Escalation and Restraint in Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Cover picture: Bukiringi, January 6, 2022 - A fighter from the FRPI (Patriotic Resistance Force of Ituri) stands guard on one of the armed group's positions from which they face the ADF (Allied Democratic Forces), Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Glossary of acronyms and technical terms

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
AFDL	Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo)
AIC	Africa Inland Church
CBCA	Communauté Baptiste au Centre de l'Afrique (Baptist Community in Central Africa)
CE	Communauté Emmanuel (Emmanuel Community)
CECA	Communauté Évangélique au Centre de l'Afrique (Evangelical Community in Central Africa)
CNPSC	Coalition nationale du peuple pour la souveraineté du Congo (National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo)
CODECO	Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (Cooperative for the Development of Congo)
CODEZA	Coopérative pour le développement du Zaïre (Cooperative for the Development of Zaire)
CRP	Convention pour la Révolution Populaire (Convention for the Popular Revolution)
DCR	Disarmament and Community Reintegration
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EACOP	East African Crude Oil Pipeline (Oléoduc de pétrole brut d'Afrique de l'Est)
FAPC	Forces armées du peuple congolais (Armed Forces of the Congolese People)
FARDC	Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
FNI	Front des nationalistes intégrationnistes (Front of Integrationist Nationalists)
FPAC	Force populaire d'autodéfense du Congo (Popular Self-Defense Force of the Congo)

FRPI	Force de résistance patriotique de l'Ituri (Ituri Patriotic Resistance Force)
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MONUC	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations unies en République démocratique du Congo (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OKIMO	Office des mines d'or de Kilo-Moto (Kilo-Moto Gold Mining Office)
PLW	Parti de libération des Walendu (Walendu Liberation Party)
PPRD	Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie (People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy)
PUSIC	Parti pour l'unité et la sauvegarde de l'intégrité du Congo (Party for the Unity and Safeguarding of the Integrity of the Congo)
RCD	Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (Congolese Rally for Democracy)
RCD/K-ML	Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie/Kisangani-Mouvement de libération (Congolese Rally for Democracy/ Kisangani––Movement for Liberation)
UPC	Union des patriotes congolais (Union of Congolese Patriots)

Executive summary

Since mass violence broke out in the Democratic Republic of the Congo thirty years ago, various theories have been put forward to explain the conflict and to find ways to stop it. Some have emphasized minerals; others have placed the onus on the weakness of Congolese state institutions or on meddling by its neighbors. This report serves as a summary of and intervention into this debate as conflict continues to escalate. We make two main points. First, we argue that more attention needs to be paid to restraint, focusing on places and moments when conflict has been ratcheted down, as well as on escalation. This leads us to our second point — that conflict cannot be explained by a single cause. Instead, escalation and restraint emerge from the interaction of political, economic, social, and historical factors. We argue that structural conditions — such as state weakness, unresolved land disputes, elite manipulation, and the legacy of past wars — shape how local triggers ignite into wider crises.

The case of Ituri illustrates these dynamics. Between 1999 and 2005, conflict intensified as foreign armies, ethnic militias, and shifting alliances between Uganda, Rwanda, and Kinshasa converged in the province. A long period of relative stability followed, supported by military pressure, demobilization programs, and local peacebuilding efforts. Yet structural inequalities and unresolved historical resentments allowed violence to resurface in 2017 with the rise of CODECO, whose decentralized organization and spiritual mobilization made de-escalation difficult.

This account of escalation and restraint suggests that these phenomena cannot be conceived as separate from broader conflict dynamics — interventions such as early warning systems, human rights training, and communal reconciliation projects will have little lasting impact if they are not connected to national and regional frameworks. We conclude that what is above all needed is a national peace process, a framework that can link local peacebuilding to national political processes, strengthen institutions, and bring an end to foreign meddling in domestic conflicts.

Introduction

Numerous political and academic studies examine the causes of violent conflict, both from a general perspective and more specifically in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, most of these studies rely almost exclusively on cases where conflicts have broken out. As scholars have noted,[1] this leaves out the many cases when violence could have broken out but did not — the "dogs that did not bark." In short, we have focused too much on why conflicts break out and too little on restraint and de-escalation.

There are many standard predictors of violence that one can find in the academic literature: a weak state, the lack of third-party mediation, the abundance of natural resources, and adverse socioeconomic conditions. Yet mass violence remains relatively rare; taken at face value, these variables would overestimate conflicts despite a steady rise in their numbers over the last 15 years.[2] This variation is striking in the DRC, both between provinces and over time. Using internal displacement as an indicator of violence, we observe sharp rises and falls, even in the troubled eastern provinces.
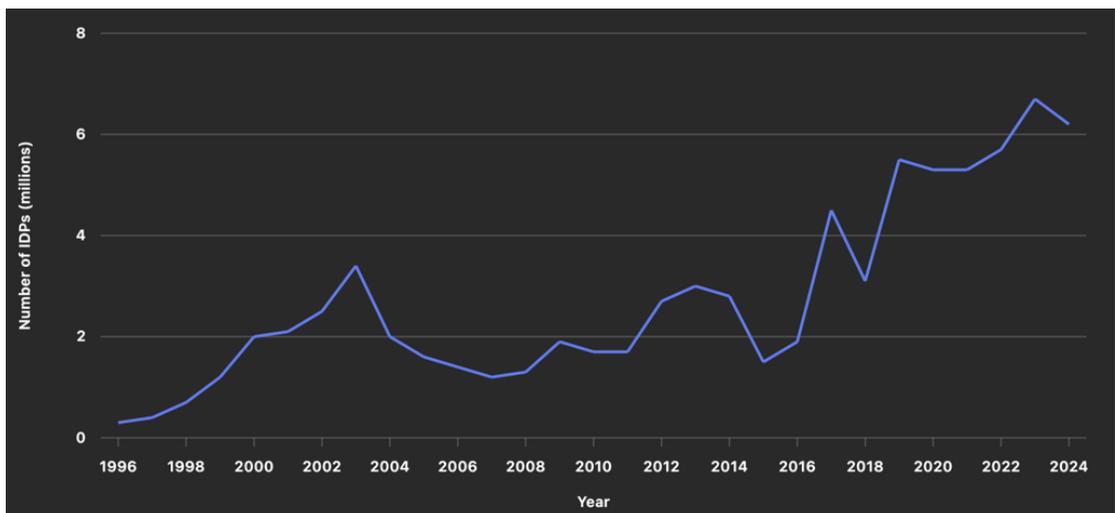
Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; OCHA.

What can these peaks and dips tell us about what is fueling violence in the DRC and, perhaps more importantly, what works in terms of peacebuilding? This report aims to provide some initial answers to these questions.

In Chapter I, we summarize the state of research on conflict escalation and restraint and apply these findings to Congolese conflicts, drawing on nationwide research to identify factors that have intensified or moderated violence over the past three decades. Chapter II presents the results of fieldwork conducted in Ituri province, where extreme violence has alternated with periods of relative calm. We end with policy recommendations.

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1   Scott Straus, "Retreating from the brink: Theorizing mass violence and the dynamics of restraint." Perspectives on Politics 10, no. 2 (2012): 343-362; Barbara Geddes, Paradigms and sand castles: Theory building and research design in comparative politics. University of Michigan Press, 2003.

2   Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). "UCDP: Sharp increase in conflicts and wars." Uppsala University press release, June 11, 2025.

Chapter 1 : Theories of Escalation and Mitigation

Most academic literature focuses on conflict onset, not escalation, although one can assume that many similar dynamics are involved. There is also no agreement on a single, unified theory of conflict, but several broad groups of factors can be distilled from the literature. It is necessary to distinguish between turning points — the triggers of violence — and the structural factors that determine the direction, intensity, and duration of violence. In the first two sections of this paper, we will focus mostly on the latter, while both triggers and structural causes feature in our discussion of Ituri that follows.

The statistical approach favored by much of the political science literature on conflict has provided nuanced correlations and theoretical contributions. However, it can easily lead to the misunderstanding that abstract variables — resource abundance, institutional strength, or poverty — themselves act. Rather, they influence decisions made by sets of actors; these processes have their own dynamics and pathologies.[3] Any escalation or restraint results from interactions among several of these factors, and this interaction is context specific and often indeterminate. Finally, it is important to distinguish between the factors that provoke and mobilize violence, those that explain the persistence of conflicts, the factors that influence the intensity of violence, and those that contribute to restraint.

a. State Weakness and the Security Dilemma: War As Tragedy

In the rationalist tradition, which is dominant in many policy circles, war is often depicted as a tragedy. Violence is an inefficient means of resolving conflicts because it destroys resources that both sides value. In an influential article, James Fearon argues that rational actors should prefer negotiated agreements to fighting; when negotiations fail, escalation results from obstacles such as information asymmetries, commitment problems, and, more rarely, the indivisibility of stakes.[4] From this perspective, war is tragic: no one wants it, but actors succumb to structural constraints.

The security dilemma leads to a similar tragic conclusion.[5] It arises when measures that one actor takes to increase its own security — such as building up its military, forming alliances, or developing new weapons — make other actors feel threatened. Those other actors then respond by increasing their own military capabilities, which in turn makes the first actor feel less secure. The result is a spiral of insecurity and arms competition — a conflict that emerges not from aggression, but from mutual fear and uncertainty.

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3   This includes feedback loops, critical junctures, different responses by actors to the same impulses, among others. See Charles Tilly. "To explain political processes." American Journal of Sociology 100 (1995): 1594-1610; Peter Hall, "Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research." In Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences, edited by James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003; James Bohman, New Philosophy of Social Science: Problems of Indeterminacy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

4   James Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war." International organization 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma." World Politics 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; Charles Glaser, "The security dilemma revisited." World politics 50, no. 1 (1997): 171-201.

5   Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma." World Politics 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; Charles Glaser, "The security dilemma revisited." World politics 50, no. 1 (1997): 171-201.

These approaches to conflict lead to a focus on state capacity and strength, factors many scholars of the Congolese conflicts have focused on. The absence of strong security forces can provide opportunities for armed mobilization, and the absence of a functioning judicial system and inclusive mediation mechanisms is often seen as a factor in fueling the escalation of conflicts.[6] These institutions can be domestic or international: scholars have argued that UN peacekeeping operations reduce the risk of renewed hostilities and that third-party guarantees can overcome commitment problems.[7]

b. Strategic Objectives: War as a Means of Seizing Power

Other researchers argue that conflicts escalate because actors seek — quite simply — to maximize their power. Governments and rebels may want war when their ambitions grow, when resources become available, or when they believe their goals cannot be achieved peacefully. This claim that states will use violent means to expand their power is most closely associated with offensive realism but can also be found in economic modeling.[8]

A similar argument applies to subnational actors: "violent entrepreneurs" escalate conflicts to obtain limited political or economic gains. For example, scholars have shown how Indian political elites have used ethnic violence strategically;[9] others argue that belligerents sometimes intensify violence against civilians when they hope to gain a military advantage.[10]

In this context, changing power relations can trigger violence and escalation. Since Thucydides, scholars have linked escalation to systemic change. In his account of the Peloponnesian War, rising powers challenge the status quo, a logic that was later formalized by theorists of power transition.[11] Economic changes can play a comparable role. For example, Robert Bates argues that economic contraction in weak states pushes elites toward predation and violent competition, while Peter Uvin and Helen Hintjens link structural adjustment and economic crisis in Rwanda to the conditions that enabled the 1994 genocide.[12]

Text Box 1: The Kamuina Nsapu conflict, which broke out in the Kasai region between 2016 and 2017, took many observers by surprise, as this region was not perceived as a potential hotbed of violence. Tensions began to arise between the provincial governor of Kasai Central and Jean-Pierre Pandi, a traditional chief, over the latter's official recognition. Although Pandi was appointed according to tradition, he never received an official decree, which

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6   Govinda Clayton and Han Dorussen, "The effectiveness of mediation and peacekeeping for ending conflict." Journal of Peace Research 59 (2022): 150–165.

7   Virginia Fortna, Does Peacekeeping Work? Princeton University Press, 2008; Barbara Walter, Committing to peace: The successful settlement of civil wars. Princeton University Press, 2002.

8   John Mearsheimer, The tragedy of great power politics WW Norton & Company, 2003; Barry and Andrew L. Ross. "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy." International Security 21, no. 3 (1996): 5–53; Jack Hirshleifer. "The Analytics of Continuing Conflict." Synthèse, (1988) 76(2): 201-33.

9   Steven Wilkinson, Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

10   Benjamin Valentino, Paul K. Huth, and Sarah E. Croco. "Bear any burden? How democracies minimize the costs of war." The Journal of Politics 72, no. 2 (2010): 528-544.

11   A. F. K. Organski, World Politics New York: Knopf, 1958.

12   Robert Bates, "Political Conflict and State Failure" in Vol. 1 of The Political Economy of Economic Growth in Africa, 1960-2000, ed. Benno J. Ndulu, Stephen A. O'Connell, Robert H. Bates, Paul Collier, and Chukwuma C. Soludo, 249-296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Peter Uvin, Aiding violence: The development enterprise in Rwanda. Kumarian Press, 1998; Helen Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 genocide in Rwanda." The Journal of Modern African Studies 37, no. 2 (1999): 241-286.

fueled resentment that was compounded by his region's economic and political marginalization. The conflict intensified after Pandi's death at the hands of the FARDC in August 2016, triggering a widespread revolt against the state and Joseph Kabila's regime. Pandi's supporters began to organize themselves into militias, using traditional means to mobilize young people and erect barricades in their villages. The situation quickly deteriorated, leading to the displacement of nearly 1.5 million people and the deaths of more than 3,300 individuals between October 2016 and June 2017. The escalation of the conflict also took on an ethnic dimension, with the formation of self-defense groups by the Chokwe and Pende in response to the migration of Kamuina Nsapu militiamen. Although the state suppressed the uprising with overwhelming military force, this response resulted in numerous deaths without leading to a prolonged war, as no foreign army was involved and the rebels lacked military experience.

These perspectives can lead to similar policy options as the theories about commitment problems and security dilemmas, pushing for stronger state institutions. In the short-term, however, they can also lead to an emphasis on conflict-sensitive economic policy and the development of inclusive political agreements, a factor highlighted by the literature on political settlements.[13] Cederman, Hug, and Wucherpfennig, for example, show how structural shocks — pacts between elites, territorial changes, shifts in external patronage — can exacerbate or mitigate violent conflict.[14]

In the DRC, this approach is best exemplified in the role of elites in the mobilization of armed groups. Scholarship has frequently documented the role of traditional leaders in using violence to shore up their power for — example, many Mai-Mai groups have had links to, or have been directly guided by, customary elites, as did many of the Kamuina Nsapu militias in the Kasais (see Box 1). At the same time, these authorities can play a decisive role in mediating conflicts within their own communities.

Political and social elites play a similar role. They can actively invest in creating stability — as in Kaziba, South Kivu, where a political elite has succeeded in maintaining social cohesion, or as the case study of Ituri below shows — and facilitate mediation in conflicts. However, there are many examples of how these elites also interfere in local conflicts. In some cases, elites actively seek the support of armed groups, either to position themselves locally, to settle disputes, to oust their competitors, or to secure the necessary electoral support during elections.[15] This has contributed to the increasing militarization and violence of local conflicts and rivalries. Electoral processes can be an aggravating factor in the militarization of political competition: they strengthen the links between political elites and armed groups and encourage populist or extremist rhetoric to mobilize voters.[16]

13   Johnathan Di John and James Putzel. "Political settlements: Issues paper." Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), 2009; Alex de Waal, "The Political Marketplace & the Roots of Persistent Conflict." Fletcher Sec. Rev. 2 (2015): 10.

14   Lars-Erik Cederman, Simon Hug, and Julian Wucherpfennig. Sharing power, securing peace?: Ethnic inclusion and civil war. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

15   Judith Verweijen and Claude Iguma Wakenge, "Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo" (PSRP Briefing Paper 7), Rift Valley Institute, December 2015.

16   Jason Stearns,The War That Doesn't Say Its Name: The Unending Conflict in the Congo. Princeton University Press, 2023.

c. Social, Psychological, and Emotional Factors: War as Passion and Grievance

Escalation is also attributed to emotional or psychological dynamics: hatred, revenge, and fear. Authors such as Xavier Crettiez and Arjun Appadurai (1998) consider violence as a means of asserting one's identity or giving meaning to one's life.[17] Jacques Sémelin highlights the role of "identity entrepreneurs" who mobilize rage and anxiety, particularly in times of economic upheaval or existential uncertainty.[18]

In the DRC, groups such as the ADF legitimize violence on the basis of a radical and selective interpretation of Islam, reinforced by systematic religious propaganda.[19] Elsewhere, in Christian churches, biblical motifs — such as the image of a "chosen people of God" who must fight for their survival in a hostile world — are sometimes invoked to support enemy images and justify conflict; the Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO) mobilization described in Ituri below is an example of this[20] Finally, traditional mystical-religious repertoires often serve as points of reference and legitimization for the use of violence by armed groups. The use of dawa (a ritualistic medicine or amulet used in the Kivus and Ituri) or tshiota (in the Kamuina Nsapu conflict, huts or compounds centered on ritual fires where initiates underwent ceremonies) points to the spiritual dimension of the conflict.[21] In all these cases, belief systems help justify violence as they represent a source of meaning and provide moral guidance to communities.

Conversely, everyday norms and practices can protect communities from violence or help to reduce it once it has begun. Scott Straus argues that institutional checks and balances, ideological pluralism, and a strong civil society have helped curb violence in Côte d'Ivoire.[22] Other scholars have highlighted how peacekeepers and mediators exercise authority through rule-setting and communication,[23] as well as the local dimension of peacebuilding: local norms, everyday practices, and bottom-up legitimacy often determine whether ceasefires hold and peace "sticks."[24]

In the DRC, religious leaders have acted as mediators and promoted peace by establishing social dialogue and interfaith forums, thereby contributing to de-escalation and peaceful conflict resolution.[25] Traditional leaders have also played an active and essential role in

17   Xavier Crettiez, Violence et nationalisme. Odile Jacob, 2006; Arjun Appadurai, "Dead certainty: Ethnic violence in the era of globalization." Development and change 29, no. 4 (1998): 905-925.

18   Jacques Semelin, Purify and destroy: The political uses of massacre and genocide. Columbia University Press, 2007.

19   Lindsay Scorgie-Porter, "Militant Islamists or borderland dissidents? An exploration into the Allied Democratic Forces' recruitment practices and constitution." The Journal of Modern African Studies 53, no. 1 (2015): 1-25; Tara Candland, Adam Finck, Haroro Ingram, Laren Poole, Lorenzo Vidino, and Caleb Weiss, "The Islamic State in Congo." George Washington University: Program on Extremism The George Washington University (2021).

20   Field observations by Ebuteli researchers in the High Plateau of South Kivu and Ituri.

21   Kaspar Hoffmann, Koen Vlassenroot, Tatiana Carayannis, and Godefroid Muzalia. "Violent conflict and ethnicity in the Congo: beyond materialism, primordialism and symbolism." Conflict, Security & Development 20, no. 5 (2020): 539-560.

22   "Retreating from the brink."

23   Barnett, Michael, and Martha Finnemore. "The Power of Liberal International Organizations." Chapter. In Power in Global Governance, edited by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 161–84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

24   Roger Mac Ginty, "Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies." Security dialogue 45, no. 6 (2014): 548-564; Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond. "The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace." Third world quarterly 34, no. 5 (2013): 763-783.

25   Lisa Zengarini, "Churches Continue Efforts to Restore Peace in War-Torn DRC," Vatican News, March 21, 2025, accessed December 3, 2025; Jude Atemanke, "Inside Four-Stage Roadmap Unveiled by Religious Leaders in DR Congo to End Protracted Violence," ACI Africa, August 28, 2025, accessed December 3, 2025; "Sensitization Campaign on Interfaith Dialogue," MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), accessed December 3, 2025.

preventing or de-escalating violence through their moral authority. The existence of such mechanisms is generally considered an important factor in prevention or de-escalation.[26]

An adjacent set of drivers of conflict can be categorized as grievance. Scholars in this vein emphasize that armed conflict arises primarily from social, economic, and political injustices. Ted Gurr, for example, paved the way for this vein of scholarship, arguing that people rebel when there is a perceived gap between their expected and actual conditions — relative deprivation.[27]   Other scholars narrow this argument, suggesting conflicts emerge where there are systematic inequalities between identity groups: in political power, access to resources, and social status.[28]

In the DRC, these factors are borne out in different ways. Many scholars point to the socio-economic marginalization that leaves certain groups — in particular youth[29] and ethnic communities[30] — feeling disempowered. Natural resources often play a role in this kind of mobilization. For example, in Maniema (see Box 2) province, the arrival of a multinational mining company created resentment that led to armed mobilization. In Ituri, the Ugandan and Rwandan armies, as well as multinational companies have armed local armed groups to gain access to mining concessions or to secure their operations.[31]

Text Box 2: The conflict in Kabambare (Maniema) stems from deep-rooted grievances triggered by the arrival of Banro, a Canadian mining company, which disrupted local social and economic structures. The forced expulsion of thousands of artisanal miners led to mass unemployment, loss of livelihoods, and widespread discontent. Furthermore, Banro's 2014 promises of social projects were not immediately fulfilled, exacerbating frustrations. The situation worsened in January 2016 when a human rights activist was killed by police during a protest, intensifying the anger of residents. Faced with these tensions, the Mai-Mai Malaika began to mobilize, supported by local elites such as General Sikatenda. At the same time, the then Minister of the Interior, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, encouraged the revolt against Banro by promising the miners that they would get their land back[32] In response to this resurgence of violence, the Congolese army launched a counterinsurgency campaign in 2017, causing massive population displacement. While this initially garnered support for the Mai-Mai, their violent methods eventually caused them to lose that support over time.

d. Resources: War As Greed

Although many sources — in the popular press, Congolese government discourse, and policy literature — attribute an important role to the struggle for access to resources, this factor should be

26   Markus Geray, "Navigating Insecurity: Community-Combatant Relations and the Role of Traditional Leaders in Eastern DRC," IPIS Briefing, September 23, 2025.

27   Ted Gurr, Why men rebel. Routledge, 2015.

28   Frances Stewart, "*Horizontal inequalities and conflict: An introduction and some hypotheses.*" In Horizontal inequalities and conflict: Understanding group violence in multiethnic societies, pp. 3-24. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008; Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min. "Why do ethnic groups rebel? New data and analysis." World politics 62, no. 1 (2010): 87-119.

29   Luca Jourdan, "Mayi-Mayi: young rebels in Kivu, DRC." Africa Development 36, no. 3-4 (2011): 89-112; Koen Vlassenroot,"Violence et constitution de milices dans l'est du Congo: Le cas des mayi-mayi." L'Afrique des Grands Lacs, Annuaire 2002 (2001): 115-152.

30   Jackson 2006, Verweijen and Vlassenroot 2015. Stephen Jackson, "Sons of which soil? The language and politics of autochthony in Eastern DR Congo." African studies review 49, no. 2 (2006): 95-124; Judith Verweijen and Koen Vlassenroot, "Armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority: the contested territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge in eastern DR Congo." Journal of Contemporary African Studies 33, no. 2 (2015): 191-212.

31   Human Rights Watch, The Curse of Gold: Democratic Republic of Congo. New York: Human Rights Watch, June 1, 2005.

32   Congo research group: The CNPSC Rebellion: Social Marginalization and State Complicity in South Kivu, February 2019, https://s44308.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-CNPSC-Rebellion-Feb-26.pdf

interpreted more broadly. First, despite the emphasis on minerals, historically land has played just as important a role in fueling violence. This can be seen in the highlands of South and North Kivu where conflicts over land have been at the heart of communal conflicts (see Box 3).

Other resources, including but not limited to minerals, have played important roles in armed violence. Armed groups have developed extortion and protection strategies regarding minerals, trade routes, charcoal production, logging, cannabis farming, fishing, and poaching. This has deeply militarized local economies. Some groups are also directly involved in mining or the production of palm oil, cocoa, and other products. Control of these production centers is a major factor in armed confrontation between groups in conflict and a key explanation for the prolongation of the conflict in certain specific areas. Clashes between CODECO and the Zaire armed groups, for example, have centered on control of gold mining centers in Ituri, an important source of funding for both groups. In South Kivu, the Coalition Nationale pour la Souveraineté du Congo (CNPSC), led by William Amuri Yakutumba, has focused on controlling the gold trade, while also controlling several mines around Misisi and the transport routes between these mines and the town of Baraka.[33]

Second, conflict over resources in the DRC has always been the result of a conjunction of factors. For example, in the conflicts that pit the Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge against other communities, disputes over land have combined with discourses of indigeneity and competition over administrative power. The potential return of refugees is also a critical factor in this perspective. In Kalehe, for example, local communities often cite the impending return of Tutsi refugees as a reason for armed mobilization.

Lastly, the struggle over resources can also be interpreted as being caused by other, structural factors. In the case of land, it can be attributed to the absence of institutional frameworks (see above), massive population displacements, the lack of economic development, and demographic pressure.

Text Box 3: The conflict between the Buyu-Basikasingo and Bembe in the Lulenge area (Fizi territory) mainly concerns identity and land and has its roots in the colonial era. Colonial policies on agricultural labor recruitment and land management encouraged the large-scale settlement of the Bembe, established power sharing, and maintained relative stability despite latent tensions. The first outbreaks of violence appeared in the 1960s and then intensified during the Congolese national rebellions of 1997 and 1998, when attacks and mass displacement restructured community territories. Today, the conflict revolves around the autonomist demands of the Buyu-Basikasingo, who are calling for territorial redistribution, a demand rejected by the Bembe. Despite a period of calm thanks to pacification interventions, the structuring of local armed groups is causing new concerns within the Buyu community. Nevertheless, the conflict did not escalate into violence due to two main factors: an imbalance of power, with the Bembe being better organized and supported, while the Buyu-Basikasingo were less well represented politically and had less experience of armed struggle; and the lack

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33   Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN S/2022/479.

of support for the autonomy project from Buyu outside Lulenge, which limited collective mobilization. Internal divisions and the Bembe's dominance in key sectors make an escalation into violence unlikely.

e. Self-perpetuating Violence: War as a Tautology

One of the most important factors in fueling violence is violence itself. Conflict in the eastern DRC often draws on resentments and social tensions and memories forged by over three decades of violence.[34] Wars have militarized society, normalized violence, and created deeply rooted grievances. The limited progress — and sometimes even reluctance — of state authorities to address communal struggles over access to resources and political power contributes to violence and perpetuates the population's dependence on armed groups. Furthermore, the lack of effective security measures by state institutions has encouraged armed groups to expand their sphere of influence, thereby intensifying the militarization and fragmentation of society.

Most armed groups operating today have their roots in existing traditions of armed struggle dating back to the Congo wars and, in some cases, even earlier (see Box 4). These groups evolve, merge, split, or change names frequently in response to shifts in leadership and local circumstances, but they are still informed by previous waves of violence. Although changes in the security environment — such as humanitarian interventions during the Ebola crisis, intensified attacks by forces such as the ADF, or the resurgence of the M23 — may trigger new waves of mobilization or alliances, these developments typically build on preexisting patterns and legacies.

Text Box 4: The Raia Mutoboki in Walikale. The ability of armed groups to adapt to changing contexts while remaining linked to long-standing structural problems highlights the persistent and complex nature of violence. Armed mobilization in the territories of Kalehe and Walikale illustrates these long-term trajectories, shifting alliances, and adaptations to changes in the security context.[35] The origins of the current Raia Mutomboki factions operating in Bunyakiri (Kalehe) and its surroundings date back to the early 1990s, when Banyarwanda and indigenous groups clashed in the neighboring territory of Masisi. Intensifying political competition and struggles over land pitted the two sides of society against each other and triggered the mobilization of local youth along ethnic lines. Since then, armed groups have been able to consolidate their position as legitimate providers of protection and justice, as political intermediaries, and as de facto institutionalized security services. Their ability to adapt to changing security conditions and approaches has become essential to their success, as has their embeddedness in local society. Over the years, this has given rise to an ambiguous governance context, with armed groups becoming the main providers of public goods and gradually gaining recognition from state services. The conciliatory stance of the Congolese state and local administration toward these groups further contributes to this ambiguity. While this reflects the lack of progress in creating

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34   Judith Verweijen, Stable Instability: Political Settlements and Armed Groups in the Congo. Usalama Project / Rift Valley Institute, 2016; Kaspar Hoffmann and Koen Vlassenroot. "Navigating Social Spaces: Armed Mobilization and Circular Return in Eastern DR Congo." Journal of Refugee Studies 33, no. 4 (2020): 832–857.

35   Kaspar Hoffmann and Koen Vlassenroot. "Armed groups and the exercise of public authority: the cases of the Mayi-Mayi and Raya Mutomboki in Kalehe, South Kivu." Peacebuilding 2, no. 2 (2014): 202-220.

Intermezzo: Making Sense of the Literature

What lessons can be drawn from this review of the literature? Perhaps most obviously, there is no clear consensus about the causes of conflict onset and escalation. In large part, this is because what we call "conflict" is not a clearly defined, homogeneous object — it is a complex social process that is rooted in local realities. As with many social phenomena, the causal chains underlying conflict are knotted and tangled. No single factor explains the violence in eastern Congo, and even the most significant variables are shaped by the actors, structures, and networks through which they operate. The closest that scholars have come to pinning conflict on a particular factor — notably in the World Bank and United Nations' 2018 landmark report Pathways to Peace is — to highlight the importance of strong, inclusive institutions and social policy.[36]

And yet, while among conflict scholars there is only fraught agreement on general theories of causation, academics working on the broad sweep of the DRC conflicts agree on several key areas. First, that individual variables such as natural resources are important, but need to be situated within the historical and political environments that give them meaning. The same goes for ethnic marginalization and state weakness, variables that can often be found quantified in statistical analyses but are social dynamics and relations requiring contextualization. The reason that natural resources, for example, help fuel armed conflict, is largely because they are controlled by violent, patronage-based networks that dominate large parts of the Congolese economy. Tackling conflict minerals for — example, through due diligence and "bagging and tagging" initiatives — will have limited impact, and can even cause harm, unless these networks are addressed.

A similar argument holds for "state weakness," another oft-mentioned factor in conflict analyses of the Congo. A visit to the eastern DRC can quickly reveal how misleading this term can be. In many ways, the state is far from weak — it can be brutal, omnipresent, and unforgiving. The weakness lies in the absence of an impartial and meritocratic bureaucracy, and in the reality that the Congolese state largely functions as a means of extracting and allocating resources, rather than providing services. Technocratic attempts to build state capacity — through security sector reform, digital and physical infrastructure projects, and trainings — will always be confronted with these realities.

Another area of broad agreement lies in the "levels-of-analysis." Since its origins in the early 1990s, the Congolese conflict has featured a blend of local, national, and regional dynamics. While these local aspects leave a very clear imprint on all conflicts — the importance of struggles over land and customary power, the salience of ethnic identity — since the late 1990s, most armed groups in the eastern DRC have become progressively dislocated from these grassroots

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36   World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, March 1, 2018.

drivers as an elite of military entrepreneurs has formed, invested in its own reproduction. Moreover, even the elements that are most frequently associated with "communal conflicts" — land feuds and customary title, for example — are often controlled by decision-makers in provincial and national capitals

What does this mean in terms of concrete policy programming? First, efforts should be connected, as much as possible, to national and regional initiatives. It will do little good to launch a demobilization program in Kalehe territory (South Kivu), for example, as long as the M23 conflict — which is driven by regional rivalries — continues to escalate. At present, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive national and regional peace process that can provide a foothold for local demobilization and communal reconciliation efforts. Without this, peacebuilding will most likely be limited to short-lived and piecemeal projects.

Second, the DRC is not just the Kivus and Ituri. Over the past two decades, there have been periodic flare-ups of violence in areas without long-standing armed groups or regional interference: the Enyele, Mobondo, and Kamuina Nsapu crises are evidence of this. Most of these conflicts also involve a mixture of local actors and national elites and share a common need for innovative thinking about how to address the combustible blend of customary power politics and conflicts over land and fishing rights.

Lastly, all projects require a deep understanding and analysis of local conflict dynamics. These can be extremely opaque and require extensive research up-front before engaging. All aspects of programming, from staffing to the selection of local partners and the substantive content, require a solid understanding of local realities. Failing this, there is a significant risk that humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts can inadvertently fuel or compound conflict dynamics — as was the case during the Ebola epidemic between 2018 and 2020, or during the peace process with the FRPI in Ituri (see below).[37]

The next chapter provides a good example of this. The conflict in Ituri showcases the connections between local, national, and regional actors, the role of minerals in conflicts, and the salience of ethnicity. Perhaps most importantly, it points to a successful example of de-escalation and restraint as one of the bloodiest conflicts in the country was quickly ratcheted down.

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37   Congo Research Group, Rebels, Doctors and Merchants of Violence: How the Fight against Ebola Became Part of the Conflict in eastern DRC. Center on International Cooperation, August 2021.

Chapter 2. Escalation and Restraint in Ituri

The Ituri region has seen dramatic fluctuations of violence over the past three decades. Between 1999 and 2005, conflict escalated as foreign armies and local militias competed for control. This was followed by a period of relative stability between 2005 and 2017, only for conflict to resume in 2017. This succession of escalation and de-escalation makes the violence that affected this province a particularly relevant case study for this report.

This chapter provides an overview of the factors that led to escalation or de-escalation in Ituri. In our post-2017 analysis we focus on the CODECO armed group in Djugu territory and do not discuss the recent incursions by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which have largely taken place in Irumu and Mambasa territories. Ebuteli researchers conducted 20 semi-structured interviews from September 5 to September 15, 2025, with local leaders, government representatives, civil society actors, and academics.

a. The Escalation from 1998 to 2005: Historical Structural Factors and Political Upheavals

Tensions between two communities underlie the main episodes of violence in Ituri. Historically, the Lendu community in Ituri has felt marginalized in relation to the Hema, whom they accuse of having benefited from successive regimes since colonization. As one observer explained, "From a sociological point of view, there is a persistent feeling of rejection between the sons of these communities. Some believe themselves to be superior to others because of myths created by the colonial power, which also helped to [fuel] such behavior up to the present day."[38]

The first conflicts are said to have occurred around 1885, when the Hema brought their cattle to graze on Lendu land with the support of the British, who sought to impose their authority. Subsequent clashes followed in 1911, 1921, 1975, 1982, and 1994.[39]

Persistent land disputes and conflicts over administrative boundaries — particularly between Walendu-Bindi, the only Lendu chiefdom, and the South Bahema community — have been the main sources of tensions between the two groups in the territories of Irumu and Djugu. During the colonial era, Belgian settlers acquired numerous land concessions. When they departed, some Hema with whom they had established close relations inherited these holdings. In general, the colonial administration, influenced by stereotypes and mythologies about the ethnic superiority, empowered the Hema to the detriment of other communities. The Lendu began to denounce

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38   Interview with a professor in Bunia, September 2025

39   Alphonse Maindo Monga, "La républiquette de l'Ituri." *Politique africaine* (2003), no. 89: 181–192

what they perceived as historical injustices, believing that the concessions had not been obtained through truly legal means.[40]

This resentment, which has endured across generations, was less visible during much of the Second Republic (1965–97). Divisions were muted under the institutional and symbolic framework imposed during the era of Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the country with an iron fist and — at least during the initial phase of his rule — proclaimed that there were no divisions within the nation he sought to keep united.

In the early 1970s, the first Lendu intellectuals who had studied at the University of Kinshasa created the agricultural cooperative and ethnic organization CODEZA. They promoted the idea that the Hema community had monopolized political and economic power in the region, a discourse that was further amplified during the democratization period of the early 1990s, when the Parti de Libération des Walendu (PLW) was created. Around the same time, Hema also began to mobilize along ethnic lines. These ethnic divisions came to the fore when Mobutu's power began to decline and the democratization process began in earnest in the 1990s, state institutions weakened, economic stagnation set in, and politicians drew on ethnic divisions to bolster their stature.

The Great Congo Wars of 1996-2003 brought the influx of weapons and the occupation of Ituri by the Ugandan army, although during the First Congo War there was initially little violence in the region. It was a minor dispute in April 1999 that sparked large-scale violence: villagers accused the Hema owner of a large ranch in Leyna of illegally expanding his concession into Lendu land. Similar incidents occurred elsewhere, as Hema landowners sought support from the occupying Ugandan army to bolster their land claims, while Lendu formed self-defense militias. The conflict intensified due to the geopolitical competition in Ituri that erupted in 1998 when President Laurent Désiré Kabila fell out with his Ugandan and Rwandan allies, who launched a new military offensive in the form of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). Rwanda and Uganda then also fell out and Uganda backed the dissident RCD/Kisangani-Liberation Movement (RCD/K-ML) rebellion, which moved its headquarters to Ituri in 1999.

This period saw the emergence of ethnic armed groups. Hema and Lendu youth were armed, largely with makeshift weapons, and given traditional medicine that supposedly made them impervious to bullets — a spiritual dimension that tended to escalate the violence. Until 2002, the intensity of the violence remained relatively contained, in part because Lendu and Hema leaders were part of the same RCD/K-ML rebellion. During this time, MONUC also contributed to restraint by launching peace initiatives, investing heavily in local prevention committees. In 1999, for example, an inter-community dialogue was initiated between the Lendu and the Gegere.

As the RCD/K-ML became riven by internal conflict, and as Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC vied for influence in the region, the situation became more combustible. Around 2001, a new rebellion emerged out of the K-ML, the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), mainly composed of Hema and initially allied with Uganda. The following year, the leader of the RCD/K-ML, Mbusa Nyamwisi,

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40   Ibid.

allied with Kinshasa and backed Lendu militiamen of the Front des Nationalistes Intégrationnistes (FNI) to try to counter the UPC. This period is a good example of the dislocation of armed groups from their local constituencies: as the regional capitals invested in them, these groups became more powerful but also less accountable to and legitimate in the eyes of their communities.

External intervention in the conflict led to a dramatic escalation. The UPC switched alliances from Uganda to Rwanda in 2003, while Kinshasa backed rival Hema leaders, as well as Lendu armed groups. This led to a significant influx of weapons and firepower into Ituri, exacerbating tensions.

While the Ugandan and Rwandan governments had political and security reasons for being in Ituri, they were also attracted by economic profits. Reports suggest that the Ugandan army plundered nearly one ton of gold between 1998–2002 and was involved in much of the gold trade — valued at $60 million in 2003 alone — thereafter. Rwandan forces were also alleged to have profited from the gold trade during this period. This trafficking continued, but as the DRC embarked on a process of reunification and pacification, the violence, which peaked in Ituri between 2002 and 2005, declined dramatically in the following years.

> **Text Box 5:** The Force de Resistance Patriotique de l'Ituri (FRPI) emerged in 2002-2003, in the midst of the Ituri war in northeastern DRC, primarily as the armed expression of the grievances of Ngiti/Lendu communities in the Irumu territory. It grew out of locally organized self-defense forces and political entrepreneurs who presented the conflict as a struggle against groups dominated by or allied with the Hema — especially Thomas Lubanga's UPC — and against what they considered to be outside interference (Ugandan presence, shifting alliances in Kinshasa). At the height of the conflict in Ituri, FRPI units committed serious abuses against civilians. In early 2017, however, the FRPI entered a lengthy peace process, facilitated by the United Nations. During this process, peacebuilding and demobilization efforts became co-opted by the armed group leadership, which treated negotiations as a vehicle for extracting amnesty, ranks, and material benefits while delaying demobilization.[41]

b. De-escalation from 2005 to 2017: The Political and Economic Forces Shaping Restraint

After the Great Congo Wars (1996-1997 and 1998-2003), the DRC embarked on a process of peacebuilding and state-building. Ituri was the pilot case for these efforts, combining coercion with the offer of alternative livelihoods for combatants. Our interlocutors agreed that the military operations carried out successively by Artemis (the European Union military mission, deployed from early June to early September 2003 in the city of Bunia), MONUC, and the government, coupled with the gradual return of state authority between 2005 and 2007, were critical to de-escalation. At the same time, donors injected hundreds of millions of dollars into making Ituri an example of peacebuilding. For example, the first Congolese demobilization program was piloted in Ituri, the Disarmament and Community Reinsertion (DCR) program, lasting from September

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41 Alexis Bouvy, Ingebjørg Finnbakk, Jean-Marc Mazio, Eric Mongo, and François Van Lierde. 2021. The FRPI Peace Process at an Impasse: Lessons from a Community-Based and Political Approach to DDR in the Congo. Governance in Conflict Network, Insecure Livelihoods Series, May 2021.

2004 to mid-2005 and demobilizing approximately 15,000 combatants.[42] The involvement of the national courts and the International Criminal Court also played a role the arrest of Thomas Lubanga, Chief Kahwa, Germain Katanga, and Mathieu Ngudjolo helped de-escalate the violence.[43] Critically, Ituri also ceased to be the focus of proxy warfare between Kinshasa, Kigali, and Kampala, as the neighboring countries withdrew under international pressure. Together, these factors created the broad structural conditions for de-escalation.

This context allowed grassroots peacebuilding efforts to gain traction. Donors funded programs for DDR, economic development, and the return of internally displaced people. The Ituri Pacification Commission facilitated dialogue between members of all communities and helped to rebuild trust. Around the same time, the Catholic Church and other organizations formed the Haki na Amani network, bringing together local organizations under one umbrella to promote inter-communal reconciliation, dialogue, and non-violent conflict resolution. While it is difficult to assess precisely how important these communal reconciliation efforts were, almost all our interlocutors felt that they played an important role. As one interviewee noted, "There were also communities that said no, we have endured enough shock. It's time to get down to business, it's time to talk to each other, to be frank."[44]

Economic factors were also important. The main economic stake in some areas — in Irumu territory, in particular — was the conflict between farmers and herders. The war economy had also benefited certain business elites, especially those linked to the minerals trade, while leaving traditional business elites marginalized. Some of those traders — especially those who had invested in cattle, timber, and agricultural products — formed an important constituency in the stabilization effort. They were further motivated by competition from Nande traders who had prospered in the towns of Beni and Butembo in North Kivu and were now moving into Ituri to buy up land and set up businesses. As one source said: "The Nande made a lot of money during the war. They arrived from North Kivu, where they had prospered during the RCD-K/ML rebellion, and bought everything."[45]

Despite this progress, however, the structural problems underlying the conflict — the deep economic inequalities, the perception among Lendu that they were marginalized, and simmering resentment over violence suffered during the wars — were never resolved. One area where the lasting ethnic polarization can be seen particularly clearly is in religious life. Our interviewees pointed out that the main churches in Ituri are each led by members of a particular communities: "The Evangelical Community in Central Africa (CECA 20) is led by people from Aru, the Africa Inland Church (AIC) by people from Mahagi, the Baptist Community in Central Africa (CBCA) by the Nande, the Communauté Emmanuel (CE) by the Hema, and the Catholic diocese of Bunia almost always by the

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42 Hans Rouw and Rens Willems, Connecting Community Security and DDR: Experiences from Eastern DRC. The Hague: Peace, Security and Development Network, 2010, 15.

43 Hans Rouw and Rens Willems, Connecting Community Security and DDR: Experiences from Eastern DRC. The Hague: Peace, Security and Development Network, 2010, 15.

44 Interview with an academic in Bunia, September 2025.

45 Interview with researcher in Bunia, September 2025.

Hema from the north, known as the Gegere."[46]

These continued social divides, along with weak state institutions, created fertile ground for the next round of escalation.

c. The Escalation of 2017: The Political and Economic Factors at Play

In the Djugu territory, the violence that resumed in 2017 continues to this day. In 2015, there were probably fewer than 100,000 people displaced in Ituri; by 2018 that number had grown to 650,000, further rising to 1.7 million in 2021.[47]

The reemergence of violence is closely linked to the rise of the CODECO. This organization, which built on the legacy of the Coopérative du Développement du Zaïre (CODEZA) — an agricultural cooperative with roots in the Lendu community that was created in the 1970s — was launched in 2018 under the leadership of Mukwake Mambo and quickly became the main source of violence in the province. Upon his death in a battle with the FARDC in 2018, he was succeeded by Justin Ngudjolo, who expanded the organization and became its spiritual, military, and political leader. Ngudjolo was also killed in clashes with the FARDC in 2020.[48] Since his death, CODECO has become more radical and split into several highly decentralized factions that continue to carry out widespread and indiscriminate violence against civilians.

For its supporters and members, the group is more than an armed group — it is a church, an army, and a business venture. Other researchers on Ituri describe it as a politico-religious sect.[49] Its fighters are recruited, blessed and sometimes "healed" in prayer houses linked to the movement, and its leaders present their cause as a divinely mandated defense of the Lendu/Bale people against Hema domination and an abusive state. It draws on traditional Lendu cosmologies but overlays these beliefs with Pentecostalism and the notion that God has chosen this community to "reclaim" its land.[50]

Within that spiritual framework, violence has become ritualized. Fighters receive amulets, oils, or cords blessed by CODECO "pastors," which are said to make them bulletproof or to neutralize enemy sorcery."[51] This gives commanders strong social control: to disobey a military order is also to disobey the spiritual order. It also helps explain why the group has recently splintered: when a commander claims a fresh revelation or a new protective ritual, he can peel away followers and still call it "CODECO."

Two specific triggers are often mentioned regarding the emergence of CODECO. In June 2017, a Lendu priest who had been drinking heavily died at the Drodro parish. Almost all the clergy and seminarians there were Hema, although it is in a predominantly Lendu area. His community, believing he had been murdered, attacked the

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46 Interview with researcher in Bunia, September 2025.

47 Data from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), https://www.unocha.org/democratic-republic-congo

48 Radio Okapi, "Ituri: les FARDC confirment la mort du leader de CODECO Justin Ngudjolo," March 27, 2020, accessed December 6, 2025.

49 Georges Berghezan and Adolphe Agenonga Chober, "La CODECO, au cœur de l'insécurité en Ituri," GRIP, June 2, 2021.

50 Amir Sungura, Limbo Kitonga, Bernard van Soest, and Ndakasi Ndeze, *Violence and Instability in Ituri. Ghent: GIC* Network, 2020.

51 Interview with a territorial public servant in Bunia, September 2025.

seminary. A second, similar altercation took place in December 2017 at an army roadblock near Ladedjo between a soldier and a young Lendu man. The local Lendu community, feeling their kinsman had been humiliated, carried out reprisals against three Hema women, which in turn triggered an attack by Hema youths.[52]

These incidents point to the dynamics of violence in Ituri. In contrast to the reemergence of the M23 rebellion in November 2021, which was prompted by geopolitical tensions that led to an intervention by the Rwandan army, the rise of violence in Ituri appears to have bubbled up from the grassroots in a sudden, relatively spontaneous fashion. The structural backdrop of state weakness, as well as memories of trauma and violence, allowed these sparks — the death of a priest and the humiliation of a Lendu youth — to escalate into armed mobilization and widespread violence. During this mobilization, groups were able to reactivate ethnic grievances and ideologies and draw on armed entrepreneurs with deep experience in violence.

CODECO exemplifies this process. It appears to have mobilized spontaneously in 2017 and 2018, coalescing around several former commanders — such as Mukwake Mambo and Lokana Mambo — of the FNI armed groups that were led by Lendu in Djugu between 2002 and 2007. Under the leadership of Justin Ngudjolo, who was by some reports a former altar boy, it then developed into a mystical-spiritual movement steeped in Lendu grievances. While there are many allegations that it was funded and even controlled by shadowy political elites inside and outside of Ituri, little solid evidence for this has been provided. In contrast to the mobilizations of the 2000s, Lendu traditional and political leaders have largely condemned the movement. Nonetheless, several other factors also contributed to this escalation, including counterproductive military operations, the impact of oil and gold on the conflict economy, and manipulation by members of the political elite.

The rapid expansion of the movement, its decentralized nature, and the spiritual elements involved are reminiscent of other Congolese rebellions in recent years: the Kamuina Nsapu in the Kasais, the Raia Mutomboki in the Kivus, and the Mobondo outside of Kinshasa.

Military Operations as a Catalyst for Escalation

There is a tendency within the Congolese government, as well as among the broader public, to view military operations as the primary response to armed groups. This is logical and legitimate; any lasting solution to the three decades of violence and conflict in the eastern DRC will most likely include the use of military force. Paradoxically, however, military operations have also been a catalyst for violent escalation in Ituri.

In 2021, President Félix Tshisekedi declared a state of siege in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri in response to the violence across the region. In the first phase of its operations against armed groups, the army at times collaborated with militiamen from communities targeted by CODECO, notably Hema and Alur, in particular the Zaire.[53] Much like in the case of the Kamuina Nsapu conflict in Kasai, the indiscriminate nature of the military operations deepened ethnic

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52   International Crisis Group, DR Congo: Ending the Cycle of Violence in Ituri, Africa Report No. 292. Brussels, July 15, 2020.

53   Ebuteli. 2025. "Djugu, l'autre conflit sanglant de l'est de la RDC." *Ebuteli.org*

divides and led other civilians, outraged by the brutality, to join the CODECO.[54]

This creates a serious challenge for the government. As military officers have often lamented, it is difficult or even impossible to carry out military reforms in the middle of a war. The deployment of undisciplined and abusive units, however, can exacerbate the unrest they are meant to solve, while merely negotiating with armed groups often leads to deals in which rebel commanders are co-opted through positions in the national army and police, rewarding them for their insurrection. The only way out of this quandary is to promote restraint and accountability during the use of military force, while attempting to address the communal grievances that gave rise to rebellion without buying off commanders with cash or positions.

Political Elite Manipulation

The creation of the province of Ituri in 2015 — previously it had been a district within Province Orientale — heightened ethnic polarization and increased violent competition for power. Initially, leaders across ethnic divides appeared to agree on norms of power-sharing, and Abdallah Pene Mbaka — who was from a marginal ethnic group from Mambasa territory — became governor. Following the 2018 elections, however, political relations between ethnic communities deteriorated. The new governor Jean Bamanisa said that he wanted to run a technocratic government and did not appoint cabinet members based on their ethnic identity, as had been the practice in the past. For example, leaders of the Bira community said they had supported Bamanisa but failed to obtain any influential positions. Several sources argued that this feeling of marginalization helped give rise to the Chini ya Kilima/FPIC group from the Bira community, although Bamanisa himself contests this view.[55] Other communities, including the Lendu, expressed similar sentiments. Nonetheless, as moderate political elites gained sway within the Chini ya Kilima armed group and were able to express their frustrations and ambitions in the provincial assembly, competition was displaced from the arena of armed violence to politics and the armed group lost some of its momentum.

Another element of restraint has been criminal prosecution. Since 2005 at least nine Ituri armed group commanders have been prosecuted by Congolese and international courts. This has made some members of the elite reluctant to become openly involved in armed group politics. Few, if any, political or traditional leaders have publicly backed armed groups during this round of escalation.

One exception has been Kahwa Panga Mandro, a customary chief from the Hema community and the former leader of the Parti pour l'Unité et la Sauvegarde de l'Intégrité du Congo (PUSIC) who had been convicted for crimes against humanity by a Congolese court in 2006.[56] By 2015, Kahwa had served his sentence and returned to the region. In 2022, the UN Group of Experts reported he was again

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54   Interview with a youth leader from the Bira community in Bunia, September 2025.

55   Jean Bamanisa does not deny that the feeling of marginalization of the Bira helped give rise to the Chini ya Kilima/FPIC. He thinks, however, that this marginalization dates back to independence, since no Bira has been a member of the national government since then. He also argues that some Bira leaders have concluded that they need to have an armed group to win at elections, as that has helped others. He also mentions that he appointed a Bira, Bahati Kukwabo Emmanuel, as minister in charge of mines, oil and energy in May 2020 (Right of reply, December 17, 2025).

56   He was acquitted by an appeals court in 2008 and then convicted again in 2014.

involved in armed mobilization.[57]

Thomas Lubanga constitutes a similar case. Convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for recruiting children into his armed group in 2012, he was released after serving his sentence in 2020. Upon his return, he and other armed group leaders — including Kahwa — were mandated by the Kinshasa government to negotiate with armed groups in Ituri. He was subsequently elected to the provincial assembly for Ituri in 2023, but his election was invalidated due to his ICC conviction. Angered, he moved to Kampala and launched a new rebellion in 2024, the Convention pour la Révolution Populaire, allied with the M23.[58] Kahwa initially joined him in this endeavor before defecting in 2025 and is now preaching restraint and appealing for de-escalation.[59] It remains difficult to assess the CRP's real strength; in 2025 it has been one of the main targets of FARDC operations in Ituri.

The examples of Kahwa and Lubanga show that, while civilian political and customary elites have largely shied away from armed politics during this latest escalation, networks of former combatants and commanders have provided the social infrastructure for remobilization. This logic also holds for CODECO, which has drawn on networks of former FNI combatants in the region. These dynamics highlight the importance of successful demobilization programs.

Natural Resources: Oil and Gold

Natural resources have long been at the center of violent mobilization in Ituri. During the first wave of violence (1999-2005) armed groups fought for control of the OKIMO's Mongbwalu–Mambasa gold belt the resources gleaned from controlling pits, roadblocks, and the gold trade funded recruitment and arms. There were other rackets, as well, that allowed groups to benefit from minerals. For example, Jérôme Kakwavu's FAPC controlled the Aru–Ariwara–Durba corridor in Mahagi territory, extracting rents from gold and cross-border commerce to sustain his forces.

Since 2017, CODECO has increasingly been able to dominate the gold mining areas in Djugu, controlling pits and transport networks around Banyali-Kilo, Mambisa, and Mongbwalu. This is allegedly one of the reasons why the military governor has changed his attitude toward CODECO, by 2024 stating that the FARDC preferred to resolve conflicts peacefully.[60] One of our sources accused the FARDC of being involved in gold trafficking and of cooperating with armed groups : «The FARDC were sometimes present alongside Zaire in the areas where they are, and when they are in the Lendu areas, they collaborate with CODECO, which has become the largest force on the ground."[61] This is in line with other reporting from on the region.[62] By 2024 the UN Group of Experts estimated that the gold trade in Ituri generated at least $140 million per year for armed or criminal networks, allowing them to pay for recruits,

57 United Nations Security Council, *Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, S/2022/967 (29 December 2022), para. 88.

58 "Est de la RDC : Thomas Lubanga officialise le lancement de son mouvement politico-militaire," RFI, March 26, 2025, accessed December 9, 2025.

59 Radio Okapi, "Yves Kahwa Panga: 'La nouvelle rébellion de Thomas Lubanga n'est qu'une...'." Radio Okapi, April 17, 2025.

60   Interview with a researcher in Bunia, September 5, 2025.

61   Interview with an academic in Bunia, September 2025

62   United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2022/479 (14 June 2022), 3.

fuel, weapons, and logistics.

The recent escalation has not prevented the development of artisanal and semi-industrial mining, particularly for gold. One noticeable trend has been the arrival of Chinese investors in partnerships with artisanal cooperatives in the Djugu territory, a phenomenon that has been observed across the eastern DRC in recent years. This informal mode of exploitation is well suited to conflicts such as those in Ituri: these economic actors can ally themselves with armed actors to secure their activities. In doing so, however, they also contribute to the continuation of the conflict by paying these armed actors.

Another factor has been the prospect of oil exploration on the shores of Lake Albert by TotalEnergies. The French company acquired a majority stake in Block III, just south of the lake, in 2011, to complement its activities across the border in Uganda. It engaged in exploration in 2014-2015 but then halted its activities; since then, there has been no serious oil exploration in Ituri, in part due to the escalation of violence. Nonetheless, the perception persisted that oil would provide a windfall and there are allegations made by local actors that armed groups mobilized to secure a share of oil revenues[63]. These allegations are made about the Hema militias such as Zaire and CRP that are active along the shores of Lake Albert. Other sources[64] claim that the armed mobilization was intended to make exploitation on the Congolese side difficult, to the benefit of Uganda, where TotalEnergies had established itself with the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project.

Community Structures and Restraint

One of the lessons that can be drawn from Ituri is that dynamics of escalation and restraint are influenced by social structures. The existence of a central hierarchical structure within a social group can facilitate escalation or de-escalation, depending on the objectives of its leaders. In contrast, when power is decentralized and few hierarchies exist, it can be more difficult to achieve deescalation.

For example, in peacebuilding efforts in Ituri, our sources indicate that once armed groups in the more centralized Hema community have agreed to a peace process, it is relatively straightforward to monitor implementation. Among the Lendu armed groups, however, the CODECO group is managed in a decentralized fashion, sometimes even by individuals isolated from one another, each responding to local realities. This has made negotiations more difficult.

As in much of the eastern DRC, the conflict landscape in Ituri has become fragmented, with around a dozen different armed groups active. CODECO exemplifies this — there are four and six different factions of this group, depending on how they are counted. While this fragmentation renders them less of a strategic threat to the Congolese government, it also makes them more difficult to demobilize or defeat entirely.   .

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63   Interview with a researcher in Bunia, September 5, 2025.

64   Interview with a researcher in Bunia, September 5, 2025.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no general, unified theory of conflict in the DRC. Nor is this the first effort to sort through the factors that contribute to violence there. In 2011, a group of prominent scholars commissioned by the governments of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, summarized the broad causes of the violence in the DRC under four headings: ethnic conflicts; inter-elite power struggles; conflicts over land and minerals; and interference by neighboring countries. Elsewhere in the report, they provided a more detailed list of eight proximate causes of violence, while local focus groups came up with forty-two causes.

Our triage of causal factors is broadly similar. Yet this "kitchen sink" approach to conflict causality is also of limited utility to policymakers. If so many different dynamics fuel violence, where should conflict resolution begin — communal reconciliation initiatives, employment programs, sanctions against elites, or with security sector reform?

The second part of this report provides some answers to these questions. First, rather than of privileging isolated individual variables, we emphasize the political contexts that give them meaning. Violence in the eastern Congo cannot be traced to a single cause, and variables themselves do not act; minerals or ethnicity, for example, gain relevance only through the agents, institutions, and networks that mediate them. As such, we should be careful not to generalize — conflict dynamics in Djugu differ from those in Irumu or Masisi territories and may require a distinct policy approach.

Second, while it is difficult to disentangle the various factors that lead to de-escalation, Ituri does offer important lessons. The long period of de-escalation between 2005-2017 resulted from a combination of top-down and bottom-up factors: the deployment of Artemis alongside MONUC peace enforcement operations; the focus of DDR and humanitarian programs in the region; and communal peacebuilding efforts conducted by civil society groups. Our sources in Ituri agree, however, that the robust military operations, together with prosecutions of armed group commanders, opened space for communal reconciliation. This aligns with conflict dynamics more broadly in the eastern DRC: that local peacebuilding is critical but can only take hold within broader peace processes that produce political settlements that lead to the retreat of foreign actors and the reform of government institutions.[65]

This report should also serve as a warning. Throughout these pages, we have highlighted how volatile the DRC has become. Minor conflicts over customary succession have spiraled into massive

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65 Stearns 2022, Vlassenroot, Koen, and Timothy Raeymaekers. "Kivu's intractable security conundrum." *African Affairs* 108.432 (2009): 475-484 ; Hellmüller, Sara. "A trans-scalar approach to peacebuilding and transitional justice: Insights from the Democratic Republic of Congo." *Cooperation and Conflict* 57.4 (2022): 415-432 ; Van Leeuwen, Mathijs, et al. "The 'local turn'and notions of conflict and peacebuilding–Reflections on local peace committees in Burundi and eastern DR Congo." *Peacebuilding* 8.3 (2020): 279-299 ; Paffenholz, Thania. "Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: A critical assessment towards an agenda for future research." *Third world quarterly* 36.5 (2015): 857-874.

humanitarian emergencies in the Kasais, nearly 1.5 million people were displaced and more than 3,300 people were killed between October 2016 and June 2017. In contrast with the M23 crisis, this was not a conflict born out of geopolitical competition among political elites, but rather one initially fueled by local grievances that escalated into a regional disaster due to elite meddling and a ham-fisted security response.

These arguments point to several policy avenues. Above all, there is a need for a national peace process. There is currently no comprehensive peace process for the DRC and the narrow process for dealing with the M23 is facing numerous obstacles above all, the irreconcilable differences between Rwanda, the M23, and the DRC. The escalation of violence has scuppered attempts to relaunch the demobilization process, as well as other potential stabilization and economic reconstruction plans. These efforts must be revived as soon as possible. The following elements should then be part of a comprehensive peace process.

Long-Term Approaches

- Promotion of civil society. Support for civil society actors can promote conflict monitoring and public scrutiny that constrain belligerents. Targeted support for peacebuilding organizations can open avenues for de-escalation and communication. Societies with denser social capital and cross-cutting organizations are more difficult to radicalize.[66]

- Peacekeeping and third-party mediation. Strong evidence shows that UN peacekeeping operations reduce the risk of conflict recurrence; by the same logic, they can also curb escalation.[67]

- Conflict-sensitive economic policy. Comparative studies on Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Syria suggest that economic shocks may be linked to an escalation of violence. Institutions such as the UNDP and the OECD provide conflict-sensitive policy guidance to international financial institutions, aid organizations, and multinational corporations.[68]

Short-Term Approaches

- Promoting restraint through training, public naming and shaming, and accountability mechanisms. Micro-studies conducted in Afghanistan and Iraq (Condra et al.) show that damage inflicted by counterinsurgents can trigger subsequent insurgent attacks — the so-called "revenge effect."[69] External actors can alter the cost-benefit calculations of belligerents by threatening sanctions, reducing aid, and signaling to investors to avoid certain actors. Since many rebels hope to convert their

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66 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink. "International norm dynamics and political change." *International organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887-917.

67 Virginia Fortna, "Does peacekeeping work?: shaping belligerents' choices after civil war." In *Does Peacekeeping Work?*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

68 United Nations Development Program, *Conflict Sensitivity and Monitoring & Evaluation Toolbox*. New York: UNDP, October 2024; OECD, *States of Fragility 2025: Managing Risks and Building Resilience*, February 2025, accessed December 9, 2025.

69 Luke Condra, Joseph H. Felter, Radha K. Iyengar, and Jacob N. Shapiro, *The effect of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq*. No. w16152. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010.

battlefield gains into political office, legitimacy matters. Stanton develops this argument based on cases from Azerbaijan, El Salvador, Indonesia, Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda.[70] DeMeritt finds that "public shaming" can reduce atrocities committed by governments, as belligerents seek to preserve their legitimacy.[71] "Compliant rebels" sometimes sign unilateral commitments for example, through Geneva Call and limit attacks on civilians in order to build a reputation.[72]

■ Communication and diplomacy. Daily diplomatic routines, rituals, and practical know-how often defuse crises and limit rivalries.[73] In the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, escalation was avoided through informal channels between officers, diplomats, and senior officials, often based on personal trust.[74]

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70   Jessica Stanton, "Regulating militias: Governments, militias, and civilian targeting in civil war." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 899-923.

71   Jacqueline DeMeritt, "International organizations and government killing: Does naming and shaming save lives?." *International Interactions* 38, no. 5 (2012): 597-621.

72   Hyeran Jo, *Compliant rebels: rebel groups and international law in world politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

73   Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot. "International practices." International theory 3, no. 1 (2011): 1-36.

74   Nicole Jenne, "The Thai–Cambodian border dispute: an agency-centered perspective on the management of interstate conflict." Contemporary Southeast Asia (2017): 315-347; Christian Oesterheld, Christian. "Cambodian-Thai Relations during the Khmer Rouge Regime: Evidence from the East German Diplomatic Archives." Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies (2014): 107-128.

Annex 1 - The Kamuina Nsapu Conflict in Kasai[75]

What became known as the Kamuina Nsapu conflict in Kasai (2016-2017) took almost everyone by surprise. The Kasai region was not considered a part of the DRC where violent conflict was likely to occur. But tensions between the provincial governor of Kasai Central and a traditional chief over the latter's official recognition by the state quickly escalated into violence.

Jean-Pierre Pandi was appointed chief by the ruling family of the village of Kamuina Nsapu in September 2013, succeeding his uncle and becoming chief of the Bajila Kasanga *groupement* in Kasai Central. Although he was appointed chief according to customary procedures, Pandi languished for several years: he never received a state decree confirming him as the officially recognized traditional chief of his *groupement*. Provincial governor Alex Kande is believed to be behind this refusal, although he has claimed otherwise.

A local struggle for customary power ensued, spreading to four provinces and fueled by resentment over the economic and political marginalization of the Kasai region under Joseph Kabila's regime. Nearly 1.5 million people were displaced and more than 3,300 people were killed between October 2016 and June 2017. Initially, Jean-Pierre Pandi organized armed resistance against the state, recruiting young people from Kamuina Nsapu into a militia-type group through traditional means around a sacred fire as part of a "tshiota" — a reference to the extended family or village that is also a physical place where interpersonal issues are resolved. He asked them to erect barriers at the various entrances to the village of Kamuina Nsapu. The situation worsened considerably when Pandi was killed in August 2016 by the FARDC, his body then being taken away and publicly displayed in a stadium in Kananga, the provincial capital.

The state's brutal response to Pandi occurred in a context ripe for escalation: a region that had long perceived itself as deliberately marginalized by the central government; an unstable national political situation, with President Joseph Kabila seemingly unwilling to leave power at the end of his term in 2016; and a region marked by numerous customary conflicts. What began as a conflict between a traditional chief and the state quickly turned into a general revolt against the state and the Kabila government, fueled by existing grievances and made possible by mobilization using "traditional" means: initiation into Kamuina Nsapu during the "tshiota" and the widespread belief that newly initiated fighters could turn sticks into guns.

After looting two local administrative centers, Kamuina Nsapu fighters headed for the provincial capital, Kananga, to recover the body of their deceased leader. After Pandi's death, Kamuina Nsapu evolved from a small, semi-organized group into a label adopted by many newly created militia groups. It was not a cohesive armed group. Over time, Kamuina Nsapu groups began to appear in the western

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75   Congo Research Group: Setting Fire to Your Own House Crisis in Kasaï: The Manipulation of Customary Power and the Instrumentalization of Disorder. July 2018

province of Kasai. By this time, "Kamuina Nsapu" had become a means of using magical-religious power — and violence — to settle local disputes. In Kasai province, a succession conflict between members of the Bajila Kasanga clan, to which Pandi belonged, saw the emergence of the "Kamuina Nsapu" phenomenon. One of the two parties to the conflict, Mbawu Nkanka, traveled to the village of Kamuina Nsapu to be "baptized" by Pandi and bring back Kamuina Nsapu fetishes to help him in his fight against his opponent. In November 2016, two police officers were killed by Nkanka's supporters. This led the provincial authorities to send additional police officers to "restore order" in Nkanka's village, which then led to a retaliatory attack by Nkanka's supporters against the provincial capital, Tshikapa.

The arrival of Kamuina Nsapu introduced an ethnic dimension to the violence: while Central Kasai is largely composed of Lubaphones (Lulua), Kasai is more diverse. As a result, the migration of Kamuina Nsapu groups to Kasai and the provincial capital, Tshikapa, raised fears among the Chokwe and Pende, who then formed their own "self-defense groups" called Bana Mura.

The escalation of the Kamuina Nsapu conflict, which went from a simple dispute over customary authority to widespread violent conflict, was undoubtedly the result of the state's decision to kill Jean-Pierre Pandi. This triggered violent reactions from his supporters, who were then suppressed by overwhelming military force, resulting in numerous deaths. However, this episode did not ultimately lead to the cycles of armed conflict that we are accustomed to seeing elsewhere in the DRC. No foreign armies were involved in the conflict, and few of the rebels had any military experience. The state effectively suppressed the uprising, at a dramatic human cost. While the logic of resorting to violence to resolve customary conflicts remains, changes in the overall political context — the accession to the presidency in 2019 of Félix Tshisekedi, a native of Kasai — have given many people in the region hope that they will no longer be neglected or marginalized by the central government.

Annex 2: Mobilization of Armed Groups Following the Arrival of a Mining Company in Kabambare

The territory of Kabambare, located in the east of Maniema province, on the border with Fizi territory in South Kivu, saw significant mobilization of armed groups (Mai-Mai) during the Second Congo War (1998-2003). However, during the transition period from 2003 to 2006, these combatants and their leaders were demobilized or integrated into the army. The region then enjoyed relative stability. The situation changed radically with the arrival of Banro, a Canadian mining company whose subsidiary, Namoya Mining, developed an industrial mine in Namoya that began commercial production in January 2016.

In 2013, some 8,000 artisanal miners and 195 households were forcibly evicted from the mining concession following a controversial process that sparked large protests the previous year. This displacement caused a severe economic shock, leading to mass unemployment. Although Banro designated another area as an artisanal mining zone, it contained virtually no gold accessible to miners. In addition, in 2014, the Namoya community signed a memorandum of understanding with the company listing the social projects (roads, schools, and health centers) that the latter was to carry out. However, the implementation of these projects was slow, causing widespread discontent. In January 2016, a protest march turned violent, resulting in the death of a human rights activist who was shot by a police officer hired by Banro to guard its facilities. Banro won an appeal of a decision by the garrison court martial that had found the company civilly liable, thereby exempting it from paying compensation to the victim's family, as ordered by the court. The company also decided to prosecute the organizers of the January protest march. These actions caused further resentment within the community.[76]

In the months that followed, armed gangs began attacking the company's property. In September 2016, six trucks were set on fire near Namoya during an attack on a convoy transporting fuel and mining equipment. On December 31, 2016, a similar attack targeted two vehicles belonging to Civicon, a subcontractor of Banro. In March 2017, five workers were kidnapped, and in May of the same year, a series of attacks targeting police and military personnel took place in the villages surrounding the mine. Combined with an attempted invasion of the camp, these actions prompted the company to evacuate its staff and temporarily suspend operations.

In early 2017, it became clear that the attacks were being carried out by a new armed group: the Mai-Mai Malaika, whose political and spiritual leader was Sheh Hassan (also known as Sheikh Assani), a local teacher renowned for his exceptional spiritual qualities. However, the mobilization of this armed group cannot be attributed

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76   The story of Banro's arrival and its tense relations with the people of Namoya is documented in detail in: Geenen, S., & Verweijen, J. (2017). Explaining fragmented and fluid mobilization in gold mining concessions in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Extractive Industries and Society, 4(4), 758-765.

solely to popular discontent. It was also the result of deliberate decisions taken by the elites. Among these elites, a particularly important figure was retired Congolese army general and former Mai-Mai leader Sikatenda, who was based with some twenty armed bodyguards in his native village of Fizi, near Namoya, where he had mining interests.

In 2013, Sikatenda sent his bodyguards to occupy part of Banro's concession to protest the company's alleged overstepping of concession boundaries and the meager compensation offered to expropriated farmers. According to some sources, Banro then attempted to "pacify" the general by offering jobs to members of his network and providing them with generous donations of fuel and even money. Sikatenda had considerable mobilization capacity in the region. In 2015, he organized "popular meetings" during which he encouraged the population to revolt against Banro, accusing it of usurping the ancestral lands of the population and practicing "imperialism." He also maintained close relations with various Mai-Mai groups operating in Fizi.[77]

In addition to Sikatenda, a politician also played a crucial role in the emergence of the Mai-Mai Malaika. In early 2017, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, then minister of the interior and a native of Maniema, visited Namoya and gave an inflammatory speech in which he promised artisanal miners that they would recover part of their hill (the Banro concession). He reportedly put Sheh Assani in touch with General Sikatenda.[78] The latter then helped organize the first wave of training for recruits under the command of Commander Inga, a Mubangubangu who had gained his military experience with the AFDL during the First Congo War (1996-1997). These actions, carried out by Shadary, a member of former President Joseph Kabila's party (the PPRD), took place at a time (2017) when the race to nominate a possible successor to Kabila as presidential candidate had already begun. It is important to note that Shadary had a reputation for encouraging violence; he had played a key role in the bloody crackdown on opposition protests in Kinshasa according to the European Union, which sanctioned him in May 2017.[79]

In late 2017, the Congolese army launched a counterinsurgency campaign against the Mai-Mai Malaika, also motivated in part by the need to secure Banro's mining operations. This campaign caused massive population displacement and generated local sympathy for the group. However, that support was gradually undermined by the group's propensity to resort to public flogging and brutal repression to maintain control over the population. In 2018, divisions emerged within the movement, with some commanders defecting. In subsequent years, further internal dissension triggered infighting between different factions, taking a heavy toll on the population. The death of Sheikh Assani in October 2020 also sparked a struggle for succession, but did not end the movement, which is still active today. Due to ongoing violence in the region, Banro was forced to cease operations in Namoya in 2019 and subsequently sold all its assets in the DRC in 2022.

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77 See also: Verweijen, J. (2017). Luddites in the Congo? Analyzing violent responses to the expansion of industrial mining amidst militarization. *City* 21(3-4): 466–482.

78 Congo Research Group: *The CNPSC Rebellion: Social Marginalization and State Complicity in South Kivu*, February 2019.

79 Official Journal of the European Union, L 138 I, 29 May 2017 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L:2017:138I:TOC

Annex 3: Restraint from Violence in the Conflict between Buyu-Basikasingo and Bembe in South Kivu

The conflict between the Buyu Basikasingo[80] and the Bembe in the Lulenge sector of Fizi and territory dates to the colonial era. When developing the Lwama plain (cotton cultivation), the colonizers did not recruit local labor. According to an interview with a scholar of the area, "the Buyu were not interested in this work. They fled recruitment. They preferred to fish. The colonists were then forced to carry out mass displacement of the Bembe from Itombwe. The latter soon established themselves in all areas of life in what later became the Lulenge area. To ease tensions, the colonial administrators continued to pay the tribes (through the Bembe) and instituted a system of power sharing between the two communities."[81] These two measures, combined with the presence of the repressive colonial apparatus, prevented escalation prior to independence. The first significant friction was observed in the context of the Simba rebellion in the first half of the 1960s. But it was quickly brought under control.

The Buyu Basikasingo aspire for autonomy. Their leaders have demanded that Lulenge sector (an administrative entity in the Fizi territory) be attached to the Buyu groupement Kabeya (Maniema province). The Bembe contest this and support the administrative subdivisions that date back to the colonial era. (Lulenge sector has five groupings, with the Bembe occupying four of them.)

This conflict escalated between 1997 and 1998 on the fringes of the Congolese rebellions (AFDL and RCD). Buyu militiamen allied themselves with the Bayamulenge to assert their land claims. In retaliation, Bembe militias attacked Buyu Basikasingo villages in Bibwe, Kilembwe, and Kimanu II. The Buyu took refuge in the Buyu-Kabeya sector in Kambambare, Maniema. A pacification set up after the AFDL victory played a decisive role in bringing the two communities together. Since then, there has been a relative lull until December 2024. Currently, with the structuring of the Wazalendo armed groups, the Buyu's concerns have resurfaced.

Why is the Conflict Not Escalating?

Two factors may explain this restraint. The first is the imbalance of power between the two communities, and the second is the lack of support from other Buyu communities for the Buyu-Basikasingo's aspirations for autonomy.

While the Bembe militias have a long "warrior tradition," there was no armed group among the Buyu-Basikasingo until 1997, and even then, it was quickly disbanded as the militiamen returned to their usual activities of fishing and farming. Unlike the Bembe militias, which often work with foreign armed groups (Rwandan and Burundian), the Buyu have no such connections. The short-

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80   The Buyu are an ethnic group subdivided into eight clans (Bahaya, Bahuchwe, Banyabemba, Basilugezi, Baseti, Basonga, Basumba, and Basikasingo) established in the territories of Kabambare (Maniema province), Nyunzu, Manono, and Kabalo (Tanganyika province), and in the Lulenge sector in the territory of Fizi. The Basikongo are considered to be the first inhabitants of the Lwama plain.

81   Interview with a scholar working on the area in Bukavu, November 2025.

lived alliance between them and the Banyamulenge in 1997 did not lead to large-scale militarization of the community. Meanwhile, the Banyamulenge had positioned themselves well in Kinshasa, where they were already collaborating with certain Bembe elites, General Sylvestre Lwecha in particular.

Politically, the Buyu Basikasingo are not influential. They are a minority in the Fizi territory in general and in the Lulenge sector in particular. Most of their community is in Kabambare territory (Maniema province) and in Tanganyika province, and it is there that they play a political role.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the "political absence" of the Buyu-Basikasingo elites in Kinshasa. Indeed, the political elites who represented the Fizi territory under Kabila's presidency were all Bembe. During Laurent-Désiré Kabila's reign, Colonel Lwecha (Bembe) played a very decisive role. After him, Nehemie Mwilanya was for a long time chief of staff to Head of State Joseph Kabila. Currently, the heavily armed Mai-Mai Yakutumba, supported by Bembe community leaders, are on very good terms with the government of Félix Antoine Tshisekedi. There is no room for the Buyu to express themselves.

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