

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Update on Ituri

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Introduction

Since November 2003, the Ituri Brigade¹ of the United Nations (UN) Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) has consolidated its position in Bunia and started preparing to deploy to the rest of the Ituri district. The overall political and military situation has not, however, improved significantly. Since January 2004, two high-level delegations, one of which was headed by Vice-President Ruberwa, have been sent to Ituri by the Transitional Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (TGoDRC) to assert its administrative control over the region. On 26 May 2004, President Kabila appointed Governors and Deputy Governors for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), including Ituri.

It seems that the armed groups generally accept the transitional process in the DRC, although clashes between them continue in various parts of the district, notwithstanding the deployment of the Ituri Brigade. At a meeting of the Committee for the Co-ordination of the Armed Groups in Ituri (CCGA) that took place in Kinshasa during the week of 10 May 2004, 20 leaders of the militia groups signed an agreement with the TGoDRC to disarm and participate in the county's transitional process.

However, a new trend has become apparent among militia hardliners. This is the deliberate

targeting of MONUC, which has been subjected to 20 separate attacks, the last of which was launched by militiamen of the Front for National Integration (FNI) on 7 May 2004.

This article focuses on the process of restoring government in Ituri, the current status of Ituri's armed groups and MONUC's role in this district.

Restoring government in Ituri

Since January 2004 there has been some progress, albeit limited, in stabilising the political situation in Ituri. On 17 December 2003, the CCGA in Bunia agreed in principle to launch a pilot disarmament project. Since then MONUC, the Pacification and Verification Commission of the Ituri Interim Administration (IIA) and members of CCGA have designated assembly areas for the Ituri armed groups as a precursor to their handing in their arms. An operational plan for disarmament and community reintegration was adopted on 20 January this year. However, the IIA has not yet succeeded in extending its reach much beyond Bunia, and even within Bunia the armed groups are still competing for political power.² There are several reasons for this, including lack of trust on the part of the community, the unwillingness of most of the armed groups controlling Ituri to accept the

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IIA, the absence of a police force or army, and limited logistical and technical capacity in the IIA. Also, the role to be played by the IIA is as yet undefined

On 24 February 2004, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to the DRC, Ambassador Swing, requested President Kabila to extend the reach of the state's authority by appointing a governor for *Province Orientale* and a district commissioner for Ituri. During a visit to Ituri early in 3 March 2004, an inter-ministerial delegation from Kinshasa expressed strong support for the inclusion of the district in the broader transitional process. It announced that Ituri's administration would be transferred from the IIA to the central government through the appointment of a provincial governor and a district commissioner. During the visit, the delegation also extended an invitation to all armed groups to visit Kinshasa to resume dialogue with the TGoDRC. On 14 May 2004 President Kabila announced the names of the governors of the provinces, which included that of Baruti Amisi of the Rally for Congolese Democracy–Goma (RCD–G) for *Province Orientale*,³ on the same day that representatives of seven armed groups, responding to the delegation's invitation, had signed an agreement to disarm and participate in the transitional process (referred to in the Introduction).

To end the culture of impunity and restore justice in Ituri, nine magistrates were sworn in on 30 January 2004 in Bunia. MONUC and its partners have refurbished the Bunia prison, the courthouse, the police headquarters and the judges' accommodation. The TGoDRC has not released the funds to pay the salaries of judicial staff in Bunia, however, although the European Union has paid the first instalment. MONUC will continue to hold detainees in Bunia on behalf of local authorities until the latter are able to take over this responsibility. In addition, MONUC has trained 81 police officers in Bunia, and is providing advisers to support local police. However, the impact of this assistance has been limited because the local police lack essential equipment (and are very inadequately paid).⁴

Current status of armed groups in Ituri (May 2004)

Ituri is home to 18 distinct ethnic groups, with the Hema/Gegere and Lendu/Ngiti communities together representing about 40% of the inhabitants. The other major groups are the Bira, the Alur, the Lugbra, the Nyali, the Ndo-Okebo and the Lese. Although the importance of ethnic identity is growing, a new group has emerged, the *non-originaires*—“outsiders” who were not born in Ituri. The Hema, Lendu and Nande groupings largely seek to set agendas that serve their own ends. They are playing off the various outside groups against one another, and change sides as their interests dictate.⁵ Table 1 below sets out details of the different armed political groups: their leaders, ethnic connections, areas of operation and estimated strength.

Although the Ituri armed groups are superficially alike (all having young commanders, child soldiers and light equipment), this is not actually the case. An important difference is that while some groups are ethnically-based, others have no specific ethnic connection. The summary opposite provides further distinctions between the groups.

UPC

The northern Hemas, who control the Djugu territory, split into two groups (UPC–Thomas Lubanga and UPC–Floribert Kisembo) in December 2003. The head of the UPC forces, Floribert Kisembo, had personal grievances against the leader of the UPC, Thomas Lubanga. He tried to bring off a coup within the party, but failed, as most of the militia remained loyal to Thomas Lubanga, even though he is based in Kinshasa for several months of each year. UPC–Kisembo is a minor armed group that is not very effective.

PUSIC

Kisembo officially runs the southern Hemas militia, but Chief Kahwa, the former president, is still very much in command. There were some dissident elements within PUSIC, but they have recently been neutralised. PUSIC controls a part of the Irumu and

<i>ARMED POLITICAL GROUP</i>	<i>ETHNIC CONNECTION</i>	<i>LEADER</i>	<i>AREA OF OPERATION</i>	<i>ESTIMATED STRENGTH</i>
UPC: Union of Congolese Patriots	Hema/Gegere	UPC–Lubanga UPC–Kisembo	Djugu Territory, Iga Barriere and Fataki	3,000
PUSIC: Party for Unity and Safeguarding of the Integrity of Congo	Hema	Chief Kahwa Mandro Kisembo in the South	Irumu, Djugu and Chomia	2,000
FPDC: Popular Force for Democracy in Congo	Alur and Lugbara	Thomas Unen Chen	Aru and Mahangi north of Ituri	300
FNI: Front for National Integration	Lendu	Floribent Njabu Ngabu	Reti and Kwandroma	27,000
FRPI: Patriotic Forces of Resistance in Ituri	Ngiti	Dr Adirodo	Beni	9,000
FAPC: People's Armed Forces of Congo	Mixed	Commander Jerome Bakonde	Aru	6,000
APC: Congolese Peoples Army	Non Iturian		Irumu and Mambasa	300

Djugu territories and the main harbour on the Congolese shore of Lake Albert.

FNI

These are northern and southern Lendu militias who joined together in 2003 but divided up again at the beginning of this year. They disagreed on strategy, and their commanders therefore decided to return to their independent status. Nevertheless, they are still allied on ethnic grounds.

FPDC

This is an Alur militia, allegedly run by Thomas Unen Chen. Although this group purported to protect the Alur people when the FNI started attacking them, the FPDC has never been able to mobilise a significant force. It is regarded as a “fake” force created by Kampala.

FAPC

The FAPC is a militia controlling the Aru territory and part of the Mahagi territory, which is on the DRC border with Uganda. It is led by Jérôme Kakwavu with the support of the UPDF.

APC

Now called the FARDC, the APC militia controls the southern part of the district (the Irumu territory and part of the Mambasa territory), and is composed of non-Iturians from Kivu. They are expected to be integrated into the Congolese army at some point in the future.

Ituri: a “no peace, no war” situation

The present situation in Ituri is one of “no peace, no war”. Violence continues outside Bunia, and during January 2004 MONUC was attacked several times by the UPC in Nizi, Drodo and Iga Barriere. The combatants claimed they had been ordered to do so by Commandant Ngatanga, who had replaced Floribert Kisembo. The FNI combatants have been keeping a low profile, and do not seem particularly keen on increasing their political visibility in Bunia, although their militias have continued to intimidate the population in Kpandroma, Reti and surrounding areas. However, when they attacked MONUC on 8 May 2004 near Kobokabo, MONUC retaliated, killing ten FNI combatants.⁶

On the inter-militia side, there has been a degree of stabilisation. Clashes between militias are rare, as harassing civilians for money, food and women has become the main activity instead. Two massacres whose main motive was robbery took place in October 2003 and January 2004. All the militia leaders claim to want to be integrated into the new dispensation, as part of either the army or the government. However, while the majority of troops hope to become soldiers in the new unified Congolese Armed Forces, this is unlikely to happen. [As a result] Realising this, the militias have adopted a survival strategy, keeping particularly tight control over the large and rich areas in the district.

On the international front, while a fundamental pillar of the transition in the DRC is that Kampala (Uganda) and Kigali (Rwanda) should no longer interfere in Ituri, they continue to do so in important ways. Kampala is still the place where militia leaders gather when they must take important decisions, and Rwandan troops have recently been spotted in Kivus.

MONUC's response

Since November 2003, MONUC's Ituri Brigade has consolidated its position in Bunia and deployed to seven locations (Iga Barriere, Bogoro, Fataki, Kpandoroma, Mahagi Marabo, Tchomai Aru and Mongbwalu) in the interior, as part of Step 4 of the Concept of Operations. The security environment in Bunia has improved tremendously since the Ituri Brigade started round-the-clock foot patrols across the town. It is very important that the Brigade, which has a strength of 4,800 soldiers (four battalions), attack helicopters and a Chapter 7 mandate, should continue to ensure stability in the Ituri district.

Conclusion

Although the international community has injected enough peacekeepers into Ituri to defuse conflict and stop massacres on the scale witnessed during 2003, much remains to be done to achieve a sustainable local peace process in Ituri. Many of the underlying causes

and instruments of war have not been removed. In Bunia, while some areas are still under the control of the UPC, providing some sort of stability, the local population continues to be harassed by this militia group. It is hoped that the IIA will take advantage of the deployment of MONUC troops to assume authority over all the territories. This would enable the new District Administration to provide some basic public services to the local population.

Recent events, such as the appointment of a governor for *Province Orientale* and the new agreement signed between the TGoDRC and the Armed Political Groups are positive steps. Nevertheless, the local dynamics remain for war rather than against it. The foreign powers that have been fuelling and manipulating the conflict have not really changed their behaviour, despite their official pledge to withdraw from the DRC.

There are currently four major concerns that need to be addressed: foreign influence and meddling; the militias; ethnic rivalry between the Lendus and Hemas; and, finally, commercial interests. Foreign influences need to be diluted by exerting diplomatic pressure on neighbouring countries and stopping the flow of weapons into Ituri. The militia leaders who are responsible for continued killings must be arrested and sentenced, and their troops disarmed. The ethnic rivalry between the Lendus and Hemas could be greatly reduced by sorting out the land issue and sidelining the most radical of their leaders. Finally, satisfying the commercial interests would mean brokering a fair deal among the economic players, and putting businesses on formal footing.

Notes

1. The Ituri Brigade consists of 4,500 soldiers from MONUC.
2. Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the UN Mission in the DRC, 25 March 2004.
3. Reliefweb, 19 May 2004.
4. Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the UN Mission in the DRC, op cit.
5. Ituri covered in blood, *Human Rights Watch*, July 2003.
6. Reliefweb, 10 May 2004.