

March 8, 2012

Online, a Distant Conflict Soars to Topic No. 1

By JOSH KRON and J. DAVID GOODMAN

KAMPALA, Uganda — Jason Russell said he never knew he was driving into a war zone. At 24, he had just graduated from the University of Southern California after studying film, he said, and was out looking for a story to tell.

Suddenly, he said, gunmen shot at the truck in front of him, and that is how he discovered the horrors wrought by [Joseph Kony](#) and his [Lord's Resistance Army](#). Mr. Russell would dedicate the next nine years of his life, often in obscurity, to making them a household name.

This week, in a testament to the explosive power of social media, he managed to do so in a matter of days, baffling diplomats, academics and Ugandans who have worked assiduously on the issue for decades without anything close to the blitz of attention that Mr. Russell and his tight-knit group of activists have generated.

Since being posted on Monday, their video, "[Kony 2012](#)," has attracted more than 50 million views on YouTube and Vimeo, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations on the first day alone and rocketing across Twitter and Facebook at a pace rarely seen for any video, let alone a half-hour film about a distant conflict in central Africa.

Though Mr. Russell is at a loss to fully explain it, he has clearly tapped into a vein of youthful idealism that the authorities the world over have been struggling — and failing — to comprehend and keep up with. YouTube said the popularity was driven by viewers in the United States and those younger than 25. Many parents, including at least one in the State Department, discovered the video only after their children showed it to them.

"Mark had it brought to his attention by his 13-year-old, I think, earlier this morning," Victoria Nuland, a State Department spokeswoman, [said at a news briefing on Thursday](#), referring to her colleague Mark C. Toner.

The surge of awareness is even more remarkable considering that President Obama, under pressure from Congress, [announced in October](#) that he had authorized the deployment of 100 American military advisers to help African nations working toward "the removal of Joseph Kony from the battlefield," a major step in American foreign policy in Africa.

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Yet many viewers had never heard of Mr. Kony or his murderous band of fighters until seeing the video by Mr. Russell's group, [Invisible Children](#), pop up in their Facebook feeds. On Tuesday, views on YouTube, already climbing steadily, exploded at a vertiginous rate after celebrities began posting messages, including Oprah Winfrey, with her nearly 10 million Twitter followers. Soon, other celebrities, like Rihanna and Ryan Seacrest, who were similarly bombarded with messages from the campaign's supporters, began posting about it, too.

Posting to Twitter on Wednesday, Mr. Seacrest wrote, "Was going to sleep last night and saw ur tweets about #StopKony ... watched in bed, was blown away."

Gripping and evocative though it is, the video has alarmed many veteran observers of the devastation Mr. Kony and his fighters have left in their wake over the years. Many specifically take issue with the video and the organization for how they present the fight against the rebels, as well as how the organization spends its money behind the scenes.

Not until halfway through the film does Mr. Russell mention that "the war" he describes is no longer happening in Uganda, where he sets the documentary. The Lord's Resistance Army left the country years ago, [migrating to more fragile nations](#) like the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Another complaint among critics is that the film fails to mention the human rights abuses by the Ugandan military, and that Mr. Russell's narration could imply that there are as many as 30,000 child soldiers in Mr. Kony's army today. After years [on the run](#), the group is believed to be down to hundreds of fighters, though they still [prey mercilessly on civilians](#).

Mr. Russell, a co-founder of Invisible Children, acknowledges that he has not made the most nuanced or academic of films. The video charts his personal odyssey to tell the world about Mr. Kony's reign of terror and bring it to an end. He may have boiled down the issues, but that is what it takes to captivate so many people, he contends.

"No one wants a boring documentary on Africa," he said. "Maybe we have to make it pop, and we have to make it cool."

"We view ourself as the Pixar of human rights stories," he added.

Others take issue with the amount of money Invisible Children — which brings in and spends millions of dollars a year — dedicates to officer salaries, filmmaking costs and travel, as opposed to on-the-ground programs to help rebuild the lives of people traumatized by decades of conflict.

"Along with sharing the movie online, Invisible Children's call to action is to do three things: 1) sign its pledge, 2) get the Kony 2012 bracelet and action kit (only \$30!), and 3) sign up to

donate,” a [deconstruction of the film](#) on the Web site of Foreign Policy reads.

Some have called the video a pitch-perfect appeal to so-called slacktivism, a pejorative term for armchair activism by a younger generation, often online. But rather than eschew such digital action, the video takes it as one of its primary goals. Making Mr. Kony infamous, after all, is just a click away.

The criticism notwithstanding, there was an excited commotion at the charity’s office in downtown San Diego, where dozens of volunteers and staff members were handling a flood of incoming phone calls. With hundreds of boxes of promotional material piled all around, the office had the hubbub of a campaign in the final days before the election. Staff members said that additional volunteers were flying in from out of state to join the cause and that donation pledges were coming in at an unprecedented rate.

“It was unstoppable,” Noelle Jouglet, 29, a spokeswoman for the group, said of the video’s rapid spread. “It went internationally very quick. This is a game-changing event for our company.”

She said she had barely slept in recent days as she dealt with the interest in the group’s cause and the criticism of the group’s methods, from time zones around the world. Some calls, she said, were from people who had previously pledged donations but now, after reading the online criticism of Invisible Children, wanted their money back.

Activism in conflict zones has long brought both benefits and unforeseen consequences. It clearly helped make the crisis in Sudan’s Darfur region an international issue. But many analysts also argue that the one-sided way activists painted the conflict — highlighting the Sudanese government’s crimes against villagers while largely ignoring the atrocities committed by rebels — ultimately made it harder to negotiate an end to the crisis.

In this case, some experts said Invisible Children’s campaign, while oversimplified, could help add to the international resolve to stop the killing.

“It’s ultimately a good thing,” said Pernille Ironside, a senior adviser for child protection at Unicef who is an expert on the Lord’s Resistance Army. “It’s not just one organization in the United States who has discovered this issue,” she said. Still, Invisible Children “is essentially distilling a very complicated 26-year war into something that’s consumable and understandable by mass media.”

Mr. Russell said he was far from finished with his campaign, which he said was an example of just how much young political novices could accomplish. “We are ready to make this bigger,” he said. “We are waiting for Jay-Z” to trumpet the cause.

And as a filmmaker, he said he had already received plaudits from producers in Hollywood. “They are getting in touch with the Academy Awards. They want this to be up for an Oscar.”

Josh Kron reported from Kampala, and J. David Goodman from New York. Rob Davis contributed reporting from San Diego.