LOCAL VOICES

Congolese communities and the Kivu conflict

LOCAL VOICES
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Introduction

International Alert, Local Voices and Search for Common Ground are proud to announce the launch of their joint project, ‘Local Voices: Congolese communities and the Kivu conflict’.

Through a series of stories using personal testimonies and photographs, the project strives to give a voice to local people, from warlords and youth to displaced women and local authorities. The project focuses on sensitive issues such as armed groups, the weakness of state authorities, or tensions between ethnic communities, and places the reader in the daily lives of the communities most affected by armed conflict.

Local Voices aims to inform the general public as well as policy makers about the dynamics and triggers of violence in eastern Congo and put local populations at the centre of concerns.

For Alexis Bouvy, project director and co-founder of Local Voices, the project is about “giving a voice to populations who have no opportunities to share their experiences with armed conflicts, to express their concerns, their difficulties, their frustrations and their fears.”

Maria Lange, DRC country manager at International Alert says: “The exclusion of Congolese people from decision-making has been one of the obstacles to peace in DRC. Giving them a voice is an important step when it comes to building peace.”

The photostories were published weekly from 5 December 2013 to 28 January 2014.

Disclaimer: *Adopting the voice of the local actors does not mean that International Alert, Local Voices or Search for Common Ground endorse their views or defend their 'cause'. Instead we seek to communicate the fears, beliefs and wishes of local people in order to contribute to the search for sustainable peace-building solutions.*

Part 1

Masisi, the Wound of Kivu

Torn apart by 20 years of bloody conflict, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the most violence-stricken parts of the world. In a region with colossal economic potential, many armed groups without specific goals regularly engage in fighting with devastating consequences for the local populations.

The armed conflict in the Kivus is extremely complex and made up of a mix of regional politics, anarchic exploitation of mineral wealth, ethnic rivalries, land conflicts, weakness of the state and political opportunism. A seemingly infinite maze in which the territory of Masisi, North Kivu, occupies a central place. While the recent dismantling of the M23 rebel group opens a new window of opportunity for peace, many deep-rooted challenges remain of great concern.

Widuhaye, a 10-year-old displaced girl in front of Katale IDP camp. Masisi territory, North Kivu, July 2013.

A PARADISE WITHOUT ARMED GROUPS

“Without the armed groups, Masisi would be a real paradise!”, Joseph Sukisa, deputy administrator of the Masisi territory in charge of economy and development stated. “We have everything here! Fields, pastures, minerals! Our lands are very fertile!”

Despite its peaceful mountainous and green landscapes with economic potential, Masisi has been the scene of a deadly armed conflict for 20 years, which has resulted in colossal humanitarian consequences. United Nations agencies speak of some 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the territory of Masisi alone, out of a total of two million IDPs in North and South Kivu, the two provinces most affected by the war in DRC.

This young boy is walking with a plastic bag with cigarettes that he sells one by one in order to help his parents pay for his school fees. In Masisi, poverty is widespread and families can hardly afford basic needs such as medical care or education.

Ten years after the signing of the Sun City peace agreement (2003), seven years after the first democratic elections (2006), which ought to have ushered in a new era of peace and prosperity for the country, the east of DRC remains prisoner to an endless cycle of wars.

FDLR, APCLS, Nyatura, FDDH, Mai-Mai Cheka, Guides, MAC... So many abbreviations for the many armed groups that continue to clash in Masisi and its surroundings.

THE REASONS FOR THIS VIOLENCE?

They are as numerous and complex as the participating armed groups. Joseph, the deputy administrator of Masisi, gives us his point of view on the continuation of the war in his country:

“If armed groups continue to exist in Masisi, this is not because of tribalism, but because of the M23 which, with the support of Rwanda, seeks to balkanize our country” he said. “But the children of Congo are hard-working and cannot accept this balkanization. That is why they continue to create armed groups!” he adds without flinching.

A young IDP girl with her brother in her arms. Behind her, down the hill, the IDP camp of Lushebere. Masisi territory, North Kivu, September 2013.

This discourse of ‘balkanization’ of Congo by external forces remains widespread in Kivu and in the territory of Masisi in particular. It is based on the existence of the M23 until November 2013, and before that of the CNDP and RCD, three successive rebel movements evolving in eastern Congo since 1998 and who have, according to many reports by the United Nations, received broad support from neighboring countries, in particular from Rwanda and Uganda. But it is also a political discourse that oversimplifies the profound and multiple causes of the armed conflicts and masks internal problems in Congo.

Young members of APCLS armed group, the People's Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo, in their military camp in Lukweti. They are just coming back from military operations in Pinga, Walikale territory, against elements from Cheka armed group. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

For this reason, a leader of the Tutsi community based in Goma condemns in strong terms a discourse that he considers manipulative:

“Pointing the finger at Rwanda is a way to distract the people!” he tells us. “The discourse of balkanization serves the interests of the politicians in power. It allows them to divert attention away from the real issues, namely the lack of good governance and the incompetence of the authorities.”

This woman and her two kids stand on the remains of their home in the village of Tunda, that has been destroyed in November 2012 during fighting between armed groups. Eight months later, inhabitants from Tunda are coming back to their village in order to rebuild their homes, but still live in nearby Katale IDP camp. Tunda, Masisi territory, July 2013.

Sixty kilometers north from Goma, in Masisi, Hutu women displaced by war will tell us exactly the same:

“What brings armed groups here? It is the weakness and the incompetence of the government! It’s our MPs themselves who stir up our youths, who organize them and distribute weapons among them! It’s the people in power who create these armed groups!” the women exclaim, disgusted by what the candidates for whom they voted for in the last elections in November 2011 are doing.

Mama Mirimo had to flee her village because of fightings between APCLS and Cheka groups. She took refuge in an IDP camp in Nyabiondo. One of her sons recently died from disease in the camp. Access to medical care remains problematic in the area, although several humanitarian agencies intervene in the health sector. Nyabiondo, Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

The discourse of balkanization today continues to reflect the real or imagined fears and feelings of insecurity (physical insecurity as well as economic and political insecurity) of a large part of the population in Masisi and Kivu. Masisi is indeed the center of a particularly sensitive issue, namely the return of the Congolese Tutsi (but also Hutu) refugees who, having fled the war and ethnic violence that began in Masisi in 1993, remain in Rwanda and Uganda to this day and now have to (or at least a large part of them) go back to Masisi.

However, many people from other ethnic communities in Masisi are not really in favor of these returns, accusing the refugees of stealing their lands. For that reason, they question the nationality of a large number of refugees (70,000, according to UNHCR).

Wyduhaye, a 10-year-old displaced girl, and her grandma in their shelter. Katale IDP camp, Masisi territory, North Kivu, July 2013.

To understand this, one should know that land abandoned or cheaply sold by refugees when they fled has often been occupied by those who remained in Masisi. The ‘new’ occupants who have sometimes exploited the land for 20 years now consider themselves as the rightful owners and often have no intention of returning it. Moreover, in a context where politics are strongly influenced by ethnicity, the arrival of thousands of Hutu and Tutsi electors in Masisi doesn’t serve the interests of the Hundu community. In such a context, the return of the refugees, if poorly managed, can be a real ‘time bomb’ for the peace process in Kivu.

A woman walks in front of an IDP camp, Lushebere, Masisi territory, September 2013.

The return of refugees also depends on another factor that obstructs the end of armed conflicts in Kivu: the dismantling of the FDLR, the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda. These Rwandan Hutu rebels arrived in Kivu in 1994 and many of them have actively participated in carrying out the genocides (especially those in the higher ranks). The Congolese Tutsi refugees won't ever be able to return without fearing for their safety as long as the FDLR is still there.

A member of APCLS armed group, on the road between Nyabiondo and Lukweti. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

While these two particularly complex problems were never met with complete and satisfactory solutions, some armed groups have used them to make claims of their own. This only heats the discussion on these topics and diminishes the likelihood of finding a solution that all parties involved can agree on. For example, the M23 rebel group, a month before being defeated militarily by the national army, posed as its main condition for disarmament the repatriation of the refugees and the dismantling of the FDLR.

A young female merchant set up her small shop just below a military camp of the national army in Katale. The camp is empty, as Congolese soldiers have left for Goma and Nyiragongo territory in order to fight with M23 rebels. Katale, Masisi territory, July 2013.

Although the military dismantling of the M23 in October constitutes a victory without precedent for the proponents of the discourse of balkanization, it should not ignore the many profound challenges that remain both on the internal level (local and national) and on the external level. In Congo, armed groups are also the result of a corrupt and failed political system that, under the cover of democracy and multi-party elections, hardly try to cover predatory, brutal and violent dynamics. This system did not just pop out of the blue. It is rooted in a long, complex and tortuous history, dating back at least to the Belgian colonial era, if not further.

Part 2

Between army and militias: A volatile balance

In the many villages of Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), rebels and government soldiers walk side by side in the streets, go to the same bars, and sometimes even drink beers together. In these areas, authority and force are not subject to any monopoly, but rather to a state of permanent negotiation between the different armed actors present. This situation leads to unusual compromises, which may or may not hold over time.

Jean-Claude, a soldier in the national army. Nyabiondo, North Kivu, September 2013.

Since the beginning of 2013 the Mai-Mai rebels of the APCLS, the People's Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo (formerly known as the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo), have been able to walk calmly along the dusty streets of Nyabiondo, a small town about 90 kilometers north of Goma in the Masisi territory. Perhaps this is not overly surprising in a province which contains more than 15 armed groups, except that

soldiers of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) walk the same dusty streets in their boots without this posing the slightest problem.

In Nyabiondo, rebels and soldiers speak to one another, interact, smoke a cigarette together, or share a beer in a local nganda (bar). The two hills which overlook Nyabiondo on the opposite sides of the town have gained military significance: one is for the rebels, the other for the FARDC. Sandwiched between these hills are houses made out of mud, straw and corrugated iron, which house the town's population of a few thousand.

Among this overabundance of frequently scruffy soldiers it is extremely difficult to tell the different factions apart: you can find as many FARDC soldiers in civilian clothing as militiamen wearing FARDC shirts and khaki berets. The same goes for policemen: officers of the Congolese National Police (PNC) wear the same uniforms as members of the APCLS police, if indeed they have one.

Today's mutual acceptance between the FARDC and the APCLS in Nyabiondo has not always prevailed.

"In the past, FARDC soldiers and APCLS rebels would confront each other as soon as they met!" explains a female resident.

Officers of the armed APCLS group using radio communication in a bar in Nyabiondo. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

“Today, we are pleased that the goat and the lion can eat at the same table!” she says. Since the soldiers and rebels ceased to be enemies, Nyabiondo’s population has enjoyed a certain level of calm. In early September 2013 the town’s schools opened their doors to hundreds of students, a clear sign that security had improved again.

As a result of the clashes between the FARDC and the M23 rebels in November 2012, when the M23 seized Goma, relations between the national army and the APCLS warmed. As the M23 is their ‘common enemy’, the APCLS assisted the FARDC, particularly in Sake, to halt the M23’s advance. In exchange for this alliance, provincial military staff allowed APCLS members to gather in the towns of Kitchanga and Nyabiondo with the idea of integrating them into FARDC.

However, things are rarely that simple. In Kinshasa the central government refused to sanction the automatic integration of the militia into the army, instead insisting on a military competency exam to establish which rank integrated militiamen should occupy, which stalled the process. Although the situation remained under control in Nyabiondo, this was not the case in Kitchanga, where APCLS members came face to face with their worst enemies: FARDC commanders from the former National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) rebellion.

APCLS policemen stand guard while their commander negotiates with the major of the Congolese National Police in a shop. APCLS militiamen, government soldiers and national police officers have peacefully coexisted in Nyabiondo for over 12 months. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

Relations between the two groups deteriorated rapidly over the control of Kitchanga, and were exacerbated by the manipulation of ethnic tensions. Over the course of a few days in February and March 2013 clashes claimed at least 90 lives (according to the report of the Expert Group of theUnited Nations). Five hundred houses were destroyed, 100,000 people fled the city, and Kitchanga was virtually wiped off the map of Masisi.

Faced with the violence in Kitchanga, the people of Nyabiondo were delighted by the peaceful cohabitation between the FARDC and the APCLS. The question remains, however, as to how long it will last.

Major Indi, FARDC commander stationed in Nyabiondo, in his military position. In September 2013 the FARDC was vastly outnumbered by APCLS members in Nyabiondo. Masisi territory, North Kivu, September 2013.

This cohabitation between the two forces has not meant that FARDC officers stationed in Nyabiondo have become ‘best friends’ with APCLS members. Indeed, far from it. While waiting for an order from his superiors about a possible change of attitude towards the rebels, a FARDC officer gave us his point of view on the security situation he faces on the ground, as well as on APCLS members: “[The APCLS is] a tribal army that only protects its own community!”

FARDC soldiers on a break in civilian clothing, having a smoke in the remains of an old tea factory dating from the colonial era. Nyabiondo, North Kivu, August 2013.

For the civil authorities of the Osso-Banyungu sector (a local government entity), the headquarters of which are in Nyabiondo, the situation is no clearer. The APCLS has tended to set itself up as an alternative authority, with the aim of reaping the benefits accrued through the exercise of state authority. Rebels have set up roadblocks, where they tax local people on market days, as well as coltan freight trucks from Walikale on their way to Goma. When given the opportunity, APCLS colonels interfere in civil matters, such as debt resolution or land conflicts, acting as mediators or arbitrators. Holding a gun helps you to be heard.

An officer of the PNC (National Congolese Police) in Nyabiondo. A considerable number of Nyabiondo's policemen are former Mai-Mai militiamen of the Akilami group who occupied Nyabiondo during the RCD rebellion (1998-2003). For this reason, some of the town's inhabitants describe them as 'family police', as the former militiamen were often children from the village. Nyabiondo, Masisi territory, September 2013.

To avoid these processes being abused and to remind APCLS members that their role is not to replace the state or tribal chiefs, local authorities regularly organise 'mixed security meetings', in which different actors are involved: the APCLS, the FARDC, local authorities, civil society and even the peacekeepers of the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).

The presence of APCLS militiamen does not stop this 65-year-old resident of Nyabiondo from laughing when she sees us arriving at her house. Nevertheless, she says that she is very frightened when she sees civilians carrying weapons. The elderly are particularly vulnerable during confrontations: they often lack the strength to run and escape. During the last confrontation, this old lady hid on a riverbank for two days. Nyabiondo, North Kivu, August 2013.

The Secretary of Osso-Banyungu sector explains how this ‘local technique’, as he calls it, despite its unofficial character, allows different actors to safeguard the security of people. However, the presence of armed groups, including the APCLS, affects how it functions.

A farmer shells beans in front of her home. Nyabiondo, North Kivu, September 2013.

According to some inhabitants of Nyabiondo, the APCLS's tendency to present itself as an alternative authority is due in part to the weakness of the current administration. "APCLS's meddling in civil matters is also a result of the irresponsibility of the sector authorities!" exclaims a civil society representative from Nyabiondo.

"When someone submits a legal or customary case to the sector, it can sometimes take months for the case to be processed. At that moment, the population loses its confidence in the system. People prefer to use alternative systems where cases will be processed in a timely manner, perhaps in the same week", he explains.

Gérard, the Secretary of Osso-Banyungu administrative sector, in his office. Nyabiondo, Masisi territory.

The Secretary of the sector also recognises that people often approach the APCLS in order to find solutions to their problems, such as land disputes or debt settlements.This is a situation which the Secretary deplores. “When you throw a piece of meat to a dog, it opens its mouth, right?” he tells us, bitterly.

The local commander of the Congolese National Police in Nyabiondo, with some of his men behind him. Masisi territory, September 2013.

Everybody in Nyabiondo agrees on one thing: the government has the ability to take responsibility and integrate APCLS members into the national army. This integration would allow the local authorities, both civilian and military - as well as the town's inhabitants - to breathe a huge sigh of relief. However, faced with the dilemmas and constraints of a hypothetical integration process, there is a strong possibility that Nyabiondo will remain in limbo, where each faction will jostle for influence and survival at the expense of others. This is likely to continue until the 'local technique' of the 'mixed security meetings' reaches its limit or until decisions made further up the chain of command disrupt the deal and dash the compromises made between the rebels, the national army and the local authorities. It may then be that the residents of Nyabiondo have to flee again.

Inhabitants of Lukweti village returning home after a distribution of food and non food items organized by a Non Governmental Organization in Nyabiondo. Masisi territory, August 2013.

Part 3

Power, land and identity: The origins of violence in Masisi

Since independence was declared in the Congo, the history of Masisi has been marked by high tensions over the control of power and land between the three major communities in this territory: the Hunde, the Hutus and the Tutsis.

At the heart of these tensions is the issue of land rights and the power exercised by, or denied to, the different communities. Since 1994, regional conflicts have heightened these local tensions and reshaped the landscape of conflict in Masisi, and eastern Congo. Right up to the present day, the distribution of power remains a particularly sensitive stumbling block between local communities.

The traditional Hunde leaders in the Masisi territory almost all share the same complaint: they can no longer wield their power freely, as they did in the past when Mobutu ruled Zaire. For the past 20 years, large parts of their customary entities (divisions of land) have effectively been in the hands of armed groups; they simply do not have access to their land anymore and fear for their lives if they dare to go to the villages which they are supposed to administrate. Some heads of the groupement (a local customary and politico-administrative division) whom we met in central Masisi provided specific examples to illustrate these facts. The head of the Bapfuna groupement controls only one of the six villages within his groupement, the heads of the Buabo and the Bihiri groupement each control one out of their respective five villages, and the head of the Banyungu controls half of one of his two villages.

A member of the royal family within the Hunde community, Mwami Michel Bapfuna, has been the head of the Bapfuna groupement since the early 1960s. For the past twenty years he has not been able to access the majority of his land. Masisi Town, North Kivu, August 2013.

Some people gave themselves permission to use weapons to take our power" the eldest of them tells us, whilst the others agree. These big men, named 'usurpers' by the Hunde leaders, have, for the most part, come from the Hutu community and, through war and rebellions, have managed to bring about the recognition of the right for which they have been advocating for years: the right to administrate the land where they live and where they are the largest ethnic group.

These demands are unacceptable to the Hunde leaders. For them, this land comes from the 'ancestors' and can only be looked after by the traditional leaders. The Hunde believe that the people who came from Rwanda (the Hutus and Tutsis) only several generations ago, could not possibly carry out such a role. In the Hunde discourse, only the 'autochthonous' can be traditional leaders, by which they mean the Hunde.

Masisi in the morning mist.

This belief in the Hunde primacy of customary power has its roots in the history of the settlement of eastern Congo, and in Masisi in particular. The Hunde community settled in Masisi before the Hutu and Tutsi communities, who arrived in the area in the 1930s to 1950s as a result of migrations organised by the Belgian colonisers, who were looking for workers for their colonial plantations, as well as due to the political situation in Rwanda in the 1950s.

As time went by, the Hutu community grew larger than the Hunde community who had originally occupied the land. The Hutus (and, with them, the Tutsis) wanted to liberate themselves both economically and politically from the authority of the Hunde's traditional leaders.

However the Chef de Poste d'Encadrement (an administrative - non customary - official) for Lushebere, a Hutu leader, disputes the Hunde leaders' complaints by saying: "The Hunde leaders are our traditional leaders, and we accept them as such". Despite this, Hunde leaders often rise up against him when they accuse Hutu leaders of having stolen their power. They cite him as the 'big man' of the area, and claim that he has authority over the Nyatura, a Hutu militia who are active in the area. He defends himself against these accusations by saying: "I am the Chef de Poste d'Encadrement for Lushebere. My aim is to develop my area. The traditional leaders don't do anything. They don't have offices. They are weak and almost never work!"

Maman Angelique has spent the whole day in the fields. At the end of the day, she goes home, overloaded with firewood which she will use to prepare food. Buabo group, Masisi territory, North Kivu, June 2013.

Even if inter-community tensions date back to the colonial period, they worsened after independence and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, due to the huge inequalities in land rights between small cultivators and large land owners. These grievances stemmed from both land owners reshaping local ethnic divisions through the introduction of a political system based on elections, as well as from changes to the law on nationality which, at the beginning of the 1980s, called into question the nationality and Congolese citizenship of Rwandophone populations. Twice, at the beginning of the 1960s and in 1993, during electoral seasons and due to influence by political leaders who manipulated ethnic allegiances for their own ends, the situation broke down into open confrontations between ethnic militias.

Displaced young people in the Katale Camp. Masisi, North Kivu, August 2013.

Emmanuel Munyamariba, the Chef de Poste for Lushebere recalls this period of unrest. At the end of the 1980s, tribal “mutualités” get organized with the Hutu MAGRIVI, the Virunga Farmers’ Association, and the Bushenge Hunde (literally, the Hunde’s meeting place). Originally a means of solidarity between members of the same community, these two associations became the spearhead of ethnic militias who confronted each other in 1993.

In 1989, M. Munyamariba became the Secretary of the MAGRIVI. He explains: “the MAGRIVI quickly understood that the Bushenge Hunde planned to drive out the Hutus, to send them back to Rwanda. For me, for example, my grandfather arrived in Masisi in 1930. Where would I go in Rwanda? Thus the young Hutus put up a fight and took on the young Hunde. That’s how we came to exterminate each other”.

The NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) estimates that the interethnic violence in Masisi territory in 1993 caused between 6, 000 and 15, 000 deaths over a period of three months. For the local population, this first round of violence marked the beginning of a war which was not going to stop easily.

A woman and her two children go home after a day of working in the fields. Masisi, June 2013.

Apart from the huge displacement of populations and the change of the ethnic layout of the territory, this violence also reshaped the local political landscape in Masisi, as the Chef de Poste for Lushebere went on to explain: “Before 1993, all the positions (traditional and administrative) were in the hands of the Hunde. There was not a single Hutu Principal, for example. As well as the traditional leaders, all the secretaries and the administrators were always Hunde. The tribal war of 1993 changed that: we started to govern ourselves. The Hutus became the heads of the area. We had tasted authority and, once you’ve tasted it, it’s hard to stop! We often say that it is better to die than to give up power…”

After fleeing violence for several months, Biringiro rebuilds a home for his family in his native village of Bibotobolo. Their house had been destroyed during interethnic clashes in November 2012. Bibotobolo, Masisi territory, June 2013.

He continues: “But then, Laurent Kabila’s AFDL (the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo) arrived (in 1996) and told us to put an end to the tribal wars. They told us that we would overthrow Mobutu’s government and that, in the new government, there would be room for everyone. At that point we said to each other ‘let’s share the responsibilities, let’s put Hutu secretaries to work with the Hunde leaders….’. That’s how, today, the area chiefs are often Hunde and their secretaries are Hutu”.

The Chef de Poste’s secretary also rejects the Hunde leaders’ accusations.

“It’s completely untrue to say that traditional power was usurped by force!” he says. “Right until today, there is not a single area which is managed by a Hutu or a Tutsi. There are obviously traditional leaders who fled their areas because of insecurity, but they left an intermediary who continues to report back to them. Look for just one official document signed by a Head of groupement from the Hutu community! There aren’t any!” he explains without recognition of the Hunde traditional leaders’ complaints.

A Hutu family from the Bibotobolo village, in the Masisi territory, in the ruins of their former home, which was destroyed during the interethnic violence at the end of 2012. Having spent several months in a camp for displaced people, they have just finished building a new home (behind them), specifically by reusing the charred corrugated iron sheets from their former lodgings. Bibotobolo, Masisi, June 2013.

REGIONAL WARS AND REBELLIONS: THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHEF DE POSTE ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

The arrival in 1994 of two million Hutu Rwandan refugees, including many genocidaires (genocide perpetrators), into the Kivus, and the two Congolese wars of 1996-97 and 1998-2003, increased the existing tensions between communities in Masisi. The communities were swallowed up by the regional dynamics of these wars which involved almost all of the countries in the Great Lakes Region.

A child's toy lies on the ground in front of a home belonging to a family who were displaced by clashes between armed groups. Nyabiondo, Masisi, August 2013.

The belligerents exploited the fears of the local ethnic groups in order to win them over to their cause and to swell the numbers of their combatants. For their part, numerous local leaders made use of the wars and its many opportunities for new alliances to develop their political and land-related agendas. In Masisi, the second war from 1998 – 2003, set the Congolese government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila against the rebellions supported by the neighbouring countries. The Hunde community (with a few key exceptions) aligned itself with the government (through joining Maï-Maï armed groups) whilst the Hutu and Tutsi communities (also with a few key exceptions) took the side of the RCD (the Congolese Rally for Democracy) which, with the support of Rwanda and Uganda, occupied a large part of the Kivus.

By the end of the war, with massacres committed along ethnic lines, the hatred between the communities in Masisi and the Kivus had grown exponentially.

A former colonial house for TEKI workmen, the colonial business for tea production in the Kivus, destroyed by the war. Nyabiondo, Masisi, August 2013.

The RCD era coincided with further changes to local power structures in Masisi. As elsewhere, the RCD leaders wanted to bring power closer to the rural - and often landlocked - populations. The rebellion created several new state Postes d'Encadrement, taking their number from 12 to 27. The Hutu community was the largest in the territory and supported the RCD, and they benefited most from the new positions, to the great displeasure of the Hunde traditional leaders who saw their roles taken over by the new Hutu leaders.

The Chef de Poste for Nyabiondo, from the Hunde community, explained to us that this expansion of the Postes d'Encadrement and their recognition by the central government had been as well a strategy to try to end the war. "It was a way to keep the former warlords busy"', he said. It was a strategy that certainly made the traditional leaders 'uncomfortable'.

However, as part of the decentralisation process, a new institutional structure will now be implemented, and this does not include the Poste d'Encadrement positions. What will happen to the Hutu leaders who hold most of these positions in Masisi? "They will go and work in the new communes (which will be created through decentralisation)" explained the Chef de Poste for Lushebere. "Even I have got to try to get myself elected as mayor, if I'm lucky!" Another leader in Lushebere is still concerned that decentralisation could lead to unemployment for a large number of the current local leaders. He told us "this would have a huge impact on peace in our area!"

Two young girls from Lukweti carry firewood home. Lukweti is the village where the armed group APCLS set up their HQ several years ago. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Whether power has been usurped or not, these statements demonstrate how bitter the disagreement over local power sharing is between the community leaders in Masisi.

Whilst the most recent national elections (in November 2011) were heavily contested, particularly in the territory of Masisi, the provincial and local elections will be the next key date for the territory's leaders and all of the communities. Before this major event in local political life, the priorities must be to establish a more peaceful environment between the communities in Masisi and between their respective leaders. Amidst the games and sometimes deadly political calculations, it is always the local populations who find themselves trapped first.

Young Sifa, 18 years old, in front of the shelter where she has been living with her parents since November 2012, in the Katale camp. Masisi, August 2013.

Part 4

Armed Militias in Masisi: A Case Study of the APCLS

With a few hundred men led by Hunde's 'General' Janvier Karairi, the People's Alliance for Free & Sovereign Congo (APCLS) is one of the many armed groups who undermine the authority of the Congolese state in North Kivu, without even being the most detrimental within the province.

The APCLS brings together people who are unhappy about previous peace processes and who say that they "are defending the integrity of the national territory against all aggression from outside", a responsibility which should be exclusively the preserve of the national army. The APCLS sets itself up as a fervent enemy of M23, and of the CNDP before that - groups whose support from Rwanda (and Uganda) has been widely documented.

Called ‘diehards’ by some, the APCLS commanders have always refused any compromise with their enemies in different peace process negotiations. They deliberately have a strong anti-Rwandan and anti-Tutsi rhetoric which often makes them sound like radical extremists. Local Voices spent several weeks in the Lukweti and Nyabiondo villages in the Masisi territory, zones which are under the group’s control.

Lukweti, as dusk is falling. On the left, ‘Mt Sinai’, where ‘General’ Janvier lives. Masisi territory, August 2013.

Lukweti is a small village with several hundred inhabitants, enclosed by mountains and forests in the northwest of the Masisi territory, a few hundred kilometres north of Goma. It is a hot and humid place: it rains every day in Lukweti, a strong tropical rain which turns the whole village into a huge muddy and slippery playing field. There are no great riches in Lukweti; unlike many other places in North Kivu, there is no gold, nor any precious minerals.

A farming town, the village economy is effectively based on the production of a local banana-based spirit, known in the area as kasusu. It is a strong alcohol, over 40% proof. This being the case, the villagers and members of the militia can often be found wandering the streets of Lukweti, drunk.

It is this village where, having been without a FARDC (Congolese army) military presence for a long time, the self-proclaimed ‘General’ Janvier Karairi set up, in 2006-7, the headquarters for the group which would later become the APCLS, the People’s Alliance for Free and Sovereign Congo (previously known as the Patriotic Alliance for Free and Sovereign Congo).

This bamboo bridge over the river is one of the only access routes to Lukweti. The bridge became overloaded with people and broke when the Lukweti residents were fleeing the fighting between the APCLS and Cheka’s armed group in October 2012. Twelve people were drowned. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

About two hours on foot from the village, Janvier set up his headquarters at the top of a mountain renamed, at the time, ‘Mount Sinai’. Janvier is a strong believer and willingly presents himself as a sort of new Moses. Wherever he goes, his Bible goes too. One day a week, he shuts himself away to pray and seek ‘guidance’ from the Almighty. He is often surrounded by ‘intercessors’, priests who, according to him, help him to ‘fathom the ways of the Lord’. This is a very paradoxically Christian way to justify a deadly armed struggle.

'Colonel' Christian in the middle, with two militiamen. 'Colonel' Christian is the brother of 'General' Janvier, the APCLS' 'supreme leader'. Lukweti, August 2013.

'TO FREE OUR COUNTRY'

The 'General' Janvier started his fight over 20 years ago. In 1989 he was the President of the Hunde youth within the Bashali chefferie, in Kitchanga, which was his home town in the Masisi territory. The youth group quickly took on the name of Wakombozi, the 'liberators'. It was in this position that Janvier played a big role in the interethnic confrontations which flared up Masisi in 1993. He became a member of Laurent-Désiré Kabila's AFDL in 1996 and aligned himself with the Maï-Maï when, two years later, the RCD war broke out.

Colonel Christian, with other APCLS members. Lukweti, August 2013.

When the peace agreements were signed and the different rebel movements were starting to be ‘integrated’ into a new national army in 2003-4, Janvier went to the ‘integration centre’ in Mushaki. He would not stay there long. Whilst taking part in the officers’ training, he had the impression that the exercises were really trying to promote the former RCD rebels over the men from the Maï-Maï groups. Worried about joining a national army influenced by Rwanda and, doubtless frustrated for not having been sufficiently ‘compensated’ for his support for Kabila Père (the Elder Kabila), he deserted. With other disenfranchised individuals, he set up the first group in Bweremana, on the shores of Lake Kivu, before falling back towards Nyabiondo and Lukweti, in the harder-to-reach mountains.

An APCLS militiaman shelters from the rain in the Lukweti health centre. Masisi, August 2013.

We met Janvier in a dilapidated school in the Kinyumba village, between Nyabiondo and Lukweti, where he explained to us what had motivated him to set up the APCLS; “Since we felt that our country had been overrun by foreigners, we felt obliged to find ways and means to free the country. We are convinced that it is our patriotic duty to save our country. We are carrying out this fight through following the spirit of the National Constitution. In articles 63 and 64, the Constitution exhorts all the Congolese people to defend the sovereignty and the integrity of Congo when our country is under attack. This is what pushed us to create our movement. We are not the enemies of the country, but its sons and, as such, we have the right to defend our sovereignty, our independence and to be treated well. This means that we have been in the bush for a long time now, but we know that, with God’s help, we will manage to free our country from the hands of foreigners”.

‘General’ Janvier Karairi, the APCLS commander, with his Bible in his hands, in a school in ruins in Kinyumba. Masisi territory, August 2013.

DISCRIMINATORY RHETORIC

The people whom Janvier and his officers call ‘foreigners’ are, predominantly, the M23 soldiers (and before them, soldiers from the CNDP and the RCD). The M23 are the rebel group whose officers are Congolese Tutsis but who, according to several UN reports, benefit from direct support from Rwanda and Uganda to carry out their armed struggle. Using the particularly ambiguous term of ‘foreigners’, or, more explicitly ‘Rwandans’, the APCLS commanders’ rhetoric directly makes the link to an old and dangerous debate on the nationality of the Congolese Hutus and Tutsis.

Through invoking this particularly sensitive debate and undermining the Congolese nationality of these populations, the aim is to deny them all civil, political and economic rights within the DRC. This idea was part of the origins of the ethnic violence in the 1960s and the 1990s in Masisi and still finds favour today with the non-Rwandophone communities, including the Hunde.

The Lukweti 'Barza' is the meeting place for the elders of the village. Mzee Massomo, in the middle, is the former Chief of Lukweti. He ceded his position to his grandson but continues to be listened to within the Barza. He claims to have been born in 1922. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

In fact, the similarity of the rhetoric and the concerns between the APCLS officers and key people in the Hunde community is often striking. "Through the APCLS we are free to keep our customs and to go to our fields, until such time as there are foreigners who come here to help themselves to our land and steal our power", explains one of the Lukweti leaders. His condemnatory discourse replicates the deeply held fears at the heart of the Hunde community. Throughout its history, the Hunde community has effectively seen its economic and political power decrease, taken over by the Hutu and Tutsi communities who arrived in the area later. The recent wars have contributed to an increase in the tensions which existed between the communities. Today each community seems to perceive the other as a genuine threat to its own interests, even to its existence. There is a feeling of fear due to the presence of armed groups who are drawn up on ethnic lines and the absence of an effective national army which is capable of protecting all Congolese citizens.

On the right, wearing a jacket, the 'Cardinal', the APCLS President. The 'Cardinal' became President of the APCLS only recently, in mid-2013. He lived in Europe for several years, mostly in Belgium, before deciding to join the APCLS in the Lukweti forest. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

For these reasons, the APCLS is often seen as a group which is defending the Hunde community alone, despite its insistence of calling itself a movement of 'National Liberation'. Janvier himself is Hunde, most of his men are Hunde and the group occupy zones which are mostly lived in by Hunde. The APCLS officers and the Hunde leaders do their best to avoid attributing tribal motivations to the APCLS' actions.

One of the Hunde leaders demonstrates this point by saying "Janvier is not here to defend the Hunde, but the physical integrity of the entire DRC". One of the other members of the community barza (the meeting place for the Elders) in Lukweti affirms: "Janvier did not consult the Hunde traditional leaders before setting up his movement. He did not ask anything of anyone about whether he could come and settle here in Lukweti".

These words are unconvincing to those outside the Hunde community. One of the local authorities tells us: "The armed groups defend their own communities before anything else, here in Masisi. The APCLS is for the Hunde, the Nyatura for the Hutus, the Cheka Maï-Maï are defending the Nyanga and M23 are protecting the Tutsis".

One of the Tutsi leaders from Masisi, based in Goma, has the final word, put just as strongly: "The APCLS want to get the Hunde land back, saying that all of Masisi belongs to their community, which the Hunde themselves all sold long ago. This is why they want to drive all those who speak Kinyarwanda out of Masisi! Talking of 'national liberation' is no more than a cover for their other interests…."

'Colonel' James, APCLS second in command, at the group's military base in Lukweti. Behind him, his 'Chief Escort', Sentiment. Masisi territory, August 2013.

It might be reductive to present the armed groups as mere products of the local communities, but it would also be wrong to deny their ethnic background and the links which can exist between the militiamen and their respective community. The APCLS, like the other armed groups, is no exception to this rule, despite its rhetoric of national liberation which certain groups use to establish their legitimacy.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, A STRATEGIC STAKE

Whilst setting up their movement, Janvier and his men had to nevertheless take care to win the local population over to their cause. As a way of doing this, the political leaders within the APCLS organised information-sharing sessions and meetings with all levels of society: leaders, heads of civil society, and teachers, right down to the youth and even the small scale farmers. A local dignitary from the Hunde community explains that “in the beginning the Movement needed to convince the population about its legitimacy so that it could evolve”. Another inhabitant of Nyabiondo adds “And the people understood!” It was through this that many young people, often unemployed, became members of the militia, sometimes acting directly on the advice of the local leaders.

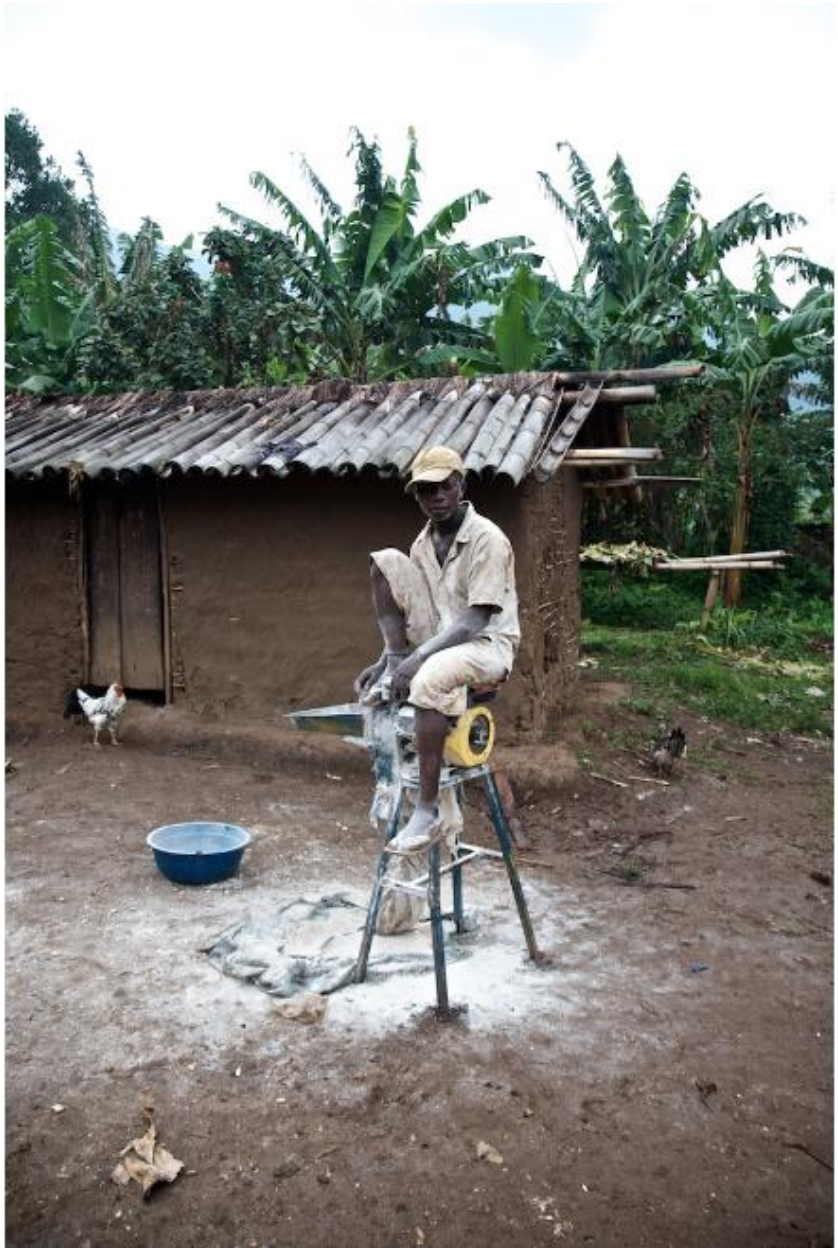
A family in Lukweti. August 2013.

Gaining the support of the local population is not to be taken lightly by a group like the APCLS. It is a highly strategic action. One of the officers in the movement tells us: “The main strength of the APCLS is the population”. Certainly it is the villagers who feed the militias. Every week in Lukweti the traditional leaders collect food stuffs from each household in the village, mostly manioc flour, as part of a programme designed by the APCLS officer in charge of civil and military relations and the traditional leaders.

Young Kahindo, a female member of the militia, is a 'rations provider'. Every day she collects manioc flour from the windmills in Nyabiondo. There are not many women who belong to the APCLS. Kahindo tells us that she and a friend are the only two women at the Nyabiondo military post. She told us that her older brother was also a member of the APCLS, but he died in combat. Here she is relaxing in a restaurant in Nyabiondo, before leaving to collect the manioc flour. Nyabiondo, Masisi territory, August 2013.

In Nyabiondo, which is a larger town than Lukweti, the militiamen have put up several barriers on the roads which the villagers use to get to the fields. Each passer-by has to donate some agricultural produce. At the end of the day, someone from the APCLS is systematically sent to each windmill to collect a bowl of flour from the female farmers who have been grinding the manioc which they harvested during the day.

The APCLS 'protection' has an obvious cost for the population.



Lumoo, in charge of a manioc flour windmill in Lukweti, is waiting for his customers. Lukweti, August 2013.

Nevertheless, a female villager from Nyabiondo explains to us: “These donations are voluntary. If you do not have enough food to give, you do not have to give and they let you through. The (APCLS) soldiers do not harass us. They don’t create problems!”

However, on a different road, several metres from a roadblock, the passers-by complain. They have just come back from a food distribution session held by an international NGO which supports vulnerable and displaced people. An APCLS soldier stands in front of a large bamboo which blocks the road, asking for 500 Congolese francs (50 US cents) from each person. The people who do not want to give do not get through easily. “Do you really think that ordinary farmers, who have almost nothing, are happy to give part of their harvest to armed men?” says one of the local authorities who calls us to witness that “our people do not want that, but they don’t have any choice!”

Young women from Lukweti loot the manioc flour for 'General' Janvier and his 'guests'. August 2013.

REAL DISCIPLINE?

Since the local population has been feeding them for several years, the APCLS officers are generally aware that, in the zones under their control, they cannot allow themselves to lose this precious support through letting their men treat the civilian population badly. Thus there is a certain level of discipline found within the militia, which the local dignitaries praise often and emphatically. One of the leaders from Lukweti says: "The APCLS soldiers are disciplined. They are not paid, but they respect the civilians. Here we can walk around at night without difficulties, no-one will attack you!'"

The Hunde dignitaries are used to boasting about the APCLS' discipline, despite the harassment which the militiamen can create for the civilian population. Here the young escorts for the APCLS officers pose for the photo. Kinyumba, Masisi territory, September 2013.

To maintain order amongst his troops, 'General' Janvier does not hesitate to punish troublemakers with beatings or days of imprisonment. He even uses the underground prison, a hole the size of a grave into which you can force several soldiers at once to crouch for 15, 20 or 30 minutes; unable to move, they come out almost asphyxiated. Given the punishments meted out to the wrongdoers, the militiamen seem to behave. "We have rules of conduct that the men have to follow" confirms Janvier. "We have a whole series of measures which are taken for those who commit violations: they get punished in relation to what they have done. Once you have responsibility for a whole group, you cannot allow yourself to have undisciplined men amongst them".

Militiamen and civilians drinking cassixe, banana beer, in the Lukweti market. August 2013.

These measures do not, however, always prevent problems between the civilians and the soldiers. The Lukweti leaders are used to saying: “Where there are men, there are no shortage of problems”.

In a town like Lukweti, where banana alcohol production is the main source of income, civilians and soldiers get drunk often, if not every day. At nightfall, as in plain daylight, it is common to find drunk soldiers walking through the village, with Kalashnikovs slung over their shoulders.

A young woman and an APCLS militiaman (dressed in civilian clothing) getting drunk on kasusu, the local banana-based spirit. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

When drunk, it is easy for an argument or a misunderstanding to blow up. They tell us that it is never anything serious: “I have never seen an APLCS soldier point his gun at a civilian here in Lukweti”, says the old head of the village, in an almost congratulatory manner. One night however, when the militia are celebrating their return from the frontline, we hear a shot coming from the military base. In the village people listen anxiously, wondering if they should flee to the forest again. Then nothing happens. The following day an APLCS officer says: “Oh, no, it was nothing. Just a bit of confusion…”

As soon as the militia carry out attacks in the ‘enemy’ zones, the APCLS disciplinary measures cease to matter. In those situations, the rule seems to be to take as much as possible: “As we don’t have a salary, it’s only through attacking the enemy that we can hope to get something” admits a member of the militia, meaning that they normally pillage the goods from the civilian population where they are carrying out their operations. Thus we can see APCLS militia returning from the frontline with a new radio, or other valuable objects, fruits of their labour. Moreover this is common practice amongst the armed groups in the area. Despite the rhetoric around discipline coming from APCLS members, it is clear that this group’s behaviour, like that of all the other militia in North Kivu, is far from irreproachable in its demands on the civilian population.

APCLS militiamen leave for the frontline to fight against some of Cheka's men at Pinga, in the Walikale territory. Lukweti, August 2013.

PERMANENT INSECURITY

The APCLS speeches about the discipline of its militia cannot hide another truth for long: the fact that the APCLS is a real threat to the security of civilians, through its attacks against the other armed groups in the surrounding area. The APCLS engages in military operations which strike hard against the civilians in the areas being attacked, and also expose the population in the APCLS held areas to reprisals by enemy groups, which can often be fatal. The civilians are regularly caught in crossfire and often have to flee into the forest. The primary school principal for Lukweti tells us that "in 2012 we spent the entire year in the forest. We were forced to teach in straw huts! It's only in 2013 that we were able to return to Lukweti".

As a member of the militia passes by, the school teacher does not forget to say "thanks to the intervention of General Janvier, and his patriotism".

An APCLS militiaman walks in the forest with a grenade as his only weapon. Lukweti, August 2013.

The APCLS is surrounded by at least four other armed groups: the FARDC National Army; the Maï-Maï Cheka (Nyanga) in the Walikale territory; the FDLR (Rwandan Hutu rebels, including some former génocidaires, or genocide perpetrators) and the Nyatura (Congolese Hutus). MAC, another Hunde armed group who stand against the APCLS and often allied with the Cheka, could also be added to this list. Currently the APCLS is on good terms with some of the groups (FARDC, Nyatura and FDLR), whilst they are fighting with others (FARDC in the past, Cheka and MAC today). The relationships between the groups are unstable and can change easily; it is common to go back on alliances as they are often based on short-term interests.

APCLS militiamen get ready to leave for the frontline to fight against Cheka at Pinga. Lukweti, August 2013.

Since 2010, the APCLS has been at daggers drawn with the Maï-Maï Cheka, an armed group from Walikale who are linked to the Nyanga community. The two groups clash regularly in the Pinga area, on the border between Masisi and Walikale, and are disputing the control of the location, as well as the large mineral resources found in Walikale. Along with many Nyanga leaders, Cheka blames Janvier for having ‘colonised’ Walikale. One of the Nyanga leaders, based in Goma, tells us that “Janvier is collaborating with the FDLR in order to reclaim parts of the Walikale territory and exploit our mineral resources. This is why Cheka formed a barrier between the FDLR and APCLS”.

Fubula, a young APCLS militiaman, in a hut in Lukweti. He has been in the militia since he was 16. He has a wife and a child. Lukweti, August 2013.

Despite the numerous demands that his group make of civilians, Cheka has developed a reputation as a ‘liberator’ within his community for driving out the FDLR who controlled the mines for many years and generally set themselves up as the masters of the land in Walikale. Cheka also asked Janvier to break his allegiance with the FDLR in order to drive them back into Masisi, but Janvier refused. For his part, Janvier accuses Cheka of collaborating with M23 and bringing a pro-Rwandan agenda into North Kivu. The APCLS commander confirms that “since Cheka started working with M23 we knew from then that he should be considered dangerous, not only for the APCLS, but for the Congolese people”.

The APCLS militiamen leave for the frontline with Cheka at Pinga. In the background, 'Mt Sinai' where 'General' Janvier lives. Lukweti, August 2013.

According to local sources, the FDLR headquarters are near Janvier's base, about one or two days' walk from Lukweti. Despite its anti-Rwandan ideology, paradoxically the APCLS tolerates the FDLR's presence, even if it is not directly working with them, for example, to confront Cheka. Some of the Tutsi community accuse the APCLS of having formed a coalition with the FDLR, but Janvier refutes these accusations: "We have no relationship at all with the FDLR. The FDLR are at the service of the international community, it is them who are allowing the FDLR to be here, in Congo. It is for that same international community to deal with this issue, to catch the FDLR and to take them back to where they came from (Rwanda). That is not the role of the APCLS!'"

In Lukweti, an elderly lady prays in church during Mass on Sunday. Lukweti, August 2013.

The relationship between the APCLS and the Nyatura militiamen is also ambiguous, wavering between a sort of co-existence, even collaboration, and intermittent clashes. At the beginning of 2013, a roundtable for peace and peaceful co-existence was organised in the parish of Masisi. This came out of the violence between militias which led to many tens of villages catching fire in Masisi. During the roundtable talks, the APCLS and the Nyatura agreed not to fight each other anymore. This resolution was followed by some efforts, but they broke down over time. In October 2013, for example, the two groups clashed again, whilst elsewhere, near Pinga, they continue to collaborate (as well as with the FDLR) in order to fight against parts of Cheka's militia.

"The collaboration between Nyatura and APCLS is not sustainable!" said the young Hutus that we met in Lushebere. "Even if it means the situation is calm for a while, the whole agreement is based on a strong dose of hypocrisy. The problem is that the armed groups are tribal…"

Another part of the issue is the armed groups' lack of command structure. A number of groups, like the Nyatura, are made of many small groups who report to different commanders and act more or less autonomously from each other.

A child in a hut in Lukweti. August 2013.

These allegiances, counter-allegiances and relentless confrontations make the security situation confusing and hard to unravel, as well as causing the unbearable damage inflicted on the civilian population which affects all of the communities. Moreover, they are reinforcing the hatred and enmity between the ethnic groups. One of the Tutsi community leaders, now based in Goma, but formerly a Masisi territory administrator in the 1990s, sums it up well: "The tragedy of Masisi is that the armed groups, supposedly created to defend their communities, have become the same armed groups who are now killing their own communities".

The eldest son of this Lukweti resident was an APCLS militiaman. He died in a fight with some of Cheka's men. As a widow, she is left alone with her youngest son, and she struggles to get by. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

IS INTEGRATION THE ONLY WAY OUT?

For the 300, 000 displaced people, crammed into the camps full of poverty across the territory of Masisi, one fact is clear. "Today it is the armed groups, the APCLS, Cheka and the Nyatura, who are preventing us from going home!" says a woman in a camp in Lushebere, without hesitating. "All that we want is for the government to resolve the problem of the armed groups by integrating them into the national army", say a representative of the displaced in the Katale camp. "Without that, we will never have peace!"

A young girl who has been displaced. Katale Camp, Masisi Territory, July 2013.

Is integration into the national army the only solution for the existence of armed groups in the Masisi territory? It is not as easy as that. The government itself is more and more reluctant to allow the integration of the armed groups into the FARDC as they can foresee the creation of parallel chains of command within the army, which would be difficult to control. Old allegiances would not automatically disappear with integration, far from it.

'General' Janvier, on the left, and the APCLS' Secretary General Colonel Jeff (on the right). Kinyumba, September 2013.

Even if 'General' Janvier was himself in favour of the principle of integrating into the FARDC, the conditions which he has set have, until now, prevented several efforts to succeed in this endeavour. Moreover, his words demonstrate his lack of trust in the FARDC, since the army is a mix of former rebels, amongst whom are those that he would still consider enemies. He says: "We are ready to unite with the FARDC to fight with them against the forces coming from outside of the country. What we will not accept is the infiltration into the heart of the FARDC by people who have come from Rwanda. We think that the FARDC are currently having problems because they are fighting against the same people (parts of M23) whom they also have within their own ranks. That is the problem with the FARDC".

Demobilised young men (ex-militiamen) in Nyabiondo. Even if there are programmes for rehabilitation into civilian life, the lack of local economic opportunities is a large barrier to sustained rehabilitation for former militiamen. Nyabiondo, Masisi territory, September 2013.

Janvier is not the only person to mistrust the FARDC. Some members of the local population also seem to find it hard to believe that the national army could really protect them, which is one of the reasons why they often support the armed group of the same ethnicity as themselves. The female activists for peace in Nyabiondo confirm this view, as one of them says: “If we could integrate our children from the APCLS into the national army, we would ask them not to directly deploy them elsewhere, so that they could still continue to guard this area for a fixed period. We are afraid that our enemies would make the most of the opportunity to attack us again - us, the civilian population - and that makes us worry!”

One reason for wanting the APCLS to integrate into the army is, first and foremost, so that they will not have to donate food to the militia anymore rather than to see them leave the area.

AFTER M23, ARE THE INSTITUTIONS CAPABLE OF RESTORING CONFIDENCE?

Since the military victory of the FARDC over the M23 in November 2013, a new window of opportunity seems to have opened for negotiations over the disbanding of the other armed groups, and particularly, the APCLS, for whom the disappearance of M23 (at least for now) has removed a key reason to exist. However this window is unlikely to be enough toresolve the issue in the long term. Even without the M23, the armed groups have an uncanny ability to sustain each other, as each group refuses to put down its weapons if the others are not also disarming. Many of them, controlling large local resources, have no interest in disbanding, without even mentioning the issue of the FDLR which will also block the process. The military option, which the authorities are proposing to resolve the problem of the FDLR and the other rebel groups, is far from being a guaranteed success.

A woman carries a child on her back whilst she sieves manioc flour. Lukweti, Masisi territory, August 2013.

As the witnesses state in this article, and are backed by numerous observers elsewhere, the sustainable answer to the issue of the armed groups comes back to the existence of state institutions who are genuinely able to guarantee the safety of the local population, without discrimination on ethnic grounds. The army is the first obvious institution to be implicated.

The recent military successes by the FARDC over the M23 rebellion demonstrate the speed with which the Congolese army, or at least some of its units, are able to become a truly effective military instrument, provided there is true political will at the highest level of the state. There are no guarantees that this positive political engagement will last long enough to bring about, following its first success, real and serious reform for the entire Congolese military corps. If the government wants to put an end to the armed groups, the priority has to be to stop the FARDC soldiers from exploiting the local populations, for whom they currently represent a threat, rather than anything else.

'General' Janvier's escorts. Kinyumba, Masisi, September 2013.

Beyond dealing with the army, building the trust between the Republic's institutions and the Congolese people has to remain the cornerstone of any sustainable solution to the phenomenon of armed groups in Eastern Congo. This trust depends on the leaders' abilities, at all levels, to take up their responsibilities in the context of a country which, for the large part, remains to be built. A peace activist from Masisi sums up the situation: "All our problems came from bad governance. Here we have managed to make corruption into an official culture. Article 15 – 'be resourceful' – is completely integrated into the minds of the Congolese. When elections are organised, the practice of giving gifts means that we vote for criminals".

This challenge of changing mentalities, governance practices and the institutions themselves will not happen overnight, but can only happen in the medium to long term. If, and only if, the political will is there.

Disclaimer: *Many of the witness statements used in this article come from APCLS militiamen or civilians who share their daily existence with the APCLS militia. Their words clearly demonstrate a strong adherence to the ideology and the rhetoric of this particular armed group; whether voluntarily or coerced. We therefore ask our readers to read some of the accounts herein with a critical eye. Local Voices, International Alert and Search for Common Ground do not endorse the opinions held by the different people who speak out in this article. However it seems important to us to publish these statements in order to better grasp the sometimes radical, and extreme, points of view, positions and understanding of these local actors, as, without this, no viable peace process would be able to take place.*

Part 5

Say no to war, stay in civilian life

Deciding between an armed existence and civilian life is far from being a rhetorical question in a context where armed groups abound and the lack of economic opportunities erodes all thoughts of the future.

Despite the numerous challenges which the civilians experience on a daily basis in the far-flung villages of North Kivu, the civilian population shows an extraordinary willpower, and capacity for resilience, when faced with the effects of armed violence and the surrounding poverty.

Through portraits and photographic witness statements, this publication looks at the civilians who share their daily lives with the armed groups; how they live and how they survive in an excessively militarised environment, and how they see their own existence surrounded by militiamen.

YOUNG WOMEN AND THE REBELS

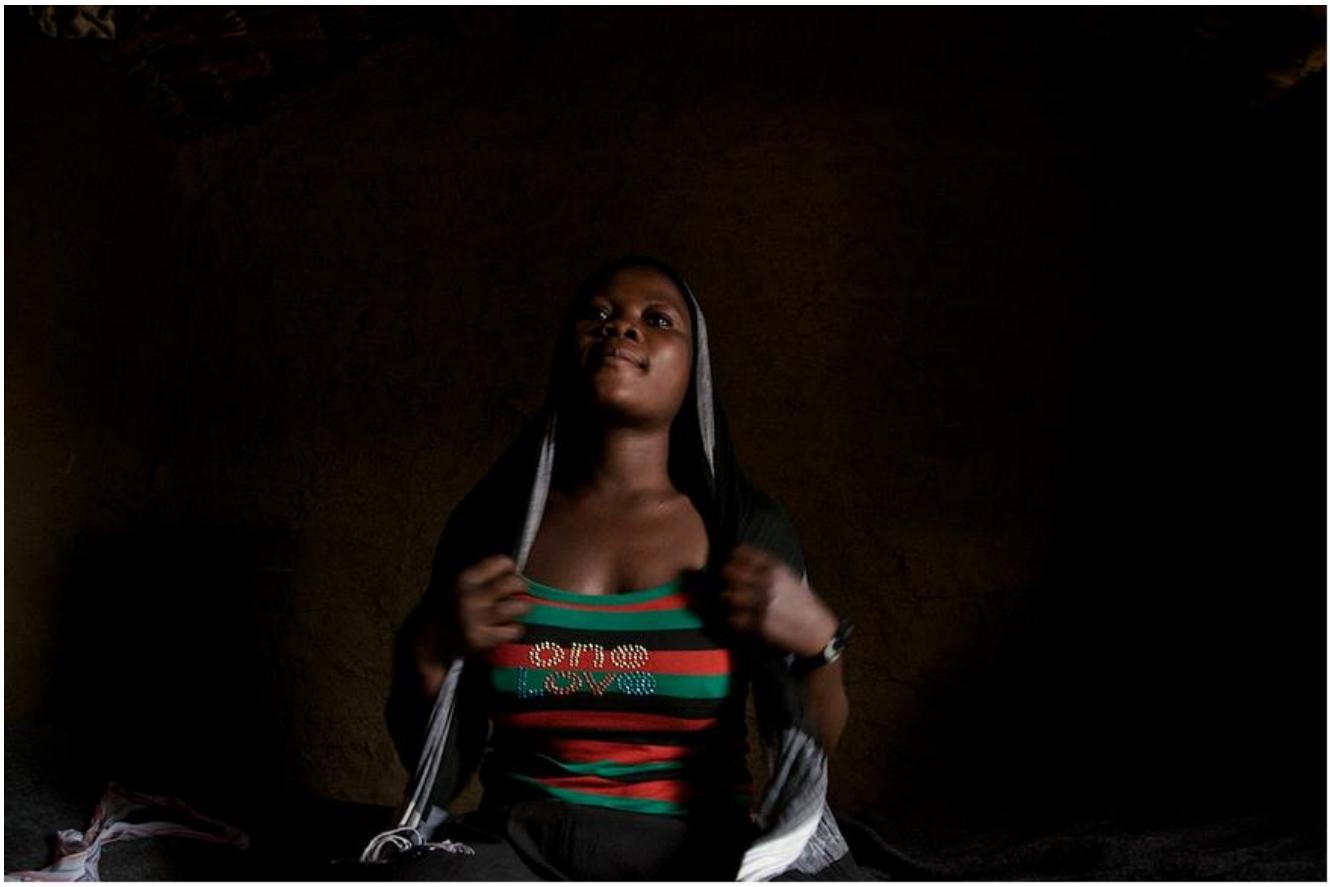
They are aged between 16 and 20 and, every day of their life, they live with young men of the same age who bear weapons and fight. Some of the young single women who live in Lukweti, where the APCLS armed group set up its headquarters a few years ago, speak to us about armed men and their own individual concerns.

"I don’t want to marry a soldier [i.e. militiaman] because there’s a danger that he could go to fight and die there. I want an intelligent husband, a husband who would be able to earn enough so that we could live well".

“There are lots of women who love the soldiers because they have a reputation for looking after their women properly. But we have seen how our older sisters who married soldiers became widows very quickly. To get by, some of them have even had to become prostitutes”.

“Life is hard in Lukweti. We have to keep fleeing because of the war. I would like to find a husband who could take me to Masisi town, or even to Goma, because there we could spend several years without ever hearing bullets fired”.

“The ideal man is a civilian because he won’t die too quickly, unlike a soldier. And if he does die, it will be from illness, or an accident, not because of the war”.



LIVING AND SURVIVING

Predominantly based on small subsistence agriculture, life in North Kivu is particularly difficult economically. There is a cruel lack of opportunities for employment which means that cultivating the land often remains the only possibility of income for households. However local agriculture is barely profitable. Even if the land is fertile, the farmers are often prevented from accessing their fields by the insecurity caused by armed groups, and, even then, their harvests would be simply ransacked by the rebels or the soldiers from the national army.

The lack of roads is a huge barrier to the development of the local economy, slowing down (or entirely preventing) the transportation of farm produce to markets and possible sale locations. In such conditions, the local people limit themselves to growing the minimum necessary for their family – the uncertainties of war regularly reduce any investment back to nothing. Here, through a series of photos we show the daily labour carried out by the local population.

A man pushes his bicycle loaded with containers of banana liquor on the road between Lukweti and Nyabiondo, a road which becomes a huge impassable field of mud. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

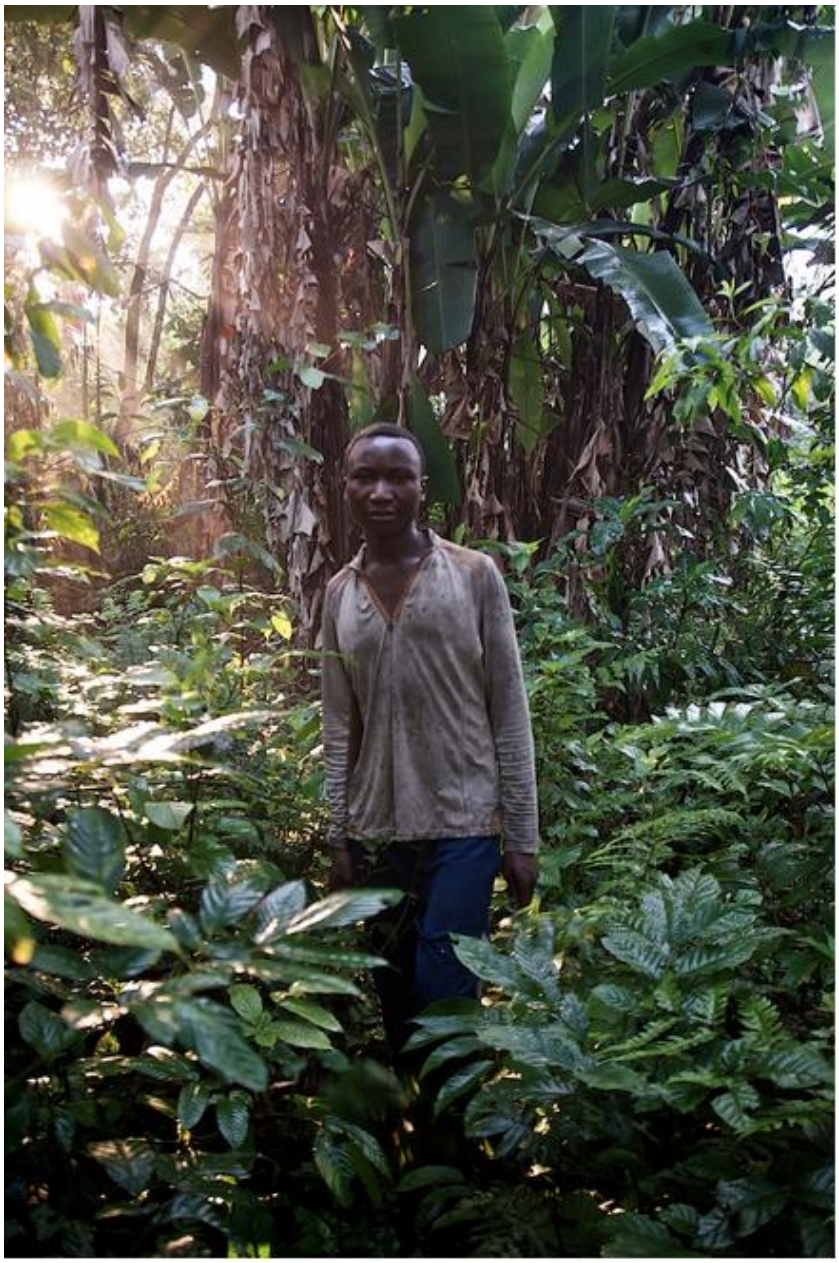
“We live a life of poverty because the road isn’t made,” said a young woman in Lukweti.

A woman comes back from the fields carrying a container of cassixe (banana beer) on her back and a child on her front. In Eastern Congo, woman are undeniably the driving force of the local economy. Katale, Masisi territory, North Kivu, June 2013.

“Life is very hard here in Lukweti. To get money, the only thing that we can do is to carry containers of Kasusu (locally brewed banana liquor) on our backs to Nyabiondo, which is a three-hour walk. We get paid between 1000 and 1500 Congolese francs ($1-$1.5) for carrying a 20-litre container”, a young woman in Lukweti explained.

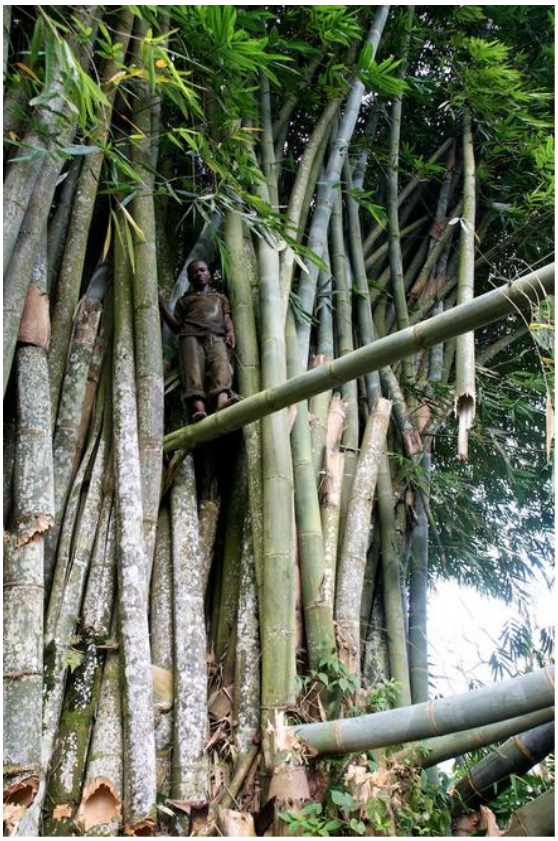
A child watching over a goat grazing. As well as going to school (when parents have the money to send them), children have to contribute to the household's coffers from a young age, in order to improve their living conditions.

Children work in the banana plantations, whilst also looking after their younger brother, still a baby. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.



Fabrice, 20, goes to the banana plantations with his friends to brew banana beer. Fabrice is not the owner of the plantations, but he will be paid up to 2500 Congolese francs (about $2,5) for the day's work. In this way he makes the most of the school holidays to make some savings to pay his registration fees at the Masisi School for the new school year. Fabrice tells us: "It's not only with weapons that we can defend our country. If I finish my studies, I can become a politician and also contribute to the development of my country and bringing peace back here".



Men cut bamboo in the Lukweti forest. Bamboo is used as a construction material, predominantly for roofing houses, but also to build bridges.

A woman plants manioc cuttings in her field. Lukweti, August 2013.

A game hunter poses with his homemade 12 bore rifle. Smoked bush meat (monkey, porcupine) is very prized in eastern Congo. Many men in Lukweti hunt in the forest, and can leave for several days at a time to go hunting. They often cross the blockades set up by the FDLR Hutu rebels and have to leave them part of their spoils.

A seller in the Lukweti market. The Lukweti market takes place every Thursday and is a day of great activity in the village. Many people come in from the neighbouring villages, particularly the FDLR armed men. All the merchandise arrives on the backs of men (and more often on the backs of women) from Nyabiondo, approximately three to four hours walk. You can find everything in the market; clothes, sandals, pocket torches, and Chinese digital watches at 1500 Congolese francs (about $1.5).

Women loot manioc for the APCLS militia. Lukweti, Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

Sifting manioc flour for the APCLS militia. Lukweti, Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

CIVILIANS AND MILITIAMEN – HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER?

Even if the possession of a firearm sets up a fundamental inequality between the militiaman and a civilian, that of a relationship of a superior over a second-in-command, the civilians and armed men are far from being strangers to one another. Amongst parents, friends, brothers, cousins and neighbours it is very rare, in the Masisi territory, to find a family which does not have a single member linked, either closely or distantly, to an armed group. The distinction between civilians and militiamen can sometimes be blurred, as civilians can sometimes have a weapon at home.

Members of the 'youth' of Lukweti with their President, in the khaki t-shirt. In many villages the young people are organised into self-defence groups, named 'youth' or 'local defence'. Lukweti's youth has some weapons and organise patrols at night in case of attack, particularly when the APCLS militia have gone to the frontline. The president of the Lukweti youth tells us that he can get almost 80 young people together, but they only have 'a few weapons'.

A civilian and an APCLS militiaman greet each other warmly after not having seen each other for a long time. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Sentiment, Chief Escort of APCLS 'Colonel' James (in military uniform), celebrates his return from the front in Pinga with his friend Muhindo, a member of Lukweti's youth. The two young boys met some years ago in Kitchanga, Sentiment's hometown, before Sentiment joined the APCLS. In Pinga, APCLS is regularly fighting Cheka's troops.

A football match in Lukweti – the teams bring civilians and militiamen together around the football. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Shaolin, a Lukweti resident, and Colonel Christian from the APCLS are great friends. Shaolin is not part of the APCLS but, nevertheless, he sometimes accompanies his friend Christian to the frontline. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Innocent is worried. His brother and four of his friends have been called by 'General' Janvier to explain their involvement in a fanciful tale concerning minerals. Under escort, the five young men had to climb up Mt Sinai where the APCLS commander is located. Innocent does not know what will happen to them. They were to be interrogated and lectured by the General himself, but did not experience any ill-treatment. They would stay at Mt Sinai for four days, carrying out work for the 'General', before they could return home.

Maman Mishé was married to Kalé, the oldest son of 'General' Janvier. Kalé had a reputation for being one of the most hardened APCLS militiamen. He died a year ago. Whilst he was on the frontline during the fight against Cheka's men, Kalé was caught in an ambush. His body was riddled with bullets. Maman Mishé thinks about Kalé often. She dreams about him at night. They had one child, a boy. Mishé does not have fields. When Kalé died, her in-laws took her husband's four cows as well as his goats and chickens. Today Mishé lives from running a small pork meat business, without anyone's support. Lukweti, Masisi, August 2013.

KEEP THE FAITH

Confronted by the adversity of war and the surrounding poverty, the Christian faith and its promise of a better tomorrow undeniably provide a certain kind of comfort to the very devout population in North Kivu. The churches are full on Sundays. In Lukweti's CEBECA Protestant Church, one Sunday in August, the pastor fervently preaches fire and brimstone at the top of his voice.

Apart from the religious aspect, churches are also particularly important social spaces for community life. There people meet as families, amongst friends and neighbours, and sing and dance for hours. Sometimes some militiamen also come to pray and gather their thoughts. Nevertheless, the pastor tells us: "They don't come often".

The pastor maintains an impressive level of energy throughout his sermon, which lasts for two hours.

Many young mothers come to church with their children.

Although there is no electricity in Lukweti, the CEBECA church has a solar-powered drum kit from which the musicians can amplify their instruments and invigorate Mass with their songs.

Every good Christian has to contribute to the Church's development. The basket is passed round for the faithful to put in several francs.

Men, women and children sing and dance. Mass is also a time to relax and be social.

A small girl plays outside the church waiting for the end of Mass. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Disclaimer: *Many of the witness statements used in this article come from APCLS militiamen or civilians who share their daily existence with the APCLS militia. Their words clearly demonstrate a strong adherence to the ideology and the rhetoric of this particular armed group; whether voluntarily or coerced. We therefore ask our readers to read some of the accounts herein with a critical eye. Local Voices, International Alert and Search for Common Ground do not endorse the opinions held by the different people who speak out in this article. However it seems important to us to publish these statements in order to better grasp the sometimes radical, and extreme, points of view, positions and understanding of these local actors, as, without this, no viable peace process would be able to take place.*

Part 6

Twenty years old with a Kalashnikov

They are barely 20 years old but they have already been carrying Kalashnikovs for several years.

Their entire life has been marked by the war that has ravaged eastern Congo since 1993. At first, they were passive victims; now they are active fighters. Mostly motivated by suffering and despair, some are also driven by their convictions. They usually say they do it to ‘free their country’. Local Voices met some of these young Congolese rebels.

TUMA

His name is Tumaïni. In Swahili, this means ‘Hope’. He is 24 years old. Tuma, as his friends call him, has spent the last eight years with a Kalashnikov in his hands. This is a third of his life. He was 16 when he joined the armed groups. He says that “it wasn’t because they made me. I felt the suffering which the ‘aggressors’ were inflicting on us”.

Tuma, in the shadow of a hut. Lukweti, Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

At the age of two, Tuma lost his father. His mother remarried and left him with friends from his father’s side of the family, a Hutu family, despite the fact that Tuma’s parents came from the Hunde community. He was about 10 years old when his adoptive parents shared the truth with him. He tells us: “I thought of myself as a Hutu, but I became more of a Hunde from one day to the next!”

At the same time, he found out that ‘General’ Janvier, the commander of the APCLS rebel group, was part of his extended family.

Patrol in the banana trees. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Tuma went to live with his maternal grandfather in Kitchanga, a large town in Masisi which is predominantly Hunde. He tells us that there he was ‘harassed’ by the soldiers from the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), then by the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP)’s soldiers, who were part of the uprisings supported by Rwanda and taking place in eastern Congo.

Tuma in the Lukweti market. North Kivu, August 2013.

Tuma explains to us: “I joined the armed groups because they were constantly making martyrs of us! The CNDP soldiers often made us carry their bags. They told us that they were going to wipe us, the Hunde, out’. During this period, Tuma, who does not know how to read or write, tried to improve his situation by setting up a small business selling ‘miscellaneous items’, such as batteries, cheap Chinese watches, flashlights, sandals…. but twice he had all of his merchandise stolen by armed men.

He could not cope any longer. It would not be long before he ceased being a ‘civilian’.

“When you are a soldier, no-one can intimidate you. You are protected by your weapon. When you’re a civilian, the soldiers ill-treat you. Even the other civilians can threaten you. That is the main difference between a civilian and a soldier”. Tuma tells us this when explaining what changed in his life when he took up arms.

Fubula, one of Tuma's companions in arms, with his Kalashnikov slung across his shoulder. The young militiamen constantly carry their weapon so that it quickly becomes a part of them. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

He tells us about how he left: "I knew that there was a Maï-Maï base [the rebels fighting the CNDP] not far from Kitchanga, near Kahira. Those people often came down to Kitchanga to go to the market. I used to speak to them. I always knew about the other young people who had left to join them. One day, I also took the decision to leave. I didn't tell anyone; not my family, nor my friends. I was afraid that they wouldn't allow me to go".

Tuma crosses a bridge in Lukweti. North Kivu, August 2013.

Tuma joined the Maï-Maï around 2005. Since 1998, these were the militia who had aligned themselves with the new Laurent-Désiré Kabila's government. They were fighting the rebellions which were backed by neighbouring countries, ostensibly Rwanda and Uganda, two countries that had been instrumental in bringing Laurent-Désiré Kabila into power. When Tuma decided to take up arms in 2005, the CNDP - an armed group headed by Laurent Nkunda - was just being formed. To counter this movement, which was often called 'pro-Rwandan', another group was set up by former rebels from the Maï-Maï movement; called the PARECO, the Coalition of Congolese Resistence Patriots. This was the group that Tuma would join. It was also the group where Janvier Karairi was a brigade commander, before he founded the APCLS.

People tell us that during this period the radio in Kitchanga would everyday list the names of the young people who had left their villages to join the armed groups.

Tuma, on the window ledge of a classroom in the Lukweti school. Tuma does not know how to read or write; his parents were unable to pay his school fees. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

Welcomed with open arms by his new colleagues with weapons, Tuma went through two months of military training where he learnt, amongst other things, how to fire a Kalashnikov. He had never touched a weapon before this training. He says he learnt quickly: “During the first fights, I remember, I didn’t stay back! I went up to the frontline without being scared by the noise and the shots. I only went forward. Of course, I’m tough, I always go in front”. Up until now, Tuma has always been lucky; he is still alive. He says that “most of the colleagues with whom I went to that first frontline are dead. It’s difficult now for me to remember them”.

Tuma's weapon is always loaded. He shows us a cartridge that he has just taken from the magazine. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

The banality of death and violence are one of the first by-products of the last 20 years of war. War is considered to be the normal state of affairs for young people like Tuma who have never known peace; it has reached the point where war is almost an intrinsic part of them. Tuma and his friends talk about weapons, about AK-47s and RPG machine guns(which Tuma prefers), boasting about their exploits on the front and reminding anyone who wants to listen that they are not afraid of death.

Tuma tells us that "it's very important to be a combatant. If a colleague gets hit and dies at the front, you can't let it throw you off. You have to continue fighting. You have to step over his body and keep moving forward'.

Tuma in front of the Lukweti school, and the bamboo 'network markers'; the only place in Lukweti where it is possible to get telephone network coverage. Masisi territory, North Kivu, August 2013.

Tuma got married a year ago. He married a young woman from Kitchanga called Risiko. They do not have children yet, but it won't be long. "Even if I die, the most important thing for me is that my children will know that their father fought for a noble cause. Death is not a big issue for me. God created each of us with our own destiny".

Tuma and his wife, Risiko, in their home in Lukweti. Risiko, like Tuma, comes from Kitchanga, which is also where they met each other. Risiko would prefer to live in Kitchanga than Lukweti; she tells us that "there's war too often in Lukweti". North Kivu, August 2013.

With his Kalashnikov in hand, looking us right in the eyes, Tuma says calmly that "everyone has their time to live, and their time to die".

Tuma, just before leaving to fight some of Cheka's armed group at Pinga. Lukweti, North Kivu, August 2013.

VÉRITÉ

Vérité was 21 when he decided to join the Maï-Maï from the PARECO/APCLS. It was 2005 and his village had been the target of repeated attacks by armed men and his family home had been ransacked every time. The bandits broke down the door, beat them up, stole all their money and went as far as making them strip so that they could take their clothes. Vérité tells us: "I couldn't continue like that, in that life". With a friend, he abandoned his school desk in order to join the armed groups. When he told his parents about his decision, they gave him a container of cassixe, the local banana beer, to encourage him and "left him in the hands of God".

Vérité got shot in the leg during a confrontation with CNDP rebels a year later. The three men who were fighting alongside him didn't fare much better: one was hit in the hand, one in the collarbone and the last in the neck. It was a total rout. Vérité hid in a hole, waiting for it to end. Finally the shooting stopped. Vérité was alone and unable to walk. He crawled on his knees for two hours until he was picked up by some villagers who took him, wounded, to his commander. From there he was taken to the General Hospital in Masisi. His wound was not clean-cut and the leg had to be amputated. He spent six months convalescing in hospital.

Verité, at home, in the house which he rents with his older brother in Nyabiondo. North Kivu, August 2013.

On coming out of hospital, Vérité did not return home to his parents, but rather went back to his former military post. He explains, simply, that “through losing a leg, I lost all my value for my family. When parents get old, children have to look after them. If I went home without a leg, what could I do to help them? How would I be useful to them?”

At the military post, he was welcomed. His old colleagues in arms were happy to see him alive. They said to him that “it is better to be suffering and alive than to be dead!” Even “General” Janvier congratulated him on his bravery and reassured him that he would always be one of their own. Therefore, and despite his disability, Vérité still thinks of himself as an APCLS soldier. He lives in Nyabiondo with his older brother who is a carpenter. Every morning he goes to the military post with the other militiamen for the Reveille. He no longer bears a weapon, but two wooden crutches.

Verité in front of his home. Nyabiondo, August 2013.

Nowadays, Vérité is waiting. Without any source of income and with a disability, he hopes that the APCLS will soon be integrated into the national army. When that happens, he thinks that he will have the right to the monthly salary for soldiers, along with the other militiamen. This is, at least, what the 'General' has told him. After all, didn't he lose a leg in battle? Won't he also have the right, when the day comes, to the fruits of their struggle?

Therefore, despite his difficulties and his crutches, when we ask him if he wouldn't rather simply go back to civilian life, Vérité doesn't hesitate for a second, saying ruthlessly: "I could never accept to call myself a civilian. I would rather die a soldier!"

Disclaimer: *The statements here come from two young men who joined the APCLS, the People's Alliance for Free and Sovereign Congo, which is an armed group close to the Hunde community with a strong anti-Rwandan ideology. Due to some of the project's constraints, it was not possible for the Local Voices team to gather statements from young rebels from different armed groups. We are therefore asking the reader to maintain a critical eye when reading the words of these young men; rebels from other armed groups would have described the situation radically differently. As we can expect, given the inherent violence in the Eastern Congo context, the words here are both strongly emotive and very subjective.*

Publishing these statements does not mean, in any situation, that Local Voices, International Alert or Search for Common Ground approve of or share the opinions or positions held by the militiamen. However, it is important for us to publish these stories given the extent to which they show quite how extremely the young militiamen, manipulated or not, see their environment and explain why they were motivated to take up weapons. The radicalism of these statements reminds all of the actors for peacebuilding in Eastern Congo of the importance, and the great difficulty, of considering local points of view and stereotypes, particularly those which prevail amongst the armed men.

Text and photographs: Alexis Bouvy.
Facilitation in the field: Crispin Mvano and Rodolpe Mukundi.

For more information on the context of armed conflicts in North Kivu, see Jason Stearns' *North Kivu. The Background to Conflict in North Kivu* (2012).

For a critical perspective on the peace efforts carried out or supported by the Congolese authorities and international actors, see International Alert's report *Ending the Deadlock. Towards a New Vision of Peace in Eastern DRC* (2012).

On negative discourses and stereotypes in DRC, see International Alert's report *Words That Kill. Rumours, Prejudice, Stereotypes and Myths Amongst the People of the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (2009).

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