

Brief on Conflict Dynamics in the Ruzizi Plain, South Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo

1. Conflict Profile

The Ruzizi Plain Chiefdom is in the northeastern part of the Uvira territory, in South Kivu Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The soil of the plain is particularly fertile and rich in natural resources such as gold, cassiterite, and columbite-tantalite. It is also well-suited for growing various crops including corn, rice, and beans. For a very long time, this area was considered the breadbasket of South Kivu. The agricultural and economic potential there is enormous. Nevertheless, the Ruzizi Plain has been the scene of several historic rebellions and remains a border area disputed by various communities.¹ This area is inhabited by two main communities: the Bafuliiru and the Barundi. Among the other communities living in the Ruzizi Plain are the Banyamulenges—a community closely related to the Barundi. The region is rife with armed groups—both ethnic and economically motivated—that claim to protect the communities.² Most studies show that these communities regularly clash over control of resources, particularly land, as land grants traditional chiefs enormous economic and political power. Furthermore, the issue of land is closely tied to identity.

This intercommunal rivalry stems from the region's settlement history and the principle of indigenous rights. Land conflicts in the Ruzizi Plain between farmers and herders are exacerbated by an ethnic dimension; most herders are Barundi, while the farmers belong primarily to other communities. Land conflicts also pit large landowners (cessionnaires considered wealthy) against smallholders (considered poor), illustrating the political and economic dimensions of these conflicts. Given the confusion resulting from the dual nature of land governance (as will be discussed below), some traditional chiefs “sell” land to the highest bidders at the expense of smallholders. These smallholders are consequently driven from the lands they consider ancestral. Studies also consistently indicate that traditional chiefs play a major role in the Congolese political and administrative system. Considered influential actors during elections, they are part of political patronage networks and enjoy extensive support at the provincial and national levels.³

2. The Cause of Conflicts

¹ International Crisis Group, Comprendre les conflits dans l'Est du Congo (I) : la plaine de la Ruzizi, juillet 2013. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167978/206-understanding-conflict-in-eastern-congo-the-ruzizi-plain-english.pdf>

² Comprendre les conflits dans l'Est du Congo la plaine de la Ruzizi, Rapport Afrique N°206 coordinations du 23 juillet 2013.

³ Vlassenroot, K., (2013), Identité, terre et pouvoir dans l'Est du Congo, Rift Vallet Institut, Nairobi.

Numerous reports on the Ruzizi Plain indicate that the conflicts between the Bafuliiru and the Barundi have historical roots that are linked to economic, social, and political factors. Tensions over access to customary power, land disputes, and issues related to transhumance lie at the heart of these conflicts.⁴

2.1. Structural causes

Most analyses of this area confirm that the core of the conflicts in the Ruzizi Plain lies in access to power. The colonial legacy has undeniably played a major role in shaping current tensions. During colonization, the colonial authorities assigned the chieftdom of the Ruzizi Plain to the Barundi, creating a distinct marginalisation of the Bafuliiru. In 1928, the colonial authorities divided the territory of Uvira into three chieftdoms that corresponded to the major ethnic groups: the Bavira, the Bafuliiru, and the Barundi. This division granted the Barundi a right to the land, which, according to Bafuliiru customary practices, had initially been denied to them. This division fuelled frustrations: the Bafuliiru revolted in 1929 against the granting of one of the chieftdoms to the Barundi, marking the first episode of territorial tensions.⁵

According to some research, the Barundi were more inclined to cooperate and pay taxes. This penchant toward cooperation would have made them more favourable in the eyes of the colonial authorities.⁶ However, this analysis should be qualified. Though the Bafuliiru resisted the creation of the chieftdom, their feelings of discontent did not truly surface until the intensification of political tensions in 1960 and the resurgence of regional conflict of the 1990s. The assassination of Burundian President Ndadaye in 1993,⁷ followed by the Rwandan genocide of 1994, led to a further influx of refugees into the region. Displaced populations were used as scapegoats by certain malicious leaders to incite the masses.⁸

Beginning in 2014, the livestock of the Barundi and the Banyamulenge were targeted by Mai-Mai groups associated with self-defence groups from the high and middle plateaus, the Biloze Bishambuke. Looting of livestock was often encouraged by certain politicians and local authorities as a means of weakening their opponents and forcing them to leave the plains permanently. This attitude is a staple for these troublemakers, who derive their political standing from it.⁹

2.2. Immediate causes

⁴ SFCG-Analyse-ISSSS-Ruzizi-Mwenga-2014-1.pdf Zone « Hauts Plateaux de Mwenga - Plaine de la Ruzizi » Sud-Kivu, R.D. Congo Search for Common Ground Octobre 2014.

⁵ Juvénal Twaibu, Oscar Dunia et al, *Dynamiques contemporaines et acteurs des conflits et violences dans la plaine de la Ruzizi*, in *La plaine de la Ruzizi*, Rapport de recherche, Conflict Research Group, 2021, pp24-46.

⁶ Depelchin, J. (1974): *From Precapitalism to Imperialism: A History of Social and Economic Formations in Eastern Zaire (Uvira Zone, c. 1800–1965)*, PhD dissertation, Stanford University.

⁷ Lemarchand, R. (2004) « La mémoire en rivale de l'histoire », *Cahiers d'études africaines*. 173-174.

⁸ Vlassenroot, Koen (2013) *South Kivu: identity, territory, and power in the eastern Congo*. Usalama Project Report: Understanding Congolese Armed Groups, Rift Valley Institute, London, UK.

⁹ Verweijen, J.; Twaibu, J. ; Dunia Abedi, O. et Ndisanze Ntababarwa, A. (2020). *La plaine de la Ruzizi Un carrefour de conflits et de violence*. Governance in Conflict Network.

Ineffective land management and weak governance exacerbate tensions in the plain. In rural communities, land is valued as an economic asset and a symbol of identity, history, and power. Consequently, land conflicts in the Ruzizi Plain are extremely complex and difficult to resolve. The source of conflict lies in the competitive relationship between the land administration and customary authorities. The latter, which have historically managed land according to collective rules and ancestral customs, often find themselves at odds with administrative structures that attempt to impose “private” laws and regulations. These tensions lead to power struggles and conflictual land management. Customary authorities, in their capacity as traditional land managers, may be perceived as abusing their power when they sell or allocate land to urban elites, often to the detriment of the farmers who cultivate it.¹⁰ Land conflicts in the region are therefore not merely intercommunal but illustrate a phenomenon of land grabbing by a privileged class. In 2005, conflicts erupted over land sales. Access to land became more restricted, leaving local farmers in a precarious position.¹¹ Farmers were allowed to continue cultivating their land, but only on the condition that they provided labour to the concessionaire or landowner. This system, like sharecropping, places farmers in a situation of exploitation and instability; their labour does not guarantee them land security.¹²

Mobilization over land aggravates existing social tensions and conflicts. Indeed, struggles for access to and control over land have become a key factor in the region’s socioeconomic and political divisions. Since the resurgence of violence in 2012, herders and farmers have been accusing each other of illegally occupying land with the support of traditional authorities.¹³ The Bafuliiru perceive the Barundi as “cattle thieves” who have fled Burundi. Although conflicts related to transhumance are often viewed through an ethnic lens,¹⁴ some analyses show that the situation is more complex in the Ruzizi Plain because the Barundi are also farmers and some Bafuliiru raise livestock. In the past, a system of crop rotation and grazing allowed the needs of both groups to be reconciled. Despite official transhumance corridors exist, the management of these areas remains inadequate.

2.3. The triggers and aggravating factors of these conflicts

The main events triggering violent conflicts are theft (of property and cattle), murders and stray livestock. For example, the murder of the traditional chief, Mwami Ndabagoy, of the Ruzizi Plain community on 25 April 2012 reignited violence between the Barundi and Bafuliiru communities, which

¹⁰ Vlassenroot, Koen (2013) South Kivu: identity, territory, and power in the eastern Congo. Usalama Project Report: Understanding Congolese Armed Groups, Rift Valley Institute, London, UK.

¹¹ Verweijen, J.; Twaibu, J.; Dunia Abedi, O. et Ndisanze Ntababarwa, A. (2020). La plaine de la Ruzizi Un carrefour de conflits et de violence. Governance in Conflict Network.

¹² Les conflits dans la plaine de Ruzizi, à l’Est de la République démocratique du Congo - Irénée Jean De Dieu BALA ATUA, République Démocratique du Congo, janvier 2014. https://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-analyse-1009_fr.html

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ La houe, la vache et le fusil Conflits liés à la transhumance en territoires de Fizi et Uvira (Sud-Kivu, RDC) : État des lieux et leçons tirées de l’expérience de LPI Série des Grands Lacs © Life & Peace Institute 2013.

continued until the end of 2012.¹⁵ Some reports argue that unemployed and unsupervised young people, as well as the proliferation of small arms like small-calibre weapons, are contributing factors.¹⁶

3. The conflict actors

The main actors in the conflicts in the Ruzizi Plain are the Bafuliiru and Barundi communities, traditional authorities, political leaders, major concession holders, urban elites and armed groups.¹⁷ Politicians and armed groups support these competing communities, paving the way for control over natural resources such as land and minerals.¹⁸ The sale of land by traditional chiefs to major concessionaires (which constitutes an abuse of power) alienates their respective communities. At the same time, armed groups attract large numbers of individuals—primarily idle youth—with promises to defend the interests of "their" community and the prospect of financial gain. Once again, ethnic divisions are exploited by politicians to boost their power during elections.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, traditional authorities engage in violent struggles to consolidate their power, often with the backing of armed groups. These groups—whether local or foreign—operate without hindrance, sometimes in collusion with state officials seeking political advantage and with poorly paid and/or undisciplined armed forces.²⁰

Bolstered by their numerical superiority, the Bafuliiru community views itself as indigenous and seeks to formalize and strengthen its leadership within the Ruzizi Plain chiefdom. It is allied with Congolese armed groups—such as the Mai-Mai Buhirwa and Mwenyemali—as well as with other communities in the region. As previously noted, the Bafuliiru accuse the Barundi and Banyamulenge of destroying their crops due to the presence of their cattle.²¹ To legitimize and consolidate their power, the Barundi of the Ruzizi Plain have allied themselves with the Banyamulenge and foreign militias, notably the National Liberation Forces (FNL) of Burundi. Consequently, the ties the Barundi maintain with Burundian communities reinforce accusations—particularly from the Bafuliiru—that the Barundi are non-indigenous and feel a closer affinity to their country of origin than to the Congo.

Major concession holders exert strong influence over traditional chiefs, while political leaders, seeking to position themselves and driven by electoral motives, heavily influence the population. The latter do not hesitate to resort to hate speech targeting specific communities or to promise the installation of

¹⁵ Verweijen, J.; Twaibu, J. ; Dunia Abedi, O. et Ndisanze Ntababarwa, A. (2020). La plaine de la Ruzizi Un carrefour de conflits et de violence. Governance in Conflict Network.

¹⁶ Zone « Hauts Plateaux de Mwenga - Plaine de la Ruzizi » Sud-Kivu, R.D. Congo Search for Common Ground Octobre 2014 page 13.

¹⁷ Zone « Hauts Plateaux de Mwenga - Plaine de la Ruzizi » Sud-Kivu, R.D. Congo Search for Common Ground Octobre 2014 page 6.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Comprendre les conflits dans l'Est du Congo(l)la plaine de la Ruzizi, rapport Afrique Crisis Group N°206,23Juillet 2013, page 7.

²⁰ International Alert (2012), Sortir de l'impasse : Vers une nouvelle vision de la paix à l'est de la RDC, <https://www.international-alert.org/fr/publications/sortir-de-limpasse-vers-une-nouvelle-vision-de-la-paix-a-lest-de-la-rdc/>

²¹ Au-delà des « groupes armés », conflit locaux et connexions sous-régionales, série des grands lacs, © Life & Peace Institute 2013.

specific traditional chiefs once elected. Analyses have also indicated that certain provincial elected officials support or even collaborate with armed groups. This cooperation is often driven by personal and political interests. During elections, ethnic divisions are exploited by some politicians to expand their sphere of influence and manipulate voters.²² The aforementioned armed groups specialize in armed cattle rustling, the extortion of civilians, and vehicle hijackings on National Road No. 5 (Bukavu-Uvira) or on the numerous bush tracks that are often in poor condition.²³ Furthermore, local and foreign armed groups operate without difficulty, often with the complicity of certain state authorities and undisciplined, poorly paid armed forces.²⁴

4. Conflict dynamics

Following the June 2024 closure of the MONUSCO base (COB) in Sange, the security situation deteriorated. As shown by a recent study (January 2025) on the impact of MONUSCO's withdrawal on security in South Kivu, ambushes have increased along the RN5 between Kamanyola and Kahuzi.²⁵ The same study highlights that MONUSCO's withdrawal coincided with the increased presence and freedom of movement of Wazalendo groups, which has gone hand in hand with numerous cases of human rights violations, theft, rape and torture. It can be observed that the FARDC have not increased security operations to compensate for MONUSCO's absence; on the contrary, they are increasingly implicated in cases of abuse. Furthermore, in the towns of Uvira and Baraka, as well as in certain towns in the territory of Uvira (Kiliba, Sange, Luvungi) and Fizi (Misisi), most night-time patrols are carried out by groups known as Balala Rondo (youth night patrols), rather than by the FARDC and the PNC. Even when the security services are actively engaged in security tasks, security does not automatically improve for citizens, as these services set up roadblocks and occasionally engage in acts of harassment, extortion and arbitrary arrests.²⁶ Nevertheless, a provincial roadmap has been developed by the Provincial Integrated Transition Team (EPIT) that focuses on security, the protection of civilians, support for security institutions and the rule of law, and assistance with the disarmament, demobilisation, and community and social reintegration programme (PDDRCS). This roadmap aims to facilitate the handover of responsibilities from MONUSCO to the government, with the support of UN agencies, funds and programmes and other partners, ensuring that progress made is safeguarded and supporting a responsible withdraw.²⁷ This roadmap does not appear to be yielding results.

More recently, the occupation of the city of Goma by the March 23 Movement (M23), supported by Rwanda, has had repercussions in South Kivu, particularly in the Ruzizi Plain. Historically recognised as a transit zone between the DRC and Burundi, the Ruzizi Plain has become a refuge. The Ruzizi Plain is therefore facing waves of refugees fleeing the fighting between the FARDC (Armed Forces of the DRC) and the M23. The increased presence of the M23 risks heightening inter-ethnic tensions, particularly

²² Idem.

²³ Analyse du contexte des moyens et hauts plateaux des territoires de Fizi, Mwenga et Uvira. horizon (bukavu), 1er novembre 2019.

²⁴ Zone « Hauts Plateaux de Mwenga - Plaine de la Ruzizi » Sud-Kivu, R.D. Congo ; Search for Common Ground Octobre 2014.

²⁵ Rapport trimestriel sur les effets du retrait de la MONUSCO et le processus de transition, juin-août 2024. International Alert, 21 septembre 2024.

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Idem.

between the Bafuliiru and the Barundi. The Twigwaneho armed group, led by Colonel Makanika and hailing from the Banyamulenge community – an ally of the Barundi – is considered to be close to the M23. The intensification of the conflict between the M23 and the FARDC will undoubtedly deepen mistrust between the Barundi and the Banyamulenge on the one hand, and the Bafuliiru on the other, and risks fuelling cycles of violence between these communities.²⁸ In short, the M23's increased presence in South Kivu is contributing to a climate of mistrust and insecurity, threatening already fragile peace efforts, further complicating the political dynamics of the Great Lakes region and exacerbating an already precarious humanitarian situation.²⁹

²⁸ Aurelie L., (Janvier 2025) une course aux ressources : Pourquoi le conflit en République démocratique du Congo risque de s'étendre.

²⁹ Idem.

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