

The CNPSC Rebellion

Social Marginalization and State Complicity in South Kivu



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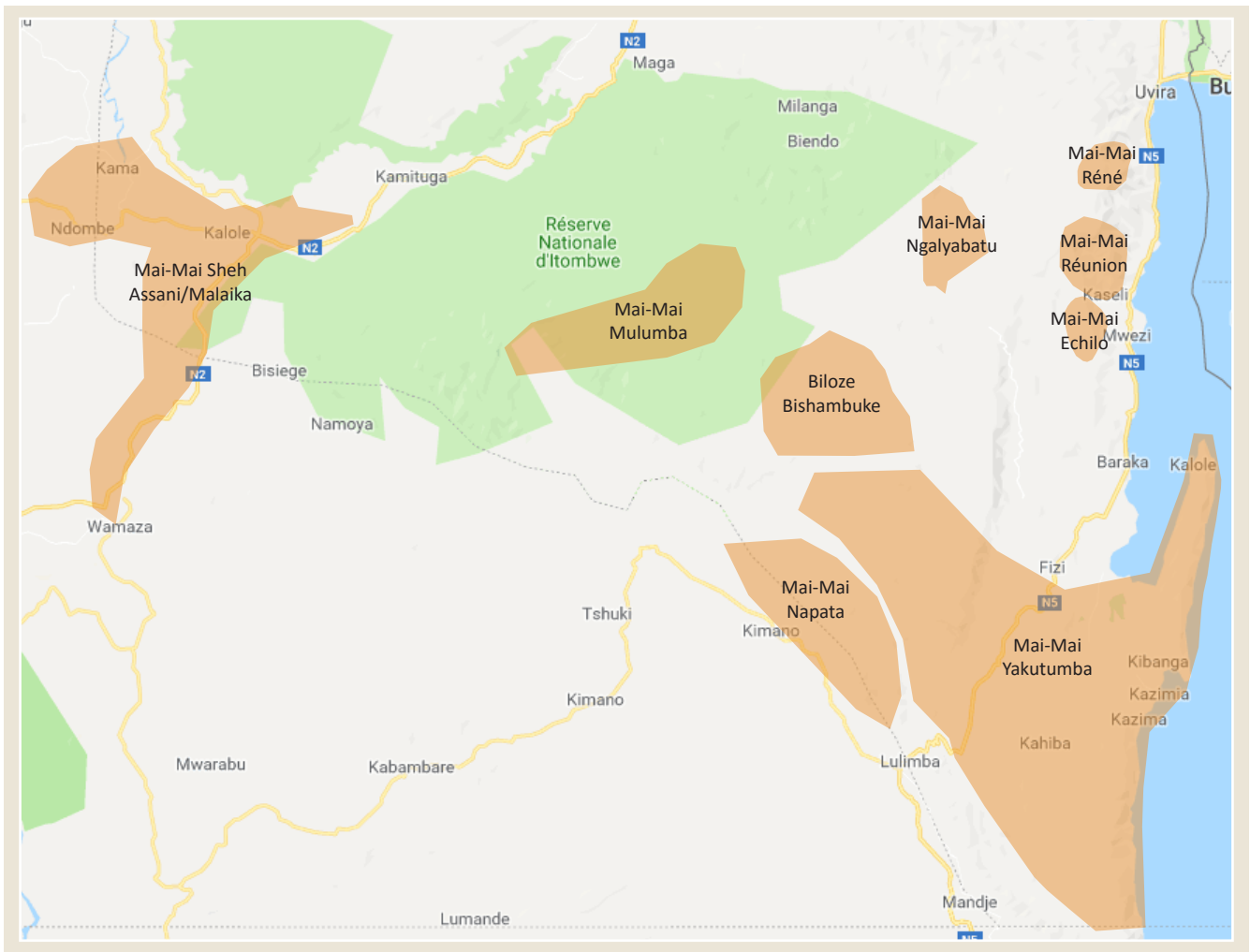
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The CNPSC rebellion: Social marginalization and state complicity in South Kivu



Members of the CNPSC January 2018

Introduction

In June 2017, an armed group coalition in the far south of South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo started a large-scale offensive. This Coalition Nationale pour la Souveraineté du Congo (CNPSC) launched a series of attacks, rapidly overrunning Congolese army bases. It obtained significant amounts of arms and ammunition, briefly took control of large gold mining areas, and reached the outskirts of Uvira, a major regional trade hub. The coalition involved at least seven armed groups, spread out over an area of hundreds of square miles. A little over a year later, the group has been buffeted by an army offensive and pushed out of most population centers, but still remains a threat to civilians and to regional stability.

What was behind this impressive alliance? What lessons can be learned about the drivers of instability in general in the region? This briefing highlights social marginalization, the weakness and complicity of government officials and troops, and the political positioning of armed groups as key factors. While much of the early impetus driving the CNPSC was provided by the controversial electoral process, the inauguration of opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi and regional tensions involving Rwandan and Burundian armed groups are currently shifting conflict dynamics in the area.

Background

Fizi territory, where the CNPSC emerged, has been a hotbed of armed group activity since the 1960s. Together with the neighboring territory of Uvira, Fizi hosted a rebellion that would engulf large parts of eastern DRC, led by the *Conseil national de libération* (CNL). Created in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and fomented by nationalist sentiment, what became known as the Simba rebellion strove to overthrow the new government. At the local level, this rebellion also drew on long-standing antagonisms within the Fulero and Bembe communities against the abuses of local customary and government elites during colonial rule. It is important to remember this history; local leaders and combatants refer to it, and it provides part of the context for the current mobilization. Notions of victimhood and economic marginalization, and a tradition of insurgency inform the worldview of the current combatants.

The Simba rebellion was defeated by 1965, but remnants persisted, carving out small fiefdoms in the remote interior, especially in an area of Fizi territory called *Hewa Bora*, where Laurent-Désiré Kabila – a CNL leader and future president of the country – remained in control of a small number of troops until the 1980s.

Armed mobilization here started up again during the democratization period of the early 1990s, when firebrand Bembe politicians whipped up support against the Banyamulenge, a small, cattleherding community of Rwandan and Burundian origin living mostly in the highlands to the west of Lake Tanganyika. Tensions between these communities had existed since the colonial period, centered on access to land and customary power.

In October 1996, this somewhat inchoate mobilization then fed into the emergence of local militias that recruit largely along ethnic lines in defense of local communities. These groups, later known as “Mai-Mai”, were motivated by the invasion of the Congo (then Zaire) by a broad rebel coalition, the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL), which included many Banyamulenge

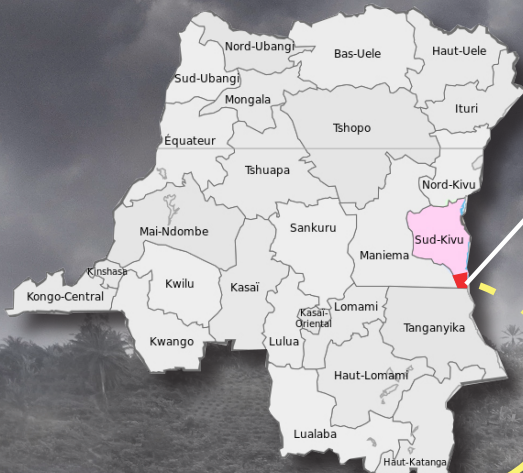
and was backed by the Rwandan, Ugandan and other regional governments.

This is the moment when William Amuri Yakutumba, the main leader of the CNPSC, first took up arms in the village of Lubondja, where he had grown up. He joined a Mai-Mai group that came to be led by General Dunia Lwendama, who had been active in the rebellions of the 1960s and Laurent Désiré Kabila’s *Hewa Bora maquis*. In 2003, a peace deal unified the country and most armed groups integrated into a new national army, including Dunia’s Mai-Mai. Yakutumba, who had become a battalion commander for Dunia, launched a new rebellion in January 2007 with the complicity of his former commander. His rebellion was eventually named the *Forces armées alleluia* (FAAL) with a political wing called *Parti pour l’action et la reconstruction du Congo* (PARC). The timing was critical: although a peace deal had united the country and armed groups were supposed to join a new national army, tensions between communities persisted and reports continued regarding Rwandan infiltrations. Articulating a fierce message aimed mostly against the Tutsi community, he claimed to have mobilize to defend the Bembe community against Banyamulenge militia that refused to integrate in the national army.

Yakutumba’s forces carved out territory along the Ubwari peninsula and the Misisi gold mines close to the South Kivu-Tanganyika provincial border. In 2001, he engaged in an ad hoc alliance with the Burundian rebels of the *Forces nationales de libération* (FNL) and became increasingly involved in racketeering and banditry on Lake Tanganyika and in the remote interior. Increasingly, and especially after the 2011 elections, Yakutumba began to argue that President Joseph Kabila, who had supported the Mai-Mai in Fizi against Rwanda and its allies during the 1998-2003 war, was in fact himself a Rwandan agent, turning his anti-Tutsi rhetoric against the Congolese army and state. By 2014, however, Yakutumba’s troops had appeared to lose their political relevance, largely content with taxing the gold trade, fishing boats, and the roads in remote areas of Fizi territory.

AROUND
45 to 55
OLD

WILLIAM AMURI YAKUTUMBA



GREW UP IN LUBONDJA,
NGANDJA SECTOR OF
FIZI TERRITORY

1990

TRAVELED TO
LUBUMBASHI
TO STUDY AT
THE UNIVERSITY



3 AFTER
YEARS

HE BROKE OFF HIS
STUDIES IN THE HISTORY
DEPARTMENT

1996



RETURNED TO FIZI
AND JOINED THE
MAI-MAI

Yakutumba's forces carved out territory along the Ubwari peninsula and the Misisi gold mines close to South Kivu-Tanganyika provincial border.

Yakutumba's Resurgence

This changed in June 2017, when Yakutumba's troops attacked a Congolese army position in Force Bendera, a hydroelectric dam just south of the border between South Kivu and Tanganyika provinces. It was a surprise attack that allowed Yakutumba to make away with a considerable stash of weapons and ammunition. Several days later, his troops attacked important FARDC bases in Lulimba and Misisi, one of the most important gold mining areas in the eastern Congo, killing senior FARDC officers and capturing significant stocks of gold and weapons. Misisi also hosts a large multinational gold mining project run by Casa Mining, which is based in Mauritius and owned largely by the Chinese company Zijin. During this offensive, witnesses reported an alliance between Yakutumba and a militia from the pygmy community of northern Tanganyika province, led by a commander named Ndume, which appears to have continued until today in this area.

While it is unclear what sparked these attacks, and whether there was an external impetus, the political significance was clear. President Kabila's second term had ended on December 19, 2016, but elections were delayed indefinitely. A deal was signed between the opposition and the ruling coalition – the Saint Sylvestre Agreement – on December 31, 2016, calling for a power-sharing government and the delay of elections. However, seeing limited indications that elections would be held and Kabila would step down, Yakutumba decided to launch a new offensive. He started these on June 1, with the attack on Bendera, but made his first major public statement regarding the CNPSC on the symbolic date of June 30, 2017, national independence day.

Yakutumba had been preparing this offensive for several months at least. Earlier in 2017, Yakutumba had begun to stitch together a coalition of armed groups reaching from Salamabila in Maniema province down to the Ubwari peninsula and up past

Uvira town, building on long-standing alliances. This was not his first initiative of this kind. Already in 2008, Yakutumba had formed the “Mai-Mai Reformé” coalition, which formally included commanders based in Maniema, Tanganyika and Shabunda, although the core was formed by commanders based in Fizi territory, such as Aoci, Mulumba and Bwasakala. In practice, though, there seems to have been limited coordination between these groups. In 2011, efforts to build a coalition resumed, and in 2013, the name CNPSC surfaced for the first time. However, the coalition was largely inoperative until its first major military actions mid-2017.

There is historical precedent for this kind of alliance. During the 1998-2003 war, Mai-Mai groups in a similar area had come together, ironically with support from Joseph Kabila's government, against the Rwandan army and its allies, forming the “Secteur Opérationel Est”. Since then, there has never been such a broad-based alliance in South Kivu province. Yakutumba's success in bringing together around a 10 disparate groups from half a dozen ethnic communities – but with a preponderance of Bembe commanders – speaks to the skill of those brokering this alliance.

A key broker in some of these coalitions involving groups from southwestern Fizi was General Shabani Sikatenda, a former rebel leader who had fought alongside Laurent-Désiré Kabila to overthrow Mobutu, becoming the head of intelligence in the national army in 1997. After officially retiring from the national army in 2015, he settled in his home village near Kilembwe, close to the border with Maniema province. There, he began setting up his own militia and imposing taxes. He joined forces with Yakutumba in 2017, later telling the local population: “There are two lions here, the lion of the forest, Yakutumba, and the lion of the town, Sikatenda, and we know each other and we are working together to get rid of the savagery of Kabila.”¹

¹ Interview with local civil society leader in Kilembwe, July 2018.

Active Members of the CNPSC

The Mai-Mai Aoci

The Mai-Mai Aoci recruits from within the Bembe community, is based around Mbandakila in the Itombwe highlands. Aoci has loosely been under Yaktumba's command in 2007, but created his own group several years later.

The Mai-Mai Mulumba

The Mai-Mai Mulumba is led by an old rebel called Mulumba who is said to be in his eighties. Although he is from the Nyindu community, he is based in an area populated by Bembe close to Kilembwe.

The Mai-Mai Malaika

The Mai-Mai Malaika is a group created by Sheh Assani, a young man who studied in a local Islamic school around Wamaza, Maniema province. He is from the Bangubangu community and leads a militia that emerged in protest to the activities of the Banro mining company at their Namoya gold mine.

The Mai-Mai Napata

The Mai-Mai Napata is a splinter faction of the Mai-Mai Mulumba, which broke away due to ethnic tensions within the group. Mulumba is Nyindu, while Napata is Bembe. They are based in Lulenge sector of southwestern Fizi.

The Mai-Mai Mshabah

The Mai-Mai Mshabah (aka Aigle) is active around the towns of Kilembwe and Mai-Ndombe and is led by the FARDC deserter Aigle.

The Mai-Mai Wilondja

The Mai-Mai (or just "Groupe") Wilondja is a small group recruiting from the Bembe community and active around Ngalula, south of the Misisi mining area.

The Mai-Mai Eshilo

The Mai-Mai Eshilo are a Bembe-dominated group based in the hills to the west of Lake Tangnyika, along the border between Uvira and Fizi territories.

The Mai-Mai of René Itongwa

The Mai-Mai of René Itongwa, a Bembe deserter from the FARDC, are based in the hills around Makobola and Kikozi in Uvira territory. Itongwa is from the Bembe community and had been a Mai-Mai in groups led by Baudouin Nakabaka and Zabuloni Munyentware before joining the national army.

The Mai-Mai Biloze Bishambuke

The Mai-Mai Biloze Bishambuke are a coalition of mostly Bafulero groups, which started in 2012/2012 in Milimba, but expanded to the Itombwe highlands around Bijombo, where they are reportedly led by a commander called Ngarukiye.

The Mai-Mai Réunion

The Mai-Mai Réunion is a Bembe-dominated group active around Soma and Lusambo, along the border between Uvira and Fizi territories. It used to be called the Mai-Mai Mupekenya.

The Mai-Mai Ebuela*

The Mai-Mai Ebuela are led by Ebuela, a former Bembe senior commander of Yakutumba, who split off from him in 2013 but who later joined the CNPSC alliance and who is active in the hills to the west of Lake Tanganyika, between Lweba and Mboko, and in the Hauts Plateaux.

*Ebuela surrendered in January 2019, but some of his troops are reported to have joined other members of the CNPSC.

Sikatenda had also been active in harassing workers at a nearby gold mining site in Namoya, which is run by the Canadian company Banro. In January 2016, he is reported to have given some weapons to a group of youths who were protesting against Banro for having evicted them from a local quarry. This group, which came to be led by a certain Sheh (Sheikh) Assani Mitende from the Bangubangu community,² called itself Mai-Mai Malaika (Angels) and succeeded in kidnapping two foreign employees of Banro in late 2016. As an indication of the interconnectedness of local groups, Yakutumba then helped facilitate the freeing of a Tanzanian hostage in late 2016, allegedly by negotiating a ransom payment. Sikatenda also worked to federate smaller local groups, more akin to bandits, led by the FARDC deserters Colonel Aigle, as well as Pichen and Mshaba.

The Mai-Mai Malaika, which became one of the most important groups in the CNPSC coalition, was itself also linked to another prominent figure: Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, currently the presidential candidate for Joseph Kabila's ruling coalition. According to numerous local and foreign sources, Shadary, who is from this part of Maniema province, was involved in the initial stages of the armed mobilization in 2016, riling up local youth and artisanal miners against Banro.³ According to two separate sources, Shadary allegedly played a role in putting Sheh Assani in touch with Sikatenda and was instrumental in obtaining the release of the kidnapped foreigners.⁴ Our sources suggest that Shadary was attempting to gain the favor of the local community during the electoral period, and to position himself within Kabila's inner circle. This relationship reportedly ended in 2017 when the Mai-Mai Malaika broadened their focus from Banro to the Congolese state, attacking local officials and the security services.

One of Yakutumba's challenges was to mend relations with former commanders who had fallen out with him. This included Ebuela, his former operational commander who had defected from him in late 2013 as well as Réunion, who had been allied to Yakutumba in the past but had fallen out with him over his alliance with the Burundian FOREBU rebels and because of his abuses of local communities. Yakutumba also contacted armed group leaders from the Fuliro and Vira community based in the hills around Uvira, including Kashomba, Ngarukiye, and Byamungu, each of whom leads small groups. To the north of Fizi, in Mwenga territory, he contacted commanders such as Nyakiliba and Ibanda, both from the Nyindu community. These groups, however, were small and had little impact; Fizi and Uvira remained the hub of the CNPSC activity.

After the attacks in June 2017, the CNPSC coalition was beaten back by the army. Yet, it would soon relaunch operations, attacking Mboko, along the shores of Lake Tanganyika, on September 24, 2017. Here, the strengths of having a broad coalition became clear: Yakutumba's troops participated, but benefitted from the firepower of Mai-Mai commanders based in the hills to the west of Mboko, including Réunion, Ngarukiye, and René Itongwa. These leaders had met two days prior in Kazimiya, at the base of the Ubwari peninsula, to plan the operation.

The attack took the FARDC troops by surprise – Mboko is a several days' march from Lulimba, where Yakutumba had been most active previously – and the coalition quickly took control of the town, blocking the main thoroughfare of the region, the National Road 5. The main target of the attack appeared to be Colonel Samy Matumo, the commander of the 3302nd regiment, whom Yakutumba had just chased out of the Misisi gold mines.

² The Mai-Mai Malaika was initiated by a local Muslim leader called Sheh Haruna, who then designated a local youth leader called Sheikh Assani to lead the movement.

³ Interviews with Malaika combatants, business consultants, a foreign diplomat, and local civil society. See also, Justine Brabant, "Au Congo-RDC, les guerres noircissent le bilan de Kabila", *Mediapart*, August 11, 2018.

⁴ Interview with foreign security official, October 2018; interview with civil society activist, November 2018; interview with foreign civil society activist, December 2018.

Speaking to a local journalist shortly afterwards, Yakutumba said:

“There are three things that we see as very, very bad that motivate us to overthrow Joseph Kabila’s government. First, bad governance in our country Congo. Second, the invasion of our country by neighboring countries with the goal of splitting our country into two parts... what you are seeing is not an ethnic war, but a war of invasion...all of this is something that Joseph Kabila has done to break the strength of the children of the Congo, in order to split the country into two parts. The third reason is because we thought we had become a democracy, but President Joseph Kabila has thrown this democracy away.”⁵

From interviews with members of the CNPSC, it appears that the rebels themselves were surprised by their quick defeat of the FARDC in Mboko, just 40 kilometers south of Uvira, the second largest town in South Kivu province. Some of the commanders, in particular Saidi Ekanda (Yakutumba’s naval commander), Ebuela (Yakutumba’s former operational commander), and René Itongwa (an FARDC deserter with his own militia), inspired by the ease with which they had taken Mboko, then took the initiative to launch an attack on Uvira on September 27, 2017. The attack reached the southern outskirts of town, briefly taking control of the port, and receiving support from Mai-Mai groups such as the one led by Makanaki based in the hills overlooking the Kalundu port, provoking a panic among the ill-prepared FARDC. Other Fuleru Mai-Mai groups, however, refused to help the coalition, allegedly having been bought off by Fulero politicians. The UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO eventually stepped in, using its attack helicopters to defend the town. Local observers counted one Mai-Mai, one MONUSCO blue helmet, and 13 FARDC dead following the attack.

It was after this attack that the first large CNPSC meeting took place in Kazimiya at the end of October. During several days, the various coalition members discussed the terms of collaboration and the structure of the movement. There were also delegates present from elsewhere in the Kivus provinces, from Beni, Bunyakiri, Mwenga, and Shabunda.

Following this attack, which made international headlines and sent shock waves through the Kinshasa government, the FARDC launched a counteroffensive. The CNPSC, including those usually based close to Uvira, retreated toward Kazimiya, at the foot of the Ubwari peninsula, where they were based until December 2017, controlling the shores of the lake and the hinterlands.

⁵ An interview with journalist Jean de la Croix of the Nipashe broadcast, which can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vej1zQgQ-DU&t=159s>.

The FARDC Offensive and the Fraying of the Alliance

The FARDC suffered significant losses during this initial phase of the CNPSC of June – December 2017. On October 2, for example, rebels reportedly killed 92 soldiers and captured another 13 during an ambush south of Uvira town. It was not until mid-December that the FARDC launched a counteroffensive and was able to inflict serious losses against the coalition.

The FARDC offensive started off badly, with a targeted attack against General Philemon Yav, a prominent FARDC general close to President Kabila, who had recently been made commander of FARDC operations in South Kivu. The ambush, which took place in mid-December close to Lulimba, failed, prompting an all-out assault on the CNPSC positions around Lake Tanganyika. The offensive was an indication of what could be accomplished by the FARDC with determination and sufficient resources. Reportedly, General Yav's presence between October 2017 and March 2018 was accompanied by an injection of money and equipment in the area. Local observers saw large amounts of ammunition arrive in the area, and new, well-motivated soldiers accompanied Yav. His troops were supported by the deployment of FARDC Special Forces based in Maniema province, which attacked the CNPSC around Namoya and Kilembwe.

This FARDC offensive, however, was accompanied by a rash of human rights violations. According to a local non-profit, for example, in Makobola, 15 kilometers south of Uvira, at least 25 women were gang raped by soldiers in late September 2018. A journalist for IRIN found evidence for many other abuses, which alienated the local population and drove some youths to join the CNPSC.⁶

Yakutumba was forced to retreat from the port of Kazimiya to the savannah of southwestern Fizi territory, where he built a new camp in Membelelo village, while the other members of the coalition returned to their respective bastions. Yaktumba was based in Membelelo between February and May 2018, when, again under FARDC pressure, he fled toward the forest around the Lwama river, close to Salamabila in Maniema province, where the Mai-Mai

Malaika welcomed him and his remaining troops.

Much of the rivalry was conducted away from the battlefield, with the FARDC and senior government politicians seeking to take advantage of the shaky cohesion among the rebels to pit them against each other and encourage defections, often playing on ethnic divides. The most important such case played out between Yakutumba and Ekanda, his important naval commander. Both are from the Bembe community, but the former is from Ngandja sector, while the latter is from Mutambala sector. According to several sources, Nehemie Mwilanya, President Kabila's chief of staff, who is also from Mutambala, helped convince Ekanda to defect with several dozen soldiers to Burundi in February 2018, from where he was handed over to Burundian army by Congolese fishermen who had suffered from Ekanda's abuses.

Once Yakutumba arrived around Salamabila, he began to rebuild his strength, along with the Malaika. Once the immediate threat had subsided for the Congolese government, the FARDC allowed its military pressure to fizzle out, coinciding with a change in the military command in South Kivu province: in August 2018, General David Rugayi was named to lead operations in Fizi and Uvira, while General Akili Mundos Muhindo was named to command the whole province.

Meanwhile, CNPSC members have ramped up their attacks against the FARDC. On June 24, 2018, CNPSC troops attacked the Namoya mining site again, stealing equipment and money. On September 15, they launched attacks against FARDC positions in a wide radius around the town of Kilembwe, taking control of the town and forcing the army to beat a strategic retreat. Yakutumba took advantage of this to cross towards the forest of Ngandja. He is currently based between Milimba and the southern edges of the Itombwe highlands. Yakutumba has remained relatively active, visiting the troops of Mai-Mai commanders René and Réunion in December 2018 above Swima and Mboko, and then participating in a large meeting in Kitala, in the highlands of Uvira, on January 11, 2019. That meeting featured delegates

⁶ Philip Kleinfeld and Gaius Kowene, "Inside the Congolese army's campaign of rape and looting in South Kivu," *IRIN*, December 18, 2017.

from the following Mai-Mai groups: René, Réunion, Ngarukiye, Kashumba, Malaika, and Makanaki.

Since General Rugayi took over in August 2018, only two major FARDC operations have taken place: in mid-September, to take back control over Kilembwe following the CNPSC offensive there; and in late November, in the highlands overlooking Mboko and Swima, against the groups led by René and Rénuon there. While the FARDC claimed a victory in this last offensive, they also reportedly suffered numerous casualties, and the CNPSC briefly took control of the lakeside town of Mboko on December 2, 2018 before being pushed back. Members of the government have probably been more successful with political overtures to co-opt some of its members. The largest recent success has come in Maniema province, where two large defections of Mai-Mai Malaika members took place in April and October 2018, involving commanders Pichen and Shetani Kapela, respectively. Dozens of their fighters surrendered and demobilized following deals struck with provincial political leaders.

The largest and most important defection took place at the end of January 2019, when Ebuela wa Seba, Yakutumba's former deputy and one of the best known commanders in the CNPSC, surrendered with – according to him – 300 combatants. Ebuela said that “we already have a new president of the Republic, we must now open a new page to build our country.”⁷ Sources close to Ebuela suggest that a deal had been negotiated between him and the national government to facilitate his surrender.

The CNPSC's profile in South Kivu is also becoming eclipsed by regional conflict dynamics that involve Rwandan and Burundian armed groups, as well as the governments of those two countries.

⁷ Lubunga Lavoix, “RDC-Fizi : Reddition d'un chef milicien avec ses 300 éléments”, *Actualité.cd*, February 1, 2019.

The Rising Regional Tensions

As the CNPSC was pushed back toward the south and west of Fizi territory, a new cluster of conflicts emerged in the highlands just to the west of Uvira town. At the heart of this conflict are two main camps: Burundian rebels who rebelled against the government of Pierre Nkurunziza following the failed coup of 2015 and the ensuing repression; and various Rwandan rebellions, old and new, seeking to position themselves against Kigali. Both countries are supporting their neighbor's enemies, while the Congolese and Ugandan governments are demonstrating considerable flexibility, switching alliances as they see convenient. This unrest has led the FARDC to shift its focus away from the CNPSC while drawing in some members of that coalition.

The most important Burundian armed groups are the RED-Tabara (former FRONABU-Tabara) and the Nzabampema wing of the National Forces of Liberation (FNL). Over the past several years, the Burundian armed forces (FDN) has been attacking these groups on Congolese territory, often benefitting from the tacit or active complicity of the Congolese armed forces (FARDC). On the other side of the battlefield, the FNL – which has been in the eastern Congo for many years – has cultivated relationships with Mai-Mai groups such as those led by Makanaki, Rushaba, René, Réunion, and Nyerere.

Meanwhile, former Rwandan chief of staff Faustin Kayumba Nyamwasa, who defected in 2010 and since then resides in exile in South Africa, has been supporting a small rebellion in the Uvira highlands. Operating under the same name as Kayumba's political party, the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), this group had allied themselves with Banyamulenge militias like the Gumino and Twiganeho while receiving support from the Congolese government. Since December 2018, there have been reports suggesting dissent within the RNC, possibly provoked by outside instigators, even as some analysts speak of Rwandan support for the RED-Tabara to attack the RNC.

While fighting continues in the highlands of Uvira territory, a dissident wing of the FDLR - the National Council for Renewal and Democracy-Ubwyunge (CNRD) - seems to be heading towards this area, from where they are reportedly trying to navigate a passage toward Burundi. It is not clear what role the CNRD will play in these complex interplay of alliances, but it is likely that these crosscurrents will affect the CNPSC, as the Congolese army shifts focus and some members of the CNPSC seek new alliances and sources of support.

Analysis

The structure of the movement

The CNPSC is a noteworthy counterpoint to the trend of fragmentation of armed groups in the region. The number of groups in North and South Kivu alone has gone from 20-40 in 2008 to around 140 in 2018. While there are sporadic alliances among these groups, the CNPSC is by far the largest coalition, both in terms of the number of members, as well as in its geographic reach.

Nonetheless, it would be an exaggeration to call the group a cohesive or well-structured coalition. While Yakutumba presents himself as secretary-general and commander of the CNPSC, the other members of the coalition do not appear to have formal roles in a joint command, and they usually are not based in the same place. When they organize an attack, Yakutumba may send weapons and ammunition to other members of the coalition, and coordinate strategy. There are also reports of combatants trained by the Yakutumba core group who were subsequently deployed to other coalition members.

However, the different coalition partners retain a high degree of autonomy. This lack of cohesion plays itself out in day-to-day operations, as well. According to numerous sources, for example, the attack on Uvira was not the result of joint strategic planning, but rather the spontaneous initiative of Ekanda, Ebuela, and Itongwa, who were trying to take advantage of the FARDC's disorganization after their attack on Mboko. Another example was provided by local fishermen, who told CRG researchers that on numerous occasions they had tried to address insecurity on Lake Tanganyika with Yakutumba, until it became clear that the latter had little influence over his navy, led by Ekanda.

In June 2017, a CNPSC Facebook appeared, followed by a Twitter account in September 2017, and videos were posted on YouTube. Both accounts, however, have not been used since October 2017. Raphael Looba Undji – a politician who has been the leader of Yakutumba's political wing – and is said to play the role of political coordinator, has had little visibility in these new media efforts, some of which appear to involve Congolese diaspora members. The most recent public statement of the CNPSC was made in September 2018,

when the coalition briefly took control of Kilembwe and Yakutumba and Sheh Assani organized a meeting to greet the local population, speaking to a variety of national political issues, including the controversial use of the voting machine in the upcoming elections and the exclusion of several opposition leaders from the upcoming presidential polls.

The surprising strength of the movement

How can we explain the rapid rise of the movement? In part, a sequence of chance occurrences played a role. The surprise attack on Force Benera in June 2017 provided Yakutumba with the equipment and ammunition necessary to take control of the Misisi mining area, which in turn provided him with a significant amount of gold and money, which helped in forging the broader coalition. In addition, the Malaika seem to have derived significant resources from attacks on and kidnappings of Banro personnel and property.

More than chance, however, was involved in their rise. The weakness of the Congolese government has been a major factor. After the injection of weapons and money that arrived with General Yav, resources began to dwindle, leaving soldiers demoralized. As elsewhere, the FARDC units deployed on the frontlines suffer from low troop numbers, with some regiments – which are supposed to have 1,200 soldiers – left with only several hundred troops. Since Salambila is along the border between Maniema and South Kivu provinces, operations have also suffered from competing command structures, with troops from South Kivu being paid and fed (or often not) from Kindu, the capital of Maniema. Yakutumba and his allies also benefitted from seizing major stockpiles of weapons that were poorly protected. Some FARDC officers even suspected treason from within their ranks, and claim that some of their colleagues sold weapons and equipment to Yakutumba, or helped him seize some of their stockpiles.

Ethnic antagonisms also have complicated FARDC operations. Many of the FARDC officers deployed in the operations are from the Hutu and Tutsi communities, against whom there are deep resentments among

the population. While General Yav had made sure not to deploy many of those officers on the front line, the current South Kivu operational commander General Rugayi, himself a Rwandophone, has fallen back on units led by officers from these communities – a longstanding feature of military operations in Fizi and Uvira territories – which has stoked tensions.

There have also been persistent rumors of outside funding being provided to Yakutumba from Congolese politicians and businessmen abroad, especially in Tanzania and Zambia, where there is a large Bembe community and where Yakutumba has forged a support network over the years. According to a variety of sources, Yakutumba has been in touch with members of Congolese opposition parties and other armed groups from North and South Kivu. While this has been difficult to confirm, it is clear that Yakutumba, and perhaps other members of this coalition, have been able to tap into regional trade networks through which they sell gold and other commodities.

Implications for stability in the region

The birth of the CNPSC takes place amid a general deterioration of the security situation in the Congo. In Fizi territory alone, 127,000 people were displaced in the second half of 2017, and displacement in the Kivus increased by 700,000 people between September 2016 and December 2017.⁸

It is clear that at least some of this escalation is due to the national political context. Even though most armed groups are based in remote areas a thousand miles from Kinshasa, their leaders are keen followers of national politics. Political turmoil around the delaying of elections, which were pushed back by two years from the original date of December 2016 and were finally held on December 30, 2018, has reverberated in the Kivus and has affected the dynamics of contention. Many armed group leaders and their supporters expected the crisis to provide

new opportunities, leading some armed group commanders, together with some politicians, to ramp up mobilization in order to position themselves, although in other cases it also led politicians to renew efforts to demobilize existing combatants.

Armed groups, including the CNPSC, which were previously largely content with controlling and taxing rural areas, have begun to increasingly target government and UN installations. For example, the CNPSC has been explicit in its denunciation of Kabila's government, stating that it will fight to "liberate" the Congo, while in North Kivu, the Mai-Mai Kilalo and other armed groups have also made clear their opposition to the government. In January 2018, Mbusa Nyamwisi, a veteran of opposition and rebel politics, declared, "there will not be elections. So, we need to use the same means as Kabila and the opposition knows this."⁹

The inauguration of Felix Tshisekedi as president has taken many armed group leaders by surprise. Some were expecting Kabila to force through his own candidate, Emmanuel Shadary, and many others had sympathies for Martin Fayulu. The controversial election of Tshisekedi, despite reports by the Catholic Church and independent media that Fayulu had won, has led many armed groups to reevaluate their position. Some, such as Ebuela, have sought to demobilize, while others are still weighing their options. However, without a functional demobilization program, and as conflict simmers on in the region, there are good chances that members of the CNPSC will reinvent themselves in new roles and alliances.

⁸ All figures are from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), www.unocha.org/drc. No displacement figures have been published since December 2017.

⁹ Pierre Benetti and Joan Tilouine, 'Mbusa Nyamwisi ou le retour d'un chef de guerre dans le bourbier congolais,' *Le Monde*, January 30, 2018, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/01/30/mbusa-nyamwisi-ou-le-retour-d-un-chef-de-guerre-dans-le-bourbier-congolais_5249371_3212.html (28 February 2018)

Conclusion

The trajectory of the CNPSC does not so much point to an organization that has the capacity of seriously challenging the Congolese state. It is unlikely to take control of major urban areas, and its internal incoherence suggests that the alliance will probably not persist in its current shape for much longer. Nonetheless, the threat that the Congo faces today is not a rebel insurrection that could annex part of the country, as was the case in 1996-1997 and in 1998-2003, but rather of a simmering humanitarian crisis created by a proliferation of armed groups and an army that lacks the political will and resources to conduct the operations necessary.

The CNPSC is a good example of that kind of threat – it has been able to federate a number of other armed groups, propelling an attack against the trade hub of Uvira as well as against two international gold mining companies – Casa Mining and Banro. Most importantly, the fighting with the Congolese army displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians in Fizi and Uvira territories, almost certainly leading to deaths among the most vulnerable due to disease and hunger. It has also led to the increased militarization of Fizi territory – thousands of soldiers and combatants are deployed there, taxing the local population, hindering economic activity, and tearing at the social fabric. This in turn, has pushed many young men into the ranks of the various armed groups.

There is no easy solution of this crisis. It would be easy to draw up a familiar list of actions that need to be taken: a community-based demobilization initiative, reconciliation projects, and local economic development programs, all on top of peace talks and, if necessary, counter-insurgency operations that take the security of local populations seriously. The problem is not in devising shrewd technical solutions; it is in forging the political will among the main stakeholders to act. Above all, the Congolese government, which must launch and manage most of the above initiatives, has been hitherto unwilling to take serious, sustained action. The coming months in the Kivus will form a critical test for the incoming Tshisekedi government. Will it be able to reform the Congolese state and bring about stability?

Further reading

Stearns, Jason, et al. “Mai-Mai Yakutumba: Resistance and Racketeering in Fizi, South Kivu.” (2013).

Verweijen, Judith. “Taking Uvira? The Remarkable Tenacity of the CNPSC Coalition”, 28 September 2018, <https://suluhu.org/2017/09/28/cnpsc-uvira-fizi/>

Verweijen, Judith. “Shedding Light on Why Mining Companies in Eastern Congo are Under Attack|” *The Conversation*, 30 August 2017, <https://theconversation.com/shedding-light-on-why-mining-companies-in-eastern-congo-are-under-attack-82922>

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