



Contraditório think-tank

Briefing

Kony, Activism and Neocolonialism | Beatriz Gil-Schwandl

Invisible Children's "Kony 2012" video has achieved astonishing notoriety since it was first posted online a couple of weeks ago. With over 80 million viewers so far, it has brought to light the crimes of Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. It has managed to garner support against the warlord in quarters where he had never been heard of before with the goal of putting pressure on the US government to get involved in the conflict and bring Kony to justice. These newly recruited activists have been tirelessly spreading the word about the campaign, donating funds, planning global action events, and even celebrities such as Oprah and P.Diddy have also taken up the cause. Yet will this recent wave of interest really make a difference, and what are its consequences? More importantly, how are the countries directly concerned responding, and what should really be done?

Whilst critics, both Ugandan and international, have accused Invisible Children

of oversimplifying the issue and promoting a 'feel-good' but ultimately useless activism, it is difficult to argue that such awareness-raising is negative. True, the perspective given in the film is mainly Western, but that is what its target audience is. Moreover, it is certainly guilty of present a narrow and short-sighted view of events, but one can hardly expect a 30 minute-long film to delve into the historical and political complexities of the LRA, and the aim is not to present a thorough academic overview but to get people interested in the issue and want to investigate more. Some say that the money invested in the campaign would have been better invested in aid programmes and that the activism it has prompted is fruitless, but in order for governments to act, popular pressure is often necessary: these lobbyists may not be able to intervene directly, but they can nonetheless push to make the matter relevant. Indeed, regardless of the personal agendas of the politicians and celebrities involved, the fact is that unprecedented attention has been given to



Kony thanks to Invisible Children, an attention that has never been present despite the fact that he and the LRA have been terrorizing Central Africa for over a quarter of a century and that he was been indicted for arrest by the ICC seven years ago. Thus, the argument that the Kony 2012 campaign awareness-raising is useless and that the Western intervention it advocates smacks of paternalism is hardly well-grounded. It is true that the timing of the campaign is somewhat odd, but it has been 26 years and all local attempts to stop the LRA have so far failed; must the rest of the world just stand by and passively watch on for fear of being dubbed neo-colonialist interventionists? Is political correctness really more important than stopping the LRA?

The real danger lurking behind Invisible Children's campaign lies in its omissions and inaccuracies that, unless rectified, could provoke blind public support for Museveni's administration and too much emphasis and aid directed towards Uganda at the expense of the countries where Kony has been operating over the past six years, i.e. the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. It is important not to forget that the current Ugandan president also

came into power with the use of child soldiers, and that his army has fought along them in the DRC, though Invisible Children has made no mention whatsoever of these facts. Channeling Western support towards Museveni would therefore be ignorant or hypocritical at best, and crediting his corrupt and violent regime with dangerous power and legitimacy at worst. Furthermore, the issue is not about Uganda anymore, though this is where the campaign focuses on, and it is unlikely that Kony will be returning there soon given that he has been busy elsewhere, killing more than 620 civilians and kidnapping over 120 children in the DRC between December 2009 and the beginning of 2010.

Though perhaps the major criticism directed at Kony 2012 is aimed at its support of military intervention, it is difficult to see another solution. Peace negotiations were attempted between him and the Ugandan government in 2007, but failed to have any impact except prompting him to move elsewhere. Invisible Children has failed to explain Kony's self-professed ideological motivations that make him all the more difficult to deal with: his ultimate goal is the creation of a Christian Theocracy with,



ironically, a legal system based on the Ten Commandments. Moreover, if Kony did agree to a negotiations, he would be under constant threat of capture not to mention assassination. He has condemned himself to keep on fighting until he is stopped, and the only viable way of doing so is unfortunately through international military intervention, there being too much danger in merely relying on the often inefficient and corrupt local governments. In addition, the local military forces lack the expertise, resources and technology to deal with the problem alone, and hunting for a small army adept at employing guerilla tactics in the enormous thick and treacherous jungle is no easy task.

Most importantly, those who are at present directly concerned by the LRA are themselves overall supportive of Kony 2012 message and not against the military solution it advocates, for many of its victims agree that he must be stopped at all costs, and that attracting media attention to this ongoing problem long ignored by the Western public at large will be the catalyst for the LRA's annihilation. The Central African Republic's minister of Justice, Firmin Findiro, has applauded the campaign, asserting that his country, along with the others, could not face this problem alone.

It would be foolish to blindly adhere to Invisible Children's claims without asking questions about its agenda or gathering more accurate information about the reality of the situation and donations to the charity which had hardly been heard of before now are perhaps unwise and prudence must be exercised. But completely dismissing it amid arguments of naivety and neocolonialism is equally foolish. What truly matters is that it has brought Kony and the LRA at the forefront of international news, and while some disagree with conferring celebrity status upon the warlord claiming it to be insensitive, his anonymity amongst the public at large has been one of the reasons for his ongoing existence. Military intervention will undoubtedly lead to violence, but so will no intervention, and it is a matter of choosing the lesser of the two evils. In order to apprehend Kony, both Western and African governments need to cooperate and the UN and the African Union need to continue promoting diplomatic engagement as well as make sure that the humanitarian agenda is stuck to. The eyes of the world need to continue turned towards this problem and debate and criticism openly encouraged to keep international intervention in check. Finally, it is crucial not to push aside other urgent African policy issues, particularly those concerning democracy and



corruption, as ignoring them will inevitably lead to the formation of other, perhaps even bigger, problems than the LRA.

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