

**CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH**

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

MONMOUTH  
112 Village Center Drive  
Freehold, NJ 07728-2510  
(732) 780-3035

OCEAN  
405 Route 539  
Plumsted, NJ 08514-2303  
(609) 286-2571; (732) 350-2300

MERCER  
4573 South Broad Street  
Hamilton, NJ 08620-2215  
(609) 585-7878

2373 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-3004  
(202) 225-3765

<http://chrissmith.house.gov>



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## **‘Africa’s Great Lakes Region: A Security, Political, and Humanitarian Challenge’**

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,  
Global Human Rights and Int’l Organizations*  
*Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman*  
*October 22, 2015*

To say that the Great Lakes region of Africa is troubled would be an understatement. Burundi is experiencing continued turmoil due to a recent contentious election. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, has had some level of conflict since the late 1990s. The Lord’s Resistance Army, also known as the LRA, has plagued several of these countries. Alleged plundering of DRC resources by Rwanda and Uganda have never been fully resolved. Nations in the region have been preoccupied in the last two years with resolving the South Sudan civil war.

Definitions vary, but the Great Lakes region, as defined by the U.S. Department of State, comprises Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda. The region is among the most densely populated in Africa, especially around Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika, and enjoys rich agricultural potential, water resources, minerals, and wildlife. However, political instability, conflict, humanitarian crises, and a lack of development remain key challenges.

These four countries are the purview of the U.S. Special Envoy to the Great Lakes, Tom Perriello, whom we have before us today. We also have Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who has spent a great deal of her time in office dealing with Great Lakes issues. They were unavailable for our September 30th hearing on the Lord’s Resistance Army, but while we would like to hear from them on Administration policy in that regard, this hearing has a broader scope.

Today’s hearing offers an opportunity to hear from these Administration officials not only about continuing U.S. efforts to extinguish the LRA threat, but also the Administration’s work with governments in the region on issues such as peace building, governance and adherence to international human rights and democracy standards.

In our subcommittee hearings over the last three years, we have uncovered numerous troubling situations:

- Even with the supposed end of operations by the M23 militia in eastern DRC in late 2013, there are several other militias still causing instability in the region.
- The Kabila government in the DRC is reportedly using a ban on completing foreign adoptions as leverage to ward off actions to prevent him from prolonging his rule despite a constitutional bar to any reelection bid.
- Burundi President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term, which some Burundians and outside observers viewed as a violation of a landmark peace agreement – and, arguably, the Constitution of Burundi – has led to a political crisis and heightened concerns about regional stability.
- Human rights abuses in Rwanda were found to be targeted toward real or perceived political opponents prior to 2012, but after 2012, such abuses were seen as more random, expanding the targets of the regime.
- Maj. Robert Higerero, a retired Rwandan military officer, told our subcommittee on May 20th about his solicitation by the Rwandan intelligence chief to kill to high-level defectors. He turned against the government and informed the targets who asked him to record the offer. He did, and the recording was validated by the Globe and Mail in Canada and the British Broadcasting Corporation. The State Department has not only found the allegations to be credible but warned Maj. Higerero to leave Belgium where his life was in danger.
- Although LRA killings have diminished in the past few years, kidnappings by the group have risen as it operates in smaller, scattered cells, using more adults as temporary labor. One witness at our hearing last month said an end to the U.S. support for the counter-LRA effort would be “devastating.”

We have heard of the difficulties of addressing issues in this troubled region of Africa by both government and private witnesses over the past few years. However, the fates of these countries are interconnected, and our policies need to take this into account.

There are numerous issues in the Great Lakes countries that require examination, and we will discuss today what should be a coordinated U.S. policy in this region and will hear from our witnesses what the prospects are for this policy to be implemented.