors such as a signals intelligence package and the Jungle Advanced Under Dense-Vegetation Imaging Technology system, a light detection and ranging (LIDAR) instrument. LIDAR involves using pulsed laser light to measure the distance to objects rapidly and produces highly accurate three-dimensional maps. The use of a laser also allows such systems to penetrate water or foliage to determine objects beneath them. LIDAR has great utility in central Africa, as much of the LRA’s operating area is under multiple layers of rain-forest canopy. LRA fighters, like guerrillas around the world, used this natural cover to escape and evade regional forces and establish secure base areas.

The utility of Sigint data is critical to the effort. The LRA probably does not have advanced encryption technology for their communications. Scanning for radio chatter gives clues as to the guerrillas’ whereabouts and may even provide advance warning of raids. Most Sigint systems also have an aerial radio direction finding capability. Properly equipped ISR aircraft could generate actionable intelligence for African Union troops simply by homing in on LRA transmissions.

Because of these factors, Air Force ISR support (both organic and contractor associated) has been invaluable to counter-LRA operations. Most African partners have few, if any, airborne ISR assets themselves that could help readily locate enemy fighters.

The intelligence that American forces provide to their African partners is essential to the mission, but so is airlift support. Finding the LRA is one thing, but if AU troops cannot respond before LRA fighters flee, the effort in finding them is effectively wasted. Streamlining these operations remains a significant issue because regional governments do not always exercise complete control over their territory and have limited military resources—a fact the LRA has repeatedly exploited in the past.

The African partners have few aircraft to call upon themselves. Uganda, by far the largest contributor to the regional effort, had only three functional Mi-17 Hip helicopters as of 2013, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and has no fixed wing transport aircraft of any kind. At the same time, the Central African Republic, Congo, and South Sudan, combined, have another dozen or so Mi-8/Mi-17s and two C-130 Hercules transports.

In response, the Pentagon and the State Department have worked to provide “robust logistics support” via several funding streams such as foreign military assistance and the State Department’s Global Peace Operations Initiative, said Army Lt. Col. Jason Nicholson, chief of the East Africa Regional Division at AFRICOM’s Strategy, Plans, and Policy Directorate. Before his tour at AFRICOM, Nicholson also served for two years as the chief of the Office of Security Cooperation at the US Embassy in Kampala.

The US military uses fixed wing aircraft from AFSOC and additional aircraft flown by civilian contractors to facilitate this movement of men and materiel. Aircraft from AFSOC’s Nonstandard Aviation fleet (NSAv) are integral to this effort.

The NSAv fleet includes various types of fixed wing light transport and utility aircraft and is ideally suited to the austere conditions in central Africa. Many of these aircraft are specifically designed to take off and land from short, unimproved airstrips and require far less infrastructure than a larger C-130 transport.

NSAv aircraft have participated in Operation Observant Compass by flying personnel and equipment between Entebbe and operating sites in Obo; Dingu, in the Congo; and Nzara, South Sudan. American SOF and members of the AU RTF manage these sites to facilitate operations in all four countries. Personnel and equipment might then be transported to additional forward operating locations. Many of these sites can only be resupplied from the air, Nicholson explained. AFSOC’s PZL Mielec M-28s and Bombardier Q-200s are turboprop transports, capable of air dropping supplies.

NSAv aircraft provide AFSOC with a variety of options for SOF missions and to advise and assist friendly air arms. Because of worldwide demand, AFSOC has made it a priority to improve the NSAv fleet and its capabilities. This includes fully militarizing the remaining aircraft to meet official Air Force regulations. This unique fleet continues to support operations against the Lord’s Resistance Army.

Despite the recent emphasis, there are still only a limited number of AFSOC and contractor aircraft available to move African personnel around and fly critical logistics missions. These aircraft are not always available to respond to actionable intelligence as a result. Helicopters with the ability to reach remote areas may not be fast enough to reach the sites in time even if they are ready to go. The Pentagon hopes the recent CV-22 deployment would fill some of these gaps, at least temporarily.

These tilt-rotors have been a boon to American SOF. The Ospreys came into service just before the retirement



Photo via Melting Tarmac Images

Uganda in 2013 had only three Mi-17 Hip helicopters and no fixed wing transports. The CAR, Congo, and South Sudan combined have a dozen helicopters and two C-17 aircraft. Robust US logistics support is vital to the effort.

of the MH-53 Pave Low helicopter fleet and are “often mistaken as a replacement,” according to AFSOC’s 2010 official history. The CV-22Bs fly almost as fast as C-130s, but can still make use of small landing zones in remote locations. Ospreys are well-suited to rush African forces to engage groups of LRA fighters, and tanker support gives them added flexibility.

A VICTIM OF SUCCESS?

Unfortunately, the aircraft’s specialized capabilities also mean they are in high demand. Ospreys from AFSOC’s 8th Special Operations Squadron and 20th SOS are regularly deployed to support SOF missions around the globe. The 7th SOS, based in England, began receiving CV-22s last year.

This spring’s deployment actually marked the second time in six months that the airplanes had been sent to help in Africa. CV-22Bs from Djibouti flew a mission last December to evacuate American civilians caught up in the fighting in South Sudan.

US and African officials laud the regional effort against the Lord’s Resistance Army. Observant Compass and Air Force support for African forces have been invaluable in degrading the ability of the organization to continue its campaign of violence. The LRA numbered in the thousands as recently as 2007, but has shrunk to less than 500 members, by UN and US estimates, with between 100 and 300 actual armed fighters.

News reports and UN figures cited in the LRA Crisis Tracker online website show there were 61 attacks attributed to the LRA in the first quarter of this year, compared to 215 in the first quarter of 2010. Recent defectors say they have not seen Kony himself in some time, highlighting the belief that the LRA has morphed into loosely associated groups participating in banditry to fund their activity.

However, there are concerns that American assistance—especially ISR assets and other advanced technology—might become a “victim of its own successes” in Africa and elsewhere, said Nicholson.

Partner nations feel the US military can “do anything” and “think the US military is more capable than we are or we are not sharing enough, and this is just simply not the case,” Nicholson said. The Pentagon—and the Air Force elements—must work to manage their partner’s expectations.

Overall, the combined Counter-Lord’s Resistance Army mission appears to be working. “In the last six months alone, US forces provided enabling support to 33 partner operations that disrupted LRA activities and significantly increased pressure on the LRA,” Army Gen. David M. Rodriguez, AFRI-COM commander, told Congress this past March. “With the enhanced support provided by [AFSOC] aircraft, we believe our partners are well-positioned to further degrade the LRA’s remaining command structure,” said Lt. Cmdr. Matthew Allen of SOCAFRICA.

“The American people can take pride in knowing that US forces helped set the conditions to bring the endgame to this long running conflict,” Nicholson said of the progress thus far. AFSOC’s piece of this campaign is prime reason Joseph Kony’s reign of terror appears to be drawing to a close. ■

Joseph Trevithick is a longtime writer on defense and security affairs. He is also a fellow at globalsecurity.org and operates America’s Codebook: Africa, a blog dedicated to tracking US military engagement on the continent. This is his first article for