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The Networks of Eastern Congo's Two Most Powerful Armed Actors

Explanatory Note

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The complexity of the war in eastern Congo with its entangled web of actors pursuing a multiplicity of agendas can be overwhelming and confusing. Once known as “Africa’s World War”, the conflict in the Congo once embroiled nine countries and a myriad of local and foreign rebel groups. Over the years, relationships have shifted. Friends have become foes, foes have become friends, and political circumstances have changed, frequently altering the power equation in Africa’s Great Lakes Region.

Because the Congolese state does not have a monopoly over the means of violence in eastern Congo, and elements of its armed forces often engage in abuses similar to those of militias, the region is a fertile environment for the development and growth of armed groups and warlordism. As a result, violence is frequently traded for money, political power, and control of natural resources. This situation has left Congo’s North and South Kivu provinces in a protracted crisis. One of the latest outgrowths of the insecurity is the M23 rebel group, which defected from and is now fighting against the Congolese national army. Each of these parties pursues its interests through a set of relationships with other armed groups.

The Enough Project has prepared the following materials to shed light on the intricate dynamics among these groups. The infographic sets out the strength and nature of the relationship between the Congolese army, or FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) and its allies, and the M23 rebels and their allies. An accompanying table provides more detailed information about the groups, including their histories, leadership, composition, and other notable features. The aim of this effort is to provide accurate, granular information that could contribute to more effective policy responses to eastern Congo’s tragedy.

Summary of Findings

The various armed groups provide a variety of services to the M23 and the Congolese army. For example:

- FDLR/Mandevu, a subset of a group founded by some former perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, has supplied weapons to M23,
- Mai-Mai Sheka assassinated adversaries of M23’s former leader Bosco Ntaganda, and
- UPCP provided free passage to M23 recruits, among other functions.

Elements of the Congolese army often team up with the enemies of their enemy such as Nyatura, APCLS, as well as elements of FDLR/FOCA, the largest subset of the group led by some of the former Rwandan genocide participants, to repel its adversaries. These relationships are fragile and in most cases short-lived. The divorce rate among the groups is high, and most groups maintain a high degree of independence.

As the table shows, many of the armed groups are led by disgruntled officers who defected from the Congolese army, such as “Brigadier General” Sultani Makenga (M23 troops), “General” Janvier Karayiri (ACPLS troops), or “General” Kakule Sikuli Lafontaine (UPCP/FPC troops). Neighboring countries, powerful businessmen, high and low-level politicians, community and church leaders – among others – often covertly support these groups for economic and political interests. The majority of rank-and-file rebels are ordinary men and children joining for a host of different reasons, including for the protection of their communities, perceived injustice, or economic opportunities. Others are conscripted by force. The different groups have a wide range of objectives. The stated goals of some include a struggle for their land and/or the protection for their communities against internal or outside adversaries. While some seem to have initially had the best interests of their communities at heart, many have become corrupted over time and sought personal gains. The groups often exercise little caution for civilian life and employ vicious methods. Large-scale human suffering is the consequence.

Except for the M23, the majority of the armed groups are loosely structured. Raïa Mutomboki and the Nyatura groups are particular cases in point. This is why, for instance, different elements of the Nyatura group can collaborate with M23 and the Congolese army at same time. Ideologically opposed groups might temporarily cooperate, such as the M23 and the NDC and UPCP, respectively. It is not always clear whether an alliance is based on relationships among leaders or the group at large. For instance, former M23 leader Bosco Ntaganda was largely responsible for interactions with the NDC, FDC, and FRPI. After his surrender and transfer to the International Criminal Court, it remains to be seen to what extent the M23 has maintained these alliances.

The FARDC is fragmented, ill-functioning, and ridden by competing interests at all levels. Most of its relationships are not systematic but are instead facilitated by local commanders.

The infographic and chart focus on armed entities in eastern Congo and as such does not address the relationship M23 has had with Rwanda and to a lesser extent Uganda and to some extent continues to enjoy with Rwanda, according to Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Group of Experts. For more on both countries’ reported support to M23, see the 2012 United Nations Group of Experts Report¹, the 2013 United Nations Group of Experts Interim Report² and findings by Human Rights Watch³.

Methodology

The infographic draws on information collected during extensive interviews both in person and over the phone throughout the Kivus and Ituri district in Orientale Province from December 2012 until July 2013. It is also based on reporting by the United Nations Group of Experts⁴, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the DR Congo, and the Rift Valley Institute⁵. Although the chart and table discuss a few groups from South Kivu and Ituri, it focuses primarily on North Kivu, given that it has become the epicenter of the conflict.

Given the quickly evolving security landscape in the region and the difficulties of collecting comprehensive evidence in times of conflict, the chart and table present a snapshot of the situation at a particular moment. For this chart, it is August 2, 2013. Over time, the situation and relationships will likely change. The infographic, in particular, presents a static picture, while in reality the relationships are in a constant state of flux, subject to rapid and dramatic changes sometimes over days.

Endnotes

[1] United Nations Security Council, “Letter dated 12 November from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2012/843, November 15, 2012, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/843 (accessed July 2013)

[2] United Nations Group of Experts, Leaked Interim Report for 2013, June 30, 2013, available at <http://www.innerecitypress.com/drcsanc0613repicp.html> (accessed July 2013)

[3] Human Rights Watch, “DR Congo: M23 Rebels Kill, Rape Civilians. New Evidence of Rwandan Support for M23,” July 22, 2013, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/22/dr-congo-m23-rebels-kill-rape-civilians> (accessed July 2013)

[4] United Nations Security Council, “Letter dated 12 November from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council,” S/2012/843, November 15, 2012, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/843. United Nations Group of Experts, Leaked Interim Report for 2013, June 30, 2013, available at <http://www.innerecitypress.com/drcsanc0613repicp.html> (accessed July 2013)

[5] Rift Valley Institute, Jason Stearns et al., “Raia Mutomboki: The flawed peace process in the DRC and the birth of an armed franchise,” January 2013, available at <http://riftvalley.net> (accessed July 2013).