

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS WORKING IN THE FIZI TERRITORY

Period: August 2025

General Guidance

The Conflict Sensitivity Hub produces explanatory notes on context monitoring that can help Human, Development, and Peace (HDP) actors better incorporate conflict sensitivity into their activities and organizational procedures. Given that the situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) can change rapidly, these notes are particularly relevant and beneficial when produced and used within a relatively short timeframe. Nevertheless, they remain valuable in the long term for documenting changes in the context and preserving a record of events that can enrich the learning process. The purpose of this document is to provide HDP actors with information on recent developments in the conflict context in the Fizi territory so they can adapt their interventions to the context.

Brief Overview of the Context

In the Fizi territory, the complexity and persistence of conflicts are fueled by inter-community rivalries and fighting involving various armed groups. These conflicts, rooted in history and the economy, encompass issues of land ownership, disputes over customary power, and inter-community tensions. Indeed, intercommunal conflicts in the Fizi territory have for years pitted the Babembe, Bavira, Bafuliru, Balega, and Banyindu communities against the Banyamulenge community in the high and mid-altitude plateaus, respectively.¹

Conflicts in the Fizi territory also manifest as tensions between herders and farmers, which take the form of antagonism between communities, the destruction of crops and livestock, and can escalate into violence.² The presence of Mai-Mai militias—generally associated with community grievances—exacerbates insecurity and violence in this territory.³ These militias control several mining concessions,⁴ particularly in the Ngandja sector, where they impose monthly taxes on miners.⁵

There are also conflicts related to access to and exploitation of minerals.⁶ In the Fizi territory, conflicts over minerals—particularly gold—are fueled by a combination of economic, security, and political factors. Mining is largely artisanal, often conducted without permits or legal oversight. Some members of the population believe there is no reason to ban this activity, even if it takes place in the informal sector.

Description of Conflict Factors and Causes

Six main structural factors underlie the conflicts in the Fizi territory:

1. Weak State: The Congolese state has little presence in the remote areas of Fizi. This results in a lack of public services (justice, security, administration), often contested local governance, and an inability to disarm armed groups or resolve conflicts.
2. Competition for natural resources: Local communities and armed groups vie for fertile land, forests, rivers, and mineral resources.
3. Intercommunal tensions: Rivalries between communities are long-standing and exacerbated by land disputes, identity-based claims, and alliances with armed groups.
4. Presence of armed groups: Armed groups exacerbate insecurity and prevent any lasting stabilization by exploiting local tensions and resources to finance themselves.
5. Land issues: The absence of a land registry and land regulation mechanisms leads to property disputes, illegal occupations, and forced displacement of populations.
6. Regional geopolitical influences: The conflicts in Fizi are linked to cross-border dynamics, including the involvement of Rwanda and Burundi in the conflicts, the movement of weapons and combatants, and regional military and political alliances.

Underlying causes

1. Proliferation of armed groups that are often linked to communal grievances.⁷
2. Conflict over transhumance: conflicts between herders and farmers due to the lack of clear regulations governing transhumance corridors. The Babembe's survival depends on their agricultural activities, unlike the Banyamulenge, whose survival depends on their herding practices. The movements of livestock by herders—generally Banyamulenge—in search of pastures often cause damage to farm fields, which frequently belong to the Babembe, leading to acts of retaliation and cycles of violence between these two communities.
3. Traditional and political rivalries are marked by the manipulation of ethnic identities for territorial control or electoral purposes, as well as by the creation or abolition of administrative entities. Territorial claims are one of the main factors fueling the conflicts in Fizi. The establishment of Minembwe as a rural commune (in 2016), followed by the appointment of local officials for this commune (in 2020), sparked strong reactions at various levels, including in Kinshasa.⁸
4. Presence of displaced persons: they include both internally displaced persons (seeking protection and security) and external displaced persons (Burundian refugees) in search of land and survival.

5. Tensions over natural resources: Tensions over natural resources (the Itombwe Nature Reserve, community forests, and the Lake Tanganyika watershed) in the Fizi territory are a key factor in armed conflicts and inter-community rivalries.
6. Recurring Intercommunal Violence: Tensions are often ethnic in nature, pitting certain communities against one another. These rivalries are exacerbated by competition for land and natural resources, as well as claims to identity and territory.⁹

Description of the Main Actors and Stakeholders in the Conflicts

The actors involved in the conflicts in Fizi territory are as varied as the conflicts themselves. Political leaders of the Babembe, Bavira, Bafuliru, Balega, Banyindu, and Banyamulenge communities at the national and provincial levels, traditional authorities, and the diaspora are actors who often contribute indirectly and covertly to the financing of armed groups within their respective communities, to mobilization around identity and self-defense, and to convincing young people to join their armed groups by providing them with essential material resources. This category also includes high-ranking military officers in the Congolese army who belong to these communities and who reportedly provide considerable strategic support to the armed groups with which they share the same identity.¹⁰

Coalitions of Mai-Mai armed factions (from the Babembe, Bafuliru, and Banyindu communities) on one side, and Twirwaneho and Gumino armed groups (from the Banyamulenge community) on the other, perpetuate cycles of reprisals by targeting opposing communities in the Middle and Upper Plateaus of Fizi. This has contributed to the intensification of ethnic divisions in the Fizi territory as well as the radicalization of public opinion.

The FARDC is involved in both intercommunal armed conflicts and mining-related conflicts. It clashes with armed groups to establish state authority, but some of its officers are also reportedly involved in mineral exploitation. The involvement of foreign armed groups, including the Red-Tabara and the FNL-Nzabampema from Burundi, complicates and, to some extent, internationalizes the conflicts in the Fizi territory.¹¹

Changes in the Context and Dynamics of the Conflicts

Changes Regarding the Actors

With the emergence and advance of the AFC/M23 in eastern DRC, the landscape of many armed groups operating in Fizi territory has changed. Many of these armed groups have now joined forces with the FARDC under the name Wazalendo,¹² while others have simply pledged allegiance to the rebellion. For example, the Twirwaneho armed group, which originated in the Banyamulenge community, has joined the AFC/M23 and intensified its attacks against FARDC and Wazalendo positions in the highlands of Uvira territory;¹³ the Twirwaneho armed group operates and now serves as a support force, bolstering the strategic and military capabilities of the AFC-M23 until it took control of the town of Minembwe in late February 2025.¹⁴

The most significant Mai-Mai factions are those of Yakutumba, Ebuela (also known as Kibukila), and Biloze Bishambuke, which are now collaborating with the FARDC under the name Wazalendo in the fight against the AFC/M23 and its allies in Fizi territory.

While on an awareness-raising mission in Fizi to foster patriotic resistance against the AFC/M23, the vice governor of South Kivu, Jean-Jacques Elakano, had gathered several warlords¹⁵ in central Fizi. Following this meeting, a Wazalendo coordination body against the AFC/M23 in Fizi territory was established under the leadership of Willam Yakutumba.¹⁶

At the regional level, the Burundian army has been present in the DRC since 2022. Initially, it was deployed in the territories of Uvira, Fizi, and Mwenga with the aim of fighting Burundian rebels from the FNL and Red-Tabara, who, according to Burundi, are supported by Rwanda.¹⁷ However, its mandate quickly expanded as it became involved in the armed conflict between the Congolese government and the AFC/M23 rebellion to ensure the survival of its regime, as it fears that the advance of the Rwanda-backed AFC/M23 could destabilize its own government by moving closer to its borders. Thousands of Burundian soldiers are reportedly currently active alongside the FARDC and the Wazalendo (Congolese militias that are now pro-government). Since the Twirwaneho armed group declared its allegiance to the AFC/M23, it now appears to be the Burundian army's new priority in this area.¹⁸

Changes in Factors/Causes

Since Minembwe and its surrounding areas have been under the control of Twirwaneho elements allied with the AFC/M23, residents no longer have access to essential goods coming from Uvira via Baraka and Fizi Center. The Wazalendo armed groups, allied with the FARDC, which are stationed along this route, have barred street vendors from traveling to Minembwe, driving up the cost of food.¹⁹ Furthermore, the lack of schools in the region is said to endanger thousands of young children, exposing them to armed groups within their own communities under the pretext of protecting them.²⁰

Since MONUSCO's withdrawal from Fizi territory, residents who used to take refuge around MONUSCO bases to escape the clashes no longer have anywhere to seek protection, further exacerbating their suffering.²¹

In the Fizi territory, hate speech is used on social media and in traditional media with the intent to harm or destroy a particular person or community²⁵. Such hate speech has increased significantly in this territory since the remobilization of the armed group AFC/M23 and the Twirwaneho's alignment with it.

Impacts on the HDP Community

In this volatile context, HDP actors working in the Fizi territory face certain risks:

Types of Risk	Description	Mitigation / Required Sensitivity
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Physical Security	Presence of armed groups (Wazalendo, Red Tabara FNL, Twirwaneho/M23, Gumino, Android) leading to clashes, ambushes, crossfire, and exposure to landmines.	- Regularly update maps of armed groups and high-risk areas. - Mapping of high-risk areas. - Limit travel in red zones.
Limited humanitarian access	Since Twirwaneho joined the AFC/M23 and the capture of Minembwe, the Wazalendo have reportedly restricted movement toward the highlands and prohibited street vendors from traveling to Minembwe. There is reason to fear that this decision could extend to HDP actors.	- Establishment of a system to monitor restrictions on humanitarian access in order to anticipate, - Coordination and involvement of local authorities in planning and interventions. - Flexibility in logistical planning
Suspension or withdrawal of the authorization to operate granted to HDP actors by the authorities	When authorities do not understand the mission, mandate, and intervention strategies of HDP actors, this may lead them to make severe decisions such as suspending or halting the activities of these actors. ²²	- Coordinating actions by involving local authorities. - Negotiating, within the limits of its mission and mandate, access with the authorities that control the intervention areas prior to any field operations. - Flexibility in logistical planning. - Training local authorities and community leaders on humanitarian principles and raising community awareness of these the same principles.
Extortion and looting	Theft of humanitarian or personal property by armed groups or opportunistic individuals.	- Discreet and secure transport of resources, strictly adhering to the security protocols in place within organizations and following the instructions provided by the authorities responsible for security.

		- Engagement with local leaders to ensure community-based protection of property.
Handling of political groups or community	Some members of armed groups may believe that HDP actors are partisan toward certain groups or that they exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions.	- Strict application of humanitarian principles and conflict sensitivity; - Suspension or complete cessation of interventions that could exacerbate communal divisions. - Equitable distribution of aid, without favoritism. - Integrated conflict analysis in the project implementation.

Recommendations

The current situation in the Fizi territory is complex. It is characterized by regular clashes between armed groups and a rise in the number of internally displaced persons. Much of the infrastructure—including health, education, and even market facilities—is no longer operational. This creates enormous needs and urgent demands on HDP actors. Therefore, to ensure a conflict-sensitive response in the context of Fizi District, HDP actors must:

- Conduct regular contextual analyses by mapping conflicts with a focus on dynamics, actors, and armed alliances in order to adapt objectives, intervention areas, and beneficiaries.
- HDP actors should also increase the number of training sessions for state actors and awareness-raising sessions for community leaders on humanitarian principles.
- HDP actors should significantly strengthen their partnerships with national and local organizations to organize community-based interventions in the Fizi district.
- Increase the involvement of local labor in humanitarian initiatives and activities and enhance the transparency of assistance operations.

- Regarding the rise of hate speech, peace actors should strengthen training and awareness-raising efforts for political and community leaders, as well as civil society organizations, on combating hate speech.

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