

The

Ruzizi Plain

**A CROSSROADS
OF CONFLICT
AND VIOLENCE**

**Judith Verweijen,
Juvénal Twaibu,
Oscar Dunia Abedi and
Alexis Ndisanze Ntababarwa**

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The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

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Executive summary

The Ruzizi Plain in South Kivu Province has been the theatre of ongoing conflicts and violence for over two decades. Patterns and dynamics of conflicts and violence have significantly evolved over time. Historically, conflict dynamics have largely centred on disputed customary authority – often framed in terms of intercommunity conflict.

Violence was connected to these conflicts, which generated local security dilemmas. Consequently, armed groups mobilized to defend their community, albeit often at the behest of political and military entrepreneurs with more self-interested motives. At present, however, violence is mostly related to armed groups' revenue-generation strategies, which involve armed burglary, robbery, assassinations, kidnappings for ransom and cattle-looting.

Violence is also significantly nourished by interpersonal conflicts involving debt, family matters, and rivalries. In recent years, regional tensions and the activities of foreign armed groups and forces have become an additional factor of instability. Unfortunately, stabilization interventions have largely overlooked or been unable to address these changing drivers of violence. They have mostly focused on local conflict resolution, with less effort directed at addressing supra-local factors, such as the behaviour of political elites and the national army, and geopolitical tensions between countries in the Great Lakes Region. Future stabilization efforts will need to take these dimensions better into account.

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The Ruzizi Plain in South Kivu Province of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is strategically located between the Mitumba mountain chain on one side and the Ruzizi river, which separates the DRC from Burundi and Rwanda, on the other. Over the past two decades, this small strip of land in Uvira territory has witnessed astonishing amounts of violence, following earlier episodes of turmoil. In 2012, a conflict over customary authority in the Ruzizi Plain Chieftdom flared up, fuelling dynamics that led to a highly media-tized massacre in Mutarule in 2014. International media and policy attention on the Plain has mostly focused on this conflict, which has been interpreted as an 'intercommunity conflict' pitting Barundi (and Banyamulenge) against Bafuliiru. This report argues that the narrow focus on 'intercommunity conflict' has been a poor guide for stabilization initiatives, even though for a brief moment – between 2012 and 2015 – the dispute around customary power was indeed a crucial factor of insecurity in the area.

The report focuses on three interrelated questions:

- What are key drivers and actors of conflict in the Ruzizi Plain?
- What are key drivers and actors of violence in the Ruzizi Plain?
- How have international stabilization efforts addressed dynamics of conflict and violence?

The Ruzizi Plain is understood herein to encompass both the Ruzizi Plain Chieftdom and parts of the adjacent Bafuliiru Chieftdom located in the geographical plain. Where pertinent, the analysis also considers developments

in the *Moyens Plateaux* or the middle-range mountains bordering the Plain. This mountainous area, which is mostly located in the Bafuliiru Chiefdom, is socially closely connected to the Plain. It also hosts most of the armed groups that are active in the Plain.

The report shows that dynamics of conflict and violence in the Ruzizi Plain have three characteristics, which mark the eastern DRC's current security predicament more broadly. The first is the multiscale nature of conflict dynamics, which play out at overlapping local, provincial, national and subregional (Great Lakes area) scales. When conflicts at one level subside, tensions at other levels flare up, sparking new insecurity and eventually rekindling conflicts that had lowered in intensity. For instance, just when the conflict around customary authority in the Plain had started to diminish in 2015, political tensions related to a coup d'état in Burundi contributed to an intensification of Burundian armed opposition on Congolese soil, sparking new tensions.

The second feature is that dynamics of conflict and dynamics of violence overlap and intertwine but may also diverge. This point is not always well understood in policy circles, where there is a widespread understanding that political and social conflicts are the *cause* of violence. Much violence in the eastern DRC today, however, is weakly related or even unrelated to such conflicts. The Ruzizi Plain and its immediate surroundings, in particular the *Moyens Plateaux* hills, are home to an array of generally minuscule armed groups. Almost all of these groups resort to a wide range of banditry activities to generate income, including cattle-looting, armed burglary, armed robbery (often during ambushes) and ransom kidnappings. With the exception of cattle-looting, these activities are largely unrelated to social and political conflict. Victims are generally not targeted because they belong to or are believed to have collaborated with the opposite camp in a conflict, but for other reasons, such as possessing wealth or the personal grudges of the perpetrator. At present, Bafuliiru in the Plain are by and large the primary victims of violence committed by predominantly Fuliiru armed groups.

While banditry is rarely related to social conflicts, it is often informed by more personalized forms of conflict. This is the third characteristic of present-day instability in the eastern DRC: the importance of interpersonal and interfamily

disputes in fuelling violence (Verweijen 2019). These disputes generally relate to family, dowry, inheritance, debts, jealousy, envy, grievances or past violence. People embroiled in such conflicts appeal to armed actors to intervene and eliminate their opponents, including by accusing them of witchcraft. Civilian collaborators of armed groups, who help them commit violence, are often also guided by personal preferences and envy when selecting targets for banditry.

The intimate character of much of the violence in the Ruzizi Plain has become overshadowed by the focus on the conflict around customary authority and intercommunity tensions. This focus has also distracted from *intra*community conflicts, in particular within the Fuliiru community, which have been a key driver of tensions in the Plain. Examples are the conflict concerning the throne of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom and the conflict surrounding the leadership of the *groupement* of Luvungi-Itara, a subentity of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom that is in part located in the Plain.

Any efforts to bring stability to the Ruzizi Plain must consider the entire spectrum of conflicts at play, including *intra*community and more personalized disputes. They must also identify and address the drivers of violence, in addition to dynamics of conflict. Armed groups in the Ruzizi Plain largely follow their own agendas and logics. Consequently, conflict resolution efforts addressed to civilian communities rarely have a direct effect on their actions.

The analysis presented in this report is based on years of research in various villages of the Ruzizi Plain and the cities of Uvira and Bukavu, conducted between 2010 and 2019.¹ The research employed qualitative methods, in particular semi-structured interviews with key informants. The latter included customary and administrative authorities, community leaders, civil society actors, state security services, and current and former armed group members and leaders.

¹ Research was conducted in Lubarika, Katogota, Kamonyi, Kibungu, Lemera, Mulenge, Luberizi, Mutarule 1 and 2, Rwenena, Kibirizi, Nyakabere 1 and 2, Sange, Kahungwe, Rusabagi, Ndunda, Kiliba, Kawizi, Kagando, Rutemba, Runingu centre, Biriba, Kabunambo, Namijembwe, Kigoma, Kigurwe, Rulimbi, Nyango, and Bwegera.

The rest of the report proceeds as follows. The first part traces the historical evolution of dynamics of conflict and violence in the Ruzizi Plain from the precolonial era to 2012. The report then discusses the main drivers and actors of contemporary dynamics of conflict, which is followed by an analysis of current dynamics and actors of violence. The next section focuses on international stabilization and peacebuilding initiatives. The conclusion reflects upon the implications of the report's findings for international stabilization interventions.

A history of conflict and violence

History is essential to conflict narratives in the eastern DRC. The stakes of writing and telling history are therefore exceedingly high. Interpretations of events that occurred during the precolonial and colonial eras came to play a crucial role in the turmoil that emerged in the first years after the Congo's independence in 1960, and again in the run-up to and during the First (1996–97) and Second (1996–2003) Congo Wars. Events during these episodes of violence, in turn, would form an additional source of memories and grievances that were harnessed in subsequent rounds of armed mobilization.

2.1 The precolonial and colonial eras

In the second half of the 19th century, Kinyoni, a subchief of Burundian King Mwezi Gisabo from the Banyakarama Dynasty, established himself with his followers on the right bank of the Ruzizi River. This followed earlier movements in the same area by his ancestor Ntorogwe around 1800, who later moved to other zones. Although the territory where they settled was barely inhabited, it was claimed by Fuliiru chiefs, who lived at the foot of the Mitumba mountain chain (Depelchin 1974: 84–86). According to a popular narrative, the arrival of what would become known as 'the Barundi', often described as 'foreigners', was the start of a decades-long conflict between them and the Bafuliiru. This latter group considers themselves the 'autochthonous' population, or those who arrived in the Plain first.

This narrative is ahistorical and perpetuates a number of myths that are at the heart of present-day conflict dynamics. Kinyoni's movement took place at a time of general population movements and territorial fluidity, when there were no established – let alone 'international; – borders (see also Mathys 2014). It is therefore problematic to label the Barundi 'foreigners'. In addition, 'the Bafuliiru' did not exist or self-identify as a homogeneous 'ethnic group' at the time, nor did they have a well-defined territory.

Before colonization, a set of heterogeneous clans populated present-day Uvira territory. It was only during the colonial era that these groups became merged into a single 'tribe' (the Bafuliiru) with a paramount ruler and a clearly demarcated territory. Some of these clans have their origins in Burundi (such as the Bazige) or Rwanda (such as the Bagesera) (Muchukiwa 2006: 23-25, 43). This history was ignored by the persistent framing of Bafuliiru as 'autochthonous' and Barundi as 'foreigners'. The 'foreigner' label has also been applied to the Banyamulenge. This group of predominantly Tutsi pastoralists had migrated with their cattle from present-day Rwanda and Burundi to what is now South Kivu in various waves throughout the 19th century, possibly following earlier movements (Depelchin 1974: 65-66). Arriving first in the Ruzizi Plain, most of them would eventually settle in the *Hauts Plateaux* mountains at the intersection of Uvira, Mwenga and Fizi territories, although they retained a small presence in the Plain around Bwegera²

That the clans who would later come to constitute 'the Bafuliiru' were far from a united group was reflected in regular fighting between their chiefs. Depelchin describes how at the start of the 20th century, severe tensions emerged in the Ruzizi area. This instability followed the gradual territorial expansion of Barundi chiefs after a number of Fuliiru chiefs had left the area, fleeing the advance of the Belgian colonial administration and a group of mutineers from the colonial army. While some of the fights that erupted pitted Barundi against Fuliiru chiefs, an even greater number of clashes took place between Fuliiru chiefs – an aspect that rarely appears in standard narratives on the Ruzizi Plain's history (Depelchin 1974: 91-96).

² Interview with Munyamulenge leader, Bwegera, 11 April 2014.

From the 1920s onwards, the economic, infrastructural and administrative organization of the Plain intensified in the context of the development of the cotton sector, which was partly based on forced cultivation. The economic transformations introduced by the colonizers, which rendered indigenous currency worthless, prompted many Bafuliiru on the mountain slopes to descend and establish themselves in the Plain. Others were attracted by the fertile land, good pastures for their cattle and employment opportunities in commerce. In the 1940s, population movements from the mountains accelerated, causing the Bafuliiru to become the demographic majority in the Plain in the 1950s. As a result, contact between Bafuliiru and Barundi intensified, through economic relations, cattle exchange, intermarriage, and friendship and blood pacts. Among both groups, the majority were cultivators, while elites also had herds of cattle (Depelchin 1974: 87-88).

This high level of intermarriage and exchange would continue throughout history. As a result, the current population in the Plain is in majority of mixed Fuliiru-Barundi descent.³ As one informant put it, 'In almost all households [in the Plain] there is Barundian origin, often the mother is Murundi or someone among the grandparents. Someone who is a 100% Mufuliiru, that is really difficult to find.'⁴ Intermarriage also took place in the royal family of the Barundi, as two of the children of Felix Kinyoni, the former *mwami* (customary chief) of the Barundi Chiefdom, are married to Bafuliiru.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that most people in the Plain today highlight the cultural similarities, assimilation and intermingling between Barundi and Bafuliiru, most of whom speak each other's language. In fact, the Kirundi dialect of the Plain differs from the Kirundi spoken in Burundi, due to the long exposure to other languages, including Kifuliiru.

Despite these close relations, there were also tensions. The colonizers favoured the Barundi, who showed themselves more collaborative and willing to pay tax. Moreover, the Barundi constituted the demographic majority in the Plain

³ Interview with Congolese scholar, Bukavu, 7 April 2014; interviews with Barundi notables, Uvira, 10 April 2014; and interview with mwami of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom, Bukavu, 16 October 2014.

⁴ Interview with Mufuliiru of mixed household, Luberizi, 12 April 2014.

⁵ Interview with Murundi currently living in Burundi, Bujumbura, 7 November 2014.

when the Belgians started to develop their administration at the start of the 20th century. For these reasons, the colonizers granted them a chiefdom in 1928, the same year as the creation of the two other chiefdoms in Uvira territory, namely, those of the Bafuliiru and Bavira (Depelchin 1974: 87-88). While there were misgivings among Bafuliiru about this at the time, discontent about the Barundi Chiefdom would only really start to surface in the context of the political tensions that surrounded the country's independence in 1960.

2.2 The post-independence era (1960–96)

The run-up to and first years after the Congo's independence were characterized by stark political competition, pitting those advocating a strong centralized state and having anti-imperialist leanings against federalists who were more favourable towards Western powers. The political landscape was further marked by provincial and local tensions, as dozens of competing parties emerged that often had regional and ethnic constituencies (Young 1965, Vlassenroot 2013: 22-26). Tensions were also palpable in the Ruzizi Plain, where socio-economic and political competition surfaced that was at times ethnically tinged.

In 1961, Bafuliiru attacked the houses of Barundi but also of some Bafuliiru in the Plain, pillaging goods and small livestock in what has become known as the *guerre de chèvres* ('the goat war'). This episode is often considered to be the first outbreak of 'ethnic violence' between the Barundi and the Bafuliiru, but this is a reductionist explanation. First, there was an unmistakable class dimension to the violence. The attacks were mostly conducted by poor Bafuliiru from the mountains, and not those living in the Plain, who were comparatively better off (Depelchin 1974: 98).⁶ Second, the attacks had unmistakable political dimensions. They were initiated by the ambitious politician Musa Marandura, who had been elected to the provincial assembly in May 1960. Marandura symbolized a new generation of politicians, who wanted to get rid of the old colonial order and corresponding political leaders. Following the electoral victory of radical nationalists in the provincial elections, *mwami*

⁶ Interview with Murundi leader, Uvira, 10 April 2014.

Henri Simba of the Bafuliiru, who was seen as an accomplice to the colonial regime, fled to Burundi. Subsequently, Marandura was given power over the Bafuliiru Chiefdom. He immediately appointed loyalists as *chefs de groupement* (subchiefs) and as new political-administrative staff. When Henri Simba returned from exile in April 1961, Marandura and his allies faced an imminent loss of power. This prospect likely contributed to their unleashing violence on the Barundi Chiefdom, possibly as a way to take over power there (Verhaegen 1966: 269-270, Depelchin 1974: 55-56).

In 1963, a series of protests took place, again initiated by Marandura, that eventually culminated in a full-fledged insurgency in 1964 known as the Simba rebellion. The rebellion caused much of the Plain's population to flee to Burundi. The Barundi *mwami* sought refuge in Bukavu, which led to the annexation of his chiefdom by that of the Bafuliiru. While the Simba rebellion was primarily driven by a complex set of socio-economic and political factors, at times it assumed ethnic overtones. The leadership of the rebellion consisted of an emerging class of Fuliiru politicians, such as Marandura, who strove to establish their own power as well as an alternative political order. They were inspired by the ideas of Patrice Lumumba, the independent Congo's first prime minister, who was assassinated in 1961 with US and Belgian involvement (Depelchin 1974: 56). The base of the rebellion – at least in Uvira – was rural populations who had been hit hard by falling real incomes in the cotton sector and sharp currency devaluation in 1963. It was therefore no coincidence that individuals with visible wealth were among the primary targets (Verhaegen 1966: 259).

Most of Marandura's followers were Bafuliiru, as very few Barundi joined the rebellion. Given they were better off than many of the Bafuliiru in rural areas, the Barundi and their property became the rebels' preferred targets. When the insurgency arrived in the *Hauts Plateaux*, fleeing an offensive by the Congolese National Army, the Simba started to attack the Banyamulenge's cattle en masse. This prompted the Banyamulenge to fight the Simba, most of whom were Babembe and Bafuliiru. The fighting caused many Banyamulenge to descend from the mountains and establish themselves in the Ruzizi Plain, where some of them remained after the rebellion ended around 1967. These events gave the Simba rebellion an ethnic

character, leading participants and observers alike to ignore its political and socio-economic drivers. These ethnic overtones heavily coloured the often bitter memories of the rebellion, which formed a reservoir from which ethnic entrepreneurs in future periods of political turmoil would tap (Verweijen and Vlassenroot 2015).

During the 1970s and 1980s, political tensions in the Plain continued to have ethnic dimensions, although they mostly centred on administrative appointments and reforms. The chief of the Barundi, *mwami* Felix Kinyoni, who had resumed his functions after returning from exile in 1967, was suspended multiple times. Today, many Barundi ascribe these suspensions to efforts by the Bafuliiru to divest him of his functions and assume leadership of the Barundi Chiefdom,⁷ which was renamed Chiefdom of the Ruzizi Plain in the early 1970s.⁸ Others, however, allege they were also related to poor governance, including allegations of embezzlement and public drunkenness.⁹ It is also important to emphasize that these events took place in the context of general efforts by the Mobutu administration to rein in customary chiefs' power and assure their political loyalty (Callaghy 1984: 401-404).

An even bigger source of controversy was the creation of the *cités* (towns or non-customary local governance entities) of Sange, Kagando (Kiliba), and Uvira in 1987.¹⁰ The *cités* reduced the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom's area by three-quarters and deprived it of important resources. Chiefs lost control over vast amounts of land, the use of which had been subject to customary tax. In addition, they were deprived of tax revenues from the most important markets in the area, especially those of Kiliba and Sange. The move was all the more controversial given that of the six *cités* mentioned in the

⁷ Interviews with Barundi leaders, Uvira, 17 April 2014 and Luberizi, 16 October 2015.

⁸ Interviewees were divided on the causes and moment of the name change. Some suggested it was in 1972, and others pointed to 1974, when all chiefdoms were suppressed as part of the chieftaincy reforms. Administrative documents show that the administrative unit of the *collectivité* (overlapping with the customary unit of the *chefferie* or chiefdom) was already called 'Ruzizi Plain' in the 1960s. According to some, this name came into use when the chiefdom was annexed by the Bafuliiru Chiefdom during the Simba rebellion.

⁹ Interviews with Bafuliiru leaders, Uvira, 18 April 2014.

¹⁰ The *cités* were created by the 1982 law on territorial reorganization (*ordonnance-loi* No. 82-0006 of 25 February 1982), which was however not applied until 1987 (by *ordonnance* No. 87-238 of 29 June 1987).

1987 ordinance, only the three that reduced the area of the Ruzizi Plain and Bavira Chiefdoms were erected, while the three planned for the territory of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom (namely, Rungu, Lemera and Luvungi) were not. Moreover, because the administrator of Uvira territory unilaterally changed the boundaries, the dimensions of the three *cités* far exceeded the area foreseen in the law (Muchukiwa 2006: 163-167). Similar discussions concerning boundaries currently take place in relation to the transformation of Sange, Kiliba and Luvungi into *communes rurales* (rural communes), which are non-customary decentralized local governance entities.

The 1980s also saw an intensification of political tensions over the issue of Zairean national identity and citizenship, as reflected in debates over the new law on national identity that was adopted in 1981. These debates were increasingly anchored in so-called ‘autochthony discourse’, which is based on a dichotomy between supposed ‘sons of the soil’ on the one hand and ‘foreigners’ – who would be unentitled to Congolese citizenship – on the other. In Uvira, this dichotomy became superimposed on the division between ‘Rwandophones’ (speakers of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi language, such as the Barundi and Banyamulenge) and other groups, in particular the Bafuliiru, Bavira and Babembe. This superposition was largely ahistorical, ignoring a complex history of precolonial population movements, and lumping together groups with diverse historical trajectories into single categories. Yet, precisely because of its simplicity and its strong emotional appeal, autochthony discourse proved a highly powerful political weapon that continues to be deployed today (Verweijen 2015).

In the late 1980s, the discussion of nationality became increasingly politicized. Rwandophone candidates were excluded from the 1987 parliamentary elections, based on the allegation that they were ‘foreigners’. Similarly, Rwandophones were excluded from participation in the 1991 *Conférence nationale souveraine* (Sovereign National Conference), a body that had to prepare the country’s transition to multiparty democracy. During a controversial census aimed at the ‘identification of nationals’ conducted the same year in the Ruzizi Plain, Barundi were barred from registering, provoking upheaval. Tensions intensified when Bafuliiru youths surrounded the house of the *mwami* – who had been, since 1982, Floribert Ndabagoye, son

of Felix Kinyoni – and chanted, ‘Ndabagoye, Ndabagoye, obwami bwamala’ (‘Ndabagoye, your reign is finished’).¹¹ This prompted the *mwami* to flee to Burundi, causing his chieftaincy to be subsequently ruled by mostly Bafuliiru interim administrators.

This brief overview of post-independence history shows how political and socio-economic tensions in the Plain have often been expressed and understood in ethnic terms. This understanding has been driven both by political developments at the national level, such as elections, and specific local tensions aggravated by the political ambitions of local leaders. While this history of frictions has been seen as evidence for ‘deep-seated animosities’ between Barundi, Bafuliiru and Banyamulenge, it is important not to lose sight of the underlying political and socio-economic developments.

2.3 The Congo Wars and their aftermath (1996–2011)

Similar to the Simba rebellion, the Congo Wars were an era in which local, provincial and national tensions informed and intertwined with logics of violence. While the overarching narrative of the violence once again pitted Banyamulenge and Barundi against Bafuliiru, the reality was much more complex. There were also numerous tensions within these groups, resulting from competition among military leaders. Moreover, certain conflict parties, such as the insurgency of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD, Congolese Rally for Democracy), drew members of supposedly opposing ethnic groups.

In 1996, the Rwanda-backed *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL, Alliance of Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre) invaded Uvira, resulting in the First Congo War. Ndabagoye, the ousted *mwami* of the Barundi, would seize upon this occasion to return to office. He would stay in power throughout the subsequent Second Congo War (1998–2003), when another Rwanda-backed rebellion, the RCD, took control over large parts of the east. The RCD’s dominance was heavily resisted

¹¹ Interview with Murundi leader, Mutarule, 14 April 2014.

by self-defence forces generically labelled 'Mai-Mai', which were mostly composed of groups seeing themselves as 'autochthones', such as the Bafuliiru and Bavira. While many Barundi insist that their *mwami* remained neutral during the war, most Bafuliiru accuse him of siding with the RCD, with some suggesting that he 'started to play the Tutsi card'.¹² Among the Barundi, the Hutu/Tutsi distinction historically never played a role as an identity marker.¹³ Yet in the 1990s, when tensions framed in these terms intensified in neighbouring Burundi and Rwanda, this distinction gradually became projected onto the Barundi.

This development was in part a result of the arrival of tens of thousands of Burundian and Rwandan refugees mixed with combatants in the Ruzizi Plain in 1993 and 1994. These combatants all belonged to Hutu armed groups. In the case of Burundi, this concerned mostly the *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL, National Liberation Forces), which then fought against Tutsi opponents. It was in this climate of polarization that the royal dynasty of the Barundi, the Banyakarama, became increasingly seen as 'Tutsi' and the majority of the Barundi as 'Hutu'. Given that Tutsi played prominent roles in the leadership of both the AFDL and the RCD, this development affected the Barundi leadership's political course during the wars. Both rebellions appeared to be favourable towards the Barundi, and several of its leaders were appointed to important administrative positions in Uvira, such as *chef de cité* (town chief). Bafuliiru also accuse the *mwami* of having used his position under the RCD to manipulate Local Defence Forces, which had been recruited and trained by the Rwandan army around the year 2000 in part to weaken the Mai-Mai. While most Barundi deny this in the starkest terms, Ndabagoye is alleged to have used a group of Local Defence Forces dressed in yellow, called *Majaunets*, to settle personal scores and repress opponents.¹⁴

In 2003, Ndabagoye was designated to represent the RCD as a member of the transitional parliament in Kinshasa, which resulted from a power-sharing agreement between the former belligerents. To many Bafuliiru, this further

¹² Interview with Congolese scholar, Bukavu, 7 April 2014.

¹³ Interview with Murundi leader, Uvira, 10 April 2014; and interview with Murundi customary chief, Bwegera, 11 April 2014.

¹⁴ Interview with Bafuliiru leaders, Luberizi, 12 April 2014.

confirmed his close association with the RCD. Yet Bafuliiru had rallied to the RCD rebellion too. Numerous militia members, including Bede Rusagara, Kilolo, Karakara and Bigaya, started out as Mai-Mai but later joined the Local Defence Forces organized by the RCD. Bede was even asked by the RCD to participate in the peace negotiations in Sun City, which culminated in the signing of the Global and All-Inclusive Accord in 2002.

The peace agreement stipulated that the armed wings of all belligerents, including the RCD and the Mai-Mai, would be integrated into a newly formed national army, the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC, Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Troops on the ground would initially be locally merged into brigades, and then train and redeploy elsewhere in mixed brigades. Yet numerous Mai-Mai leaders resisted this process, as they felt that the FARDC brigades they were assigned to were dominated by the RCD. Some refused to participate in the army integration process altogether, staying in their home areas. Others initially integrated but dropped out later. Several officers of this last category, including Mwenyemali, Bede and Karakara, would come to constitute new armed groups operating in the Plain and the adjacent *Moyens Plateaux* (Verweijen 2016: 18-19).

On the side of the RCD, too, military leaders resisted the army integration process, fearing they would lose out in power. In 2004, the ex-RCD Munyamulenge officer and FARDC brigade commander Jules Mutebutsi mutinied, briefly capturing the city of Bukavu. His actions provoked significant counter-mobilization by the FARDC – including the Mai-Mai forces that had recently become part of it – forcing him eventually to flee to Rwanda. In Uvira, many former RCD cadres fled to Burundi and Rwanda around the same time, fearing revenge. This paved the way for replacing them with administrators loyal to the Mai-Mai – a process in which former Mai-Mai army officer Baudouin Nakabaka is believed to have played an important role. These changes of power also affected the Chiefdom of the Ruzizi Plain. In 2004, a Mufuliiru named Kibinda was installed as the ruler, and all Barundi *chefs de groupement* were replaced by Bafuliiru.¹⁵ Deprived of power, *mwami*

¹⁵ These *chefs de groupement* were Lameke in Luberizi, Soko Bin Mayeye in Kakamba, Mupanzi in Kabunambo, and Dunia Kwibe in Kagando.

Floribert Ndabagoye undertook countless lobbying and advocacy efforts to regain the throne – a mission that would finally succeed in 2012.¹⁶

While the war had formally ended, the decade following the signing of the peace accord did not bring much stability to the Ruzizi Plain. Importantly, foreign rebel groups stayed active there, including a group of deserters from the FNL under Bitagyumunyu who engaged in ambushes and robbery. The Rwandan Hutu-led rebel group *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR, Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) also controlled parts of the Plain, from which they engaged in transborder movements for recruitment and trade purposes (Rafti 2006). The FARDC brigade deployed there at the time tolerated the presence of the FDLR, reflecting the army's ambiguous relations with this group. These relations would radically change in 2009, when the rebel movement *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP, National Congress for the Defence of the People), which included many ex-RCD officers, integrated into the FARDC.

The integration of the CNDP fostered instability throughout the Kivus for two reasons. First, it led to a complete reshuffle of the army command and a recomposition of brigades, triggering competition and unrest in the army. The result was numerous desertions, particularly by ex-Mai-Mai officers, who felt marginalized and discriminated against in the distribution of command positions (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013). In Uvira, Fujo Zabuloni, the eldest son of the well-known Simba and Mai-Mai leader Zabuloni Rubaruba, deserted in April 2009. He withdrew to the *Moyens Plateaux* to establish a new rebellion, allegedly with the help of a number of important Fuliiru businessmen (United Nations 2009: para. 72-73). According to the UN Group of Experts, Fujo also benefited from arms diverted from the stock of the 10th Military Region covering South Kivu, under the responsibility of its deputy commander (United Nations 2009: para. 24-25). A second reason why CNDP integration led to instability is that it coincided with large-scale, Kivus-wide military operations against the FDLR and other armed groups. These operations pushed the FDLR back from the Plain and the *Moyens Plateaux* into

¹⁶ Interviews with civil society actors, Sange, 14 April 2014; and interviews with Bafuliiru notables, Luberizi, 12 April 2014.

the *Hauts Plateaux*, particularly the Itombwe forest (Verweijen 2016: 24-25). The changing political constellation resulting from the FDLR's withdrawal unleashed a new power competition in the Plain and *Moyens Plateaux*.

In 2011, a number of developments occurred that created further tensions. It was an election year, which increased political competition. It was also a time of army restructuring aimed at transforming brigades into regiments, which sparked another round of unrest in the army. Many service members felt that Rwandophone soldiers and officers, especially from the ex-CNDP, had once again been favoured. Consequently, some former Mai-Mai officers who had been denied important positions in the newly formed regiments, such as Mwenyemali, deserted and returned to the bush (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013). Others felt threatened by the growing presence of Rwandophone FARDC officers. This was the case with Nyerere Bunana, a former Fuliiru Mai-Mai and RCD officer from Kiliba who had integrated into the *Police nationale congolaise* (PNC, National Congolese Police) after the Second Congo War. Residing in Uvira on extended leave, Rwandophone army commanders tried to arrest him for desertion, prompting him to return to the bush. Nyerere's rebellion was supported by local elites, including a rich businessman from his hometown Kiliba, and a part of the town's population.¹⁷ A third new armed group that emerged in 2011 was that of Bede Rusagara, a native of Mutarule in the Ruzizi Plain. Bede deserted from the FARDC in North Kivu and returned to his home area to launch a rebellion. He recruited his officers among those he served with in the RCD's Local Defence Forces, for instance, Bigaya and Kilolo. Bede appears to have deserted for different reasons than the perceived marginalization of former Mai-Mai officers in the army, as his desertion was supported by the very ex-CNDP circles that had grown powerful in the FARDC.

Also in 2011, Burundian armed mobilization in the DRC surged, following growing political repression and irregularities surrounding the 2010 local elections in Burundi. These developments had prompted two opposition leaders to flee the country and initiate insurgent activity from Uvira and the neighbouring territory of Fizi. The first was Agathon Rwasa, leader of the FNL

¹⁷ Interviews with civil society members, Uvira, 26 October 2011 and 13 January 2012.

political party, which grew out of the eponymous rebel group. The second was Alexis Sinduhije of the *Mouvement pour la solidarité et la démocratie* (MSD, Movement for Solidarity and Democracy). Their groups established bases on Congolese soil and the FNL initiated collaboration with a number of Mai-Mai groups, including those of Bede Rusagara, Fujo Zabuloni and Nyerere Bunana. Concerned by this growing insurgent activity, which included cross-border attacks, the Burundian National Army, the *Force de défense nationale* (FDN, National Defence Force), established an unofficial presence in Kiliba in the Ruzizi Plain, from which it conducted limited operations against the FNL (Verweijen 2015b and United Nations 2015: para. 83-90)

Instability increased in 2012. Some CNDP troops who had integrated into the Congolese army in 2009 mutinied and launched a new rebellion, the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23, 23 March Movement). With the support of Rwandan networks, the M23, which was based in North Kivu, tried to launch satellite groups in South Kivu. In Uvira, they liaised with the fledging rebellion of Bede Rusagara, who had briefly joined the CNDP back in 2008. Bede attempted to build an offshoot of the M23 called *Alliance pour la libération de l'est du Congo* (ALEC, Alliance for the Liberation of Eastern Congo). Together with his close connections to networks in Rwanda and Burundi (United Nations 2012: para. 70-81), this provoked deep distrust among the Bafuliiru. Soon, however, Bede would manage to turn the tide of unpopularity, earning widespread support by becoming involved in a conflict concerning customary authority in the Plain.

Contemporary dynamics and actors of conflict

In 2012, the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain flared up after the re-installation and then assassination of *mwami* Floribert Ndabagoye. This conflict unleashed intense political and armed mobilization. It came to dominate accounts of insecurity in the Plain, thereby overshadowing developments in the preceding years that had already destabilized the area. Nevertheless, between 2012 and 2015, the conflict made a huge imprint on the social order of the Plain, not least due to the implication of high-profile political actors and intense violence caused by the proliferation of armed groups and Local Defence Forces. The conflict also intersected with, and therefore reinforced, a number of other conflicts in the Plain. The latter included struggles over customary power in the neighbouring Bafuliiru Chiefdom, land conflicts, and conflicts between farmers and cattle-herders.

3.1 The Conflict over the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom

In 2010, Marcellin Cishambo was appointed governor of South Kivu. In part due to his ties to the Ndabagoye family going back to his youth, he started to advocate for the reinstallation of Floribert at the helm of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom – efforts that were soon successful. In April 2012, Ndabagoye visited the Ruzizi Plain to prepare the population for his return. However, shortly before the enthronement ceremony, on 25 April, he was assassinated in Luberizi. It is widely believed that the *mwami's* assassins were linked to Bede Rusagara, a relative of the acting administrator of the Ruzizi Plain. While four suspects were arrested in relation to the assassination, including

a number of Fuliiru *chefs de groupement*, none of them was prosecuted. The official reason for this was a lack of evidence, but some ascribe it to political interference.¹⁸ This interference would be related to elite interests. The Fuliiru interim administrators and *chefs de groupement* of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom had used their control over the area to dole out huge tracts of land to elites. Consequently, those who had benefited from this policy had a stake in maintaining the status quo.

The same local authorities, backed by powerful Fuliiru political actors, set out to aggravate the crisis in the Plain. To do so, they relied on youth and armed groups, providing them with money and favours.¹⁹ For instance, in July 2012, they encouraged Fuliiru youths to block *route nationale* (RN, national road) 5, the main road in the Ruzizi Plain linking Uvira to Bukavu, to demand the release of the four suspects held in the central prison of Uvira. These manifestations triggered unrest throughout the Plain. Emile Kadudu Baleke, then president of the South Kivu General Assembly, was believed to have played a key role in this escalation. A police officer commented, 'When these politicians arrive (in the Plain), they give money to the youth, including those who smoke cannabis. Even Baleke, he organizes parties for youth, he provides crates (of beer) and generators to play music.'²⁰ Links to powerful politicians and armed groups prevented these youngsters from being apprehended or prosecuted, as their protectors pressured and intimidated security and justice officials to let them go.²¹

Youths were also instrumental in boycotting and undermining the new administration of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom. Soon after Floribert's assassination, his son Richard Nijimbere Kinyoni III was enthroned as *mwami*. To the dismay of the Bafuliiru, Richard reinstalled the former Barundi *chefs de groupement* who had been deposed of their functions in 2004. To disrupt these new rulers, Fuliiru 'hawks' incited youths to engage in violence. In October 2012, a group of youths set fire to the office of the Ruzizi Plain

¹⁸ Interview with civil society actors, Uvira, 10 April 2014; interview with Murundi notable, Luberizi, 13 April 2014; and interview with military justice official, Uvira, 11 July 2015.

¹⁹ Interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 13 April 2014; Mutarule, 14 April 2014; and Luvungi, 13 May 2015.

²⁰ Interview with police officer, Luvungi, 13 May 2014.

²¹ Interview with civil society actors, Uvira, 14 April 2014; and interview with military justice official, Uvira, 11 July 2015.

Chieftdom in Luberizi, destroying the archive and all furniture. The same month, youths encircled and destroyed part of the office of the Barundi *chef de groupement* of Kabunambo, to prevent him from exercising his functions.

To undermine the new administration, Fuliiru hardliners also called for a tax boycott (of market, land use, and cattle tax) to deprive the Ruzizi Plain Chieftdom of revenue. Instead of paying taxes to the chieftdom, many Bafuliiru now paid *effort de guerre*, or a contribution per household and per cow 'for the war effort', which was destined for armed groups.²² In addition, Bafuliiru were called upon not to obey the new Barundi *chefs de groupement* and any *chefs de localité* (locality chiefs) that had been appointed since the *mwami* of the Barundi came to power. 'Moderates' believed to collaborate with the new administrators were often intimidated by armed groups, based on information provided to these groups by their civilian collaborators (for an example see Verweijen 2015c). In this manner, a system of parallel administration was created in the Plain that remains in place today. In two of the at present three (formerly four)²³ *groupements* of the Ruzizi Plain Chieftdom, namely, Luberizi and Kabunambo, and in a number of localities, there is both a Murundi and a Mufuliiru chief (see overview in Table 1). This system of parallel administration complicates conflict resolution. According to one village chief:

When there is a conflict between people from the same community, the chief will address it, and they pay him the *mutungi* [traditionally a calabash with drink, nowadays often money]. But when there is a conflict between a Murundi and Mufuliiru, there is nothing to resolve and it becomes a game of cat and mouse.²⁴

As further explained below, the parallel administration also hampers the implementation of peacebuilding projects.

²² Interview with notable, Luberizi, 12 April 2014.

²³ The *groupement* of Kagando was absorbed by Uvira when it transformed from a *cit * (town) into a *ville* (city) in 2018, and the two *chefs de groupement* who disputed power were appointed *chef de quartier* (neighbourhood chief) and *chef de quartier adjoint* (deputy neighbourhood chief) respectively.

²⁴ Interview with local leader from Biriba, Uvira, 21 February 2017.

Table 1 Villages with parallel power structures in the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom.

GROUPEMENT	VILLAGE
Luberizi	Ruhenena 1/Kibirizi
	Ruhenena 2
	Ruhenena 3
	Mataba
	Ngendo
Kabunambo	Kigurwe
	Mwaba
	Biriba

Aside from sparking at times violent manifestations and attacks on property, the crisis of rule over the Ruzizi Plain intensified armed mobilization. Existing (Fuliiru) armed groups were reinforced, profiling themselves as essential for the defence of the Fuliiru community. In particular, Bede vastly increased his activities and sphere of influence in this period, with the support of politicians.²⁵ Furthermore, new armed groups appeared both on the Barundi and the Bafuliiru sides. Each of these groups invoked intensified armed mobilization by the opposing side and the corresponding need to protect their respective communities as the main reason for taking up arms. In addition, in late 2012, Fuliiru Local Defence Forces emerged in the Plain. The first group mobilized under Simuzizi in the *groupement* of Luberizi, with the support of the Fuliiru *chef de groupement* Lameke. Local Defence Forces can be distinguished from armed groups (such as Mai-Mai) in that they consist of people who continue to live in their village and exercise their usual profession but conduct part-time security activities, such as nightly patrols, and mobilize in case of attacks. An important factor in the emergence of Fuliiru Local Defence Forces was distrust towards the FARDC in the Plain, resulting from the perceived high percentage of Rwandophone, mostly Banyamulenge, officers. This alleged skewed representation caused many

²⁵ Interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 14 April 2014 and Sange, 16 February 2017; and interview with ex-Mai-Mai FARDC officer, Luvungi, 16 May 2015.

Bafuliiru to doubt the army's neutrality, since the Banyamulenge in the Plain had sided with the Barundi in the conflict around the throne.²⁶

Intensified armed mobilization on all sides led to a situation that can be compared to a security dilemma, whereby one group's moves to bolster their protection is seen as a threat by another, motivating the latter to also reinforce their defence capabilities. The regular occurrence of atrocities and the repeated failure of the FARDC to intervene in time further reinforced the core logics underlying these security dilemmas. While distrust between communities was one of these logics, these dilemmas did not flow 'naturally' from 'ethnic animosities' between communities writ large: they were to a large extent the product of deliberate strategies by local authorities and politicians. These political actors not only financed, and in some cases, organized armed groups and Local Defence Forces, but also provided them with moral and rhetorical support. For instance, after a massacre in the village of Mutarule on 6 June 2014, in which 30 Fuliiru civilians died, an important Fuliiru politician declared during the victims' funeral, 'Those who have done this will undergo the same fate, we will not cross our arms, we will do the same.'²⁷ This toxic language encouraged people to support armed groups.

While the hands of local authorities, politicians and armed groups in exacerbating the crisis were clearly visible, international news media, think tanks and the *Mission de l' Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO, UN Mission for the Stabilisation of the DRC) consistently described the situation in the Ruzizi Plain as an 'intercommunity' or 'ethnic' conflict, implying it concerned animosities between 'communities' as a whole (Verweijen 2013). This contrasted sharply with the analysis provided by people interviewed in the Ruzizi Plain, in particular non-elites. As a female cultivator commented, 'The people, the people are not in conflict. It is the leaders. We cultivate together. They are our neighbours.'²⁸ In Luberizi, a village elder stated, 'The conflict between Bafuliiru and Barundi is a conflict around succession of power, not between

²⁶ Interview with civil society actors, Uvira, 21 February 2017; and interview with ex-Simba and ex-Mai-Mai officer, Luberizi, 3 March 2017.

²⁷ Interview with civil society actor, Bwegera, 13 April 2014.

²⁸ Interview with cultivator, Mutarule, 12 April 2014.

the population.²⁹ Many interviewees also highlighted the long history of integration and collaboration between Barundi and Bafuliiru, and the mixed nature of most of the households in the Plain, believing it was therefore difficult to speak of two distinct, sharply delineated communities.

Another dynamic that was overlooked through the focus on 'ethnic conflict' was the crucial importance of *intra*community conflict. Accusing one's personal adversaries of being a moderate in the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain became an effective tool to discredit them, showing how inter and intracommunity conflicts are closely intertwined (Verweijen 2015c). In combination with increasing competition and jealousy between Fuliiru armed group commanders, as further detailed below, intracommunity conflicts have become a growing source of insecurity in the Plain, fuelling tit-for-tat killings and clashes between armed groups.

3.2 Intracommunity conflicts around customary authority

The conflict around customary power in the Ruzizi Plain was intimately bound up with two other major conflicts related to customary power which took place within the Fuliiru community: the first over the throne of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom and the second concerning rule over the *groupement* of Luvungi/Itara, which is part of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom. The Ruzizi Plain conflict was also fuelled by and shaped contestations within the Barundi community, which revolved around the new *mwami*'s governance.

THE CONFLICT IN THE BAFULIIRU CHIEFDOM

In December 2012, *mwami* Ndare Simba of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom died of a cardiac arrest, which is widely believed to have been the result of poisoning, although there is no hard evidence to substantiate that hypothesis. Ndare, however, had many enemies, and had played a major role in the conflict over the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom by siding squarely with the hardliners. This

²⁹ Interview with village elder, Luberizi, 12 April 2014.

positioning was partly a result of the weakening of his own power base, particularly after failing to be elected in the 2011 parliamentary elections. In addition, Ndare had come under fire for years of poor governance. The main source of his chiefdom's revenues was cassiterite exploitation, which had been monopolized by the Bukavu-based Shi businessman Olive Mudekereza. Yet he invested very little of these tax revenues or the *rétrocession* (percentage of national tax revenues granted to the lower-level administrative entities where they are levied) in the development of his chiefdom. This created dissent among the population, the majority of whom are poor, smallholder farmers in the isolated *Moyens* and *Hauts Plateaux* hills (Verweijen 2016: 32-34).

Ndare's contested legacy was at the root of the resurgence of a long-standing conflict over the throne. In 1980, Ndare left for Europe to study, leaving his half-brother Albert Mukogabwe Muzimu-wa-Simba as the interim chief. Although their father, Simba Nyamugira, was still alive, he had stopped being the acting chief in 1977. In 1988, Simba Nyamugira died, prompting Ndare to return from Europe to be invested as *mwami*. Instead of taking up his position, however, Ndare left soon for Europe again. In his absence, his half-brother Albert, who had ruled the chiefdom for a long time, was invested as *mwami* by the *banjoga*, the Fuliiru guardians of custom. When Ndare came once again back from Europe, this time intending to take up his position as *mwami*, months of tensions ensued. Eventually, Albert gave in and stepped aside. In 2012, however, he saw a renewed opportunity to take control over the chiefdom. Ndare's eldest son, Adam Kalingishi Simba III, destined to become his successor, was not well prepared to become *mwami*. He was very young, had no experience in administration, did not speak Kifuliiru and was unfamiliar with the Fuliiru Chiefdom and customs, as he had grown up in Kinshasa. Albert had retained a high level of popularity within the chiefdom and was supported by a number of heavyweight Fuliiru politicians and business people, who became actively involved in the conflict. The latter included the national member of parliament Espoir Majigira Ruhigita and Justin Bitakwira Bihonahayi, at the time linked to the opposition party *Union pour la nation congolaise* (UNC, Union for the Congolese Nation), which Albert was believed to support. Adam, on the other hand, was backed by Senator Kuye Ndondo, and the Kinshasa-based politician Martin Bitijula Mahimba,

linked to the pro-government party *Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie* (PPRD, People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy). Allegedly, Bitijula wanted to avoid a pro-opposition figure at the helm of the chiefdom, reflecting how national politics intersect with conflicts over local authority (CIRESKI 2014).

In addition to politicians, armed groups became implicated in the conflict, which further hampered finding a solution. The Local Defence Forces that Ndare had created throughout the Bafulliiru Chiefdom became divided (Verweijen 2016: 35). The commander in chief, Molière, stayed loyal to Adam, the son of his former boss. A number of other Local Defence Forces commanders, by contrast, supported Albert. Moreover, Albert was alleged to have reached out to Mai-Mai forces to back up his position. In this manner, some armed groups from the Ruzizi Plain (but partly operating in the Bafulliiru Chiefdom), particularly the groups of Bede, Karakara and Simuzizi, became implicated in the conflict. The resulting tensions between these armed groups increased instability. However, these tensions were also the result of growing competition regarding stolen cattle. Lubanga, the most important market in the Bafulliiru Chiefdom, became a crucial hub for the sale of illegal beef, which was controlled by the same groups that looted the cattle (CIRESKI 2014).

In recent years, the conflict over the throne in the Bafulliiru Chiefdom has somewhat calmed down after taking a number of unexpected turns. On 6 February 2016, Albert Mukogabwe was installed as the acting chief, in the presence of Justin Bitakwira and Martin Bitijula. The latter made a turn-around after Albert ended his ties to the political opposition and veered towards the government camp. Similarly, while Cishambo, the governor of South Kivu, had initially supported Adam Kalingishi, he eventually rallied behind Albert. Despite backing by these heavyweights, Albert's installation remained contested, sparking significant unrest. These tensions partly resulted from Albert's efforts to dismantle the Local Defence Forces, which had mostly been loyal to his competitor Adam.³⁰

³⁰ Interviews with local authorities and civil society actors, Uvira, 26 February 2017 and Lemera, 18 October 2019.

While Albert tried to consolidate his reign, the tide gradually started to turn against him. In June 2018, Adam was reinstated as *mwami* (Uvira Online 2016). A number of reasons explain this surprising turn of events. First, influential members of Adam's family continued to lobby provincial and national authorities. Adam was also backed by the *Lubunga* (Fuliiru customary council), particularly its president Selemani Bujaga. In addition, he gathered support from a number of political heavyweights from Uvira, including national member of parliament Luc Mulimbalimba Masururu and the businessman Dialo. This occurred at a time when Mulimbalimba's political party, l'*Alliance des forces démocratiques du Congo* (AFDC, Alliance for Democratic Forces of Congo), gained influence in national politics. The AFDC was part of the pro-government camp, and the ruling coalition needed support from its allies for its contested political course, related to postponing the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 2016. This highlights once again how national political developments shape the course of local conflicts.³¹

Adam's installation initially caused friction, as some saw their power threatened. For instance, in Runingu, the *mwami* appointed a new *chef de groupement*, Nuhu, to the dismay of the incumbent Gadi. At the market of Runingu, tax collectors who had been appointed by Albert continued to collect tax.³² In 2019, however, these frictions abated. Most people had grown tired of the conflict and Adam had strong political backing. Consequently, he managed to consolidate his rule in most of the chiefdom, with the exception of the *groupement* of Luvungi. The return of Adam also seems to have paved the way for reinstating the Local Defence Forces. These groups first reappeared in Lubarika, Rupango, and between Kibungu and Rubanga during the 2018 electoral campaign, propelled by politicians aiming to reinforce their popularity. In mid-2019, they also emerged—allegedly with the blessing of the *mwami*—in the *Moyens Plateaux* of Kigoma and Lemera, in part due to increased insecurity on the *Hauts Plateaux* and frequent foreign troop movements.³³

³¹ Interviews with Bafuliiru leaders, Uvira, 2 November 2019.

³² Interviews with civil society actors and local authorities, Runingu, 17 October 2019.

³³ Interview with human rights monitors, Lemera, 18 October 2019.

THE CONFLICT IN THE GROUPEMENT OF LUVUNGI/ITARA

The conflict over the throne of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom was closely interwoven with a dispute over customary authority in one of its *groupements*, Luvungi/Itara. This *groupement* has historically retained considerable autonomy from the chiefdom. The town of Luvungi gained prominence as an important caravan post in the era of the Arab/Swahili traders-cum-rulers in the late 19th century and has remained an important trade centre since (Ngoy Mutamba Eshiba 1997). It is strategically located along the main road connecting Uvira and Bukavu, and close to the Kamanyola border post between the DRC and Rwanda. Its prosperity is also based on the sectors of real estate, services, agriculture and, to a lesser extent, mining.

In 2012, the *chef de groupement* of Luvungi, Mbambaro Ombeni, who was appointed chief during the Second Congo War, was suspended by *mwami* Ndare Simba. He was replaced by one of his family members, Ndaye Kimbumbu, who had ruled the *groupement* from 1977 to 1991, and again in the late 1990s. One of the reasons for Mbambaro's suspension was poor land governance, as he had doled out huge tracts of land to elites and had sometimes sold access to the same land twice.³⁴ Similar to what occurred in the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom, this policy bought him considerable support among the elites he had granted land to. Mbambaro, who is close to PPRD circles, also had backing from a wider political network that included the then governor of South Kivu, Marcellin Cishambo.³⁵

This network supported Mbambaro in the terrible conflict that broke out after he was deposed in 2012 and decided to contest his successor Ndaye. Although he was soon restored to his functions, the contestations continued well into 2013. This conflict had serious security implications given that both sides solicited armed actors to back them up. Ndaye recruited a militia among Local Defence Forces active in the Bafuliiru Chiefdom, headed by a certain Intervention Kashea. Mbambaro, for his part, solicited help from Bede

³⁴ Interview with notables, Luvungi, 13 May 2015; and interview with member of royal dynasty, Luvungi, 14 May 2015.

³⁵ Interview with civil society actors, Luvungi, 15 May 2015.

Rusagara, in addition to cultivating good relations with the state security services. The militarization of this conflict led to a cycle of attacks and counterattacks on supporters of both camps, destabilizing the entire *groupement*. It also led to animosities between armed group leaders, especially after Bede abducted and tortured Intervention in May 2013 (CIRESKI 2014).

The conflict in Luvungi diminished after Ndaye and some of his relatives were arrested and sentenced in April 2013, in what his supporters saw as a heavily biased and politicized process. Yet this did not end instability in Luvungi. In recent years, unrest in the *groupement* has been mostly the result of Mbambaro's use of a personal militia to intimidate and harm opponents, and his competition with the Luvungi-born Shi politician Luc Mulimbalimba.³⁶ Aside from being a member of national parliament since 2011, Mulimbalimba briefly served as provincial minister of the interior between 2017 and 2018, under the new governor of South Kivu, Claude Nyamugabo, who was appointed in late 2017. In 2015, Mulimbalimba's involvement in a conflict over the fishing pond of Kindobwe, which Mbambaro had allegedly sold to the vice-governor of South Kivu, triggered violent manifestations, clashes and repression (Radio Maendeleo 2019). In 2018, violence erupted during the installation ceremony of Mbambaro's younger brother Maisha Ombeni as the interim administrator. Because Mbambaro had been elected a provincial member of parliament in 2018, he had to stop acting as chief. A soldier assigned to Mulimbalimba's guard opened fire on a protestor, who subsequently died. Held responsible for this killing, Mulimbalimba was sentenced *in absentia* to ten years by a military court in July 2019. He is not serving that sentence, however, as he has fled abroad. With his main competitor out of sight, Mbambaro's power over Luvungi remains unbroken, causing the land conflicts that have emerged under his rule to linger.

STRIFE IN THE BARUNDI COMMUNITY

The Barundi community has not been spared from internal divisions either. These frictions both are a product of and nourish the conflict over the throne

³⁶ Interviews with human rights monitor and other civil society actors, Luvungi, 30 October 2019.

of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom. They have mostly centred on the position of the *mwami*, who is not very often in the Plain, as he stays most of the time in Bukavu, ostensibly for security reasons. This prolonged absence alienates him from the population.³⁷ Moreover, some allege that he does not sufficiently invest in the development of his chiefdom. As one notable said, 'The mwami is out of step with the population, he is obsessed with money, he just uses the \$8000 *rétrocession* all for himself.'³⁸ Another controversy, which has now somewhat abated, was his alleged, but so far unproven, links to armed Burundian opposition groups. For many, it remains a mystery how approximately 200 combatants could gather in Mutarule in December 2014 and stage an attack on Burundi without any approval from Burundi rulers (Jeune Afrique 2015). In December 2015, another suspected cross-border assault via the Plain took place in Burundi, targeting three military installations close to Bujumbura (BBC News 2015). As part of a wider effort to roll back and deter the networks implicated in these attacks, the Burundian security services asked the FARDC to take measures in Uvira. In response, the army conducted a cordon-and-search operation in Mutarule in February 2016, in the course of which important arms caches were discovered. They also arrested the *chef de groupement* of Luberizi, Claude Mirundi, who was held responsible for the arms cache (United Nations 2016: para. 35-41). This operation heralded the end of Burundi-linked armed mobilization in the Plain. With the Bafuliiru no longer facing an armed adversary, the related security dilemma considerably diminished.

After years of tensions, many people had grown tired of the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom. Together with the reduced prominence of the security dilemma, this caused the conflict to gradually diminish in intensity from late 2015 onwards. While becoming less directly connected to armed and political mobilization,³⁹ the conflict does continue to linger. One indication of this is the continuation of the parallel administration and the ongoing refusal of the Bafuliiru to pay taxes to the chiefdom and acknowledge

³⁷ Interview with Murundi notable, Uvira, 17 May 2015.

³⁸ Interview with Burundi notables, Bwegera, 18 October 2019.

³⁹ There continue to be acts of violence with an alleged but unclear link to the conflict, such as the assassination of the secretary of the Ruzizi Plain, Mr Rizinde on 12 March 2019, and the kidnapping of the chief of Rutemba village, Ricardo Mugaye Godé on 10 August 2019.

the Barundi *mwami* Richard. In May 2019 vigorous contestations over the *mwami's* authority surfaced during his marriage ceremony in Luberizi and the period leading up to it (SOS Médias Burundi 2019). The conflict also continues to inform disputes over land use between cattle-herders and farmers. In addition, it plays out in political and administrative institutions and appointments. One example is the contestations over the boundaries of the still to be implemented *communes rurales* of Kiliba and Sange. The creation of these entities will further reduce the chiefdom's area after the *groupement* of Kagando had already been gobbled up when Uvira transformed from a town into a city in 2018. Another example is *mwami* Richard's election (by other customary chiefs) to one of the seats in the provincial parliament of South Kivu designated for *bami* (plural of *mwami*) in 2018. The fact that the *mwami* of the Bavira voted for Richard created tensions between Bavira and Bafuliiru elites. The election also intensified frictions between Bafuliiru and Barundi leaders.⁴⁰ A final area where the conflict over the chiefdom remains visible is peacebuilding and development projects, specifically, in competition over accessing the material and symbolic rents. In sum, instead of finding its expression in armed group violence and violent youth manifestations, the conflict now plays out in other arenas, without being resolved.

3.3 Land conflicts

In the customary power conflicts in both the Ruzizi Plain and the Luvungi *groupement*, disputes over land and its governance play an important role. An extensive body of literature describes the historical, socio-economic and political factors underlying land conflicts in the eastern DRC, including deficient legislation and the ambiguous role of customary chiefs (Mugangu 2008; Van Acker 2005; Claessens et al. 2014). While *de jure* all land is owned by the state, the distribution of much land remains *de facto* in the hands of chiefs. This raises the stakes in customary power conflicts, and shapes chiefs' broader alliances.

⁴⁰ Interviews with civil society actors and local government officials, Uvira, 16 October 2019 and 2 November 2019.

In the Plain, land conflicts mostly pit urban, often Bukavu-based elites (of different ethnic groups but generally from South Kivu) against smallholder farmers, whose fields are located on land sold to big concession-holders. While these farmers are often allowed to continue to cultivate their land, they have to provide labour to the concession-holder in exchange, working a designated amount of hours a week on the latter's land. This system is called metayage. In Luvungi/Itara, elites – generally described as *les barons* (barons) – obtained vast tracts of land (see Table 2), subjecting thousands of smallholders to the metayage system. Not all of these concessions currently stir up overt conflict. Some of them were acquired long ago and the population is no longer actively contesting them. Latent conflict potential, however, is very high, and one interviewee described the situation as a *bombe à retardement* (time bomb).⁴¹ Another explained:

The population does not have anywhere to cultivate, they pay dearly, they do metayage, they are in serfdom, where there are no contracts. They let them work that many days per week, every week they work two or even three days. They cede hours. These used to be their ancestral lands, but now they are in others' servitude. It is a war in preparation, after having given in for that many years, they will revolt one day.⁴²

Active contestations and tensions surface whenever announcements or suspicions of newly acquired pieces of land circulate. For instance, in 2015, rumours surfaced of the sale of the vast (more than 1,800 hectares) MAE concession between Lubarika and Lupango, belonging in the colonial era to the *Mission anti-erosive* (MAE, Anti-erosive Mission). In May, it was announced that these lands would be used for a World Bank project to promote large-scale agriculture in the Ruzizi Plain (for an overview of the World Bank's Regional Great Lakes Integrated Agriculture Project, see World Bank, 2016), creating significant unrest. In Lubarika, one youth commented, 'There are 14,000 people in Lubarika, where will they cultivate? This will be a war [*njoo vita inakuja*], we will take up arms again ... We will attack [*tutashambulia*]. This comes from people with money in Bukavu.'⁴³

⁴¹ Interview with civil society actors, Luvungi, 15 May 2015.

⁴² Interview with local leader, Luvungi, 14 May 2015.

⁴³ Interview with youth, Lubarika, 15 May 2015.

Despite occasional protests, neither the population nor civil society actors in Luvungi feel they can influence the course of events. The *chef de groupe-ment* simply has too many powerful friends and does not hesitate to employ intimidation tactics. For instance, in 2015, after civil society actors tried to protest the sale of the fishing pond of Kindobwe, they were intimidated severely, receiving threats that they could lose their jobs and even their lives.⁴⁴ Because of the *chef's* political connections, other state services, including Land Affairs and even the police, do not have sufficient clout to counteract him.⁴⁵ As one observer said, 'The order, that is him, the law, that is him, it is like Louis XIV at the time in France.'⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Interview with civil society actors, Luvungi, 15 May 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview with civil society actors, Luvungi, 15 May 2015.

⁴⁶ Interview with local leader, Luvungi, 14 May 2015.

Table 2 Examples of large concession holders in and around the Ruzizi Plain.

NAME	DESCRIPTION	CONCESSION
Shenila Mwanza	Businesswoman from Fizi, currently member of the provincial parliament of South Kivu	Kahuli, Kamoni/ Katogota
Olive Mudekereza Namegabe	Businessman, former president of the Association of Congolese Businesses- South Kivu chapter, now member of national parliament	IPAC, Gombaniro/ Lubarika
Norbert Basengezi Katintima	Former minister, ex-member of parliament and, up to June 2019, vice-president of the National Electoral Commission (CENI)	Kahama, Kahanganiro
Gabriel Kalonda Mbulu	Former vice-governor of South Kivu (under Cishambo)	Kindobwe, Luvungi
Marc Fiston Malago	Current vice-governor of South Kivu and son of the former governor of Kivu province (in the 1960s) Simon Malago	MALIBA, Kakumbukumbu/ Kinyinya
François Rubota Masumbuko	Former member of provincial and national parliament; currently director-general of the National Fund for Redistribution	Narwizimya, Kaboya

Some people see a way forward in the pending transformation of Luvungi into a *commune rurale*, which will place governance in the hands of a *bourgmestre* (mayor) and reduce the influence of the *chef de groupement*. Others do not expect the *commune* to make much of a difference, as the current rulers will simply manipulate and influence the new institutions. As one interviewee stated:

We know that soon, there will be a commune and if the commune is created we have to bring councillors and find a mayor, but they tell us that the *chef de groupement* needs to be co-opted into the council. They have already organized people in the PPRD and the PPRD will spend a lot of money to pass many councillors so that they will instal an ally as mayor and have many of their people in the council.⁴⁷

As of mid-2020, the *commune* had still not become operational, reflecting the politicized nature of local governance reforms in the eastern DRC.

⁴⁷ Interview with civil society actor, Luvungi, 15 May 2015.

3.4 Agropastoral conflicts and cattle-looting

Tensions over land in the Ruzizi Plain also stem from conflicts over land use, in particular between farmers and herders. These disputes mostly relate to cattle that trample on and destroy agricultural fields. This generally occurs during the so-called *petite transhumance* (small transhumance) between April and August, when cattle from Kamanyola move southwards into the Plain to access greener pastures. Yet even more fields are destroyed by daily cattle movements between kraals, pastures and watering points.⁴⁸ In addition, there are disputes about designated land use, which stem in part from unclear limits between cultivation and grazing areas. These disputes inspire farmers to deliberately cultivate in kraals, in areas known to be grazing pastures, or on paths towards these areas. Herders, for their part, may intentionally let their cattle graze in areas designated for agriculture (Brabant and Nzweve 2013: 30-33).

Since the Congo Wars, agropastoral conflict in the Plain has intensified. Demographic growth, land-grabbing by elites, and rampant insecurity have caused farming and cattle-keeping to become increasingly geographically proximate. Disputes over land use have also intensified due to land expropriation and frequent population movements, as temporarily abandoned lands are often used for the passage of cattle or as grazing grounds (Brabant and Nzweve 2013: 37-40).

Over the past five years, additional factors have further aggravated agropastoral conflicts. When the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom broke out in 2012, it became entwined with frictions between farmers and herders. Instead of paying taxes on cattle to the chiefdom, Fuliiru cattle-owners were encouraged to contribute to Fuliiru armed groups. Soon, cattle-owners who refused to contribute had their cattle stolen. Furthermore, from 2014 onwards, Mai-Mai groups targeted cattle belonging to the Barundi

⁴⁸ Given that transhumance is a much smaller cause of frictions than everyday cattle movements, tax payments during transhumance, a major stake of agropastoral conflicts in the Hauts Plateaux area, are overall less of an issue in the Plain. They are subsumed within the general conflict around taxes in the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom, with the Bafuliiru and their allies refusing to pay regular taxes over cattle to the Chiefdom.

and their associates, the Banyamulenge. These actions were encouraged by certain politicians and local authorities, who proposed cattle-looting as a way to weaken their adversaries and force them to ultimately leave the Plain.⁴⁹ As a Fuliiru youth interviewed in Sange not long after the Mutarule massacre put it: ‘You have to exterminate their cattle because it is based on this wealth that they find arms to commit massacres against the Bafuliiru’ (CIRESKI 2014). The Barundi-linked armed group based in Mutarule also engaged in cattle-looting as a way to supplement their income. This was authorized by Barundi leaders, given that they had limited financial means to sustain this group.

The omnipresent threat of cattle-looting has led herders to take protection measures that have further intensified frictions with farmers. Instead of going to faraway areas, where cattle can be easily looted, many herders prefer to stay closer to villages. Yet due to rising insecurity since mid-2017, in part related to growing foreign armed group activity and banditry, farmers also prefer to stay closer to their villages. This particularly concerns women, who run an elevated risk of getting raped by armed actors when cultivating in remote areas. The growing spatial concentration of agricultural and pastoral activities has given rise to increased agropastoral conflicts, which in turn, and in complex ways, fuel cattle-looting. Disadvantaged conflict parties sometimes solicit armed actors to reverse the course of conflict, or simply take revenge. For instance, in September 2019, a farmer from Mutarule/Katekama found his field devastated by the cows of a cattle-owner from Luberizi. To take revenge, he appealed to the Mai-Mai Buhirwa, who subsequently stole 25 cows of the cattle-owner’s herd, demanding \$3,000 for their release. In October 2019, a man in Lubarika who had wounded a cow that he found grazing in his manioc field was kidnapped one week later by armed men who demanded \$1,000 ransom. To raise this amount, his family was obliged to sell the man’s manioc fields. Ironically, the fields were bought by the very owner of the cow that he had wounded.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Répertoire des événements malheureux vécus dans la Plaine de la Ruzizi après l’assassinat du mwami Ndagoye Floribert Nsabimana, unpublished document on file with author.

⁵⁰ Interviews with local authorities and community leaders, Lubarika 14 and 26 October 2019; and Mutarule, 21 October 2019.

It is not only agropastoral conflicts that fuel cattle-looting: the theft of cattle has increasingly become a way in which all sorts of interpersonal conflicts ensue. For instance, in July 2019, a Murundi in conflict with a *vieux-sage* (elder) from the Fuliiru community had 23 of his cows stolen near Kiberizi. Allegedly, the Murundi had informed the FARDC that the elder and his son owned two rifles, causing the son to flee and the old man to be arrested. Two months after this incident, the Mai-Mai Buhirwa stole his cattle, which was believed to have been revenge.⁵¹

Aside from a channel for conflict regulation, cattle-looting – which increasingly takes the form of taking cattle and demanding ransom for their release – has become a crucial source of income for armed groups. From when it took off in 2014 to around mid-2015, cattle-looting was strongly linked to the conflict over customary power in the Plain. In this first phase, the opposition between farmers and herders was transposed onto the Bafuliiru-Barundi divide. While the Barundi and Banyamulenge were portrayed as ‘herders’, the Bafuliiru were portrayed as ‘farmers’.⁵² This framing, however, never fully corresponded to reality. Bafuliiru have sizeable herds in the Plain, in particular a number of large-scale cattle-owners such as Kidoge and Zerubabeli (who now keep their cattle elsewhere). While Barundi elites have cattle – albeit less overall than the Bafuliiru have – the majority of Barundi live primarily off agriculture. In addition, much cattle in the Plain is owned by Bashi. Rather than an accurate depiction, associating Barundi primarily with cattle-keeping and Bafuliiru with farming reflects the salience of autochthony discourses, where agricultural tropes serve to emphasize autochthones’ association with the soil.

The massive upsurge in cattle-looting from mid-2014 onwards created a whole new economy, which heavily depended on the complicity of civilian collaborators. The latter played a crucial role in trafficking stolen cattle to Burundi, into the *Moyens* or *Hauts Plateaux*, and sometimes to areas further away such as Mwenga and Tanganyika. Moreover, the meat of stolen cows

⁵¹ Interviews with local authorities and community leaders, Ndunda, 27 October 2019.

⁵² This is rather similar to how transhumance has become seen through the lens of intercommunity tensions in Fizi. See Verweijen and Brabant (2017).

was sold at markets, including Rubanga, Luvungi, and Sange, via intermediaries, and with the indirect support of veterinarians, who are required to deliver an attestation testifying to cattle's origins before slaughter. Market authorities were also crucial in this supply chain, turning a blind eye either in return for payment or because they were intimidated.⁵³ For instance, in 2016, the president of the market of Sange was threatened several times, receiving anonymous phone calls in which she was admonished to 'let the meat pass'.⁵⁴ Veterinarians too, were intimidated – one was even killed in 2016 – and forced to sign the so-called *passe avant*, a document signed by the cattle-owner that is needed to sell beef at the market.

The rise of the criminal economy fuelled by cattle-looting resulted in a drastic lowering of the price of cattle and beef. Between 2012 and 2015, the price of a cow fell from roughly \$400–600 to \$200–350. At the same time, the price of one kilogram of beef dropped from 4,000 *Francs congolais* (FC, Congolese Francs) (around \$4.50) to FC 2,000 (then around \$2.50).⁵⁵ The FARDC became a key stakeholder in this economy. Whenever cattle was looted, they often did not intervene or intervened too late, sometimes as part of an arrangement. The army also became directly involved in the traffic of stolen cattle and beef. In particular, the commander of the military base in Luberizi was suspected of facilitating cattle-looting.⁵⁶ These suspicions further eroded trust in the Congolese army, thereby fuelling the security dilemmas described above.

⁵³ Interviews with Barundi notables, Uvira, 10 April 2014 and Mutarule, 14 April 2014; interviews with Bafuliiru notables, Luberizi 12 April 2014; and interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 31 October 2013 and 2 November 2014.

⁵⁴ Interview with civil society actors, Luvungi, 13 May 2015.

⁵⁵ Interviews with civil society actors and economic operators, Rubanga, 11 May 2015 and Luvungi, 13 May 2015.

⁵⁶ Interviews with local leaders, Luberizi, 12 April 2015; and interviews with notables, Mutarule, 20 January 2017.

With cattle-looting increasingly driven by profit-seeking, armed groups also started to loot the cattle of members of the communities they claimed to defend. As one commentator observed:

In the past, Fuliiru militia only looted the cattle of the Barundi and the Banyamulenge, but nowadays it is every cattle-owner who is a victim, whether it is a Murundi, Munyamulenge or Mufuliiru. For that reason, these militias are badly regarded even by their own kindred.⁵⁷

Some groups tried to avoid reputational damage by not looting cows close to the villages of their supporters, instead going elsewhere, for instance, around Katogota.⁵⁸ However, this practice has not prevented cattle-looting from becoming perceived overwhelmingly as criminal, rather than political, activity.

⁵⁷ Interviews with former Mai-Mai officer and civil society members, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁵⁸ Interview with FARDC officer, Luvungi, 20 February 2017.

Contemporary Dynamics and Actors of Violence

After the Second Congo War, there have been several waves of renewed armed mobilization in the Plain. The first wave took place from 2009 to 2011, when former Mai-Mai (and sometimes RCD Local Defence Forces) officers deserted from the FARDC and launched new armed groups. The second wave followed after the power conflict over the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom flared up and lasted until the conflict abated (2012–15). A third wave started in late 2015, after the death of the most influential armed group commander in the Plain, and endures today. These different waves relate to shifting drivers of armed mobilization, which have also affected armed groups' modus operandi and social embedding.

4.1 An increasingly volatile armed group landscape

During the first wave of mobilization (2009–11), four armed groups appeared in the Plain and *Mayens Plateaux* of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom, led by army and police deserters (Fujo, Mwenyemali, Bede, and Nyerere). The resurfacing of conflict over customary authority after 2012 led to the emergence of still other armed groups, as well as Local Defence Forces. One of the most important new Fuliiru armed groups was that of Espoir Ngombarufu (aka Karakara), a Mufuliiru from Mutarule/Katekama (the Bafuliiru inhabited part of Mutarule), who had integrated in the FARDC after the Second Congo War. During the 2011 regimentation process, Karakara had not been assigned a function, remaining in the so-called *regiment cadre* ('cadre regiment', which is not in

active service) at the army base of Luberizi in the Ruzizi Plain. He deserted in early 2013, for a number of reasons: frustration over not having been assigned a function after regimentation and not having been promoted in rank over the past decade; tensions with his superior, a Munyamulenge commander; and the unfolding conflict in the Plain. He was joined by a number of former Mai-Mai officers, such as Amuse Guelle (Ngingo) and Buneti.⁵⁹

On the Barundi side, too, an armed group appeared, which was headquartered in the Barundi-inhabited part of Mutarule (Mutarule I). The Barundi felt threatened by the proliferation of Fuliiru Local Defence Forces and Mai-Mai groups, and believed they needed to reinforce their protection. Barundi chiefs therefore took the initiative to create an armed group, allegedly with the help of a number of Banyamulenge officers in the FARDC.⁶⁰ Given that the Barundi are only a small group, with few members having experience with armed mobilization, the rank-and-file of this militia also consisted of Banyamulenge and youngsters recruited in Burundi. This recruitment is said to have been facilitated by Barundi *chefs de groupement*.⁶¹

While these new armed groups were linked to the Bafuliiru and Barundi/Banyamulenge camps respectively, there was considerable infighting between groups supposedly on the same side. In particular, frictions and even hostilities among Fuliiru groups became a growing source of instability in the Plain. Around 2013, serious tensions emerged between, on the one hand, Bede's group operating around Sange and, on the other hand, the group of Nyerere, still based in the hills above Kiliba. At the same time, Karakara was in competition with Mwenyemali, who had his support base in his native village Luberizi, leading to clashes in April 2016. Karakara was also at odds with Bede. While both are from Mutarule, Karakara profiled himself as the 'true defender' of the Fuliiru community, unlike Bede, whom Karakara portrayed as an opportunist due to his previous collaborations with Rwandophones. Bede, in turn, saw himself as the true leader of the Ruzizi

⁵⁹ Interview with ex-Mai-Mai FARDC officer, Luvungi, 16 May 2015; and interview with ex-Mai-Mai FARDC officer, Uvira, 12 July 2015.

⁶⁰ Interview with armed groups expert, Bukavu, 15 April 2014; and interview with FARDC officer, Uvira, 27 October 2014.

⁶¹ Interviews with civil society actors, Bukavu, 27 March 2014 and 11 July 2015.

Plain, and considered Karakara's group an infringement on his power. The ensuing competition between these two groups led to a number of tit-for-tat killings that sparked considerable unrest.⁶²

There were also tensions *within* these groups, often related to the division of booty and leadership aspirations, which surfaced particularly after a group's commander in chief died. In 2013, both Biyaga and Kilolo fell out with Bede, and started to act autonomously. That same year, Bede's officer in Sange, Safari – who had demobilized after the Second Congo War – was killed by the FARDC. A leadership struggle ensued, with both Mbulu and Bitwange eager to succeed him. Losing this struggle, Bitwange left and joined Kilolo. In mid-2013, Simuzizi, who had joined Karakara in the bush after the Local Defence Forces were abolished by the FARDC, defected from Karakara after a dispute over the killing of one of his bodyguards. He subsequently launched his own group.⁶³

While Fuliiru armed groups had already begun to proliferate from 2013, an important surge occurred in the wake of the death of Bede Rusagara in 2015, who was killed by the FARDC. Tigre, his former deputy commander, tried to take over the movement, but many officers defected to other groups, such as that of Kilolo, or tried to start their own group. Jojo Kimanga, from Nyakabere I, fell into the latter category. Having only seven members, his group was rather vulnerable. When attacked by the FARDC in June 2016, only three of them survived. The survivors included Jojo's relative Lubange Kishule, who tried to continue the movement and then rallied to Karakara in early 2017. New groups had also emerged in 2015 in the *Moyens Plateaux*, including the groups of Toto Kabengele, formerly a farmer, and Kijangala Muhangwe, previously in the Local Defence Forces of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom and then in different Mai-Mai groups. Their stated aim was to protect their communities against repeated attacks on their cattle by Mai-Mai leader Bitwange and his assassinations of elderly women accused of witchcraft.

⁶² Interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 12 May 2015 and Sange, 16 May 2015.

⁶³ Interview with PNC officer, Luvungi, 13 May 2015; and interview with FARDC officer, Luvungi, 16 May 2015.

The killing of yet another armed group leader in 2016 led to further shifts in the armed group landscape. On 25 July, Simuzizi was killed in Luberizi, allegedly by his bodyguards, who had been instrumentalized by the armed group leaders Mwenyemali and Intervention. His second in command and little brother Songa Kivuwe took over but remained with only seven combatants, until he surrendered to the FARDC in April 2017.⁶⁴ Another group that emerged in 2016 was that of Kihebe, who was formerly in one of the Local Defence Forces of the Bafuliiru Chiefdom, and formed his own group with Musema in October that year.

In recent years, the armed group landscape has continued to fragment. On 9 April 2018, Karakara was killed in an FARDC attack in Rugeje, paving the way for the emergence of new armed groups. In September 2018, the FARDC special battalion under Colonel Kalenga launched a campaign against the groups of Mbulu and Bigaya. As part of this crackdown, they arrested young men, accusing them of being Mai-Mai. To protest these arrests and protect local youths, Alain Shukuru, from the village of Nyamoma, formed his own armed group. In 2019, still more groups appeared, including that of Buhirwa Namufagake Nibwe, from the village of Nyamuguli. Buhirwa had first worked with Simuzizi, and then with Songa Kivuwe, who died of illness in September 2019 in Burundi. Subsequently, Buhirwa continued the group on his own, also taking over the combatants of Mwenyemali, who was weakened due to illness and injuries. Not long afterwards, in October, yet another armed group emerged in the hills around Sange in the Kigoma *groupement*, led by Lwaboshi Zakaria aka Shetani ('devil' in Swahili), a former Mai-Mai officer during the Second Congo War. This movement was however short-lived as Shetani quit in December, fleeing to South Africa after selling his arms and equipment to Buhirwa.

This overview illustrates the volatility of armed mobilization in the Plain. New, tiny armed groups continually emerge only to quickly disappear, as commanders die or surrender, and their former officers or relatives attempt to fill the void. In the words of one commentator: 'These are no longer armed

⁶⁴ Interview with PNC officer, Sange, 18 February 2017; interview with civil society actors, Uvira, 20 February 2017; and interview with ex-Bede officer, Sange, 3 March 2017.

groups but *nébuleuses armés* ['armed nebulas'] as they are born and disappear each moment.⁶⁵

4.2 Changing drivers of armed mobilization

The volatility of armed groups in the Plain and *Moyens Plateaux* reflects changing drivers of armed mobilization. These drivers have generally included both more self-interested motives, such as career advancement and revenue generation, and more political ones, related to protecting one's community, grievances over past violence, and local conflicts. The balance between these sets of motives has shifted between waves of armed group mobilization.

The first wave was largely driven by the frustrations of former Mai-Mai and RCD Local Defence Forces officers who had integrated into the FARDC after the Second Congo War. As we have seen, army deserters who launched new armed groups in this period were disgruntled by their lives in the FARDC, particularly the harsh service and living conditions. Army salaries are low, and when one does not have a command or general staff position, the prospects of making money on the side are limited. Moreover, most of the officers who deserted had not risen in rank over the years. This marginalization, they believed, was a result of the systematic discrimination by (generally ex-RCD) Rwandophone officers who were seen to dominate the army command. CNDP integration in 2009 and the regimentation process in 2011 further confirmed this analysis, as Rwandophones were believed to obtain more and better functions.⁶⁶

Aside from these 'push factors' in the army, there were also a number of 'pull factors' at work, including grievances over violence committed during the Congo Wars and conflicts related to local governance – often seen in ethnic terms. Many Bafuliiru were angry about massacres committed during the

⁶⁵ Interview with expert on armed groups, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁶⁶ Interviews with (ex-)Mai-Mai officers, Kisanga, 12 February 2012; Kitundu, 15 February 2012; Luvungi, 16 May 2015; Uvira, 12 July 2015; and Sange, 17 February 2017 and 28 February 2017. See also Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen (2013).

Congo Wars, which they ascribed to the Rwandophone-dominated rebellions of the AFDL and RCD, and sought justice and revenge. Furthermore, they were unhappy with Barundi rule over the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom during the wars. Even though this rule had ended in 2004, the conflict remained unresolved. These sentiments further motivated army deserters to launch armed groups and formed a reason for politicians and businesspeople to support them. These political-military elites generally reframed these grievances in the terms of the autochthony discourse, invoking the continuing threat of 'foreign invasion' and Rwandophone armed groups, and calling for 'community self-defence' to counter this threat. Yet politicians and businesspeople also had more self-interested motives for supporting armed groups, hoping in this way to reinforce their power position.⁶⁷

A similar combination of motivations related to both more personal and more socio-political circumstances prompted the rank-and-file to join armed groups. Those who had lost family or close friends during the wars sought payback – a motivation often combined with the desire to prevent the same from happening to others, hence to protect community members. Others joined because they had difficulties transitioning to civilian life. Being part of an armed group provides one with a sense of belonging, group identity, and purpose in life. For many, 'being in the bush' had become a type of lifestyle that, despite its hardships, was more attractive than living as a civilian. In addition, many had limited prospects to access education or employment.⁶⁸

During the second wave of armed mobilization after 2012, the motive of community self-defence became paramount, as the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom resurfaced. Again, it was mostly disgruntled FARDC deserters, such as Karakara and Buneti, who were at the forefront of launching new armed groups. Similar to the first wave of mobilization, frustrations over a lack of career advancement, poor service conditions and

⁶⁷ Ibid.; and interviews with political representatives of Mai-Mai groups, Uvira, 1 November 2014; 20 February 2017; and 28 February 2017; and Sange, 16 May 2015; and interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 30 October 2014 and 1 November 2014.

⁶⁸ Interview with de-and remobilized, Sange, 17 February 2017; Kigurwe, 18 February 2017; Nyakabere, 19 February 2017; and Luvungi, 19 February 2017.

perceived discrimination in the army played a role in their decision to take up arms. However, these considerations were of lesser importance compared to the perceived need to defend their community.⁶⁹ Community defence also generated family and community pressure to join armed groups. Youths throughout the Plain were expected to mobilize to advance the cause of their respective communities in the conflict over the chiefdom. However, mobilization was unevenly distributed. For instance, almost no youths from Nyakabere II, which is part of the town of Sange, joined. Nyakabere II is an area with inhabitants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the words of one inhabitant, 'It is not a customary entity, hence we are not willing to get involved with customary conflicts.'⁷⁰ As a result, this area was often targeted by armed groups from Mutarule/Katekama, which considered them traitors.⁷¹ In other villages, by contrast, numerous youths joined, often because the armed group leader was from the village in question. For instance, both Bede and Karakara had many soldiers, including extended family members, from their native village Mutarule. These examples illustrate how pre-existing social ties shape patterns of armed mobilization.

The second wave of armed group mobilization also involved the emergence of Local Defence Forces. It was mostly the conflict in the Plain and the related security dilemma with the Barundi and Banyamulenge that motivated youths to join these forces. And yet these forces were short-lived. Towards the end of 2012, the FARDC prohibited all Local Defence activity in the Plain, considering it a dangerous usurpation of the state security services' authority. Rather than demobilizing, many combatants joined armed groups. Aside from the continuing intention to defend their communities, their decision to go into the bush was generally motivated by personal reasons. These included limited employment prospects and a thirst for revenge for violence committed against loved ones, including the massacre in Mutarule. In addition, some had committed crimes and were wanted by the army. This was, for instance, the case with Simuzizi, who had attacked FARDC personnel near Kahanda in January 2013. Kihebe, who was in the Local Defence Forces of

⁶⁹ Interviews with ex-Mai-Mai FARDC officer, Luvungi, 16 May 2015 and 20 February 2017.

⁷⁰ Interview with notable of Nyakabere II, 19 February 2017.

⁷¹ Interview with chief and notables of Nyakabere II, 19 February 2017.

the Bafuliiru Chiefdom, had shot at his cousin in 2014, fleeing into the bush to escape prosecution.⁷²

Self-interested motives, in particular leadership aspirations and a desire to obtain wealth, status and power, played a growing role in the third wave of mobilization, which started after the death of Bede Rusagara in August 2015. As mentioned above, many of these groups were splinters of existing groups or emerged after the death of armed group leaders. In a growing number of cases, those who launched armed groups were no longer those who had been officers in the Congo Wars but members of younger generations: figures such as Jojo Kimanga, Songa Kivuwe, Kihebe, Alain Shukuru, Lubange Kishule, and Buhirwa Namufagake.

Most of the armed groups that emerged in this period focus heavily on revenue generation, which assumes increasingly criminal and violent forms. Several groups from the first wave of mobilization already engaged in criminal income-generating activities. For instance, Nyerere excelled in extorting minibus companies (on the Uvira-Bukavu route), ambushing the minibuses of those companies who refused to make a monthly 'donation'.⁷³ In 2013 and 2014 Bede's group initiated often quite brutal forms of criminal activity, including kidnappings, cattle-looting, armed robbery and armed burglary. Combatants in Bede's group who had developed the knowledge and skills to carry out these types of activities would often continue to employ them in other groups. Bede's outfit set an example for other armed groups, who were subsequently inspired to engage in similar forms of violent revenue generation.⁷⁴ As a result of these developments, armed groups in the Plain increasingly resemble banditry outfits, and have started to attack members of their own community. As a civil society leader explained, 'On the side of the Bafuliiru it is as if the scenario has changed. It is no longer Bafuliiru against Barundi. Bafuliiru Mai-Mai now attack Bafuliiru.'⁷⁵

⁷² Interview with PNC officer, Sange, 18 February 2017; and interview with armed group experts, Sange, 17 February 2017.

⁷³ Interview with human rights monitor based in Kiliba, 4 November 2014; and interview with civil society actors, Uvira, 19 September 2016.

⁷⁴ Interviews with human rights monitors, Uvira 8 May 2015 and Sange, 16 May 2015; interview with military justice actors, Uvira, 11 July 2015; interview with armed groups expert, Luberizi, 3 March 2017.

⁷⁵ Interview with civil society leader, Sange, 16 February 2017.

The growing emphasis on revenue generation has impacted motivations for the rank-and-file to join or stay in armed groups. As one observer said, 'It is mostly young delinquents and the jobless who are in armed groups. The well-educated youth cannot do it. The majority of the rank-and-file are youth, not demobilized ... they want to eat without working.'⁷⁶ It is too simplistic, however, to see a desire for revenue generation solely in material terms. Rank-and-file combatants generally receive only a tiny part of armed groups' income, as this is divided among the officers, with the commander-in-chief taking the lion's share. Obtaining revenue is also about obtaining social status and a desire to 'be somebody'. Reflecting the general rise of criminality in the Plain, another motive to join armed groups that has gained salience is escaping justice. A police commander explained, 'There are people who join armed groups in order to escape justice. S. was the owner of two bars in Luvungi, and he started to recruit youth from Luvungi to steal the solar panels of VODACOM. They hid these solar panels in R's shop. But when the operation was uncovered, one of these youths rallied to the group of Karakara.'⁷⁷

While the activities of this latest wave of armed groups are mostly oriented towards revenue generation, this is not reflected in the rhetoric they use to mobilize support, attract new recruits, and justify their activities. While this rhetoric initially related mainly to the conflict in the Plain, around 2016 it started to reflect national political developments. This transformation resulted from the emerging national political crisis surrounding elections and the position of President Joseph Kabila. Youths in the village of Kigurwe explained:

The conflict with the Barundi does not really play a role in recruitment anymore. That was in the time of Bede ... The people from Mwenyemali came here to recruit, but we refused. Their ideology now is to overthrow the government. When they recruit they say, 'We are preparing a war against the government and afterwards, you will have ranks and functions.' But once you arrive in the bush the ideology starts to change and it is only to steal from people.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Interview with PNC officer, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁷⁷ Interview with PNC officer, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁷⁸ Interview with youths, Kigurwe, 18 February 2017.

After the 2018 elections, the discourse of overthrowing the government and political change lost its purchase, and identity politics once again gained ground. In particular the conflict on the *Hauts Plateaux* and the creation of the *commune rurale* of Minembwe have led to the recycling of the old tropes of 'foreign invasion' and 'community self-defence'.⁷⁹

Regardless of the rhetoric, a growing number of people see the groups in the Plain as bands of criminals rather than armed groups. Whereas armed groups from the second wave, particularly Karakara's, still had some credibility as protectors of the community, this is no longer the case for groups in the last wave. As a customary chief testified, 'The Mai-Mai do not have an objective, even when you talk with them, they cannot explain their objectives ... everybody who is in the bush also wants to enrich themselves, even if they say they are doing it for the country.'⁸⁰ It is too simplistic, however, to conclude that these groups no longer have any political dimension to them. The discourses that they draw on, such as the language of community self-defence, are political and resonate with combatants and civilians alike as they appeal to deeply held beliefs, grievances and feelings of insecurity. This implicit political dimension should be taken into consideration in efforts to end armed group activity.

4.3 Armed groups' modus operandi and social embedding

Armed groups' growing orientation towards revenue generation coincides with transformations in their organization, modus operandi and social position. Armed groups in the Plain have become small, roving bands without fixed headquarters. While many groups continue to have a general staff with functions and nomenclature similar to that of the regular army (with intelligence, operations, and logistics officers named S2, S3, S4, etc.), they are generally poorly structured. The commander in chief tends to centralize

⁷⁹ Interviews with local authorities and community leaders, Mutarule, 21 October 2019 and Sange, 25 October 2019.

⁸⁰ Interview with customary chief of Kigoma, contacted in Sange, 17 February 2017.

all revenues, which often leads to infighting with the group's handful of officers. The latter are not rarely family members or co-villagers of the main commander. In most groups, rank-and-file do not receive any training, and levels of discipline are low. One observer described current armed groups as follows: 'Even those who have two people will say they have an armed group. It is Bede who brought that system here. After his death, everyone saw that this brings in money and they have started to copy it.'⁸¹ The chief of Kigurwe village commented, 'Just one firearm is enough and you can declare yourself warlord.'⁸² With groups becoming that small and engaging mostly in banditry, the boundaries between 'armed groups' and 'groups of bandits' have started to blur. This is especially the case since there is a growing number of professional criminals in the Plain who operate either on an individual basis or in small groups of two or three.⁸³ In addition, members of the security services also engage in banditry.⁸⁴ This has made it increasingly difficult to identify the perpetrators of crime.

THE PROXIMATE NATURE OF ARMED MOBILIZATION

While most armed groups have a limited number of combatants, they generally have many civilian collaborators, who help with armed robberies, burglaries and kidnappings. These collaborators select the targets of planned crime and report on their activities and movements, in exchange for a part of the booty. More generally, they function as the eyes and ears of armed groups in villages, providing intelligence and indicating who speaks badly of the group or collaborates with the FARDC. In many cases, these collaborators are relatives, friends and former classmates of armed group members, reflecting the intimate character of armed mobilization in the Plain. As we have seen, armed groups are socially and spatially proximate to the population, consisting mainly of recruits from just a few villages. This proximity allows

⁸¹ Interview with FARDC officer, Sange, 17 February 2017.

⁸² Interview with chief of Kigurwe village, Kigurwe, 18 February 2017.

⁸³ Examples of such bandits are Mafikiri Manenga Martin alias Mbembe and Ombeni Rumenera alias Checheri from Kiliba, who mostly engaged in kidnappings and assassinations, and were arrested on 13 October 2019. Another is Mugiriki Bosco from Luvungi, who specialized in kidnappings and ambushes on the RN5, and was arrested on 11 January 2020.

⁸⁴ Reporting by human rights focal points based in Sange, Kiliba, and Luvungi between February 2016 and March 2017.

armed groups to exercise a high level of social control, despite their limited numbers and insignificant military capabilities. Armed groups' extensive network of civilian collaborators also fosters fundamental distrust between community members, as every action or transaction might be reported. A former combatant explained:

The target is always people with money. Someone who sells three sacks of groundnuts, at night he is being robbed. Often, people also receive telephone messages. For instance, those who transport money for paying the nurses, they receive a message from people demanding 10% and they list the exact amount. But who informed those people that this person was transporting the money and with that exact amount? Even those who sell recharge cards (with phone units), when they go to Uvira to buy cards they often receive a message 'you have to send us a card of 50'. The small-scale traders are the main victims of that.⁸⁵

The result of these practices is that people become wary of sharing information on their movements and activities, are always on the alert when talking on the phone, and *a priori* distrust customers and their own employees (see also Verweijen 2019: 35-39). What's more, people are terrified of ending up in a dispute with civilian armed group collaborators. When selecting targets, the latter typically choose someone they dislike, have a dispute with, or have had frictions with in the past. Due to this climate of fear, local leaders and civil society members impose self-censorship when dealing with armed groups, and easily give in to demands for payment. One Fuliiru chief explained how Mai-Mai groups called him regularly, either for money, or in relation to conflicts:

They say they protect the population, even though they are rebels, and if you refuse what they demand, they will create chaos, so you are obliged to give them what they want. So we are forced to negotiate with these rebels but for a good cause. It is to avoid damage, to avoid deaths.⁸⁶

NGOs are also extorted. As one leader explained, 'The warlords ask each person who wants to work here for money, even NGOs pay these warlords.'

⁸⁵ Interview with three demobilized combatants, Sange, 17 February 2017.

⁸⁶ Interview with Bafuliiru chief, Bukavu, 8 July 2015.

The employees of NGOs are intimidated: “Send us something such as a phone card.”⁸⁷

Fear is reinforced by people’s tendency to call on armed groups to intervene in all types of interpersonal conflicts, such as debt problems. ‘Whenever you have an outstanding debt, you call someone in the bush to reduce that debt,’ said a local leader in Mutarule.⁸⁸ People also appeal to armed groups in case of family conflicts, economic competition, land disputes, agropastoral disputes and even love affairs, asking them to pressure their adversaries. These interventions generally do not resolve the conflict, as the party who is disadvantaged will remain with a grudge and may seek to take revenge in the future, for instance by soliciting another armed group or the FARDC (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2014). Harnessing armed groups to solve personal disputes may also take the form of accusing one’s opponents of witchcraft, especially when it concerns the elderly. In other cases, witchcraft accusations already circulate, and after an unexpected death believed to stem from witchcraft, armed groups are solicited to target the suspected witch (Verweijen 2015d). These groups then either kidnap the alleged witch and ask for ransom or eliminate them directly against payment. Both Simuzizi and Bitwange were involved in numerous witchcraft cases, making them widely feared.

THE PARALYSING EFFECTS OF FEAR AND PROXIMITY

The proximate nature of armed mobilization hampers getting armed groups out of the bush. It allows those trying to convince these groups to demobilize to be easily identified and targeted. Armed groups’ penchant for criminal revenue generation has further complicated initiatives to demobilize them. No longer depending on material support from relatives and friends, armed group members have taken on an increasingly harsh attitude towards their loved ones. Consequently, the latter no longer dare to convince them to lay down their arms. For instance, parents now hesitate to tell their children to come home: ‘Parents are even at risk of getting killed when they inform the state that their children are in the bush, these are ill-intentioned youth,’ said a

⁸⁷ Interview with civil society actors, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁸⁸ Interview with notables, Mutarule, 20 February 2017.

local chief.⁸⁹ Civil society actors too, are at increasing risk. In 2016, civil society in Sange organized a campaign to demobilize Mai-Mai groups, together with *vieux-sages* and youth organizations. Soon, however, they were intimidated by these groups and some of them needed to have soldiers stationed in their houses for over three weeks. After that experience, they decided to give up on the pacification initiative, judging it simply too dangerous.

Fear of revenge also makes people hesitant to denounce armed group members and their civilian collaborators, who are generally well known in the community. Those arrested by the security services are often rapidly liberated because of *traffic d'influence* (interference and pressure by powerful political actors, in this case generally those sponsoring the armed groups in question). Once liberated, the arrestees may take revenge on those who denounced them. State justice and security officials can also be the target of such revenge actions, in addition to facing regular intimidation and interference from armed groups' political protectors. What adds to the fear is that armed groups often have collaborators within the police and army, who facilitate their revenue-generation activities, for instance, organizing and protecting the sale of stolen goods. These collaborators also warn them whenever an operation or arrest is at hand (Verweijen 2019: 44-48). When in 2016, the FARDC tried to do a house-to-house search for arms in Kasenga (a quarter of Uvira), they did not find a single young man in the quarter, nor any arms. People had already been warned in advance and had subsequently hidden their arms.⁹⁰ A military justice official explained how when he was in his car to undertake a mission, he received a phone call from Bede indicating he knew his exact location.⁹¹ In many cases, these armed group collaborators are ex-Mai-Mai who integrated into the security services⁹² or local recruits with family connections to armed groups. A police chief testified, 'I only have locally recruited personnel. These people inform their brothers in the bush. They work with a double hat.'⁹³ Furthermore, many army personnel deployed in the Ruzizi Plain have married and had children with Fuliru women who

⁸⁹ Interview with local authority, Kigoma, 17 February 2017.

⁹⁰ Interview with military justice officials, Uvira, 11 July 2015.

⁹¹ Interview with military justice officials, Uvira, 11 July 2015.

⁹² Interview with FARDC intelligence officer, Luvungi, 19 February 2017.

⁹³ Interview with PNC officer, Luvungi, 13 May 2015.

have relatives in the bush. Whenever military operations against these groups are planned, they inform their family-in-law.

Widespread collaboration with armed groups reflects people's ambivalence towards these groups. On the one hand, armed groups are widely denounced for the violence they inflict on people and the insecurity that they sow. Many people describe armed groups as a bunch of thugs, criminals or terrorists that only seek to enrich themselves on the backs of others. On the other hand, many people take advantage of these groups, for instance, to settle personal disputes and scores, or enhance their political and economic clout. The warlord Bede secured employment for many people in Mutarule, his native village, by either pressuring the administration or NGOs or employing them directly in his economic activities. They became, for instance, drivers in his fleet of minibuses or money exchangers in his pre-financing activities. Others profit more indirectly from armed group activity, making money in the criminal economy that results from these groups' banditry. They may, for instance, deal in stolen goods or in beef from stolen cows. Consumers of these goods also benefit, as they buy them at much lower prices. These advantages, together with fear, render many people reluctant to actively counter armed groups. This partly explains why armed group activity in the Plain shows no signs of abating.

4.4 Regional dynamics

Being close to both Rwanda and Burundi and forming a corridor to mountains where armed groups easily hide, the Ruzizi Plain has served as a rear base for foreign armed groups since the early 1990s. This has rendered its stability susceptible to political and military developments in neighbouring countries.

In recent years, Burundian armed activity in the Plain has again intensified. This first occurred in 2011, after contestations over the 2010 local elections in Burundi. Yet another surge took place in 2015, in the wake of a failed coup d'état by General Godefroid Niyombare. In reaction to the growing political repression triggered by the coup, new armed groups were formed, such as

Forces républicaines du Burundi (FOREBU, Republican Forces of Burundi), which established bases in Fizi territory. Moreover, existing groups stepped up activity, particularly *Résistance pour un état de droit au Burundi* (RED-Tabara, Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi), which had emerged from MSD circles and was also present on Congolese soil, including in the Plain. The UN Group of Experts on the DRC documented that this group had received Rwandan support in 2015, including training and logistical assistance (United Nations 2016: para. 46-50). Meanwhile, in the Ruzizi Plain and *Moyens Plateaux* of Uvira, the FNL (National Liberation Forces) became more visible. This group had come under the command of General Aloys Nzabampema after internal tensions had led to a split in January 2013. The other part, which was loyal to the leader of the political party FNL, Agathon Rwasa, eventually halted active military operations. In 2012, Rwasa had withdrawn from direct involvement in military activities and resurfaced in Burundi to resume political work. Yet the FNL under Nzabampema continued hostilities against the Burundian government, including cross-border attacks. In part due to pressure from their colleagues in Burundi, the FARDC launched operations against the FNL in the *Moyens Plateaux* in 2013 and 2015, with the help of various Mai-Mai and Local Defence Forces groups (Verweijen 2015b; United Nations 2016: para. 42-45).

Towards the end of 2016, FOREBU left Fizi and arrived in Kiryama in the Kigoma *groupement* of the Bafulliru Chiefdom (in the *Hauts Plateaux*). This was a strategic location that provided easy access to both Burundi and Rwanda via the Ruzizi Plain, as well as to Rwandan and Burundian phone and radio networks. To monitor this intensified rebel activity, Congolese Mai-Mai groups were harnessed to provide intelligence to networks in Burundi.⁹⁴ In early 2017, the groups of Mbulu and Bigaya, among others, and a certain Colonel Mathias Nibizi, an FNL defector based in Busumo (west of Sange), were suspected of working with Burundian pro-government forces.⁹⁵ More recently, newer armed groups such as the Mai-Mai Buhirwa, Toto, and Kijangala were reported to have become involved. A 2017 UN Group of Experts report details an arms trafficking network via the Ruzizi River from Burundi

⁹⁴ Interview with former Mai-Mai officer, Sange, 16 February 2017.

⁹⁵ Phone interview with armed group experts, 25 October 2017 and 21 April 2018.

to Mai-Mai groups such as Bigaya, Mwenyemali and Nyerere. This could indicate that efforts to counter Burundian armed opposition are bolstered by material support (United Nations 2017: para. 151-154).

In 2018, high-profile cross-border attacks on Burundi occurred more frequently, in particular in May and September. The May attack was preceded by clashes between RED-Tabara and the *Forces populaires du Burundi* (FPB, Burundian Popular Forces, the successor group to FOREBU), after these groups had fallen out with one another (Anderson 2017). Later that year, thus far unverified reports of Rwandan support for RED-Tabara circulated. This came at a moment when networks in Burundi were suspected of supporting the anti-Kigali rebellion of the Rwandan National Congress (RNC) based in the *Hauts Plateaux* of Fizi and Mwenga, which was hosted by the Banyamulenge rebel group Gumino. A 2018 UN Group of Experts report documents a recruitment and supply network for the RNC operating from Bujumbura, which channelled deliveries of arms and ammunition, weapons, boots and uniforms (United Nations 2018: para. 36-48). Events in mid-2018 further strained relations between Rwanda and Burundi. Unknown assailants based in the Nyungwe forest straddling Rwanda and Burundi conducted multiple attacks on Nyaruguru District in Rwanda. While Rwanda denied initially that the attacks had taken place, Burundi categorically denied the presence of a rebel group in the Nyungwe forest. It was only later that responsibility for the attacks was claimed by a new Rwandan rebel group, the *Forces de libération nationale*/National Liberation Forces (FLN/NLF), the armed wing of the *Mouvement rwandais pour le changement démocratique* (MRCD, Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change) (Reuters 2019).

Against the backdrop of these renewed regional tensions,⁹⁶ and amidst reports of ongoing cross-border movements of Burundian rebel combatants, the Burundian army (FDN), intensified activity on Congolese soil, where it had periodically engaged in operations since 2011. In October 2018, FDN Special Forces, which had entered the Ruzizi Plain via Ngendo, launched operations against Burundian armed groups in the *Moyens* and *Hauts Plateaux* of

⁹⁶ These tensions and their effects on armed mobilization in the eastern DRC are also described in: International Crisis Group (2020)

Kigoma, in conjunction with the FARDC (Radio Okapi 2018). Reportedly, the FDN relied on the groups of Mbulu and Kijangala as guides, as well as for intelligence and logistics. RED-Tabara, for its part, was reported to be working with Kihebe, until the latter surrendered in February 2019. The group then started to work with Nakishale (around Kitembe) and Ilunga, a dissident of the Mai-Mai Mushombe.⁹⁷

On the *Hauts Plateaux* of Mwenga and Uvira, RED-Tabara also collaborated with other groups, after fighting had flared up there in 2018 and 2019. This fighting involved, on the one hand, a coalition of various Banyamulenge armed groups (Gumino, Twirwaneho) and the Rwandan RNC, and, on the other hand, a broad coalition of RED-Tabara, FNL and Bafulliru and Babembe-led Mai-Mai groups, specifically Biloze Bishambuke and the Mai-Mai Mtezezi. These clashes have reinforced cross-border movements of foreign troops, some of which pass the Ruzizi Plain. This does not only concern rebel combatants, but also government troops, allegedly including Rwandan army troops (Kivu Security Tracker 2019). In October 2019, a cross-border attack on Burundi took place, at Musigati in Bubanza, which was claimed by RED-Tabara (Nimubona 2019). The attack was followed by movements of the FDN into the DRC via the Ruzizi Plain in November 2019, this time aided by Mbulu and Shetani.⁹⁸

This flareup of regional tensions has significantly exacerbated instability throughout Fizi and Uvira, including in the Ruzizi Plain. To start with, Burundian rebel groups menace Congolese civilians directly. For instance, after the military operations against RED-Tabara in January and February 2019, the group threatened to take revenge on civilians suspected of having given information to the FARDC. In early February, RED-Tabara pillaged small livestock around Kitoga, Rudefwe and Lubuga. Burundian combatants are also reported to be involved in criminal activities in the Plain, in particular ambushing vehicles on RN5 (Debout RDC 2020). The frequent crossing of foreign combatants creates further insecurity. It is therefore

⁹⁷ Interviews with local authorities and civil society actors Luberizi, 20 October 2019 and Kigoma, 21 October 2019.

⁹⁸ Reporting by field-based focal points, 27 November 2019.

no wonder that some Local Defence Forces and even banditry groups try to stop these movements. One example is the Rasta in the *groupement* of Luvungi/Itara, which captured an FPB officer in January 2018. In early 2020, the observed return in the Plain of Rwandan rebel combatants of the *Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie* (CNRD, National Council for Renewal and Democracy), a splinter group of the FDLR, created further unrest, given the history of this group's presence in the region (Radio Okapi 2020).

Another way in which foreign troop presence increases instability is the alliances between Congolese armed groups and both Burundian pro- and anti-government armed factions, which lead to tensions between groups with allies on opposing sides. By providing them with arms and ammunition, these alliances also bolster armed groups' confidence and military capacities, motivating them to quickly attack their rivals. A case in point is the attack by Kijangala on the positions of Kihebe in Mubere in mid-2018. Some groups, such as the Mai-Mai Buhirwa and Kijangala, are also said to have Burundian combatants in their ranks. These combatants are locally called 'imbonerakure', after members of the youth wing of the Burundian political party *Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie – Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD-FDD, National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy). However, it is doubtful whether they really belong to the party.

Many Burundian youths cross the border as economic migrants and refugees or to work as day labourers, and some of them join armed forces. These youths often have no pronounced political motives but join Congolese armed groups to earn a living.⁹⁹ Two of the reported consequences of this foreign recruitment concern Mai-Mai groups' deteriorating behaviour towards civilians. First, it intensifies their engagement in violent banditry – in part because they need income to pay foreign soldiers. Second, foreign soldiers' lack of shared loyalties weakens their Congolese commanders' grip over their troops and hence their capacity to rein in ill behaviour.

⁹⁹ Interviews with local authorities and civil society actors Luberizi, 20 October 2019, Sange, 25 October 2019 and Ndunda, 27 October 2019.

In sum, regional interference in the form of operations by and support for foreign armed forces has significantly exacerbated instability in the Plain. While it has not directly led to the emergence of new armed groups, it has intensified already existing tensions and armed group activity by imposing a regional dimension. This can easily reignite local and national tensions, as well as negatively affect armed group's behaviour.

International stabilization interventions in the Plain

Overall, international stabilization and peacebuilding interventions in the Ruzizi Plain have had limited impact on insecurity in the area. Ambushes, kidnappings, cattle-looting, armed burglary and rape remain a daily reality. Armed groups and groups of armed bandits continue to proliferate, and their civilian collaborators have developed wide-ranging systems of surveillance and intelligence in local communities. Social regulation is thoroughly militarized, as people solicit armed actors to intervene in a wide range of personal disputes and grudges. The result is a climate of profound fear, insecurity and mutual distrust. This indicates that the initiatives taken by MONUSCO and international NGOs have not managed to fundamentally address the drivers of conflict and violence.

There are numerous reasons for the limited impact of international stabilization and peacebuilding efforts. Some of these relate to the set-up of and support for the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS or I4S), designed to help with the implementation of the DRC's Stabilization and Reconstruction Plan for War-Affected Areas (STAREC). These factors include: the implementation of I4S being project- rather than process-based; limited coordination between I4S and other programmes, as well as among its various donors; and an initial lack of commitment to the second phase of the programme from MONUSCO (for critical analyses of the first and second ISSSS programmes, see Paddon and Lacaille 2011; de Vries 2015; de Vries 2016). Here, the focus is on the programme's analytical point of departure in relation to the Ruzizi Plain, as well as political obstacles to its implementation. Based on these dimensions, three main reasons emerge that explain

its limited impact: 1) a myopic focus on intercommunity (or 'ethnic') conflict, to the detriment of attention to intracommunity, interpersonal and class-based conflicts; 2) limited engagement with supra-local drivers of conflict and violence, in particular national and regional political and military actors; and 3), a singular focus on dynamics of conflict, to the detriment of attention to key drivers of violence.

5.1 A myopic focus on 'ethnic' conflict

International media, NGOs and MONUSCO have systematically approached insecurity in the Plain from the perspective of 'inter-community' or 'ethnic' conflict. For instance, although the Mutarule massacre in June 2014 was very clearly an armed group attack against civilians, MONUSCO framed it as 'inter-ethnic clashes'. Its head of mission, Martin Kobler, visited the area shortly after the events 'to encourage local communities to resolve inter-ethnic conflicts through dialogue' (Oussou 2014). In this, MONUSCO echoed the analysis of the situation in the Plain laid out in a 2013 International Crisis Group (ICG) report, which identified conflict between Barundi and Bafuliiru, believed to be at odds since colonial times, as being at the heart of the insecurity (International Crisis Group 2013). Unhindered by much historical knowledge, as reflected in ignoring the work of prominent historians of the region, including the Congolese scholars Bosco Muchukiwa and Jacques Depelchin, the ICG report contained numerous historical inaccuracies and problematic language (Verweijen 2013). For instance, it labelled the Barundi 'immigrants', even when no international boundaries had existed at the time they moved into the Ruzizi Plain, and they have been living on Congolese soil for about a century and a half (International Crisis Group 2013: 4). In addition, no mention was made of how certain clans of the Bafuliiru, such as the Bazige and Bagesera, originate from present-day Rwanda and Burundi and should, following the same criteria, also be considered 'immigrants'.

It is important to mention the ICG report because it formed the basis for the historical narrative presented in a conflict analysis by Search for Common Ground (SFCG 2014) which fed into the STAREC and I4S 2015 Provincial Stabilization Strategy and Action Plan for South Kivu Province. The SFCG

report similarly reproduces, rather than questions, the narrative by which Bafuliiru appear as the 'autochthonous' population and Barundi as 'foreigners'. It states, problematically, that 'the Rwandophones and Burundians have never been completely integrated within the local or "autochthonous" communities (SFCG 2014: 9).' This statement ignores the history of the Bazige and Bagesera clans and the long history of mutual assimilation and integration of Barundi and Bafuliiru in the Plain. By not mentioning that the majority of households in the area are of mixed descent, a fiction is created of two separate, well-delineated communities. The entire report is based on this binary, leading to historical inaccuracies and dubious interpretations of contemporary conflict dynamics.

The report frames both land and agropastoral conflicts entirely in terms of intercommunity conflict. Conflicts between farmers and herders cattle-keepers are said to 'have an ethnic dimension given that the majority of cattle-keepers are Banyamulenge and Barundi, while the majority of cultivators in the area are Bafuliiru, Babembe and other communities (SFCG 2014: 15).' As we have seen, this analysis is inaccurate, given that most Barundi are farmers and Bafuliiru own sizeable cattle herds. Concerning conflicts over land, the report only mentions that 'in the Ruzizi Plain, communities clashed in 2005 due to the sale of customary land by the *chefs de groupement*' (SFCG 2014: 22). It does not mention that the vast majority of lands were sold by customary authorities to the detriment of members of their own community, nor does it further reflect on the class dynamics of elite land-grabbing at the expense of smallholders.

The Provincial Stabilization Strategy copies the singular focus on 'inter-ethnic conflict', identifying the frictions between Barundi and Bafuliiru as the most important driver of conflict in the Ruzizi Plain (*Province du Sud-Kivu* 2015: 7). This analysis is not totally inaccurate concerning the situation in the Plain in 2013 and 2014, when the customary power conflict was of overriding importance. However, it is reductionist to see that conflict uniquely in ethnic terms. Moreover, emphasizing the ethnic dimension implies overlooking many other important drivers of conflict and violence. For instance, the section on 'mobilization around land and identity' does not mention intra-ethnic and class-based conflicts, and foregrounds 'inter-ethnic dialogue' as a solution

to land conflicts (*Province du Sud-Kivu* 2015: 52). The section on security dynamics similarly focuses uniquely on intercommunity aspects (*Province du Sud-Kivu* 2015:18), even though clashes and competition between Fuliiru armed groups were at that point in time already a crucial source of violence in the Plain.

Given the Provincial Strategy and Plan's emphasis on ethnic tensions, it is no wonder that stabilization projects in the Plain were centred on intercommunity dialogue. However, many interviewees questioned the usefulness of these dialogues for bringing stability. Some observers highlighted that the a priori focus on 'inter-ethnic' conflict pushed the debate in a certain direction, reducing space for discussing other drivers of conflict and violence. Others found the focus on communities as a whole reductionist and stigmatizing, believing the focus should rather be on individuals. Still others emphasized that these activities always involved the same people, for whom this had become some sort of business due to the accompanying per diems, and therefore ultimately reached few stakeholders. Finally, some questioned the value of 'dialogues' compared to concrete development activities.¹⁰⁰

What further limited the effects of community dialogue activities was that NGO projects in a context of tense intercommunity relations can heighten awareness of intercommunity tensions, even when designed to address these very tensions. In a situation of chronic joblessness, NGO employment is gold. Therefore, each community will accuse intervening NGOs of bias and of recruiting more people from the opposing camp. This occurred, for instance, with the projects of the consortium of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), ZOA-International, SFCG and International Alert. These NGOs were also accused of reinforcing the parallel administration in the Plain by working with the Fuliiru rather than the Barundi chefs de groupement, allegedly to facilitate their activities on the ground and avoid being bothered by Mai-Mai groups. The same happened to the *Comités mixtes agriculteurs-éleveurs*, or mixed committees for herders and farmers to resolve agropastoral conflicts. Given that the committees included Bafuliiru notables, they were seen by

¹⁰⁰ Interviews with participants in dialogue activities, Kabunambo, 20 October 2019; Mutarule 1 and 2, 17 and 21 October 2019; Bwegera, 18 October 2019; and Uvira, 21 October 2019.

Barundi leaders as legitimizing illegal authorities. Moreover, Barundi leaders questioned the need to discuss agropastoral conflicts as long as the Bafuliiru refused to pay tax on cattle.¹⁰¹ Yet excluding Bafuliiru leaders would have limited access to and the involvement of Bafuliiru, thereby undermining the objective of community integration. These dilemmas illustrate how peacebuilding initiatives can inadvertently entrench intercommunity conflict rather than overcome it.

5.2 Limited engagement with supra-local drivers of conflict and violence

An often-voiced sentiment by research participants was that international peacebuilding and stabilization initiatives cannot be effective as long as they do not address the destructive behaviour of extremist and toxic politicians, generally described as *tireurs de ficelles* (those pulling the strings). Some interviewees even emphasized that such politicians should be prosecuted rather than dealt with via community-level projects.¹⁰² The same problem of elite obstruction was encountered by NGOs dealing with land conflicts, leading them to limit their interventions to small-scale conflicts over plot boundaries rather than focusing on land-grabbing by big concession holders. Indeed, it has proven difficult for local-level peacebuilding and stabilization interventions to address national and regional conflict actors, including politicians and foreign governments (The problems of addressing supra-local actors in peacebuilding interventions in Uvira are outlined in detail in Van Leeuwen et al.: 2020).¹⁰³

While both MONUSCO and international peacebuilding NGOs are aware of politicians' crucial role in mitigating or aggravating conflict, they often have

¹⁰¹ Interviews with Barundi leaders, Mutarule, 17 October 2019 and Bwegera, 18 October 2019. International Alert was also believed to reinforce the conflict between the administrator of Uvira territory and the mayor of the city of Uvira. Allegedly, they preferred to deal with the mayor, even though issues related to the Plain fell under the competence of the administrator.

¹⁰² Interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, 21 October 2019 and Sange, 25 October 2019.

¹⁰³ The problems of addressing supra-local actors in peacebuilding interventions in Uvira are outlined in detail in Van Leeuwen et al. 2020.

no clearly defined approach for dealing with this problem. Including them in talks and other activities risks legitimizing them, especially as long as their detrimental role is not addressed. However, isolating them can further radicalize them, as it cuts them off from alternative points of view. The risk of legitimation is particularly high where high-profile actors are openly featured as ‘peace champions’ when their behaviour on the ground suggests the opposite. A case in point is the success story featured on the website of the NGO ‘Interpeace’ about two politicians from the Barundi and Bafuliiru communities who decided to run for provincial parliament on a joint ticket. These leaders were the customary Chief Claude Mirundi on the Barundi side, and Professor Dieudonné Di-Kuruba Muhinduka on the Bafuliiru side (Interpeace, 2015). Professor Muhinduka is however a member of the Bavira, not the Fuliiru, community. Moreover, Claude Mirundi is cited as having organized recruitment and logistical support for the Barundi armed group based in Mutarule that was implicated in the 2014 Mutarule massacre, which led to his being charged by the Congolese Military High Court (Human Rights Watch 2019). He was also held responsible for the arms cache found in Mutarule in February 2016 and was accused of supporting the Burundian armed group that used these arms, leading to his arrest and transfer to the military prison of Ndolo in Kinshasa (Uvira Online 2016b). This incident highlights the dangers of engaging with elites in peacebuilding initiatives without proper knowledge of the context.

Another supra-local actor that has important influence on stabilization but that has proven difficult to address in international interventions is the FARDC. The army plays a paradoxical role, fostering both insecurity and security. On the one hand, as described in this report, it promotes armed mobilization by collaborating with armed groups’ illegal revenue-generation activities, such as cattle-looting, by selling arms and ammunition to armed groups, and by providing them with crucial intelligence. In addition, it exacerbates security dilemmas by not intervening in time to protect civilians and making the impression of being partial; and engages in violence against civilians, including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and murder. On the other hand, the FARDC weakens armed groups through military operations, tracks down and arrests armed bandits, and engages in efforts to demobilize armed groups. In 2015, General Bwange Safari, commander of the South/South Kivu

operational sector launched a promising demobilization initiative, convincing many warlords, including Mazimano, Amuse Guelle, Tigre and Mbulu, to come out of the bush. He also employed former Mai-Mai leaders, such as Fujo Zabuloni and Ernest Buneti, to convince other Mai-Mai to demobilize. However, he did not get much collaboration from Kinshasa to bring this demobilization initiative to a proper end. Crucially, he was not granted the means to take care of those who had surrendered. Many warlords stayed for around five months in Sange, but returned to the bush because they were not well received. Even the ex-Mai-Mai working to demobilize others were paid directly by the operational sector, as General Safari failed to regularize their payment situation with Kinshasa.¹⁰⁴ For some informants, these events point to the deliberate derailment of the general's demobilization initiative, labelling it an *echec planifié* (planned failure) that would reflect a general lack of commitment by Kinshasa to stabilize the east.¹⁰⁵ While the level of intent is difficult to establish, the fact is that no support was given to deal with those who came out of the bush. International actors were also not able to support the initiative, citing their limited coordination with and influence on FARDC politics and practices.

International players also have limited influence over regional military actors. The regional dimension of I4S emphasizes reinforcing border control and addressing refugees and returnees. This amounts to tackling the symptoms, not the causes, of regional factors of instability. There has been little initiative by MONUSCO and other UN actors to address the presence of foreign armed groups and forces in Uvira and neighbouring Fizi other than the FDLR. For instance, despite the Lusenda refugee camp in Fizi, near the border, being used as a staging ground by FOREBU, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) made limited efforts to relocate the camp or address the issue of arms circulation through it.¹⁰⁶ The presence of the Burundian army in Kiliba between 2011 and 2014, where it also trained *imbonerakure*, (United Nations 2015: para 83-89) was also not addressed by international

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Fujo Zabuloni and Ernest Buneti, Uvira, 28 February 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with FARDC officers, Uvira, 12 July 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with civil society members, Mboko, 22 February 2017; interview with FARDC officer, 24 February 2017; and interview with civil society actors from Lusenda, contacted in Uvira on 26 February 2017.

actors. MONUSCO initially even denied the FDN presence. It was only after it started to get international media coverage in 2014 that the peacekeeping mission looked into the matter (Radio France Internationale 2014). The recent incursions of both FDN and RDF troops have been met with silence on the part of MONUSCO, even though they raise serious concerns among Congolese citizens, and there is a lack of transparency concerning these operations (Rolley 2020). At the same time, it is unclear what diplomatic initiatives are being taken to address the tensions between Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. Yet diminishing these tensions is a precondition for stabilizing the eastern DRC (International Crisis Group 2020).

5.3 A focus on dynamics of conflict, rather than of violence

As reflected in the Regional Stabilization Plan, stabilization initiatives in the Ruzizi Plain have focused on intercommunity conflicts, and conflicts over land and land use. However, addressing these conflicts has done little to diminish violence, for two reasons. First, much of the violence is not directly related to these conflicts, and when it is, there is rarely a linear connection between the two. Second, violence tends to undo conflict mitigation and resolution work. For instance, the initiatives of mixed committees to deal with agropastoral conflicts in the Plain have been hampered by cattle-looting and armed actor involvement, in part because cattle-looting provokes the suspicion that the opposing party has mobilized armed actors, creating an atmosphere of distrust and animosity.¹⁰⁷

Concerning the relations between conflict and violence, the great majority of violence in the Plain stems at present from robberies, ambushes, burglaries, cattle-looting, and, occasionally, contract killings. These incidents are mostly related to a drive for revenue generation, and sometimes interpersonal conflicts. In addition, some violence, such as rape, appears to partly stem from

¹⁰⁷ For an analysis of the complex relations between dynamics of conflict and dynamics of violence and how this plays out in relation to agropastoral conflicts, See Verweijen and Brabant (2015).

dynamics within armed groups. These different drivers of violence merit more attention in stabilization initiatives.

Criminal activities are not only the work of armed groups but also of armed bandits and personnel of the security services. However, bandits are not concerned by Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives or military operations, and the police are ill-equipped to deal with them. Similar to armed group combatants, bandits are often known in the community. Consequently, peer and family pressure, as well as efforts by local leaders, could help convince them to change their ways. State security services are engaged in banditry too. Yet this appears to receive much less international attention than their implication in other types of abuses (such as sexual violence), even though banditry entails serious human rights violations and is a major source of everyday insecurity. Security sector reform initiatives should therefore take the entire spectrum of security personnel's ill behaviour into account. Bandits' civilian collaborators also merit attention. They play a crucial role in banditry as they assist with selecting targets and preparing attacks, but also help with selling the booty or collecting the ransom. Current stabilization initiatives rarely address these collaborators, for instance through awareness-raising campaigns or community pressure.

Another driver of violence in the Plain that is not sufficiently taken into consideration in stabilization efforts is interpersonal conflicts. Traditionally, local leaders, including customary authorities and *chefs de quartiers* (local urban authorities), are the authorities designated to address these matters. However, these leaders often demand a fee, which dampens enthusiasm for using their services. Moreover, their authority has been somewhat eroded over the years, including in matters related to witchcraft (Verweijen 2015d). Certain peacebuilding initiatives, such as local mediation and reconciliation committees, also address personal conflicts, for instance, disputes over land, debt, inheritance and other family affairs. While these committees regulate many disputes, their existence does not prevent people from soliciting armed actors to deal with their conflicts. This indicates that such committees are not always seen as capable of dealing with disputes in a satisfying manner. One reason is that some people may want revenge and to harm their opponents, rather than seek a peaceful solution. Stabilization programmes should pay

more attention to why people initiate violent actions against their personal rivals and opponents, and how to address this problem.

Finally, stemming certain types of violence requires grasping the internal dynamics in armed groups. For instance, much of the sexual violence committed by armed group members in the Plain does not appear to be ordered by commanders, nor to serve strategic or tactical purposes. However, this violence is tolerated, implying commanders do not punish subordinates who engage in it (Wood 2018). There are several reasons for this. First, commanders take most of armed groups' revenues, leaving little for the rank-and-file. Tolerating sexual violence is a cheap way of granting combatants a form of gratification, which will keep them motivated to stay in the armed group. Second, there is weak discipline in many of the current groups operating in the Plain and *Moyens Plateaux*. Soldiers do not receive any training and operate often in a dispersed way. As a result, whenever commanders try to rein them in, combatants may revolt. Commanders may therefore prefer to tolerate certain abuses (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). Third, the informal norms in many armed groups are that rape is acceptable, which explains why it happens on such a large scale, without serving any clear military or group objectives. This indicates that there is a need to continue to educate armed groups on international humanitarian law and human rights principles. While the International Committee of the Red Cross undertakes these activities, they generally do not reach out to the smaller and more volatile armed groups operating in the Plain. Even when these groups operate more like banditry outfits, instructing them on human rights principles is important.

Conclusions and policy implications

This report has provided a comprehensive analysis of drivers of conflict and violence in the Ruzizi Plain. It has demonstrated that these drivers have shifted over time. After the Second Congo War (1998–2003) and up to 2012, they were to a large extent related to frictions stemming from army integration. Grievances over past violence and local conflicts played a secondary role and were seized upon by political and military entrepreneurs to reinforce their power position. Between 2012 and 2015, conflicts over customary power – generally expressed in ethnic terms – became an important driver of conflict and violence, being linked in complex ways to inter- and intracommunity tensions and related local security dilemmas. From 2015 onwards, the salience of these customary authority conflicts has waned. Dynamics at other levels became more salient, as conflicts within and between neighbouring countries have intensified. Moreover, the link between local conflicts and violence has weakened, as the armed group landscape fragmented and a growing number of armed groups are focusing primarily on banditry activities.

International peacebuilding and stabilization initiatives have by and large failed to adequately identify and tackle the shifting drivers of violence and conflict. As the report has shown, these initiatives were narrowly focused on addressing ‘intercommunity’ or ‘ethnic’ conflict, even though this was an inaccurate analysis of the conflict over the throne of the Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom. To avoid such misdiagnoses, interventions should be grounded in an adequate understanding of history and avoid reproducing inaccurate and harmful narratives, such as problematic labels of ‘immigrants’ and ‘autochthones’. In addition, they should pay more attention to intracommunity

and class-based conflicts, including disputes around customary power and large-scale land-grabbing.

The myopic focus on intercommunity conflict has led international interventions to ignore national and regional dynamics and actors of conflict and violence. More reflection is needed on how to engage with these actors, including politicians and businesspeople known to sow division and support armed groups (see also Verweijen 2013b). In addition, international stabilization initiatives should devise ways to better harmonize bottom-up and top-down efforts. This applies especially to improving the behaviour of the national army, which plays a crucial role in local dynamics of conflict and violence, but whose reform requires national policy initiatives. International stabilization and diplomatic actors should also develop a coherent approach to addressing the presence of foreign armed groups and forces, harmonizing diplomatic, political and military tools in regional initiatives.

Finally, it is necessary to identify and address drivers of violence in addition to drivers of conflict. This includes addressing individuals and security services, and not only armed groups, engaged in banditry. It also implies the necessity of initiatives to address interpersonal conflicts and how they fuel violence, such as through contract killings and witchcraft accusations. In addition, a greater focus is needed on mitigating armed group violence, including direct engagement with armed groups to influence norms and norm-enforcement processes. Too often, peacebuilding and stabilization interventions assume that addressing conflicts will automatically diminish violence. While this may hold true for areas where the two are closely linked, this is decreasingly the case in the Ruzizi Plain and a number of other parts of the eastern DRC. In these contexts, dynamics of violence should be approached in their own right rather than as a derivative of the dynamics of conflict.

7 | Bibliography

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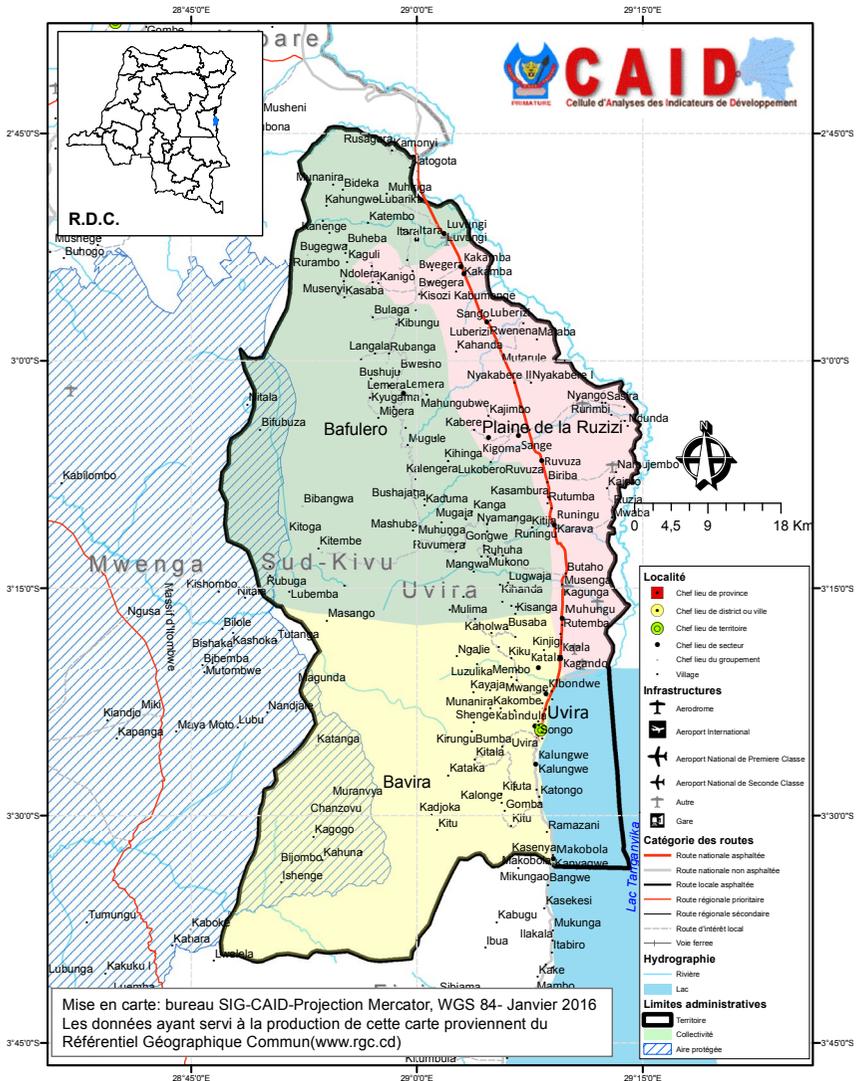
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ANNEX:

Map of The Ruzizi Plain

CARTE ADMINISTRATIVE DU TERRITOIRE D'UVIRA



THE INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

