



La paix des armes in North Kalehe

**STABILIZATION,
DEMOBILIZATION AND
THE CONTINUOUS
RECONFIGURATION
OF ARMED GROUPS**

**Alexis Bouvy
Stanislas Bisimwa
Eric Batumike**

INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

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Executive summary

This report analyses the security situation in North Kalehe, which is characterized by the presence of armed groups, including the Rwandan CNRD, Mai-Mai Kirikicho, Nyatura Kalume and various Raia Mutomboki – and the near absence of government military forces. The year 2019 included three major developments: the arrival of and military operations against the CNRD in Kalehe, the return of Mai-Mai Kirikicho and Nyatura Kalume to Ziralo, and the failed demobilization of Raia Mutomboki.

However, analysis shows that these security changes are just the latest in a cycle of reconfigurations of the conflict landscape of North Kalehe over the previous 25 years, and that politics lie behind the presence of armed groups. The report details armed group strategies to exert authority in a context of competing political orders. It shows how armed groups' presence intersects with broader conflict dynamics and politics, as their presence revives grievances and tensions between communities (as is the case with the CNRD) or reconfigures patronage networks.

In the context of the 2018 elections and the political transition, armed groups have been at the flashpoints of intense political opportunism by political entrepreneurs and community leaders. Armed groups, community leaders and political entrepreneurs thrived on the politics of elections and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) opportunities to advance their interests.

Hence, DDR and stabilization efforts have to take into account the political dimension of armed groups and broader conflict dynamics if they are to exert any meaningful impact. This includes depoliticizing the new inter-provincial DDR commission and advancing a new approach that avoids past technical and individual conceptions in order to embrace an inclusive, collective, community-based DDR that gives communities and (former) combatants a role not as simple beneficiaries but as central stakeholders who have a say in the orientation and implementation of the approach.

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Introduction

This report analyses the recent security and conflict dynamics in the northern part of Kalehe territory in South Kivu through November 2019. It focuses on the highlands of Kalehe and the Ziralo *groupement* in Mubuku chieftaincy – where the prevailing security situation has been dubbed *la paix des armes* (peace of the weapons) by local stakeholders. This emic term refers to a no-war-no-peace security situation of high volatility, as multiple armed groups occupy and control portions of territories and tend to more or less subdue and replace local state authorities. In such *la paix des armes* situations, '[E]verything can change at any moment,' as local observer put it. If *la paix des armes* prevailed during most of 2019 despite drastic changes and the presence of armed groups new to the area, it was certainly disrupted in late November 2019 when the national army (*Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo*, FARDC) launched military operations against the Rwandan-originating rebellion of the *Conseil national pour la restauration de la démocratie* (CNRD) – a *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) splinter group – in the Ziralo highlands. The report focuses on three key developments that reconfigured the landscape of armed groups in 2019 and triggered *la paix des armes*:

- the arrival of the CNRD in the Ziralo highlands (and the FARDC operations against it);
- the return of Mai-Mai Kirikicho, together with the Nyatura faction of Kalume to Ziralo; and
- the (failed) demobilization attempts of several Raia Mutomboki factions.

These developments are just the most recent in a continuum or cycle of reconfigurations in the North Kalehe armed group landscape, which can be traced back to the early 1990s when local armed groups began mobilizing in a context of communal tensions over land and power. To put it bluntly, if the current security situation of North Kalehe may seem new, the dynamics that led to such a reconfiguration are entrenched. The reconfiguration of conflict dynamics in North Kalehe seems endless, and has been ongoing for a quarter-century. Hence, this report considers these developments from a long-term perspective, with a detailed background of the historical conflict and security dynamics in Kalehe in chapter 1.

The March 2019 arrival in North Kalehe of the Rwandan rebels of the CNRD, a dissident faction that split from the FDLR in 2016, is without doubt the most important security development of the past year. While it triggered fierce opposition, especially among the Tembo community, it did not lead to clashes with other armed groups, despite the presence of Raia Mutomboki groups well-known for their invective against the Rwandan rebels. While the cohabitation of the CNRD, other armed groups, and the local population has been relatively quiet, if not collaborative, the situation drastically changed on 26 November 2019 when the FARDC launched a military operation against the CNRD. While the CNRD has fled in various directions, hundreds of combatants and dependents (civilian refugees) have been caught by the local population and Raia Mutomboki groups, delivered to the FARDC and repatriated to Rwanda.

The CNRD was not the only armed group to return to North Kalehe in 2019. The long-standing Mai-Mai leader Kirikicho Mwanamayi, an ethnic Tembo, also came back to Ziralo, together with his ally Matias Kalume Kage, a local Nyatura leader, in early 2019, after spending several years in the neighbouring area of Ufamandu in South Masisi (North Kivu). The return of Kirikicho and Kalume is the second recent key security development in the area. It led to an important shift in the presence of armed groups and security dynamics, which had been more or less under the control of state authorities since 2017, particularly since Raymond Kabishula's Ziralo-based Mai-Mai group, known as Ngubito, spontaneously returned to civilian life as '*volontaires*', despite keeping their weapons.

Finally, while armed groups strengthened their grip on North Kalehe in 2019, a third key security development consisted of several demobilization attempts by former Raia Mutomboki and Mai-Mai groups, such as Ngubito, Shukuru and Butachibera. While the result of recent national elections largely explained these groups' new will to demobilize, and as the new president, Felix Tshisekedi, expressed his desire for peace in the eastern DRC, the demobilization attempts largely failed because they were ill-prepared and not taken seriously by the government. These security developments are described in chapter 2 of the report.

Beyond the description of the most recent armed groups' reconfiguration in North Kalehe, the report develops an analysis of what we refer to as 'armed groups politics' in a context of 'no-war-no-peace' (or *la paix des armes* situation) at the local level and a fast-changing political landscape at the national level, especially following the political transition in Kinshasa and a concomitant political reconfiguration of patronage networks. From this perspective, we look first at how armed groups project their authority on territories and populations in the context of a competitive socio-political environment in which many stakeholders claim authority. While the presence of armed groups generally reflects a weakening of local authorities (both state and customary), we identify and analyse some key differences in the strategies of armed groups to impose and exert their authority on the territories and populations they control. We show that each situation is unique, as it leads to a specific *modus vivendi* or no-war-no-peace settlement between armed groups, local authorities, and the broader population. Secondly, we analyse how the presence of armed groups also creates new opportunities for civilians, especially community leaders and political entrepreneurs, to reassert influence, and therefore remodel the existing patronage networks in which armed groups are embedded.¹ This is particularly the case as politicians from all sides had to position themselves in relation to the new regime in 2019. This political dynamic was prominent in various attempts by armed groups to demobilize in Kalehe in 2019. Linked to this, we also describe how armed groups interfere with broader conflict dynamics between communities. This political analysis of armed group dynamics is developed in chapter 3.

¹ Our analysis of armed group politics draws on the argument developed in Hoffmann et al. 2016; Hoffmann & Vlassenroot 2014.

The 2019 security developments in North Kalehe took place in a specific context characterized by key features of longer-term conflict dynamics. First, the area of North Kalehe is extremely remote, as no roads provide access to its forests and highlands. Second, the presence of the state, and especially of the national army, has been particularly weak if not totally absent from North Kalehe and especially the Ziralo area, for many years. In 2019, armed groups once more seized the opportunity to occupy new territory in North Kalehe, as FARDC elements withdrew and left the area empty of any military presence. Third, the historical root causes of conflict remain important drivers of conflict and security dynamics to the present day. Tensions over land and power between local communities, especially between so-called autochthonous communities (Tembo) and Kinyarwanda-speakers, continue to fuel accusations and antagonistic narratives on both sides. Every incident is reinterpreted through the lenses of a fierce competition between Hutu, Havu and Tembo for the control of territory and power in Kalehe. These root causes of conflict have been fuelling violence and armed group mobilization since the early 1990s. The return of Tutsi refugees who had fled North Kalehe in 1994 is yet another issue that has great potential for reigniting conflict and armed mobilization. Chapter 1 of the report offers insights into the background of the conflict in order to place the more recent conflict dynamics of North Kalehe into a broader perspective.

Finally, chapter 4 considers recent interventions to bring more peace and stability to North Kalehe. This chapter focuses in particular on stabilization projects (called IRF1 and IFR2, for Immediate Response Fund) implemented by a consortium of international and Congolese organizations from 2014 to 2018, as part of the new stabilization approach led by the Government Stabilization and Reconstruction Plan for Eastern DRC (STAREC) and its international counterpart, the International Stabilization and Security Support Strategy (ISSSS). The chapter also analyses opportunities for and challenges to a new interprovincial DDR commission that has been created largely as a result of the stabilization projects.

Throughout the four chapters, the main argument elaborated in this report is the importance of the long history of politics of armed (de)mobilization and insecurity in Kalehe territory. We argue that armed groups, including

foreign ones, do not evolve in isolation from their social and political context but are rather deeply embedded in patronage networks and social, political and economic dynamics playing out from the very local to the national and regional levels. This is one of the main reasons armed groups have not disappeared but only entered a cycle of seemingly endless reconfiguration over the past 25 years, of which the security changes observed in 2019 are nothing but the latest incarnation. As a consequence, we argue that no military operation, and no DDR or stabilization effort, will have positive results without taking into account the very political and inextricable character of armed groups and conflict dynamics in this area.

This report is based on a 12-day field research trip to North Kalehe, specifically Minova, Numbi, Shanje, Chambombo, Tushunguti, Lumbishi, and Bukavu, by two associate researchers in October 2019. During field research, 30 interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with 57 area stakeholders and community members, including members of armed groups such as Kirikicho. Three complementary interviews were carried out in Goma. The material collected during the field mission was collectively analysed and discussed during a three-day workshop in Bukavu, together with the researchers and other colleagues.

2 |

Background of conflict in North Kalehe

The first chapter develops the background of the conflict in North Kalehe. It first introduces the geographic and cultural context of North Kalehe from a historical perspective, then shows how colonial authorities deeply reorganized local societies in North Kalehe at the administrative and political levels, which planted the seeds of future tensions and conflict. It then presents how these long-time local tensions were aggravated in the 1990s and spiralled into a regional war in the aftermath of the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda and the start of the Congo wars. A final paragraph addresses the flaws of the peace agreements and the post-war settlement, which contributed to the continued presence of armed groups in North Kalehe to the present day.

2.1 The conflictual heritage of the colonial period

The history of the Kalehe region is key to understanding the current conflict dynamic, as some of today's cleavages date back to the (pre) colonial era.² Predating colonial times, the north of Kalehe territory could be divided into two distinct cultural areas separated by the Mitumba mountains: to the east, Lake Kivu, where lakeshore cultures developed; to the west, the forest on the lower Congo River basin where hunter-gatherer cultures developed and populations were highly mobile. Thus the 'local communities' to the west were not based on political power so much as ritual coherence. Indeed, the

² The historical background of conflict in South Kivu and Kalehe has been described in several reports and articles. See APC 2009; APC & Life & Peace Institute 2012; Vlassenroot 2013; Hoffman et al. 2016.

Batembo communities west of the Mitumba mountains were divided into six distinct units, with considerable interaction among them and little hierarchy.

By the time of colonial arrival in the twentieth century, the area was defined by six such communities, each focused on a mwami, a ritual authority, who represented the communitarian identity. From north to south, these Tembo polities included Bufumandu (now in North Kivu); Ziralo; Mubugu; Buloho; and Kalima; the sixth Tembo community, located to the west of Ziralo, was Walowa-Loanda (in what is now Walikale District).³

Violence and armed resistance in the region dates back to the mid-19th century, first in relation to the east coast traders in search of slaves, then to the forced incorporation of local inhabitants into the colonial economic framework, especially through forced labour.⁴ Beyond such violence, two key interventions by colonial authorities had drastic consequences for the future of conflict dynamics in northern Kalehe. The first was the reorganization of Kalehe's political structures, as the Belgians looked for ways to govern the local population. Following an administrative policy of creating larger administrative units called *chefferies* or *secteurs*, the Belgians incorporated various Tembo chiefs into the Havu chiefdom, placing them under the authority of the Havu mwami (chief).⁵ This decision informed the future administrative organization of the area, which would later become the Kalehe territory. As such, it marginalized Tembo customary authorities from the exercise of local authority. As a consequence, Tembo leaders emerged leading up to Congo's 1960 independence and organized themselves to advocate for their own political entity. This triggered resistance by Havu chiefs, for a Tembo political entity would deprive them of most of what is now Kalehe territory. This political claim by the Tembo was later expressed as a claim for Bunyakiri territory.

When in 1996 the AFDL entered Kalehe on its way to Kisangani and Kinshasa, Laurent-Désiré Kabila succeeded in rallying the Tembo community only after promising its leaders they would be granted their own Bunyakiri territory after an AFDL victory. Only on this basis did the Tembo leaders agree to join

³ Personal communication with David Newbury.

⁴ See Hoffmann & Vlassenroot 2014, p. 206.

⁵ See Hoffmann & Vlassenroot 2016, pp. 14-15.

a movement that they saw with great mistrust for including in its ranks many Congolese Kinyarwanda-speakers and Rwandans. While later, during the RCD war, the Tembo mostly joined the Mai-Mai movement under the leadership of General David Padiri Bulenda, and opposed any interference from Rwanda or Kinyarwanda-speakers in Congolese affairs, it was the RCD-Goma – a Rwanda-backed rebellion – and not the AFDL, that officially created the Bunyakiri territory (together with the Minembwe territory), in a bid to rally the local population to its cause by bringing the administration closer to the population. Despite Tembo resistance, the Bunyakiri territory was abolished in the aftermath of the 2003 peace agreement, and the Bunyakiri population was (officially at least) placed back under Kalehe territory authority, which remains largely perceived as under the influence of the Havu.⁶

The claim for a Bunyakiri territory resurfaced during the 2018 electoral campaign, not as an open message from Tembo candidates but rather in closed-door meetings of Tembo leaders. The Tembo *mutualité* called *Buuma bwa Batembo* is one of the main arenas for Tembo leaders to discuss matters connected to the political positioning of their community, among which the issue of the Bunyakiri territory is paramount. Tembo leaders continue to develop strategies to influence the way the decentralization process is being rolled out in Kalehe and Bunyakiri and advocate for more autonomy and political recognition. Tembo claims for more autonomy have always been met by fierce opposition by Havu chiefs. Recently, in the context of a political transition and the negotiations over political posts in Kalehe, Havu leaders opposed the nomination of Tembo leaders for certain political posts and claimed they did not feel adequately represented. While Tembo claims for political autonomy date back more than half a century, they are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The question, though, is how exactly and to what extent an agreement can be reached among different leaders of Kalehe, especially Havu and Hutu.

⁶ The administrative office of the Kalehe territory is in Kalehe, near Lake Kivu, which is a one-day drive from Bulambika, the centre of Bunyakiri in the Havu customary chiefdom.

2.2 ‘Migrants’ versus ‘autochthonous’

The second crucial socio-political reorganization introduced by the colonial authorities relates to the migration of Rwandans to North and South Kivu, starting in the 1930s in Masisi, as colonial authorities needed labour for plantations. In the 1950s, this migration extended to the highlands of Kalehe, where colonial plantations also existed, then continued after independence, as Rwandan refugees fled political and ethnic turmoil in Rwanda and settled in Masisi or Kalehe. In the highlands, this migration had a major demographic impact, as the Banyarwanda became the majority in most areas they occupied. Later, they advocated for political autonomy from customary leaders of autochthonous communities on whom they depended to access land and to whom they were obliged to pay tribute. These claims were met by strong opposition. In the 1980s, tensions between Banyarwanda and other communities in North and South Kivu soared as a more restrictive new law on nationality (1981) questioned the nationality of the Banyarwanda, and their civil, political and land rights in what was then called Zaïre.

The 1991 *Conférence nationale souveraine* (CNS) and the subsequent *recensement des nationaux* was a turning point in these tensions; the census was violently opposed by Kinyarwanda-speakers. As communities felt increasingly threatened, each began arming itself: the MAGRIVI (*Mutualité des agriculteurs des Virunga*), initially a Hutu farmers' association, helped organize Hutu militias, while the so-called autochthonous communities (Hunde, Nyanga, Tembo) initiated local militia called Katuko and Batiri.⁷ Violence first escalated in Ntoto, Walikale territory, in 1993, as local militia attacked Banyarwanda in a market. It quickly spread to Masisi territory in large-scale interethnic fighting, and to Kalehe.⁸

In Kalehe, interethnic violence contributed to creating ethnically homogenous territories. Tembo and Banyarwanda were previously rather mixed: Tembo from the highlands fled to the Bunyakiri area (Bulambika, Bitale) while the Banyarwanda remained in the highlands. At that time, the Banyarwanda refused to pay the customary tribute (*redevances coutumières*) to the Tembo

⁷ See APC 2009, pp. 16-19.

⁸ See Hoffmann et al. 2016.

leaders of Ziralo and advocated for their own customary entity. Havu customary chiefs were more inclined to accept Banyarwanda's claims for autonomy, in a bid to secure their own authority over the Ziralo groupement, which so far had been under the authority of Tembo chiefs. Havu Mwami Raymond Sangara therefore recognized the existence of the Numbi groupement for the Banyarwanda as long as the Banyarwanda recognized the authority of the Buhavu chiefdom and paid customary tribute to the Havu mwami. This 'transfer' of authority from an important part of the Ziralo groupement to the Buhavu chiefdom had been detrimental to the chief of Ziralo, a Tembo customary leader, who lost control of five hills with abundant mineral deposits. Although Buhavu control over Numbi was never officially recognized by provincial and national authorities, and faces opposition by Tembo leaders, it remains the status quo to the present today. If Tembo leaders continue to oppose the control of Mwami Sangara over the village of Numbi, the balance of power is not in their favour, as Mwami Sangara, a former RCD dignitary, distributed huge plots of land to key ex-RCD heavyweights, military officers, businesspeople, and other national strongmen against whom Tembo chiefs had no means to counter their demands. This is a good example of how patronage politics, as opposed to state legal provisions, has been used in North Kalehe as a way to consolidate particular interests. In turn, it has contributed to entrenching anti-Banyarwanda sentiment among the Tembo, but also strengthened Tembo resentment against the Buhavu.

2.3 The Congo Wars and the flaws of the post-war settlement

The arrival in eastern Congo of over a million Rwandan (Hutu) refugees in 1994 fostered the existing dynamics of armed violence in North Kalehe, as armed ex-FAR elements had crossed the border and contributed to the militarization of local communities, especially the Congolese Hutus of Kalehe who allied with their Rwandan counterparts. The main consequence was that the Tutsi families who had inhabited the Kalehe highlands fled to Rwanda, leaving the land they had occupied to neighbours or selling it for a cheap price. To the present day, the return of these Tutsi refugees is met by strong opposition and anti-Tutsi and anti-Rwandan invective, for two reasons: first, the number

of refugees entitled to return is an open question and has been the object of exaggeration and political manipulation, raising fears of a new invasion by Rwandans; second, the people who occupy the land abandoned by the refugees have no incentive to give it back to the previous owners.

The two Congo Wars reinforced the militarization of local communities in Kalehe, propelling the development of the Mai-Mai, first adhering to the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL) (1996–97), and opposing the RCD rebellion (1998–2003) for its backing by Rwanda, while most of the Banyarwanda adhered to the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) as a way to secure their Congolese nationality and gain autonomy from so-called autochthonous communities. The wars, therefore, aggravated the animosity between communities, as fighting between belligerents overlapped with ethnic violence more broadly. The Congo Wars were a typical example of how regional dynamics of war and violence were reappropriated by local stakeholders to develop new alliances and foster partisan agendas.

The 2003 Sun City Agreement peace settlement was in many ways a no-war-no-peace settlement, given the flaws in its implementation, and has been in force to the present day. The integration of former rebel commanders and militiamen into a professional, integrated national army proved difficult and challenging, while reintegration into civilian life often offered few economic prospects to keep former combatants from returning to the bush. In addition, the root causes of the conflict – land and power – that were exacerbated by the wars, were never addressed by the peace agreement; nor was the animosity between communities, especially between the so-called autochthonous and Kinyarwanda-speakers. No transitional justice process was ever implemented after the Congo Wars, despite the heavy civilian toll. Finally, and crucially, the electoral democracy launched in 2006 has not succeeded in transforming the clientelist, neo-patrimonial and corrupt nature of governance in Congo. Rather, the Kabila era intensified the state's patrimonial character.

Neither the 2003 and other peace deals, such as the Goma Peace Conference, the Amani Programme, and the March 23 peace agreement in 2009, nor the

many military operations to neutralize armed groups, were successful in dismantling militias in North and South Kivu. As the Kabila government increasingly lost legitimacy, many of the Mai-Mai groups in the Kivus switched from anti-Kigali rhetoric to criticizing Kinshasa. This situation of no-war-no-peace continues today in many parts of eastern Congo, as armed groups have increasingly fragmented since 2013 (and the March 23 Movement, or M23, has disappeared), forming a more complex militarized landscape, with smaller armed groups gaining autonomy and fostering short-lived, volatile alliances amongst themselves.

In North Kalehe and Bunyakiri, several local and foreign armed groups remained active, such as the Mai-Mai Kirikicho, the group led by Colonel 106 (a former Mai-Mai leader who joined the army in 2012 and was sentenced for war crimes in 2014), and the FDLR. While each of these groups controlled its own territory, they often collaborated rather than fighting each other. At times, even the relationship between these armed groups and the FARDC was fairly peaceful, as some FARDC officers preferred dialogue over military operations in a bid to win them over for DDR or DDRRR programmes.⁹ This changed in 2012 when the Raia Mutomboki phenomenon was sparked in Bunyakiri – chasing the FDLR as well as Kirikicho and Nyatura Kalume from the area.¹⁰

⁹ See Life & Peace Institute 2006.

¹⁰ See Hoffmann et al. 2016.

La paix des armes: **a continuous reconfiguration** **of armed groups**

In 2019, many changes in the security dynamics of North Kalehe resulted in a reconfiguration of armed groups' presence and relations. Key developments were the return of Mai-Mai Kirikicho and Nyatura Kalume, in coalition, to Ziralo (North Kalehe) in early 2019, but also the arrival of the CNRD in Kalehe's highlands, which merged the separated CNRD units from Itombwe and Masisi. While this 'return of new armed groups' to the Ziralo area illustrates a strengthening of armed groups' grip on North Kalehe, other armed groups responded to calls for demobilization under President Tshisekedi. Raymond Kabishula 'Ngubito', the leader of a long-standing Mai-Mai group in Ziralo, as well as Shukuru and Butachibera, two Raia Mutomboki leaders from Bunyakiri, temporarily surrendered with a significant number of troops.

Throughout most of 2019, and until the November launch of military FARDC operations against the CNRD, these developments did not lead to clashes between armed groups or involving the army (except a clash between the FARDC and the CNRD in a mining area), despite tensions and opposition between the newcomers, the larger Raia Mutomboki movement and communities (especially the Tembo). Instead, cohabitation and collaboration took place between armed groups: Nyatura Kalume helped forge ties between Kirikicho and the CNRD. Stakeholders ranging from community leaders, provincial authorities, FARDC commanders and MONUSCO played an important role in appeasing tensions and cautioned the Raia Mutomboki groups keen to attack the CNRD, among general fears that confrontation would lead to civilian bloodshed. This situation of 'no-war-no-peace' but high volatility and unpredictability has been dubbed by interlocutors as *la paix des armes*, a

situation where ‘everything is possible’ and ‘everything could change at any moment’, meaning that armed confrontation and attacks on civilians could ensue anytime.

A *paix des armes* situation is nothing new in North Kalehe, an area where multiple armed groups have been roaming, collaborating, fighting and cohabiting with local communities for more than two decades. Kirikicho, for instance, has been an active Mai-Mai leader since the early 1990s. Along these lines, a Congolese observer quipped, ‘Did Kirikicho come back to Ziralo? He actually never left Ziralo, but just took some holidays in neighbouring Waloaloanda in Masisi where he enjoyed an alliance with the Mai-Mai Kifuafula of Delphin [Mbaenda].’ As for the CNRD, its arrival resembles the historical occupation of parts of Ziralo and Bunyakiri by the FDLR until they were violently expelled by the Raia Mutomboki in 2012.

This chapter presents the main security developments of 2019 and outlines how they reconfigured the security landscape of North Kalehe in the shape of a *paix des armes*. The launch of military operations against the CNRD and other armed groups in November 2019 provoked yet another reconfiguration of this landscape, prompting the CNRD to flee towards Kalonge and into Kahuzi-Biega National Park. The operations also took place in a context of rapprochement between the DRC and Rwanda, and of so-called preparations for regional military operations against local and foreign armed groups in the Kivus and Ituri, potentially involving the armies of four neighbouring countries – but all of which fell apart again by late 2019. In the face of these developments, the military disruption of the *paix des armes* situation in North Kalehe reflects similar dynamics in other areas of South and North Kivu, and Ituri.

3.1 The return of Mai-Mai Kirikicho and Nyatura Kalume to Ziralo

Mai-Mai Kirikicho, named after its Tembo leader Kirikicho Mirimba Mwanamayi, is the longest-standing Mai-Mai group in Bunyakiri, and one of the oldest in the Kivus overall.¹¹ Kirikicho started his military career as early as 1992 in the Katuko groups mobilizing from Tembo and among Nyanga youths in Kalehe and Walikale in opposition to MAGRIVI, the Hutu militia organized to defend Kinyarwanda-speakers' claims to land in these areas (see chapter 1). While he refused to join the AFDL because of the Rwandan influence in this rebellion, Kirikicho played an important role within the more structured Mai-Mai movement led by General Padiri, which opposed the Rwandan-backed RCD rebellion, and acted as S3 (*chargé des opérations*) of the Mai-Mai in the Second Congo War (1998–2003).¹² Kirikicho resisted many attempts at demobilization or integration into the national army, such as in 2003 and 2008. A hardliner and hardly predictable Mai-Mai leader, Kirikicho's fief is Tushunguti in the Ziralo groupement. He is the longest-serving Tembo Mai-Mai leader, and certainly one of the most resilient and flexible commanders in the area.

After another failed attempt at dialogue to broker a deal with the government for Kirikicho's integration into the army in 2012, Kirikicho began losing the support of community leaders, as his supporters were harassing the population and perceived as an unnecessary burden to the community. Then the Raia Mutomboki phenomenon took root in Bunyakiri, and with that an anti-rwandophone and anti-FDLR agenda flared up in the community. As the Raia Mutomboki chased out the FDLR from Bunyakiri, Kirikicho – who had once collaborated with the FDLR – faced opposition. Clashes between his group and Raia Mutomboki factions as well as Ngubito occurred in mid-2014,¹³ leading to Kirikicho leaving Ziralo. He crossed to North Kivu where he had connections with the Mai-Mai Kifuafua in Waloaloanda (Walikale) and Ufamandu (Masisi).

¹¹ See <https://kivusecurity.org/about/armedGroups> (accessed 22 November 2019).

¹² See Mulimbi 2014.

¹³ See Radio Okapi, <https://www.radiookapi.net/actualite/2015/08/03/sud-kivu-plus-de-5-000-menages-de-deplaces-beneficient-des-semences-ziralo> (accessed 21 November 2019) and interviews conducted in Bukavu and Bunyakiri in October 2019.

Together with Kirikicho, the Nyatura group of Kalume that was occupying parts of the Lumbishi area was also expelled by the Raia Mutomboki, and joined the alliance of Kirikicho and Kifuafua. While Mai-Mai and Hutu militias were once allied in PARECO (*Patriotes Résistants Congolais*), which fought Laurent Nkunda's *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) in 2006–09,¹⁴ Mai-Mai and Nyatura groups are usually hostile to each other. Matias Kalume Kage, the leader of Nyatura Kalume, was a PARECO commander until 2009, when he joined the national army. However, he defected from the army after the regimentation process of the FARDC, as he was disappointed by the rank he had been given, and went back to his home village of Lumbishi to launch his own Nyatura group.¹⁵

Internal rifts within the Kifuafua (between Delphin Mbaenda and its deputies Shalio and Maachano) helped put an end to the alliance with Kirikicho, who was again losing control and influence. He decided with Kalume to go back to Ziralo to prepare their groups' integration into the army. In the meantime, their groups merged in a bid to strengthen their demands for army rankings and other perks during the negotiations: Kirikicho, a self-proclaimed general and the most notorious rebel leader in the area, became the commander of the coalition and Kalume his deputy. Either, however, maintained significant autonomy from the other, and it seems their alliance did not survive the military operations against CNRD in November 2019.

The return of the two groups was well prepared with local community leaders and announced to FARDC members deployed in Ziralo. At the end of 2018, both Kirikicho and Kalume peacefully returned to Tushunguti, and only one clash with Ngubito occurred, early November 2018.¹⁶ By then, the Ngubito group was known as the *volontaires* in Ziralo, meaning that they were integrated into civilian life and usually farming their land but still kept weapons

¹⁴ The PARECO was a broad coalition of armed groups originating in the Hunde, Hutu, Nyanga and Tembo communities, while the Hutus provided much of the armed force of the coalition. For more information on the PARECO, see Stearns 2013.

¹⁵ See Kivu Security Tracker, <https://kivusecurity.org/about/armedGroups> (accessed 22 November 2019).

¹⁶ See <https://www.laprunellerdc.info/2018/11/05/kalehe-affrontements-le-week-end-dernier-entre-deux-factions-des-miliciens-a-ziralo/> (accessed 22 November 2019).

at home, ready to operate. The lack of any formal DDR process contributed to blurring the distinction between civilians and militiamen in the area.

While they were discussing the terms of army integration with FARDC members based in Ziralo, Kirikicho and Kalume benefited from a sudden withdrawal of the military, as troop reinforcements were needed in the highlands of Minembwe and Uvira in early 2019, where fighting broke out between Mai-Mai of so-called ‘autochthonous’ (Fuliuro, Bembe and Nyindu) and Banyamulenge (Tutsi from South Kivu) armed groups, involving foreign armed groups and neighbouring countries. As a result, the FARDC deployed in Ziralo in 2017 after years of absence in the area, left again, creating a military void beneficial to local armed groups. Kirikicho and Kalume seized this opportunity to re-establish themselves and Kalume redeployed to Lumbishi in March 2019, allowing for more autonomy from Kirikicho.

3.2 The installation of the CNRD in North Kalehe

The second key development that unfolded in 2019 relates to the arrival of the CNRD in the highlands of Kalehe, a moment of key significance in a context of deep-seated tensions between Kinyarwanda-speakers and other communities of North Kalehe. The long and at times brutal occupation of Bunyakiri by the FDLR has left vivid grievances against the Rwandan group among local populations, especially among the Tembo. The return of Rwandan Hutu rebels in the form of the CNRD, an FDLR splinter group, also had an impact on the ethnic equilibrium between Congolese Hutu on one side and Tembo and Havu on the other. If the presence of CNRD increased tensions between communities, it also heightened the risks for civilian protection in North Kalehe.

The CNRD arrived in Kalehe in two waves – one from South Kivu, the other from North Kivu – intended to come together at Kalehe. The first wave arrived in December 2018 and January 2019 from North Kivu, as the CNRD was under military pressure from the NDC-Rénové of Guidon Shimiray: at the end of 2019, NDC-R elements in coalition with John Love’s Nyatura attacked the

headquarters of the CNRD in Faringa (Rutshuru territory).¹⁷ These CNRD first moved to Masisi but were pursued and attacked by NDC-R, and continued to Kalehe. The second wave of CNRD elements arrived from the Uvira and Mwenga territories in April 2019. While the local population wondered why the FARDC and MONUSCO did not stop this mass movement, the UN Group of Experts reported various clashes with FARDC and local armed groups during the CNRD's journey to Kalehe, in particular involving the North Kivu-originating wave.¹⁸

The CNRD's arrival was interpreted as a show of force by local populations. The UN Group of Experts gathered testimony from combatants recounting that they took as many weapons and as much ammunition as possible when fleeing their strongholds in Rutshuru, using dependents to carry it all. Local testimonies also mentioned that civilians, including women and children, were used as scouts to avoid being spotted by the FARDC. Most dependents moved between two main groups of combatants to ensure their 'protection'. Local testimonies in Ziralo mentioned that the group coming from Rutshuru used a local Congolese scout to get to Ziralo and indicated on which hills they could settle.

Estimates of the number of CNRD elements vary greatly from one source to another, but all agree they range in the thousands, stationed in the remote hills of Buhovu, Bibatama, Kitindiro, Rutare, and Cumuyaga in the Ziralo groupement, although the repartition between combatants and dependents is unclear. Local civil society activists affirmed, based on distributing mosquito nets to the CNRD and their dependents, they might be as many as 45,000, but even including all civilian dependents this figure is likely to be exaggerated. A local FARDC officer mentioned approximately 12,000. The UN Group of Experts reported the movement of two CNRD groups of 1,000 and 2,000 combatants, but these main groups were later joined by several smaller groups. The CNRD chose a remote location to settle: a few hills covered with forest, allegedly owned by a Tutsi landlord, in a remote part of Ziralo's highlands and only accessible by foot; it takes several hours to walk to the nearest village. This isolation is strategic for a group that recently

¹⁷ See UN 2019.

¹⁸ See UN 2019.

faced military attacks. Moreover, the area is mainly inhabited by Congolese Hutu potentially favourable to the CNRD. Lastly, there was virtually no army presence in the area, the closest FARDC outpost being in Chambombo, several hours away by foot, held by a mere dozen FARDC at that time (this later changed with FARDC operations against the CNRD).

While the arrival of so many heavily armed combatants alarmed local populations in Kalehe, the CNRD's behaviour has been a key factor in reassuring civilians and avoiding clashes with local armed groups, such as the Raia Mutomboki. Like the FDLR in the past, the CNRD communicated a peaceful message to the local population, claiming they did not want any fighting but to peacefully live alongside local communities. In addition, they announced they would not stay for more than three months in the Kalehe highlands, as they were looking to go back to Rwanda (a claim that sounds fictitious in the short term given the absence of dialogue with the Rwandan government).

The CNRD presence also prompted various initiatives by Congolese authorities and MONUSCO. The provincial government, the FARDC and MONUSCO organized a mission with community leaders to meet the CNRD leadership in order to better understand the group's intentions and assess risks for civilian protection. The main fear was that Raia Mutomboki would mobilize and attack the CNRD, a dangerous move that could prompt retaliations on civilians from CNRD combatants. However, Raia Mutomboki remained calm as FARDC officers, provincial authorities and community leaders worked with the population in order to deflate potential tensions and clashes. MONUSCO also built a Temporary Operating Base (TOB) close to the main CNRD camp to monitor the security situation in the area and the group's movements, while locally based humanitarian organizations distributed food and non-food assistance to the dependents of the group and provided medical care. Local populations, however, quickly saw this assistance as complicity with the CNRD on the part of national authorities and the international community (through MONUSCO).

Kirikicho and Kalume also took initiatives before the CNRD's arrival in Kalehe. In March 2019, they organized a meeting with community leaders of Tushunguti in order to discuss the challenges linked to the CNRD's presence and the behaviour to adopt, as well as the potential prospects for their

own demobilization.¹⁹ The relations between the CNRD, Nyatura Kalume and Mai-Mai Kirikicho were quickly established, as Kalume, a Congolese Hutu, acted as an intermediary between the CNRD and Kirikicho. Meetings between CNRD and Kirikicho officers were organized in the area of Lumbishi, in Nyatura Kalume positions, in order to ensure good relations and avoid tensions. During an interview, Kirikicho claimed the presence of the CNRD was not his business and rather pointed to the Congolese government and Rwanda as the main stakeholders responsible for the issue and its resolution. The cohabitation of Kirikicho, Kalume and the CNRD, and the acceptance of the Raia Mutomboki allowed for the security situation of North Kalehe to remain calm for most of 2019 in the form of a *paix des armes* between armed groups in the absence of the FARDC. That situation changed in November 2019 as the FARDC redeployed to North Kalehe and launched a heavy military operation against the CNRD, reshuffling once more the security balances between armed actors in the area.

3.3 Military operations against the CNRD and other armed groups

After redeploying a large number of troops into North Kalehe in November 2019, the national army launched an offensive against the CNRD, causing the displacement of thousands of civilians. The prospect of military operations had raised fears among populations living near the CNRD's recently established camps: civilian Congolese Hutu were afraid of being confused with CNRD dependents, and Congolese Nyatura combatants of Kalume's group feared being considered CNRD troops. Moreover, as the past had shown, attacks against the FDLR significantly raised the risks of retaliation against civilians. In 2009, during the Umoja Wetu military operations launched by the FARDC and the Rwandan army, FDLR units hit back and killed scores of civilians they accused to be traitors. In Ziralo, between January and July 2009, the FDLR attacked 19 villages and killed at least 84 civilians.²⁰ For the year 2009, a Human Rights Watch report counted over 700 killings of Congolese

¹⁹ See APC 2019.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch 2009, p. 72.

civilians by the FDLR across North and South Kivu. Moreover, numerous Rwandan Hutu refugees were killed in the context of these operations. With these brutal memories in mind, the population of Ziralo had every reason to worry as military operations against the CNRD were launched.

While the situation remains confused on the ground at the time of wrapping up this report, it seems the military operations have had some positive results and limited impact on civilians. First, according to local sources, the CNRD, as opposed to the FDLR ten years ago, did not carry out much retaliation against civilians. However, collateral civilian casualties occasionally happened, especially as CNRD elements crossed through villages while retreating. Thousands of civilians had to flee their villages and took refuge in adjacent areas. Second, the CNRD preferred to flee rather than confront the FARDC, limiting the intensity of fighting and the toll on civilians. The CNRD completely evacuated the hills they had settled in Ziralo for North Kivu (Walikale and South Masisi), Kalonge (south of Kalehe territory) and Kahuzi-Biega National Park, a convenient sanctuary for armed groups. CNRD combatants also left behind hundreds of dependents (650 according to a Congolese NGO staff active in Kalehe), many of whom were rounded up by populations and then brought to Nyamunyuni military base by the FARDC and the UNHCR in order to be repatriated to Rwanda.

The military operations had further consequences on the armed groups in Ziralo. In theory at least, the operations targeted not only the CNRD but all groups. The resulting military pressure seems to have pushed elements of Mai-Mai Kirikicho (about 40)²¹ and Nyatura Kalume (about 100)²² towards demobilization in the days preceding the operations. Kirikicho and Kalume have not surrendered. At the same time, Raia Mutomboki are believed to have supported the FARDC during the operations, a move that risks emboldening their posture in Bunyakiri and Kalehe.

²¹ See Radio Okapi, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2019/11/15/actualite/politique/sud-kivu-reddition-denviron-40-mai-mai-kirikicho-munis-darmes-de> (accessed 6 December 2019).

²² See https://www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-60668_sud_kivu_reddition_de_100_elements_nyatura_a_kalehe.html (accessed 6 December 2019).

Yet it is too early to draw conclusions on the military operations against the CNRD. While it is clear that they prompted a new (and ongoing) reconfiguration of armed groups in the area, it is hard to understand how it will play out in the longer run. If the CNRD has left the hills of Ziralo, the group has not fully disbanded but rather split into several units and fled to even less accessible areas. This could worsen security threats in and around Kahuzi-Biega National Park, and on the road that connects Bunyakiri to Bukavu via the park. Moreover, the military operations have not solved but rather displaced and potentially aggravated the CNRD issue. Still, the separation of hundreds of Rwandan refugees from the CNRD might be a positive result of the operations, opening up an avenue for their potential repatriation to Rwanda. The impact of the operations on relations between communities, especially between the Tembo and the Hutus, remains to be assessed.

3.4 Failed DDR initiatives in North Kalehe

In the meantime, current DDR initiatives in the area have been marred by failure. The Mai-Mai of Raymond Kabishula 'Ngubito' is a case in point, as are the Raia Mutomboki of Shukuru Kawanya and Butachibera. All of them surrendered in 2019 but at least significant numbers of their surrendering troops eventually returned. On one hand, this highlights the window of opportunity for new DDR efforts. While the main objective for local armed groups moved away from the fight against an external aggressor (Rwanda) towards the fight against the government of President Kabila, the latter's departure from office reshuffled the cards. The inaugural speech of President Tshisekedi was interpreted as a call for peace by armed group leaders willing to seize new opportunities. Moreover, Kalehe politicians needed to get the new president's attention in order to position themselves in a new and still uncertain political landscape.

THE FAILED DEMOBILIZATION OF NGUBITO: A TYPICAL CASE OF DDR UNPREPAREDNESS

In March 2019, around 400 combatants known as '*volontaires*', led by Raymond Kabishula's Mai-Mai group, gathered in Kalungu village near Numbi, with the aim of joining the national army. While the trigger for this

was Tshisekedi's assuming the presidency, two stabilization projects (IRF1 and IRF2, for Immediate Response Fund) implemented between 2014 to 2018 had focused on making community leaders advocate for demobilization. These projects allowed strengthening the acceptance of DDR within communities and among armed groups. In the framework of these projects, dozens of weapons had been surrendered to MONUSCO or the FARDC by individuals. Now, in March 2019, it was not individuals but a whole group that surrendered weapons. However, the roughly 400 combatants gave up only some 16 guns or rifles, while most of them brought machetes, spears or other blade weapons.

Ngubito's troops were regrouped in the Nyamunyunyi FARDC base next to Bukavu's airport, but the process lacked support and living conditions were harsh. Women and men lacked food, water, medical and basic services. As a consequence, the vast majority fled the camp and went back to Ziralo by their own means. In the end only a dozen troops joined the base. While Ngubito's main objective is to join the army, it is unlikely his demands to be given a high rank will be met. Previous army integration programmes have led to vicious circles of mobilization in a bid to acquire ranks in the national army, impacting heavily on FARDC cohesion and internal chains of command. Moreover, integrated militia leaders rarely have the basic qualifications to serve as commissioned officers. Ngubito and his remaining elements were offered military training in the DDR camp in Kasai, allegedly to make them believe they would be integrated later. Ngubito was then told he did not satisfy the criteria for entering the army and was instead offered a place in the national civil service, which effectively meant being sent to farm in state-owned fields far from his home. He took the proposition as an insult and found his way back to Ziralo, where he arrived in late October 2019. The conditions of his journey from Kasai to Kalehe remain unclear but he allegedly benefited from Bunyakiri politicians who covered his travel costs. Since his return to Ziralo, Ngubito has openly and publicly discouraged other armed groups, such as Kirikicho and the Raia Mutomboki, to demobilize and claimed the government had nothing to offer them.

THE DEMOBILIZATION OF SHUKURU AND BUTACHIBERA IN BUNYAKIRI

In late September 2009, Shukuru Kawanya, leader of one of the main Raia Mutomboki groups in Bunyakiri, decided to surrender and join the national army. While he came with only a dozen elements, Shukuru received the support of many Bunyakiri leaders (see below). He spent two weeks in Bulambika, Bunyakiri's main centre for negotiating the conditions of surrender with local FARDC officers. During his stay in Bulambika, the number troops willing to surrender increased to 80. However, according to local sources, many of them were not genuine Raia Mutomboki but youngsters and civilians betting on receiving assistance or a regular income within the army. Presenting himself as a general to the FARDC in Bunyakiri, Shukuru triggered the envy of another Raia Mutomboki leader, Butachibera, who was frustrated by Shukuru taking all the glory of the Raia Mutomboki movement for himself. Butachibera also surrendered just to claim he was the true Raia Mutomboki general in Bunyakiri, sparking tensions with Shukuru. But as he lacked support from community leaders, who had already thrown their weight behind Shukuru, he was snubbed by the FARDC. After two or three days of waiting, Butachibera went back into the bush. Local sources mentioned that several of his elements joined Shukuru because they felt he had more traction to negotiate his surrender. Shukuru and his elements were finally integrated in Nyamunyunyi. However, Shukuru only delivered about ten weapons to the FARDC, while it is widely known in the community that his group had a much larger arsenal. It is unclear if Shukuru's surrender will last longer than Ngubito's.

These three failures illustrate the complexities of DDR and expose the lack of preparedness of both the Congolese government and MONUSCO – despite recent speeches by President Tshisekedi in support of the surrender of armed groups. It is also a stark reminder that the DRC lacks a new DDR programme with well-defined objectives, strategies, and methodologies, despite the ongoing discussions on a next phase.

Armed group politics in North Kalehe

Armed groups are key players in Kalehe's local struggles of power and politics;²³ while they set up strategies to exert authority on territories and populations and tend to replace or undermine formal state authorities, they also face challenges and limitations in a variable and competitive political environment. While the authority of armed groups ultimately relies on the threat of armed violence, they often cannot simply impose brute force on local populations owing to the risk of losing legitimacy. Examples relating to Raia Mutomboki factions have shown that civilian resistance can emerge and provoke a backlash to armed group rule, complicating governance.

Armed groups deal with constraints at various levels: security (the presence of armed competitors, be it the FARDC or competing militias); social (popular support is of key importance for many armed groups to assert control over a territory); economic (groups need resources to sustain themselves); and political (groups need political support to boost their authority). Hence changes in the broader political or security context at the provincial, national or regional level may directly affect them, as they impact the patronage networks they are part of. The first part of this chapter looks into the strategies of armed groups in North Kalehe in 2019, focusing on how they mobilized to bolster their authority in a specific territory and population, and outlines how each armed group developed its own specific strategy to assert power

²³ Several authors insist on these aspects related to armed groups, state authority and local politics, especially for the area of Kalehe. See Hoffmann & Vlassenroot 2014, Hoffmann et al. 2016.

depending on context, constraints and connections with other stakeholders. The second part looks at how armed group presence creates opportunities for community leaders, political entrepreneurs and the population.

4.1 Armed groups and the exercise of power

Based on two weeks of field research in Ziralo, this report argues that – in a volatile context of *la paix des armes* – as multiple armed groups operate alongside each other in the same area, no single actor can just simply and abruptly impose itself, especially if it wants to cohabit peacefully with the local population. Therefore, most armed groups in North Kalehe seem to be negotiating the space (social, political, economic) they can occupy. In other words, armed groups adapt themselves to the current security, political, social and economic situations, where communities as such, through their leaders, remain significant stakeholders. And, even if an armed group has the advantage of possessing weapons, it is usually not in its interest to employ full-scale violence, which could harm its legitimacy down the road. While civilian populations rarely get to choose which armed group arrives when in their area, they can – especially when authority is shared among different actors – influence the ways in which they cohabit with a specific group, as well as armed groups in general. This observation should underpin the broader rationales of any stabilization programme.

MAI-MAI KIRIKICHO:

A ‘CUSTOMARY LEADER’ VYING FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Since he returned to Tushunguti in late 2018, Kirikicho's strategy of ‘governing’ has evolved – mainly due to pressure by local politicians. While the group had a reputation of being harsh towards local populations – even though Kirikicho himself is a Tembo from Tushunguti – harassing local populations and imposing taxes, this changed after Tembo leaders warned Kirikicho against illegal taxation. Subsequently, Kirikicho began ordering his elements not to harass civilians, and stopped taxation. This illustrates how customary leaders and local politicians can influence armed groups in order to adopt a less threatening stance towards communities. Yet, while agreeing not to levy taxes, Kirikicho imposed a systematic collection of food on each market day

in Tushunguti – payable in kind and upon access to the market. This turned out to be a more subtle strategy than cash taxation while supporting his group's subsistence.

A second illustration of authority is the exercise of justice: Kirikicho has become the presiding judge over conflicts and problems ranging from debt and heritage issues to land conflict. Local populations even began calling him Tushunguti's 'new customary chief'. Kirikicho, however, carefully balances the limits of his judicial authority: he does not judge any penal crime but rather arrests suspects and transfers them to the FARDC or the *Police Nationale Congolaise* (PNC). Kirikicho still commands strong clout with Tushunguti's local authorities, be it the PNC, the *Agence Nationale de Renseignement* (ANR) or the *Direction Générale de Migration* (DGM). Often, he decides who is arrested and who may be set free. His involvement in local law enforcement and justice also created frustrations among local state institutions, but no one dares to challenge him openly. However, one local ANR operative complained about the shortage of revenue for the ANR, the PNC, local state services and customary authorities – given that money always comes alongside arrests, administrative services and justice provision. In all that, Kirikicho is involved. This is also true for the actual *chef de groupement*, who operates under the authorization of Kirikicho when engaging in justice provision (and the concomitant revenues).

While state and customary authority in Tushunguti exists on paper, it needs to coexist with Mai-Mai rule in practice. For instance, Kirikicho's presence led to the abolition of the *Conseil local de sécurité* (run by the FARDC, the PNC and local state agents on a weekly basis), as people feared Kirikicho would participate. While this would not change the actual security governance of Tushunguti, local authorities are often wary of being accused of direct collaboration with an armed group by including its leader in the local security committee (revealed via participant lists they are required to send to their superiors). The concentration of authority in the hands of Kirikicho has also changed the character of local political power in Tushunguti, rendering it more autocratic and arbitrary. While authority was previously shared among a variety of stakeholders, local patronage networks in Tushunguti now all converge towards the central figure of Kirikicho. Several observations during

fieldwork highlighted how beneficial it was to have a personal relationship with Kirikicho when living in the area. Examples include a woman trying to use her contact with him to get an acquaintance of hers freed from jail. Upon his return, Kirikicho rearticulated existing patronage networks and managed to position himself at the very nodes of these networks, creating frustration among other local heavyweights (mainly state agents and customary authorities).

However, Kirikicho did not come out of nowhere; he has a long history in the area. While he no longer belongs to the vanguard of the resistance movement – which since 2012 has been driven much more by the Raia Mutomboki movement – Kirikicho hails from the very first wave of the Mai-Mai in North Kalehe in the early 1990s. Over the years, he lost most of community support for having allied with the FDLR and toyed excessively with army integration. Kirikicho increasingly detached himself from the community, becoming unpredictable in his actions. As such, he was perceived as a burden and the *raison d'être* of his armed group was questioned by local populations.

At the same time, Kirikicho has a deep understanding of the political situation and the various interests at stake, which allows him to smartly navigate and negotiate leverage across Tushunguti's political landscape. Returning from Masisi, he managed to directly negotiate with the FARDC locally – owing to the weakness of other armed groups (especially Ngubito) that had opposed him back in 2015. Looking for new support, Kirikicho struck alliances with other armed groups including Mai-Mai Kifufua and Nyatura Kalume. Allying with the latter, widely perceived as an enemy by the Tembo community, was a way of sending a message to Tembo leaders: withholding support for Kirikicho could cost them.

Kirikicho's authority also extends to social and community life, successfully imposing weekly community work locally called *salongo*. In September, Kirikicho mobilized about 700 persons to work on the rehabilitation of a road that connects Tushunguti to broader Kalehe. Even though the idea of road rehabilitation was introduced by a provincial MP and former provincial minister who – alongside NGOs and local leaders – engaged with and provided the community with the tools to work on the road, Kirikicho was key in organizing

the workforce. This example of collaboration between an armed group leader, NGOs, local MPs, and local state authorities illustrates how deeply certain armed groups are embedded in local politics. Yet it also highlights that such embedding comes with coercion: no civilian would dare challenge Kirikicho given his position. Another example of Kirikicho's far-reaching clout: two NGOs provided three motorcycles to transport Kirikicho's wife, on Kirikicho's demand, from the hospital where she gave birth back to her home. It further illustrates how social relations transcend the expected fault lines between civilian organization and armed groups. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Kirikicho and his elements are considered 'children of the village' and live amongst the Tushunguti population. This includes having their own houses and fields, just like the civilian population, although reflecting his true role, Kirikicho's house is the Tushunguti's largest after that of a former provincial minister. At the same time, he is known for farming his fields himself like any other civilian. This close attachment to land renders further local legitimacy, land being a central definer of local identity, and it underscores that Kirikicho and his elements are acting as both armed groups and civilians. The same is true for the *volontaires* of Ngubito, who live as civilians but maintain their weapons, ready to mobilize if necessary. This shows the ambivalence of armed group membership – floating between civilian life and armed mobilization.

NYATURA KALUME: VIOLENT RACKETEERING IN NORTH KALEHE

The case of the Nyatura Kalume exhibits both similarities and differences the Mai-Mai Kirikicho. Like Kirikicho, Kalume returned to his hometown (Lumbishi, near Numbi), which is inhabited by Hutu. However, Kalume shows little restraint when it comes to burdening the local population. Like Nyatura groups in Masisi and Rutshuru, Kalume levies a monthly 1,500 FC tax called *lala salama* ('sleep peacefully') and punishes any adult caught without the *jeton* that proves it has been paid. He also taxes cattle ownership 3,500 FC per month per farm. While this is similar to other Nyatura groups, Kalume and Kirikicho belong to the same coalition and share a similar situation. Like Kirikicho, Kalume interferes in justice provisions and local conflict resolution. He delivers judgment, levies fines, arrests people and hands them over to the PNC. If the PNC wanted a presence in Lumbishi, they would have had no choice but to collaborate with Kalume, but the few PNC elements eventually fled the area, leaving behind virtually no state presence. Both Kirikicho and

Kalume occasionally arrest undisciplined FARDC members and transfer them to Bukavu, as illustrated by cases in early 2019.

However, Nyatura elements are also responsible for arbitrary extortion and acts of banditry in the area of Lumbishi, and Kalume exhibits little concern for discipline among his troops. Local sources reported that Nyatura elements harass and steal from civilians at night. The *lala salama* tax is also used to extort civilians and to punish them for non-payment. Several cases of armed robbery have been reported and the general security situation seems to have deteriorated since Kalume's return. The Nyatura's presence also has an economic impact on the community, as taxes weigh heavily on local populations. A local nurse reported a drastic decline in child vaccination rates around Lumbishi, as residents cannot afford to pay them.

THE CNRD: ISOLATION FROM AND INFILTRATION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION

Until the FARDC's crackdown beginning in November 2019, the CNRD's presence in the Ziralo highlands was yet another strategy by an armed group to exploit a local population. Again, this case is marked by both similarities and differences from other armed groups. While Kirikicho and most of his elements live in Tushunguti among the local population, the CNRD, fearing attacks from other armed groups and the FARDC, settled in forests and farmlands to better control the environs and keep potential intruders at a distance. At the same time, this allowed the CNRD to benefit from local markets and build relations with the local populations on their own terms. This report underscores the strategic choice of the CNRD to set up shop in an area populated by Congolese Hutu, allowing for dissimulation via exploitation of linguistic and cultural affinities. The proximity between the Rwandan and Congolese Hutu has been a subject of tension between communities, as Tembo were quick to accuse Kalehe's Hutu of playing a double game and being complicit with the CNRD. As for Kirikicho and Kalume, the CNRD has become the main provider of justice and security in its area. Local populations from nearby Chambombo go to the CNRD to have conflicts settled, as it has a reputation for swift judgment in comparison to local authorities. The CNRD further undermined local administration, nominating a local *chef de poste* in charge of relations with the population.

The presence of the CNRD and their dependents also had a strong economic impact, as the group began to exploit local resources such as charcoal and timber, causing deforestation. They sold their products in Shanje, in a new market dedicated to the CNRD. CNRD troops and civilian dependents work as day labourers in the fields of the local population. While CNRD combatants went to work with their weapons, they did not carry guns when coming to Chambombo and Shanje, where CNRD officers spent the night. They also arrived at local markets such as in Chambombo and Shanje to buy food, clothes and other commodities in cash, using US dollars. According to local testimony, this happened twice a month, but it is in particular at the end of the month that CNRD officers came to the market with a lot of cash. This has supported the belief that CNRD officers and combatants received monthly salaries. Witnesses testified that CNRD officers receive cash transfers by phone in Shanje. The economic impact of the CNRD presence also increased the prices of goods in the small weekly market and the shops in Chambombo.

4.2 Armed groups, conflict and politics: a reciprocal influence

This section analyses how the presence of armed groups impacts local political life in Kalehe and reconfigures armed mobilization and patronage networks in the area. In a changing political environment, the presence of armed groups creates new opportunities for other stakeholders, as community leaders and political entrepreneurs reposition themselves and try to bolster their own political agenda and interests. At the community level, the presence of armed groups is also used to remobilize based on grievances and ethnic divides. The chapter emphasizes mutually influencing dynamics to explain the impact of armed groups on politics: if armed groups influence the political game, the political game also influences the way armed groups – like any other political stakeholder – position themselves in the broader political arena. In order to illustrate these dynamics in a context of *la paix des armes*, this section looks at two dynamics:

- the impact of the CNRD's arrival in Kalehe, and how this affects tensions between key local leaders;

- the fallout of national elections and concomitant new opportunities for armed groups and political entrepreneurs to assert influence and gain power, particularly through new DDR initiatives.

THE CNRD'S PRESENCE AND THE RISE IN INTERCOMMUNAL TENSIONS

The CNRD's arrival triggered sharp reactions from politicians and community leaders in Kalehe, especially among the Tembo. While populations in Bunyakiri took to the streets against the CNRD's presence in Kalehe, protests were also organized by the Tembo *mutualité* in Bukavu in May 2019 to denounce the situation at the provincial level and request the repatriation of the CNRD to Rwanda.²⁴ While this has been much more evident among the Tembo, the Bunyakiri Tembo were less affected than the Hutu living in the Ziralo highlands. Yet Hutu leaders from Kalehe remained silent and were quickly perceived as complicit by Tembo leaders – even though their silence may have been rooted in fear of retaliation. The disagreement between Hutu and Tembo leaders was made apparent during a social dialogue organized in Kalehe, at the initiative of Tembo leaders, where the representative of the Hutu community refused to sign a joint statement calling for the CNRD's either voluntary or forced repatriation. While the Tembo leaders saw this as further evidence of complicity, Hutu leaders felt that the Tembo were trying to impose their agenda, once more looking for ways to expel the Hutu from the Kalehe highlands.²⁵

In addition to these recriminations, Tembo leaders also tried to keep the Raia Mutomboki in check, who had begun discussing the possibility of attacking the CNRD – a scenario Tembo leaders believed would trigger bloody retaliation. On the side of the Hutu, testimonies from Ziralo suggest they felt empowered by the CNRD's presence. Meanwhile, the 2018 elections had the unprecedented result of two Hutu MPs taking office in the Kalehe highlands (one provincial, one national), and the presence of the CNRD seemed to further embolden the position of the Hutu in Kalehe. Except for the military

²⁴ See <http://www.radiomaendeleo.info/2019/05/24/sud-kivu-la-presence-des-fdlr-a-kalehe-une-source-dinsecurite/> (accessed 27 November 2019). See also Radio Okapi, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2019/05/17/actualite/securite/sud-kivu-la-presence-des-fdlr-inquiete-les-habitants-de-bunyakiri> (accessed 27 November 2019).

²⁵ Interview with members from the Hutu community of Kalehe, Goma, October 2019.

operations later launched by the FARDC, the most important impact of the CNRD presence in Kalehe has not been on the security situation but rather local politics, especially by resurrecting old grievances over land and fears of marginalization between Tembo and Hutu. While the CNRD's presence did not spark significant fighting until November 2019, it contributed to accentuating political agendas in both communities and, thus, to rising local tensions.

ELECTIONS, TRANSITION AND ARMED GROUP POLITICS

The elections and the subsequent transition in Kinshasa had significant impact on armed politics in North Kalehe, as various political entrepreneurs began repositioning themselves within a changing political landscape. As the electoral campaign approached its end in late 2018, competition for votes intensified between the main candidates in North Kalehe. Ziralo – an important demographic hub in North Kalehe – was key in this competition. The strongman of Ziralo, Kirikicho, was courted by at least two candidates in order to help secure votes. Several sources mentioned that Kirikicho leaned more towards one of these candidates. However, he did not deploy troops to the polling station on election day to interfere physically in the ballot. In a context of *la paix des armes*, in which an armed group assumes local authority and the threat of armed violence is inscribed into collective memory, Kirikicho only needed to spread his message to make sure a majority of the population would follow. This partly relied on the fact that the candidate Kirikicho supported was already popular and endorsed by a majority of Tembo leaders in Ziralo.

Once it became clear that Felix Tshisekedi would assume office, an important reconfiguration ensued at all levels of the Congolese political landscape, as politicians eyed opportunities to get the new President's attention. Tshisekedi quickly announced peace and demobilization to be his priorities for eastern Congo and promised to push for a new DDR programme. Consequently, politicians from North Kalehe started seizing the opportunity to align. According to their respective interests, however, and given diverging political affiliations (CACH, FCC and Lamuka), they adopted different attitudes. The moderates – and winners in the elections – played in favour of DDR while radicals – who lost – worked hard to convince armed groups not to demobilize. This explains to some extent the lack of demobilization among the Raia Mutomboki of

Bunyakiri, as the leaders of these groups aimed to position themselves for negotiating deals and thus needed as many elements as possible. Conversely, it was interesting to notice other cases, in which politicians and community leaders used their clout to push armed groups towards surrender.

While the demobilization of Ngubito in March 2019 seemed to have been rather spontaneous, the demobilization of Shukuru in October 2019 was co-opted by leaders. First, a re-elected MP (FCC) pushed for Shukuru's surrender – using kinship with Shukuru to convince him. When he came out of the bush with a few elements, community leaders started taking control of the process: they organized meetings with Shukuru in order to understand his position and demands. They then seized the opportunity of Shukuru's surrender to advance an agenda of local development (rehabilitation of the derelict Bukavu-Kisangani road via Bunyakiri) and administrative autonomy for the Tembo community (Bunyakiri territory). According to local sources, Tembo community leaders went as far as to completely rewrite Shukuru's list of demands to the government, as an initial draft memorandum was judged empty and useless for the community since it was mainly asking for military commissions. Tembo leaders easily convinced Shukuru to adopt a more community-based agenda in the process of his surrender, confirming earlier observations about the influence of customary chiefs in the Raia Mutomboki movement.

Shukuru initially surrendered with only a few elements. But when the word quickly spread, others joined, seeing an opportunity to join the army and earn a regular income. While there were genuine combatants from Shukuru's as well as Butachibera's groups, there were also many free riders including motorcycle taxi drivers, farmers, and even unregistered policemen. At the same time, the bulk of Shukuru's troops (and their weapons) remained in the bush, observing the CNRD advance. Yet overall the trick worked: political entrepreneurs found a way to demonstrate to the new president that they were able to induce surrenders (which they had, specifically in Shukuru's case, stressed in every political meeting in Bukavu and Kinshasa); community leaders found a way to express their demands towards the new government; and Shukuru's group thought it had found a way to be rewarded for the fight against the FDLR. However, while a year ago a vast majority of Tembo

leaders were supportive of DDR initiatives in general, the arrival of the CNRD has cast doubt on emerging security dilemmas.

It is important to note that demobilization, including formal DDR processes, involves with a wide variety of interests from various stakeholders at different levels, as patronage networks are reasserted, reconfirmed or reconfigured in a context of broader political change and new opportunities. While one prominent MP was known for his influence on the Raia Mutomboki and other armed groups, both Shukuru and Ngubito refused the MP's call to not surrender. Yet the political transitions somewhat exposed the radical positions of this politician and marginalized him to the benefit of other political entrepreneurs. Moreover, Shukuru was an easy case to deal with for politicians and local leaders. Dealing with Kirikicho, a seasoned veteran in the art of political manoeuvring, is more complicated, as dozens of failed attempts have proven.

An important lesson to be learned from these recent demobilization initiatives relates to the role played both by politicians and other local leaders, and the importance of the motley politics and interests at stake. It illustrates clearly how stakeholders read differently such processes, which go far beyond a unified and isolated collective armed group interest and involve affected communities and their leaders alike. Hence it is likely to be futile to conduct a DDR initiative without the broader support of communities galvanized through or manipulated by the respective leaders.

Risks and opportunities for DDR and stabilization

There have been significant peacebuilding and stabilization efforts to put an end to armed mobilization, insecurity and conflict in North Kalehe. The most recent attempts have been carried out in the framework of STAREC and its international counterpart, the ISSSS. After a first phase of stabilization was implemented from 2012 to 2014, there was criticism for its lack of impact on the root causes of violence and its inability to grasp the political dimensions of conflict. The second phase of stabilization was therefore redesigned to render it more politically sensitive and geared at fostering accountability between populations and state institutions to enhance inclusivity and promote good governance. While the first phase aimed at extending the authority of an inherently weak and convoluted state apparatus (especially in areas under the influence of armed groups), the second phase aimed at developing a 'better' state.

North Kalehe remains a priority zone for the STAREC and ISSSS alike. Recent stabilization projects from 2016 to 2018 were ineffective with respect to armed groups. While these stabilization efforts have so far failed to reduce armed group influence in North Kalehe and address long-term conflict dynamics, they initiated an era of community-led DDR that allowed the demobilization of dozens of armed group members. It created a more systematic mobilization of community leaders to convince armed group leaders and combatants to lay down their arms. Importantly, it fostered the development of an inter-provincial DDR initiative between South and North Kivu which ultimately led to the creation of an interprovincial commission. This is highly relevant for

North Kalehe, for the area embodies key dynamics of insecurity that cross provincial boundaries. This chapter outlines recent stabilization and DDR efforts in North Kalehe and analyses their success as well as the challenges that limited their impact.

5.1 Experimenting a new approach to stabilization

BACKGROUND TO THE REVISED STAREC/ISSSS APPROACH

During the past four years, North Kalehe has been a key testing ground for a new approach to stabilization in the eastern DRC. While the first phase was criticized for being too technical and lacking a critical analysis of the Congolese state and its modes of governance, it was essentially centred on the restoration of state authority, and armed groups were merely seen as the main stumbling blocks to properly functioning state institutions. Hence, it focused on hard infrastructure, such as building offices for the local administration, new police posts, prisons and roads, but also training in gender-based violence (GBV) issues and alleviating socio-economic vulnerability. Despite its budget (more than \$250 million), the first phase of stabilization never addressed root causes of the conflict, such as the convoluted character of the Congolese state. Critics went as far as to condemn the approach for strengthening a predatory state ultimately oppressive to the local population.²⁶ Bunyakiri and North Kalehe were among the areas prioritized in the first phase and benefitted from infrastructural projects (a new prison, new offices for state and customary administration and police).

The second phase (designed in 2012–13 and implemented 2014–18) relied on a different concept, focusing more on accountability between state authorities and populations and aimed at transforming the predatory governance of Congolese institutions. This mainly happened through the Democratic Dialogue pillar of the new ISSSS approach, promoting participatory, transparent and inclusive dialogue on priority issues (such as the presence of armed groups, insecurity, land and intercommunity conflict, local governance) from grassroots stakeholders (community representatives) up to

²⁶ See Paddon & Lacaille 2011.

national authorities. The Democratic Dialogue pillar was complemented by five supporting pillars referred to as Security, Restoration of State Authority, Reintegration, Return and Socioeconomic Recovery, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. As such, the STAREC/ISSSS now promotes an integrated and multisector approach to peace and stability.

STAREC/ISSSS IN NORTH KALEHE: THE IRF PROJECTS

In December 2014, a 24-month stabilization project – called the Immediate Response Fund (IRF) – was launched in Minova, Numbi and the Kalehe highlands (Ziralo). The first phase of STAREC/ISSSS efforts focused on Bunyakiri. The IRF project was extended by 18 months and ended in 2018. It was implemented in North Kalehe but also in Mambasa (Ituri province) and served as an experimentation of a new approach to stabilization. However, various implementing partners struggled to understand the new paradigm and continued intervening in a very technical way. The Democratic Dialogue pillar of the IRF project in North Kalehe focused on insecurity and the presence of armed groups, but also on land issues and local political conflict. Other pillars supported the building of new offices for the local administration and the police in Minova and Tushunguti, or provided assistance to vulnerable people through local associations and cooperatives.

Under the Democratic Dialogue pillar, local leaders and community representatives gathered with local and provincial authorities and agreed on priorities for peace and stability. Committees to follow up on priorities (*Comités de mise-en-oeuvre et suivi*, or CMOS) were created in Minova, Numbi and Ziralo, and allowed local leaders to be proactive on a wide range of issues, including armed groups, insecurity and land conflicts. The IRF hence strengthened community mobilization to raise the awareness of armed groups. Local leaders got much more involved and dozens of combatants surrendered to MONUSCO or the FARDC. Local leaders also led advocacy efforts vis-à-vis the FARDC to make sure it would not arrest surrendering parties.

If the IRF project remained far from resolving all problems, it did contribute to an interesting development in terms of demobilization, by reinforcing local ownership of stabilization. As the cases of Ngubito, Shukuru and Kirikicho highlight, by fostering the commitment of community leaders in

DDR processes, the IRF project embedded ongoing demobilization efforts more deeply into the community. The project also strengthened the commitment of provincial authorities in South and North Kivu and foreshadowed the new interprovincial approach to DDR exemplified by the aforementioned commission. This was possible thanks to the efforts of Congolese NGOs that led Democratic Dialogue activities. Moreover, limited success was achieved through an approach that was essentially political, giving a central place to the stakeholders themselves. Nonetheless, the second phase of stabilization has thus far failed to reduce the activism of armed groups overall and resolve longer-term conflict dynamics around land and political power. The following issues in particular impeded stabilization efforts in North Kalehe in recent years:

- The causes of conflict are deeply rooted in the region's history. Hence, it is naive to believe that a 42-month intervention (24 plus 18) could have a significant impact on peace and security. Any serious attempt to instil a lasting peace will require a longer-term framework of five to ten years at least.
- While the new stabilization approach has a clear political dimension, most of its pillars (except Democratic Dialogue) remain technical. That is in part because most implementing partners (UN agencies and NGOs) are unable or unwilling to develop a more political approach to their activities.
- Although stabilization projects are designed in a multisector, integrated fashion, the lack of coordination does not allow for the integrated strategy to empirically trickle down. Instead, isolated interventions have been the norm and various efforts remained superficial in their impact.

5.2 The politicization of future DDR

While around 125,000 combatants have gone through a formal DDR process since the end of the Second Congo War in 2003, DDR in the eastern DRC failed to end armed mobilization. While the first two national DDR programmes emphasized a technical, individual approach, which could be termed a 'one

man-one reintegration kit' and resulted in a lot of embezzlement, the recent PNDDR3 (2014–16) transported combatants to remote military bases where they experienced misery while undergoing training often unsuitable to their local reality. Meanwhile, MONUSCO – which a few years ago became responsible per its mandate to facilitate only disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration, and resettlement (DDRRR, the equivalent for foreign combatants) – recognized the need for a more community-based approach and established a programme called Community Violence Reduction (CVR). An umbrella to local DDR efforts, it works through cash-for-work projects benefitting communities and associating both former combatants and civilians, usually for a period of three months. Yet the inherent failures and manipulations of the PNDDR3 and the limited impact of CVR led to an insignificant amount of change in armed group activism. This was amplified by the context of political contestation of the Kabila government.²⁷ Negative experiences and political resistance led many to remobilize between 2016 and 2018.

Against this backdrop, the political transition prompted spontaneous demobilization by armed groups across the Kivu provinces and new discussions between donors and the DRC about funding a new nationwide DDR programme. Yet this quickly raised concerns as to how to avoid previous shortcomings. In this context, the community efforts in Kalehe that have led to an interprovincial DDR commission were considered a fresh and innovative way forward. However, while the IRF contributed to popularizing the concept of community-led DDR, authorities and donors insisted that such an approach still lacked proper definition and substance. Donors were keen to see a more political approach to DDR, which has yet to be defined. Congolese NGOs and other stakeholders involved in the IRF therefore started reflecting on a proper definition and strategy for a community DDR. At the same time, the interprovincial commission was created as a result of civil society lobbying.

While a central place should initially have been given to civil society, STAREC, community representatives and local and provincial authorities in the new commission, funding announcements quickly attracted new political

²⁷ For a thorough analysis of DDR pitfalls and weaknesses, see Hoffmann & Vlassenroot 2019.

interests. At the time, the interim governor of North Kivu – a seasoned politician who knew he was about to be removed as a result of the elections – chose to appoint political cronies instead of experts to the new commission. Civil society, community members and STAREC were side-lined, denouncing and refusing to collaborate with the new commission. An international peace-building NGO called ILC was brought in to facilitate workshops in order to reconcile the stakeholders and ensure the interprovincial commission would have solid partners in civil society.

The political instrumentalization of this commission is likely to become a harbinger of potential dynamics when a new, better-funded, broader national DDR programme is attempted. Like other externally funded peace initiatives – such as the fight against GBV and addressing conflict minerals – it is likely to turn into a new opportunity for political operatives to reinvent themselves and co-opt peacebuilding programmes to feed various patronage networks. In a broader context of clientelist governance, the capture of peacebuilding by partisan and ethnic politics can put at risk their effectiveness, as this case highlights. Finally, any future DDR phase will need to contain safeguarding techniques to avoid not only political interference but also to make sure the DRC's powerful securocrats in the army and intelligence services remain independent.

In 2019, the landscape of armed groups in North Kalehe experienced notable shifts: the arrival of the CNRD, its dispersal through FARDC operations (supported by Raia Mutomboki); the return of Mai-Mai Kirikicho and Nyatura Kalume in Ziralo; and several, mostly flawed demobilization attempts. However, these are nothing but the most recent developments in a 25-year cycle of constant political and military reconfigurations in a context of entrenched tension between communities over land, power and identity. Despite seemingly positive results of the FARDC operations against the CNRD (hundreds of refugees and dozens of combatants have been caught by the FARDC), the situation is unlikely to stabilize on its own in the short run, as the drivers of conflict are poorly addressed and will continue to feed insecurity and armed mobilization.

In Ziralo, *la paix des armes* prevails, creating a status quo of militarization and 'no-war-no-peace'. Like in other parts of North Kalehe, a variety of armed groups compete over authority, territory and populations. While this can engender a modicum of stability – especially if armed groups collaborate with rather than fight each other – 'anything could happen at any time'. The permanent harassment of civilians by Nyatura Kalume and the launch of military operations against the CNRD, and the massive displacement of civilians both provoked, are but two examples of such volatility and insecurity.

The report has explained how the continued presence of armed groups weakens local state and customary power and that armed politics involve specific strategies to acquire and exercise authority over civilian populations,

depending on the context. While Kirikicho has imposed himself as the new customary chief in Tushunguti, he still relies on support from his community and local leaders. He thus stopped imposing taxes in cash and reduced the harassment of civilians. The Nyatura Kalume, on the other hand, continues to extort civilians. As for the CNRD, it strategically settled in a Hutu area to bolster its temporary legitimacy in North Kalehe.

Armed groups are always embedded in their broader social, political, and economic environment. They share a geographical and political space with other stakeholders with whom they compete or join forces in the quest for authority and influence. The current political transition reinforces the subsequent repositioning. The report therefore stresses the political nature of security dynamics and (de)mobilization in North Kalehe. Armed groups are connected to broader patronage networks and, just like political entrepreneurs and other leaders, try to seize political opportunities – such as the advent of Tshisekedi's presidency. Like politicians, they participate in the DRC's electoral and post-electoral politics, always trying to boost their own influence. Moreover, armed groups are deeply connected to historic conflicts over land and power, as well as the politics of belonging in eastern Congo.

Because they are highly political phenomena, armed groups in North Kalehe need to be dealt with in a political way. If recent stabilization initiatives offered some interesting results in North Kalehe, these efforts remain insufficient in addressing the key drivers of conflict. They should therefore be bolstered to form a long-term, inclusive and participatory vision for peace and stability in Kalehe. Such a vision would need to be rolled out in sync with a new nationwide DDR that could draw inspiration from CVR projects and focus on flexibly and efficiently acting to avoid failures such as Ngubito's and Shukuru's back-and-forth surrenders. If the recycling of combatants and their circular return is to be interrupted, future DDR needs to move from an individualist and technical approach to embracing the collective social and political dimensions of armed group mobilization. Finally, even though CNRD operations may have had some positive impact, the repatriation or resettlement of refugees and foreign combatants will require a clarification of political guidelines between the DRC and Rwanda, and take into account the perspective of communities affected by the presence of groups such as the CNRD.

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