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## Kony 2012 – attracting attention at any price!

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# The Current Column

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## Kony 2012 – attracting attention at any price!

Bonn, 16 April 2012. With more than 100 million hits, the video clip “Kony 2012” produced by the US organisation *Invisible Children* is an internet sensation. In just under 30 minutes Jason Russell, the organisation’s founding member, reports on the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony in a tone suitable for the ears of young children. Joseph Kony from northern Uganda heads the rebel organisation known as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). There is evidence that Kony is responsible for abducting children and deploying them as child soldiers in northern Uganda, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The LRA is considered to be a particularly brutal rebel group, which maintains its struggle by looting and holding orgies of violence in the border areas of East and Central Africa. The video ends with the call for Kony to be made so famous throughout the world that the US Administration comes under pressure to leave the hundred military advisers assigned for the specific purpose of arresting the LRA leadership in Uganda and to increase its military commitment in order to track Kony down. This goal is to be achieved through the distribution of the video, the sale of a “Kony 2012 Action Kit”, which includes a bracelet and letters to be sent to US politicians and other prominent individuals, and the holding of a Kony 2012 Day of Action on 20 April. The message from *Invisible Children* is that increasing the global attention paid to the LRA’s atrocities will generate the necessary international pressure to put a stop to Kony and the LRA.

Almost as soon as the video appeared, the criticism of the Kony 2012 campaign began. It initially focused on the factual errors in the video, such as the claim that the LRA had not operated in Uganda for years, but confined its activities to neighbouring countries, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo. It had no more than 300 rebel fighters scattered throughout the region. The explicit appeals to the US government to support the Ugandan army in northern Uganda and the

regime headed by President Museveni were also questioned. The army has already committed serious human rights violations in northern Uganda, and Museveni recently made international headlines when he used violence to restrict the Opposition’s activities before the 2011 elections. As a result of all this, virtually none of those who know the region well have supported the Kony 2012 campaign. Nor has the recent Kony II film done anything to change the situation. In it the former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Luis Moreno Ocampo, again speaks at length. A military search operation conducted with renewed vigour by the African Union (AU) in March is being celebrated as a success directly attributable to the Kony 2012 campaign.

The campaign appears to have least support among the people of northern Uganda, who have reacted angrily to the emotional and simplistic portrayal of what is a complex conflict. After the video was shown in one village in northern Uganda, an area very largely cut off from the internet, the audience threw stones at the screen. Those whom *Invisible Children* is meant to help feel insulted by this kind of help. What has gone wrong?

First of all, the basic assumptions made by *Invisible Children* are incorrect. Those who could “do” something are well aware of Kony’s and the LRA’s existence and brutality: the Ugandan government, Ugandan civil society, the governments of the neighbouring countries, the AU, the ICC and the US government. Nor is there anything new about the military solution demanded by *Invisible Children*, but it has yet to prove successful. One of the last foreign policy decisions taken by US President Bush in late 2008 was to bomb Ugandan border areas, an operation designed to stop Kony and coordinated with Uganda, its neighbours and the AU following an act of brutality by the LRA. It is also assumed that, given its dependence on resources made available to the Ugandan government by the international community for the

fight against the LRA, the Ugandan military has no real interest in stopping the LRA, especially as it is no longer active on Ugandan soil and does not therefore represent a security risk to the government. Uganda's central government is, moreover, accused of being largely indifferent to the suffering of the people in the North for historical reasons. President Museveni, who has been in office for more than 25 years, has found little political support in this marginalised region. The AU and the United Nations have made and supported several attempts to launch negotiations. But the most recent peace talks broke down in 2009, because Kony was afraid he would end up in the ICC dock. This is an indication of both the complexity of the conflict and the misguided foreign policy recommendation put forward by *Invisible Children*.

The Kony 2012 campaign reveals a dangerous pattern: a 30-minute advertising video made by a private non-governmental organisation is supposedly enough to mobilise sections of a global YouTube community. *Invisible Children* evidently interprets every YouTube hit as an appeal to the US government to waste no more time in increasing its military engagement in an African country. What the people of that country actually think of this is as irrelevant to the YouTube community as is the opinion of proven experts. The call is for

military intervention by the US government in a country that has been damaged by external engagement in the past.

The Kony 2012 campaign is backing simple solutions that far exceed the USA's problem-solving capacities in the region. And, sad to say, successfully, even among those in politics who should know better. *Invisible Children* nurtures an image of Africa that is harming the whole continent: given the chaos that appears out of control, triggered by individuals who clearly personify evil, what is needed is a military campaign led by the USA to stop this boundless brutality in the "heart of Africa". Knowledge of the background to and complexity of asymmetrical conflicts like that between the LRA and the Ugandan army is ignored in this context. What is in fact needed is not more US military, but a well equipped regional security architecture, the creation of jobs in abjectly poor northern Uganda, more opportunities for political participation at all levels of government in the countries of the region, the development of transparent and democratic institutions and additional resources to enable the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals to be achieved. For this innovative global campaigns would be worthwhile.



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