

AGLI - Report from Kenya #176 – March 16, 2012

My Take on *Kony2012*

Dear All,

A number of people have asked me about the new media sensation, *Kony2012* by the group, Invisible Children. Today I was the 79,574,419 person in the world to download the thirty-minute video. Normally I don't try to download video because my system here in Kenya is still too slow. After one and one half hours, I had downloaded 4:44 minutes. When I tried to look at even this beginning part, it went away and said it was no longer available. So I have not seen the video, but I have a lot of background on the issue and have read a good number of criticisms of the video including those from Uganda itself.

In 2003, AGLI sponsored three HROC workshops in Soroti, Uganda, for “night commuters.” These were twelve to twenty year-olds who each night walked to the town of Soroti to sleep in order to keep from being kidnapped by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and being turned into child soldiers for the boys and to sex slaves for the girls. They were sleeping all over the town including churches and on the verandas of the stores – 20,000 of them just in this one town. At the 2011 international HROC training in Burundi there were three people from a group called *Empowering Hands* which was working with children who had been abducted by the LRA and had escaped and were trying to re-integrate into Ugandan society. One of these participants had been abducted when she was twelve and escaped when she was eighteen, with her baby. She admitted to killing people, for example, attacking a bus that blew up as they robbed the passengers. If I understand correctly, one of the other three people at the HROC training from Northern Uganda was one of the robbed passengers on that bus.

Here are my comments about the video.

1. The video focuses solely on Joseph Kony himself. While Kony has been a “bandit” in northern Uganda, and then later in South Sudan, northeastern Congo, and the Central Africa Republic, he is only one of many such outlaws that attack, steal, rape, and destroy average people's homes and towns in order to survive. Thousands of such men exist in this vast, heavily forested, thinly populated region. The LRA is reported to have only about 200 adult fighters plus 1000 to 2000 child soldiers. It seems that LRA itself has actually split into a number of armed groups. So killing or capturing Kony will have little effect on the lives of people in this region since he is but one of many.
2. A group from Northern Uganda showed the video to people in Lira, one of the towns greatly affected by the LRA. Included was a group called AYINET, African Youth Initiative Network which was started by the American Friends Service Committee in

countries from East Africa to South Africa. I attended the initial organization meeting in Nairobi in 2003 as the representative of the AFSC because I then served on their Africa panel. They report, *The screening was attended by over 35,000 people from across northern Uganda; it was broadcast live on five local FM radio stations that reached approximately 2 million people in northern Uganda. . . However, at the Lira screening, the film produced such outrage, anger and hurt that AYINET has decided that in order not to further harm victims or provoke violent response that it is better to halt any further screenings for now.* If the subjects of the video have this extreme negative reaction to the video, then I would conclude that there is something seriously flawed with it.

3. The video concludes by recommending the violent solution; sending in the military to capture or kill Kony. There is little understanding of the implication of this recommendation. The military solution has been tried almost continually since 1986 when Kony began the LRA. It has not only failed time after time, since he still has not been captured or killed, but with the result of increased suffering among the ordinary people. Few people are actually killed in the fighting in this region, but the many – particularly children, the elderly, and the sick – die an unnoted death from exposure and disease when they flee from the fighting. Consequently many more people die in these military offensives than would normally die from the LRA itself.
4. At the end of 2011 the United States Government posted 100 US soldiers to Uganda to help with the hunt to capture or kill Kony. Since these soldiers are based hundreds of miles south of northern Uganda in the safe, cosmopolitan city of Kampala, and, since Kony was pushed out of Uganda five or six years ago, the rationale for this US deployment is suspect. Many Africans think that the real reason is to support the pro-American, but dictatorial regime of Yoweri Museveni who has been in power since 1986 and regularly manipulates and steals elections while his corrupt family and cronies salt away the proceeds of their corruption.
5. While the LRA is without doubt a terrorist group, the Ugandan Government and Army have committed atrocities that, since they are such a bigger and stronger group than Kony's rag-tag army, exceed anything that the LRA itself has done. For example, the Ugandan army forced 1.8 million people in northern Uganda into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps where they had to live off the charity of foreign NGOs. Not only do many people die when they are uprooted from their homes, but IDP camps are never healthy places to live and particularly grow up. Moreover the Ugandan army has been accused of numerous human rights violations, so much so that when Kony was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), the deputy prosecutor at the ICC resigned in protest when the Ugandan Army was not also indicted for their crimes against humanity.
6. While we are on the ICC, it is the Uganda Government itself that took the case to the ICC which led in 2004 to the first ICC indictments of four LRA leaders. In other words, it was part of the anti-LRA campaign. To go to the ICC, a country must be unable to try the suspect itself; the Uganda Government was admitting that they did not have a fair, valid

judicial system. But the bigger issue was with the ICC who, according to my understanding, is supposed to try those who are or are close to state actors who have committed human rights violations, and not just some two-bit bandits. Most of the leaders of the countries in this region, including Museveni, were once rebel outlaws and all of them committed human rights abuses in their seizure of power. Then, once in power, most of them committed further human rights abuses. These are the ones the ICC should be indicting.

7. A number of times the Museveni Government has sabotaged peace agreements with the LRA which were usually initiated by the people of northern Uganda. In 1998, a peace/amnesty agreement was reached with the LRA, but then-President Museveni refused to sign it. In 2009 another agreement was almost reached with Kony and his lieutenants. The only sticking point was the demand by Kony and the three other LRA commanders that the ICC indictments be withdrawn. It would be difficult for those four to sign a peace agreement when they would then go directly to trial by the ICC. This peace agreement, as with every other peace agreement, was strongly supported by the people of northern Uganda. Nonetheless the involvement of ICC, rather than bringing peace, in this case extended the fighting for years. Museveni did not want to end the conflict with the LRA as it justified his bloated military budget and army, allowed numerous avenues for additional corruption, and kept in chaos that part of Uganda most opposed to his rule.
8. I am of that older generation and in my youth opposed the Vietnam War. This Kony2012 campaign is geared for American youth, which is one reason it has spread so widely on YouTube. The message is that the United States needs to initiate another military action. Are the youth who should be out on the streets opposing the many current US wars and military actions being diverted to a rather small group of 200 rebels so that they do not focus on the real war issues that are confronting the US? In my book, *A Peace of Africa*, concerning the Save Darfur Coalition, I wrote, *My biggest skepticism is the fact that the Save Darfur movement mirrored the foreign policy objectives of the Bush Administration and diverted the idealism, energy, and concern of the youth from the real American problems of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.* This is also the case with the Kony2012 campaign.
9. The organization, Invisible Children, also seems suspect. From 2003 to 2005 the Save Darfur Coalition did a similar, but much more thorough campaign about the situation in Darfur. They collected lots of money but all of it went back into promoting the campaign and none of it reached Darfur. Invisible Children has had allegations of improper use of the funds that they raised in the past. The AYINET report said, *It was hurtful for victims and their families to see posters, bracelets, and T-shirts, all looking like a slick marketing campaign, promoting the person most responsible for their shattered lives.* The proceeds will be going to the organizers of the NGO and there is no intention, yet, that any of the funds collected are to be used in northern Uganda. It seems that this is another incident

where the suffering and problems of Africa are being used for the benefit of an American NGO and its leaders.

10. AGLI has been asked, and we would agree, to introduce the HROC (Healing and Reconciling Our Communities) program in northern Uganda but in these difficult times fundraising cannot generate the additional income needed to do this.

Peace,

Dave

David Zarembka, Coordinator

African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams

P. O. Box 189, Kipkarren River 50241 Kenya

Phone in Kenya: 254 (0)726 590 783 in US: 301/765-4098

Office in US: 1001 Park Avenue, St Louis, MO 63104 USA 314/647-1287

Webpage: www.aglifpt.org Email: dave@aglifpt.org