

Proxy Wars and the Dawn of Godfathers

RESHAPING VIOLENT ORDER
IN BASHALI AND BWITO
(NORTH KIVU)

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Executive summary

Despite significant stabilization efforts and analysis, the situation around Kitchanga – sitting on the edges of Rutshuru and Masisi territories in North Kivu – remains volatile. This report understands Kitchanga as part of a broader geographical and socio-political complex, including the Bwito and Bashali chieftaincies. While deep-seated conflict persists in this area, the report highlights new security challenges that are undoing the status quo of political order. It demonstrates how the military dynamics shift the balance of power that has revolved around the Rwandan FDLR and its allies for over two decades; illustrates how protracted dynamics of land, local politics and protection keep shaping everyday life; and highlights the limits of stabilization in a context of ongoing fighting and military operations. Together, these dynamics seriously challenge short-term stabilization and peacebuilding efforts.

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Introduction

'Can you imagine thinking of peace while using violence? I don't think so, neither for armed groups nor the army and the population. We all lose.' — North Kivu civil society activist, November 2019

Lying adjacent to both the Bashali (Masisi territory) and Bwito chieftaincies (Rutshuru territory), the region around Kitchanga combines a set of predominant conflict dynamics in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). These include long-standing social, political and economic tensions and a history of violence fed by political manipulation of identity and belonging (pitting so-called rwandophones against so-called autochthonous populations), contestation of local political power, the exacerbation of land conflict through historical and contemporary migration, displacement and land-grabbing, and widespread poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural bust. While each of these are problems in their own regard, they also underpin and intersect dynamics of warfare and armed mobilization.¹

Since 2014, the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS) has identified Kitchanga as one of its priority zones. Ever since, a flurry of initiatives have aimed to stabilize the area. Yet the situation has barely improved and stability remains largely an illusion in Bashali and Bwito. This report considers the two customary entities more broadly, arguing that their security challenges cannot be reduced to Kitchanga's (peri-)urban dynamics

¹ The authors would like to thank CRG and the peer reviewers for their support. The names used are pseudonyms.

alone. It demonstrates how, after decades of conflict, another significant reordering of political authority and military control took place in 2019.

Even though violence and insecurity had never ceased since the 1990s conflicts and the subsequent regional wars, patterns of military control had been somewhat stable between 2013 and 2018. However, during the past year, a sustained military campaign of the *Nduma Defence of Congo-Rénové* (NDC-Rénové) and its allies – acting as a proxy on behalf of Congo’s government army (*Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo*, FARDC) – has not only curtailed the clout of the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) and its allies, but also triggered a spike in internal displacement: IDP numbers in Masisi and Rutshuru quintupled from 50,000 to around 250,000 within a year in each of the territories, according to Congo’s National Commission for Refugees (CNR).

This report reproblematises instability in Bashali and Bwito. It investigates how the reshaping of order generates new violence, unmaking previous peace interventions, and how new dynamics of conflict intersect with longer-standing problems. While violence in Bashali and Bwito is often reduced to ‘ethnic conflict’ pitting Bahunde against Kinyarwanda-speakers or Hutu against Tutsi, this report outlines more complex social, political and economic fault lines, many of which may develop or widen as Bashali and Bwito undergo a brusque reshaping of political order.

Based on previous analyses rooted in over a decade of research by the authors, amounting to roughly a thousand interviews, this report uses new evidence from fieldwork in the Bashali and Bwito areas in early 2020, resulting in around 50 interviews with stakeholders on all sides and levels.² After a short historical contextualization, the report will introduce the key stakeholders and analyse the drivers and characteristics of conflict – relating to violence, order and justice; land, custom and displacement; taxation, business and agriculture. It then assesses how conflict is influenced by outside intervention and offers a set of conclusions geared at how stabilization efforts can be fine-tuned.

² Yet, owing to ongoing fighting, researchers cancelled two day trips in certain areas of the Bwito chieftaincy.

Background to the Conflict

While recent dynamics have caused severe instability in Bashali and Bwito, many of the area's patterns of violence and conflict relate back to a longer history – including colonial domination, political manipulation in the era of Zaire and the ensuing wars of the past 30 years. This chapter briefly outlines the roots of current violence, organized in four main periods of the turbulent history of North Kivu.

2.1 Colonial Roots of Conflict

Carved out as one giant colonial territory during the 1885 Berlin Conference, contemporary Congo is marbled by latent and open conflict that penetrates political governance, access to means of subsistence and production, and the negotiation of public authority at different levels.

Bashali and Bwito form a prime example of how order has been captured and reorganized around colonial needs to make territory and populations administratively legible and economically profitable. Under the private rule of Belgian King Leopold II of 1885–1908 and during the Belgian colonial era of 1908–1960, Bashali and Bwito underwent a radical and lasting demographic change and their politico-territorial organization was repeatedly undone by migration and land policies which aimed at fostering a colonial extractive enterprise and its concomitant *mission civilisatrice*.

While this report cannot be exhaustive on how (post)colonial policies manipulated and reshaped political, social and economic order in eastern Congo more broadly (hence, see Mathys 2017), three key moments pertain to the most controversial aspects: first, the *Mission d'immigration des Banyarwanda* (MIB) brought in forced labour from the neighbouring colony of Rwanda-Urundi (under Belgian rule as well) and changed prevalent ethnic balances in Bashali. While identity was fluid and migration and mobility patterns were legion and vivid prior to colonial subjugation, this campaign of forced labour migration intersected with a second key moment: the Belgian attempt to both oust customary elites resisting colonization and consolidate customary authority according to imagined and fixed grids and categories of belonging. This happened against the backdrop of a third key moment as colonial entrepreneurs performed the large-scale gazettement of plantations, reducing land for local populations and thereby accentuating the scarcity pushed by the MIB-induced demographic explosion.

2.2 Postcolonial Manipulation of Land and Identity

While Congo gained its independence in 1960, the country was bound for future crisis. During the turbulent first years, culminating in Mobutu Sese Seko's power grab in 1965, one key event unsettling the precarious peace in what today is North Kivu province was the conflict known as the 'Kanyarwanda war'. The conflict largely played out between Hunde and Nande, who consider themselves 'autochthonous', and 'rwandophone' Hutu and Tutsi. Tensions were further amplified by Mobutu's early administrative policies, which were believed to favour the Kinyarwanda-speaking populations of today's North Kivu (Jackson 2007).

Mobutist policies generally had a significant fallout in nurturing local conflict and future violence in Bashali and Bwito. During the Zaireanization reforms in the early 1970s – affecting the country more broadly and lastingly – many of the area's large agro-pastoral concessions were taken over by naturalized descendants of colonial settlers and other emerging – mostly rwandophone – domestic elites in eastern Congo. This, in turn, kindled contestation over land ownership, created legal ambiguity between overlapping customary and

state regulation, and further antagonized communities – often galvanized by their respective political leaders' radical, xenophobic diatribes.

The impact of Zaireanization continued through the 1970s and 1980s when subsequent legislation on land and citizenship 'switched on and off' the Zairean nationality of Kinyarwanda-speaking populations with little consideration of how long the concerned people had been living in then-Zaire (Jackson 2007: 483). While Mobutu pushed such legislation, most famously the 1966 Bakajika Law, as part of a broader strategy to divide and rule, ensuing uncertainty provided substantial grounds for violent mobilization.

2.3 The Masisi Wars of the Early 1990s

In the early 1990s, this mobilization first materialized in the so-called 'Masisi war' that started in southern Masisi before plunging Bashali and other areas into turmoil too. Spurred by inflammatory politics in the wake of Zaire's collapse and the national army's incapacity to impose order, armed militia sprung up in various communities, establishing a tit-for-tat logic of violence that led to large-scale displacement. Violence then was predominantly organized along ethnically demarcated factions.

Hunde, Tembo and Nyanga communities organized the Batiri and Katuko militias (predecessors to later Mai-Mai and Raia Mutomboki armed groups) while Kinyarwanda-speakers rallied to the Hutu-led *combattants*, the Kibarizo and Mongol militias – founding a genealogy leading up to the present-day Nyatura groups operating in the area (Congo Research Group 2020).

Revolving around access to land and local political power, the Masisi war's fault lines reflected a criss-crossed administrative carpet made of 'collectivités-chefferies' (hereditary customary entities) and 'collectivités-secteurs' (non-hereditary entities) and the multiple conflicts existing within and between them due to demographic-representative imbalances as well as politically and legally manipulated incumbency (see Cercle de Concertation 2019). As these conflicts spiralled out of control, broader regional events would further complicate the situation around Bashali and Bwito.

2.4 The Congo Wars of 1996–2003

When in mid-1994 the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) kicked out the genocidal forces, consisting of *interahamwe* militia and government troops, from neighbouring Rwanda into eastern Zaire, over 1 million civilians and combatants arrived in the Kivus. Initially confined to vast refugee camps surrounding main urban centres, these camps were forcefully disbanded by the invading RPA in 1996.

Kigali resented Mobutu's inaction as to the camps' militarization and helped set up a motley rebel outfit under the leadership of veteran revolutionary Laurent-Désiré Kabila: the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL). Under the AFDL label, embedded RPA forces went on to disperse the main camps, pushing *génocidaires* and refugees alike into Zaire's hinterlands.

This campaign continued through the 'first Congo war' of 1996–97 and continued afterwards. If 'autochthonous' militia in eastern Congo had largely supported the AFDL's campaign and the concomitant push against Hutu militia during this 'liberation war', alliances shifted in the 'second Congo war' of 1998–2003. Getting rid of his Rwandan sponsors, Laurent-Désiré Kabila turned to both nationalist Mai-Mai outfits and the successor groups of the Rwandan *génocidaires* (called the *Armée de libération du Rwanda*, or ALiR, before being renamed the *Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda*, or FDLR) to confront the newly established *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) and its Ugandan and Rwandan backers (Stearns 2010).

Under the slogan of 'fighting the invaders' decried as Tutsi-led RPA surrogates, Kabila mobilized across communities in the Kivus, except in the Banyamulenge and parts of North Kivu's Kinyarwanda-speaking population, which sided with the RCD and RPA. Despite their 'ethnic' character, however, many of these alliances were also motivated by considerations of what alliance could better bolster respective claims to political power. From 2004, a series of peace deals paved the way for a transition through power-sharing, army integration and demobilization projects – but violence resumed soon in North Kivu.

3 |

Evolving Conflict and the Road Towards an FDLR Endgame

This chapter looks at the evolution of conflict in the Bashali and Bwito chief-taincies since the ‘second Congo war’. It summarizes trajectories of armed mobilization from 2004 to 2018 in order to contextualize three central issues framing the areas’ continuing predicament: the role of the FDLR and its allies, the significance of the NDC-Rénové advance into Masisi and Rutshuru, and the broader patterns of instable political order, proxy warfare and militarization (Vogel and Stearns 2018).³ It closes with observations on recruitment and armed mobilization patterns in Bashali and Bwito.

3.1 Conflict and Armed Mobilization since 2004

Prior to nationwide democratic elections in 2006, the first of their kind in 40 years, the security situation in North Kivu once more deteriorated when, in 2004, former RCD elements led by Jules Mutebusi and Laurent Nkunda mutinied to form what would later become the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP). While Mutebusi briefly came to fame for the 2004 siege of Bukavu, Nkunda staged a more lasting insurrection and controlled vast parts of Bashali and Bwito until 2009.

³ For short biographical descriptions of all armed groups mentioned in this report, see www.sulu.org/congo/biographies.

As with previous rebellions, the CNDP received sizeable support from Rwanda and triggered local counter-mobilization. Different Hutu, Hunde and Nande militias converged in the *Patriotes résistants congolais* (PARECO) and confronted the CNDP between 2006 and 2008. Meanwhile, the FDLR, i.e. the ALiR's successor group since 2000, remained a military pivot point in the region. Most of the ensuing violence centred on Masisi and Walikale (Stearns 2013). Although a Kigali-brokered integration deal in 2009 absorbed the CNDP (and placed Nkunda under house arrest in Rwanda, where he remains) back into the Congolese army, ex-CNDP military hierarchies remained largely intact. The CNDP deal also resulted in the *Umoja Wetu* operations with Congolese and Rwandan troops which cracked down on the FDLR. These operations devastated local communities and significantly reduced the FDLR's soldiers and territory.

Shortly afterwards, a restructuration process in the Congolese army, known as *régimentation*, created empty spaces and allowed the FDLR to recover. In consequence, a new, decentralized wave of local militia emerged under the umbrella term Raia Mutomboki ('angry citizens') and, beginning in 2010, opened up multiple battlefronts against the Rwandan rebels (Vogel 2014). After the 2011 elections and benefitting from never-dismantled ex-CNDP networks within the FARDC, the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23) emerged as the latest variant of so-called 'Tutsi' rebellions in eastern Congo. While it was decisively beaten in late 2013 by the FARDC, the UN's newly established Intervention Brigade Force and several co-opted proxy forces (including ex-PARECO which had fractured again into smaller, ethnic militias), other armed groups only half-heartedly joined the subsequent third national demobilization programme.

Ever since then, the military landscape in the Kivus remains characterized by constant fragmentation and recomposition of armed groups. Rooted in long-standing traditions of armed mobilization as well as intense and fine-grained local struggles, Bashali and Bwito are among the most volatile areas. Situated at the crossroads between Rutshuru's borderlands, Lubero's forest lowlands and Goma's hilly hinterlands, this geographic space historically has been a complex of chafing interests and clashing politics. Moreover,

the nearly complete destruction of Kitchanga town in clashes between army units and local armed groups in 2013 further entrenched among local populations suspicion, mistrust and fear, including of government institutions. In two decades of conflict, Kitchanga had also come to be considered a safe haven by many, leading to spectacular growth and the establishment of numerous IDP camps on its outskirts (Mathys and Buescher 2018). Meanwhile, the FDLR's weakening through military operations and fearless Raia Mutomboki campaigns led to its relocation to Bashali and Bwito, where they would remain the central pole of military power. Within volatile dynamics of armed mobilization and a topography of dozens of belligerents according to a 2017 tally, the FDLR – actively through their own alliances and activities and passively through the military operations they faced – has remained a main driver of conflict ever since (Vogel and Stearns 2018).

3.2 The Tenacious Endurance of the FDLR

Having faced multiple military challenges as this decade ended, the FDLR's range of manoeuvre has consistently shrunk as compared to 2010. After the 2009 *Umoja Wetu* operations, conducted jointly by Congolese and Rwandan militaries, it was the Raia Mutomboki that inflicted major losses on the Rwandan group between 2012 and 2014 – effectively chasing them out of Shabunda, Kalehe and southern Walikale. Between 2014 and 2016, a new wave of Nyanga- and Nande-led mobilization, crystallizing in the NDC-Rénové and Mai-Mai Mazembe, took place in Walikale and southern Lubero.

Ever since, the FDLR's heartland has been confined to Bashali and Bwito. In mid-2016, the group's most significant dissidence occurred: riven by internal discord and mounting pressure since the onset of the FARDC's Sukola II operations – the first major army operations against the FDLR in almost a decade – and the loss of its headquarters in late 2015, the FDLR split in two. While the FDLR-*Forces combattantes Abacunguzi* (FOCA) remained under the command of Sylvestre Mudacumura and Victor Byiringiro, a rival wing under the leadership of former Vice-President Wilson Irategeka took up the name of *Conseil national pour la restauration de la démocratie* (CNRD)-Ubwiyunge (United Nations 2017).

It was a clean break, with either faction assembling approximately half of the troops and equipment. The CNRD rallied all South Kivu and parts of the North Kivu units, establishing its bases in northwest Bashali. The FDLR, in turn, concentrated its presence in southeast Bwito, including stretches inside Virunga National Park. Right after the split, clashes ensued between the factions, drawing in Congolese Hutu militias whose allegiances to either FDLR or CNRD were subsequently realigned (with the FDLR rallying the bulk). The FARDC also began using the CNRD as a proxy in its *Sukola II* operations around Kitchanga. Meanwhile, the FDLR faced a second front, as Lubero-based Mazembe militias and the expanding NDC-Rénové upped the pressure in Bwito (Congo Research Group 2020).

Yet the Rwandan group once more defied its impending ruin and resorted to evasive battlefield tactics and the use of local proxies on its own side. Keeping its own units from fighting the NDC-Rénové, Mai-Mai Mazembe, CNRD or FARDC, it intensified its training of allied Nyatura militias which would bear the brunt of military confrontation on their behalf. While the FDLR entertains a number of satellite forces and keeps up sympathetic relations with other groups such as the *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* (APCLS), its key buffer force since 2016 has been a Nyatura coalition called *Coalitions des mouvements pour le changement* (CMC). Led by Dominique Ndaruhutse, the CMC comprises ex-PARECO, Congolese ex-FDLR outsourced for tactical reasons, as well as newly recruited Congolese Hutu – most of whom have undergone military training in the FDLR's *groupement d'écoles*.

In sum, the FARDC's counterinsurgency operations and a concomitant proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups has intensified the impact of armed politics on numerous other social and economic dynamics. While this further eroded local political and customary power – much of which has been ailing in a limbo of contestation and reaffirmation through recent decades – it entrenched protection rackets, amplified displacement, and legitimized violence as a tool for addressing land conflict.

3.3 The Sprawling Campaign of the NDC-Rénové

Formed 2008 in Walikale territory, the *Nduma Defence of Congo* (NDC) established itself as an ethno-nationalist militia, driven by resistance to the ‘foreign’ exploitation of Walikale’s tin mines. Led by Sheka Ntabo Ntaberi, who currently faces a military trial in Goma for war crimes, the NDC was Walikale’s most powerful armed group between 2008 and 2014 and enjoyed thorough backing from customary leaders and local politicians inclined to its objectives. A few factors led to Sheka’s fall: his authoritarian leadership style alienated close associates, a pending arrest warrant made him a liability to the group, and his erratic coalition-building (cooperating first with the FDLR, then with ex-CNDP/M23 circles) irritated political patrons. When Sheka snubbed then-North Kivu Governor Paluku during a 2014 meeting in Binyampuri, the tide turned and key NDC commanders conspired with Nyanga politicians and military commanders to take over the movement.

In September 2014, the NDC’s second-in-command Guidon Shimiray Mwissa announced a splinter group called NDC-Rénové. Bringing along the bulk of the NDC’s combatants, he marginalized Sheka and began an ongoing expansion spree across Walikale, southern Lubero and northern Masisi. Based on ethno-nationalist invective (fighting the FDLR) and a sophisticated economic enterprise (taxation, mining, timber and other sources of revenue), Guidon’s NDC-Rénové managed to absorb at least half a dozen of smaller armed groups into its ranks and heavily benefitted from army supplies in return for serving as Kinshasa’s main proxy for fighting the FDLR. After getting vast parts of northern Walikale under his control by late 2015, Guidon launched operations into southern Lubero, where, throughout 2016 and 2017, he brokered shaky alliances with Nande militias to kick out the FDLR from areas such as Bunyatenge Bukumbirwa, Buleusa and Luhanga (Congo Research Group 2020). Consolidating in 2018, with a focus on internal reorganization and miscellaneous business rackets, the NDC-Rénové then began eyeing northern Masisi and western Bwito, circling in on the FDLR’s and the CMC’s strongholds.

3.4 Ambiguous Alliances and Unstable Orders

Both the FDLR's struggle for survival and the rampant expansion of the NDC-Rénové are of paramount importance to fathom current conflict dynamics in Bashali and Bwito. Fiercely opposed to each other, the two dominant belligerents of the *Petit Nord* area of North Kivu (Masisi, Walikale and Rutshuru) paradoxically employed fairly similar strategies of warfare, local rule and economic subsistence. This section explains how military alliances and political order around Bashali and Bwito currently revolve around the FDLR and the NDC-Rénové. Despite its continuous weakening over the years, the FDLR still counts on diligently cultivated support networks among Congolese Nyatura militias rooted in previous armed mobilization, and the Hunde-based *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* (APCLS) led by Janvier Karairi Buingo – both with origins in the erstwhile PARECO (Stearns 2013).

Guidon Shimiray built similar alliances. However, other than the FDLR, he did not outsource his own combat forces. Rather, the NDC-Rénové co-opted other armed groups into its ranks, which boosted its reputation as a nationalist but multi-ethnic force for protecting and liberating 'autochthonous' populations. While these claims need to be taken with a pinch of salt given the NDC-Rénové's heavy-handed taxation rackets, the group effectively succeeded in driving a wedge into the APCLS in late 2018. While combatants loyal to Karairi remained close to the FDLR, a splinter group under former APCLS Deputy Commander Mapenzi Likuwe joined the NDC-Rénové and backed its entrance into northern Masisi. Progressing towards Mweso and Kitchanga in 2019, the NDC-Rénové also pressured smaller militias, including some Nyatura militias not allied to the FDLR, and subsequently bloated its ranks with deserters from various armed groups such as Kavumbi's Nyatura. At the same time, it uprooted the CNRD in northern Bashali and began sustained military offensives against the CMC, leading to the killing of the latter's Deputy Commander Muhawenimana Bunombe (alias John Love) in April 2019. In parallel, the FDLR managed to tie other Nyatura factions (those led by Jean-Marie and Nzayisenga) and the remaining APCLS troops to its protection belt in southern Bwito.

Guidon's self-styled 'liberator' image was also reflected in the politics of the NDC-Rénové: early on, he and his fellow commanders used a carrot-and-stick approach to bind local authorities of different ethnic groups into their propaganda and management efforts. This led to carefully orchestrated public appearances in newly conquered areas around Mweso and Kitchanga. Instead of merely subjecting local authorities with brute force, Guidon's strategy consisted of making them part of his protection rackets, selling the NDC-Rénové as a liberation force, and forging a converging ideology targeting the FDLR but not other Hutu-led armed groups or the broader civilian populations. While diehard FDLR allies in the CMC refused most diplomatic overtures by the NDC-Rénové, smaller Nyatura groups joined Guidon's ranks and few Hunde, Hutu or Tutsi leaders openly contested the NDC-Rénové.

Both the NDC-Rénové 'liberators' and the FDLR 'besiegers' employ thriving machines of revenue generation. Known as 'non-conventional logistics' inside the FDLR, this includes diversified legal and illegal, violent and non-violent techniques to garner supplies and means. It continues to include a strong emphasis on taxation and the charcoal trade, specifically both self-organized as well as paid protection of charcoal businesses run by Hutu civilians from Bwito area. While relations between the FDLR and the army have gone sour in the slipstream of the emerging NDC-Rénové/FARDC collaboration, the jointly controlled charcoal business seems less affected by these tensions.

A strong emphasis – on both sides – is the taxation of persons and goods in their respective areas of control, although they can vary in amount, frequency, currency (cash or kind) and justification. Often, the main lines of taxation take the form of protection rackets and invoke implicit or explicit notions of safety as expressed by 'support to security' (*appui à la sécurité*), 'food for the troops' (*chakula ya jeshi*), 'war effort' (*mukongoro*) or 'sleep well' (*lala salama* or *ndengera buzima*). Such euphemisms are common among all armed actors of the area.

While violent taxation is widespread among many armed groups in eastern Congo, the NDC-Rénové and FDLR have fine-tuned their techniques. As of late 2019, the NDC-Rénové's main tax consists of approximately one US dollar per adult against which a monthly token is delivered. On the FDLR and CMC/

APCLS side, similar taxes exist. Moreover, all belligerents including army units exhibit a variety of other taxation patterns, such as storing or transporting goods, movements of motorcycles and cars, or licences for sawing timber and carrying hunting rifles. These forms of taxation are particularly visible around Mweso and Kitchanga, as those towns are pivotal bottlenecks for local trade and informal finance owing to humanitarian NGO presence, demographic concentration, and their roles as layover hubs and thus conveyors of local mobility (Mathys and Buescher 2018).

Both the NDC-Rénové and the FDLR – superficially – aim at a modicum of cordial relations with local administrative and customary authorities. To some degree foreign to Masisi – the former’s leadership hails from Walikale and the latter is Rwandan – the two belligerent heavyweights collaborate with local chiefs, government police officers and other institutions on certain matters of justice and occasionally co-opt them into their taxation schemes. Moreover, to point out one more similarity, both Guidon Shimiray’s group and the FDLR do not shy away from employing heavy-handed measures to impose taxation, and to punish resistance against their core strategic and military objectives.

These similarities are striking, given that the FDLR and the NDC-Rénové and their respective allies represent the two major – but opposed – poles of military might in the area. Moreover, the FDLR’s ‘non-conventional logistics’ is a long-standing and well-oiled machine of revenue generation, and while the NDC-Rénové acts similarly in many ways, it does not refer to its extractive activities with specific terminology. Geographically, the FDLR and its allies (CMC and APCLS) were locked into southern and eastern Bwito in late 2019. Meanwhile, the NDC-Rénové controlled most of the Bashali-Mokoto and Bashali-Kaembe *groupements* (sub-territorial administrative units) and progressed from Walikale into Bwito. It continued to benefit from regular army supplies in arms and ammunition but also the army’s complacency in leaving the NDC-Rénové a free reign in governing and taxing a huge territory (including its areas of control in Walikale and Lubero). A military justice arrest warrant for Guidon Shimiray notwithstanding, the tacit alliance also features joint roadblocks and military operations against a weakening CMC/FDLR alliance. In part, this explains the FARDC’s preponderance in urbanized

areas in Bashali and Bwito, where government troops usually tend to deploy greater clout than they do in sparsely populated hinterlands.

As a result of internal tensions and political pressure, the NDC-Rénové split in mid-2020. After kicking out Guidon Shimiray, his deputies Bwira and Mapenzi took over the movement, although Guidon retained some troops. Ever since, the two rival factions have been weakening each other in clashes, leading both to surrender combatants, as Guidon moved his remaining troops back into the Walikale area and pressure on the FDLR lessened.

3.5 Recruitment into Armed Groups

The continuing dynamics of armed mobilization in Bashali and Bwito are testimony to the importance of understanding recruitment into armed groups. While recent cases of surrender in Bashali and Bwito align with a general momentum across eastern Congo – hundreds of combatants have surrendered to MONUSCO and the FARDC since the 2018 elections – these positive signs are likely to be imperilled by the lack of a viable DDR programme as well as ongoing dynamics of mobilization. Recruitment dynamics, individual and collective combatant motivations vary. This section tries to provide a brief summary of key tendencies. Recruitment into armed groups in eastern Congo – Bashali and Bwito are no exception – often takes shape in a fluid mixture of coercive and voluntary patterns. More often than not, it targets male youths, who are more susceptible to mobilization for a number of reasons. While this includes widely known aspects, recent observations highlight the less visible social pressure which leads to the ‘recycling of rebels’ (Vogel and Musamba 2016) and a ‘circular return’ (Vlassenroot et al. 2020) of combatants in between civilian and military worlds.

For instance, young Congolese men face the expectation of their kin to prove their ability to provide for a family and thus be considered adult members of society. Yet the classic trajectory of acquiring land as a basis for family subsistence has been uprooted after decades of conflict. Converging factors include forced displacement through insecurity and different dispossession logics (concessions, military land grabs, the disruption of customary norms

to distribute land plots), among others. In response, artisanal mining has become a vital source of jobs due to its itinerant nature, largely uncoupling subsistence from fixed geographic spaces, and is thus strategic for populations facing continuous displacement.

Membership in armed groups is also a mobile activity and hence appealing to some of the population. Certain armed group leaders are aware of this and mould aspirations and prospects of earning a quick buck into their repertoires. However, this is only part of their recruitment strategy and blends into larger narratives which often revolve around self-defence and the right to claim one's rights in the face of (often amplified) outside threats – be it militias hailing from 'rival' communities, predatory army units, a broken social contract with the government or external meddling by neighbouring countries. In the absence of a solid education system, these arguments appeal to many unemployed youths, or those mired in trauma and loss.

Armed group leaders and their recruitment staff often have an intricate understanding of these local social and political dynamics and use them to lure youths into their ranks, sometimes with strong support by local elites who support armed groups out of genuine conviction and personal interest. Once in an armed group, youths are socialized into military life. This includes both the formation of a certain habitus as a combatant (raising the bar later for successful demobilization and pushing ex-combatants to often rejoin armed groups) but also command and peer pressure, making it difficult (and often harshly sanctioned, including socially) for youths to defect and reintegrate into civilian life.

The two dominant armed factions operating in Bashali and Bwito in late 2019 are the NDC-Rénové and the CMC alliance (backed by the FDLR). Both are known for using a mix of these strategies, adding specific elements to their respective recruitment. Again, this often features a mix of coercive and persuasive tactics prior to a recruit joining, or becoming predominantly coercive only once an individual has enrolled (similar to any regular army). While individual strategies and motivations for recruitment are complex and may differ across cases, a few broader tendencies are noteworthy for the NDC-Rénové and the CMC.

Dozens of interviews with former combatants of the latter strongly suggest that the CMC has recently benefitted from new Congolese recruits previously enrolled with the FDLR. Reluctant to have Congolese nationals in its ranks, the FDLR has pursued a strategy of outsourcing these to its ally CMC. Meanwhile, the FDLR continues to support CMC recruitment by offering military training. Moreover, the CMC's recruitment continues to rely strongly on Hutu nationalism, rallying youths through ethnic diatribes and bolstering its image as a local bulwark to protect Hutu populations in the Bwito area.

The NDC-Rénové in turn, has adapted its recruitment strategies to its gradual expansion. If the movement initially targeted mainly ethnic Nyanga, as well as occasionally Kumu and Kobo, it increasingly gears its mobilization towards a broader repertoire of liberation and self-defence against foreigners, in particular the FDLR. Moreover, it couples such ideology with a carrot-and-stick approach, boosting its reputation for being one of the rare groups offering a relatively constant salary but also coercing youths into joining. Coupled with clever alliance-building (e.g. with the APCLS-R) and political patronage (benefitting from Congolese Hutu leaders brokering the co-optation of former Nyatura groups), this has allowed the NDC-Rénové to grow quickly and without, as yet, showing signs of internal fracturing owing to fast growth.

Drivers of Conflict in Bashali and Bwito

This chapter analyses of the contours of conflict outlined above and broadens the scope beyond a pure focus on belligerents and militarized dynamics. Three interconnected sections – addressing violence, order and justice; land, custom and displacement; taxation, agriculture and trade – analyse the stakes and interests leading to conflict and violence, the dynamics driving and aggravating them, their roots, functional logics and main protagonists and effects.

While conflict and violence in Bashali and Bwito are complex and entangled, much of the contestation touches on struggles over land and identity and concomitant access to economic subsistence and political representation. Moreover, the greater share of current conflict in and around Kitchanga is a legacy of historical contingencies and a violent path-dependency of more than 25 years.

Bearing in mind this means no one under 35 has any significant memory of a largely peaceful past (which, in the absence of a reliable census, may represent easily more than half of the area's population), this also led to deeper socialization processes in which violence is considered a normal, tolerated pattern of conflict resolution, as many interviewees suggest. Yet fieldwork illustrated at the same time that civilian populations are also increasingly frustrated by violence – suggesting the limitation of armed group capacity to legitimize their actions and presence in the longer run.

4.1 Violence, Order and Justice

Much of the conflict in the eastern Congo is driven by desires to establish or change the prevalent political order in a given area. While a range of governance techniques exist to negotiate, claim or impose political order, the normalization of armed violence over the past 25 years has entrenched the links between order-making and the use of force (Vogel and Stearns 2018). This trend extends across regular security forces such as the FARDC, the *Police nationale congolaise* (PNC), or the *Agence nationale de renseignement* (ANR), and to armed non-state actors (ANSA) of all sorts, including identifiable militias and rebel groups with a modicum of structure and organization but also gangs and criminal actors.

An epicentre of successive wars and conflicts and the site of countless contested political, economic and social questions, the area around Kitchanga features a range of examples. Frequent armed clashes and other incidents including killings and ambushes at times no less political marked 2019. Often, this political underpinning of violence was not obvious. Armed groups in Bashali and Bwito, as well as FARDC units, used similar techniques despite ideological differences and also engaged in more depoliticized, sometimes outright criminal forms of violence:

I do not see any difference. Previously, we had Nyatura, APCLS and FDLR in Bashali-Mokoto, now the NDC-Rénové is here and employs the same forms of harassment (Civilian in Bashali, November 2019).

Militarized rule in eastern Congo sometimes involves arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, abductions, sexual violence and different types of extortion. While they reflect abuse of power and the criminalization of conflict, they often are embedded – whether convincingly or not – in political context, such as when ‘traitors’ of a given cause are targeted. In 2019, a defining line in the frame of contested order-making was the confrontation between NDC-Rénové and the CMC. Since December 2018, the former had progressed along the Pinga-Mweso road. If the NDC-Rénové had been expanding elsewhere before, this advance was made possible by Mapenzi Likuwe’s defection from the APCLS and the full integration of his Lola Hale/APCLS-Rénové into Guidon’s ranks in early 2019.

Brokered by politicians from the area, this strengthening of the NDC-Rénové foreshadowed the dispersal of numerous smaller militias (mostly Nyatura groups with origins in Kasongo Kalamo's erstwhile Nyatura-*Groupe de Sécurité*) to the south of the Pinga-Mweso road and the eviction of the CNRD from its strongholds north of that same road. After a successful operation, the NDC-Rénové even absorbed many Nyatura combatants including commanders such as Batachoka and others. Similar to Mapenzi Likuwe's defection, some of these developments were pushed by elites: after the dismantling of Kavumbi's Nyatura faction, customary leaders and politicians from Bashali helped broker the NDC-Rénové's recruiting of Batachoka, Mungwete, Apollo and others.

In the second half of 2019, the NDC-Rénové continued to gain ground towards Mweso and Kitchanga and began operating towards Bwito. While it had cooperated with CMC units in its campaign against the CNRD, the two forces fell out when Guidon Shimiray requested joint offensives against the FDLR, which the CMC refused. The two groups then clashed north of Mweso, leading to the killing of John Love, as the NDC-Rénové ventured into the Nyanzale and Katsiru areas. Its progress only came to a brief halt after the killing of FDLR military leader Mudacumura in September 2019. While not killed by the NDC-Rénové, his death initiated a period of CMC wins, temporarily driving out Guidon's troops from Bwito again. By November 2019, this tide had turned. Under pressure by both NDC-Rénové and FARDC operations, the CMC and FDLR suffered additional defections and losses of commanders. While the APCLS under Janvier Karairi and the Nyatura groups of Jean-Marie and Nzayisenga fled Masisi to join the CMC, this did not contribute to a real shift in power relations. Instead, as is often the case when armed groups arrive in an area where they are not indigenous, it intensified violence against civilians.

The struggle over authority and territory pitting the NDC-Rénové side against the coalition of the CMC, FDLR and APCLS can hardly be understood without taking into account the role of the national army. Since NDC-Rénové's creation in 2014, internal MONUSCO documents have persistently alleged that Guidon Shimiray receives army support. While there has been little conclusive evidence during their Lubero advance – except an ominous cease-fire – the NDC-Rénové's campaign into Bashali and Bwito carves out a much

clearer picture. Both forces established camps and roadblocks within shouting distance of one another without interfering with each other's business. While this led to double taxation of civilians, interlocutors have stressed that in shared FARDC/NDC-Rénové zones, this has engendered a 'false peace' marked by less fighting.

This collaboration also includes frequent meetings among commanders and deliveries of government supplies (arms, ammunition, uniforms, etc.) for the NDC-Rénové. Much of the material support has been channelled through an army regiment operating around Kitchanga whose commanders have previously been cited by United Nations investigators for organizing FARDC support for the FDLR, as those forces were still in alliance (see also Congo Research Group 2020).

Despite recent reshuffles in the army leadership of North Kivu – according to Goma-based sources this happened following a motion in North Kivu's provincial parliament, led by Hutu political leaders who had otherwise remained awkwardly silent with regards to the NDC-Rénové's progress – this collaboration continues. While specific regiments seem to provide most of this support, others are alleged to be purveyors of arms and other forms of support to the NDC-Rénové.⁴ Some of this collaboration dates back to the NDC era, when ex-CNDP circles within the integrated army supported Sheka in the fight against the APCLS and FDLR around 2009 and 2010 while also engaging jointly in trading Walikale's tin.

This more structured support coexists with continuing small-scale diversions of army stockpiles as rank-and-file FARDC keep selling ammunition to the CMC, the FDLR and others – sometimes coupled with the marijuana trade. A specific case is a new FARDC regiment recently deployed to southern Bwito, consisting of recently reintegrated ex-combatants hailing from all across North Kivu. Operating around Kitchanga, this unit is frequently cited for human rights violations including rape, theft and burglary. Locally referred

⁴ This includes colonels Muhire (based in Nyanzale), Bisetsa (Rutshuru), Munyakazi (Masisi), Padiri (Sake), Rusimbi (Tongo), and Dumu, Major Lebe (Kitchanga), a group of FARDC based in Mokoto, and others reported to act under the orders of General Innocent Gahizi.

to as *musheku*, these units have reinforced army operations against the CMC since mid-2019.

Within wider patterns of active conflict, certain specific incidents highlight how attempts at order-making intersect with violent practice. Two interesting recent cases in Bashali and Bwito are the killings of *Maman Fina*, a famous businesswoman from Mweso, and *Mwami Kivu Mabuanano*, the customary chief of Bishusha *groupement*. Both furthermore provide examples of the absence of equitable, public rule of law even though most belligerents engage in some form of justice provision. These cases also stand for a wider pattern of local elites being killed, including the customary chief of Tongo in 2016 and Abbé Etienne Nsengiyumva, a well-known priest in Kitchanga, in 2018.

Mwami Kivu was killed in a feud among ruling Hunde families in Bishusha, an area east of Kitchanga and predominantly inhabited by Hutu. The fourth customary chief killed within two years in the area, he was shot during an ambush on 17 January 2017. One suspect was convicted by a local court but soon after left prison, was made a policeman and deployed near Kitchanga. The instigators of the killing were never properly identified. In a context of customary power disputed both in ethno-demographic battles as well as internal Hunde rivalry, this shows how quickly violence is employed to (un)make political order, as well as the availability of manpower to execute such violence. The Bishusha case is illustrative of tensions within the Hunde chieftaincies, including the contestation of Mwami Nyanguba of Bashali and the exiled *groupement* chief Roger Bashali in Bashali-Mokoto, and a similar contestation in Bwito where the incumbent customary chief lives in Goma. As is the case elsewhere, customary leadership has been further eroded by urbanization. As town dwellers are more mixed and less bound by rural local politics, the demographic and spatial expansion of major centres like Kitchanga (or Rubaya, in southern Masisi) reinforces existing pressure on the overall legitimacy of customary power.

The case of *Maman Fina* highlights how difficult it is to balance proximity and distance vis-à-vis competing belligerents. In early 2019, she was abducted while travelling on a motorcycle taxi and later assassinated; her driver was

beaten and eventually released. While she was transporting humanitarian supplies during this period, interlocutors have repeatedly stressed that she had worked in the past as a type of logistic contractor for several armed groups, and that her collaboration with different sides had raised suspicion among belligerents. A former collaborator with the CNDP, she was suspected of having more recently collaborated with the NDC-Rénové. Army officers also participated in efforts to negotiate her release. While Fina's killing relates back to the rivalry between Hutu armed groups with others considered to be on good terms with neighbouring Rwanda, it was triggered by a personal feud involving the family of the late Nyatura leader Kasongo Kalamo. Kasongo had previously collaborated with Fina and thus encouraged his wife to claim 'heritage' from this collaboration. Fina's case also more broadly illustrates how navigating militarized local economies has become part and parcel of local entrepreneurship in such places.

4.2 Land, Custom and Displacement

Land is a particularly acute reason for conflict in Bashali and Bwito chieftaincies. As outlined above, the area's history of forced migration, demographic change and large-scale concession economies has rendered land access and tenure tenuous and often exclusionary (Mathys and Buescher 2018).

Moreover, recurrent tensions between agricultural and pastoral lifestyles, both within and between communities, intersect with contested land governance. This accentuates grievances rooted in the unequal distribution of land among local farming populations and the elites holding vast plantations – often with unclear titles and rights and enforced by violent means, by subcontracting army units and armed groups alike. While dialogue and peace-building initiatives have been part of stabilization and other programmes, the deeper causes of land conflict remain difficult to address in an environment of ongoing armed conflict (Life and Peace Institute 2014).

Aggravating land issues is the extraordinary level of internal displacement. In Bashali and Bwito, displacement is triggered by different factors including armed groups' active combat and fluctuating territorial control, as well as

expulsion dynamics, that is, kicking out local populations (often including descendants of the *anciens ouvriers* who used to work the plantations, as stressed in interviews). As land and custom are intricately connected in eastern Congo, conflict over the former often affects struggles over local political power and vice-versa. Finally, local populations' lack of access to land is a major factor affecting the local subsistence economy, and thus tends to amplify internal displacement, malnutrition, and youth radicalization.

Much of eastern Congo's colonial concession economy is replicated in contemporary patterns of land use and ownership. In Bwito and Bashali, a particularly high number of large-scale plantations exist, most of which are owned by provincial political and military elites. While conflicts over concession areas do not neatly overlap with ethnic contestation, many interlocutors stressed the preponderance of Tutsi and Hutu ownership acquired during Zaireanization or after recent conflicts such as the 'second Congo war'. This has led to a trend of transforming previous agricultural lands into cattle-grazing zones that further compound food insecurity and the overall precarity of landless classes. While this contributes to displacement in the long run, it is also a major factor in violence. One Nyatura group, for instance, the Bohoza faction under Apollo, was born of disgruntled descendants of *anciens ouvriers* who had been denied usufructuary rights by landowners.

Many concession-holders in the area, however, react to increasing tensions which they seek to appease by granting access to small portions of land against payments. Often, a plot of 30 square metres is traded against US\$10 per season or the in-kind equivalent of a harvest of potatoes, beans, maize and other crops typical of the region. While this secures a modicum of access, it additionally puts farming revenue under strain. Others, however, have been using soldiers to keep out farming populations. This has benefitted armed groups rallying support amongst dispossessed civilians, such as those in Bishusha. There, the CMC has prohibited land access to all Tutsi – who are considered to be close to local concession owners – and begun establishing its own access lease system. However, the same armed group is also reported to have been bribed by concession-holders against in exchange for assurances that they would claim authority only over parts of the concessions and protect the rest on behalf of the owners.

Armed groups engage in land governance and conflict in many other, usually predatory, ways. Both within and beyond concessions, they attempt to control land access to steer it towards their own community and interests, generate revenue or implement ethnic and ideological ambition. As much of Bwito and Bashali's populations are ethnic Hutu, Nyatura groups and the FDLR are able to bolster their legitimacy by contesting Tutsi-held concessions and Hunde customary power. Representing demographic minorities in many areas of Bwito, Hunde chiefs in turn have also relied on contracting Hutu to collect taxes. This creates a trinity in the authority over land in which state actors are relegated to bystander roles (see also Mathys & Buescher 2018).

Armed group land governance tends to be uneven and arbitrary and is often mixed with respective taxation practices (see more below). While members of regular security forces occasionally intervene in similar ways, the bulk of armed land governance remains on the sides of militias. Local authorities are usually compelled to comply with belligerents or otherwise exposed to reprisals, even if they are formally involved in the administration of land access. The CMC, for instance, controls harvests and takes over the leasing of plots on the land they control. The NDC-Rénové, in turn, focuses on diversified taxation strategies and 'offers' protection and access for everyone properly complying. However, while ongoing combats often further complicate land access, more stable control – such as that imposed in parts of Bashali – can also lead to increased production, even if armed rule remains harsh and extractive.

Another key issue in the competition for land is customary power, which has a history of contestation in both Bwito and Bashali. As customary authorities vie for power, they often tend to exacerbate land conflicts given the intrinsic link between chiefs and territory, even though at local levels customary authority remains somewhat legitimate when it comes to land access negotiation. Wherever customary power is not infringed on by concessions or armed groups, land is distributed by chiefs on demand and subsequently leased out or sold (a practice certain armed groups try to mimic) with concomitant paperwork including plot records. In many areas, however, such transactions can be contested within situations of customary conflict or offer local authorities a possibility for predation.

Certain local leaders demand sizeable tribute payments (often in the form of alcohol or meat) before even listening to requests. Cases also exist where chiefs instrumentalize armed conflict by siding with a belligerent to (re-) establish their authority over land, such as in Bweru. Another example is Burungu, where a local chief faced the large-scale arrival of displaced persons in need of plots. While he somehow conceded to the pressure, he tried to sell land at excessive prices. Other authorities, in turn, struggle to exercise their roles. This is the case for many so-called *fonctionnaires délégués*, interim clerks charged with local administration at the level below the territorial administration. Most of those deployed in Bashali and Bwito are constrained to remain Kitchanga-based due to insecurity and unacceptance.

Conflict-induced displacement adds to the existing land conflicts in Bashali and Bwito, more particularly around the Kitchanga area where thousands of IDPs gather in camps, most of which are structured ethnically. These camps reflect some of the fault lines, including land conflict but also inter- and intra-community tensions. Hence armed groups have a strong interest in maintaining a grip over camp management. The APCLS, for instance, deployed one of its top intelligence officers in a mostly Hunde camp in order to spread the group's ideology and recruit. Other armed groups employ similar practices, reflecting the utility of IDP camps in political and military struggles. Moreover, the specific role of Kitchanga as a space where population movements concentrate and are shaped has led to both contestation and friction – as exemplified by the town's 2013 destruction – but also to some sort of neutral zone in which all belligerents, political and ethnic parties can move, and in which levels of violence often remain below the threshold set by surrounding areas.

4.3 Taxation, Agriculture and Trade

While land issues, armed governance and customary struggles are key drivers of conflict in Bashali and Bwito, one of its central outcomes is the pervasive taxation by multiple state and non-state authorities across Bashali and Bwito. As stressed in recent research (Cercle de Concertation 2019), taxation of agricultural goods, land access, and mobility, as well as head taxes or war

chest collections, are both a source of revenue and a mode of governance for belligerents. Taxation dynamics vary from highly structured approaches, such as those of the NDC-Rénové, to more diffuse schemes employed by smaller Nyatura factions. They include static practices such as roadblocks and mobile forms of taxation. Moreover, they vary between cash or in-kind, in amounts and frequency. This section distils the main trends.

A main taxation technique used by armed groups (and, occasionally, the Congolese army) is head taxes organized through systems of tokens (known as *jétons*). *Jéton* systems exist both under NDC-Rénové and CMC rule and are usually fixed at 1,000 Congolese francs per month (in certain areas, 1,500) per person in a given age range – often from 15–60 years. Certain local authorities are exempt from this tax and in return co-opted for its collection alongside local commanders or armed group members specifically appointed to that end. In the *jéton* system, tax revenue is usually centralized and redistributed and the issuing of tokens is controlled by high-level commanders. These taxes are often named euphemistically with a reference to safety and security, such as the examples of *lala salama* and *ndengera buzima* ('rest/sleep safely') among the CMC and other Nyatura while the NDC-Rénové, like the FARDC in certain cases, refers to these taxes as support for the war effort, or *chakula ya jeshi* and *mukongoro*. In NDC-Rénové areas the *jéton* is also called *carte mémoire* in reference to the need of not forgetting or losing it. Non-payment of taxes can result in heavy fines, between 50,000 and 100,000 Congolese francs, and physical punishment. In areas where the FARDC and NDC-Rénové split control, double taxation is common, government troops often demanding slightly lower rates.

In addition to head taxes at checkpoints and in villages, taxation of transported goods or passing vehicles (motorcycles, lorries, etc.) is a key income source for armed groups and the military. These taxes vary between groups and often exist both as in-cash or in-kind systems. They are often levied at strategic roadblocks before fields and local markets, leaving civilians little chance to avoid them. Justified by the provision of security and the need to supply the protectors, these taxes blend into existing taxation by countless government bodies. Many of these taxes, hence, have similar purposes or justifications, demonstrating the fragmentation of authority in Bashali and Bwito.

While taxes by larger, more structured armed groups and the army tend to be more stable and consistent, they can still vary across zones, and locally or temporally higher amounts are often explained by prevailing insecurity or ongoing operations. Taxation by smaller groups or units escaping neat command chains tends to be more unpredictable or transforms into random extortion. Although certain taxes – specifically those levied by traders – can be negotiated with armed groups, this requires other payment such as food or alcohol contributions. In certain local markets the NDC-Rénové taxes 5,000 Congolese francs for the right to sell on local markets, up to 200,000 for requesting a theft to be pursued, 45,000 for large-scale agricultural buyers who trade with Goma, and between US\$10–20 to permit a lorry pass through key roadblocks. In addition to their monthly taxes, Nyatura groups like the CMC often request food contributions – for instance, X kilogrammes per larger unit (e.g. bags) of food harvests. On several occasions, the CMC has installed temporary special taxes contributing to infrastructure projects such as the construction of bridges and schools in its Bukombo stronghold.

Other than money and goods, armed groups also tax time and labour. Known as *salongo*, the Mobutu era’s coercive communal work, civilian populations are required to clean villages, help build military camps, or dedicate a given amount, for instance a specific day each week, of their agricultural work to produce for armed groups. As with *jéton* taxes, these practices are widespread among armed groups in Bashali and Bwito. Opting out of *salongo* is possible but requires substitute payment of between US\$20–30. Another specific tax that broadly falls under the *salongo* concept concerns motorcycle taxis in areas under armed group control. Both in the frame of operations and other troop movements, they are often obliged to transport combatants for free (a practice also common among government troops). While priests, nurses and teachers are often exempt from *salongo*, others face repression when trying to escape – ranging from threats and insults to torture and high fines.

The Role and Fate of Outside Interventions

Against the backdrop of protracted conflict dynamics and significant changes in the security landscape of Bashali and Bwito, stabilization efforts are confronted with difficult challenges. This section assesses how Bashali's and Bwito's populations perceive outside interventions, and how specific programmes – such as promoting women and youths or supporting dialogue and mediation – can foster stability and security. It also highlights the limits of stabilization in zones of high volatility and intense mobilization.

5.1 Mitigated Views on Stabilization: 'Avoid giving water to those not thirsty'

Despite significant efforts and programmes rolled out in the ISSSS framework in and around Kitchanga, fieldwork highlights that stabilization is seen critically, and its reputation has room for improvement. Numerous interlocutors, across age, gender and ethnic origin, either state they do not know any stabilization projects being undertaken, or that they doubt such projects have any positive effects on the ground. Among those lamenting the usefulness of stabilization, a feeling of non-involvement is widespread. It reflects fatigue with outside interventions as well as frustration with local elites:

In my opinion, a good stabilization project should be co-conceived by affected populations. We often have no idea of when and where such projects begin and end.

I hear people talking about ISSSS, but I am yet see positive impact. They should consult populations in order to make such projects more successful.

Stabilization projects mostly benefit local elites, providing funds for them and tend to favour recipients close to the local customary authority.

Others are simply unaware of stabilization. Asked for their opinions, many interviewees asked what stabilization is, or replied right away that no stabilization projects have ever been organized in their area, but that they would welcome such projects on the condition that they are preceded by in-depth and participatory research. This is the case for Bishusha, Katsiru, Bweru and other localities. Other interlocutors are aware of ongoing stabilization efforts but perceive them as useless or ill-designed:

A good stabilization project needs to involve local communities, armed groups and local authorities, since all of these are supposed to be somehow beneficiaries.

Projects led in the name of stabilization had zero impact because armed groups are on the rise. These projects need to start respecting local realities.

Yes, I have even participated in some ISSSS workshops, but I do not understand what they seek to achieve. Their results are poor, armed groups keep popping up. Good projects need to be elaborated where they seek to have impact, not brought from far away.

However, there are voices that recognize the existence and purpose of ISSSS activities, and some even attribute tentative success to certain initiatives. Unsurprisingly, and similar to humanitarian action (Brabant and Vogel 2014), local judgement of external projects is often pertinent, critical and well thought out. This judgement, however, also often merges with actual or pretended sentiments of partiality, as many voices demand a more even, non-discriminatory approach in ISSSS programming:

These interventions should not be politicized or aimed at one side of the conflict.

ISSSS experts only met people from one lineage in our community, hence the subsequent programmes were absorbed by a particular interest, which is very deplorable.

The conception and implementation of ISSSS projects have followed logics adverse to beneficiary interests and focused mostly on particular interests.

Others again seem to be conflating ISSSS activities with broader development work, or see stabilization merely as a part of MONUSCO's broader mandate to protect civilians and help restore state authority, which according to interviewees, in particular in the Bwito area, has not been successful:

Stabilization projects have brought mills, helped with reforestation, initiated raising egg-laying hen and sheep-herding for eggs, built hair salons, but they do not affect youths' choices whether or not to join armed groups.

We have never seen a stabilization project here, but recently we were given sweet potato and cabbage seeds, which has been very useful to the community.

In all of 2018, MONUSCO has come one single time here.

MONUSCO arrives so rarely and randomly here that many people suspect them to be looking for natural resources [*chercheurs de bornes*].

Overall, more than effectively refuting the existence of stabilization, these testimonies rather hint at a lack of awareness and local ownership of ISSSS-related programmes. Interlocutors generally agree that stabilization needs to be executed across and with participation of all stakeholders and communities in a given environment, including civil society and youth movements. This leads to the following section, focusing on the role of women and youth in conflict and stabilization.

5.2 Empowering Women and Youth

Fostering the role of women and youth, as the ISSSS priorities outline, is both a key priority for stabilization efforts and a crucial vantage point to instil peace in Bashali and Bwito. However, to better gear projects towards that end, the role of women and youth is a central aspect. Their positionality in violent conflict is often ambiguous, combining agency and victimhood. For instance, while most armed actors are male in eastern Congo, there are prominent examples of females being involved with militias.

The NDC-Rénové has various women in its ranks, such as the chief escort of its leader Guidon Shimiray. Within the CMC, most women are relegated to auxiliary functions such as the provision of food. Some women traders collaborate in the movement's economic endeavours, sharing the spoils of local conflict economies. Others again collaborate with militias to privately settle scores, a widespread phenomenon in eastern Congo, involving both armed groups and regular army units (Verweijen 2013). One case revolved around a divorce, leading to the woman starting a relationship with an NDC-Rénové officer and pushing him to arrest her ex-husband over alleged ownership of guns.

Overall, women's engagement with armed groups features frequent abuse, including sexual violence and forced marriage. However, gender-based violence is not unique to armed groups. While this cannot be generalized, certain FARDC units are specifically accused of human rights abuses. Like their male counterparts, women in security services do not always employ a fully impartial and professional approach towards populations. The example of Maman Alliance, commander of the anti-GBV police unit around Kitchanga, is illustrative. She has a track record of making up complaints and selling judgement to the highest bidder. On the other hand, the role of women and youth organizations is a potential boost to peacebuilding. Among respondents of all ages, communities and sexes, women have an overwhelmingly positive reputation for conflict resolution. Future stabilization efforts should keep harnessing these opportunities and deepen their engagement with women.

5.3 Obstacles to Peace and Stabilization

Certain obstacles are intricately connected to the chances of success in stabilization projects. This section revisits some of the main risks emerging from the previous observations and points of analysis. While peacebuilding efforts have their merit if thoughtfully planned and executed, the following dynamics can undo efforts and thus necessitate wider attention in specific programming.

A first major issue is uneven or inexistent justice and concomitant impunity. Some of these issues relate to deeply entrenched systems of extortion entertained by local law enforcement officials who have been in their posts for many years; one interlocutor asked rhetorically whether policemen were customary authorities, too. Some local police and intelligence operatives have not been changed for a decade and are regularly alleged to co-implement lucrative networks of ambush and theft, including cattle raids known locally as *abashishura*. Both the PNC and the ANR are alleged to frequently invent infractions in order to extort alleged culprits. This extends across law enforcement and justice institutions. People detained for wrongdoing frequently report that they need to pay bribes to even get a trial, and specific police units – like those elsewhere in the country – rely on highly structured mechanisms of extortion. Traffic police are a common example but commanders of other PNC branches have also been cited for being involved in racketeering, ambushes and on-demand killings. Others face accusations of only handling cases of other communities and extracting accusations against their own kin into the private sphere, thus finding amicable solutions.

Certain individuals within government institutions not only perpetuate impunity but engage actively in abuses. While police are known for engaging in theft instead of chasing thieves, intelligence services define their mandate very broadly, considering random issues of public order their playing field. Certain army units sport a reputation of having an ambiguous impact on security whenever they deploy for operations. As in other areas of eastern Congo, FARDC operations in Bashali and Bwito often come with a toll in terms of human rights violations – carried out by both enemy forces and undisciplined individuals among the government's troops. Between Kitchanga

and Bishusha, for instance, the deployment of certain units is assumed to be linked to a steep rise of abuses in villages suspected of supporting armed groups such as the CMC.

Another bundle of challenges is rooted in the tenuous and contested character of land access and customary power. Local populations complain that, previously, customary chiefs would decide claims on the basis of proof and documentation but nowadays play off claimants and plaintiffs against each other. While the uneven provision of customary rule and justice – usually conditioned by bribe-like contributions – is one of the minor problems here, competition over customary authority across Bashali and Bwito is one key source of conflict and violence. Customary authority is pivotal in organizing and granting land access, but also to mediate conflict. However, in at least seven *groupements* around Kitchanga, mostly on the Bwito side, local chiefs either are in exile or have been killed. Targeted killings have also extended to others carrying out important social roles, including teachers. In several of these and other places, armed group leaders have effectively overtaken the role of chiefs, while in other cases they exert *de facto* power through a chief dependent on them. The latter is the case in many areas controlled by the NDC-Rénové.

Armed group presence has enacted broader governance changes for populations in the Kivus. However, and as the example of Bashali and Bwito demonstrates, the specifics are often dependent on context. The arrival of the NDC-Rénové has made the area a theatre of major proxy warfare, leading not only to the dawn of the FDLR – the region’s long-standing godfathers of public order – but also to a specific situation where government forces cohabitate with and support one belligerent against others. Hence, in NDC-Rénové’s areas of influence – whether or not state authorities or FARDC units are present as well – order-making largely lies in the hands of the NDC-Rénové. Dispute management often happens in exchange for payment of *pombe ya comanda* (beers for the local commander), with amounts being high in many cases and required for basic rights such as access to fields.

Even though minor infractions continue to be formally handled by local authorities such as the PNC, the latter cannot allow itself to act against the

NDC-Rénové's will. In other instances, state authorities have left when an armed group arrived. While both the NDC-Rénové and its enemies, such as the CMC, APCLS and FDLR, are known for exaggerated fines imposed on civilians and partial judgement, this happens under tacit approval in the case of the NDC-Rénové. Not only has the FARDC never engaged operations against Guidon Shimiray since he arrived in Bashali and Bwito, it also has not intervened to stop human rights abuses by the NDC-Rénové, such in two recent cases on 10 and 11 November 2019. This, coupled with FARDC deployment patterns in the area, has raised significant questions among local populations. Numerous officers with a past in rebellions, such as those of the RCD and CNDP (some of whom have earlier histories of military or economic cooperation with the NDC – see above), are currently deployed in Bashali, Bwito and nearby, and confidential reporting by the United Nations and other investigations illustrate, beyond reasonable doubt, that the NDC-Rénové are supported, supplied and given free rein to act as a proxy in the fight against the FDLR and its allies. While not ultimately linked to Bashali's and Bwito's entrenched problems, the NDC-Rénové's campaign also impacted their local and customary governance in ways similar to those of previous campaigns by other armed groups. The recent split has weakened the NDC-Rénové's grip on the area but led to a short-term increase in uncertainty and insecurity and may trigger a potential revival of the FDLR.

Surrounding an ISSSS priority area, Bashali and Bwito are severely impacted by ongoing violent conflict and a multitude of armed groups whose alliances and splits are frequent and hard to predict. Even though the NDC-Rénové is by now the area's main armed force, owing in part to its proxy arrangement with the Congolese army, the situation remains volatile and the alliance between the NDC-Rénové and the army is not free of tension. Although NDC-Rénové leaders still regularly meet FARDC officers to receive arms and ammunition, and share drinks, the fallout between Guidon and Bwira highlights the fragility of armed group configurations in this area.

However, while the current conflict dynamics are somewhat unique – there have been few cases where the FARDC has visibly outsourced military operations to proxy forces, and there has never been that much of a chance that the FDLR, the godfathers of armed mobilization over more than two decades of wars in eastern Congo, would be dismantled – a plethora of longer-standing conflict dynamics persist. Dynamics of insecurity in Bashali and Bwito remain strongly connected to underlying tensions over land and customary power, entrenching mistrust between and among Hunde, Tutsi and Hutu.

While relations among the communities are not conditioned by any intrinsic form of ethnic hatred, these fault lines are – as in previous cycles of conflict – often skilfully navigated by local and provincial political elites. One main point that remains unclear to date, given the recent and ongoing reshuffling of military and political order in Bashali and Bwito, is the future of land, identity and customary conflict – including tensions concerning concessions and the

situation of IDPs. As opposed to the long-time dominant FDLR (including its CNRD dissidence and its Nyatura allies) to which involvement in political and customary affairs is part of a broader strategy of rule, as it is in the Bwito area, the NDC-Rénové has been meddling less in these issues since arriving in the Bashali area. Rather, at this time, it seems that its immediate interest lies in randomly co-opting any local authority.

Peace efforts must better incorporate the complexity of the conflict and at the same time be aware of contemporary changes in governance, authority and violence which also affect stability in the area. This involves not only dedicated engagement with communities but also approaching conflict protagonists, including armed groups, in order to better understand the intersection of armed politics and local insecurity, as well as to gauge the scaled character of conflict, most notably given the observation that 'local conflict' is rarely only local. Finally, the reduction of violence in Bashali and Bwito will require accountable state and customary authorities and a stronger push against impunity and abuses of power – challenges that cannot and should not be addressed by external intervention only, but by agreement with local, provincial and national levels.

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