



small
arms
survey

NUMBER 56 • JANUARY 2016

ARMED
ACTORS

Research Notes

Down, but Not Out: The FDLR in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, FDLR)—including its armed wing, the Forces Combattantes Abacunzi (Abacunzi Fighting Forces, FOCA)¹—is among the most enduring armed groups in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Several members of the group's top leadership are suspected of involvement in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, making the FDLR's continued presence in the DRC a recurring point of contention between Kinshasa and Kigali and a source of tensions for the Great Lakes region as a whole (Omaar, 2008, pp. 65–66, 236–312). Maj. Gen. Sylvestre Mudacumura, the group's military commander, is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed in the DRC itself (ICC, 2012). The group's presence has also led to the emergence of local armed groups that claim to protect communities, further complicating security dynamics in the eastern DRC (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 206).

In 2015, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (Armed Forces of the DRC, FARDC) launched a new operation targeting mainly the FDLR, one in a long series that has weakened the group since 2009. Alongside continuing disarmament and reintegration programmes, as well as international judicial proceedings, increased military pressure has played a notable role in the FDLR's loss of about 85 per cent of its estimated strength since 2002 (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 187). Yet, though diminished, the group still stands, offering policy-makers valuable insights into the impact of external interventions on armed groups.

This Research Note examines the state of the FDLR as of late 2015. It builds on the information published in the *Small Arms Survey 2015* regarding the FDLR's origins, structure, and small arms holdings up to 2014 (Debelle and Florquin, 2015). The Note also draws on field research carried out by the Small Arms Survey in the eastern DRC and Rwanda in August and December 2015, as well as supplementary commissioned research.²

An enduring force

Formed in 2000 from the remnants of the Hutu-dominated ex-Rwandan Armed Forces and Interahamwe militia that fled Rwanda in 1994, the FDLR distinguished itself on the basis of particularly strong internal cohesion and hierarchical structures that closely resemble those of the former Rwandan state and

army (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, pp. 192–93). Its primary stated objectives have long been to reclaim power in Rwanda and to protect the Rwandan refugee population in the DRC. Faced with the spectacular decline of its military strength—from an estimated 11,500 in 2002 to 1,400 in 2014, according to UN sources—the group has called for the opening of political space in Rwanda (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 187); in particular, it has sought 'dialogue with the Rwanda government and reform of the Rwandan security forces permitting FDLR representation at a leadership level' (Schlindwein and Johnson, 2014). Rwandan authorities have yet to express readiness to engage in a political dialogue with FDLR leaders, however (UNSC, 2015, para. 25).

The FDLR initially relied on a sophisticated, multi-layered support and financing scheme. Kinshasa's support to the FDLR officially ended following the end of the Second Congolese War (1998–2002), yet certain commanders of the FARDC continued to cooperate at least tacitly with the FDLR in operations against other armed groups, including the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (National Congress for People's Defence, CNDP) in 2007 and 2008 (UNSC, 2008, paras. 102–13). The group could also count on the external support of hundreds of Rwandans who had emigrated to Europe, North America, and other countries in Africa after 1994.³ Most crucially, the FDLR essentially relied on sophisticated income-generating activities within the DRC to fund its operations and subsistence. Although significant proportions of the FDLR's human resources were devoted to controlling and exploiting gold and tin ore mines, the group secured additional revenue through trade in local goods, agriculture and cattle raising, fishing and poaching, trafficking in cannabis, and looting (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, pp. 195–96).

Despite significant shifts in its configuration and influence, the FDLR remains a key armed actor in the Great Lakes region. Recent changes are due to a convergence of inter-linked factors, including improved collaboration between the governments of the DRC and Rwanda, a succession of military operations targeting the group, international judicial proceedings against the FDLR leadership members who were based in Europe, and ongoing efforts to encourage the demobilization and repatriation of remaining combatants. The initiation of a series of military interventions in 2009 proved to be a turning point, beginning with Umoja Wetu, an operation conducted jointly

by the Rwanda Defence Forces and the FARDC. The FDLR retaliated with particularly gruesome attacks against civilian communities it accused of aiding the enemy (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 198). Additional FARDC-led and UN-supported interventions followed and, by 2012, had led to the defection of almost 4,000 FDLR elements (SSRC, 2014, p. 3). The attacks also disrupted the group's ability to control territory and, by extension, their capacity to generate revenue (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 208). Progress in routing the FDLR lost momentum at the end of 2012 and into 2013, however, with the resurgence of other armed groups in the Kivus, notably the M23.

Voluntary disarmament

In 2013, the UN Security Council established the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) as part of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO); the peacekeeping force was tasked with undertaking a targeted offensive against armed groups in the eastern DRC, including the FDLR. The likelihood of an FARDC-FIB military offensive was among the factors that prompted FDLR leaders to initiate a 'voluntary' disarmament process in 2014. While some observers contend that the initiative was a tactical ploy to buy time and delay what were thought to be inevitable military operations, sources close to the FDLR affirm that the decision to disarm was part of a strategic choice within the political wing of the FDLR, which was more interested in political solutions.⁴

The first wave of voluntary disarmament began in May 2014, when a group of FDLR elements surrendered in Kateku, North Kivu. In June 2014, more FDLR combatants came out to surrender at Kigogo, South Kivu, while a third wave was turned back following the UN statement that their only option was a return to Rwanda. As part of this process, a total of 339 combatants were demobilized and the FDLR turned over 253 weapons (UNSC, 2015, para. 23). Although MONUSCO initially pushed for the repatriation of ex-combatants to Rwanda, the FDLR leadership adamantly refused and, as of December 2015, the ex-combatants and their dependents were still in the camps of Kanyabayonga, Kisangani, and Walungu, with no clear solution in sight (para. 24).

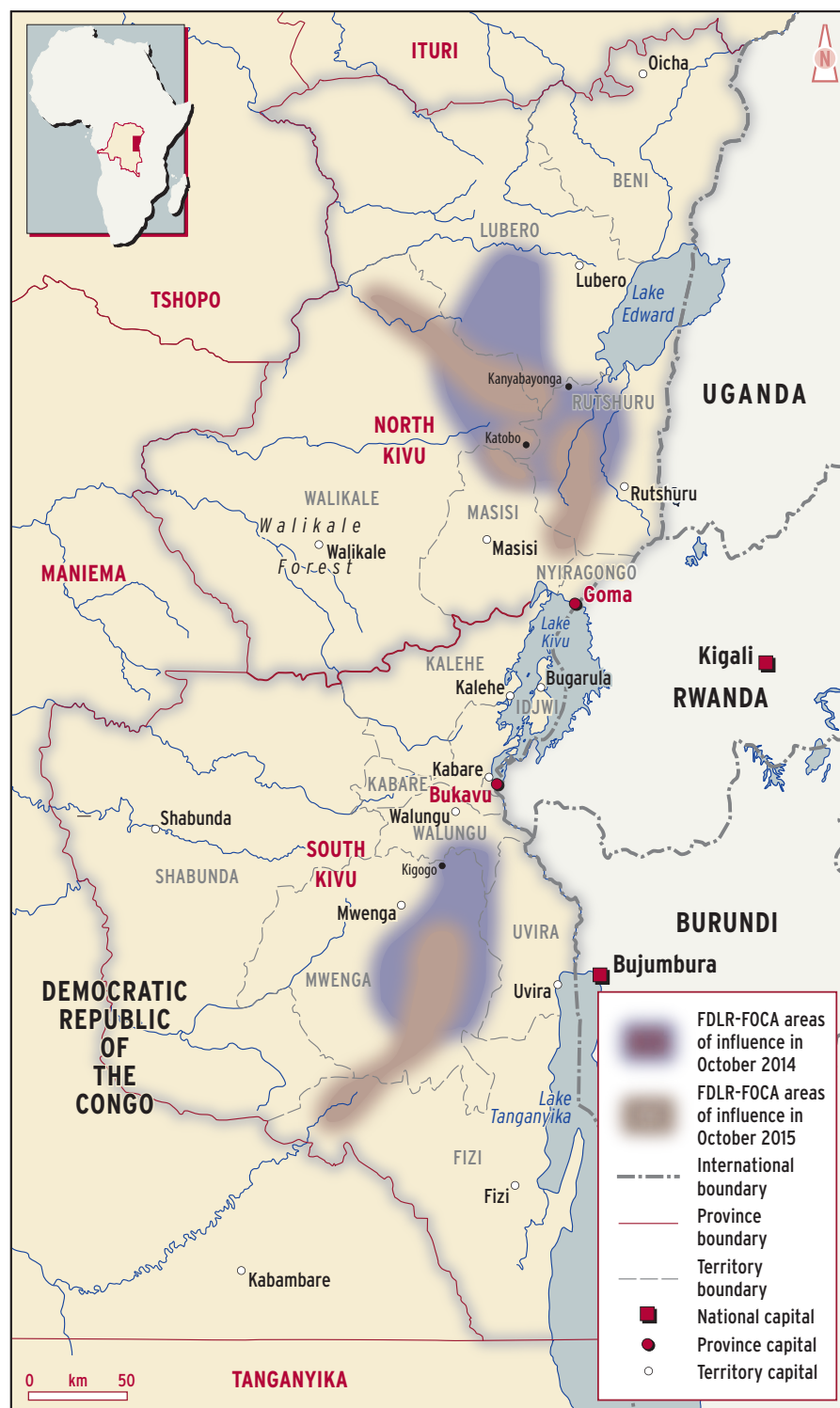
Sukola II

As the voluntary disarmament process gradually stalled, the UN Security Council and regional African governments threatened to carry out joint FARDC-MONUSCO military operations against the FDLR unless it fully demobilized by early January 2015 (ICG, 2014, pp. 11-14). Following a row over the human rights record of

the two FARDC generals selected to lead the operation, military collaboration between MONUSCO and the FARDC was suspended, however (UNSC, 2015, para. 26). The FARDC unilaterally launched its 'Sukola II' operation on 27 January 2015 and carried out offensives in the provinces of North and South Kivu.

In the first seven months of the operations, there was little active

Map 1 FDLR-FOCA areas of influence, October 2014 and October 2015



Note: The methodology employed by sources to determine FDLR-FOCA areas of influence was slightly adjusted between 2014 and 2015. See the sources for more information.

Sources: Vogel (2015a); Stearns and Vogel (2015, p. 4)

combat, as the FDLR's response was to retreat and abandon strongholds without fighting (see Map 1).⁵ Reports indicate that combatants knew when to abandon their camps thanks to advance warnings from the FARDC (UNSC, 2015, para. 27). Very few actual engagements took place between the FDLR and the FARDC during this period, such that human rights violations reportedly remained limited.⁶

In November 2015, the FARDC began a new wave of attacks in North Kivu, which forced the FDLR to retreat to areas where it faced opposition from other local armed groups.⁷ Some observers viewed the last round of attacks as significant, possibly the largest in the region since those targeting M23 in 2013.⁸ The FDLR retreated together with dependents and Congolese civilians, abandoning the FDLR headquarters in Katobo to head towards north-east and north-west Walikale, south-west Lubero, and north Masisi.⁹

Current state of the FDLR

While the full impact of the late 2015 attacks remained unclear at the time of writing, general developments pointed to a militarily weakened FDLR, albeit one that was not yet defeated. The UN Group of Experts on the DRC reported that while Sukola II had forced FDLR elements to abandon long-held positions and had further disrupted the group's revenue strategy, its leadership, strength, and overall military capacity remained largely intact (UNSC, 2015, paras. 22, 28). No senior officers were captured in 2015,¹⁰ although four—two colonels, one lieutenant colonel, and a major—deserted and repatriated to Rwanda.¹¹ Significantly, the operations seem to have forced FDLR leaders to put aside the internal rifts created by the volunteer disarmament process of 2014.¹²

Strength

Estimates of the number of remaining FDLR combatants vary. As of December 2015, some informants reported that about 800 combatants remained in North Kivu and 200–300 in South Kivu, for a total of about 1,000–1,100; meanwhile, informed Rwandan sources estimated that as many as 2,500 fighters remained active in early 2016.¹³ Other sources distinguished between an estimated 1,000–1,500 'effective' FDLR com-

batants and perhaps as many reserves, who could be remobilized.¹⁴

Overall, the low intensity of the fighting and the FDLR's strategy to abandon its positions rather than to fight back appears to have limited the number of combatants who were killed, captured, or demobilized. In late August 2015, the FARDC reported having killed 35 FDLR combatants and captured or accepted the surrender of 313 others; in October 2015, however, the UN Group of Experts confirmed the capture of only 190 fighters, noting that many of them may in fact have been refugees or civilians (UNSC, 2015, paras. 30–32). According to FARDC sources, operations in North Kivu between 1 November and 10 December 2015 resulted in the killing of an additional 24 FDLR fighters, while 29 were captured or surrendered during this period.¹⁵ Far fewer FDLR combatants pursued repatriation in response to the Sukola II operations than in the context of the Umoja Wetu attacks of 2009. Indeed, the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission repatriated and discharged only 155 ex-FDLR combatants in 2015, compared with 1,149 in 2009.¹⁶ In short, while the FDLR may have lost a few hundred fighters in 2015, its core leadership and structure remained relatively unaffected.

Revenue

Although military operations have largely interrupted the FDLR's former mainstays of mineral extraction and trade since 2009, the group maintains control over mines in certain areas, notably in north Walikale. Other members of the FDLR continue trade for themselves but no longer channel their profits to the FDLR leadership. In general, the FDLR currently generates revenue primarily through the trade in wood and charcoal, the taxation of local farmers and traders in the villages under their control, and possibly kidnappings. Some FDLR fighters have reportedly made their way to some of the areas abandoned in 2015, notably in South Kivu, as the FARDC's attention shifted to other locations (UNSC, 2015, paras. 22, 28).

Weapons

Numerous sources stress that the FDLR still maintains weapons that they took from Rwandan army stockpiles in 1994 or obtained from foreign

military forces in the late 1990s and early years of the following decade (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, pp. 200–205).¹⁷ In the past, the FDLR was also known to procure arms from the FARDC and other armed groups, either by seizing them during incursions, or by purchasing or trading for them.¹⁸ It appears unlikely that the FDLR has substantially resupplied its weapons stores in the last two to three years.¹⁹ Observers suggest that the FDLR currently procures small amounts of weapons, largely by capturing equipment on the battlefield.²⁰

As the FDLR sourced its weapons mainly from diverted regional stockpiles, its diverse holdings contain a significant proportion of ageing and unreliable weapons. These weapons suffered from years of exposure to unfavourable climatic and inappropriate storage conditions. Unsurprisingly, most weapons surrendered in 2014 were small arms in poor condition, including ageing AK-pattern rifles and several M-16 A1 rifles. The scarcity of NATO ammunition in the region helps to explain why FDLR combatants abandoned a variety of NATO-calibre weapons in 2014, including the M-16, SAR-80, R4, and UZI (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, Table 7.2).

Although most of the FDLR stockpile is ageing, it is clear that the weapons surrendered in 2014 were particularly old, and that the most functional weapons remain in the control of the group. Only one rocket-propelled grenade launcher and two mortars were turned in during the 2014 disarmament campaign, suggesting that the ceremonies did little to diminish the FDLR's light weapons holdings. Since the FDLR probably holds few larger weapons, its ability to carry out large-scale operations, or to defend territory against a well-equipped opponent, may be limited. Ammunition stockpiles appear to be in particularly short supply (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 200).

Conclusion

Long considered one of the principal obstacles to peace in the region, the FDLR appears severely weakened and no longer able to threaten the Rwandan government in Kigali. The aggressive international pressure on the FDLR leadership, targeted military operations, and the implementa-

tion of credible demobilization and repatriation programmes discernibly accelerated the group's decline. The progress made in neutralizing the FDLR is noteworthy and shows how an array of political, military, economic, and diplomatic initiatives can be effective over time.

Even if the FDLR no longer poses a military threat to Kigali, however, its mere survival represents an ideological threat, one that appears to be preventing at least some Hutu refugees from returning home. Moreover, given the resilience of the FDLR's military leadership, the volatile context of the Great Lakes region, and the history of political manipulation of armed groups in the eastern DRC, the current dynamics are liable to change. Competing regional priorities, particularly in the lead-up to national elections in the DRC and Rwanda in 2016 and 2017, combined with heightening political tensions in Burundi, may weaken the current focus on the FDLR. Downgrading or postponing efforts to subdue the FDLR could seriously jeopardize the progress achieved to date, as the group still appears able to revive its previous income-generating activities and rebuild its strength, should it be left to its own devices. ■

Notes

- 1 In this Note, FDLR refers to both the FDLR and FOCA, as they are closely intertwined and part of a single organization. Although several factions splintered from the core FDLR structure as of 2005, the FDLR remains by far the primary force among them (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, pp. 192, 210).
- 2 Confidential author interviews for this Research Note were carried out in Bukavu and Goma, DRC, and in Kigali, Rwanda, with local and international analysts, representatives of humanitarian and human rights non-governmental organizations, UN mission staff, World Bank representatives, Congolese and Rwandan officials, intelligence officers, diplomats, and former FDLR fighters.
- 3 FDLR president Ignace Murwanashyaka was himself based in Germany until his arrest in 2009; other key political leaders also lived in Europe (Debelle and Florquin, 2015, p. 192).
- 4 Moderate forces within the FDLR served as the driving force behind the group's push for disarmament, leading to internal tensions with the FOCA commander, Sylvestre Mudacumura (author interviews, Goma and Bukavu, August 2015).
- 5 Author interview, Goma, 18 August 2015.
- 6 Author interviews, Goma, 10 December 2015.

- 7 Author interviews, Goma, 9–11 December 2015.
- 8 Author interview, Goma, 9 December 2015.
- 9 On 7 December 2015, in the context of these attacks, Congolese authorities arrested Ladislas Ntaganzwa, one of nine genocide suspects, on an international arrest warrant, in Nyanzale (Vogel, 2015b; author interviews, Goma, 9–10 December 2015).
- 10 Author interview, Goma, 9 December 2015.
- 11 Author interview, Kigali, 11 December 2015.
- 12 Author interviews, Goma, 19 August 2015; author correspondence with confidential sources, January 2016.
- 13 Author interview, Goma, 9 December 2015.
- 14 Multiple author interviews, Bukavu, Goma, and Kigali, August and December 2015.
- 15 Author interview, Goma, 11 December 2015.
- 16 Author correspondence with the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, January 2016.
- 17 Author interviews, Bukavu, 22 August 2015.
- 18 Author interview, Goma, 19 August 2015.
- 19 Author interview, Goma, 18 August 2015.
- 20 Author interviews, Goma, Bukavu, Kigali, August and December 2015.

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Publication date: January 2016

Acknowledgements

This Research Note is published with financial support from the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

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