

What they won't say about Kony 2012

Written by Bill Crane

Saturday, 17 March 2012 02:02 - Last Updated Tuesday, 12 March 2019 14:50

Link to source: <http://socialistworker.org/2012/03/12/left-out-of-the-kony-2012-video>



" [KONY 2012](#) ," a social media campaign by the charity group Invisible Children that caught fire last week, has brought the wars of central Africa into the media spotlight.

A video produced by Invisible Children that got some 71 million views in less than a week focuses on Joseph Kony, leader of the Ugandan rebel group Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The 30-minute video claims that Kony is "the most dangerous man in the world."

Invisible Children says it hopes the video will "raise support for his arrest and set a precedent for international justice." The campaign, which jumped from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to the front page of newspapers across the U.S., asks supporters to make Kony "famous" by posting flyers with his image. This, the video suggests, will convince the U.S. government to step up support for the Ugandan military in its quest to "stop Kony"--to kill him or to bring him to trial at the International Criminal Court.

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It's certainly understandable that a campaign against child soldiers and sex trafficking would gain widespread attention. But the Kony 2012 campaign is leaving out a lot of facts that every opponent of violence and injustice needs to know.

Not only does the video dangerously oversimplify the history of Kony and the LRA in Uganda, but it bolsters the position of U.S. imperialism on this question--particularly in its support for the repressive Ugandan government. And this comes at a time when the U.S. military is intervening more aggressively in Africa, including basing troops on the continent.

In October, the Obama administration announced it was sending 100 soldiers to Uganda to act as military "advisers" to Ugandan and African Union forces fighting the LRA. "I have authorized a small number of combat-equipped U.S. forces to deploy to central Africa to provide assistance to regional forces that are working toward the removal of Joseph Kony from the battlefield," Obama wrote in a letter to Congress.

But the administration isn't motivated to extend military help to the Ugandan government out of altruism. U.S. involvement comes in the context of [what SocialistWorker.org contributor Lee Wengraf called](#) "a new African land grab"--with Saudi Arabia, Japan, China, India and South Korea, as well as agribusiness and private equity firms from Europe and the U.S., buying up large tracts in a competition for farmland and biofuel sources.

THE INVISIBLE Children video says little about Joseph Kony and his history besides the allegation that he has enslaved more than 30,000 children, using the boys as soldiers and the girls as sex slaves. This, we're told, justifies stopping him by all means--including U.S. military involvement.

Certainly no one who cares about justice will shed any tears if and when Kony is brought to justice. The leader of an army that seeks "a government based on the Ten Commandments" and a man who claims supernatural powers, Kony led a 20-year insurgency--one that did, in

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fact, use child soldiers--against the Ugandan state.

But stopping at this distorts the character of the conflict.

The LRA is one in a series of insurgencies by the Acholi people, dating back to the rise to power of Yoweri Museveni, who has held the office of Uganda's presidency for a quarter century now. The Acholi, based in the north of the country, have been waging war in one form or another against the central government, based among southern ethnicities.

Museveni's government has carried out a savage campaign of counterinsurgency, with the Ugandan military matching the LRA atrocity for atrocity. In the mid-1990s, the government imposed a policy of forced displacement against the Acholi. Camps for the internally displaced in the north have some of the highest mortality rates in the world, with more than 1,000 people dying each week.

The counterinsurgency campaign failed to defeat Kony. However, the LRA stopped operating in Uganda in 2006, a fact that the Kony 2012 video fails to note. Information about the situation is scanty, but there is reason to doubt that Kony--if he is, in fact, still alive--commands more than a few hundred soldiers somewhere in either the Central African Republic or the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

As Ugandan journalist Angelo Opi-Aya Azama wrote, the area has much greater problems, including the HIV epidemic and the spread of other deadly diseases.

Nevertheless, Kony 2012 focuses on one warlord and asks that viewers support the continued presence of U.S. military advisers in Uganda to capture him. In the video, Invisible Children claims to have been central in convincing the U.S. government to send advisers last October--though this obscures the fact that Obama's move was an escalation of an ongoing intervention.

In fact, U.S. forces participated in a disastrous operation in 2008 that failed to capture Kony in his base in Congo-- [but which succeeded in provoking the LRA to launch a ferocious](#)

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[counteroffensive](#)

almost 1,000.

. The rebels abducted an estimated 700 people and killed

The Invisible Children video likewise ignores the brutality of the Ugandan military. On the contrary, it is portrayed as "the only force" capable of stopping Kony.

The military's campaign against the LRA has been corrupt, brutal and deadly. In the hunt for Kony, the regime's forces have been accused of [looting the Central African Republic and forcing women into prostitution](#)

The Kony 2012 campaign will not only reinforce this brutality by giving it a "humanitarian" justification, but it serves to strengthen an authoritarian state that last made global headlines for its attempts to pass a law to punish homosexuality with death.

Even from a strictly humanitarian point of view, it's hard to see why U.S. intervention deserves support. First of all, if the U.S. military were to find Kony, we should ask how many of the LRA's child soldiers--in whose name Invisible Children claims to speak--were killed in the attempt to bring him in.

We might also question the commitment of the U.S. government to ending the use of child soldiers-- [when it funds the armies of four countries that continue to use them](#) , including Yemen and Congo.

But beyond these questions, it's important to remember that U.S. military interventions never have and never will be carried out for humanitarian motivations. U.S. military involvement in Uganda isn't about concern for ordinary people, but Washington's desire to strengthen its imperial foothold in Africa. The Pentagon's Africa Command is aiming to expand its presence in the region--and in Uganda, [where new oil and natural gas reserves have been discovered](#) .

Moreover, like the NATO intervention in Libya, involvement in Uganda can help to rehabilitate the idea of "humanitarian intervention"--which suffered a bruising after the 2003 war in Iraq. This increases the ability of the U.S. to sell more wars around the world.

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FOR ANYONE who watched the Invisible Children video, the deceptions in the call for intervention weren't the only troubling aspects.

Despite Invisible Children's claim to speak on behalf of Kony's child soldiers, only one such soldier appears in the video. The only other Ugandans interviewed are politicians--representatives of a U.S.-aligned government that has repressed the Acholi people. In fact, the camera spends more time on the video's white director and his child, and the white activists working with Invisible Children.

According to the video, this is "a crucial time in history where what we do or don't do right now will affect every generation to come." But the "we" in that passage is clearly Westerners, not Ugandans.

This approach--appealing to people in the U.S. to settle accounts with Joseph Kony on behalf of the people of Uganda--has a long and ugly history. It goes by the term "white man's burden"--the racist argument made famous by British poet Rudyard Kipling that it is the duty of Western countries to be a "civilizing" influence in undeveloped parts of the world.

Kipling's poem, first published in 1899, was invoked in support of the U.S. government's brutal domination of the Philippines, and echoes of it have been heard ever since to justify the crimes of European and U.S. imperialism.

The Kony 2012 campaign embraces the idea that the people of Uganda must be "saved" from themselves by the benevolent West. This is the ideology that justified almost a century of colonialism in Uganda and the rest of Africa, creating the very conditions that produced the likes of Joseph Kony and Yoweri Museveni.

Naturally, ordinary people in the U.S. who see the Kony 2012 video will want to do something

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to alleviate the suffering that they see portrayed in the film. But if nothing else, a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan--justified in both instances with the language of humanitarian intervention--should teach us that the U.S. war machine can never be used to stop violence and end suffering.

The presence of Western governments in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa--whether directly in the form of troops, or indirectly in the form of political and military support for pliant regimes--does nothing to help ordinary Africans.

The Kony 2012 video gives false answers to a terrible crisis. Ultimately, the best way to help the people of Uganda is to challenge both U.S. military intervention in the region--and the neoliberal economic policies that have impoverished the continent.

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