



The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo

Fragmented, politicized networks

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The mesh off conflicts in the eastern Congo has witnessed a slow deterioration over the past year. Internal displacement has continued apace, reaching 4,1 million people, more than in Syria and one of the [highest levels ever recorded](#) since the beginning of the various Congolese conflicts in 1993, with [550,000 displaced in the past three months](#) alone. At the same time, armed groups have continued to splinter and proliferate. While none of that sounds novel to observers of the eastern Congo, a couple of new trends have emerged since [our last mapping in 2015](#).

Political turmoil caused by the uncertainty around President Kabila's succession has begun to slowly affect conflict dynamics, influencing the rhetoric of some groups and quickening coalition formation among others, such as in Fizi and Beni territories. These developments have been accentuated by a national army increasingly under strain, in part due to a drop in real wages due to sharp inflation and a decline in morale. Moreover, in the wake of the Kamuina Nsapu crisis in the Kasai region, a significant number of army troops have been relocated there from the Kivus.

While the eastern Congo is no longer the arena of muscular military intervention by its neighbors, the past two years have featured an intensification of small scale cross-border dynamics fuelling armed mobilization, such as in the Rwenzori mountains and along the border with Burundi, from where armed opposition groups have entered eastern DRC since Pierre Nkurunziza's contested re-election in mid-2015.

In this context, armed groups have continued to proliferate: in our newly launched [Kivu Security Tracker](#) (KST), we count around 120 in North and South Kivu provinces alone, most of them small in size and primarily ethno-centric, but increasingly enmeshed in an unstable web of coalitions, sometimes including wider political and business networks. Who are these groups? Where and why do they operate? This essay discusses the main trends shaping topography of armed groups in North Kivu and South Kivu in late 2017.

AN OVERVIEW OF ARMED MOBILIZATION

Armed groups are spread across the two Kivus, concentrated in strategic areas such as the Semuliki Valley, the Ruzizi Plain or around the Virunga National Park. Smaller ones appear to be clustered in areas with high population density and fierce competition between armed groups. To the west, heading into the sparsely populated lowlands, groups seem to roam further afield, creating larger areas of influence.

In late 2017, there were several important clusters of armed groups, which also coincide with hotspots in the conflict.

The Lubero-Nyanzale-Kitchanga axis

Since the Miriki massacre in January 2016, there has been a significant escalation of violence in southern Lubero and northern Rutshuru territories. This violence—which has featured Hutu armed groups opposed to those from the Nande, Nyanga, and Kobo communities—was compounded by the Sukola II offensive of the national army, the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), against the Rwandan *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) rebels in late 2015. As it had done elsewhere, the FARDC partnered with local armed groups, including Nduma Defense of Congo–Rénové (NDC-R), while the FDLR worked alongside Nyatura groups from the Congolese Hutu community. At the same time, a loose network of armed groups within the Nande community, the Mai-Mai Mazembe, emerged and initially worked with NDC-R against their perceived Hutu enemies.

These tensions between the Congolese Hutu community and their neighbors have also cropped up in the *chefferies* (customary chiefdoms) of Bashali-Mokoto (northeastern Masisi) and Bwito (western Rutshuru) since at least mid-2016, when a new splinter faction broke off the FDLR, the *Conseil national pour le renouveau de la démocratie* (CNRD)–*Ubwiyunge* led by Wilson Irategeka. Taking advantage of this split, the FARDC resumed operations against the FDLR and allied Nyatura militia, at times with CNRD support.

Ever since, this area has been the theatre of constant low-level clashes involving FDLR, CNRD, FARDC, the [Alliances de patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain](#) (APCLS), and about a dozen different Nyatura factions, concentrated around population centers such as Kitchanga, Mweso and Nyanzale. Certain Nyatura and FDLR units, in turn, have continued to engage northwards with the NDC-R and Mazembe. Following a fall-out between the latter two, however, it is mostly Mazembe groups, in the shape of highly autonomous franchises, that continue fighting against Nyatura groups but also and increasingly against FARDC units.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the perils of counterinsurgency operations for the FARDC, as well as for its UN peacekeeping partners. Such endeavors often trigger spin-off conflicts and security vacuums—which in turn fuel armed mobilization and displacement.

Fizi-Uvira: A new coalition in an unstable neighborhood

The Ruzizi Plain and the *Moyens Plateaux* of Uvira host around 15 different Mai-Mai and so-called local defense militia. Most of these recruit within the Fuliuro community, with some groups made up of Barundi and Bavira. This conflict ecosystem has existed for years. Over the past two years, however, we have observed two main developments: the spill-over of a new Burundian political crisis, and the emergence of a new Mai-Mai coalition coming from Fizi, making Uvira town the hub of overlapping conflict dynamics.

The political crisis in Bujumbura, evolving around mass protest, contested elections and a failed coup d'état in mid-2015, triggered a new generation of Burundian armed mobilization in eastern Congo. Adding to the two armed branches of the *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL)—today led respectively by Nzabampema and Nibizi—present in the area for many years, two new groups have stood out: the *Résistance pour un état de droit* (RED)-*Tabara* (since 2015, although based on precursor groups) and the *Forces républicaines du Burundi* (FOREBU, now called *Forces populaires du Burundi*, since 2016). Their new rear-bases in eastern Congo have in turn increased the involvement of the Burundian government through joint operations with the FARDC, secret incursions, and the arming of several local Congolese armed groups as proxies.

None of these developments, however, were as dramatic as the emergence of a new, broad rebel coalition in late 2016, the [Coalition nationale du peuple pour la souveraineté du Congo \(CNPSC\)](#) led by veteran militia commander William Amuri Yakutumba and recruiting mostly within the Bembe community. Within several months, it inflicted heavy casualties on the Congolese army, briefly seized important gold mining areas, and stitched together a coalition of over ten armed groups (although some are relatively insignificant). While their largest operation—an attack on Uvira, the second-largest town in South Kivu—failed in September 2017, the group operates across large swathes of territory ranging from the shores of Lake Tanganyika to Maniema province.

Although it remains unclear how this coalition gained such momentum, the declining morale of the FARDC, an influx of money from kidnapping ransoms and mining revenues, as well as alleged connections across Lake Tanganyika may have contributed to the CNPSC's rise.

Beni territory

The DRC-Uganda border between Lake Edward and Lake Albert has [historically been known both for its lucrative trade networks and the presence of multiple, often overlapping armed groups](#). In recent years, three dynamics have been fuelling an uptick in violence in the area: an increasingly hostile Islamist Ugandan rebellion, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF); networks led by former members of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie*—*Kisangani/Mouvement de libération* (RCD-K/ML) rebellion; and militia that recruit among the local ethnic minorities.

While many accounts attribute the beginning of the recent violence to the Sukola I operations against the ADF, which began in late 2013, the escalation in armed group activity began in earnest several years prior and coincided with the defection to the opposition of Mbusa Nyamwisi, the former head of the RCD-K/ML and a long-time minister in President Kabila's government. While Mbusa's role remains unclear, numerous ex-APC officers are currently active as leaders of armed groups around Beni—for instance, Sibenda and Kithikyolo—and [CRG research has determined extensive ex-APC involvement in the initial massacres around Beni in 2013 and 2014](#).

This does not mean that the ADF are not involved. In response to the FARDC offensive, the ADF has engaged in indiscriminate killings and abductions of civilians, as well as in more targeted attacks of local chiefs and officials. The arrest of its leader Jamil Mukulu in 2015 appears to have furthered the ADF's radicalization. But it is crucial to highlight its connections with other groups: During its more than twenty years in the Rwenzori area, the ADF has built strong ties with other armed actors in the area, including those led by ex-APC and local militias, such as those around Mayangose and in Bambuba-Kisiki.

Confusing matters further, members of the FARDC itself have fuelled instability in the area. CRG and UN investigations have documented the involvement of army officers in the massacres, and controversy surrounds the involvement of Bwambale Kakolele, a former APC officer turned government official, in groups in the area, such as the Mai-Mai Vivuya.

Since 2016, a shift in conflict dynamics in Beni has taken place, with several new armed groups appearing with an explicitly anti-Kabila rhetoric. While most of them claim to be protecting civilians against the massacres around Beni, they have also launched successful attacks on the Beni prison, as well as against FARDC and MONUSCO. At the same time, the ADF have become increasingly aggressive, participating in attacks close to the Ugandan border as recently as October 2017.

DISTILLING TRENDS I—THE POLITICIZATION OF CONFLICT

Even though most armed groups are based in remote, rural areas a thousand miles from Kinshasa, their leaders are keen followers of national politics and social media has multiplied the spread of news, tracts and documents. It is not surprising, therefore, that the current political turmoil around the delaying of elections increasingly impacts on conflict dynamics.

Perhaps the clearest impact has been on the largest belligerent in the region: the FARDC. Political uncertainty, along with a budget crisis and high inflation, has affected salary payments and operational funds for the army, thus eroding morale. While sporadic military operations still take place, Sukola I and Sukola II have been scaled down and some units have been redeployed to the Kasais to deal with insurgencies there. In addition, all major policies intended at dealing with the conflict—from the latest demobilization program to negotiations

with armed groups and donor-driven stabilization—have ground to a halt.

These factors appear to have encouraged armed groups to take the initiative, attacking prisons and forming ramshackle coalitions. The CNPSC in Fizi, its allies among the Kalehe-based Raia Mutomboki, as well as new Nyatura and Mai-Mai coalitions in North Kivu have been egged on by the government's perceived illegitimacy since December 2016—some armed group leaders even claiming this rendered their own struggle more legitimate.

It is in this particular political climate that the rhetoric of armed mobilization has shifted from its traditional stance against Rwanda—which used to be perceived as the main threat by many—to a much more pronounced anti-Kabila tone over the past year: when several Raia Mutomboki factions took control of the main road in Bunyakiri in September 2017, they announced they would stay until Kabila left. Moreover, the CNPSC's rhetoric is embedded in decidedly anti-government sentiment and, on the highly symbolic date of December 19 2016, Mai-Mai Kilalo attacked a police station and the adjacent MONUSCO base in Butembo.

It is still unclear, however, to what degree politicians have increased their involvement in armed group mobilization due to the crisis in Kinshasa. There are credible reports linking both opposition and government officials to groups across the Kivus, but little rigorous documentation of this nexus. Nonetheless, if past elections serve as precedent, an escalation in conflict dynamics in the coming years would not come as a big surprise.

DISTILLING TRENDS II—NETWORKED FRAGMENTATION

A key feature of eastern Congo's landscape of armed groups continues to be the [high levels of fragmentation](#): There are around 120 armed groups, compared with roughly 70 two years ago. Most of these are small and very localized, but a few control significant areas. While fragmentation continues, it also [plays out in an increasingly networked fashion](#), resulting in broad, unstable coalitions.

A good example is the cluster evolving around the FDLR. While this Rwandan rebellion has declined precipitously in size—from around 7,000 a decade ago to approximately 1,000 today—it is still probably one of the largest armed groups in the Congo, and has been able to stitch together partnerships with many other local militia. While the emergence of the CNRD initially divided the roughly fifteen Nyatura factions, most of them quickly realigned with the FDLR by late 2016. Despite infighting and leadership struggles, the Nyatura continue to form a bulwark of Congolese Hutu militia surrounding the FDLR's strategic hideouts. These armed groups also bear the brunt of the fighting against CNRD and FARDC around Kitchanga, as well as against the various Mazembe branches north of Nyanzale.

Another example recently emerged in South Kivu, with the Mai-Mai Yakutumba forming the anchor for a dozen satellite groups within the CNPSC coalition. As mentioned above, this

coalition is mostly composed of Bembe Mai-Mai groups and other affiliates such as She Assani's Malaika group, stretching from Fizi territory into Maniema province.

The resurgence in Burundian influence has accentuated this proliferation in Fizi and Uvira territories, making it even more difficult to maintain stable alliances in Uvira territory. Both Bujumbura and its armed opposition have reached out to Fuliuro armed groups, although the latter have responded with a mix of suspicion and opportunism. In addition, FARDC operations against militia leaders and internal feuds have led to constant mutations of armed groups.

Other armed groups appear to be networked on a more symbolic level, drawing on tradition and ethnicity to maintain loose networks. This is the case for the Mai-Mai Mazembe, a highly decentralized militia cluster from the Nande community, as well as for Raia Mutomboki factions in Shabunda, where a new coalition of roughly ten groups was recently formed, and among the various Mai-Mai Kifuafua factions in southern Walikale and Masisi territories.

In sum, recent attempts at coalition building form a counterpoint to the continuing fragmentation. In sum, recent attempts at coalition building form a counterpoint to the continuing fragmentation. Despite the continued splintering of armed groups, the national political turmoil, combined with the gravitational pull of some larger groups, has helped fuel the creation of new, dynamic, but not durable networks.

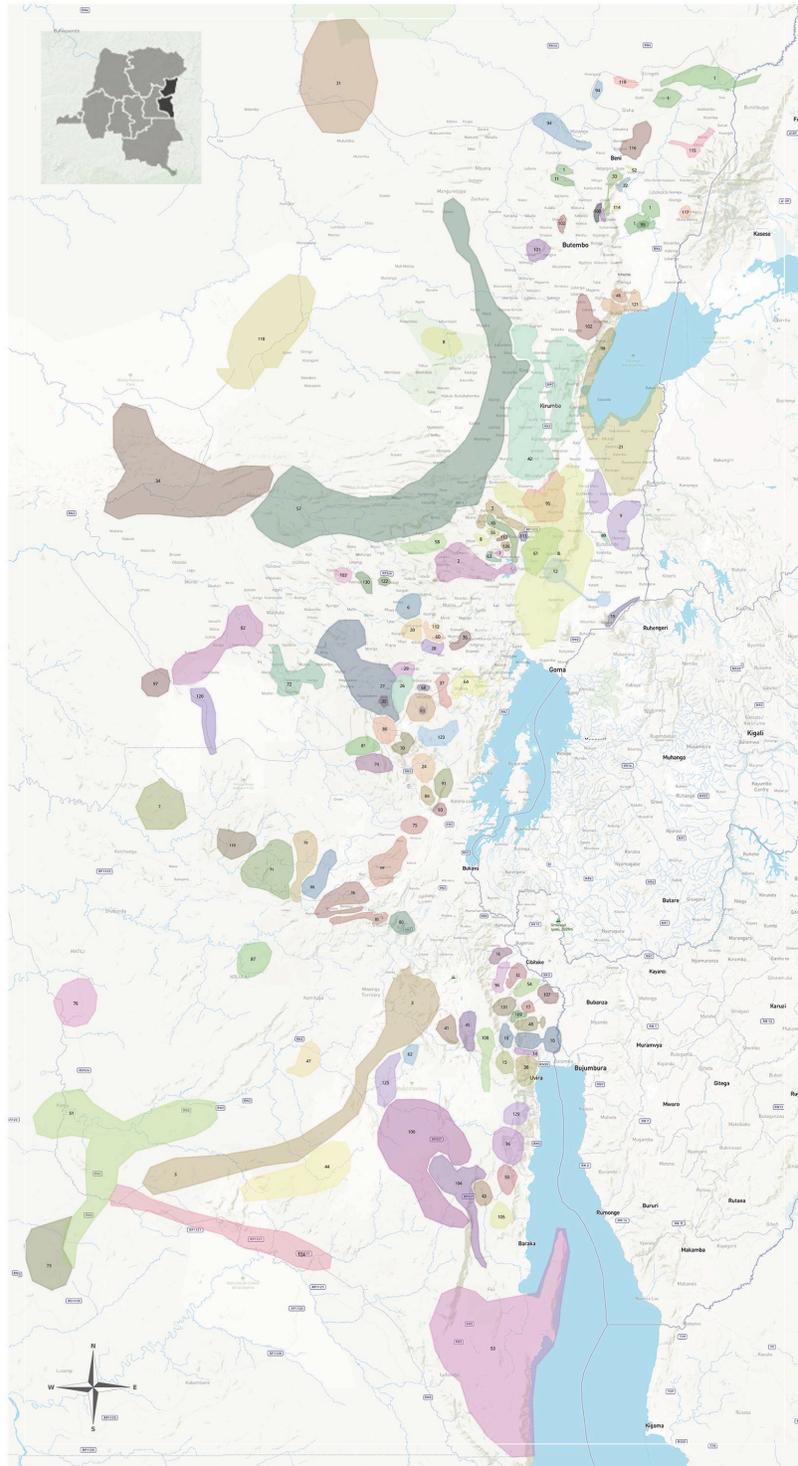


DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ARMED ACTORS IN
NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1- ADF | 70 - RM Butachibera |
| 2 - APCLS | 71 - RM Donat/Ngandu |
| 3 - CNRD | 72 - Raia Mutomboki Elenge |
| 6 - FDC-Guides | 73 - Mai-Mai Kiwis Kalume |
| 7 - Busumba group | 74 - RM Hamakombo |
| 8 - FDLR-FOCA | 75 - RM Imani Bitaa |
| 9 - FDLR-RUD | 76 - RM Kimba |
| 10 - FNL - Nzabampema | 77 - RM Kazimoto |
| 11 - Mai-Mai Kombi | 78 - Raia Mutomboki Lukoba |
| 12 - Nyatura FDP | 79 - Raia Mutomboki Mabala |
| 14 - LD Zone | 80 - RM Maheshe |
| 15 - LD Kashumba | 81 - RM Mungoro |
| 16 - LD Mahinduzi | 82 - Raia Mutomboki Mirage |
| 17 - Mai-Mai Mbulu | 83 - RM Musole |
| 18 - Mai-Mai Délégués | 84 - Raia Mutomboki Safari |
| 19 - ex-M23 | 85 - RM Ndarumanga |
| 20 - Guides-MAC | 86 - RM Shukuru |
| 21 - Mai-Mai Charles | 87 - RM Kikwama |
| 22 - Corps du Christ | 88 - RM Wemba |
| 23 - FRPI | 90 - UPCP-Lafontaine |
| 24 - RM Kabanzi | 91 - RM Shabani |
| 26 - Mai-Mai Kifuafua | 93 - RM Bipompa |
| Baeni-Limenzi | 94 - Mai-Mai Kyandenga |
| 27 - Mai-Mai Kifuafua Delphin | 95 - Nyatura Love |
| 28 - Nyatura Kigingi | 96 - Mai-Mai Mazimano |
| 29 - Mai-Mai Kifuafua Maachano | 97 - Raia Mutomboki Kisekelwa |
| 30 - Mai-Mai Kifuafua Shallo | 98 - Mai-Mai Jackson |
| 31 - Mai-Mai Simba (Manu) | 99 - Mai-Mai Dario |
| 32 - Mai-Mai Mwenyemali | 100 - Mai-Mai |
| 33 - Mai-Mai Nzirunga | Léopards-Muthundo |
| 34 - Mai-Mai Forces Divines | 101 - MRC-L |
| Simba | 102 - UPLC |
| 35 - Nyatura Mahanga | 103 - Raia Mutomboki |
| 36 - Mai-Mai Reunion (FPC) | Shebitembe |
| 37 - Nyatura Bizagwira | 104 - Mai-Mai Ebu Ela |
| 38 - Mai-Mai Makanaki | 105 - RED-Tabara |
| 39 - Mai-Mai Kirikicho | 106 - Ngumino |
| 41 - Mai-Mai Mahoro | 107 - Mai-Mai Bigaya |
| 42 - Mazembe | 108 - FOREBU/FPB |
| 43 - Biloze Bishambuke | 109 - FNL Nibizi |
| 44 - Mai-Mai Mulumba | 110 - RM Kabazimia |
| 45 - Mai-Mai Mushombe | 111 - Nyatura Gatuzi |
| 46 - Mai-Mai Nguru | 112 - Nyatura JED |
| 47 - Mai-Mai Nyakiliba | 113 - Nyatura Jean-Marie |
| 48 - Mai-Mai Nyerere | 114 - Mai-Mai Kithikyolo |
| 49 - Mai-Mai PRM/PAREM | 115 - Mai-Mai Sibenda |
| 50 - Mai-Mai Echilo | 116 - Milice Pakombe |
| 51 - Mai-Mai Malaika-She Assani | 117 - Mai-Mai Lwanga |
| 52 - Mai-Mai Vivuya | 118 - Mai-Mai Simba-Luc |
| 53 - Mai-Mai Yakutumba | 119 - Milice Mvuba |
| 54 - Mai-Mai Karakara | 120 - Raia Mutomboki Mamba |
| 55 - Nyatura-APRDC | 121 - Mai-Mai Muhima |
| 57 - NDC-R | 122 - RM Machite |
| 58 - NDC Sheka | 123 - Raia Mutomboki Manyilisa |
| 60 - Nyatura Delta | 124 - Mai-Mai Aigle |
| 61 - Nyatura Domi | 125 - Twiganeho |
| 62 - Mai-Mai Mupekenya | 126 - Nyatura Nzayi |
| 63 - Nyatura Kavumbi | 129 - Mai-Mai René |
| 64 - Nyatura Kalume | 130 - Raia Mutomboki |
| 65 - Nyatura Kasongo | Shemakingi |
| 68 - RM Akilo | 131 - Local Defense Ngengwe |
| 69 - Raia Mutomboki Blaise | 132 - CNPSC |



A dynamic online version of this map can be found at <https://kivusecurity.org/map>

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Mapping non-state armed groups is, [like many other illicit phenomena](#), a sensitive task and will inevitably involve imprecisions. New armed groups pop up every month, and their deployments are in constant flux. The aim here is stimulate conversation about the complexity of the conflict and armed group activity in the eastern Congo. We welcome comments and criticism; indeed, this will help us improve the next, updated version.

This map is the result of extensive fieldwork conducted by a network of researchers based throughout North and South Kivu, and has benefited from several rounds of internal and external reviews by experts on conflict dynamics in this region.

The map depicts 'areas of influence' rather than absolute control. While some armed groups exert effective control over an area, others may be able to exert substantial influence over larger zones but lack full control over those areas. Influence consists of the frequent deployment of troops and the ability to carry out significant attacks. Hence the size of an armed group area does not necessarily correspond to its strength.

Moreover, we do not include all armed actors. The groups included in this mapping have the following qualities: a) they have a differentiated organizational structure and an identity, b) they seek to assert some form of control over a geographic area, c) they refer to some—genuine or pretended—ideology, and d) and they employ violence regularly or as a technique of governance. While banditry continues to thrive in parts of the Kivu, we do not consider such gangs as armed groups. Nonetheless, we included actors ranging from micro-militias with no more than 20 combatants to large, sophisticated groups such as the FDLR.

This map represents a snapshot of the situation in October 2017.

