

Kony 2012 promotes US “humanitarian” intervention in Africa

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The campaign launched around Kony 2012, a 30-minute video targeting the leader of Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, is aimed at furthering US military intervention on the African continent under the guise of humanitarianism.

The video has been viewed on YouTube tens of millions of times, and its depiction of the suffering of the people, and particularly the children, of Uganda as the result of the protracted military conflict between the LRA and the US-backed government of President Yoweri Museveni has no doubt struck a chord with many, particularly younger people with little knowledge of the complex history of the region and the many interests involved.

The campaign’s message has been greatly amplified by a series of celebrities, ranging from Oprah Winfrey to George Clooney, Sean “Diddy” Combs, Rhianna and four of the Kardashians, all of whom have tweeted their support. It has likewise received virtually uncritical promotion from the mass media, with television anchors in the US comparing it to the use of social media during the mass revolts that shook Tunisia and Egypt last year.

In reality, there is absolutely nothing radical or oppositional about Kony 2012, whose explicitly stated aim is to drum up popular support for the continuation and escalation of one of the first direct military interventions by the Pentagon’s Africa Command (AFRICOM) on the African continent.

In October of last year, the Obama administration announced its decision to send 100 combat-equipped US military “advisers,” most of them special forces troops, into Central Africa with the stated aim of hunting down and either capturing or killing Kony and other leaders of the LRA.

While Invisible Children claims its campaign is for Kony to be delivered to the International Criminal Court for trial, the US government has refused to be a party to the ICC and has made no mention of the court in relation to its military operations in Central Africa.

A March 7 open letter to President Barack Obama, issued in conjunction with the release of the video, praises the Democratic president for his “leadership on this issue.”

“Your decision to deploy U.S. military advisors to the region in October of 2011 was a welcome measure of further

assistance for regional governments in their efforts to protect people from LRA attacks,” the letter states.

It continues, “However, we fear that unless existing U.S. efforts are further expanded, your strategy may not succeed.” It touts the US military as the sole force capable of providing “tactical airlift” together with “cross-border coordination.” It cautions against any “premature” withdrawal of US special operations troops and urges the administration to utilize recently approved Pentagon funding “to provide enhanced mobility, intelligence, and other support for ongoing operations.”

The heads of three organizations signed the letter: Invisible Children, the maker of the Kony 2012 video; the Enough Project, a subsidiary of the Democratic-oriented think tank, the Center for American Progress; and Resolve, a human rights group connected to Catholic missionary organizations.

Behind this campaign is an unholy alliance between the Christian right in the US, which has chosen Uganda as something of a laboratory for its reactionary social and political outlook, and sections of well-heeled liberals who have become a new constituency for imperialist intervention waged on the pretext of upholding human rights and protecting civilians.

The White House last week came out publicly in support of the Kony 2012 campaign, with spokesman Jay Carney stating that Obama “congratulates” all those who responded to this “unique crisis of conscience” and vows to continue the US intervention.

Underlying the sudden and peculiar turn by Washington towards a “human rights” crusade against the Lord’s Resistance Army are very definite economic and geo-strategic interests. These are bound up with the recent discovery of substantial oil reserves precisely in the area where the hunt for the LRA is being staged and increasingly fractious competition between Washington and Beijing for geo-political influence in resource-rich Africa. AFRICOM and military intervention have become crucial instruments for the US in combating the wave of Chinese investments in infrastructure projects aimed at facilitating the extraction of African oil and mineral wealth.

What is peculiar about the intervention against the LRA is that it has been launched under conditions in which the militia group has already been reduced to a few hundred fighters and

driven out of Uganda. While it conducted brutal attacks that claimed many civilian lives and was responsible for abducting large numbers of children for use as child soldiers a decade ago, its operations have been sharply curtailed in recent years and its atrocities far overshadowed by the mass killing carried out in the resource wars being waged in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Museveni's Ugandan troops and affiliated militia groups are among those responsible for the loss of nearly 6 million lives since the mid-1990s.

The Kony 2012 video portrays Uganda as it was a decade ago, thereby generating false propaganda for the US military intervention. At the same time, it casts the struggle between the Ugandan government and the LRA as a morality play, pitting "good" against "evil."

While the LRA has committed massacres and crimes against the region's civilian population, it is hardly unique in this regard. It is a product in the final analysis of the divide-and-rule methods utilized by British colonialism, which generated inter-ethnic conflicts that independence and a rising native ruling class only continued to foster.

With the coming to power of Idi Amin in 1971, power shifted to the traditionally oppressed north of the country and away from the south, which had been favored by the British. The Acholi, one of the main northern ethnic groups, dominated the country's military, which continued to exercise significant power even after Amin's ouster in 1979.

In 1986, however, the country's military ruler, Gen. Tito Okello, was brought down and the Acholi-dominated army disbanded after Museveni and his National Resistance Army, which preceded Kony in the use of child soldiers, swept to power.

It was out of Museveni's ruthless suppression of resistance in the north that the LRA emerged. This repression led to the forced relocation of much of the north's Acholi population into "protective villages," effectively concentration camps in which people were deprived of their land and agriculture and many thousands died from hunger and disease.

Even the Museveni regime has criticized the film's distortions. "It is totally misleading to suggest that the war is still in Uganda," Fred Opolot, a spokesman for the Ugandan government, told the *Telegraph*. "I suspect that if that's the impression they [Invisible Children] are making, they are doing it only to garner increasing financial resources for their own agenda."

While no doubt the Ugandan regime is critical for its own reasons, tied to its own interests and concerns that an image of Uganda as a war zone will interfere with the corrupt privatization and investment schemes that have enriched a narrow elite at the expense of the masses of people, the government spokesman has a point.

According to Invisible Children official Jason Russell, the group sold some 500,000 \$30 "action kits," consisting of T-

shirts, bracelets, stickers, posters and buttons, in just the first week since the posting of the video, translating into \$15 million in revenue.

As Invisible Children freely admits, the bulk of this money does not go to aid the impoverished population of Uganda. Barely one third of its spending last year supported programs in Central Africa, while 20 percent covered salaries and expenses and 43 percent was used for "awareness programs."

Invisible Children's previous funding sources also merit critical examination. Among its biggest donors is the National Christian Foundation and the Christian Community Foundation, two grant-making groups that provide financial backing to key organizations of the Christian right, such as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, which promote anti-abortion and anti-gay legislation and religion in school, as well as the Discovery Institute, which advocates teaching "intelligent design," or creationism.

Some of these same religious right groups have been deeply involved in fostering anti-gay hysteria in Uganda, including the pushing of legislation that would make homosexual acts an offense punishable by death.

Invisible Children's Jason Russell was a featured speaker last November at Liberty University, the evangelical Christian school in Lynchburg, Virginia. The school was founded by the extreme right-wing demagogue and Baptist preacher Jerry Falwell, a defender of segregation and South Africa's apartheid regime who became a significant force within the Republican Party.

The Kony 2012 campaign represents a cynical attempt to manipulate public opinion in the interests of US intervention. It seeks to exploit the idealism of young people in order to distract them from the fundamental source of the tragic conditions facing masses of people in Africa—the heritage of colonial oppression and continued imperialist domination. And it proposes the US government and the US military as the solution to human rights abuses, as if the war crimes from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya had never happened.



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