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Mayhem in the mountains

HOW VIOLENT CONFLICT ON THE HAUTS PLATEAUX OF SOUTH KIVU ESCALATED

Judith Verweijen, Juvénal Twaibu, Moïse Ribakare, Paul Bulambo and Freddy Mwambi Kasongo

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Executive summary

This report analyses the history and causes of the escalation of violence on the Hauts Plateaux, a mountainous area located in South Kivu Province, eastern Congo. It argues that this violence can be ascribed to four mechanisms. The first is the tendency to perceive all conflict-related events on the Plateaux as stemming from 'ethnic conflict.' This framing obscures other drivers of conflict and violence and leads to attributing collective responsibility for individual acts of violence. The result is revenge violence and the blurring of boundaries between armed groups and civilians. The second mechanism is the security dilemma. In part due the perceived partiality of the Congolese armed forces, the presence of armed groups considered 'ethnic' prompts counter-mobilization. The third mechanism is militarization, or the tendency of local political actors and national and regional politico-military elites to resort to force in order to win disputes and power struggles. The fourth mechanism is the multilayered nature of dynamics of conflict and violence, as local, provincial, national and regional developments alike shape the crisis on the Plateaux.

Stemming the violence on the Plateaux requires addressing all four mechanisms. However, current stabilization initiatives do not address militarization nor account for the multiplicity of drivers for conflict and violence. Moreover, by emphasizing intercommunity dialogue, they reinforce discourses of "ethnic conflict" which this report identifies as problematic. To tackle the crisis on the Hauts Plateaux, interventions need to acknowledge the crucial role of political-military elites at all levels, including national politicians and governments of neighbouring countries.

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1 |
Introduction

Over the past three years, violence has escalated on the *Hauts Plateaux*, a mountainous area located in the south of South Kivu province, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While fighting in this region has been ongoing since the formal end to the Second Congo War (1998–2003), violence of such an intensity and duration has not been witnessed before.

The violence has provoked a humanitarian tragedy, with over 220,000 people driven from their homes.[1] Entire villages have vanished, including schools, churches and health care centres, razed to the ground by the belligerents. A large part of the population has grown hungry, being unable to cultivate and having lost most of their livestock due to endemic cattle-looting. People have also become subject to horrific abuses, with belligerents on all sides violating international humanitarian law by attacking civilians, including camps for the displaced. Both the Congolese army and the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) have been unable – or not made sufficient efforts – to protect civilians and stem the fighting. While there have been numerous initiatives to bring peace, including intercommunity dialogues and ceasefire agreements, none of these efforts has so far had a sustainable impact.

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[1] In January 2021, the number of IDPs was estimated to be 220,795 according to a count by the NGOs APADEC, *Groupe milima* and AJEDC; correspondance with coordinator of APADEC, February 2021.

This report looks at the origins and evolution of the tragedy on the *Hauts Plateaux*, located at the intersection of the territories (or *territoire*s, sub-provincial administrative divisions) of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga. Although the current crisis is unprecedented in its scope and the destruction that it has wrought, many of the mechanisms and underlying factors are the same as in earlier episodes of violence. These drivers are much more complex than the explanation of "ethnic conflict" that is commonly brandished in reporting by national and international media and other observers, such as MONUSCO (UN, 2019).

The current escalation of violence can be explained by four interlocking mechanisms. The first is **the salience of discourses of "ethnic conflict" and "autochthony"**. A wide variety of local conflicts on the Plateaux are perceived – by conflict parties and observers alike – primarily through the lenses of "ethnic conflict" and "autochthony". The latter notion refers to the idea of being the first or original inhabitants of a certain area, rendering con-flicts a struggle between "natives" and "foreigners". While tensions between communities certainly play a role in the current violence, identity is only one of a range of aspects at play. Conflicts also relate to contestations over local authority, territory and access to land and natural resources, including the taxation of markets and mines and the regulation of cattle movements. "Ethnic conflict" also predominates as an explanation for violence. However, most acts of violence stem from a range of motivations, including revenue generation, military strategy, and personal revenge and rivalry. The notion of "ethnic conflict" does not only render these other motivations invisible, it also leads to **attributing collective responsibility for individual acts of violence**. This, in turn, **blurs the boundaries between armed groups and civilians**. Most violence on the Plateaux is committed by armed groups; yet it is blamed on communities at large. Armed groups are widely seen to "represent" certain ethnic groups, and, by implication, to act on their behalf. Consequently, acts of armed group violence may provoke revenge on (civil-ian) members of the perpetrator's group, setting off tit for tat massacres. While many armed groups are indeed supported by members of particular communities for reasons of protection and advancing their cause in local disputes, they are not mandated by these communities nor do community members have much of a say in armed group actions and strategies.

The second mechanism driving armed mobilization and violence is the **security dilemma**: given that armed groups are seen to represent particular "ethnic communities", the presence of any such group becomes automatically a threat to the other communities. As a result, these communities consider it justified to support an armed group recruited from among their own members to protect their lives, land, property and interests. The presence of that armed group, in turn, renders members of the "opposed" communities reluctant to support the demobilization of "their" group. In such a situation, demobilization is only likely to be successful if all parties involved lay down their arms simultaneously. The security dilemma is crucially related to the **perceived partiality of the Congolese armed forces** (FARDC). All parties to the conflicts on the Plateaux accuse the FARDC of favouring one side over the other, as evidenced by its selective failure to intervene and alleged collaboration with particular armed groups. Consequently, when faced with existential threats, people lack confidence that the army will protect them. This distrust forms an important justification for supporting armed groups.

The third mechanism fostering violence on the Plateaux is **militarization**: it is not local conflicts over authority, territory and resources in themselves that cause violence. Rather, it is the notion that the use of force is justified in order to win the day in these conflicts. Local leaders embroiled in disputes often have recourse to armed groups to back up their position. Similarly, politicians active at the provincial or national level harness armed groups to be influential or outdo competitors, including from their own ethnic group. Having leverage over armed groups renders politicians of importance to the government, while also allowing them to gain votes and popular support.

Militarization, in turn, underpins the fourth mechanism that has fanned the flames of violence on the Plateaux: the **multilayered nature dynamics of conflict and violence**. Local, national and regional (Great Lakes Region) tensions are closely interrelated. Due to "politico-military entrepreneurs" operating at the national level, foreign armed groups become involved in hostilities that are shaped by more localized developments. This interlacing of dynamics of conflict and violence at different levels renders simplistic the widespread idea that the violence is a result of "foreign interference

and manipulation". Certainly, the involvement of foreign armed forces has ramped up violence. But this has mostly occurred through their alliances with or support for Congolese armed groups, which generally collaborate with these forces on a voluntarily basis.

Aside from at interlocking scales, dynamics of conflict and violence play out in interlocking geographical clusters. When violence flares up in one area, it may spread to another. The Plateaux area is a vast space, stretching out over three different territories and encompassing the living space of multiple communities. Given that members of the same communities live in several zones, and armed groups are mobile and forge alliances with armed groups in other areas, violence spills over from one zone to the next. For instance, violence first peaked in the Bijombo area in 2018, before affecting the zone around Minembwe in 2019.

The Hauts Plateaux, and the adjacent area of the Moyens Plateaux (middle range mountains) consist of a number of zones with distinct, yet highly interconnected dynamics of conflict and violence. Due to a lack of space, this report will not cover each of these areas in equal detail. It focuses on three broad areas (see Map 1). The first is the *groupement* (administrative unit below a non-customary sector or a customary chiefdom) of Bijombo, which is part of the Bavira chiefdom located in Uvira territory. A key driver of conflict here is the struggle around the position of the chief of the *groupement*, which has generally – but not uniquely – pitted Banyamulenge against Bafuliiru and Banyindu pretendants. This conflict has led to parallel systems of governance and has become militarized, as different conflict parties are allied to different armed groups. Competition over the taxation of weekly markets has further aggravated these tensions.

The second zone is Itombwe, a sector that forms part of Mwenga territory. Home to the vast Itombwe forest and grazing grounds for cattle, this area is marked by struggles over local authority, including over the position of sector chief and the leadership of several villages. These conflicts have generally involved Banyamulenge and Babembe leaders. In the area of Mibunda, there have been long-standing conflicts related to the movements and

looting of cattle, most of which are owned by the Banyamulenge. In addition, there is competition over control of the weekly market of Mikalati and a number of artisanal gold-mining sites, such as Luhemba.

The third zone is that of Minembwe and its surroundings, including Lulenge sector, which is located in Fizi territory. This zone has equally been characterized by fierce conflicts over local authority, most recently in relation to the newly created *commune rurale* (rural commune, a decentralized local governance entity) of Minembwe. Near Lulenge, there have been conflicts over transhumance (the seasonal movement of cattle towards greener pastures) and the taxation and looting of cattle. Here too, competition concerning taxation at markets and mining sites has aggravated tensions. The Minembwe area is traditionally inhabited by Banyamulenge and Babembe, and there is a growing number of Bashi. In the immediate surroundings, towards Lulenge and Milimba, one also finds Bafuliiru and Banyindu.

This report is based on years of research. Three of the report's researchers are from the Plateaux area. The two other researchers – one of whom is based in Uvira – have conducted numerous field research trips on the Plateaux since 2010. All of them have closely followed developments in the area for at least a decade. Further research was conducted in April 2020, in the areas of Bijombo Nord, Bijombo South, and Minembwe and its surroundings, where semi-structured interviews were held with key informants in numerous villages. Informants included customary and politico-administrative authorities, community leaders, civil society actors, security services, and people linked to armed groups.

The rest of this report continues as follows. It first briefly elucidates the historical circumstances that have led to the pertinence of the narratives of ethnicity and autochthony. It also discusses how these narratives relate to past and present conflicts over local authority and territory. The report then explains how these conflicts and elite power competition became militarized, in particular during the Congo Wars (1996–2003) and their immediate aftermath. This is followed by an account of how local security dilemmas prohibited the demobilization of armed groups during the transition

(2003–06) that followed the Congo Wars, as well as demobilization attempts in 2011. The report then looks at the interweaving of regional, national and local dynamics of conflict and violence and how this contributed to an escalation of the violence in 2019. The following section takes stock of the current situation, zooming in on ongoing violence, fragmentation among the belligerents and divergent interpretations of the violence. The last part examines international stabilization and peacebuilding initiatives, in particular, intercommunity dialogues and talks. This leads to a set of broad conclusions and recommendations regarding the way forward.

2 |
Discourses of ethnic conflict and autochthony

One of the most common explanations for the violence on the Hauts Plateaux is that it concerns intercommunity or ethnic conflicts pitting the Banyamulenge on the one hand against the Babembe, Bafuliiru and Banyindu on the other. While there is indeed a long history of occasional tensions between these groups – amid cordial relations and peaceful everyday interactions – it is simplistic to ascribe these tensions primarily to ethnic identity. Rather, identity-related conflict interacts with and serves as a lens through which a range of other conflicts, for instance over local authority and land, are perceived. Invoking ethnicity elicits powerful feelings, as it plays into people's sense of belonging. Moreover, identity is deeply connected to certain rights, such as access to land, local authority and Congolese citizenship. In order to explain this connection, this section starts with exploring the dominant views, grievances and claims expressed by the different parties to the conflicts on the Plateaux. These views and claims draw to a large extent on particular interpretations of history, notably the colonial era and, more recently, the Congo Wars (Mathys, 2017).

2.1 Opposing conflict narratives

The Banyamulenge and self-styled "autochthonous" groups, such as the Babembe, Bafuliiru and Banyindu, have diverging interpretations of history and related views on the rights and status of certain identity groups. When exploring these views, caution is needed: we present here gross generalizations that are likely not shared by everyone belonging to the invoked

community in question. In fact, many people express relatively nuanced rather than radical views. This particularly applies to inhabitants of the Plateaux area, who have historically lived among and interacted with different ethnic groups on a day-to-day basis. Radical views are more often found among the more highly educated and those not directly affected by conflict, such as people living in big cities and the diaspora. In addition, these views are articulated by "politico-military entrepreneurs" or politicians and military figures hoping to influence people's interpretation of conflict events to attract support.

Parts of self-styled autochthonous groups consider the Banyamulenge "foreigners", specifically, recent arrivals or immigrants from Rwanda. They are therefore not "authentically Congolese" and relatedly, entitled to land, citizenship, and positions of local (customary) authority. More moderate voices may acknowledge that the Banyamulenge have lived on Congolese soil for a long time but will still contend that they are not entitled to control local governance units (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015). This prerogative should be reserved for communities considered "autochthonous" (which literally means "born from the soil"). Only the first or "original" inhabitants of certain areas are entitled to exercising (customary) authority and to ownership of their supposed ancestral lands. Since exclusively people with ancestral lands in the Congo are "authentically Congolese", Congolese citizenship "by origin" *(nationalité d'origine)* is restricted to this category. Other groups can only obtain Congolese citizenship "by acquisition" *(nationalité d'acquisition)* (Jackson, 2007; Hoffmann, 2021).

Many of these alleged "foreigner" groups, such as the Banyamulenge, are Rwandophone, implying they speak Kinyarwanda, the main language spoken in Rwanda. In addition, they are Tutsi, and therefore seen as "Nilotic" as opposed to "Bantu". Nilotic is here considered a "mega-ethnic" rather than a linguistic category, given that, linguistically speaking, Kinyarwanda is a Bantu language (Jackson, 2006). Time and again, according to this narrative, Nilotics/Tutsi, in particular Rwandans, have tried to dominate the Bantu by invading their country, occupying their land, changing the names of villages, rivers and mountains, and usurping their (customary) authority. The epitome of this vision is the so-called "balkanization" plot, or the belief that the main

aim of Nilotic/Tutsi invasion is to dismember the Congo by annexing the Kivus to a wider Tutsi empire (Jackson, 2006). The existence of this plot is seen to be evidenced by the First and Second Congo Wars, when Rwanda-backed rebellions invaded the eastern Congo. During these wars, numerous massacres of "autochthones" occurred that are ascribed to the Banyamulenge, and that are vividly remembered today. In autochthones' worldview, this violence reflected aggression to obtain their ancestral lands and usurp local authority (Verweijen, 2015). Such aggression is also reflected in the Banyamulenge's alleged refusal to prevent their cattle from trampling farmers' fields, which is an enduring source of conflict (Verweijen & Brabant, 2017).

For the Banyamulenge, the narratives of self-styled "autochthonous groups" rest on a falsification of history. Contrary to the allegation of being recent arrivals, they arrived on the soil of what is today the Congo before the colonial era. Therefore, they have a right to Congolese citizenship "of origin". That the colonizers never granted them a (customary) local governance unit was primarily related to discrimination and unfair treatment, not the fact that they were not living in the area at the time (Vlassenroot, 2002). Discrimination continued after independence, under the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. Not only were they still prevented from obtaining a customary local governance unit, their opponents increasingly tried to take away their citizenship and disenfranchise them, by invalidating their electoral candidates. In the 1990s, discrimination transformed into overt hostility. Banyamulenge were called names, while extremist politicians called for their deportation (Ruhimbika, 2001). More importantly, Banyamulenge were increasingly targeted by government soldiers and militias composed of self-styled autochthonous groups. In the run-up to and during the Congo Wars, they were the victims of several massacres, provoking existential fears. In addition, they were faced with the mass looting of their cattle. This deeply affected them, given they are a cattle-keeping people for whom cows have high symbolic and cultural value. These deteriorating conditions prompted many Banyamulenge to join the two rebel movements that sparked the First and Second Congo Wars, in an attempt to obtain existential security, uncontested citizenship, and political representation (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

2.2 The origins of opposed conflict narratives

As emerges from the narratives outlined above, when the Banyamulenge arrived in what is now the Congo has become a bone of contention. The stakes of this debate have been raised by changing citizenship legislation, which maintains different dates by which a people should have been present on Congolese soil in order for them to obtain "nationality of origin". In 1972, a law was adopted that granted such nationality to people coming originally from Ruanda-Urundi (as Rwanda and Burundi were called when they were Belgian colonies) and established in Kivu before 1950.[2] However, a 1981 law restricted citizenship to descendants of "tribes" established on the national territory in its boundaries of 1 August 1885.[3] In 2004, a new law was adopted that conferred Congolese nationality on "each person belonging to ethnic groups of which the people and the territory constituted what became the Congo at independence" (which was in 1960).[4] These different laws have prompted the Banyamulenge to emphasize their precolonial arrival. Agitators from other communities, on the other hand, have persistently portrayed them as part of the different waves of Rwandan immigrants and refugees arriving in the Congo during the 20th century (Jackson, 2007; Verweijen, 2015a).

While the Banyamulenge's migration is popularly contested, many academics agree that they moved to present-day Uvira territory before the creation of the Congo Free State in 1885, not only from what is now Rwanda but also from present-day Burundi (Depelchin, 1974; Willame, 1999; Lemarchand, 2009). This movement took place in numerous waves – the starting date of which remains contested – rendering the Banyamulenge's "arrival" not as much a single event as a gradual migratory process.[5] This process unfolded at a time of generalized population movements, when no international borders existed. Furthermore, in the precolonial era, most of the groups now

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[2] *Loi n° 1972-002 du 5 janvier 1972 relative à la nationalité zaïroise.*
[3] *Loi n° 1981/002 du 29 juin 1981 sur la nationalité zaïroise.*
[4] *Loi n° 04/024 du 12 novembre 2004 relative à la nationalité congolaise.*
[5] For Depelchin (1974), most Banyamulenge left during the reign of Rwandan King Kigeri IV Rwabugiri (c.1860–95), following smaller movements under Mutara II Rwogera (c.1830-60) and during the reign of King Yuhi IV Gahandiro (c.1797–1830). Other scholars, such as the Rwandan historian Alexis Kagame (1972), maintain that small-scale movements date back to the 16th century.

considered "ethnic" in Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga did not yet exist as separate "tribes" that self-identified in ethnic terms nor did they have well-delineated, fixed living spaces and authority structures (Muchukiwa, 2006). Many of the subgroups that would later come to constitute these "tribes" moved to Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga from other regions (Moeller, 1936). These circumstances relativize claims to "autochthony" and the related portrayal of particular groups as "foreigners/newcomers".

One of the larger groups of migrating Banyamulenge temporarily settled in the Ruzizi Plain before ascending to the Moyens Plateaux to a hill named Mulenge (in Uvira territory). As reflected in colonial administrative documents, when the Belgian colonizers began to set up an administration in Kivu at the start of the 20th century, there were a number of figures considered to be leaders among the people they called "Banyarwanda" (those coming from Rwanda). One of these was Kaïla or Kayira, who directed a group that had initially settled in Mulenge, but later moved to Lulenge in Fizi. Another was Gahutu or Kahutu, who resided in the Ruzizi Plain. When the colonial authorities started to solidify the organization of the local administration by creating enlarged chiefdoms from the 1920s onwards, they did not grant a chiefdom to the Banyamulenge (Muchukiwa, 2006). While the exact reasons for this remain to be further studied, some scholars have ascribed this exclusion to discrimination by the colonial authorities. The latter perceived this group as difficult to govern, given that they were relatively mobile and escaped tax payments and censuses. Moreover, it was feared they would incite other peoples to equally avoid European influence (Weis, 1958). The colonizers did, at some point, recognize certain Banyamulenge leaders as *groupement* chiefs, or customary leaders of subentities of chiefdoms. For instance, the 1954 administrative report of Uvira mentions that the Banyarwanda (as they were then called) living in the Bavira chiefdom were recognized as constituting a seventh *groupement* (AAB, 1954).[6] It seems, however, that this *groupement* was later abolished, which deprived the Banyamulenge of the exercise of local authority.

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[6] We thank Gillian Mathys for sharing this observation.

The Belgian colonizers adopted a system of indirect rule, implying that they relied on customary chiefs as intermediaries. To render this system orderly and efficient, they tried to create territorially well-delineated chiefdoms, each governed by a paramount chief representing a particular "tribe". As this vision did not correspond to realities on the ground, they had to engage in considerable socio-political engineering. They moved subgroups around, merged them into a single tribe, appointed paramount chiefs where none had existed before and drew fixed territorial boundaries around socio-political spaces that had previously been fluid. Customary chiefs were the cornerstone of this system and were also crucial for the governance of land, to which they mediated access. Given that chiefs were seen to represent particular ethnic groups, an intricate link was forged between local authority, identity and territory, which transformed chiefdoms into ethnic spaces (Muchukiwa, 2006; Hoffmann, 2019; Vlassenroot, 2013).

Not being granted a chiefdom, the Banyamulenge were excluded from the local administration and barred from having land of their own. Instead, they were subject to the paramount chiefs of other communities, in particular, the Bavira, Bafuliiru, Babembe and Barundi, to whom they had to pay tribute, including to access land. This exclusion was a considerable source of grievance, just as the abolishment of their *groupement* in the Bavira chiefdom was. Later on, in the post-independence era, this exclusion became a ground on which they were seen as "not authentically Congolese" and denied the related rights to land, local authority and citizenship (Jackson, 2007). These high stakes of controlling a chiefdom or *groupement* explain the Banyamulenge's struggle to obtain a governance unit of their own. These efforts intensified in the wake of the war that broke out in the first years after the Congo's independence in 1960 (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

Inspired by the anti-imperialist and social justice ideas of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Congo who was assassinated in 1961, a rebellion sprang up in Uvira territory in 1964. While many Bafuliiru, Babembe and Bavira joined the insurgency, the Banyamulenge displayed little enthusiasm for what became known as the Simba rebellion. Their attitude became outright hostile when the rebels fled from a counterinsurgency offensive into the mountains and began attacking the Banyamulenge's cattle.

In response, and because they supported the government, the Banyamulenge created a militia known as *Abagiriye* ("warriors") that was trained by and fought on the side of government forces. As a result, fighting assumed an ethnic character, pitting pro-government Banyamulenge against rebel forces from other communities (Vlassenroot, 2002). Consequently, the Simba rebellion, which was largely over by 1967, led to a sharp deterioration of intercommunity relations. Previously, these relations had been cordial, even though there remained considerable social distance between the Banyamulenge and other groups due to their distinct, cattle-centred social customs, diet, and appreciations of wealth and labour. The Simba war changed this, fostering mutual negative representations that became infused with bitter memories of violence (Depelchin, 1974).

Another factor that contributed to frictions was the Banyamulenge's growing political emancipation, which resulted in part from the renewed opportunities for employment and education opened up by their participation in the war. This new-found assertiveness was reflected in their adoption of the name "Banyamulenge" ("those coming from Mulenge") towards the end of the 1960s, after the hill in Uvira where their ancestors had dwelled. This name emphasized their connection to Congolese soil and, by implication, that they should be recognized as an authentically Congolese tribe rather than as "immigrants" from Rwanda (Vlassenroot, 2002). While the designation Banyamulenge was eventually broadly adopted, it led to accusations by self-styled autochthonous politico-military entrepreneurs – which endure to the present day – that the name change was a strategy to mask the group's "true (Rwandan) origins" (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

The Banyamulenge's political awakening intensified their aspirations for a local governance unit, specifically, a *groupement* in the Bijombo area of the Bavira chiefdom, where a large group of Banyamulenge resided under Chief Budulege (Vlassenroot, 2002). The driving force in this activism was Rumenera Sebasonera Obed (or Kabarule), who had played an important role in the counter-insurgency effort against the Simba rebellion. In 1966, Kabarule demanded the creation of Bijombo *groupement*, which was achieved only in 1979. But rather than appointing a Munyamulenge as the chief, as Kabarule demanded, the *mwami* (customary chief) of the Bavira designated

a Muvira, even though the Banyamulenge were the demographic majority. Disappointed and frustrated, the Banyamulenge in Bijombo continued to obey the orders of their own leaders, particularly Kabarule. The result was a parallel system of government that endures to the present day and that also plays out at the level of villages, which are administrative subdivisions of the *groupement* (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

Due to the historical links between local authority, territory and ethnic identity, the struggles over local authority in Bijombo – and elsewhere on the Plateaux – are commonly perceived as "ethnic conflict". This discourse is so powerful that all conflict-related events are seen and interpreted in these terms. Rather than providing an accurate analysis of the situation, however, this discourse has become part of the problem. Many conflicts centre on local authority issues and are not primarily the result of antagonisms between groups seen as "ethnic". Moreover, these conflicts and antagonisms do not automatically lead to violence. Armed violence generally requires organization, hence deliberative action by instigators. In the case of armed groups, it necessitates mobilizing, arming, supplying and training troops, and motivating and instructing them to commit acts of violence. This organizing work is generally conducted by political and military actors who believe that the use of force is justified to further their objectives and interests. Therefore, to understand how conflicts on the Plateaux have led to armed violence, we need to analyse processes of militarization.

3 |
Militarization

In the 1990s, coinciding with a faltering attempt at democratization and following two decades of economic and state decline, the number of socio-political conflicts in Kivu increased sharply. Violence became an increasingly attractive option to settle these conflicts, and to obtain and augment power within a gradually opening political space. This option was not only chosen by politicians operating at the national and provincial level, but also by those engaged in conflicts over local authority. The Congo Wars strongly intensified these processes of militarization, bringing to power a new class of politico-military entrepreneurs whose power base rests on the exercise of violence (Vlassenroot, 2004). Their reluctance to renege on armed mobilization was an important reason that violence continued in many places even after the adoption of a final peace accord. The Hauts Plateaux is one of the areas where violence never stopped and where processes of militarization fostered by the wars became an engine for further armed mobilization (Verweijen, 2015b).

3.1 The Congo Wars

The socio-political tensions that emerged in Kivu in the 1990s focused to a large extent on the status of Rwandophone populations, including the Banyamulenge in South Kivu. In the early 1990s, as the atmosphere became increasingly grim, a growing number of Banyamulenge youths joined the ranks of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The RPF aimed to overthrow the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government – which they achieved in 1994 – using pan-Tutsi rhetoric to attract recruits from across the Great Lakes Region.

These combatants would later form the vanguard of the rebel movement *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre, AFDL). The AFDL was a coalition of Congolese rebel groups and armed forces from neighbouring countries led by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), which invaded eastern Zaire – as the Congo was called at the time – in 1996 (Stearns et al., 2013).

Arriving on the Plateaux before the rebellion was officially launched, the presence of AFDL troops sparked massacres and clashes with both the army and bands of armed Bembe youth. For instance, on 12 September 1996, Banyamulenge combatants associated with the AFDL killed *Mwami* Henri Spaack, the Bembe chief of the *groupement* of Basimunyaka II (in Itombwe) as well as another local authority and their relatives (UNOHCHR, 2010). Given that the *mwami* is seen to embody and represent the members of the ethnic group to which they belong, this highly symbolic massacre came as a shock to many Babembe. It signalled to them that the Banyamulenge were bent on usurping local customary authority by means of violence. Consequently, the massacre provided an impetus to the formation of Bembe armed groups and legitimized their use of violence. These groups were the forerunners of what later became known as "Mai-Mai", or self-defence groups linked to peoples self-identifying as autochthonous. On 26 September 1996, Bembe armed units in Fizi killed around 200 Banyamulenge in the town of Baraka; another 152 with the collaboration of government soldiers in Lueba on 29 September; and nearly 100 that same night in Mboko. These killings provoked counter-violence. On 6 October 1996, armed units comprised of Banyamulenge troops entered a hospital in Lemera and killed more than 30 people, including civilian patients and hospitalized government soldiers (UNOHCHR, 2010). This event prompted many Bafuliiru to take up arms and form militias. These mobilization efforts were soon directed against the AFDL. On 18 October, after invading Uvira territory from across the border, the AFDL officially announced its rebellion, which intended to topple the regime of long-reigning autocrat Mobutu.

Banyamulenge played important political and military roles in the AFDL and the administration that it established after overthrowing the Mobutu regime in only seven months. For instance, Bizima Karaha was appointed foreign minister and Moïse Nyarugabo obtained a top post in an anti-corruption

agency (Stearns et al., 2013). For many Banyamulenge, the AFDL was an occasion to redress the exclusion and discrimination they had faced in the Zairian state and achieve their political emancipation. However, advancing their rights through a Rwanda-led insurgency proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it was effective in providing immediate security and access to power. On the other, it created dependency on Rwanda, which continued to exercise important influence over the Congo's new administration and armed forces. This dependency created a backlash among the other communities in Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga. To them, it proved unambiguously that the Banyamulenge were not Congolese but Rwandans, who were moreover trying to expropriate their ancestral lands and local authority through violent means (Vlassenroot, 2002).

Relations with Rwanda proved an enduring bone of contention within the Banyamulenge community. Some felt it was a self-defeating strategy, as it would pre-empt acceptance of their status as Congolese and eventually lead to growing insecurity. For those Banyamulenge serving in the Congolese armed forces, which encompassed former AFDL troops, there was increasing frustration about being in hierarchically inferior positions and having worse service conditions than did their Rwandan counterparts. These tensions sparked a mutiny of Banyamulenge troops in South Kivu in February 1998. That month, a number of Banyamulenge deserters led by Michel "Makanika" Rukunda and Richard Tawimbi attacked an RPA base in Bukavu, indicating just how deeply aversion to Rwanda ran in some circles (Stearns et al., 2013).

Banyamulenge political leaders also engaged in growing resistance to what they perceived to be Rwandan domination. In June 1998, a group of Banyamulenge who had gathered in Bujumbura founded a secret movement to convince the Banyamulenge to pursue a course independent of Kigali. In addition, they aimed to recast the Congo's political order along federalist lines. Within this order, the Hauts Plateaux would become a semi-autonomous entity that would be part of a wider political union. A federalist solution, they believed, would bring the administration closer to the people and therefore foster the socio-economic development of the Plateaux, which lacked basic road, communications, health and educational infrastructure. This ambition was also reflected in their name, *Forces républicaines*

federalistes (Republican Federalist Forces). Two of the main figures involved in this movement were Manassé "Müller" Ruhimbika, a civil society leader who had created the first Banyamulenge NGO called *Groupe milima*, and Gasore Zébédée, a former ministerial advisor (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

The divergent attitudes towards Rwanda within the Banyamulenge community were sharply accentuated in August 1998, when a new Rwanda-backed rebellion was launched in the east, the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (Congolese Rally for Democracy, RCD). The rebellion followed a fallout between the new president of the Congo, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and his regional backers, in particular Rwanda. In response, senior officials in the Kinshasa government ramped up anti-Rwanda and anti-Tutsi rhetoric, and encouraged the formation of militia supposedly for self-defence purposes. This contributed to outbursts of violence against the Banyamulenge and other Tutsi, who were seen as accomplices of Kigali. In both Kinshasa and some areas in the east, Tutsi civilians were massacred, thousands were arrested, and hundreds disappeared, suspected to have fallen victim to extrajudicial killings. In addition, dozens of Tutsi soldiers were killed by other members of the armed forces in military bases in Kamina and Kananga (UNOHCHR, 2010).

This widespread violence made many Banyamulenge realize that they depended on Rwanda for their very existence, as they could not rely on Congolese state services for their protection. Others saw in the rebellion a way to achieve what the AFDL had failed to deliver, namely, unambiguous Congolese citizenship, security, access to high-ranking positions in the Congolese army and increased political representation. Combined with personal ambitions, these motivations prompted large numbers of Banyamulenge to join the RCD. They came to play prominent roles in its political branch as well as in its administration in the east, where it occupied large swathes of territory, including North and South Kivu. For instance, Moïse Nyarugabo became the RCD's justice commissioner, while Azarias Ruberwa was appointed its secretary-general (Stearns et al., 2013).

Scores of Banyamulenge soldiers joined the RCD's military branch, where they were generally placed under the command of RPA officers. This subordinate

status, combined with the feeling that Rwanda was instrumentalizing them for its own interests, fed into growing tensions between Banyamulenge subordinates and their Rwandan superiors. These tensions prompted one Munyamulenge officer, Pacifique Masunzu, to mutiny and lead a rebellion against Kigali in January 2002. Earning widespread support from the population of the Hauts Plateaux, and liaising with Mai-Mai groups, Masunzu's rebellion gained considerable momentum. In response, Kigali decided to hit back hard, sending a force of thousands of heavily armed RPA soldiers into the mountains (Stearns et al., 2013).

What also became a source of tensions between Banyamulenge soldiers and their Rwandan officers were the numerous massacres in which RCD troops were involved, several of which took place in Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga territories. One of the worst massacres occurred on 24 August 1998 in the villages of Kasika, Kilungutwe, and Kalama in Mwenga, where the armed branch of the RCD killed over 1,000 civilians. Another estimated 800 people – possibly more – were killed by RCD troops between 30 December 1998 and 2 January 1999 in the villages of Makobola II, Bangwe, Katuta, Mikunga and Kashekezi in Fizi (UNOHCHR, 2010).

These massacres were often in retaliation for Mai-Mai attacks. The RCD rebellion provoked resistance among broad layers of Kivu's population, who considered it foreign occupation and an attempt to "balkanize" the Congo. Throughout the countryside, including on and around the Plateaux, Mai-Mai militias sprung up that drew on discourses of autochthony and self-defence in the fight against the RCD.[7] The massacres committed by the RCD led to massive popular support for the Mai-Mai and growing antagonism towards the Banyamulenge. These sentiments were further reinforced by the RCD administration's creation of a new territory on the Hauts and parts of the Moyens Plateaux on 9 September 1999. This entity, named Minembwe territory, surpassed the longstanding aspiration of the Banyamulenge to have

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[7] In the parts of the Plateaux located in Mwenga, the Mai-Mai were under the command of Bembe leader Georges Alunda Maukya, a native of Itombwe. The Lulenge part of Fizi, adjacent to the Minembwe area, was home to the Mai-Mai brigade of Bembe Commander Godefroid Ngomanya, while towards Lulambwe, Sébastien Kayumba was in charge. Meanwhile, many Bafuliiru, Bavira and Banyindu living on the Uvira side of the Plateaux joined the Mai-Mai brigades of Commanders Baudoin Nakabaka and Zabuloni Rubaruba.

a *groupement* or chiefdom of their own. It created an entire territory that encompassed most of the traditional living space of the Banyamulenge and where they formed the demographic majority. Since a territory is also an electoral circumscription, this move potentially boosted the Banyamulenge's political representation. Up to then, they had experienced great difficulty to get their candidates for national parliament elected, given they are a minority in each of the three territories where they live (Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga) (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

The creation of Minembwe dismembered these three territories, while placing some of their villages under newly created *groupements* dominated by Banyamulenge chiefs. It therefore provoked considerable resistance among the other communities on the Plateaux. These communities experienced the constitution of Minembwe territory as an expropriation of their ancestral lands. Moreover, they feared a loss of income related to the exercise of authority over these lands, particularly customary taxation of access to land, mineral resources and markets. In addition, they had not been consulted about the creation of the new territory. In their eyes, it was an illegitimate entity imposed by a rebel administration they deemed illegal (Life & Peace Institute, 2011). For these reasons, Minembwe territory became a major object of resistance and counter-mobilization. It also sparked conflict by leading to boundary disputes among existing and newly created sectors, *groupements*, and villages. Some existing villages were divided into two, with the newly created locality placed under a Munyamulenge chief. The territory also led to disputes within the Banyamulenge community, as it placed Banyamulenge village chiefs that had previously acted in a relatively independent manner under a new layer of administration in the form of the Banyamulenge *groupement* chiefs. These conflicts over local governance were all the more explosive in an environment where conflict parties easily mobilized armed groups to reinforce their position. The resulting militarization of local governance conflicts has outlasted both the war and the existence of Minembwe territory itself (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

3.2 Legacies of the Congo Wars

The Congo Wars left a number of legacies and related grievances that are crucial to understanding today's armed mobilization and conflicts, not least as politico-military entrepreneurs continue to draw upon this rich reservoir of perceived injustices. Three of these legacies are highlighted here: first, bitter memories of atrocities and the related existential fears, distrust and thirst for holding the perpetrators to account; second, the trauma and local conflicts related to the creation of Minembwe territory; and third, the militarization of both elite power struggles and local conflicts.

The abhorrent violence that took place in the run-up to and during the Congo Wars has left deep scars in the social tissue of the Hauts Plateaux, and the territories of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga more generally. The violence is commonly remembered as ethnic in character and blamed on communities as a whole, rather than on individual perpetrators. For instance, many Babembe ascribe the Makobola massacre to the Banyamulenge, while the latter argue that their soldiers acted on the orders of their Rwandan superiors. Similarly, Banyamulenge blame massacres, such as the one that occurred in Lueba, on the Bembe community as a whole, rather than on the armed groups that committed it. What seems to aggravate the tendency to blame communities collectively is that none of the perpetrators of these atrocities has ever been held to account, reflecting the limited efforts at transitional justice in the wake of the Congo Wars (Davis, 2013). An important consequence of collectivizing blame is that communities as whole become suspect, which entrenches distrust. As will be explained in the next section, this distrust is at the root of security dilemmas, and has contributed to ongoing armed mobilization after the Congo Wars.

The narratives of armed group leaders underscore the importance of memories of massacres in contemporary armed mobilization. A case in point is Aoci Behekelwa Katumba Saddam, a Mubembe who served in the Mai-Mai forces of Kapopo Alunda in Mwenga during the Second Congo War. From around 2008 onwards, he led his own group in Itombwe, and currently serves as a commander in the Mai-Mai Mtetezi commanded by Ebuela Trésor wa Seba, which is one of the most important Mai-Mai groups currently fighting on the

Plateaux. Aoci identifies the killing of *Mwami* Henri Spaack by Banyamulenge soldiers in 1996 as one of the key events in his armed career,[8] indicating that memories of this murder continue to be used in justifications for armed mobilization. The Kasika massacre is another event that armed group leaders in the Mwenga region often invoke, for instance, those of the former Mai-Mai group of Kapopo. While Kapopo Georges, the son of Mai-Mai leader Alunda, disbanded this group and joined the army in 2011, key officers of his movement remained in the bush and are involved in the present violence.[9] During an interview, Kapopo said, "The RCD gave orders to shoot at everything that moves in Kasika. They entered the church and first started shooting at the wife of the mwami. She was pregnant and they cut out the twins... The *mwami* had been slaughtered like a goat. This frightened me a lot, as I had never seen such barbarous acts before, especially because the *mwami* is sacred."[10] The killing of local customary authorities has remained an important feature of violence today, and often acts as a trigger for escalation. This is not only because it is a symbolic act, targeting the community that the *mwami* embodies as a whole, but also because it is interrelated with the conflicts around local authority that are a key aspect of conflict dynamics on the Plateaux.

The second legacy of the Congo Wars is a sharp intensification of conflicts around local authority, largely but not exclusively linked to the creation of Minembwe territory. In 2003, the transitional government that was formed after the adoption of the peace accord indicated that it was not likely to recognize Minembwe territory, as it would review decisions made by the RCD rebel government. In 2007, the new government that had taken office after the 2006 general elections suppressed the territory, and troops of the now General Pacifique Masunzu closed the territory's office in Minembwe. Capitalizing on the popularity he had earned from his revolt against Kigali, Masunzu emerged after the wars as one of the most powerful figures on

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[8] Unpublished administrative document, taken by the Congolese army during operations in 2010, accessed and copied in Minembwe in December 2010, on file with the authors.
[9] Kapopo created a new armed movement in Itombwe in 2007 but demobilized in 2011. Some of his former officers, such as Lwesula Sarive Kisale and Ngyalabato, command Bembe Mai-Mai forces that are involved in the most recent wave of violence in Itombwe.
[10] Interview with Kapopo Alunda, Bukavu, March 2011.

the Plateaux. To consolidate his influence on the local administration, he allegedly handpicked what now became the highest civilian authority in the area: the *chef de poste d'encadrement administratif* (in brief: *chef de poste*) of Minembwe, which is an administrative function below that of territorial administrator. While formally subordinate to the administrator of Fizi territory, the *chef de poste* of Minembwe largely acted autonomously, to the dismay of many Babembe.

Other conflicts stemmed from newly appointed authorities that were reluctant to give up their power after Minembwe territory was suppressed. Many *groupement* chiefs and other local leaders appointed by the RCD, in particular *chefs de poste*, have continued to exercise power even if they no longer have an official function. The result is ongoing local power struggles, which often partly revolve around the taxation of markets and mines. A salient example is the power struggle between the current Bembe chief of Itombwe sector, Kininga Kitabo aka Kiki, alleged to be closely linked to the Mai-Mai Ebuela, and the former sector chief under the RCD administration, the Munyamulenge Muhire Meshake. At one moment in time, Kiki, a former Bembe officer in the Mai-Mai brigade of Alunda, was also at odds with the then *chef de secteur minier* (head of the mining administration) of Itombwe, a Munyamulenge. This mining official collaborated with Banyamulenge armed groups to control Luhemba, one of the most important artisanal gold mines in the Itombwe sector. To protect himself and bolster his position, Kiki, in turn, liaised with Mai-Mai groups.

The tendency of local leaders to reinforce their position in disputes by appealing to armed groups points to a third legacy of the Congo Wars: the militarization of conflicts and power struggles. Minembwe territory has been an important vector of this militarization, serving as a symbolic rallying point for armed mobilization among both the Banyamulenge and other communities (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015). Even after its formal suppression, Mai-Mai groups have continued to agitate against the territory, linking it to the balkanization narrative to garner popular and political support. For instance, the most important Mai-Mai group in Fizi that emerged after the transition (2003-06), led by William Amuri Yakutumba, stated in a political declaration presented at a peace conference in Goma in January 2008, that

"erecting Minembwe as territory will lead to a bloody and interminable war of the type KOSSOVO [sic], or IRAN-IRAK."[11] During an interview, Yakutumba and the head of his political branch declared, "The locality of Minembwe used to belong to the *chef de groupement* Kitongo, from Basimunyaka Sud. At present, he is displaced, he took refuge in Babangwe Sud. Is it even possible in the 21st century to imagine a war of conquest? That should have ended after the division of Africa at the Berlin Conference. That's why we started a war against this aggressive people."[12]

Other Mai-Mai leaders operating on or around the Plateaux also emphasize the legacy of Minembwe territory. Mai-Mai leader Kapopo and one of his political representatives said, "We resent the administrative changes that were made when Minembwe territory was created, such as the creation of the *chef de poste* of Tulambo, who we do not recognize... there is also the confiscation of taxes from Kalingi market by the *chef de poste* of Minembwe and they changed the boundaries between Uvira and Mwenga territories. We condemn these changes."[13] Members of the Mai-Mai Mulumba, active in the Lulenge part of Fizi, pronounced the following grievances against the Banyamulenge:

1) They took a part of the locality of Ibumba, under control of Chief Itongwa Mateso, when creating Minembwe territory and up until this day, this part is lost.
2) They tax at the wolframite mine of Nzovu, which should be under control of the locality chief Lusumba [a Mubembe] but is financially administered by the Banyamulenge, due to an arrangement made by the *chef de poste* of Minembwe.[14]

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[11] Assanda, J. Mwenebatu (2008), Déclaration des Mai-Mai de Fizi à la conference nationale sur la paix, la sécurité et le développement dans les provinces du Nord-Kivu et Sud-Kivu tenue à Goma en janvier 2008, unpublished document on file with authors.
[12] Interview with William Amuri Yakutumba and Raphaël Looba Undji, near Sebele, December 2011.
[13] Interview with Kapopo Alunda, Bukavu, March 2011.
[14] Interview with Mai-Mai Mulumba officers and soldiers, Kagembe, December 2011.

The legacy of Minembwe territory has also inspired further mobilization among the Banyamulenge. The suppression of the territory in 2007 sent shockwaves through the Banyamulenge community. Even today, many continue to describe the shutting down of the administrator's office as a "putsch" and a "coup d'état".[15] Critics believe Masunzu sold out the territory to curry favour with the government in Kinshasa for purely self-interested reasons, namely, to obtain the rank of general and a high position in the newly created Congolese armed forces, the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (Armed Forces of the DRC, FARDC) (Stearns et al., 2013).

These sentiments were reinforced by disagreement about the broader question of leadership over the Banyamulenge community and the political course it should stir. The RCD stalwarts obtained important functions in the transitional government, but their pro-Kigali orientation had alienated them from many in the community. Meanwhile, those in the anti-Kigali camp became divided on the extent to which they should collaborate with the new government, and whether they should accept the suppression of Minembwe territory. A new faction emerged that was critical of Masunzu and that considered the restoration of the territory a top priority. This group transformed the FRF into a politico-military movement in 2007, which locally became known as Gumino, from *guma ino*, "[let's] stay here" in Kinyamulenge, the language spoken by the Banyamulenge, which is a dialect of Kinyarwanda. This name goes back to the Congo Wars, when Banyamulenge were fighting the threat of being expelled from the Congo. The Gumino became embroiled in a power struggle with Masunzu and the government forces, leading to years of internecine fighting until the FRF gave up armed struggle and its military wing integrated into the FARDC in 2011 (Verweijen & Vlassenroot, 2015).

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15 Interviews with civil society members, Minembwe, December 2010.

4 |
Security dilemmas
and the militarization
of local conflicts

The peace accord that ended the Second Congo War, which was adopted in 2003, stipulated that all belligerents had to either integrate their soldiers into the newly formed national armed forces or demobilize them. Soldiers were initially regrouped into army brigades in their current zone of operation and were then expected to go to a training centre for a mixing process called *brassage* (brewing). After having gone through *brassage*, they would be merged into Integrated Brigades of the national army, which were often deployed far from soldiers' home areas.

The army integration process was poorly organized and unfolded in an irregular manner. Many belligerents were reluctant to move their troops out of their zones of control, fearing for the security of the communities they claimed to defend. Commanders and senior officers also feared a loss of power and income. These fears were shared by local civilian leaders who had come to rely on armed groups to back up their power position, including in conflicts over local authority, land and resources. Thus Mai-Mai commanders and their civilian allies refused to send troops to far away *brassage* centres as long as there were still Banyamulenge forces in their home areas, and the same applied to civilian and military Banyamulenge leaders (Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen, 2013). This situation led to a series of interlocking security dilemmas that have remained to the present day and that hamper efforts at demobilization. Both Mai-Mai and Banyamulenge forces refuse to demobilize as long as the other side is still armed; nobody wants to be the first mover.

At the heart of these security dilemmas is a fundamental distrust towards the Congolese army, which all sides perceive to be partial. Indeed, Rwandophone army officers – whether from North or South Kivu – are almost always seen as pro-Banyamulenge, while non-Rwandophone officers, in particular former Mai-Mai, are generally thought to be pro-Mai-Mai. Furthermore, many Mai-Mai groups are convinced that the army is dominated by (mostly ex-RCD) Rwandophones. In their eyes, this is the reason they are systematically discriminated against in the distribution of ranks and functions within the FARDC. This perceived discrimination has prompted numerous Mai-Mai to desert from the army and return to the bush. However, Banyamulenge officers have invoked similar grievances over ranks and functions as a reason to desert, illustrating the limited merits of army integration as a peacebuilding strategy (Eriksson-Baaz & Verweijen, 2013; Verweijen, 2015b).

4.1 Interlocking security dilemmas

Mai-Mai groups' distrust of ex-RCD troops was vindicated when in 2004, an army brigade led by an ex-RCD Munyamulenge officer, Colonel Jules Mutebutsi, mutinied. The mutineers resisted redeployment outside of the Kivus and feared for an erosion of the RCD's power. The RCD was unpopular and its political wing unlikely to perform well in the upcoming general elections. The mutiny, however, was eventually quelled, and the mutineers fled to Rwanda (Wolters, 2004). Another event in 2004 also provoked distrust and fear, this time among the Banyamulenge. In August 2004, over a 150 Banyamulenge were killed in a refugee camp in Gatumba, in neighbouring Burundi. For many Banyamulenge, this illustrated how their security was still not guaranteed. It also sparked divisions within the Banyamulenge community. General Masunzu shared the reading of the Congolese government that the massacre had been committed by the Burundian rebel group *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL, National Liberation Forces), which had claimed responsibility for the attack (Human Rights Watch, 2004). However, many Banyamulenge were convinced that Mai-Mai forces were behind the attack, possibly with the collaboration of Congolese government agents. Among certain Banyamulenge officers, the discontent over Masunzu's reaction to the massacre fed into wider resentment about his leadership. This

was not only related to his position on Minembwe territory, but also to his alleged increasing authoritarian tendencies and limited efforts to have more Banyamulenge officers promoted to high ranks in the FARDC.[16]

In 2005, 46 Banyamulenge soldiers and one civilian who had fled with Mutebutsi to Rwanda one year earlier returned to the Plateaux, under the leadership of Colonel Venant Bisogo. The presence of the so-called "Group of 47", which had an unclear agenda, sparked unrest. It also led to tensions among Banyamulenge officers, in particular when it provoked the return of Masunzu to the Plateaux. The latter's troops had remained in the mountains, regrouped in the 112th brigade of the FARDC. Masunzu's return caused discontent among certain Banyamulenge officers to boil over. One of these was Michel Makanika, who subsequently deserted with a small group of soldiers from the army brigade in Uvira in which he served, taking refuge in Muramvya on the Plateaux.[17] In January 2007, after serious clashes with Masunzu's forces, this group merged with the Group of 47 led by Bisogo. Parts of the FRF – whose leadership resided mostly abroad – seized on this opportunity to continue its political project and developed into this movement's political wing. The core political objective that all these different factions agreed on was the resurrection of Minembwe territory, which became one of the main political demands of the reconstituted FRF. This earned the movement significant support among the Banyamulenge population, although many remained loyal to Masunzu.[18]

The year 2007 was marked by a series of fierce clashes on the Plateaux between the FRF on the one hand and the 112th and another FARDC brigade on the other. The latter were closely directed by Masunzu, who had meanwhile been appointed ad interim commander of the military region of South Kivu. The fighting only ended when talks led to an informal arrangement that divided up spheres of influence on the Plateaux: while the Minembwe

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[16] Interviews with (ex) FRF officers and politicians, Kamombo, December 2010; Bukavu, April 2011 and January 2012; Kajembwe, November 2011.
[17] Interview with Michel Makanika, Kabara, December 2010.
[18] Interview with FRF political leader, Bukavu, October 2011; interviews with Banyamulenge civil society members and local leaders, Bijombo-Ishenge and Mikalati. January 2011; Minembwe, February 2011.

area remained under the control of Masunzu's forces, the FRF would deploy in the areas of Kamombo (part of Fizi territory) and Mibunda (in the Itombwe part of Mwenga). Bijombo, in turn, came under the control of another FARDC brigade. This arrangement remained in place until November 2009, when the FARDC launched an offensive against the FRF as part of Kivus-wide military operations. During these years, Masunzu's 112th brigade was never sent to *brassage*, as the government believed its presence was needed to quell the FRF rebellion and maintain control over the Plateaux.[19] The presence of both the FRF and the 112th brigade, consisting almost entirely of Banyamulenge soldiers, made Mai-Mai forces reluctant to send their troops to *brassage*.

The first Mai-Mai group in Fizi and Uvira that dropped out of the army integration process and reconstituted itself as a rebellion was led by a Bembe officer, William Amuri Yakutumba.[20] Recounting the events that led him to take to the bush in January 2007, he stated that he was not in conflict with the government but with "this aggressive people" (the Banyamulenge), and that "if these forces [of Bisogo] leave the Hauts Plateaux and when the village chiefs can recover their power over the entire territory of their entities like before, we are ready to leave the bush."[21] His words illustrate how security dilemmas are not only linked to the presence of perceived hostile forces but also to conflicts over local authority.[22]

Yakutumba's group became one of the biggest and best organized politico-military Mai-Mai movements in the area, with considerable influence on other Mai-Mai groups. In 2007, it founded the *Mai-Mai réformé* (reformed Mai-Mai) that encompassed three groups operating on and around the Plateaux. Towards Lulenge, in Basimunyaka Sud, a number of Mai-Mai regrouped under Nyindu Commander Mulumba Hondwa, based

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[19] Interview with General Masunzu, Bukavu, March 2011; interviews with FRF officers and politicians, Kamombo, December 2010; Bukavu, April 2011 and January 2012.

[20] Yakutumba formerly served in the Mai-Mai brigade of Colonel Ngufu Jumaine.

[21] Interview with William Amuri Yakutumba, near Sebele, December 2011.

[22] From 2011 onwards, Yakutumba's group spearheaded the formation of a broader alliance that eventually evolved into the National People's Coalition for the Sovereignty of the Congo (CNPSC), which made its first public appearance in 2017. Different branches of the CNPSC play a crucial role in the current fighting.

in Kasolero.[23] At the end of 2007, this group became the 7th brigade of the *Mai-Mai réformé*. Meanwhile, in the area around Milimba (Moyens Plateaux of Fizi), another group mobilized under Fuliiru Commander Assani Ngungu Ndamushobora. This group would become the 5th brigade of the *Mai-Mai réformé*. In Basimunyaka Nord, yet another Mai-Mai group emerged led by the Bembe Commander Aoci.[24] In 2007, Aoci became first deputy commander and later commander in chief of the 6th brigade of the *Mai-Mai réformé*. Meanwhile, in a different corner of Itombwe, Kapopo had created another Mai-Mai group that was not part of the *Mai-Mai réformé*, as he preferred to stay independent. All these groups invoked similar reasons for their remobilization, including the threat of the FRF, the dominance of the Banyamulenge, grievances over Minembwe territory, and dissatisfaction with the army integration process pertaining to the discrimination of ex-Mai-Mai forces.

4.2 The militarization of agropastoral conflicts and cattle-looting

The FRF, the 112th brigade and the different Mai-Mai groups on the Plateaux became heavily involved in local conflict dynamics. An important reason for this was their close ties to local authorities, who were often relatives or fellow villagers. One example is the Bembe *groupement* chief of Basimunyaka Nord, Nuhu Mwenelwata-Selemani Munyaka, known for being a hardliner in power struggles with the Banyamulenge. Nuhu used to be one of the main advocates and protectors of Mai-Mai Commander Aoci. For instance, he encouraged Aoci not to surrender to the government, and to keep on stealing cattle from the Banyamulenge on the Mibunda Plain, an important cattle-grazing area. This was not without self-interest, as he often received a share of the revenues from the sale of stolen cattle.[25] In 2009 and 2010,

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23 During the Second Congo War, Mulumba served as a sublieutenant in the Mai-Mai forces of Colonel Ngomanya.

24 During the Second Congo War, Aoci served in Alunda's Mai-Mai forces, and then joined Kapopo's son Alunda in refusing *brassage*.

25 Information retrieved from the administration of Aoci, accessed in Minembwe in December 2010 (see footnote 8).

cattle-looting in Mibunda reached a climax, and Aoci clashed several times with the FRF, which tried to protect the Banyamulenge's herds.

Another area where tensions over cattle sparked intensified armed mobilization was Minembwe. In 2008, the Mai-Mai groups of Mulumba and Assani Ngungu teamed up to loot dozens of cows near Kitumba, despite the presence of Masunzu's 112th brigade. This convinced many Banyamulenge cattle owners that more robust security mechanisms were necessary to protect their herds. They therefore supported the formation of a Banyamulenge self-defence group led by Rabani Ntagendererwa Musemakweli named "Twirwaneho", which means "let's defend ourselves" in Kinyamulenge. Contrary to rebel groups, the members of this local self-defence group continued to live in their own villages, engaging only part-time in security activities. The Twirwaneho, which took their inspiration from the Abagirye that fought during the Simba rebellion, are a phenomenon that emerges in times of need (Verweijen & Brabant, 2017). After launching a number of counter-attacks on the Mai-Mai to protect the Banyamulenge's cattle during 2008 and 2009, the group gradually disappeared.[26] A group under a similar name would re-emerge almost ten years later in Bijombo, developing into a full-fledged organization that would become a protagonist in the current violence.

Cattle-looting has remained an important catalyst of violence on the Plateaux. It provides both income and support to armed groups, which claim to protect either the interests of farmers or of herders. To understand this, it is crucial to outline how cattle-looting is entwined with broader agropastoral conflicts that have pronounced identity and symbolic dimensions.[27] The majority of cattle on the Plateaux is owned by the Banyamulenge, for whom cattle are of elevated socio-cultural and economic importance. The Banyamulenge's entire way of life revolves around cattle, on which they depend for their well-being and livelihoods, although they also engage in agriculture. Other groups, by contrast, attach more socio-cultural value to land. Not only is land seen to be owned by particular identity groups, it also crucially underpins social cohesion and the prosperity of the community. One reason for this

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[26] After being beaten up by Masunzu's bodyguard Rugabisha in 2010, Rabani joined the FRF.
[27] This section is based on Verweijen & Brabant (2017).

is that land is seen to be guarded by the spirits of common ancestors, who are buried in it.

These different socio-cultural orientations exacerbate the conflicts that often arise during transhumance, the seasonal migration of cattle from the Hauts Plateaux to greener pastures, but sometimes also during smaller cattle movements. When not perturbed by the security situation, as is currently the case, around 80% of herds in transhumance are directed towards Lulenge and 20% to Ngandja in Fizi. In the course of moving, cattle often trample farmers' fields, which is an enduring source of grievances. These grievances become all the more intense if cattle owners refuse to pay *itulo,* a contribution to the customary chief owning the land on which cattle migrate and graze. Other communities accuse the Banyamulenge of not paying *itulo* since they began protecting their cattle by military means – a charge that the Banyamulenge vehemently refute. Regardless of the factual basis, these accusations point to a breakdown of the traditional mechanisms of regulating agropastoral conflicts.

Mai-Mai groups have seized on the frustrations over cattle movements by portraying cattle-looting as a form of *autodéfense* (self-defence) to defend the rights and property of farmers. Some even frame cattle movements as a form of "foreign invasion" of the lands of the autochthons. These representations allow them to increase popular support among farming communities. Cattle-looting has also become a favoured weapon of war, attacking the Banyamulenge where it hurts them most. In addition, it is sometimes used to punish "moderates" among their own communities.[28] Banyamulenge armed groups, in turn, have reinforced popular support by defending their community's cattle against looting. More recently, they have also started to engage in counter-looting, trying to compensate for the cattle they lost by stealing from self-styled autochthonous communities. For instance, in the night of 6 May 2020, Banyamulenge armed groups stole 20 cows owned by Bafuliiru in the village of Bwengeherwa in Bijombo.[29] These groups have also used cattle-looting to delegitimize the Mai-Mai, portraying them as criminal

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[28] For instance, on 24 October 2020, Mai-Mai forces stole a herd in Kuwimiko from a Munyindu whom they accused of collaborating with the Banyamulenge. Reporting by field-based monitors, October 2020.

[29] Reporting by field-based monitors, May 2020.

actors who are only interested in financial gain. This allows them to obscure the grievances that these groups voice, including in relation to transhumance.

In addition to legitimizing armed mobilization, cattle-looting contributes to violence by having become a crucial source of income for Mai-Mai groups on the Plateaux. The value of a single cow is around $350–650, depending on the quality and fluctuations in the market. For most people, this equals several months of income. Certain Mai-Mai groups, such as Mulumba's, also tax transhumance, by putting up barriers and imposing a contribution per head of cattle. Ironically, they have labelled these taxes *itulo*, reflecting how these groups closely draw on registers of customary authority.

It is not only Mai-Mai groups that financially benefit from stolen cattle: due to the high volume of looted cattle in recent years, an entire political economy has sprung up around this illegal commodity chain, in which many people have vested interests. Stolen cattle have to be transported and documents of origins and ownership have to be falsified or authorities bribed and intimidated in order for stolen cattle or the beef to be sold in markets. In particular, FARDC personnel are said to play a crucial role in this political economy of cattle-looting. Allegedly, they often fail to intervene when cattle is looted and turn a blind eye to the passage of stolen herds in exchange for protection money. Some are even believed to be actively involved in the trade of stolen cattle. This has created further distrust towards the army among the Banyamulenge. Self-styled autochthonous groups, in turn, accuse certain army officers, in particular of Banyamulenge and other Rwandophone origins, of specifically protecting the Banyamulenge's cattle. They would do so either for protection money or because they have family or other close social relations to the cattle-owners. This practice has undermined the confidence of the Babembe, Bafuliiru and Banyindu in the impartiality of the armed forces. In this way, agropastoral conflicts and cattle-looting have become another source of security dilemmas.

4.3 Army integration and disintegration

Security dilemmas and distrust in the national armed forces have remained a key obstacle to demobilization and army integration efforts to the present day. A series of events in 2011, which have paved the way for the current crisis, powerfully illustrate how security dilemmas hamper peace efforts.

After a series of negotiations on the Plateaux in 2011, the FRF and FARDC reached an agreement that would lead to the end of the FRF as a political-military movement. The group would integrate their troops into the FARDC, initially in a newly created military sector on the Plateaux, which became the 44th sector of the Amani Leo operations. The current ranks of FRF personnel (except generals) would by and large be recognized and FRF officers would be appointed to a number of important positions in the army, including in the command of the new military sector. In addition, the FRF would be recognized as a political party, which would further negotiate the group's political demands, including in relation to Minembwe territory. This rather surprising turn of events was the result of a host of factors, including: war weariness among the Banyamulenge and the FRF itself after two years of military operations by the FARDC; the personal ambitions of the FRF's political and military leaders; efforts by the Congolese government to eradicate armed groups ahead of the elections planned for end 2011; and pressure by the Rwandan government.[30] Kigali suspected the FRF maintained contacts with General Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa, a former chief of staff of the Rwandan army and RPF stalwart. Nyamwasa had launched an oppositional movement from exile named the Rwandan National Congress (RNC), which was believed to have military ambitions (UN S/2011/738) – something that Nyamwasa himself has always denied (ICG, 2020).

The end of the FRF as a political-military movement created a new situation for Mai-Mai groups: for years, they had claimed to be in the bush to defend their communities against the FRF. Some groups, such as Mulumba's, had

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[30] Analysis based on multiple interviews with FARDC officers, FRF political actors and civil society members in Minembwe, Uvira and Bukavu in January, February, March and October 2011.

also stated that they would only consider giving up armed struggle if the FRF would be disbanded. Now that there was no longer a Banyamulenge armed group, what were they going to do? Two Mai-Mai groups tried to emulate the FRF's integration deal: those of Kapopo and Mushombe. Not only did they want to have troops in the 44th sector, to counter Banyamulenge domination, they also wanted to have all their ranks recognized in the FARDC and be appointed to important functions. However, these efforts largely failed. While Mai-Mai leader Kapopo integrated into the FARDC with a small group, most of his troops remained in or returned to Itombwe, as they were unwilling to be deployed far from their home area. Moreover, local authorities were against their departure. They feared a security vacuum, given that there are few state security services in the isolated corner of Itombwe that was Kapopo's zone of influence.[31]

The integration of the group of Fuliiru Mai-Mai leader Mushombe Muganguzi,[32] based in North Bijombo, also faltered. Mushombe's group seems to have been reinforced and restructured specifically for the occasion of FARDC integration by certain Fuliiru politicians, who hoped to capitalize on the process to bolster their political position ahead of the elections.[33] The group was not a complete fabrication, however, as Mushombe had mobilized off and on in a loose manner, depending on the security circumstances. In 2011, the group was given a new command structure, as Mushombe became seconded by Kashama Ngoy Célestin (also known as Kashologozi), a former Mai-Mai officer and captain in the FARDC, and Ilunga Lusesema (aka Kilofoka), a former company commander in Nakabaka's Mai-Mai forces. Incited by their political backers, the political and military aspirations of this newly formed group proved too ambitious, and months of negotiations did not bring a breakthrough. What also played a role was ambiguous messaging by certain military and political leaders involved in the negotiations, which they did not want to end, in part as

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[31] Discussions with Mai-Mai Kapopo officers and troops, Mukera, November 2010; Lubumba, November 2011 and Bukavu, March 2011; see also UN S/2011/738.

[32] Mushombe is a former intelligence officer (S2) in the brigade of Vira Mai-Mai leader Nakabaka during the Second Congo War, who never went to *brassage*. He and other Mai-Mai in Masango first remobilized in 2007, because of the newly emerging threat of the FRF and its clashes with the FARDC.

[33] The analysis of the integration of the Mushombe group is based on discussions with Mushombe and his officers in Marungu and Mashale, November, 2011 and FARDC officers and civil society actors in Uvira, March and October 2011 and in Bukavu, April 2011.

they profited handsomely from the funding allocated to facilitate them (UN S/2011/738). Another factor was an army reform process known as *regimentation*, which aimed to transform FARDC brigades into regiments. Numerous former Mai-Mai officers failed to obtain important functions in the regiments – a situation they generally ascribed to the Rwandophone domination of the army. This perceived discrimination prompted scores of them to desert and reinforce Mushombe's group (Verweijen, 2015b).

Other Mai-Mai groups were also driven by frustrations over the regimentation process. For instance, Fuliiru officer Kazadi deserted from the Kilombwe regimentation centre in Fizi and later joined Mulumba's group, where he became a self-proclaimed general. Another group that benefited from the new wave of desertions was that of "colonel" Chochi Buzimya Muchanga, which was based in the Moyens Plateaux of Milimba in Fizi. His main motivation to take up arms was the threat of the Banyamulenge, according to Chochi, who declared, "[Y]ou have to crush a flee on its head before you are crushed."[34] Under the influence of young Fuliiru intellectuals this group would start naming itself "Biloze Bishambuke", which means in Kifuliiru (the language spoken by the Bafuliiru): "If we have to destroy, let's destroy".[35] The group was aided by certain FARDC officers such as Colonel Justin Kanyonyi aka Okapi, who formerly served in the Mai-Mai of Assani Ngungu.[36]

In the end, the FRF was the only group that fully integrated into the FARDC in 2011. This created imbalances in the newly created military sector on the Plateaux and led to new security dilemmas. Consequently, when FARDC battalions dominated by Banyamulenge troops launched military operations against Mai-Mai groups on the Plateaux, Mai-Mai mobilization intensified. The security situation on the Plateaux further deteriorated when most FARDC troops were called back for the regimentation process. In combination with renewed Mai-Mai mobilization, this situation was one of the reasons for a

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[34] Interview with Chochi, Uvira, February 2017.
[35] The groups of Chochi and Mulumba also developed a common political wing named *Mouvement pour la défense et la liberté du Congo* (MDLC, Movement for the Defence and the Liberty of the Congo).
[36] Assani Ngungu gave up armed struggle in 2009 and integrated with a substantial part of his Mai-Mai forces in the FARDC.

dissident Banyamulenge faction under former FRF officer Richard Tawimbi to remobilize during 2011. With Shaka Alexis Nyamusaraba and Mugaza Semahurungure Kimasa as deputy commanders, this group established its headquarters in Bijombo *groupement*.

When in the FRF, Richard Tawimbi had been vice-president responsible for finances and security. He often travelled in the Great Lakes Region, where he maintained an extensive network. At the moment of the FRF's integration in 2011, he had been imprisoned in Bujumbura, allegedly at the instigation of Rwandan intelligence services. The latter suspected he maintained ties with Rwandan dissident General Kayumba Nyamwasa. By bribing prison personnel, the ex-FRF managed to help him escape from jail. Upon returning to the Congo, however, Tawimbi refused to integrate into the FARDC. He feared for his security, as Kigali demanded his arrest and transfer to Rwanda. He was also dissatisfied with the deal that the FRF had negotiated for their integration into the FARDC. By integrating its military wing first, without hard guarantees for its political demands, the movement had lost leverage to push through its political agenda. In addition, he observed that the integration process had failed to improve intercommunity relations: "The integration of the FRF into the Government has not helped the cause of the Banyamulenge, just as the participation of other Banyamulenge in the Government before has not done so. The integration of the FRF did not entail reconciliation: therefore, it has not resolved anything, and it has not reinforced the security of the Banyamulenge. There have recently been Banyamulenge that were killed in Fizi, in Basimwenda (Itombwe), and Lusuku, despite the fact that the FRF integrated. There needs to be reconciliation first..."[37]

While Tawimbi's movement, the *Mouvement populaire pour le changement du Congo* (MPCC, Popular Movement for Changing the Congo), intended to collaborate with armed groups from other communities, including Mai-Mai forces, this eventually did not work out. As a consequence, the group came to be seen as the FRF-*bis*, primarily a Banyamulenge armed group defending the Banyamulenge, and therefore a threat to the other communities on the Plateaux. This continuity is also reflected in the fact that similar to the FRF,

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[37] Interview with Richard Tawimbi, Kajembwe, February 2012.

the group became locally known as *Gumino*.[38] In this manner, the presence of Tawimbi's group eventually came to breathe new life into Mai-Mai arguments about the need for self-defence. In sum, similar to the first years after the transition, the attempt to eradicate armed groups on the Plateaux in 2011 via army integration ultimately faltered through interlocking security dilemmas.

4.4 Militarized local power struggles in Bijombo

The emergence of Tawimbi's group had strong effects on the *groupement* of Bijombo, where its headquarters was based, in the village of Kajembwe. One reason for this relates to the militarization of local conflicts and competition, specifically the crucial role of armed groups in struggles over who should govern the *groupement*.

The Banyamulenge recognize the authority of Kabarule, who was a key activist in having the *groupement* acknowledged in the 1960s, and who governs mostly over South Bijombo, being based in Chanzovu. The Banyindu and Bafuliiru, by contrast, acknowledge Tete Amisi, a Munyindu who governs the north of the *groupement*, based in Masango/Miramba. This confusion is to a large extent maintained by the *mwami* of the Bavira, Edmond Lenghe Lwegereza, who has regularly appointed new ad interim chiefs. Instead of creating clarity about who is the legitimate chief, the *mwami* has opted for a divide-and-rule policy that reinforces his own grip over the *groupement*, while also benefitting financially from appointing different chiefs. Another policy of the *mwami* that has fuelled conflicts is his acceptance of the multiplication of villages *(localités)* in the *groupement*. While Bijombo used to have 18 villages, during the Congo Wars another 14 were created. Not all of these are officially recognized, and control over several of the new villages is disputed. Moreover, these entities are plagued by land and boundary conflicts, as their demarcation is unclear.[39]

The different conflicts over the *groupement* and the villages of Bijombo are the product of a range of factors, including intercommunity tensions,

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[38] Interviews with civil society actors from Bijombo, Uvira, November 2014.
[39] Interviews with civil society actors from Bijombo, Uvira, January 2012.

financial gain, and personal leadership ambitions. The Banyamulenge have long considered the *groupement* their best hope to obtain a customary governance unit of their own and have tried to control villages where they are the majority. Other communities have by and large opposed these efforts. This is not only to deny the Banyamulenge local authority but also access to the related revenues. People pay taxes exclusively to the *groupement* and village chiefs they acknowledge to be in power. The same applies to taxes levied at weekly markets: these revenues only go to the chief that is recognized within that particular area. While these conflicts can be found throughout the *groupement*, they are in certain places much more intense than in others. The reason for these differences is often the individual attitudes and behaviour of the involved leaders. For instance, some leaders draw more actively on armed groups to reinforce their position than others do. In such contexts, local authority conflicts become particularly explosive.[40]

The events that took place in the village of Kikozi illustrate well how armed group involvement causes conflicts to fuel violence. Around 2010, a new Mai-Mai group appeared under the command of the Mufuliiru Makuba Yenga Yenga.[41] Composed of Banyindu and Bafuliiru, the group cited the threat of the FRF as the main reason for their mobilization. They claimed that the FRF pillaged their fields of maize and mistreated them.[42] The mobilization of Makuba's group intensified after an army battalion composed to a large extent of ex-FRF soldiers committed human rights violations in the course of military operations against them. A Joint Investigative Team of MONUSCO and staff from the military prosecutors' office documented the rape of seven women and the looting of a health centre and several households. Its investigation ascribed these acts to Major Rupongo Rogatien John and Major Shaka Nyamusaraba, a native of Kajembwe (UN S/2011/738). This problematic track record and the risk of being prosecuted seem to have contributed to Nyamusaraba's desertion from the FARDC to join the group of Richard Tawimbi, of which he became the deputy commander.

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[40] Observations based on interviews with local authorities, elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, November 2011.
[41] This group was co-founded by Masabo Tunga Mwango, a Munyindu of Morambi who served in Mai-Mai groups during the RCD war, and Pandiza Kafuzi, a Mufuliiru from Kikozi, who is a former soldier in Nakabaka's brigade and used to have his own militia in Lusololo.
[42] Observations based on interviews with local authorities, youths, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, November 2011.

The Mai-Mai Makuba were closely involved in a conflict between Sadoc Kazinguvu Bidagara, the Banyamulenge chief of Kajembwe, and Gahusa Anzuluni Byamungu, the Nyindu chief of Kikozi. This conflict centres on disagreement over the boundaries between the two villages, which is linked to a dispute over the boundaries between the *groupement*s of Bijombo and Kalungwe. It is further fuelled by disagreement over the distribution of the taxes of the Tuesday market at Kikozi and disputes over land use. In the past, the contested part of the village of Kikozi was a grazing ground for the Banyamulenge's cattle. However, during the war, Banyindu and Bafuliiru arrived and started to cultivate corn there. The Banyamulenge view this as an encroachment on their traditional grazing lands. As a consequence, they are not willing to rein in their cattle, which occasionally destroy fields when passing this area.[43]

The presence of the Mai-Mai Makuba reinforced Gahusa, allowing him, for instance, to collect taxes at the Tuesday market. It is plausible that this situation played a role in Chief Sadoc's consent to the Tawimbi group to establish their headquarters in Kajembwe, which provided him with a force of protection. Over the years, Tawimbi's group came to control a substantial part of the *groupement* of Bijombo, but without Tawimbi being present. In 2012, he left for Kinshasa at the invitation of General Delphin Kahimbi to negotiate the terms of his group's integration into the FARDC. Curiously, this integration never happened. Tawimbi blames this on the FARDC high command, which never began serious negotiation efforts. Yet Tawimbi himself allegedly started to work for the FARDC's external intelligence service, capitalizing on his large foreign network. It has remained unclear to what extent he remained in charge of the group in Bijombo, which continued to operate under Shaka Nyamusharaba. While the group itself claimed that Tawimbi remained their leader, he has been ambiguous about this himself.[44]

This unclear leadership structure may have played a role in what observers describe as a gradual deterioration of the Gumino's behaviour towards civilians. They put up roadblocks on market days to tax marketgoers, in particular

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[43] Observations based on interviews with community-based organizations and local authorities, Bijombo, November 2011.
[44] Conversation with Richard Tawimbi, Kinshasa, May 2016; interviews with civil society actors, Bukavu, April 2016 and Uvira, February 2017.

around the markets of Hwehwe, Bijombo, Kahuna, and Mitamba. In addition, they were accused of interfering in local conflicts, including by making arbitrary arrests and imposing fines. This behaviour provoked growing resentment among youngsters of all communities, leading in early 2015 to the formation of a multi-ethnic local defence force composed of Banyamulenge, Bafuliiru and Banyindu.[45] This force received crucial support from a number of local leaders, including the Banyamulenge Chiefs Gasosi Semandwa[46] of Kahuna II – one of the few Banyamulenge to support Tete Amisi as *groupement* chief – and Nkunzigoma[47] of Kashigo (Murenze). Around March 2015, this local defence force became divided due to growing distrust between members of different communities. Eventually, the Banyamulenge withdrew, continuing as a separate local defence force under the name Twirwaneho. This force was commanded by "colonel" David Muhoza Ndahigima (also known as "Al Shabaab") from Kagogo and his deputy Mararo, both deserters of the Gumino.[48] The remaining Bafuliiru and Banyindu, for their part, transformed into a Mai-Mai group.[49]

In April 2015, the Gumino arrested Gasosi and Nkunzigoma, the two initiators of the multi-ethnic local defence force, and detained them at their Kajembwe headquarters. While in detention, they were tortured and Nkunzigoma died of his injuries. Gasosi was left clinging to life. These events triggered a conflict among Banyamulenge, many of whom believed the Gumino had gone too far. The conflict also assumed clan dimensions, given that Gasosi was Abagorora and Nkunzigoma was Abatira, while the leaders of the Gumino (Nyamusharaba and Semahurungure) were Abasita.[50] Around the same time, clashes intensified between the Gumino on the one hand and Fuliiru and Nyindu Mai-Mai based in Bijombo east (around Mukumba, Kanono,

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[45] Interviews with civil society actors from Bijombo, Uvira, April 2016 and February 2017.

[46] Gasosi is a close relative of General Bisengimana, Inspector General of the Congolese Police (PNC), and Major Muyoboke, until recently police commander of the PNC Hauts Plateaux district.

[47] Nkunzigoma is the brother-in-law of General Malik Kijege, who is said to have supported him in his mission to create a group to counter the exactions of the Gumino.

[48] Mararo was a former child soldier who demobilized in 2013 and was transferred to the Transit and Orientation Centre for child soldiers in Uvira. He resumed armed activity with the Twirwaneho in 2015 until his death in during clashes with the FARDC in Kagogo in December 2019.

[49] Interviews with civil society actors from Bijombo, Uvira, April 2016 and February 2017.

[50] Interviews with civil society actors from Bijombo, Uvira, April 2016 and February 2017.

Chanzovu) on the other. These Mai-Mai had come under the command of a young Munyindu named Baleke.[51] The FARDC got involved in some of these clashes, not least because they were in conflict with the Gumino over taxation at the weekly market of Bijombo-Ishenge. Periodic fighting continued throughout 2015 and escalated in early 2016.[52]

To redress the situation, General Gustave Bwange Safari, commander of the operational sector South/South Kivu based in Uvira, tried to negotiate with the Gumino. These efforts, however, failed, in part because the group stated they could not take any decisions given that Tawimbi, who was still in Kinshasa, was their leader. In February 2016, the FARDC launched a military offensive in Bijombo called "Natawala Hapa". These operations further complicated the situation without substantially weakening any of the involved armed groups. To start with, the FARDC attacked the Gumino, leading the latter to withdraw into Bijabo forest, a former FRF hideout. What's more, to find their way in the difficult mountainous terrain, the FARDC used Mai-Mai groups as guides. In addition, the army committed numerous abuses against civilians in the course of the operations, in particular against Banyamulenge. It also began arresting young Banyamulenge men, accusing them of collaborating with the Gumino. This harsh stance intensified after the Gumino launched a number of fierce counterattacks on the FARDC. Taken together, these developments fostered the impression that the operations were singling out one community only, and therefore that the FARDC was biased. As a result, while some Banyamulenge had initially supported the FARDC operations – not least because there was growing resentment towards the Gumino – they now turned against them and began looking more favourably on the Gumino. Another reason for this shift was that due to increased polarization between the different communities in Bijombo, the conflict around the *groupement* chief intensified.[53]

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[51] Baleke's second-in-command was a certain Ndondi, a Munyindu from Mukuba (Bijombo), who first served under Mahoro Kitay Ngombarufu. Mahoro was a Fuliiru Mai-Mai leader who served as T3 in the Mai-Mai brigade of Nyakiliba in Mwenga during the Second Congo War, and launched his own movement in 2008. In 2011, he joined Mushombe and served in Bijombo but acted as a quasi-autonomous leader. Baleke's operations officer (S3) was Ngarukyie, a Munyindu from Kirumba or Chakira, who started his armed career in a local defence group in Bijombo, before moving on to Baleke's Mai-Mai group.

[52] Interviews with local authorities, elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018.

[53] Interviews with local authorities and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018.

In late May 2016, the secretary of the acting Nyindu *groupement* Chief Tete Amisi was attacked, an act that was generally seen to be related to the power struggle over the *groupement's* leadership. With escalation looming, the Congolese authorities stepped up efforts to calm the situation. A delegation including then-South Kivu Governor Marcellin Cishambo, the Minister of Planning Manassé "Müller" Ruhimbika, and General Safari visited Bijombo by helicopter in July. During this visit, Cishambo pronounced Kabarule the legitimate *groupement* chief of Bijombo. Instead of resolving the conflict, this pronouncement aggravated it. Soon afterwards, Kabarule was shot and seriously wounded. After MONUSCO evacuated him to give him access to health care, he fled to Kenya, where he remains today.[54]

Despite Kabarule's installation by the governor, the Bafuliiru, Banyindu and Bavira continued to refuse to recognize his authority. Instead, they acknowledged Tete Amisi, who the *mwami* of the Bavira had appointed as the interim chief. In response, the Banyamulenge stated they would henceforth not recognize the *mwami's* authority and would report directly to Uvira territory instead. What further complicated the situation was the creation of new villages by the Bafuliiru and the Banyindu – allegedly with the help of the Bavira *mwami* and Mai-Mai forces–to withdraw their populations from the authority of Banyamulenge village chiefs.[55] This created yet another series of conflicts, as the chiefs out of whose entities these new villages were carved continued to claim the right to govern those areas.[56]

The fighting in 2015 and 2016 significantly reconfigured armed group presence on the Plateaux. First, having been dislocated from Bijombo, the Gumino now extended their zone of influence towards Kamombo and Itombwe, where they

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[54] His father remaining in Nairobi, Kabarule's son Furaha took over. However, he soon fled due to the rampant insecurity and is currently based in Bukavu. Meanwhile, Tete Amisi moved to Uvira. The absence of these chiefs complicates both governance and conflict resolution in Bijombo.

[55] One example is Kirumba, where another locality was created named Kihamba, in this way bypassing the authority of the Munyamulenge chief of Kirumba.

[56] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018.

started taxing markets and mines.[57] Second, as mentioned above, Banyamulenge local defence groups operating under the name Twirwaneho re-emerged. Third, the fighting in Bijombo led to an intensification of Fuliiru and Nyindu Mai-Mai activity. In North Bijombo (around Masango), Fuliiru-led Mai-Mai groups reorganized and intensified mobilization. They first designated as their leader Kashumba Musagara Constatin, a Mufuliiru from Mangwa/Kasenya in the Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma (Bafuliiru chiefdom).[58] However, a leadership quarrel ensued, and the movement split. In the north, a group remained under the command of Mushombe based in Masango. In the Hauts Plateaux of Marungu, there was an allied group commanded by Fuliiru Commander Nakishale. In the south, towards the Moyens Plateaux, Kashumba led a group that grew into a relatively large, well-structured movement with a political branch.[59]

Another area where Mai-Mai activity intensified was around Kikozi, where Baleke's group was based. In January 2017, Baleke was murdered in unclear circumstances, after which his former second in command Ndondi took over. While Bafuliiru and Banyindu sources ascribed the murder to the Banyamulenge, citing power competition and conflicts over transhumance, some Banyamulenge believed the murder was linked to a conflict among the Bafuliiru centring on influence over the Kikozi area. In particular, they suspected Anzuluni Byamungu,[60] the son of the village chief of Kikozi, who started his own armed group[61] on the Hauts Plateaux of Kalungwe soon after Baleke died.[62]

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[57] The Gumino gained control over the market of Ndayoberwa near Mikalati and of Kwamunyaka/Mibunda and started to tax at the mining sites of Luhemba, Kitasha and Rugabano.

[58] Kashumba served as an officer in the brigade of Vira Mai-Mai leader Nakabaka during the Second Congo War but decided not to integrate into the FARDC afterwards, demobilizing instead. He remobilized in 2006-07 and again in 2012, when the Burundian rebel group FNL burned down dozens of houses in the Masango area, following a dispute with Mai-Mai leader Mushombe. After a failed demobilization attempt in 2015, led by former Mai-Mai officers Fujo Zabuloni and General Bangwe Safari, he returned to the bush.

[59] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, February 2020.

[60] Around 2019, Byamungu left Bijombo to fight in different Mai-Mai groups, in particular those of René, Réunion, and Mulumba.

[61] Anzuluni's group gained strength by linking up with armed Batwa forces locally known as "Mai-Mai Mupekenya".

[62] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, February 2020.

5 |
Escalation

In 2017, a cycle of tit-for-tat attacks was set in motion in Bijombo that triggered a major escalation of violence in 2018, which then spread to other areas of the Plateaux. The escalation and spread of violence were driven by two mechanisms: first, the tendency to blame individual acts of violence on groups as a whole; and second, the complex interweaving of local, national and regional dynamics, which became mutually reinforcing.

Assassinations of members of one group prompted killings of members of the opposed group, even if the perpetrators or the motives behind these killings were unknown. Ascribing collective responsibility for violence also led to attacks on and the destruction of entire villages, as their inhabitants were seen to be linked to particular armed groups. Punishing villages as a whole was also a result of the involvement of local defence forces. The latter are village-based forces whose combatants continue to live in their own homes and are crucially supported by contributions in money and kind (e.g., food, torch batteries) from fellow villagers. Another factor that fostered wholesale attacks on villages was conflict over local authority. By attacking a village, opponents tried to undermine the authority of contested local leaders. In addition, targeting local authorities was generally seen as a declaration of war on their communities as a whole. The tendency to collectivize responsibility also crucially underpinned the geographical spread of conflict. Killings of members of one's own community provided an impetus to take up arms and punish members of the opposing group, regardless of where they lived.

The escalation of violence in 2018 was the product of a series of complex developments at the national and regional level, which enmeshed with local dynamics. At the national level, a political crisis emerged in late 2016 after President Kabila's mandate expired, before elections to choose his successor were held. This crisis bolstered armed groups that claimed to fight the government. It reinforced popular support for rebellion, including from diaspora populations, and allowed armed groups to draw greater backing from political actors eager to reposition themselves in the political landscape. At the regional level, political tensions between Burundi and Rwanda reached a boiling point in 2018, and each government was alleged to have supported Plateaux-based rebel groups aimed at overthrowing the opposing government. These complex geopolitics contributed to a regionalization of the crisis, with Burundian and Rwandan armed groups forging alliances with local forces to keep their opponents in check. At the same time, local drivers of conflict intensified after the transformation of Minembwe into a "commune rurale", which provoked strong emotions, as it became associated with the contested Minembwe territory.

5.1 Towards escalation: national drivers

The assassination of Mai-Mai leader Baleke in Kikozi in late January 2017 triggered an upsurge in violence in Bijombo that lasted through February. The violence did not only involve fighting between armed forces but also encompassed burning down houses and killing and looting cattle. Efforts at reconciliation by customary authorities and community elders in March managed to contain the violence, but not for long. In April, fighting flared up again, this time also touching the north of Bijombo, towards Itombwe. In total 263 houses were burned in nine villages and an estimated 3,500 households fled the area. The FARDC intervened to stop the violence and civil society organizations from Uvira, with the support of MONUSCO, facilitated a dialogue between Gahusa, the locality chief of Kikozi, and Sadoc, the chief of Kajembwe. Eventually, the chiefs signed an act to cease hostilities.[63]

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[63] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018.

While these efforts stemmed violence in Bijombo, in late May 2017, fighting erupted elsewhere on the Plateaux, in Kamombo. This zone had been under control of the Gumino since an FARDC offensive forced them to leave Bijombo in 2016. The violence, which continued into June, was said to be related to control over taxation at the three biggest markets in the area: Mikalati, Katongo and Kitasha. The fighting pitted the Gumino against a coalition of Fuliiru and Nyindu Mai-Mai groups called "Biloze Bishambuke".[64] This coalition was soon reinforced by Bembe combatants under the command of Ebuela. Following in the footsteps of his father Seba, who fought in the Simba rebellion in the 1960s, Ebuela started his armed career in the Mai-Mai movement of Yakutumba in 2007. He soon rose in its ranks and eventually became G3 (general staff member charged with operations). In July 2016, he deserted Yakutumba's group with a small number of fighters, allegedly driven by the desire to have a group of his own.[65] After operating for a while in Basimunyaka South in Fizi, around Mukera and Kafulo, he eventually appeared in Itombwe, his native region. It remains unclear why he got involved in the Mai-Mai coalition fighting the Gumino, but it could be related to a general reinvigoration of Mai-Mai forces in the region around that time.

In late June 2017, the *Coalition nationale du peuple pour la souveraineté du Congo* (CNPSC, National People's Coalition for the Sovereignty of the Congo), a coalition of armed groups spearheaded by Yakutumba's group, launched an offensive "to liberate the Congo" after President Kabila's mandate had expired in December 2016.[66] The offensive was bolstered by earlier attacks on FARDC positions that resulted in obtaining significant amounts of arms and ammunition. It was also facilitated by income derived from repeated attacks on personnel, property and suppliers of the multinational gold-mining corporation Banro, particularly hostage-taking. Moreover, it was rumoured – but never proven – that the coalition had support from political opposition leaders as well Burundian governmental actors. In spite of pushback by the FARDC, the CNPSC offensive rapidly gained momentum. In late September 2017, they approached the city of Uvira, the second largest in South Kivu, on

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Unconfirmed rumours allege that he was suspected of having killed Yakutumba's G2, Abwe Mapigano.
[66] Phone interview with CNPSC member, September 2017.

which they launched an assault.[67] On 27 September, the coalition arrived at the outskirts of Uvira, but ultimately failed to take the city. Heavily backed by MONUSCO, the FARDC put up strong resistance. While the offensive faltered, it substantially bolstered the CNPSC coalition, providing it with visibility – including through its social media campaigns[68] – and increasing support from the Congolese diaspora (Verweijen, 2017; Congo Research Group, 2019).

The relative success of CNPSC had implications for the situation on the Plateaux, as the coalition encompassed several groups based there. These included the groups of Ebuela, Mulumba, and Ngarukye and the Bembe Mai-Mai commanders Lwesula and Ngyalabato (formerly in Kapopo's group). While there had been considerable networking between Mai-Mai groups before, for instance, among the *Mai-Mai réformé* in 2007 and 2008, CNPSC reinforced communications, mutual support and strategic coordination among Mai-Mai groups, although individual groups continued to function largely autonomously. In December 2017, the networked nature of Mai-Mai groups on the Plateaux accelerated an escalation of violence again in Bijombo, where mostly Nyindu troops from Réunion, Ngarukiye, Byamungu and others joined forces in clashes with the Twirwaneho. While the violence soon abated, the model of broad, ad hoc coalitions of armed groups, including local defence forces, became the standard in future fighting, and also started to include foreign armed groups. This coalition-building significantly exacerbated security dilemmas, as each side felt they could easily be outnumbered by adversaries, thus further intensifying their quest for often circumstantial alliances.

The next instance in which a coalition of armed groups became involved in fighting was in May 2018, which constituted a lead-up to the more intense violence witnessed from mid-2018 to the present. In early 2018, a number of what

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[67] The members of the coalition involved in attacking Uvira included the following groups: the Mai-Mai of Réunion Warusasa, a commander of Twa descent based in the Moyens Plateaux of Fizi, who had gained in strength by hosting a training camp of the Burundian rebel forces FOREBU (Republican Forces of Burundi); a recently created group under Bembe commander Echilo based in the same area; the group of René Itongwa, a Bembe FARDC deserter who was initially based in the Moyens Plateaux of Kalungwe; the group of Ebuela; and the group of Ngarukye, the Nyindu Mai-Mai officer first operating in Bijombo with Ndondi and Baleke.

[68] The CNPSC ran a popular Facebook page where it also posted YouTube videos, see https://www.facebook.com/CNPSCongo/.

appear to be anonymous tit-for-tat assassinations occurred in Bijombo. For instance, on 25 February unknown gunmen attacked the home of Mai-Mai "colonel" Kahoro Kaluba, shooting him twice in the legs and killing his neighbour. Yet most assassinations targeted civilians. On the morning of 30 April, a young Munyamulenge travelling to Uvira to take his state exams was shot dead near Bijige/Muramvya by unidentified assailants. That same day, a number of people were killed when returning from the weekly Mitamba market to Itombwe. The victims included the Bembe locality chief of Mikungubwe (which is located in Itombwe), Achelewa Koloso. Later that day, in the evening, two people, both Banyindu, were killed in their homes in the village of Kinyoni, again by unidentified assailants.[69]

These killings took place in a tense climate. Earlier that month, there had been clashes between the Mai-Mai Byamungu and the FARDC in Bijombo. There had also been a range of attacks on cattle, which were killed and wounded by machete. Due to the importance of cattle for the Banyamulenge, these attacks were highly symbolic and thus significantly increased tensions. The killing of the chief of Mikungubwe also had pronounced symbolic value. As discussed previously, given that customary authorities are seen to represent and incarnate their (ethnic) communities, attacking a chief is experienced as an attack on the community as a whole. Moreover, it is generally seen as linked to the intense conflicts over local authority on the Plateaux. For many Babembe in Itombwe, the killing of the chief of Mikungubwe resembled the killing of *Mwami* Henri Spaack in 1996, reflecting the Banyamulenge's intention to displace the "autochthonous" population and usurp local authority on the Plateaux. Combined with the anger sparked by the killing, this perceived threat prompted Bembe Mai-Mai groups to become involved in the fighting, which had previously mostly taken place between Bafuliiru/Banyindu and Banyamulenge armed groups.[70]

In May 2018, the Bembe Mai-Mai commander Ngyalabato and his deputy Lwesula took part in hostilities in North Bijombo around Chanzovu, Kiziba and

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[69] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018.
[70] Interviews with Bembe civil society actors and local authorities from Itombwe, Uvira, February 2020.

Kagogo, reinforcing Banyindu and Bafuliiru groups that operated under the banner of "Biloze Bishambuke". They clashed with Twirwaneho forces commanded by David, which were allied to the Gumino. As the fighting became more intense in June, Mai-Mai forces led by Mushombe from the Masango area were also drawn in, as well as those from Kashumba. This Mai-Mai coalition was further reinforced by Batwa forces under the command of Kati Malisawa around Chanzovu. Forging this broad coalition had been facilitated by the perception that the FARDC, in particular the 3305th regiment commanded by Colonel Zaire, a Rwandophone officer, was partial, as it collaborated with Banyamulenge forces.[71] The process was also aided by the killing of the Fuliiru village chief of Buronge/Kajembwe, named Muhuli, in mid-June, which provoked widespread indignation among the Fuliiru community.[72]

5.2 Regionalization

In June 2018, as fighting escalated, coalitions of belligerents expanded to include foreign armed forces. The Fuliiru Mai-Mai of Kashumba, and at times the forces of Ilunga and Mushombe, collaborated with the FNL under Aloys Nzabampema. This group had emerged in January 2013 after a split within the Congo-based FNL (Verweijen, 2015c).[73] Another group that participated in the fighting was *Résistance pour un état de droit au Burundi* (RED-Tabara, Resistance for the Rule of Law in Burundi). This group was created in response to the deteriorating political climate in Burundi in the wake of local elections plagued by irregularities in 2010. It is reputed to be close to Burundian opposition party *Mouvement pour la solidarité et la démocratie* (MSD, Movement for Solidarity and Democracy) led by Alexis Sinduhije (UN S/2019/469). Fighters linked to MSD circles were initially found in Tawimbi's group, which hosted

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[71] The FARDC refutes the accusation of partiality and states that these perceptions were a result of particular unthoughtful actions of the regiment and battalion commanders in question (Colonel Antoine Bageni and Colonel Claude Micho). Interviews with FARDC officers, Uvira, July 2018.

[72] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018 and February 2020.

[73] When becoming involved in the hostilities, the group operated in the Moyens Plateaux of Muhungu and the Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma, having a base in Ruminuko near Magunda, with occasional incursions in the Ruzizi Plain.

a few dozen Burundians. These ties seem to go back to the original FRF, in which (non-Banyamulenge) Burundian nationals were found to serve from at least 2008 onwards (UN S/2009/603; UN S/2010/596). However, due to the significant financial, logistical and training support that RED-Tabara received from Rwanda between mid-2015 to early 2016 (UN S/2016/466), the Gumino kept their distance from this group.

Another reason for this distance was that from mid-2017 onwards, the Gumino hosted fighters and a training camp from the Rwandan National Congress (RNC) in the Bijabo forest. As explained earlier, the RNC is a political-military movement associated with RPF dissident general Kayumba Nyamwasa, and allegedly part of the broader "P5" coalition of anti-Kigali groups (UN S/2018/1133).[74] As documented by the UN Group of Experts, the RNC's operations were bolstered by recruitment and logistics networks based in Bujumbura, which provided them with weapons, ammunition, food, medicines, boots and uniforms (UN S/2018/1133).[75] Fearing Burundian government support to the RNC, which Bujumbura denies in the starkest terms, Kigali was reported to renew its support for RED-Tabara in 2018 – allegations which the Rwandan government strongly rejects. Bujumbura's alleged support for the RNC may have also prompted RED-Tabara, meanwhile based in the Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma near Gifuni, to liaise with the Mai-Mai in the fighting that flared up in mid-2018.[76] During that fighting, the Gumino were occasionally backed by RNC soldiers. They were also said to be supported by a limited number of Burundian fighters called "imbonerakure", after the youth wing of Burundi's ruling party.[77]

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[74] The P5 consists of the Amahoro People's Congress (AMAHORO-PC), the Forces démocratiques unifées-Inkingi (FDU-INKINGI), the People's Defence Pact-Imzani (PDP-IMANZI), the Social Party-Imberakuri (PS-IMBERAKURI) and the Rwanda National Congress. See UN S/2018/1133, p. 9.

[75] While the group suspected these networks to be linked to the government, they could not find sufficient evidence to substantiate this allegation.

[76] Phone interviews with regional armed group experts, October and November 2018; July 2019; interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, August and September 2018.

[77] Interviews with local authorities, village elders, and community-based organizations, Bijombo, July 2018; interview with security services and civil society actors, Uvira, August and September 2018.

This complex configuration of foreign forces contributed to the emergence of a proxy war between Rwanda and Burundi on Congolese soil. It was no coincidence that as relations between the two countries deteriorated in 2018, tensions between Rwanda and Burundi-backed rebel forces on the Plateaux intensified. Different foreign alliances also likely contributed to clashes between Burundian armed groups. In February 2018, and again in May of that year, RED-Tabara clashed with another Burundian rebel group that was based in Kiryama in the Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma, the *Forces populaires du Burundi* (FPB, Popular Forces of Burundi) (which splintered from FOREBU, see RFI, 2017). The reasons for these clashes remain unknown, but observers have suggested that distrust stemming from Kigali's increased support to RED-Tabara – while the FPB distanced itself from Rwanda – may have fuelled them.[78]

Distrust between pro- and anti-Kigali and Bujumbura forces further intensified as relations between Rwanda and Burundi deteriorated in July 2018. That month, attacks on Rwanda's southern border were launched from the Nyungwe forest straddling Rwanda and Burundi. While Rwanda initially denied these cross-border incursions, they were eventually claimed by a new anti-Kigali rebel group operating on Burundian soil,[79] which Rwandan sources accused of being supported by Bujumbura (ICG, 2020). These developments, in combination with the fighting in Bijombo, allegedly led to the direct interference of the Burundian and Rwandan armed forces in the Congo. In August 2018, a limited number of Special Forces of the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF), described as "technicians", were said to arrive on the Plateaux to operate jointly with RED-Tabara, reinforcing the group's combat capabilities.[80] In late October of that year, a battalion of Burundi's national army, the *Force de défense nationale* (FDN, National Defence Force), commanded by Major Aron Ndayishimiye, entered the Congo to attack RED-Tabara with

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[78] Phone interviews with regional armed group experts, October and November 2018; July 2019; interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, August and September 2018.

[79] Mouvement Rwandais pour le changement démocratique, MRCD, Communiqué de presse N0 2018/07/01.

[80] Interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, August, September, and October 2018; phone interviews with regional armed group experts, October and November 2018. See also Larcher, 2018.

informal authorization from the Congolese army (Larcher, 2018). This force was reported to partially consist of reservists who fought in Burundi's civil wars and to be backed by imbonerakure.[81] In January and February 2019, the FDN and imbonerakure were observed again in the mountains near Uvira, clashing with FNL and RED-Tabara (UN S/2019/469). This fighting, followed by two months of FARDC operations against these groups, forced these groups to withdraw from their bases deeper into the mountains.

Regional interference aggravated violence and volatility on the Plateaux both directly and indirectly. To start with, foreign governmental actors shored up Congo-based foreign rebel groups by providing material support and sometimes training. They also increased instability by conducting covert military operations on Congolese soil. Secondly, liaisons with foreign rebel groups enhanced the combat capability of Congolese armed groups. Foreign fighters often advised on strategy and tactics and sometimes conducted limited forms of training. They may also have provided Congolese groups with heavy weaponry, which boosted their fire capacity. Changing combat capabilities, in turn, led to the intensification of local security dilemmas between Congolese armed groups and interwove them with security dilemmas between foreign forces. Foreign involvement thus broadened participation in violence and fostered competition between armed coalitions.

A more indirect way in which regional involvement fuelled violence was that it further complicated already very complex command chains. While belligerents operated in coalitions, the latter did not always have centralized command chains, in particular in 2018 and 2019, as each participating armed group retained its own command structure. Certain commanders could take the lead, however, in particular when operations took place in their direct zone of influence. This certainly applied to the local defence forces that fought alongside rebel groups, as each village has its own commander.[82]

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[81] Phone interviews with Burundian civil society actors, November 2018; interviews with Congolese security services, Uvira, October 2018.

[82] For instance, the Twirwaneho are organized per zone (e.g., Bijombo, Minembwe), with each zone having an umbrella structure, composed of a president, vice-president and secretary. Each zone is subdivided into different areas *(axes)*, often corresponding to villages, that each have their own commander. Interviews with Twirwaneho members, Bijombo, February 2020.

Consequently, the composition of armed group coalitions was rather fluid. This fluidity was further reinforced by the regular emergence of new groups and certain commanders and officers switching groups. In addition, particular armed groups were very mobile. For instance, the Twirwaneho had a special rapid intervention unit under David Ndahigima, which was based in Kagogo and Kahuna but intervened in all corners of the Plateaux. Taken together, the volatile nature of armed group coalitions rendered it quite difficult to pin down command responsibility for violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, such as abuses against civilians. This may have indirectly exacerbated the violence, as perpetrators were aware that it would be difficult to hold them to account.

5.3 The multilayered effects of elections

The regionalization of the crisis in 2018 was influenced by and shaped national political developments. The political crisis that materialized in late 2016 eventually ushered in pre-electoral posturing, with elections scheduled for December 2018. These elections shook up the national political landscape, leading to power struggles to obtain positions in the government or retain one's power base after losing out on elected office. Both these pre-and post-electoral developments affected the dynamics of conflict and violence on the Plateaux.

One of the focal points of political mobilization in this period was the *commune rurale* (rural commune) of Minembwe. It had become operational in 2019, following decrees issued in 2013 and 2018 and the appointment of its leaders in February 2019.[83] The Congo's legal framework for decentralization stipulates that populous entities in rural areas are to be transformed into communes governed by a mayor, instead of by customary chiefs. In the 2013 decree, Minembwe was earmarked to obtain this status, alongside a number of other localities in Fizi and Uvira.

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[83] It concerns decree N° 013/29 of 13 June 2013; N° 25/CAB/VPM/MINISTERSEC/HMS/075/2018 of 28 November 2018, and the letter of the provincial government of South Kivu N° 090/CAB/GOUPRO-SK/2019 of 20 February 2019.

The creation of the commune of Minembwe in 2019 soon sparked anta-gonism among Bembe intelligentsia and those of other self-styled autoch-thonous groups, for who it evoked the old ghosts of Minembwe territory (KST, 2019). Given that it was predominantly located on Fizi territory, many Babembe perceived the commune to dismember part of their traditional living area, which was moreover subtracted from Bembe customary author-ity. In addition, they took issue with the appointment of the burgomaster, Gad Mukiza Nzabinesha, given that he was a Munyamulenge.[84] Finally, they argued that the commune is but the first step towards the resurrection of Minembwe territory.[85] The territory, however, had covered a much larger area and had a higher administrative status, also serving as an electoral district. For the Banyamulenge striving for a territory, the commune was therefore only a limited step forward.[86]

In mid-2018, the Bembe member of national Parliament Jemsi Mulengwa began posing questions about the commune to the Minister of the Interior and pushed for its abolition.[87] In March 2019, the Bembe politician Pardonne Kaliba, national president of the political party *Patriotes résistants Maï-Maï* (PRM, Mai-Mai Resistant Patriots), who had just failed to become elected as a member of Parliament, wrote a letter to the Congo's new president, Félix Tshisekedi, similarly demanding the abolition of the commune (Fizi Media, 2019). In 2019, agitation against the commune became an ever-more important part of the discourses of the belligerents on the Plateaux. It also circulated virulently on social media, and within the discourses of the del-egates to various intercommunity reconciliation forums and peace talks.[88] Regardless of the prominence of this conflict narrative, one should not over-state its contribution to violence on the Plateaux. Most of the violence of 2016-18 took place in Bijombo and to a lesser extent the Itombwe part of the Plateaux, hence not around Minembwe. While this changes in 2019, this

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84 His deputy Charles Isumbico Sadiki was a Mubembe; he often stayed in Baraka as he deemed Minembwe too insecure.
85 Interviews with Bembe civil society actors, Uvira, April 2019; and Baraka, February 2020.
86 Interviews with Banyamulenge civil society actors, Bukavu, May 2015; Uvira, February 2017 and July 2018.
87 Letter 310/AN/Hon/CDPN/J-MLJK/18 of 14 June 2018.
88 See, for instance, Déclaration des Babembe à l'issu du Forum Intracommunautaire tenu à Uvira du 02 au 4 mars 2020, Uvira, 4 March 2020.

earlier violence was crucial for later eruptions of fighting. It led to a deterioration of intercommunity relations and increased tensions, fuelling desires for revenge. Furthermore, given the commune's limited area, only a relatively small part of the Plateaux was directly affected. Rather than constituting a primary stake in the conflict, the importance of the commune of Minembwe lies mostly in its symbolic value, being a symbol of "Banyamulenge/Tutsi/ Rwandan aggression and balkanization", or alternatively the Banyamulenge's right to local authority and being acknowledged as Congolese citizens.

In addition to placing the commune of Minembwe at the centre of debate, the elections and their aftermath prompted certain armed groups to either demobilize or, by contrast, intensify their mobilization. In the years before the elections, agitation against President Kabila gained prominence in armed group discourses. Not only was his governance widely denounced and the fact that he overstepped his mandate resented; Mai-Mai groups saw him as an agent of Kigali, or even as a Rwandan, promoting the "balkanization" of the Congo (Verweijen, 2016a). After presidential elections had been held in December 2018, Kabila formally left power. However, the electoral process was rigged and led to the installation of a president who had not won the elections; he was rather hand-picked by Kabila after complex negotiations. For some groups, such as Yakutumba, Biloze Bishambuke, Réunion and Réné, this perversion of democracy was a reason to remain in the bush, not least as they believed it would allow Kabila to continue to reign.[89]

For others, however, the departure of Kabila implied that one of the reasons for being in the bush evaporated. In addition, they may have tried to seize the moment of the arrival of a new government to negotiate positions in the army or administration as part of their surrender. As a result, a number of armed groups decided to lay down their arms across the Kivus (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). Ebuela was one of them, and in January 2019, he regrouped his combatants in Mikenge (Actualité.cd, 2019a). This process was aided by awareness-raising efforts by politicians, in particular Néhémie Mwilanya

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[89] Phone interview with representatives of the Mai-Mai Yakutumba, January 2019; interviews with representatives of Biloze Bishambuke, Uvira, January 2019; interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, March 2019.

Wilondja, one of the most powerful Bembe politicians, who served as chief of staff under Kabila, and the Bembe *mutualité* (self-help group, generally formed along ethnic lines) Emo'ya m'mbondo.[90] Another armed actor that surrendered in early 2019 was Semahurungure, the deputy commander of the Gumino. Allegedly, he had been convinced to surrender by ex-FRF Banyamulenge officers serving in the FARDC, particularly Michel Makanika, who acted under General Jonas Padiri, then part of the general staff of the Third Defence Zone encompassing South Kivu. These officers knew that the FARDC had planned operations against the Gumino and tried to convince them to surrender before hostilities were launched.[91]

The elections and the arrival of a new government also affected the regional dimensions of the crisis on the Plateaux. The Kabila government maintained good ties with both Kigali and Bujumbura, allowing their armed forces to conduct operations on Congolese soil (UN S/2011/738; UN S/2019/469; Rolley, 2020). In January 2019, when the election results had not yet been announced and negotiations about how to rig them were ongoing, a Congolese delegation including the head of the national intelligence service Kalev Mutond visited Kigali. One day earlier, Rwandan President Paul Kagame, then also chair of the African Union, had criticized the electoral process and called for postponing the announcement of the results. It is suspected that during this meeting, an agreement was reached that Kagame would accept the rigged results, in exchange for certain concessions (Gras, 2020a). The latter seem to have included the arrest of Richard Tawimbi, still on Kigali's wanted list due to his alleged ties with Nyamwasa. Soon after the Kigali meeting, Tawimbi was arrested by the military intelligence service in Kinshasa and held in detention through July 2019 without being formally charged.[92]

When assuming office, President Félix Tshisekedi did not only respect the arrangements with Kigali but even tried to improve relations. He therefore accepted renewed operations of the RDF within the Kivus to root out Rwandan armed opposition groups. It was within this context that in late

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[90] Interviews with Bembe civil society actors and analysts, Uvira, February 2019.
[91] Interviews with Banyamulenge civil society actors and analysts, Uvira, February 2019; Minembwe, February 2020; phone interview, January 2020.
[92] WhatsApp exchanges with armed group experts, January, February and July 2019.

May 2019, RDF troops were said to arrive on the Plateaux.[93] By that time, most of the Rwandan RNC/Nyamwasa troops had already moved out of the region. In September 2018, considerable tensions erupted within the group, allegedly concerning disagreement about handling Burundian financial support. However, some observers suggest that Kigali may have also played a role in this, trying to weaken its adversaries through divide-and-rule tactics.[94] In combination with a strategic reorientation, these tensions pushed an estimated 200 RNC troops towards North Kivu. However, they were ambushed several times by the FARDC there, allegedly with the support of Rwandan Special Forces. Many were killed, some escaped and around 26 were arrested and transferred to Rwanda (Rolley, 2020).

The rapprochement between Tshisekedi and Kagame, and the related entry of RDF troops, had important repercussions in the Kivus. For several Mai-Mai groups, it proved that Tshisekedi would follow the same line as his predecessor, which reinforced their resolve to remain in the bush.[95] The presence of Rwandan troops also reinvigorated the balkanisation discourse, including among extremist diaspora groups such as Honoré Ngbanda's *Alliance des patriotes pour la refondation du Congo* (APARECO, Alliance of Patriots for the Reconstitution of the Congo) (Ngbanda Nzambo ko Atumba, 2019). This rhetoric went hand in hand with verbal attacks on the Banyamulenge, casting doubt on their precolonial arrival and their status as Congolese citizens. In late 2019 and early 2020, such hate speech reached its first apex. On 30 November 2019, member of provincial Parliament Omer Bulakali Mwanawabene of the *Union pour la nation congolaise* (UNC, Union for the Congolese Nation) delivered a speech in Baraka in which he called on people to exterminate all Banyamulenge or drive them from Fizi (CCPDD, 2019). In early January 2020, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo asserted during a press conference in Beni that eastern Congo was subject to an ongoing process of balkanization and that displaced populations were systematically replaced by Rwandan and Ugandan immigrants (RFI, 2020a). This speech, delivered

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[93] Interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, June 2019; reporting by field-based monitors, June and July 2019, see also Eyalama, 2019; KST, 2019.
[94] Reporting by field-based monitors, October and November 2018; see also Rolley, 2020.
[95] Phone interview with representative of CNPSC coalition, October 2019; interviews with political representatives of Uvira-based Mai-Mai groups, Uvira, November 2019.

by a high-profile person, significantly reinforced the circulation of balkanization and anti-Banyamulenge discourses, including among the diaspora and politicians in Kinshasa. Some analysts have suggested that these efforts to ramp up balkanization rhetoric were aimed at creating difficulties for President Tshisekedi, driven by either the opposition or his coalition allies.[96]

While having a wide reach, balkanization discourses were particularly virulent in southern South Kivu. In January 2020, Fuliiru politician Justin Bitakwira, member of Parliament for Uvira territory, launched a new movement, *Simama Kivu*, to halt the balkanization of the Congo ("Simama" means "halt" in Swahili) (Prunelle, 2020a). Shortly afterwards, an anti-Banyamulenge rally was held in Baraka, during which their extermination was called for (KST, 2020). In the city of Uvira, the organization *Nouvelle société civile congolaise* (NSCC, New Congolese Civil Society) organized a *ville morte* (strike) to protest "foreign occupation" (Prunelle, 2020b). For a moment, the situation resembled a rerun of events on the eve of the First and Second Congo Wars, when anti-Tutsi rhetoric multiplied and led to violent incidents. Although this time, there were no massive outbreaks of violence, the circulation of hate speech evoked existential fears among the Banyamulenge and reinforced the feeling that a genocide against them was planned.

5.4 Escalation and spread

While the surrender announced by Ebuela and Semahurungure in early 2019 created a ray of hope that there was a way out of the violence that engulfed the Plateaux, it was short-lived. In late February, fighting broke out between Banyamulenge and Mai-Mai troops, including those of Mulumba, in the Lulenge sector of Fizi (Basimunyaka South *groupement*), not far from Minembwe. The fighting was triggered by tensions concerning transhumance and the destruction of agricultural fields. Allegedly, Banyamulenge herders refused to pay transhumance tax to the Mai-Mai, supposedly after Twirwaneho troops expelled Biloze Bishambuke and Mai-Mai Mulumba

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troops from the area.[97] As the fighting became more intense and a dozen herders were brutally killed, Twirwaneho from all over the Plateaux became involved.

On 2 March 2019, the FARDC attacked Ebuela's house in Kafulo, killing a number of his soldiers and his wife. While the reasons for this attack are disputed, some sources state that instead of quartering his troops in the designated sites, Ebuela ordered them to occupy roadblocks to levy taxes on passers-by on market days. Moreover, some sources state he was planning to attack cattle passing through Kafulo towards the Nemba Plain. Outraged, Ebuela returned to the bush and formed during that year one of the strongest fighting forces on the Plateaux. He also built up the political branch of his movement, the *Forces des patriotes pour la défense du Congo-Mouvement de libération* (FPDC-ML, Patriotic Forces for the Defence of the Congo-Liberation Movement), presided over by Mzee Kiza (Echa) and Kabwe (Abwe) André. The group's growing strength and visibility earned Ebuela the *nom de guerre* Mtetezi, which is Swahili for "liberator".[98]

In May 2019, the situation on the Plateaux further degenerated when fighting broke out in Balala Nord (Tanganyika sector), an area hitherto spared from the violence. The fighting was sparked by an incident involving troops of Semahurungure, who was by then separated from Nyamusharaba and the Gumino, waiting for further negotiations concerning his surrender. On 4 May, Semahurungure's troops arrested the Nyindu village Chief Kawaza Nyakwana of Kanihura at Mikalati market. They took him to Semahurungure's home where he was beaten to death.[99] Kawaza's death sparked widespread indignation among the Banyindu, Bafuliiru and Babembe on the Plateaux. After initial fighting, Mai-Mai forces launched a vast offensive, led by Ebuela

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[97] Other reasons cited for these tensions are the alleged rape of a Biloze commander's wife by a Gumino or Twirwaneho combatant, and the killing of a number of women and children in Babemgwa village. Interviews with local authorities and community-based organizations, Minembwe area, February 2020.

[98] Reporting by field-based monitors, February 2019; interviews with armed group experts, Uvira, February 2020.

[99] Allegedly, Kawaza's adversary Nyerere, another contender for village chief, informed Semahurungure that Kawaza was behind the killing of one of the warlord's bodyguards, prompting him to take revenge. Reporting by field-based monitors, May 2019.

and his deputy Kakobanya, in the Tulambo and Kamombo areas. Ebuela's movement integrated Aoci, who had previously operated independently, and formed a coalition with Ngyalabato's group, which later integrated into the movement as well. Fierce fighting ensued and forces on both sides burnt down numerous villages. The FARDC intervened but failed to end the violence, which intensified as Mai-Mai forces launched attacks from multiple directions.[100]

The fighting caused massive displacement, and the Banyamulenge population largely withdrew to Madegu (Minembwe centre). While Madegu hosts MONUSCO and FARDC bases, it is surrounded by areas controlled by Mai-Mai forces. The latter appeared in all corners of the Plateaux. In South Minembwe, a Biloze Bishambuke group emerged led by Assani Malkiya, which also deployed in North Minembwe under Luhala Kasororo. In mid-May 2019, Mai-Mai groups attacked Minembwe from multiple areas: the northeast at Kalingi-Bidegu; the south at Biziba-Kabingo-Rugezi; and the west at Ruhemba-Kivumu-Nyamiringa-Gaseke-Irumba. To prevent such attacks and hold Minembwe, the FARDC launched operations against the Mai-Mai in June 2019, but these did not substantially weaken them.

Fighting continued over the next months in multiple areas of the Plateaux and was marked by large-scale destruction and atrocities against civilians: villages, health centres and schools were razed to the ground, cattle and other livestock looted and killed, women brutally raped, and civilians, including local authorities, assassinated (UNJHRO, 2020). On 11 September 2019, the chief of Ibumba village, Nalibwini Moninga, was killed by Banyamulenge forces, which in the following days triggered fighting in the villages around Minembwe (Monyi, Rutigita, Kalongozi, Masha, Kisombe). This fighting continued to be motivated by the logic of ascribing collective responsibility for individual acts of violence. For instance, while Banyamulenge armed groups attacked villages inhabited by Banyindu and Bafuliiru that served as corridors for trafficking stolen cattle, Mai-Mai groups attacked the villages of Banyamulenge leaders whose authority was contested.[101]

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[100] Reporting by field-based monitors, September 2019.
[101] Interviews with civil society actors, Minembwe, February 2020.

During this ongoing war, the Banyamulenge were in an increasingly weak position. While initially the FARDC appeared to fight mainly the Mai-Mai to prevent them from taking Minembwe, in July 2019 they clashed with the Gumino around Ndayoberwa market, close to Mikalati, allegedly because of disagreement over what force was entitled to levy taxes at the market. Furthermore, in September 2019, the Mai-Mai launched a vast attack on Banyamulenge forces in Itombwe, managing to wound Semahurungure, who died in hospital in Mikenke on 8 September. During this attack, Mai-Mai forces under Ebuela were said to have been supported by RED-Tabara and possibly Rwanda, with either intelligence or more direct support (KST, 2019). These events underscore once again how the involvement of foreign forces aggravates the violence.

6 |
Towards protracted armed conflict?

After violence escalated mid-2019, it almost seemed to become self-sustaining. Regular clashes continued throughout 2020 and into 2021. A number of factors explain the protracted nature of the violence. The first is the multilayered nature of dynamics of conflict and violence, which play out at local, national, and regional scales. When drivers at one level diminish in intensity, developments at another level spark renewed instability, with repercussions for all levels. For instance, while in late 2020 the regional dimension of the crisis became less pronounced, the official installation of the burgomaster of Minembwe commune in September 2020, which had sparked nationwide political consternation, reinforced the importance of the national level. A second factor that renders the violence difficult to stem is the fragmented and volatile nature of the main belligerents. Not only is there a large amount of different armed groups involved in the fighting, they also frequently change alliances. Moreover, the political actors linked to these armed groups are generally divided. Third, while understandings of the conflict have always diverged, the uptick in violence further reinforced the development of drastically contrasting understandings of both the events and what drives them. Each side claims that the other is bent on exterminating them. These differing interpretations are further reinforced by "information wars", or the circulation of unsubstantiated rumours and contrasting versions of incidents of violence. They are also the result of the growing physical separation between the different communities on the Plateaux due to displacement. Many traditional meeting points, such as weekly markets, are no longer accessible as a result of insecurity. Limited everyday contact complicates developing a shared understanding of the events, which in turn makes people susceptible to more radical views.

In addition, many people have directly or indirectly been victimized, losing relatives, homes, and means of subsistence. Victimization fuels feelings of revenge and causes violence to be seen as justified. In this way, violence has set developments in motion that render further violence more likely, although by no means inevitable.

6.1 Changing dynamics of ongoing violence

In 2019, as a growing number of Mai-Mai groups became involved in the fighting, the Banyamulenge found themselves in an increasingly difficult position. Consequently, Banyamulenge armed groups started recruiting youngsters from the regional diaspora, particularly in Kenya, Burundi, and Rwanda. The starting point for this recruitment, which was said to be facilitated by diaspora members in Canada and Europe, seems to have been the February 2019 attacks in Lulenge. On the Plateaux, the diaspora recruits initially formed a group known as "Abanyakenya" (those coming from Kenya) or "Android". They were led by Colonel Gakunzi, an ex-RCD officer who deserted from the FARDC during the transition and then fled to Kenya. Some of the recruits also joined the Gumino. These youngsters wanted to alleviate the plight of their parents, grandparents and other relatives, and prevent them from being chased from the Plateaux. In addition, they wanted to protect their family's land and cattle, which is often an important source of income even for those living in the diaspora.

In late 2019, another wave of regional recruits arrived. They settled in the Rurambo area under the command of Alexis Gasita, an FARDC deserter previously based in Nairobi. In January 2020, this group was joined by Colonel Makanika, the former commander-in-chief of the FRF, who deserted from his FARDC unit in Walikale. Makanika declared he returned to armed struggle with the sole purpose of protecting Banyamulenge citizens against attacks with a "genocidal character" by militias using the discourse of "ethnic cleansing", notably in the face of the failure to do so by the Congolese army and MONUSCO.[102] Initially, he did not join the Twirwaneho or what was left of

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[102] Declaration by Makanika, circulated via WhatsApp, signed 16 January 2020.

Gumino but stayed with a group of his own that absorbed most of the diaspora recruits. This fuelled speculations about a new rebellion. However, he eventually integrated into the Twirwaneho, leading to a superposition of his organization onto Twirwaneho's structure of territorially organized, village-based self-defence. Allegedly, this has led to a hybrid system where Makanika commands one branch of Twirwaneho, while another branch, which contains the village-based groups, is not fully under his control but collaborates closely with him.[103] At the start of 2021, Makanika was joined by another high-profile officer who deserted from the FARDC, Colonel Charles Sematama, and three other senior officers, which sparked renewed rumours about an emerging rebellion (Boisselet, 2021).[104]

Makanika's involvement with the Twirwaneho coincided with increasing clashes with the FARDC in mid-2020, which diminished in frequency after September. For instance,[105] on 23 and 24 May 2020, FARDC and Banyamulenge forces clashed near Minembwe, following accusations by local inhabitants that the FARDC had stolen maize from their fields. On 4 June, skirmishes broke out at an FARDC position in Tuetue in Itombwe sector, and again on 20 June in Kamombo. There were also hostilities between Twirwaneho and the FARDC around Tuetue in early July; near the village of Mugaja in late August; and in the area of Kalingi, which is not far from Minembwe centre, in early September. According to the FARDC, these clashes were mostly the result of attacks by the Twirwaneho. However, the latter ascribed them to aggression by the FARDC, which according to them demonstrated the army's partiality.[106]

The Twirwaneho also continued to clash with the Mai-Mai. For instance,[107] in April 2020, Twirwaneho and Mai-Mai forces clashed in Kitavi and the villages of Musika and Kivumu, not far from Minembwe. There were also skirmishes in

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[103] Exchange via WhatsApp with three experts on the region, March 2021.
[104] This movement would be called *Mouvement fédéral pour la révolution et la démocratie* (MFRD, Federal Movement for Revolution and Democracy); however, Ndakize Kamasa, Coordinator of the Twirwaneho (in the Minembwe-Kamombo zone), circulated a message on WhatsApp to deny any involvement of the Twirwaneho, see: kubeshuza inkuru yikinyoma irigucicikana kumbuga, WhatsApp message received on 22 March 2021.
[105] This is not an exhaustive list, but a number of illustrative examples.
[106] Interview with source close to Twirwaneho, October 2020.
[107] This is not an exhaustive list, but a number of illustrative examples.

Bijombo *groupement* near Masango. In July, hostilities took place in Bijombo, near Kateja, and in August in Itombwe sector, in the villages of Kanani, Ngezi and Bilalombili. In September, clashes occurred around the villages of Kahwela, Muliza and Kabingo, and in October in Byalere, Timbyangoma, Bigaragara and Rugezi, near Minembwe. In December, Itombwe sector was again the theatre of clashes, specifically the villages of Kakuku and Kiseke, and fighting also erupted in Bijombo, close to the village of Malimba. In addition, clashes were reported in Kamombo and Kabara that were said to involve soldiers of the Mai-Mai Yakutumba, a group that had hithertho not been actively involved in the fighting on the Plateaux.[108]

Many of these clashes took place close to Minembwe or where there were large concentrations of cattle, which continued to be the target of looting. The areas around the two main IDP camps in the region were also the target of frequent attacks. For instance, on 20 February 2020, the IDP site in Bijombo centre, which is home to mostly Bafuliiru and Banyindu, was attacked by what many alleged to be Twirwaneho and/or Gumino (Radio Okapi, 2020a). On 30 December 2020, seven people, the majority women and children, died at Kibindibindi two kilometres from the IDP camp, where they had ventured in order to cultivate their fields. The attack was ascribed to Banyamulenge fighters. There were also several attacks close to the IDP camp in Mikenge (Minembwe centre), which is primarily inhabited by Banyamulenge. For instance, in April 2020, a group of around 20 Banyamulenge women left the camp to harvest food from their fields in Kivumu. While the exact circumstances are disputed, several women were raped, killed and mutilated by Mai-Mai forces. On 28 May 2020, Mai-Mai groups again attacked near the camp in order to loot cattle, wounding numerous IDPs (Prunelle, 2020c). In addition to attacks on or close to IDP camps, the belligerents have continued to burn entire villages to the ground. This reflects a generalized lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law, as well as a troubling increase in the viciousness of the conflict.

While foreign rebel groups, specifically the Burundian groups RED-Tabara and FNL/Nzabempema, continued to be involved in the fighting, towards the end of 2020, their role became overall less important. For example, RNC/

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[108] Reporting by field-based monitors, December 2020.

Nyamwasa, which had already been weakened since end 2018, became practically invisible in 2020. Some sources even suggested they departed from the Plateaux.[109] As a result, a major source of insecurity for Kigali disappeared, which may have diminished Rwanda's interest in being directly involved. In late September 2020, the RDF arrested 19 RED-Tabara combatants who entered Rwandan territory from the Nyungwe forest in Burundi (Mugisha, 2020). This action could be seen as part of a range of overtures by Kigali to improve bilateral relations with Burundi since a new president, Évariste Ndayishimiye, took office on 18 June 2020. A flurry of diplomatic efforts ensued, including a meeting of the two countries' military intelligence chiefs in August 2020, followed by a high-level meeting between their ministers of foreign affairs near the border in October (Kaze, 2020).

Despite these initiatives, however, relations remained very tense (Gras, 2020b). In August and September 2020, RED-Tabara conducted a series of attacks in Burundi, which aggravated Bujumbura's distrust towards Kigali (AFP, 2020). It allegedly also led to new incursions of combatants linked to the Burundian government into the Congo in October 2020, in support of a major FARDC offensive against RED-Tabara and FNL/Nzabempema (SOS Media Burundi, 2020). In March 2020, Rwandan rebel combatants of the *Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie* (CNRD, National Council for Renewal and Democracy), a splinter of the *Forces démocratiques du libération du Rwanda* (FDLR, Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), were detected in the Ruzizi Plain adjacent to the Moyens Plateaux, from where they engaged in cross-border movements into Burundi (Radio Okapi, 2020b). Some sources alleged that this group was accompanied by Burundian pro-government soldiers.[110] In early 2021, unverified reports of Burundian support for CNRD/FDLR continued to circulate, specifically reports of skirmishes involving the group near the border with Rwanda.[111] While the CNRD/FDLR have up to now not been reported to be involved in the fighting on the Plateaux, this flare-up of tensions could lead to a renewed intensification of regional interference.

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[109] It is unclear where they headed; while some sources alleged that they went to Burundi, this information could not be verified.

[110] WhatsApp Exchange with armed group expert specialized in the Ruzizi Plain, 15 April 2020.

[111] WhatsApp message by URN Hitamwoneza, dated 2 March 2021.

As regional tensions eased – perhaps momentarily – in late 2020, other drivers of conflict intensified. On 28 September 2020, a high-level governmental delegation involving the minister of decentralization, the minister of defence and the governor of South Kivu arrived in Minembwe for an official visit. They attended the official installation ceremony of the burgomaster and other officials of Minembwe commune. Shortly afterwards, another high-level delegation including the US Ambassador arrived. The impression was generated that all these officials were present solely for the installation ceremony, which created a backlash and sparked nationwide unrest and activism against the commune (Rigaud, 2020). In early October, Minembwe took centre stage in national media reporting and political activity. Members of Parliament questioned Minister of Decentralization Azarias Ruberwa, marches and sit-ins took place in Kinshasa, Uvira, Baraka and other places, and local, provincial, national and diaspora organizations weighed in on the issue. Even the Catholic church, including the bishop of Uvira, and the country's largest Protestant church, felt compelled to comment on the events.

The activism against the commune went hand in hand with the renewed circulation of balkanization discourse and hate speech against the Banyamulenge/Tutsi/Rwandophones, who have been depicted as "foreigners" and "invaders" using the commune to grab the autochthones' land (Ntanyoma, 2021). Yet the activism against the commune also focused on alleged procedural irregularities surrounding its creation. According to the 2008 decentralization law, the creation of rural communes should be based on a directive that reflects the opinion of the Provincial Assembly regarding what entities fulfil the criteria for this administrative transformation. While Minembwe is mentioned in the 2013 ministerial decree, it was not included on the list composed by the South Kivu Provincial Assembly in 2009 (MediaCongo.Net, 2020).[112] However, there are more discrepancies between the Provincial Assembly's list and the 2013 decree. For instance, the Provincial Assembly recommended Kiliba become part of the city of Uvira, yet in the 2013 decree it was an independent commune. For many Banyamulenge, this proves that the argument about procedural irregularities is being selectively applied.[113]

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[112] Exchange via WhatsApp with DRC legal experts, October 2020.
[113] Phone interview and exchange via WhatsApp, with Banyamulenge analysts and civil society actors, March 2021.

Another alleged problem concerns the commune's boundaries. While these are described in relatively clear terms in the 2013 decree, opponents claim they are unclear. This seems in part the result of the circulation of false information about the commune's area and localisation (Michombero, 2020; Maximum.cd, 2020). In addition, there are alleged irregularities with respect to the appointments of the commune's authorities. Because of the high potential for the creation of communes to spark tensions, the Senate had demanded the suspension of the 2013 decree's implementation. In 2018, Prime Minister Tshibala decided to lift the suspension, leading the then minister of the interior to proceed with the designation of commune authorities. However, according to existing legislation, these appointments were the prerogative of the president. In addition, authorities were appointed only for a few communes. As a result, in the region of Fizi and Uvira, Minembwe was the sole commune to become operational.[114] For some, this gave off the impression that it was unduly favoured.[115] Combined with overwhelming pressure due to the intense political mobilization around the issue, the allegations of procedural irregularities led President Tshisekedi to announce the temporary suspension of the commune on 8 October 2020 and the creation of a scientific commission to further look into the matter.

It remains unclear to what extent the contestations over the commune had a direct impact on the hostilities on the Plateaux. Fighting near Minembwe was quite intense in October 2020, yet the area had been subject to regular clashes before, including in early September. What is certain is that the Minembwe issue had numerous indirect effects. First, it bolstered rhetorical support for "autochthonous" armed groups, which are framed as heroically fighting the commune. For instance, the Uvira chapter of NSCC (New Congolese Civil Society) declared that armed groups on the Plateaux are claiming to "retake Minembwe by force", and that "when politics fails, they will do it by force" (Cikuru, 2020). Second, the intensification of hate speech greatly enhanced existential fears among the Banyamulenge, reinforcing the feeling that they are subject to ethnic cleansing, or worse, genocide. They

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[114] While authorities were appointed for a number of cities, in particular Uvira, Kamituga and Baraka, this was not the case for the communes.
[115] Exchange via WhatsApp with DRC legal experts, October 2020.

fear that Mai-Mai groups will try to drive them off the Plateaux, in this way undermining their claims to govern local entities, which in turn has major symbolic implications for their status as Congolese citizens. These fears were seized on to intensify recruitment among Banyamulenge youth.[116] More generally, by causing national political commotion, the Minembwe commune affair raised the political stakes of the violence on the Plateaux, reinforcing political actors' motivation to comment on and get involved in the crisis.

6.2 Fragmentation and changing alliances

One reason why the crisis on the Plateaux has proven difficult to address is the fragmented nature of the main political-military players. While ostensibly there are two camps (Banyamulenge vs. self-styled autochthones, in particular Babembe, Bavira, Banyindu and Bafuliiru) operating in broad coalitions, in reality, both experience a good deal of fragmentation. This is the result of various factors, such as: differing political orientations among armed groups and their political backers; the personal ambitions of armed group leaders, which may push them to start or maintain their own armed group; and divergent positions on collaborating with foreign rebel and government forces.

While the Banyamulenge are united in defending their community's presence on the Plateaux, they are politically and militarily divided. For instance, the old animosities between Makanika and Masunzu (and more generally those who used to symphatize with the FRF and those who did not) continue to play a divisive role.[117] Furthermore, while the Twirwaneho and the Gumino collaborate, they remain separate organizations with different political orientations. For instance, in May 2020, the Gumino issued a statement that, contrary to the Twirwaneho, they were not involved in recent

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[116] Exchange via WhatsApp with Banyamulenge civil society actors, October 2020 and March 2021.
[117] These fault lines are said to have widened after the April 2020 arrival of Colonel Alexis Rugabisha, who is close to Masunzu, in the general staff of the FARDC's 12th Rapid Reaction Brigade headquartered in Minembwe. Interviews with Uvira-based civil society actors, March 2021.

fighting, as they were respecting a recently signed ceasefire agreement.[118] Moreover, the Twirwaneho remain subject to internal quarrels, with tensions between Makanika's group and the "old" Twirwaneho, parts of which are said not to be fully under Makanika's command. The Twirwaneho have tried to portray themselves as a civil self-defence movement (Murinda, 2021), and Makanika's image and approach are decidedly more military.[119] In addition, there are divisions in Twirwaneho regarding whether the organization should develop a political branch. Certain figures have acted as the organization's unofficial political representatives – one example is Muhamiriza Ntayoberwa, an influential Munyamulenge political actor based in Bukavu – but so far there is no formal political organization.[120]

The Twirwaneho have also been subject to disagreements that mark the Banyamulenge community at large, namely, how to position themselves vis-à-vis the Congolese but also the Rwandan and Burundian governments.[121] The Banyamulenge have historically been divided in their attitude towards both Kigali and the government in Kinshasa (Stearns et al., 2013). These divisions partly overlap with fragmentation along party political lines. Some politicians, generally more favourable towards Kigali, are linked to the RCD, while others are affiliated with former President Kabila's *Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie* (PPRD, People's Party for Reconstruction and Development) or allied parties.[122] Still others are members of the FRF, which was reconstituted as a political party after giving up armed struggle in 2011. Yet the FRF is also divided. Historically, some of its factions have strongly advocated for keeping Kigali at a distance, while others have taken a less hostile stance. Yet other tensions led Müller Ruhimbika to create a split-off named *FRF-Originel* (Original FRF), which disappeared after his adhesion to

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[118] Communiqué de presse du mouvement politico-militaire Gumino sur la situation sécuritaire à Minembwe, press release (without signature) dated 25 May 2020.

[119] Exchange with experts in armed mobilization on the Plateaux, March 2021.

[120] Interviews with Banyamulenge civil society actors, Uvira, January 2021. The Twirwaneho also have a growing social media presence. For instance, since May 2019, they have a twitter handle: @Twirwaneho.

[121] Some observers allege that clan politics also play a role in these internal divisions, but the actual influence of this factor is heavily contested.

[122] Note that Banyamulenge close to the PPRD are also divided, as evidenced by the tensions between Enoch Sebineza and Kibibi Kamanzi.

the PPRD in 2020.[123] Despite this schism, both FRF factions eventually cozied up to the Kabila government, putting the Banyamulenge overwhelmingly in the pro-government camp until 2018. Some Banyamulenge, however, developed doubts about that strategy, as it did not bring them security or improved their relations with other communities.[124] At present, many are uncertain about how to position themselves regarding Tshisekedi, who has become increasingly powerful, gradually weakening the grip of Kabila's networks on the state apparatus. Some distrust his close ties with Kigali, and many are discontent with his decision to suspend the commune of Minembwe.[125]

Strong political-military divisions can also be observed on the side of the Babembe, Bafuliiru, Bavira and Banyindu. Although different Mai-Mai groups on the Plateaux generally collaborate, they are far from a unitary movement. While the rank-and-file are often diverse, the leadership tends to be domi-nated by members of one particular ethnicity. This shapes these groups' political and popular support networks, causing them to have different con-stituencies with different interests, which are sometimes in conflict. For instance, there have regularly been tensions between the Babembe and the Bafuliiru as well as between the Bafuliiru and the Bavira. In addition, the personal ambitions of Mai-Mai commanders and their political backers often push Mai-Mai groups to carve out or expand their own spheres of influence. A telling example is the plan, launched in 2020, to create a Vira armed group in Bijombo called Kibalo Kyetu under Vira Mai-Mai Commander Jules, operating within Ilunga's group, and Makanaki, based in the Moyens Plateaux of the Bavira chiefdom.[126] This reinvigorated Vira activism is also reflected in the creation of new villages in Bijombo under Vira leadership by the *mwami* of the Bavira,[127] as part of broader efforts to reclaim Bijombo for the Bavira.[128]

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[123] In May 2020, Ruhimbika announced that he joined the PPRD (Prunelle, 2020d).
[124] Interview with Banyamulenge civil society actors, Uvira, December 2020.
[125] WhatsApp exchange with Banyamulenge political analyst, 1 March 2021, see also Boisselet, 2021.
[126] Interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, February 2020.
[127] The following villages were created in 2019: Makambi, Lupango, Mutara, Kalili, Gongwa, Rugomera, Bikinga, Rubarati and Mugogo.
[128] Interviews with civil society actors and security services, Uvira, November 2020.

Another source of division among the Mai-Mai has been their position towards foreign armed forces. In November 2019, certain sources claimed that a number of Mai-Mai commanders were keeping their distance from RED-Tabara and even intended to expel them from their zone of influence. This would concern in particular the Bembe Commanders Ebuela and Ngyalabato, as well as some of the Fuliiru Mai-Mai operating in the Masango area. Only Ilunga was still said to collaborate with the group. In April 2020, clashes were reported in Bijombo pitting RED-Tabara against Ebuela's forces and allied local defence forces – in what appears a reversal of alliances that some say was very short-lived.[129] In January 2021, a new coalition of Mai-Mai groups composed of the Mai-Mai of Ilunga, Makanaki and René was involved in major hostilities with the Twirwaneho near Gongwa in Bijombo. Reportedly, these clashes also involved RED-Tabara fighting on the Mai-Mai's side. This after René was reported one year earlier to have forged a deal with pro-government actors in Bujumbura to allow for the free movement of troops and supplies to the Hauts Plateaux through his zone of influence.[130]

Like the armed groups, the Bembe, Fuliiru, Vira and Nyindu political actors who play important roles in the crisis on the Plateaux are divided. They all have their own regional and ethnic constituencies, between which multiple conflicts exist. In addition, many political actors are embroiled in conflicts within their respective ethnic groups. For instance, in recent years, an intense conflict has raged among the Bafuliiru over succession to the throne of the Bafuliiru chiefdom (Verweijen, 2016b). Another important divide, in addition to party-political affiliations, is between pro-government or pro-opposition positions, which have started to shift in response to the current power struggle between the former and sitting president. During the Kabila years, the opposition/government divide was strongly felt among the Babembe. While most political actors supported the opposition – a position also held by the widely supported Mai-Mai Yakutumba – the influential Bembe politician Néhémie Mwilanya Wilondja played a key role in Kabila's administration (Kibangula, 2018).

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[129] Observations based on reporting from local focal points in Bijombo, and information provided by security services in Uvira, April and May 2020.
[130] Observations based on reporting from local focal points in Bijombo, and information provided by security services and civil society actors in Uvira, January 2021.

Political divisions are compounded by volatility. Mirroring shifting alliances among armed groups, politicians frequently engage in "political transhumance", whereby they change their political orientation, and sometimes their party-political affiliation. A good example is Justin Bitakwira Bihona Hayi, an influential Fuliiru politician who switched sides and political parties several times, and more recently has tried to curry favour with President Tshisekedi (Bambe, 2020). The latter appointed him to be part of a delegation from Kinshasa to the Hauts Plateaux to help bring peace in November 2020. The inclusion of Bitakwira, however, was heavily contested. The Bembe *mutualité* (self-help organization) Emo'ya m'mbondo refused to meet with him, stating that they declared him "non-grata" after having insulted Bembe notables in 2017 (Prunelle, 2020e). Certain members of the *Union pour la nation Congolaise* (UNC, Union for the Congolese Nation), his previous political party, were also upset about his inclusion, given that he betrayed their leader by testifying against him in court. In addition, members of the president's political party in Uvira felt bypassed, believing they should have been included in the mission instead (Kigabi, 2020). Civil society actors in Uvira were also divided, with some believing Bitakwira was unsuitable for the mission due to his long-standing support for particular armed groups in the region.[131] These contestations reflect the severe political divisions among self-proclaimed "autochthonous" groups and demonstrate how they undermine peace initiatives.

6.3 Diverging views and wars of information

As discussed at the start of the report, the Banyamulenge on the one hand, and the Bafuliiru, Bavira, Babembe and Banyindu on the other, have diverging understandings of the "deep roots" of the current crisis, which are linked to different interpretations of key historical episodes. These varying grids of interpretation fuel contrasting visions of the current violence. Again, it should be emphasized that the descriptions of these visions are gross generalizations that are not shared, or not shared to the same degree, by all members of the groups in question.

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[131] Exchange via WhatsApp with civil society actors in Uvira, November 2020. The Banyamulenge were also strongly opposed to Bitakwira's involvement, accusing him of supporting armed groups "to make the head of state believe that he is the only person who can extinguish the fire that he himself has lit" (Prunelle, 2020f).

The Banyamulenge have become convinced that "autochthonous" communities harbour a genocidal plan to expel them from the Plateaux and annihilate the commune of Minembwe.[132] This plan would consist of systematically displacing the Banyamulenge by burning down their villages and isolating them in a "concentration camp" in Minembwe. In addition, it would involve starving the Banyamulenge to death by undermining their livelihoods. This would be achieved by looting their cattle, making their fields inaccessible, and cutting off all supply routes to the Plateaux. While admitting that villages on all sides have been attacked, many Banyamulenge insist that many more villages in their community have been burned down than those in others. They have suffered most from cattle-looting, given they own a larger share of the cattle on the Plateaux. In addition, they feel that they are a minority on the Plateaux and are in a very vulnerable position since Mai-Mai groups collaborate to attack them from all sides. Moreover, they have become the target of virulent hate speech that circulates widely among local and national politicians as well as in the Congolese diaspora (Ntanyoma, 2021). At the height of regional involvement in the crisis, many Banyamulenge seemed to believe that this supposed extermination plan was endorsed by Rwanda, to punish them for having hosted the RNC and to force them to switch sides (Rolley, 2019). It is also widely believed that these extermination efforts are facilitated by the FARDC and even by MONUSCO, through their inaction. Taken together, this set of observations and beliefs explains why the Banyamulenge have adopted the discourse of genocide to describe the events on the Plateaux,[133] a discourse that they also use in international lobbying and advocacy efforts to draw attention to the plight of their population.[134]

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[132] See, for instance, "Note d'information du plan d'extermination de la communauté Banyamulenge par la coalition des communautés de Babembe, Bafuliru et Banyindu, les FDLR rwandais et les elements du RED-tabara du Burundi dans les Territoires de Fizi, Mwenga et Uvira, au Sud-kivu en République démocratique du Congo", a widely circulated WhatsApp message authored by Niyongabo Oscar, received in May 2019.

[133] See, for instance, "Les indices récents palpables du génocide en cours à Minembwe", message distributed via WhatsApp signed 21 April 2020 and "Minembwe pourrait bientôt devenir une cimentière", message distributed via WhatsApp signed 12 June 2020.

[134] For instance, US Congressman John Curtis wrote a letter to the US ambassador to the UN, dated 18 June 2020, to ask questions about the protection of the Banyamulenge community.

Perhaps in reaction to the growing use of the language of genocide by the Banyamulenge, Fuliiru political actors have started to copy this rhetoric. In a 13 June 2020 open letter, the influential Fuliiru platform *Ikihiza kya Bafuliiru* denounced an "extermination plan" by the Banyamulenge consisting of killing a maximum number of "autochthones" living on the Plateaux, in order to install a "Tutsiland".[135] The letter included an annex with all massacres against the Bafuliiru committed since 1996, which were ascribed to the Banyamulenge. Members of the Bafuliiru, Babembe and Banyindu communities also highlight that their villages have been burned down and their populations displaced too. This causes hardship and hunger, in particular for those no longer able to cultivate their fields. Many among these groups therefore refute the idea that the Banyamulenge have been more victimized than others, suggesting instead that their people have been hit the hardest.[136]

The belligerents also have strong disagreements concerning the role of the FARDC. For the Banyamulenge, the FARDC are partial, as they do not intervene or barely intervene in Mai-Mai attacks on Banyamulenge villages and cattle, which sometimes occur a stone's throw from their bases. The army proves its bias by facilitating the passage and sale of stolen cattle, and worse, by directly collaborating with Mai-Mai forces. The Banyamulenge blame this collaboration on the likes of Colonel Honoré Katembo, commander of the 33rd brigade based in Minembwe, and Kibwana Bulezi, commander of the 33011st battalion. Katembo's replacement in May 2019 was therefore widely celebrated in Minembwe. Banyamulenge political actors have also denounced General Akili Muhindo Mundos, commander of the 33rd Military Region encompassing South Kivu, as being partial and aggravating the violence on the Plateaux. More recently, they have taken issue with General Dieudonné Muhima, commander of the 12th Rapid Reaction Brigade headquartered in Minembwe, who some accuse of supplying arms and ammunition to the Mai-Mai for exterminating the Banyamulenge.[137] In addition, accusations have been levied against the civilian intelligence services and

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[135] Ikihiza kya Bafuliiru, letter dated 13 June 2020 with as subject: dénonciation du plan d'extermination des Bafuliiru, Babembe and Banyindu au Sud Kivu.
[136] Interviews with civil society actors, Uvira, February 2020.
[137] See "Le Général Dieudonné Muhima à sa phase ultime d'extermination des Banyamulenge", message circulated via WhatsApp signed 9 September 2020.

the Military Intelligence Bureau of the operational sector based in Uvira. Allegedly, these institutions aim to hunt down young Banyamulenge men, who are frequently arrested on the grounds of being combatants (Murinda, 2021).[138] Finally, many Banyamulenge believe that the regular clashes between the Twirwaneho and the FARDC from mid-2020 onwards, and the fact that Banyamulenge armed groups are systematically singled out in army press releases, clearly indicate that the FARDC is biased and prioritizes militarily weakening the Banyamulenge.[139]

From their perspective, Babembe, Bafuliiru, Bavira and Banyindu political actors perceive the FARDC to be partial in favour of the Banyamulenge. They cite in particular FARDC General Bolingo (since replaced by General Tony Mwangala), and Colonels Siméon Rugangu, Nyenyeri Kayumbe[140] and Claude Micho, as being biased. In addition, they have singled out Munyamulenge General Jonas Padiri, who until mid-2019 was deputy commander of the Third Defence Zone that includes South Kivu, and the PNC (police) Commander Major Muyoboke Ndigija Jean Éric (who served until February 2020). The case of Major Muyoboke would reflect a wider problem with the police district of the Hauts Plateaux, which was created when Munyamulenge General Bisengimana was Inspector General of the police. Allegedly, Bisengimana did not only systematically favour Banyamulenge in appointments, but also shielded them from being held accountable for missteps. A final way in which the FARDC would have proven partial is that multiple officers from self-styled autochthonous communities are said to have been arbitrarily arrested by the security services, including Colonel Majaliwa, Colonel Kanyonyi Justin alias Okapi, and Major Rugina Lambere.[141]

Accusations of partiality have also increasingly become projected onto MONUSCO, which has a base in Minembwe centre. Both sides accuse the

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[138] See also Enock Ruberangabo Sebineza, Communiqué de presse, L'insécurité par la sécurité au Sud du Sud-Kivu, RDC, 11 September 2020.

[139] See, for instance, "Démentir les propos du capitaine Kasereka, porte-parole du secteur operationnel sukula2 au Sud Kivu FARDC", message circulated via WhatsApp in May 2020

[140] Nyenyeri eventually deserted from the FARDC to join the Gumino, allegedly after he had committed human rights abuses during military operations.

[141] Observations based on fieldwork conducted between 10 and 20 February in Bijombo and the Minembwe area.

UN mission not only of inaction and failing to uphold its civilian protection mandate, but of helping the other side.[142] For instance, in a declaration issued in April 2020, a spokesperson of the IDP camp in Mikenge, inhabited mainly by Banyamulenge, denounced the actions of the commander of the MONUSCO base, Major Sajiti. The latter was accused of enabling the free passage of Mai-Mai soldiers to the IDP site, of unnecessarily causing panic by opening fire when the mistaken suspicion arose that Gumino soldiers were approaching the site, and of ordering Banyamulenge herders to displace their herds far from the IDP site, which led to their being looted by the Mai-Mai.[143] Among the self-proclaimed "autochthonous" groups, suspicions of MONUSCO's partiality are fuelled by a long-standing distrust of the UN, which they accuse of having facilitated the implantation of Rwandan refugees on Congolese soil since the late 1950s. For instance, the president of the political wing of Mai-Mai Yakutumba said during an interview: "The troops of the UN have come to secure and support the aggressors. Really, MONUSCO is not there to bring peace, but to harm the Congolese."[144] The CNPSC coalition saw this attitude further evidenced by the crucial role of MONUSCO troops in preventing the fall of the city of Uvira in September 2017. These perceptions shape interpretations of the role of MONUSCO in the current crisis.[145]

Radically opposed views on the Plateaux crisis both are the product of and fuel for widely divergent interpretations of key events, including incidents of violence. It is often challenging to establish how clashes emerged, as each side accuses the other of attacking first. Each belligerent tries to portray their opponents as "aggressors", whereas they themselves merely engage in legitimate "self-defence". The rise of mobile Internet and social media, in particular WhatsApp, has increased the speed and reach of information circulation, leading to rapid successions of declarations and counter-declarations that

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[142] See, for instance, "Les indices récents palpables du génocide en cours à Minembwe", message distributed via WhatsApp signed 21 April 2020

[143] Muhimpundu Héritier, porte parole des déplacés, "A l'intention du publique", Mikenge, 12 April 2020, circulated via WhatsApp.

[144] Interview with President of *Parti pour l'action et la reconstruction du Congo* (PARC), the political wing of the Mai-Mai Yakutumba, December 2011.

[145] Phone interview with CNPSC members, October 2020; see also, "Déclaration de Mbondo Europe, Déclaration de Stockholm, Notre refus catégorique et notre opposition ferme au projet de la MONUSCO visant à installer des réfugiés dans l'espace du territoire FIZI-ITOMBWE, terre inviolable et inaliénable de nos ancêtres", Stockholm, 22 February 2020.

present radically different interpretations of the facts. These developments have enabled a growing role for diaspora organizations within such information wars. Aside from diverging interpretations of particular events, information wars include the spread of "intox" / "infox" or false rumours that are calculated to hurt opponents. In May 2020, thus-far unsubstantiated rumours emerged that the former commander of a Tutsi-led rebel group based in North Kivu, Sultani Makenga, had appeared on the Plateaux (according to some messages, on board a MONUSCO helicopter) to support Makanika.[146] In September 2020, news of the death of Twirwaneho Commander Makanika widely circulated for over a week until it was proven false.

In July 2020, national and international outrage emerged in the wake of an alleged massacre of 200 civilians in Kipupu in Itombwe, which was attributed to Twirwaneho/Gumino. The alleged atrocities were condemned by an array of organizations and high-ranking individuals, including the opposition politician Martin Fayulu, Nobel Prize winner Denis Mukwege, members of the South Kivu Provincial Assembly, and the customary chiefs of Fizi, who organized two days of mourning (RFI, 2020b). A major Flemish news outlet reported on what it called the "bloodbath", reproducing the figure of 200 killed, despite the facts remaining heavily disputed in the absence of an independent investigation on the ground (Vidal, 2020). Eventually, a joint fact-finding mission of the Congolese government and the UN to Itombwe established a death toll of 15 (UN S/2020/919). These events highlight the importance for national and international observers of carefully verifying any information before reporting, lest they amplify "intox". Spreading rumours can not only aggravate violence but also undermine actors' perceived neutrality, which significantly hampers any peacebuilding efforts they are involved in.

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[146] "URGENT: Sultani MAKENGA est apparu à Minembwe", message circulating on WhatsApp, received 16 May 2020.

7 |
International peacebuilding interventions

In recent years, international organizations have taken numerous initiatives to end violence and resolve the tensions on the Plateaux. These initiatives have been hampered by a number of challenges: 1) problems of selection and representation, or who is invited to participate in meetings and talks and who is not, and who do they represent; 2) limited commitment and enforcement, in particular the problem that those who pledge to end hostilities continue to incite or commit violence; 3) the perceived partiality and dishonesty of international peacebuilders; and 4) the failure to simultaneously address different drivers of conflict and violence. The following section illustrates these challenges by zooming in on one area of international peacebuilding initiatives, namely, dialogues and talks.

7.1 The limited effects of dialogues and talks

One of the most important initiatives by international peacebuilding and stabilization actors for addressing the Plateaux crisis has been facilitating talks and both inter and intracommunity dialogues. Initially, these efforts focused on the *groupement* of Bijombo, where violence first escalated. On 27 September 2018, an intercommunity dialogue was held in Mbundamo with customary authorities, elders, religious leaders, and school directors and teachers. The meeting ended in an agreement, but it was also acknowledged that numerous key issues could only be resolved by higher-level authorities. Moreover, the professed intention to end the violence did not bring an end to the fighting. The intercommunity dialogue did not include any armed

group members, and none of the participants had sufficient influence over armed groups to convince them to refrain from fighting. Foreign armed groups were also excluded, which was another reason why the talks failed to change the military situation on the ground.

The next attempt at an intercommunity dialogue, facilitated by the NGO International Alert, followed in June 2019 in Uvira, as part of the *Tujenge pamoja kwa akili na amani* ("Let's Build Together for Peace") project. Ahead of the dialogue, messages circulated about different communities' unwillingness to participate. One message on social media stated that the Banyamulenge were not willing to negotiate with the Mai-Mai, given that the latter's demands were non-negotiable for them. In particular, the Mai-Mai denied the Banyamulenge's very identity as Congolese and their right to Congolese nationality. The message also stated that one of the Babembe's main demands, the cancellation of the decrees creating the Minembwe commune, should be negotiated with the Congolese government, not with them.[147]

In a letter to International Alert, the *mutualité* (self-help organization) of the Bafuliiru in Uvira stated that the Bafuliiru planned to withdraw from the dialogue, citing the hypocrisy of the Banyamulenge. They accused the latter of continuing to perpetrate violence, with the complicity of the FARDC, in spite of their professed commitment to talks. The Bafuliiru also demanded as a precondition for participating in the talks that those they held responsible for the violence on the Plateaux, including Semahurungure and Commander David of the Twirwaneho, be brought to justice.[148] The Banyindu *mutualité* in Uvira also circulated a letter addressed to International Alert in which they declared they were withdrawing from the process. They too cited as one of the main reasons the continuing violence by the Banyamulenge against members of their community, as evidenced by the May assassination of Chief Kawaza.[149]

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[147] "Pas de négociation avec les Mai-Mai", WhatsApp message circulated mid-May 2019, interview with Bembe civil society actors in Uvira in May 2019 confirmed the expressed points of view were widely shared.

[148] "*Mutualité* des Bafuliiru à Uvira, Notre désengagement du processus du dialogue sur le conflit de Bijombo", 17 May 2019.

[149] *Mutualité* de Banyindu à Uvira ville, No Réf 157/Mut/BANYINDU/2019 "Désengagement au dialogue sur le conflit de Bijombo", 16 May 2019.

Another grievance expressed by representatives from self-styled autoch-thonous communities concerned the partiality of the dialogue's facilitator, International Alert. They accused the NGO of excessively close collaboration with Banyamulenge organizations on projects within the framework of the *Plan de stabilisation et de reconstruction de l'est de la RDC* (STAREC, Plan for the Stabilization and Reconstruction of the eastern DRC).[150] This idea was fuelled by the narrative that STAREC financed mainly Banyamulenge-led NGOs, such as *Groupe milima* and ADEPAE, because Müller Ruhimbika, the founder of *Groupe milima*, was provincial minister of planning at the time decisions were made about the allocation of funding.[151]

The expressed distrust and antagonism caused the climate in which talks took place to be very tense. The atmosphere further deteriorated when during deliberations, acts of violence were committed around Mikenge. Soon after the talks ended, violence erupted in other parts of Itombwe. As with previous attempts at dialogue, armed groups did not feel represented and were therefore not committed to respecting the outcomes of the talks. As one Mai-Mai representative said, "Those agreements do not concern us. We are not fighting a community war. We are fighting against Rwanda and the government."[152] In addition, the results had to be communicated to the grass-roots on the Plateaux, but this barely happened, as many delegates went straight to Bukavu and Kinshasa after the intercommunity dialogue ended.

Yet another series of talks took place in Kinshasa in October 2019, hosted by Norbert Basengezi Kantintima, the former governor of South Kivu and vice-president of the National Electoral Commission. This encounter was said to have included representatives of armed groups, although some of the main armed groups involved, including the Mai-Mai Yakutumba, claimed they had not been invited.[153] In the context of the talks, the Banyamulenge politician Moïse Nyarugabo held a press conference in Kinshasa, declaring that the Banyamulenge community would no longer take part in any intercommunity

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[150] Of the nine organisations of the International Alert-led consortium, six were said to be led by or linked to Banyamulenge.
[151] Interviews with NGO representatives and other civil society actors, Uvira, February 2020.
[152] WhatsApp exchange, representative of CNPSC coalition, June 2019.
[153] WhatsApp exchange, representative of Mai-Mai Yakutumba, October 2019.

dialogues. According to him, there was not an intercommunity conflict but a systematic campaign by armed groups to exterminate the Banyamulenge, by burning their villages to the ground and stealing all their cattle (Actualité.cd, 2019b). Soon after, yet another declaration emerged, signed by a group called *Banyamulenge nationalistes* (Banyamulenge nationalists), represented by Kamanzi Kibibi and Sébastien Sebakanura. This group questioned the representativeness of Nyarugabo's declaration. They ascribed it to Banyamulenge close to the RCD led by Azarias Rubwerwa and stated that it therefore did not reflect the opinion of the community as a whole. They also observed that the document had omitted mention of Kigali's role in the violence on the Plateaux.[154] This incident highlights the problems of negotiating with groups that are internally divided, particularly when negotiations take the form of an intercommunity dialogue.

Amidst ongoing violence, yet another effort at talks – a South Kivu-wide initiative – was initiated in Murhesa, close to Bukavu, organized by *l'Initiative pour un leadership cohésif en RDC* (Initiative for a Cohesive Leadership in the DRC) and a number of Congolese NGOs, from 18 to 21 December 2019. While armed group representatives were invited, there was no delegation from the Gumino, which undermined the process. The talks ended with a cease-fire agreement, as well as a pledge by armed groups to stop collaborating with foreign armed groups. This pledge is believed to have stimulated at least some armed groups on the Plateaux to further reconsider their relations with foreign rebel forces, although the decision by a number of Mai-Mai groups to end their collaboration with RED-Tabara predated the talks.[155] In addition, the conference was said to have given some momentum to the community-based Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process that had been launched two months earlier by the president and that had led to the creation of the CIAP-DDRC, an interprovincial commission to support awareness-raising and community-based DDR. However, one year later, only 800 combatants in South Kivu had responded to the call to

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[154] "La pure diversion du RCD dans ce qu'il appelle 'Déclaration de la communauté Banyamulenge sur la situation des Hauts-Plateaux de Minembwe'", 24 October 2019; see also, Congo au jour le jour, 2019.

[155] Above, it was explained how the Bembe Mai-Mai in Itombwe as well as the Fuliiru Mai-Mai in Masago distanced themselves from RED-Tabara in November 2019.

lay down their arms and participate in the DDR process (Prunelle, 2020g). In addition, the ceasefire agreement had little impact on the Plateaux crisis, as violence continued unabated.

The next big effort to get conflict parties to talk took place in Uvira in March 2020. It followed in the wake of two intracommunity forums held in Uvira and Kinshasa. The first of these forums involved only the Banyamulenge and was held in Kinshasa in February 2020. It was boycotted by the *Banyamulenge nationalistes*, who were of the opinion that the problems on the Plateaux could only be resolved by involving all communities.[156] The forum also appeared to spark anger among the other communities in Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga, who felt they were not given the same opportunities as the Banyamulenge. In their eyes, this proved once more that the organizations implicated in stabilization and their international partners, such as Interpeace, were partial.[157] The only other community that organized an intracommunity dialogue, held from 2 to 4 March 2020 in Uvira, were the Babembe. It led to a statement in which they repeated their previous points, including that the Banyamulenge – whom their declaration called "Banyarwanda-so-called Banyamulenge" – were relatively recent refugees, arriving in various waves from the 1930s.[158]

The Bembe intracommunity forum was followed by a renewed round of intercommunity talks in Uvira, which also included representatives of armed groups and local defence forces. It resulted in a ceasefire agreement on 13 March 2020, which was signed by Biloze Bishambuke, Mai-Mai Mtetezi or FPDC-ML, Twirwaneho, Gumino, and unspecified "Mai-Mai", represented by four delegates, including of the Mai-Mai Kashumba and Ilunga.[159] However, soon after it was signed, numerous armed groups, including Mushombe,

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[156] *Banyamulenge nationalistes*, "Notre participation (ou avis) sur la réunion intra-communautaire prévue à Kinshasa du 13 au 14 février 2020", Press release, 6 February 2020.

[157] "Cahier de charge des communautés du Sud-Kivu pour un dialogue inter communautaire sincère et fructuex" [sic], March 2020, draft document circulated on social media.

[158] "Déclaration des Babembe à l'issue du forum intra-communautaire tenu à Uvira du 02 au 04 mars 2020", 4 March 2020.

[159] Accord de cessez-le-feu entre les groupes armés et les forces d'autodéfense opérant dans les moyens et hauts plateaux d'Uvira, Fizi et Mwenga (Itombwe), Sud Kivu, Uvira, 13 March 2020.

Ilunga and Kashumba, claimed that they had either not been represented at the talks or that fake representatives had participated in order to benefit from the per diem.[160] Most of the groups operating in the Moyens Plateaux as well as the Mai-Mai Mulumba said they had not been invited in the first place. In addition, there were no representatives of Fuliiru and Nyindu local defence forces. Moreover, the Mai-Mai Yakutumba had walked out on the first day as their delegates had disagreed with the conditions under which the talks took place. It may therefore not be surprising that the signed agreements once again failed to stop violence. Three days after the cease-fire was adopted, violence broke out at Bigaragara, near Minembwe.[161]

Between 14 and 16 September 2020, over 70 representatives of armed groups in South Kivu convened in Murhesa to participate in a new round of talks organized by a consortium of national and international NGOs, including Search for Common Ground and *l'Initiative pour un leadership cohésif* en RDC, under the aegis of the interprovincial DDR commission (CIAP-DDRC). The talks were attended by the national minister of defence, the minister of security of South Kivu Province, and the province's army and police chiefs. Before the talks were held, several Mai-Mai groups issued a declaration that they were reluctant to participate as long as violence continued. In addition, they called for including the "true leaders" of armed groups, and not the fake representatives that had participated in the first Murhesa talks (Prunelle, 2020h).[162] Representatives of most Mai-Mai groups did participate in the end, but questions remained about the extent to which they were explicitly mandated by these groups. The talks ended again with the adoption of a declaration that included a ceasefire. Some of the signatories were armed groups operating on the Plateaux including the Mai-Mai Makanaki, Kibalo Kyetu, Biloze Bishambuke, FPDC (Mai-Mai Mtetezi), Gumino and Twirwaneho.[163]

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[160] These fake representatives were said to have received death threats afterwards.
[161] Interviews with participants and observers to the talks, Uvira, February 2020.
[162] See also Assumani Fariala, "La retraite de Murhesa, Manipulation et confusion!" *Avenir d'Afrique*, message distributed via WhatsApp on 18 September 2020.
[163] Déclaration de Murhesa II pour un processus de Démobilisation, Désarmement, Réinsertion, Réintégration et Réconciliation Communautaires dans la Province du Sud Kivu, 17 September 2020.

On 17 September, one day after the ceasefire had been signed, a declaration was issued by 44 "armed and self-defence groups operating on the Moyens and Hauts Plateaux of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga (Itombwe)", stating that their leaders had never been officially invited to take part in the talks and that those claiming to have represented them were not mandated by them, and therefore participated in their own name. In addition, they expressed surprise that such talks were held without any prior consultations. They also questioned the intentions of the organizing NGOs, stating that the talks were just a form of "mediatic propaganda" to obtain or justify the expenditure of funds, as is common in the "humanitarian business".[164]

In light of that declaration, it may not come as a surprise that hostilities on the Plateaux continued. On 18 September, clashes took place in Byalere, close to Minembwe, involving Twirwaneho and/or Gumino whom some sources said had been attackers. That same day, Mai-Mai Makanaki, allegedly allied to the FNL, clashed with the FARDC in Muhule and Kasheke in the Moyens Plateaux. Still on the same day, Mai-Mai forces looted cows in Bijombo, and a young Mufuliiru was killed in Chanzovu. Hostilities continued throughout October. On 26 October, Jean Schohier Muhamiriza, a political actor close to the Twirwaneho, issued a declaration in which he accused Biloze Bishambuke of having continued attacks on Banyamulenge civilians and cattle despite signing a ceasefire in September.[165] This provoked an immediate counter-reaction from Bernard Saidi, claiming to represent Biloze Bishambuke, who accused "Gumino-Twirwaneho" of having violated the agreement first by attacking Fuliiru and Nyindu civilians and looting their cattle.[166] These events demonstrate the negligible effects of Murhesa II on the violence on the Plateaux.

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[164] Déclaration de groupes armés et groupes d'autodéfenses opérant dans les moyens et hauts plateaux d'Uvira, Fizi et Mwenga (Itombwe), 17 September 2020.

[165] Jean Schohier Muhamiriza, "Bishambuke continue la violation des accords de paix de Murhesa 2", message diffused via WhatsApp, signed 26 October 2020.

[166] Bernard Saidi, "Réaction du congrès patriotique pour la liberté des congolais (CPLC)/ Biloze Bishambuke aux accusations inexates portées contre lui par le président provincial de Twigwaneo-Gumino, en la personne de Muhamiriza habitant à Bukavu [sic]", message diffused via WhatsApp, no date.

7.2 The limitations of dialogues and talks

A number of factors explain why the peacebuilding initiatives focusing on the Plateaux, in particular dialogues and talks, have had limited effects. These include: the model of "intercommunity" dialogues; problems with inclusion and representation; the difficulty of addressing simultaneously multiple levels of drivers of conflict and violence; the perceived partiality or dishonesty of the facilitators; and the challenges of implementing agreements (see also Iguma Wakenge and Vlassenroot, 2020). Ultimately, these difficulties are caused by the four mechanisms that this report has identified as key drivers of conflict and violence on the Plateaux: militarization, local security dilemmas, the multilayeredness of dynamics of conflict and violence, and the salience of the discourse of ethnic conflict and autochthony.

It is always a challenge to decide who should and who should not be included in talks and dialogues. The different communities involved in the conflict on the Plateaux are not unitary but internally divided actors, and it can be difficult to identify and include all subgroups and currents. In addition to political differences there are generational divides that have not always been taken into consideration. For instance, while youth constitute the bulk of the troops involved in fighting, they have so far been poorly represented within forums and talks. Another problem has been the exclusion of "real" armed group representatives, including of local defence forces, from some dialogues. The armed group landscape on the Plateaux is extremely volatile, with multiple groups operating in changing coalitions, new groups frequently appearing, and certain officers regularly switching groups or operating in a quasi-autonomous manner within larger groups. This makes it challenging to have all armed groups duly represented. The fact that many dialogues have been held in Uvira and Bukavu, and not on the Hauts Plateaux, has created further problems. It has led to an orientation towards urban-based elites, including self-proclaimed political representatives of armed groups who do not always seem to have been explicitly mandated by those groups. As a result, those directly implicated in the violence as well as those bearing the everyday consequences of the fighting have often been excluded.

It has also proven difficult to include political actors from all the different levels at which drivers of conflict and violence are situated. During talks, local leaders and armed groups often voice grievances that can only be resolved through political action at the national level; yet national political actors are not always present. Similarly, while foreign rebel and government forces have played an important role in the crisis, they have generally not participated in dialogues and talks, which would require initiatives at the diplomatic level. The same applies to diaspora organizations, which have become increasingly important players, which finance armed groups, facilitate recruitment and spread intoxicating rhetoric via social media. Due to the complex layering of local, national and regional processes, addressing the Plateaux crisis requires action at multiple levels at once, yet in practice, it is difficult to harmonize different initiatives.

Deficient representation has undermined the implementation of peace and ceasefire agreements. Crucially, civilian leaders, including political representatives of armed groups, generally have only limited influence over armed group commanders, who have their own interests and agendas. Agreements that are reached without direct involvement of these commanders are therefore unlikely to be respected. Moreover, due to local security dilemmas, armed groups are less likely to accept ending hostilities without an assurance that all groups in their zone of operations, including foreign armed groups, will do so. In addition, demobilization is difficult without clear arrangements concerning where troops are cantoned, how they will be fed and secured, how the demobilization process will unfold, and who will provide effective security in armed groups' former zones of deployment. These processes need to be arranged by Kinshasa, yet the government has rarely organized the first phase of the DDR process – just as the later stages – in an adequate manner. The result has been armed group fighters growing hungry in demobilization sites, while their former areas of control have remained subject to insecurity (Vogel & Musamba, 2016).

Aside from concerns about the security of the populations they claim to defend, both civilian and armed group leaders have been reluctant to respect peace agreements out of fear for their own interests and position. This fear is rooted in militarization, or the idea that using violence to further one's

interests and power is legitimate. Many armed group commanders are in the bush because it enhances their own power, status, prestige, and wealth and is an important aspect of their way of life and belonging. It is often unclear what demobilization processes offer them, in particular since the Congolese army has committed to no longer giving high ranks and functions to those who wish to integrate into the FARDC. The same applies to civilian leaders: where armed groups have crucially backed up their power and position, including in conflicts over local authority, they may not stand to gain much from these groups' demobilization (Verweijen, 2016a).

An additional factor that has complicated talks and dialogues is that the involved international organizations are seen as partial or self-interested. For MONUSCO, their compromised image stems in part from their close collaboration with the FARDC, and the insufficiency of their efforts to protect civilians. For international NGOs, the reputation of being partial is in part the result of close collaboration with the provincial government under STAREC. While this may have enhanced local ownership, it has also increased politicization. Working in areas where competing groups have parallel governance institutions is another risk, as illustrated by dynamics in Bijombo. Banyamulenge working in the peacebuilding sector have complained that for projects undertaken within the framework of STAREC, NGOs work with the Nyindu *groupement* chief of Bijombo rather than with Kabarule, the Munyamulenge chief.[167] Aside from perceived partiality, both international NGOs and MONUSCO have increasingly been accused of dishonesty and trying to profit from "the business of peace".[168] After almost two and a half decades of ongoing violence despite an exponential growth of the aid presence, it may not come as a surprise that many Congolese have started to develop scepticism towards international peacebuilding initiatives more generally.

A final factor that has hampered the effects of dialogues and talks is the heavy emphasis on the format of "intercommunity dialogues", which reflects

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[167] Interviews with local leaders and civil society organizations in Bijombo, February 2020.
[168] See, for instance, Assumani Fariala, "La retraite de Murhesa, Manipulation et confusion!" *Avenir d'Afrique*, message distributed via WhatsApp on 18 September 2020; Déclaration de groupes armés et groupes d'autodéfenses opérant dans les moyens et hauts plateaux d'Uvira, Fizi et Mwenga (Itombwe), 17 September 2020.

an understanding of the troubles on the Plateaux as primarily "ethnic" in character. This interpretation risks obscuring other drivers of conflict and violence, such as militarization and regional interference, and may complicate peacebuilding efforts in various ways. First, intercommunity forums reinforce the idea that there are antagonisms between communities as a whole, and that these antagonisms are at the root of violence. An understanding of the conflict as "ethnic", in turn, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it causes all events to be interpreted in this light, and then provokes counter-reactions, such as revenge violence, that further substantiate the idea that the main fault line is "ethnic". Second, the belief that communities as a whole are implicated in the conflict may reinforce the mechanism of ascribing collective responsibility for individual acts of violence. This mechanism leads armed groups to target civilians and may spark spirals of tit-for-tat assassinations as well as facilitate the geographical spread of conflict. Third, the set-up of intercommunity dialogues treats communities as monolithic entities. This is not only inadequate, given their internal divisions, but risks reinforcing dominant points of view. Where these are more radical, moderate voices are being drowned out. Given that many talks and dialogues include predominantly urban-based and more highly educated actors who tend to hold more radical views than the people living on the Plateaux, these risks are very real. For all these different reasons, intercommunity dialogues may inadvertently end up aggravating rather than mitigating dynamics of conflict and violence.

8 |
Conclusion and
recommendations

Following two years of cyclical violence in the Bijombo area, violence on the Hauts Plateaux of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga escalated in 2019, provoking destruction and suffering at a vast scale. In spite of a flurry of initiatives for talks and dialogues, the crisis shows no signs of abating. This report has placed the current violence in a deeper and contemporary historical context and traced how its intensification has been driven by four mechanisms: the salience of discourses of "ethnic conflict" and "autochthony"; local security dilemmas; militarization; and the multilayered nature of dynamics of conflict and violence.

Both national and international observers and media have framed the crisis primarily in terms of intercommunity conflict. This framing does not only present a reductionist reading, obscuring other relevant factors and dynamics, but risks aggravating violence. It is therefore crucial to deflate rather than inflate discourses of ethnic conflict and of autochthony. This could be achieved by approaching local conflicts as revolving primarily around local authority and access to resources rather than as instances of "ethnic conflict", even when involving conflict parties from two different communities. It is also important to pay more attention to intracommunity conflicts, which are often glossed over due to the central importance of the intercommunity conflict frame (see also Verweijen et al., 2020). In addition, to reduce the salience of the notion of autochthony, peacebuilding efforts should pay more attention to historiography, to avoid conflict parties remaining stuck in widely divergent interpretations of history. Finally, international peacebuilding organizations and diplomatic actors should step up efforts to hold

to account those responsible for hate speech. They should at the very least engage in serious conversations on these matters when inviting the actors in question for talks or other events.

Deflating the importance of the discourse of "ethnic conflict" also entails individualizing rather than collectivizing the responsibility for violence committed both in the past and the present. Support for armed groups today continues to be fed by grievances related to violence committed in the context of the Congo Wars. To stop this violence being blamed on communities as a whole, it is urgent to address these crimes through transitional justice mechanisms, in particular a mixed chamber (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Individualizing responsibility also entails engaging with key political and military actors, including leaders of armed groups and local defence forces, on an individual basis, rather than seeing them as representing undifferentiated "communities". Finally, to avoid violence being inflicted on civilians as punishment for acts committed by armed groups, efforts to raise awareness of International Humanitarian Law among the belligerents should be stepped up, in particular, the principle of distinction between combatants and civilians.

Diminishing violence on the Plateaux also requires acknowledging that conflicts over local authority and access to resources, including transhumance, do not automatically lead to armed mobilization. This is only the case when these conflicts and related local power struggles become militarized, which is a process with its own logic and dynamics. To address militarization, it is crucial to study the incentive structures of politico-military entrepreneurs and local authorities, in order to better understand when and why they resort to force to win the day in conflicts and competition. In addition, it is important to hold the civilian backers and allies of armed groups – whether operating at the local, provincial or national level – to account, for instance through naming and shaming, community pressure or judicial means.

Demilitarization will also help deflate local security dilemmas. Eliminating distrust between communities is not sufficient to solve such dilemmas, as they are shaped by the military balance of power between armed groups. In addition, they are strongly related to distrust of the FARDC and, increasingly,

MONUSCO. Eliminating security dilemmas therefore requires restoring trust in the security services and the UN mission. To achieve this, it is indispensable for these forces to intensify their endeavours to protect civilians. Security dilemmas have also been aggravated by armed groups' collaboration with foreign rebel forces and governmental actors. While it is often unclear who has leverage over armed groups, people in their broader political and social networks should try to convince armed group leaders to stop collaborating with foreign armed groups. More generally, diplomatic efforts to improve bilateral relations in the Great Lakes Region should be intensified, particularly by the Great Lakes Special Envoys.

The multilayered nature of dynamics of conflict and violence on the Plateaux implies that action at a single level, although perhaps having a temporary effect, cannot make a sustainable difference. Talks between local actors are important but addressing expressed grievances or implementing agreements requires the involvement of national and provincial governments. Similarly, it will be difficult to implement cease-fire or peace agreements when foreign armed groups or government forces continue to engage in or encourage hostilities. Peacebuilding initiatives should therefore ideally be multipronged, touching on different levels simultaneously, even if that requires complex coordination between different sets of actors. It is often challenging for peacebuilding organizations to work outside of their comfort zone and to flexibly adapt to rapidly evolving dynamics of conflict and violence. Convoluted crisis situations such as the Hauts Plateaux test the limits of the contemporary peacebuilding industry. At the same time, they show that the inability to make a difference severely undermines international interveners' legitimacy, in particular in situations of protracted conflict. Interveners should therefore try harder to innovate, lest they become part of the violent status quo.

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Annex: Armed groups fighting on the Hauts Plateaux as of March 2021

Situation of mid-March 2021.
Groups based in the area but not implicated in the fighting, such as CNRD, are not listed.

Name	Approximate area of operations	Main commanders & officers (not exhaustive)	Collaborations with other groups on the Plateaux *(not excluding tensions)*
Mai-Mai Mulumba	**HQ:** Kasolero **Operations:** Hauts Plateaux of Kasolero- Mmonda, Lekesha, Ibumba, Kangembe, Malingumu, Kakunga (Basimunyaka Sud; Basombo)	Mulumba (Nyindu); Bulambo; Eric	Member of CNPSC coalition Collaborates with FABB and Mai-Mai Mtetezi
Mai-Mai Assani Mbakanyi (aka Malkiya)/ Forces Armées Biloze Bishambuke (FABB)	**HQ:** Rugezi **Operations:** Milimba, Byalere, Rugomero, Kasiru, Kitumba (Basimunyaka Sud; Basimukuma Sud) Movements to Kalingi and Rusankuku (Basimukindje 1)	Assani Mbakanyi (Fuliiru); Luhala Kasororo; Aimé Yotamu Sanvura; Jumy; Kulimba Rubwiza; John Karondera; Jacques Nahulogola **Spokesperson:** Aimable Rubogora	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Mulumba and Mai-Mai Mtetezi

Name	Approximate area of operations	Main commanders & officers (not exhaustive)	Collaborations with other groups on the Plateaux (not excluding tensions)
Mai-Mai Mtetezi/ FPDC-ML	**HQ:** Nakiele and Bilende **Operations:** Kanguli Kilumbi, Tubuki, Kitasha, Kuwisumo; Kipupu, Kiseke, Kaboke (Basiloca; Hauts Plateaux of Balala Nord; Moyens Plateaux of Tanganyika and Mutambala; Basimunyaka, Basimukuma Sud; Basimwenda; Basimukindje 1 and 2)	Ebuela wa Seba Trésor "Mtetezi" (Bembe); Kakobanya; Malenga Idi Mamba; Nyamangyoku; Milenge/Mirenge; Simba ya Bilima; Samuel; Aoci; Lwesula Sarive; Ngyalabato; Issa Mutoki Gosi; Ngarukiye; Zela Mbuma; Vincent *(note that some of these commanders occasionally claim to head autonomous groups)*	Member of CNPSC coalition Collaborates with FABB and Mai-Mai Ilunga, Mushombe and Mupekenya
Mai-Mai Mushombe	**HQ:** Rudefwe **Operations**: Kitoga, Magunda; Runywera Masango 2, Mushojo (Bijombo Nord and Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma)	Mushombe Muganguzi (Fuliiru); Nakishale	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Kashumba, Ilunga and Mupekenya
Mai-Mai Yakutumba	**HQ:** mobile **Operations:** different zones of Fizi (Ngandja, Mutambala and Lulenge sectors), movements on the Hauts Plateaux at Kuwisumo (Balala Nord) and Kaboke (Basimukindje 1)	Yakutumba Amuri William (Bembe); Hercule Musa; Byamungu; Kizza Bavon **Spokesperson:** Dalton Mwila	Coordinates CNPSC Collaborates with FABB
Mai-Mai Kashumba	**HQ:** Nanenge **Operations:** Mangwa, Kihuha, Ndegu, Kiruli, Mukono and Kasheka, Taba, Ndegu Katembo (Moyens Plateaux of Kigoma and Runingu)	Kashumba Musagara Constatin (Fuliiru); Rushaba	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Ilunga and Mushombe

Name	Approximate area of operations	Main commanders & officers (not exhaustive)	Collaborations with other groups on the Plateaux *(not excluding tensions)*
Mai Mai Makanaki Kasimbira	**HQ:** Kiruhura/Kitundu **Operations:** Membo, Kayadja, Shishi, Gwembogo, Mushule, Kihande, Kasenga, Bondogolo, Kabindula (Moyens Plateaux of Kitundu and Kabindula/ Mulongwe and Kasenga areas of Uvira city)	Makanaki Kasimbira (Vira); Mukevi Mika; Brown; Kata Miti, Kanga Motema; Jean aka Corona Virus; Mora Useni	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Ilunga, René, Local defence and FNL/ Nzambampema
Mai-Mai Ilunga	**HQ:** Rubarati **Operations:** Masango 1, Kihuha, Malimba, Mukumba, Bikinga, Kakuku, Mutara, Gongwa (Bijombo Nord and East)	Ilunga Lusesema (Fuliiru); Ndondi; Kasongo; Nguvu Zaradi; Jules	Collaborates with Mai-Mai René, Makanaki, Mushombe, Kashumba, Mupekenya and RED Tabara
Mai-Mai René	**HQ:** Kitala **Operations:** Kataka, Kidote, Kakuba, Gomba, Kitu, Kikozo, Kijaga Kalonge, Muheta 1 & 2 Kirambi, Murambi (Moyens Plateaux of Kalungwe and Makobola 1)	Réné Itongwa (Bembe); Motorola Alinote; Mamadou; Soleil; Kateremuka; Makara Masenda; Claude, Masudi **Spokesperson:** Amisi Mukandama	Member of CNPSC coalition Collaborates with Mai-Mai Ilunga, Makanaki and Local defence
Mai-Mai Réunion wa Rusasa	**HQ:** Makyaka **Operations:** Mibula, Bitaliro, Rusololo, Etundu, Kiringi, Katoke, Mugorere (Moyens Plateaux of Swima and Mboko)	Réunion wa Rusasa (Twa/Bembe) Mushingwa; Mbogoyishamba; Mbeleci Comando; Kasongo; Byamungu Gausa	Member of CNPSC coalition

Name	Approximate area of operations	Main commanders & officers (not exhaustive)	Collaborations with other groups on the Plateaux *(not excluding tensions)*
Mai-Mai Mupekenya	**HQ:** Bilimba/Maheta **Operations:** Kateja (Itombwe) Tchanzovu (Bijombo)	Kati Malisawa (Twa); Bienfait	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Mtetezi, Ilunga and Mushombe
Local defence	Nambingu, Munanira, Kishembwe, Kirungu/Buhonde (Moyens Plateaux of Kidjaga and Kabindula)	Jean (Vira); Nangudja; Mandevu	Collaborates with Mai-Mai Makanaki, René and Ilunga
Gumino	**HQ:** Kajembwe (Bijombo) and Kawela (Basimukindje 1) **Operations:** Muliza, Kakenge, Ilundu, Kahololo, Rurambo and Bibwangwa (Basiloca/Mutambala and Basimunyaka-Sud/Lulenge; Hauts Plateaux of Kigoma and Itara/Luvungi	Shaka Alexis Nyamusaraba (Banyamulenge); Matemberi Jonas; Koboyi Muhoza; Semahoro Mporona Norebert; Nyerere Gasinzira	Collaborates with Twirwaneho
Twirwaneho Makanika and Kamasa	**HQ:** Bijabo **Operations:** Kamombo, Mugomo, Bishigo, Mikalati, Kitaka, Kabara, Kangwe, Kirumba, Cakira, Nyamara, Bulambo, Malanda, Kangwe, Ngoma, Kitasha 1 and 2, Kaniura (Balala Nord and Basimukindji 1)	Michel Makanika Rukunda (Banyamulenge), Charles Sematama; Kibangula Sengyumva; Mufoko Joli; Munyamahoro Mudege; Rushombo Freddy; Singaye Mihingano; Serugaba; Gikwerere Charles; Musore; Shanga **Coordinator:** Ndakize Kamasa	Collaborates with Gumino

Name	Approximate area of operations	Main commanders & officers (not exhaustive)	Collaborations with other groups on the Plateaux (not excluding tensions)
Twirwaneho	Organised per zone throughout Bijombo, Minembwe, Kamombo, Kahololo and the Itombwe part of Hauts Plateaux	Rutebuka Rutenja; Ruhumuza; Kimasa Ndori; Rwemba; Mutware Alexis, Segakunzi; Ruhumuriza Semutumwa Kirayi; Rugenerwa Ruhanama; David Muhoza dit El Shabab (Banyamulenge) Coordinator: Bienvenue Kamasa	Collaborates with Gumino
FNL/ Nzabampema (Burundian)	**HQ:** Ruminuko **Operations:** Kisanga, Kabondola, Lusololo, Katonyera, Shera, Busaba; forest of Kihuha, forest of Mangwa, Rwamabuye Kyamate, Kahwizi, Kiliba (Basimukindje 2/ Itombwe; Moyens Plateaux of Kigoma and Muhungu, Ruzizi Plain)	Aloys Nzabampema (Hutu)	Collaborates with Makanaki
RED-Tabara (Burundian)	**HQ:** Rubarati **Operations:** Masango, movements to Mbandakila, Mushojo, Kahololo (Basimukindje 1/Itombwe; Kigoma and Muhuzi/Lwindi)	Gisiga (Tutsi), Lumumba Lubumbashi	Collaborates with Ilunga

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