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TENSION IN ITURI: AN UPDATE ON THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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Introduction: Renewed conflict in DRC's Ituri Province

Between 16 March and 3 April 2003, one thousand people, mostly belonging to the Hema ethnic group, were brutally murdered in the Ituri Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The massacre of hundreds of Hema at Drodro town and 14 surrounding villages on 3 April 2003 sent shockwaves across the world. The international community, in particular those countries and organisations actively involved in peacemaking and peacekeeping in the DRC, was left wondering whether this would irrevocably derail the Inter-Congolese peace process that was beginning to show some positive results after months of painstaking effort. Perhaps more significantly, the massacres in Ituri resurrected the spectre of war between Rwanda and Uganda in this region of the DRC.

This latest outbreak of violence in the DRC began on 6 March 2003, when the Ugandan Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) attacked a number of positions held by the *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC) in Ituri, capturing various towns and airfields in the province. Following the capture of Bunia, Bale and Fataki on 14 March 2003, the commander, Brig Gen Kale Kaihuru, announced that the operation was over, its objectives accomplished. In the process, some 3 500 soldiers and two senior commanders (Alex Munyalizi and Jerome Kakwavu) from the UPC had defected to the UPDF. The UPDF then turned its focus upon the Peoples Redemption Army (PRA) led by Col Mazooru, a group said to be allied with Thomas Lubanga's UPC and the Hema. UPDF jet bombers destroyed the PRA camp and airstrips in an effort to control all airports in the area. Uganda later justified these attacks as necessary to cut off the supply of arms to the PRA from Rwanda, an accusation vehemently denied by the government of Rwanda. Meanwhile, the RCD-Goma faction had accused the Armed Forces of Congo (FAC) of participating in the UPDF attacks on the UPC, claiming that this was in violation of the 'disengagement plan' agreed in Kampala and the subsequent Harare sub-plan.

In view of these developments and in an attempt to avoid an outbreak of hostilities between Uganda and Rwanda in the province of Ituri as well as to ensure that the Inter-Congolese peace process stayed on track, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki (in his capacity as Chairperson of the African Union) called the presidents of the DRC, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania to an emergency meeting in Cape Town on 11 April 2003. Subsequently, the parties announced that Uganda would withdraw its forces from the Ituri Province on 24 April 2003, while Rwanda pledged that its own troops would not re-enter the DRC. These undertakings by Uganda and Rwanda

contributed to a considerable lowering of tensions in the region, rescuing the recently formed, though not yet operational, Ituri Pacification Commission.

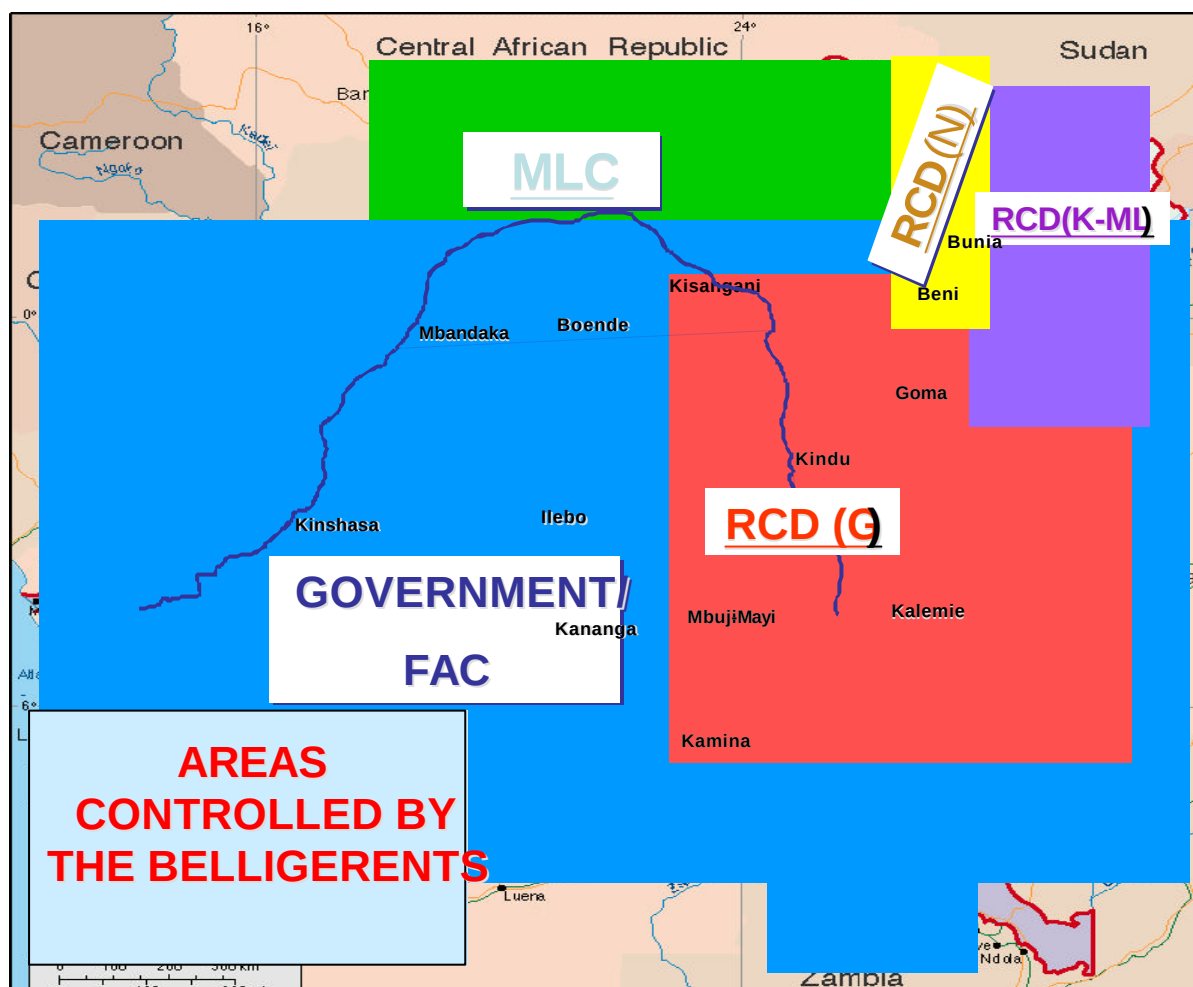
However, fighting in Ituri has not stopped, maintaining a low-intensity character. An unspecified number of civilians were killed and hundreds of cattle were stolen after fighting broke out on 17 April 2003 between UPDF and Lendu militia on the outskirts of Bunia.

Actors involved and their interests: an update

There is a centuries old underlying and complex web of ethnic rivalries in Ituri, age-old land feuds sparking the sharpest differences being between two leading communities, the Lendu and the Hema. In the centre of Ituri District, the Lendu are in rivalry with the northern Hema, (or Gerere), a wealthy, cattle owning pastoral people. In southern Ituri, the southern Hema are allied against the Lendu and Ngiti. Conflicts have grown in intensity in response to the breakdown of government control, which has resulted in communities attempting to protect themselves, a situation facilitated by the proliferation of small arms. Gold, timber, coltan and fish are the new spoils over which rivals are now fighting.

While not necessarily an expression of the overarching internationalised civil war in the DRC as a whole, the (constantly shifting) alignment of militias representing these ethnic groups with Congolese politico-military organisations is partly responsible for the escalation of violence in the region. In this regard, Hema militias closely identify with the UPC and also the *Front pour l'Integration et la Paix en Ituri* (FIPI). On the other hand, Lendu/Ngiti militias have aligned themselves with the RCD-K-ML, an alliance that has positioned them close to the Mai-Mai and the UPDF. In addition, the presence of Rwandan Interahamwe and ex-FAR in the area further complicates an already complex situation, as can be seen in the map below.

A discussion of all the players involved and their interests is apposite.



Internal Actors

- i. **The Congolese Rally for Democracy – ML (RCD-ML)**. Constant leadership disputes in 2000 within the RCD-ML contributed directly to the instability in the Ituri region. The dispute occurred between Wamba dia Wamba, and his two deputies, Mbusa Nyamwisi, a Nande, and Tibasima Ateenyi, a Hema. Mbusa Nyamwisi established himself in Beni and Tibasima Ateenyi in Bunia. Their military forces were largely recruited from the tribal support groups and were trained by the UPDF. In November 2000 Mbusa Nyamwisi was able to oust Wamba dia Wamba from the RCD-ML. In April 2002, the UPC forced the RCD-ML out of Bunia. The RCD-ML established itself in Beni under the command of Mbusa Nyamwisi.
- ii. **The Congolese Rally for Democracy – National (RCD-N)**. This is a small splinter group with limited personnel led by Roger Lumbala.
- iii. **The Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC)**. The MLC is led by Jean-Pierre Bemba. Headquartered in Gbadolite, it has a large territorial base in northern and

central DRC. In alliance with the RCD-N, the MLC advanced into Ituri against the RCD-ML in late 2002. MONUC intervened to stop this advance.

- iv. **Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC).** Created in April 2002, the UPC is led by Thomas Lubanga. It benefited from Ugandan support in its take-over of Bunia from the RCD-ML in August 2002. Mainly composed of Hema tribesmen, the UPC has oscillated between an alignment with Rwanda and Uganda. Opposed to the creation of the Ituri Pacification Commission, Thomas Lubanga finally decided to align the movement with the RCD-Goma and, by implication, Rwanda. However by February 2002, the UPDF lost patience with him and began preparing to destroy the UPC. The UPDF began undermining the UPC by supporting a breakaway group of the UPC, *the Front pour L'integration et la Paix en Ituri* (FIPI), described below. In March 2003, the UPDF launched attacks on the UPC position in Ituri province, effectively neutralising the UPC. There are fears that the UPC could try to make a comeback, leading to fresh fighting between the Lendu and Hema.
- v. **The Front pour L'Integration et la Paix en Ituri (FIPI).** The FIPI, led by Chief Kwa Mondro Panga (a Bahemu Banywagi chief) was formed in Uganda on 14 February 2003 and comprises UPC members aligned to Uganda.
- vi. **Democratic Republic of Congo.** The RCD-ML has been seeking greater co-operation with the DRC government. In 2003 the RCD-ML reportedly received supplies of weapons and ammunition from Kinshasa. The DRC government has even sent FAC soldiers to Beni. These actions coincide with strengthening of relations with Uganda. The FAC has effectively enabled itself to open a new front against the rebel movements. This has antagonised the Hema and their allies who wish for greater autonomy which this co-operation effectively denies.
- vii. **The People's Redemption Army.** A Ugandan dissident group, the PRA is led by former UPDF Col. Eddison Muzoora. They are allied to the UPC (who provides the bulk of their arms) and the Lendu of Kpawdroma. Col Kizza Besigye, a former Ugandan presidential candidate, has denied any link with the PRA, despite Kampala's allegations in this regard.

International Actors

- i. **Uganda.** Uganda's presence in Ituri has drawn considerable criticism, some of it directed at its alleged past role in playing off the Hema and Lendu against each other. The Province of Ituri has effectively been under Ugandan control since August 1998. While Uganda has never assumed administrative responsibilities in the area, it has always ensured a pro-Uganda administration. In fact, Uganda claims to be the pacifying influence in the Ituri region. However, a United Nations panel on the illegal exploitation

of resources in the DRC reported in October 2002 that elite Ugandans were manipulating the war economy and had, in fact, adopted strategies to enable them to continue their activities after the official pullout of foreign troops. Uganda has since shifted support among the RCD-ML, RCD-N, MLC, UPC, FIPI, the Hema and the Lendu militia from time to time, according to its interests.

- ii. The withdrawal of the first 1,650 troops on the 24 April 2003 marked the beginning of Uganda's (willing) withdrawal from the Ituri region (and the DRC as a whole). The rest of the estimated 6 000 soldiers, who are from the Mungalo and Irumi region, have started their three-week long walk of 100km to the Ugandan border. The date for withdrawal was set to follow the establishment and functioning of the Ituri Pacification Commission. Until a bilateral arrangement is ready with an accepted Congolese authority, Uganda will maintain a military presence of 1 000 troops to patrol the western slopes of the Ruwenzori mountains where Uganda fears that anti-government dissidents are hiding.
- iii. **Rwanda**. Rwanda involvement in Ituri is based on fears of the presence of Interahamwe and ex-FAR soldiers in the region. Rwandan President Kigali continues to claim that Uganda wants to use rebels, mostly former soldiers of the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militiamen to attack Rwanda's north-western border. Rwanda is allied with the RCD-Goma and the UPC. In February 2003, the RCD-G captured the towns of Muhanga and Bunyutemye from the RCD-ML, bringing it closer to the UPC and Ugandan border. Rwanda may hope to deflect attention away from a possible internal power struggle, especially in the military, in the light of the upcoming presidential elections.
- iv. **MONUC**. MONUC has increased its participation in the region by sending a political affairs officer, a civil affairs officer and a human affairs officer to Bunia. After the 3 April 2003 massacre, MONUC is re-thinking its position in Ituri. It has drawn up a concept paper for military deployment into Ituri, including two infantry battalion groups into Bunia and then throughout Ituri.

The Ituri Pacification Commission

Signed on 6 September 2002, the Luanda Accord created the Ituri Pacification Commission (IPC) and established the timetable for Ugandan withdrawal. The IPC consists of 177 members: 10 representatives of the DRC Government; 4 representatives of the Ugandan Government; 2 representatives of the Angolan Government; 2 representatives of MONUC; and finally, 159 representatives of Ituri's population. However, the initial timetable decided upon was not complied with, and Presidents Joseph Kabila and Museveni held a subsequent meeting on 11 February

2003 in Dar-es-Salaam to revise the original timetable. The new timetable decided upon is as follows:

- a. *19 February 2003: The signing of the cease-fire agreement.* Six active politico-military groups in Ituri signed this cease-fire agreement, including the Lendu from Djugu; the Lendu from Bindi; FIPI; FNI; FPDC (Popular Forces for Democracy in DRC) and finally, the RCD-ML. The UPC refused to sign the agreement, questioning the good faith of the other parties to the agreement.
- b. *20 March 2003: The Preparatory Committee of the Ituri Pacification Commission started its work.* A first meeting was held in Bunia.
- c. *23 March 2003: The Ituri Pacification Commission started its work.* On 25 March 2003 the IPC was convened for the first time.
- d. *1 April 2003, plus 14 days.* The IPC was launched.
- e. *14 April 2003, plus 28 days.* IPC was scheduled to complete its work.
- f. *13 April 2003, plus few days.* A Ministerial meeting on the evaluation of the agreement was held
- g. *17 April 2003.* A mechanism for peace restoration was established.
- h. *22 April 2003 plus four days.* The re-establishment of the administrative authority was scheduled but is still incomplete.
- i. *24 April 2003 plus four days.* The UPDF troops were scheduled to begin their withdrawal from Bunia. The withdrawal was delayed by a day and is currently underway at the time of writing.

The IPC, official inaugurated on 4 April 2003, approved a series of measures to end hostilities in the Province and created an interim provincial administration in Ituri. This interim administration is the result of a power-sharing agreement, which provides for a 32-member Provincial Assembly under the interim presidency of the United Nations Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative to the DRC, Behrooz Sadry. The IPC also agreed that an 18-member Commission of Prevention and Verification would examine the course of the conflict and establish measures to prevent escalation.

Rwanda-Uganda Tension

UPDF spokesman, Maj Shaban Bantariza, has strongly denounced the presence of a 'foreign force' fighting alongside the UPC. Although it has been widely alleged that elements of the Rwandan military are present in the region, Ugandan government officials have shied away from

publicly naming Rwanda as the 'foreign force', although they have accused Kigali of actively helping the PRA. Uganda believes that, in fact, Rwanda is waging a war by proxy against it in the Ituri Province. Among Ugandan accusations against Rwanda, the following are relevant:

- a. actively concentrating troops along their common border;
- b. leaving a large contingent of troops behind in the Rutshuru, Kanyanbayonga and Lubero area (while Rwanda had claimed it had fully withdrawn from the DRC);
- c. moving soldiers between Rutshuru and Goma (an allegation confirmed on the ground by civilians);
- d. recruiting and training the local youth around Rutshuru.

On 19 March 2003 at the request of Rwanda Chief of Staff, Maj Gen James Kabarebe, Rwanda's parliament passed a resolution allowing the Rwandan army to re-deploy in the DRC. The Rwandan parliament voted unanimously in favour of the Rwandan executive's initiative to take any and all measures necessary for the security of its national interest and thus to re-deploy in the DRC if necessary. The government of Rwanda has since given Uganda an ultimatum to withdraw its forces from the Ituri region. Rwanda claims that:

- a. Uganda is training the Interahamwe and the ex-FAR. Rwanda claims that the Ugandan defence minister, Amama Mbabazi, has links to Rwandan Hutu extremists. Rwanda alleges that two meetings have taken place between high-ranking Ugandan officials and the Interhamwe. Rwanda has made similar allegations against the DRC government;
- b. Uganda has deployed in threatening positions. On 15 March 2003, Rwanda accused the government of Uganda of deploying troops together with FAC, ex-FAR and Interhamwe into Beni, Butembo and Lubero in the North Kivu, which in turn threatens RCD-G positions, posing a direct security threat to Rwanda;
- c. Uganda has repeatedly violated Rwandan national security. In this regard, Rwanda has accused Uganda of being responsible for at least 15 incidents (in the last year) where Rwandans close to the Ugandan border were arrested and intimidated. In addition, Ugandans continue to lure Rwandan government officials and military officers to defect. Perhaps more seriously, four incidents of airspace violations by Ugandan military aircraft were reported between 14 February 2003 and 12 March 2003.

Not surprisingly, Rwanda has welcomed UN Security Council Resolution 1468 calling for the complete withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the DRC without further delay. The Rwandan government has urged that MONUC and the third party verification mechanism be reinforced. Such

reinforcement will enable the control of all airfields and ports in the eastern DRC in order to check the re-supplying and re-infiltration of forces. In this regard, among the decisions taken following the incidents on 3 April 2003 described above, we highlight the decision taken to the effect that the UN will replace the UPDF with an international force and that President Mkapa of Tanzania will continue his mediation efforts between Rwanda and Uganda.

Conclusion

Although the withdrawal of foreign forces from the DRC and more specifically the Ituri province are unquestionably pre-requisites for the observance of the cease-fire, the power vacuum that may ensue must be avoided. The establishment of an acceptable neutral force, focused on establishing civilian authority at local (Ituri) and provincial (Oriental Province) levels, is critical in this regard. In addition, the capacities of MONUC have to be strengthened so as to enable the effective disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants as well as to monitor border security between Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. In addition, only a strengthened MONUC will have the means to pacify and police the region of Ituri. This will depend on whether MONUC will have a revised mandate and concept of operations, which will allow it (if necessary) to use force and disarm ethnic militias in the Province of Ituri.