

Will KONY2012 Make a Difference?

Written by Tim Allen

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TIM ALLEN, MAR 18 2012

Less than two weeks after it was launched on YouTube, the new film about the Lord's Resistance Army made by Invisible Children has had 80 million viewings! It is astonishing. From the follow up video that the organization put up more recently to respond to its critics, the response has astonished them too. The KONY2012 campaign raises the bar on what it is possible to achieve with electronic media. Huge numbers of predominantly young people have been mobilized in North America, Europe and elsewhere in a way that would have been inconceivable a few years ago.

Some of us who have been researching on the issues for a while have been deluged with interview requests, and have in addition been receiving personal emails from individuals wanting to know more. Children are being shown the video in classrooms. In London I am being invited to speak at school assemblies. In Uganda there may be some bemusement about the idea of making Kony famous. He is already famous enough. But there is no doubt that in many parts of the world the Invisible Children strategy has focused attention on the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader like never before, and people have been both appalled and motivated by what they have found out.

So is all this publicity useful? What does it add to the decision by President Obama to send "combat-equipped troops" on a kill-or-capture mission to "take out" Kony last year? Is the KONY2012 video just a piece of inappropriate lobbying propaganda, as many analysts have already suggested? Above all, will it make any difference to people in central Africa?

It is really too early to answer these questions with certainty, but some things are clear. To begin with, it has to be noted that – while the Invisible Children's videos are remarkable creations, and have a powerful impact on audiences – they are, in various ways, misleading.

The first one, released in 2004, was a carefully constructed and compelling piece that purported to be a "rough cut" for a future film. It made no attempt to explain the war in Uganda, or why the population was so unprotected. Instead it focused, very movingly, on the plight of a few selected, English-speaking, "night commuters" – children who at the time the video was made were taking refuge in Gulu town at night to avoid abduction. The role of the Ugandan government and Ugandan army in what was happening was ignored, and so were the hundreds of thousands of children and adults who remained out in their displacement camps, located too far away to walk to the big towns. Living conditions in those camps were often atrocious, far worse than in the environs of Gulu. In fact, "rough cut" video focused on what was probably the safest location in the war affected region. It also promoted the idea that the LRA was comprised of forcibly recruited children, whereas the majority of those who had been forced (or who had chosen) to join the LRA were, according to UNICEF data, adults.

The new video, KONY2012, is equally effective in its emotional punch. It is a superbly produced product – one that other lobby groups with other causes will want to emulate. However, its factual content is again very partial. The points and many of the images of the earlier film are repeated. This in itself is a problem, because the "night commuter" phenomenon in northern Uganda had stopped by 2006. To make matters worse, the impression given before that the LRA is made up of children is reiterated and compounded with a computer generated image of Joseph Kony surrounded by all those he has abducted. We are told that he has captured over 30,000 children, and the impression is given that most of them are still with him. Where this number comes from is unexplained. It may be derived from estimates of how many people have at some point been with the LRA, but have now returned. If it is

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really intended as an indication of the current size of the movement, then it must be wrong. The LRA groups now active in Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan are unlikely to be made of more than a few hundred. It is one of the factors that make them so hard to locate in the dense jungles.

This is not the only exaggeration or confusion in the KONY2012 video. The idea that the improvements in northern Uganda since the LRA moved out of the country has occurred as a direct result of Invisible Children's projects is absurd. Leaving aside the controversies that surround the group's financial accounting and management in the US, in northern Uganda the organization has a limited presence. It essentially remains an advocacy group, and it is certainly much better at that than running large scale development projects.

The video has also been infuriating for those involved in the Juba peace negotiations – which include some of the contributors to *The LRA: Myth and Reality*. For Invisible Children, the peace talks with the LRA that took place in Juba between 2006 and 2008 can be dismissed as a ploy by Kony to reorganize his forces. Even if there is possibly some truth in that, we are not informed about the subsequent botched US supported military strike which closed off any possibilities of negotiation, left Kony and his senior commanders unharmed, and failed to adequately protect the local population along the borders of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the aftermath. Failure to recognise these complications is a problem, particularly as more of the same kind of military response is promoted in KONY2012. Indeed, the 100 additional soldiers sent by President Obama last year to work with the Ugandan army are presented as a solution to the LRA problem that has arisen from Invisible Children's own successful lobbying. Far from offering a new approach on the ground, KONY2012 provides, in places, a disturbingly X-Box-style surgical strike agenda. At the start, Russell and his young son are even seen having fun with computer graphics of blowing people up! Is this what US troops are now supposed to do to Joseph Kony? But that was what was intended for Operation Lightning Thunder in 2008, and that was a disaster. Why will it be different this time? How is it possible to launch such an attack without jeopardizing the lives of local people? That is not explained. KONY2012 does however come up with a very interesting twist, one that, for me, partly redeems it from itself.

The Invisible Children video is entirely supportive of the US military engagement as a way of removing Kony. The organization's campaign seeks to mobilize US politicians and celebrities to ensure that there is no back-sliding. But removal does not necessarily mean assassination. Fascinatingly, the most supportive words about what Invisible Children are doing in the KONY2012 video come not from the US, but from Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the out-going Argentinean prosecutor of the International Criminal Court based in The Netherlands. This is surprising, given that KONY2012 is explicitly aimed primarily at a US audience, US celebrities and US politicians. As explained in my book, *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and The Lord's Resistance Army*, the US has been openly hostile to the ICC. President Obama has changed that, but he has not sought to justify US military involvement on the basis that his army is executing ICC arrest warrants.

Yet, contradicting the implications made at the start of the KONY2012 video, that is what it ends up demanding. This is not a call for an assassination mission of the kind that removed Osama bin Laden. Invisible Children want Kony's arrest and trial by an organization of which the US is not a member state. If that happens, there may be embarrassing implications for the Ugandan Government. Ugandan soldiers, for example, may be called to testify and will be publically cross examined about their actions. Are Invisible Children being naïve? Is this a contradiction they have not considered? Or are they more shrewd, radical and principled than their critics suppose?

The notion that Kony might be handed over to the ICC and prosecuted in The Hague seems far-fetched to many analysts. But possibly the publicity will make Kony consider handing himself in, if there is a way of doing so safely. He has been a keen follower of international news, and has been aware, for example, of what has been happening to the former Liberian President, Charles Taylor. In the past he has talked about going to The Hague to defend himself and testify against Uganda's President Museveni. If that happens, perhaps it would make a big difference. Prosecutor Moreno-Ocampo certainly thinks so. The arrest warrants he requested for Joseph Kony and other senior LRA commanders were the first ever issued by the ICC. But the ICC does not have its own police force, and those that are still alive remain at large. In KONY2012, Moreno-Ocampo complains bitterly that this is the case, and the film is edited a little disingenuously to suggest that he thinks it is only Invisible Children who really care and want to do something about it.

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Certainly Moreno-Ocampo would love to hand over to the new ICC chief prosecutor (the Gambian Fatou B. Bensouda) on a high. Despite the problems with the case his team presented, he has just secured the ICC's first ever conviction (for Thomas Lubanga), and he would certainly like to step down with Joseph Kony and the surviving LRA recipients of his first warrants in detention and awaiting trial. It would do wonders for his somewhat battered reputation, and would help further establish the credibility of the ICC. Also such trials could lead to more rigorous interrogation of the facts in central Africa, including the alleged responsibilities of others for terrible crimes – including regional governments, various militia and international actors too.

If the KONY2012 campaign can really be about ending impunity – and can distance itself from just demonizing Joseph Kony in isolation – it might yet prove more valuable than many analysts predict. Perhaps the sudden engagement of millions of concerned young Americans and Europeans in a part of the World that they had barely noticed before could actually contribute to positive change. Let us hope so.

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*For more discussion about the KONY2012 campaign and on the decision by President Obama to send US forces on a kill or capture mission against Joseph Kony and the LRA, written by contributors to *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, see these two articles published in *Foreign Affairs*.*