

BRIEF OF CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN ITURI PROVINCE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Introduction

This brief provides an overview of the conflict situation in Ituri Province. It is based on reports, analyses, and studies containing key information on the conflict context in Ituri Province and focuses on the four dimensions of conflict analysis: profile, causes, actors, and recent dynamics. It aims to help Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) actors understand the conflict context in Ituri to better guide their interventions. The literature review in this brief focuses primarily on the territories of Djugu, Mambasa, and Irumu, and to a lesser extent on Mahagi and Aru. These two territories have been less affected by violence than the others. Notably, most studies emphasize that conflicts do not affect the territories of Ituri in the same way.

1. Profile of Conflicts in Ituri Province

Conflicts in Ituri Province are diverse and interconnected. They have ethnic, economic, political, and social dimensions, and revolve primarily around identity, land tenure, and access to natural resources. Another type of land conflict identified in Ituri Province is the conflict over administrative boundaries, which positions different administrative entities within the province in competition with one another. Although the literature review at our disposal makes little mention of this type of land conflict, the NGO Mwangaza Peace considers conflicts over administrative boundaries to be among the factors fueling violence in Ituri Province.¹ These conflicts are said to date back more than two decades and plague nearly all of Ituri's territories (Irumu, Djugu, Mambasa, and Mahagi), leading to massive population displacement.

Conflict in this province is dominated by the antagonism between the province's two largest communities: Hema and Lendu groups. This antagonism centers on identity and land issues to such an extent that land-related violence has become chronic. Rivalries between the Hema and Lendu groups are exacerbated by struggles for control of agricultural land and resources. These tensions have led to intercommunal violence. Massacres and forced displacements of populations are tragic consequences of these tensions. The role of community leaders is highlighted as a factor in the escalation of tensions.²

A study emphasizes that southern Ituri—specifically the territories of Mambasa and Irumu—is experiencing rising land-related tensions linked to migration from North Kivu. The Nande are considered the original migrants, as they have been settled in Ituri for several decades and wield significant economic power. This local financial hegemony also grants them a

¹ <https://acp.cd/province/ituri-les-conflits-de-limites-administratives-un-des-facteurs-qui-alimentent-les-violences-ong/>

² Turner, T. (2007). *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality*.

certain degree of political power which fuels frustration among certain other groups, such as the Mambamusa, the Lese, and the Bira. The Banyabwisha (Hutus from the Bwisha chiefdom in Rutshuru, North Kivu) and the Bakonzo (who live on both sides of the border between Uganda and the DRC) are other recent migrants. Like the Bakonzo, the Banyabwisha are farmers in search of arable land. The competition for livelihoods increases pressure on land ownership and leads to power struggles. The presence of numerous armed groups linked to various ethnic groups, including local militias and rebel groups, complicates the security situation in this part of the province, south of Ituri. These groups exploit conflicts to consolidate their power and control resources, leading to violence and population displacement.

A study on the impacts of natural resources on conflicts in Ituri shows that control over natural resources is often considered a trigger for violence.³ It also demonstrates how resource exploitation exacerbates tensions between communities.⁴ According to some analyses, ethnic identities are often exploited by perpetrators of violence to maintain their control over natural resources, particularly gold. Some experts believe that state weakness and the absence of effective governance in Ituri are key factors that also fuel regional conflicts and corrode the social fabric. External influences, including intervention by neighboring countries and support for armed groups, are also significant factors in the conflicts in Ituri.⁵

2. The causes and factors that contribute to conflicts in Ituri

Studies on conflict in Ituri Province demonstrate that the causes and factors are multifaceted and interconnected. They include ethnic rivalries, competition over resources, weak governance, social and historical tensions, and external influences.

2.1. Structural Causes

The colonial approach is considered by most scholars to be the root cause of conflicts and other intra-community tensions in Ituri Province. During the colonial era, colonial powers reorganized intra-community boundaries based upon economic exploitation. This deeply discriminatory framework designated the Hemas as superior and Lendus as inferior.⁶

The failure of state institutions in Ituri has also been identified as a fundamental cause of the conflicts. State weakness and the absence of good governance have fuelled land speculation and inequalities in access to land throughout the province. This situation has created an environment conducive to anarchy and violence. The state's inability to find structural

³ Mbuyi, J.-P. L. M. (2015). *Natural Resources and Conflict in the DRC: An Analysis of Local Dynamics*. Mbuyi, J.-P. L. M. (2015). *Natural Resources and Conflict in the DRC: An Analysis of Local Dynamics*.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Prunier, Gérard. *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁶ During the colonial era, the Hema seized the opportunity to attend school and maintained privileged relations with the Belgian colonists.

solutions to land conflicts since the start of the war in Ituri has encouraged fraudulent land sales by traditional chiefs and administrative authorities, the illegal land grabbing by communities and concessionaires, and “bought” partiality.⁷ This land issue is further complicated by legal duality and the overlap of two land tenure systems: the administrative cadastral system (considered the legal system) and the customary system (considered the legitimate system that is administered by local chiefs). The coexistence of these two systems facilitates duplicitous deals.

2.2. Immediate Causes

Ethnic rivalries are among the most frequently cited immediate causes of conflict in Ituri. These ethnic tensions are often exacerbated by historical stereotypes and long-standing grievances, illustrating the link between immediate causes (rivalries) and structural causes (a historical narrative inherited from colonization regarding the privileges received by a certain group). This narrative of rivalries is often manipulated by political and military leaders to mobilize their communities along ethnic lines and justify violence.⁸ Once again, the violence benefits political and economic leaders who exploit this rivalry to consolidate their power and control over natural resources.

Population growth has worsened the inequalities in access to land and problems of coexistence between herders and farmers. Some causes of land conflicts are reportedly directly linked to corruption; to a failure to enforce the law; the non-use of certain lands; or the fraudulent expansion of concessions. As mentioned above, competition for access to and control over natural resources has been cited by numerous reports as one of the main sources of conflict in this province. Some experts believe that the discovery of new gold deposits is among the factors that intensifies conflicts in the region because it fuels the appetites of those who profit from violence. Natural resources attracts the attention of various actors, including armed groups seeking to gain control over them.

2.3. Aggravating Factors and Triggers

Other social factors that are linked to the trauma experienced during past violence represent additional aggravating factors. Massacres, forced displacements, and cycles of violence are deeply ingrained in the memories of various groups and profoundly affect relations between communities. These historical factors fuel resentments that can resurface during contemporary tensions.⁹ Furthermore, other aggravating factors relate to regional and international influences. Interventions by neighbouring countries and support for various

⁷ See Justice Plus (2017). Land study report for the territories of Irumu, Djugu, Mahagi, and Aru, conducted in Ituri Province in partnership with Pax Christi.

⁸ Thomas Turner (2007), in his work [The Congo Wars](#).

⁹ Mahmood Mamdani in [Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism](#) (1996).

armed groups have exacerbated local tensions.¹⁰ For example, the Ugandan army supports the Zairian group—a militia from the Hema community—while at the same time partnering with the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) in joint operations to eradicate the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and other local armed groups. These external influences further complicate the situation and make conflict resolution even more difficult. The triggers for violent conflicts are often theft and livestock straying onto farmland.

3. Analysis of Conflict Actors, Their Alliances, Influences, and Roles

The main actors cited in most analyses and studies on conflicts in Ituri are local armed groups, the FARDC, international actors and NGOs, local communities, and certain politicians. These actors have a significant influence on the dynamics of conflict in Ituri.

3.1. Local Communities

Local communities are both victims and actors in the conflicts. Community leaders are usually situated within a traditional structure and play an important role in conflict management. They may act as mediators; however, they can also be influenced by the dynamics of violence. These communities form alliances with ethnically based armed groups. Some analyses suggest that alliances between communities are often formed in response to perceived threats and are frequently influenced by the context.

The Lendu community is reportedly allied with the armed group Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO). Conversely, the Hema community is reportedly affiliated with the Zaire armed group to defend itself against CODECO on the grounds that CODECO seeks to exterminate it. To counter the CODECO militia, the Hema community has formed an alliance with other communities with which it shares the same culture. This informal alliance is called the G5 (group of five communities): Nyali, Ndo Okebo, Alur, Hema, and Mambisa.

Some experts claim that the Lendu community in Irumu Territory, Walendu Bindi Chiefdom is allied with the armed group Patriotic Resistance Front of Ituri (FRPI). Historically FRPI used to attack the Hema community in Irumu. This situation reportedly led the Hema to ally with the Nyali and Hema communities of Djugu to form a united front and counter the Lendu Bindi. Additionally, the Bira community is reportedly allied with the armed group known as the Front Patriotique et Intégrationniste du Congo (FPIC) to defend and reclaim their lands occupied by the Hema community, which is engaged in large-scale livestock farming there.

¹⁰ Gérard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (2009).

According to some sources, the FPIC was attacking the Hema community's livestock and other property.¹¹

3.2. Local Armed Groups

Armed groups are often considered the primary manifestations of conflict in Ituri. The actions of the CODECO, the FPIC, the Zairian militias, the FRPI, and other armed factions are consistently mentioned. These groups are often affiliated with and exploit ethnic rivalries to mobilize support. Some experts point out that these militias are motivated by territorial claims, control over natural resources, and power struggles.

Experts also mention the existence of alliances between certain armed groups. There is talk of a natural alliance between the CODECO and FRPI armed groups due to their shared community affiliation (Lendu). These two groups collaborate on issues of interest to their community; they belong to the same culture known as "LORI," making this a so-called "blood" alliance. Another alliance that formed for a short period (and quickly fell apart) was that between CODECO and FPIC, an armed group affiliated with the Bira community. This alliance was forged in response to a leadership crisis between two factions of FPIC. The Zaire militia is often allied with self-defence forces belonging to the G5 communities.

3.3. Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC)

The FARDC are often accused of committing numerous human rights violations, corruption, and abuses of power. Though they are called upon to restore order and security, FARDC's lack of training, disorganization, and command issues within the group limits its effectiveness. At times, their interaction with armed groups is perceived as a form of collusion, which further complicates the security situation.

3.4. International Actors and NGOs

NGOs and international actors, such as the United Nations, play a crucial role in conflict mediation and humanitarian assistance. Some studies highlight that these actors help raise awareness and mobilize the international community regarding the situation in Ituri and promote peace initiatives. However, their impact is sometimes limited by logistical challenges, unstable security conditions, and a lack of coordination with local actors. It is often noted that international interventions must be adapted to local realities in order to be effective.

3.5. Economic Actors

Local economic actors (trading posts, small-scale operators) and international ones (Chinese operators) play a complex and often ambivalent role in the conflicts in Ituri. Whether local, provincial, national, or foreign, economic actors invest in the exploitation of natural resources. Their presence can deepen tensions due to competition for access to resources. Some of them are accused of financing armed groups to protect their commercial interests

¹¹ Interviews from peace building organizations in Ituri, including FOMI and ACIAR.

or to gain privileged access to resources. Chinese operators are accused of collaborating with armed groups to secure their gold mining operations.¹²

3.6. Political actors or politicians

Ituri experiences interethnic violence and armed conflicts that are often intensified by political rivalries. Political actors are often singled out or accused of manipulating ethnic tensions. Some politicians exploit ethnic divisions to mobilize support, thereby fuelling tensions and conflicts. They may incite violence to strengthen their power or influence. They are also accused of supporting armed groups to protect their political or economic interests, thereby contributing to the prolongation of conflicts. Furthermore, to gain access to natural resources, certain national and provincial politicians play a central role in the allocation of mining rights by influencing traditional leaders, which is contrary to the provisions of the mining code.

In conclusion, an analysis of the actors involved in the conflicts in Ituri Province reveals complex networks and alliances, reflecting an intertwining of ethnic, economic, and political interests. This implies that each actor has their own motivations and interests, often driven by financial gain, which confirms the strong economic dimension of the conflicts. Some experts emphasize that efforts to resolve these conflicts should be based on a holistic approach that integrates the ethnic, economic, social, and political dimensions of the conflicts. Collaboration among local, national, and international actors is crucial to building a peaceful and prosperous future in Ituri.

4. Current Conflict Dynamics in Ituri Province

Since the beginning of 2025, there have been reports of a lull and a decrease in tensions between various communities in Ituri. Several ongoing peace initiatives are helping to ease tensions in certain territories, the most recent of which was a meeting between the Mambamusa communities (comprising all ethnic groups claiming to be indigenous to Mambasa) and the Yira community (comprising the Nandé community). The two communities have committed to promoting social cohesion in the Mambasa territory.¹³ To date, some territories in Ituri Province are experiencing periods of relative calm, while others continue to face security crises due to the resurgence of clashes between armed groups and inter-community militias. Indeed, it is worth noting minor visible tensions linked to isolated attacks as well as provocations between the armed self-defence group Zaïre and the CODECO militia, particularly in Djugu Territory. This situation is believed to be linked to clashes between these two groups from December 15 to 22, 2024, in the Drodoro and Bule Health Zones of Djugu Territory, which resulted in about ten deaths, massive population displacements, and the suspension of traffic along the Bunia–Katoto–Masumbuku–Drodoro route.

Recent developments in the conflict in North Kivu Province, including the advance of the M23/AFC, have impacted the dynamics of the conflict in Ituri. Communities are accusing one

¹² <https://7sur7.cd/2024/11/16/ituri-des-chinois-accuses-de-collaborer-avec-des-groupes-armes>

¹³ <https://mambasanews.com/ituri-mambasa-les-communautes-mambamusa-et-yira-sengagent-pour-la-cohesion-sociale-dans-le-territoire>



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another of supporting the M23/AFC, and a climate of mistrust has taken hold. The report by United Nations experts published in December 2024 continues to fuel the debate among leaders of the various communities in Ituri. This report accused the Zaire self-defense group, linked to the Hema community, of being allied with the M23/AFC and of recruiting fighters on behalf of the M23/AFC. In an effort to refute this report, community leaders from the Hema community called on members of their armed group to lay down their weapons and join the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Program (PDDRCS). Nearly 600 members of the Zaire group are reported to have laid down their arms and returned to civilian life. By doing so, the Hema community sought to clear itself of these accusations and demonstrate its good faith in contributing to peace in Ituri Province, although other communities continue to doubt this good faith. It should be noted that this report also specifically named certain Hema leaders—notably Thomas Lubanga and His Majesty Chief Yves Kawa Panga Mandro—as being responsible for recruiting for the M23/AFC and facilitating its advance into Ituri Province.