

Briefing note on conflicts in the Fizi-Minembwe and Uvira-Ruzizi Plain Regions

February 2024

1. Profile of the Fizi and Uvira Territories

The Fizi territory is a decentralized administrative entity within South Kivu Province and is divided into five administrative sectors: Ngandja, Mutambala, Tanganyika, Lùlenge, and Itombwe. The Fizi territory shares borders across Lake Kivu with Burundi and Tanzania, making it highly strategic at the regional level. The Fizi Territory is home to various communities, including the Babembe, Babuyu, Babwari, Bagoma, Basanze, Bazoba, Banyindu, Bafuliiru, Bavira, Bashi, Barega, Bambuti (Pygmies), Barundi, and Banyamulenge.

The Uvira territory, for its part, is bordered to the north by the Walungu territory, to the south by the Fizi territory, to the west by the Mzenga and Walungu territories, and to the east by the Ruzizi River and Lake Tanganyika, which separate it from Burundi. The Uvira territory includes the Bavira chiefdom and the Bafuliru chiefdom. The population of Uvira consists primarily of the Bafuliru community, as well as Banyamulenge, Banyindu, Barundi, and Bavira communities.

The territories of Fizi and Uvira have been marked by conflicts and protracted cyclical crises for decades. These conflicts revolve around land (land tenure), power and identity, security dilemmas, the exploitation of natural resources, and intra- and inter-community tensions. Added to this are regional dynamics that contribute to security and protection issues and fuel the crystallization of intra- and inter-community tensions in these territories.

The most visible conflicts in the Uvira territory are linked to access to and control of power, as well as mobilization around identity. These conflicts are particularly acute among the Luberizi, Kakamba, Bijombo, and Kigoma communities.

Conflicts between herders and farmers related to transhumance, conflicts between traditional and modern authority, land disputes, and territorial conflicts linked to the creation of territorial and administrative entities are the main conflicts in Fizi.

Beyond the conflicts specific to each territory, it should be noted that a conflict pits the communities of Fizi and Uvira against one another, with violence used as a means of asserting claims. This violence is particularly evident in the persistence of numerous “armed groups,” some of which present themselves as “advocates for community claims.”

Only the coastal area of Fizi currently remains more or less spared from the cyclical violence that has been rocking the High and Middle Plateaus of Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira since May 2019. However, since October 2021, this coastal area has been hosting internally displaced persons living in camps and with host families who have come from the Fizi Middle Plateaus, fleeing the clashes.

Furthermore, recurring clashes between armed groups (AGs) and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in the Middle and Upper Plateaus of Fizi have

triggered flows of displaced persons from the Upper Plateaus of Minembwe and its surroundings toward Mikenge, near the MONUSCO camp, and Fizi.

These displacement routes are sometimes dictated by the desire to remain with communities of their own ethnic group, given the resurgence of communal tensions following clashes between AGs that have taken on an inter-communal character.

- Persistent and Alarming Security Dilemma

Since June 2019, the Fizi and Uvira highlands have experienced complex changes in the security situation, marked by a resurgence of large-scale clashes between armed groups from the Mai-Mai and BILOZE BISHAMBUKE coalition and the coalition of armed groups Ngumino and TWIRWANEHO.

The insecurity and its consequences have had a considerable impact on the daily lives of the area's population, notably through widespread famine and extreme poverty, the burning of villages, massive population displacements, livestock theft, and the abandonment of fields.

The FARDC still maintains its main bases in central Minembwe and its surroundings, as well as in central Mikenge and its surroundings, from which it launches military operations against armed groups present in the area. Nevertheless, the FARDC is absent from many locations, especially the most isolated ones such as the Bijombo and Fizi highlands. Armed groups exploit this vacuum to expand their power and spread their influence, claiming to represent the interests of one community or another.

The MONUSCO mission is present in Central Minembwe, Mikenge, and Bijombo, as well as in Kala on the Ruzizi Plain, where it is involved in protecting civilians in nearby camps. Furthermore, with MONUSCO's ongoing withdrawal from the south, questions are being raised about the security of camps for internally displaced persons amid a severe crisis of trust between the primarily Banyamulenge communities and the state security forces, whom they view as partisans.

The Banyamulenge believe they are being targeted by militias from other communities in the Hauts-Plateaux (Babembe, Bafuliru, and Banyindu) allied with rebels from neighboring Burundi (Red Tabara, FNL, and Forebu).¹ Note also that security incidents affecting humanitarian workers—such as kidnappings for ransom—have been reported in the territories of Fizi and Uvira. For example, last November, armed men attacked a humanitarian convoy, kidnapped staff members, and set fire to the organization's three vehicles.²

- Conflicts between herders and farmers over grazing lands (transhumance)

Conflicts between herders and farmers are longstanding and persist in both territories. They occur most frequently in the Ngandja (Fizi) and Lulenge (Uvira/Ruzizi Plain) sectors. These conflicts are closely linked to insufficiency or even lack of grazing land during transhumance.

¹ <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/rdc-minembwe-la-localite-enclavee-qui-enflamme-les-hauts-plateaux-du-sud-kivu-36918>

² <https://acp.cd/nation/sud-kivu-lattaque-dun-convoy-humanitaire-a-fizi-condamnee-par-les-nations-unies/>

These conflicts between herders and farmers also have an ethnic dimension: most herders are Banyamulenge and Barundi, and most of the farmers are Bafuliuro, Babembe, or come from other Bantu communities in the area.

- **Minembwe at the Center of Territorial, Community, and Political Tensions in the Fizi and Uvira Territories**

Minembwe is a rural commune located in the Fizi territory that was established by a ministerial decree in 2013. This status remains a subject of controversy in political and community circles.³ Indeed, the creation of the rural commune of Minembwe sparked protests from other communities in the territories of Fizi and Uvira, leading to its suspension by the President of the Republic. This continues to exacerbate tensions between the Rwandophone Banyamulenge and the “indigenous” Babembe, Bafuliru, and Banyindu, triggering a resurgence of violence in the territories of Fizi and Uvira. In both the Fizi and Uvira territories, traditional chiefs are colluding with elites from major cities and political actors. In several localities, such as Luvungi and Luberizi in the Uvira territory, traditional chiefs—and particularly the chiefs of 34 sub-groups—sell vast tracts of land to the urban elite of Bukavu and Uvira, to the detriment of smallholder farmers, who are, in fact, the original occupants. This practice reinforces a sense of mistrust toward certain traditional chiefs.

Furthermore, the management of agricultural land is allocated along lineage lines within families. In other cases, customary chiefs issue land grants simultaneously to multiple buyers at once. While this practice is at the root of claims that often lead to conflicts among buyers, it is also a source of violence and dispossession for the less affluent. The latter lack the financial means to take legal action. There is also interference by state authorities, which can fuel land conflicts and exacerbate the dispossession of small farmers. All of this intensifies competition over access to land and amplifies conflicts between herders and farmers—conflicts heavily influenced by ethnic tensions in both Fizi and Uvira.

In short, the conflicts in both territories revolve around land management between farmers and herders, unequal access to resources—particularly fertile land—and have a strong economic (and political) dimension, as evidenced by the class conflict between large concessionaires and small-scale farmers.

- **Root Causes and Structures**

The structural causes of intercommunal conflicts stem from issues of control and the political and administrative governance of the Bijombo community. The establishment of Bijombo as a group by Departmental Decree No. 0229 of August 23, 1979—at the initiative of Representative Gisaro Muhoza, a member of the Banyamulenge community—involved removing villages from other groups and appointing a leader for this new entity by the Chief of the Bavira Chiefdom. Although the Banyamulenge hoped to be appointed to the position of community leader, the Mwami of the Bavira chiefdom chose a member of his own family instead. Since then, intercommunity relations have shifted from peaceful coexistence to mistrust between the

³ <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minembwe>

Banyamulenge and other communities, particularly the Bavira, Banyindu, Babembe, Bafuliiru, and the Pygmies.⁴ This was followed by a struggle characterized by a duality of customary power within the Bijombo group among the Bafuliiru, Bavira, and Banyamulenge.

In this ecological zone, several factors come into play to exacerbate the identity conflict and fuel antagonism among the communities living in this part of South Kivu Province. These factors include, among others, violations of the transhumance management protocol, the quest for customary power, challenges to modern authority related to the creation and management of administrative entities, the administration of taxation within these entities, challenges to the appointment of group leaders⁵ and village chiefs, administrative overlap, the absence of military and police authority, etc.

These factors foster the proliferation of community-based armed groups, namely Twigwaneho, Gumino, and Al-Shabab among the Banyamulenge, and the Mai-Mai known as Biloze Bishambuke among the Babembe, Bafuliiru, and Banyindu. Armed groups are legion in Itombwe and constitute new power structures there that contribute to the radicalization of intercommunal conflicts.⁶ The lack of economic opportunities means that idle youth are recruited by armed groups and exploited by local leaders for their political and economic ends.

Moreover, in these two territories, security challenges are exacerbated by regional dynamics. The Ruzizi Plain, like the Fizi coastline, remains a cross-border area of high economic value, characterized by significant movement of goods and people between different countries.⁷

2. Immediate Causes

Since 2015, the highlands of Fizi and Uvira have seen the emergence of a phenomenon involving the coalition and spillover of regional political and identity-based conflicts due to the presence of foreign armed groups from Burundi and Rwanda (RD-Ntambara, FOREBU, FPB, FNL-Palipe Hutu, FDLR-Interahamwe), some fighting alongside the Mai-Mai Biloze Bishambuke and others alongside the Twigwaneho, Gumino, and Al-Shabab. Incursions by foreign fighters, who are sowing insecurity in the Ruzizi Plain bordering Burundi and Rwanda, are reportedly facilitated by the porous nature of the Congolese borders connecting the three countries.⁸

3. Triggering Factors

Traditionally, the triggers for violent conflicts in this part of South Kivu Province have included cattle theft, ethnically based appointments to political positions, seasonal livestock migration, etc.

⁴ Jean-Louis KAMBALE NZWEVE and Elourd LUANDA KIEKIRE (2018), *Intercommunal Conflicts in the “Ruzizi Plain—Mwenga, Uvira, and Uvira-Centre Highlands” Stabilization Zone: The Need for Good Governance by Territorial Entities*.

⁵ International Alert: *Under the Thumb: Why Young People Join Armed Groups in South Kivu – DRC*; 2019

⁶ Bosco M: *Conflicts in the midlands and highlands of Fizi, Mwenga, and Uvira: factors contributing to escalation, actors’ modus operandi, and the regional political crisis in perspective*; 2019.

⁷ See the profile of these two territories above.

⁸ <https://actualite.cd/2020/11/13/rdc-la-porosite-des-frontieres-les-infiltrations-des-groupes-armes-etranagers-la-base-de>

In 2019, a series of events triggered violence in the territories of Fizi and Uvira, notably the abduction and murder of village chief Ndahoberwa (Kawaza, of the Banyindu community) by the leader of the Ngumino armed group, the assassination of traditional chief Bafuliro (Muninga) in the village of Ruchima, also allegedly by Ngumino militiamen. This incident marked the beginning of a new wave of violence characterized by armed attacks and targeted assassinations of traditional chiefs in the Fizi and Uvira Highlands. Attacks on villages, killings of civilians, and looting of livestock have increased on both sides of the conflict.

Tens of thousands of civilians were thus forced to flee their villages to areas of relative calm, notably in central Bijombo, Minembwe, Mikenge, Nakiele, Kanguli, Mukera, Fizi, Baraka, Nundu, Mboko, and Uvira.⁹

4. Past Peace Initiatives

Many initiatives and activities aimed at consolidation have been undertaken and carried out in these territories. Indeed, since July 2017, International Alert—with funding from the Coherence Fund for Stabilization—has supported an inter-community dialogue process in the highlands, as part of the “Tujenge Pamoja kwa Ajili ya Amani” project. The action plan resulting from this process includes a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program; efforts to improve access to the area; a process to clarify the boundaries of decentralized political entities; and an economic recovery program.

Organizations such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG), ILC, and ADCI facilitated the process that led local armed groups to sign a communiqué ceasing hostilities in December 2019. At the same time, an Interprovincial Commission to Support the Process of Awareness-Raising, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Community Reintegration (CIAP-DDRC) was established in South Kivu and North Kivu.

The dialogue process led by the MNS, with technical support from Interpeace, SVH, and ADEPAE, which began in January 2020, made it possible to organize intra-community dialogues between the Babembe and Banyamulenge communities from February 13 to 15, 2020, in Kinshasa, and from March 2 to 4, 2020, in Uvira.

5. Key Actors

The main actors in the conflicts in the Fizi and Uvira plains are the Bafuliru, Barundi, Banyamulenge, and Babembe communities; traditional chiefs; political leaders who have relocated as far as Kinshasa; the community diaspora; and key dealers, the urban elite, and armed groups. There is an active presence of Congolese armed groups (such as the Mai-Mai Bulirwa, Simuzinzi, and Mwenyemali) and foreign militias, particularly the Burundian National Liberation Forces (FNL). They specialize in armed cattle raids, extorting the civilian population

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/rapport-de-la-mission-inter-cluster-skm-hauts-plateaux-de-bijombo>

and hijacking passenger vehicles on National Highway No. 5 (Bukavu-Uvira) or on the numerous roads and bush trails.

The majority of herders are Barundi and Banyamulenge, and the majority of farmers are Bafuliru. Drawing on their numerical superiority, the Bafuliru intend to consolidate and formalize their leadership at the highest level of the Ruzizi Plain's traditional chiefdom, while the Barundi seek to legitimize their community's traditional authority among all other communities living in the Ruzizi Plain.

Major dealers exert significant influence over traditional chiefs, while political leaders exert influence over the population. To advance their political positions—and especially for electoral reasons—political leaders resort to hate speech against one community or another, or promise to install a particular traditional chief once elected.

On the one hand, the Bafuliru accuse the Barundi and the Banyamulenge of allowing their cows to devastate their fields. On the other hand, the Barundi and Banyamulenge accuse the Bafuliru of stealing cows and property from members of their communities. Due to the conflict between farmers and herders, mistrust and discord between the communities are on the rise.

6. Recommendations

Some operational recommendations for the CIAT project in the area:

- Communicate clearly and transparently about the project's objectives and activities, as well as the criteria for selecting project beneficiaries;
- Continuously monitor community perceptions of humanitarian interventions in the area by establishing a fluid feedback mechanism;
- Identify the interests and power dynamics of traditional leaders and large landowners, the needs of smallholder farmers, and the terms of access to land before undertaking any project that affects or interacts with land tenure in the Ruzizi Plain;
- Identify existing and functional initiatives or structures for land mediation or land conflict resolution in each area in order to strengthen them through training and equipment;
- Support community initiatives aimed at establishing livestock corridors and community pastures;
- Strengthen preventive measures against the escalation of violence and conflicts in the Fizi and Mwenga territories through a multi-stakeholder approach (traditional chiefs, civil society organizations, provincial and national leaders, local and national authorities, and monitoring committees for various agreements resulting from inter-community dialogues) in the Fizi and Mwenga territories;
- Promote grassroots dialogue and peace education activities to dismantle prejudices and stereotypes;
- Promote initiatives to combat misinformation about the causes of conflict and potential obstacles to restoring peace in the conflict zone;

- Prioritize the representativeness of localities based on which community groups inhabit them when selecting project intervention areas;
- Take geographical entities into account when selecting project intervention sites based on which communities inhabit them, to avoid concentrating all project activities solely in areas inhabited by a single community;
- Establish a conflict monitoring system during project implementation;
- Thoroughly analyze the system of community representation to determine strategies for working with authorities and community leaders;

Bibliography

1. FAO. 2023. Democratic Republic of the Congo: Conflict Analyses in the Provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu – Summary Note. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8227fr>
2. Judith Verweijen, Juvénal Twaibu, Oscar Dunia Abedi, and Alexis Ndisanze Ntababarwa (2020), The Ruzizi Plain: A Crossroads of Conflict and Violence, INSECURE Livelihoods Series, available at https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/03_GIC_La-plaine-de-la-Ruzizi_FR.pdf
3. Understanding Conflicts in Eastern Congo (I): The Ruzizi Plain, Africa Report No. 206 | July 23, 2013, available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167978/206-comprendre-les-conflits-dans-lest-du-congo-i-la-plaine-de-la-ruzizi.pdf>
4. Jean-Louis KAMBALE NZWEVE and Elourd LUANDA KIEKIRE (2018), Intercommunal Conflicts in the “Ruzizi Plain—Mwenga, Uvira, and Uvira-Center Highlands” Stabilization Zone: The Call for Good Governance of Territorial Entities.
5. Christiane Kayser and Flaubert Djateng (2018), Civil Society Actors and Conflict Prevention: Building the peace, available at <https://peaceworkafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BfdW-Heft-16-Franzoesisch-Web.pdf>.
6. USAID (2021), “Identifying Conflict-Sensitive Private Sector Engagement in South Kivu,” available at https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XS68.pdf
7. Gesine Ames and Ronja Fink (2021), “New Levels of Escalation in the Conflict, Growing Insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” available at https://oenz.de/sites/default/files/oenz_dossier_rdc_de_nouveaux_niveaux_descalade_dans_le_confli_fevrier_2021_0.pdf
8. Godefroid, Musalia Kihangu (2020), Insecurity in the Ruzizi Plain: Yesterday and Today: Rethinking the Perspectives for Peace available at <https://www.ssrc.org/programs/african-peacebuilding-network/current-opportunities/>
9. Claude IGUMA WAKENGE (2021), “It Changes, But Remains the Same: Land and Transhumance Conflicts Through the Lens of Participatory Action Research.” Report of the SKM Inter-Cluster Mission to the Bijombo, Mikenge, and Minembwe Highlands, May 12–15, 2021.

10. Understanding Conflicts in Eastern Congo: The Ruzizi Plain, Africa Report No. 206, Coordination, July 23, 2013.
11. Christiane Kayser and Flaubert Djaten (2018), Overcrowding: Civil Society Actors and Conflict Prevention, Civil Service for Peace (SCP) / BfdW – Mano River Region, DR Congo, and Cameroon.
12. Alert International: Under the Thumb: Why Young People Join Armed Groups in South Kivu – DRC; 2019