

**UNITED NATIONS**  
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**Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN)**

DRC: Special report on Ituri District, northeastern DRC

Note: This report was issued as part of an IRIN web special on the humanitarian crisis in Ituri published on 18 December 2002. The web special includes background information, a detailed chronology of events, a who's who and web links. To access the web special please go to : [www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/default.asp](http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/default.asp)

## **I. Introduction**

The northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) region of Ituri is bracing itself for a new round of conflict, "ethnic cleansing" and civilian desperation, even as peace talks have concluded between the government and warring rebel factions, and most foreign troops have withdrawn from the war-ravaged country.

Ituri, bordering Uganda, is one of eastern DRC's least stable and most conflict-affected areas. A population of several million is largely cut off from international humanitarian assistance due to a dangerous patchwork of military occupation and control. The faction in control of the regional capital, Bunia, Union des patriotes congolais (UPC), is not a signatory to the 17 December Pretoria accord<sup>1</sup> between the present government, five armed groups, the political opposition and civil society.

The UN reports that 50,000 people may have been killed in the region since the war-within-a-war began in 1999. Hundreds of thousands are displaced, food security is poor, and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and measles commonplace. The few local and international humanitarian agencies which do attempt to operate in the region face very limited access outside, Bunia, and a highly unpredictable relationship with local authorities and factional leaders.

The UN peacekeeping force in the DRC, MONUC, has posted up to eight military observers at any time to Bunia, the conduct of some of whom has been praised, but whose influence is largely symbolic.

The tensions in Ituri result from several factors, including historical land ownership and tensions between the Hema and Lendu communities, and have been fanned by military, commercial and political forces.

The chorus of warnings from UN agencies and NGOs, human rights groups, political commentators and diplomatic sources has reached a crescendo in recent weeks, while fighting continues on the ground. New humanitarian supplies due to arrive by air have not yet been delivered due to protracted negotiations with local leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> For copies of this and other agreements, go to [www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/Weblinks.asp](http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/Weblinks.asp)

## II. Current Situation - Summary

UN officials, humanitarian workers, NGOs, diplomats and regional analysts contacted by IRIN are of an almost unanimous opinion that Ituri is on the brink of another round of extreme violence and an ever more severe humanitarian crisis. This report draws on published reports, interviews and internal documents from humanitarian and political sources and aims to provide an overview of the situation in Ituri. The precarious security of colleagues on the ground and a highly charged political climate have led most organisations and individuals contacted by IRIN for this report to request anonymity.

Aid agencies are torn between wanting to draw attention to the crisis while protecting their staff. A donor official, when IRIN requested information on Ituri, wrote that “this will sound familiar, but with things the way they are - extremely bad - we are very, very wary about information/communication on Ituri. Only information of a purely humanitarian nature should be rendered public - anything of a more sensitive nature will automatically rebound on [humanitarian actors] on the ground in Bunia, whose lives we consider to be seriously at risk.” On the other hand, some aid agencies remain, despite a frustrating lack of access to people in extreme need, out of a feeling of duty – “to be the eyes and ears of the international community”, one agency manager said. Aid agencies can act as a restraining influence - “a lot more horrible things would have happened if we were not there”, the manager told IRIN.

Documents and comments from sources who requested anonymity use phrases such as “a precipice of extreme violence”, “the conditions are in place for a major humanitarian disaster in Ituri”, “another killing-spree in the making”, “strong likelihood of another round of massacres and retribution”. Other reports state: “we could be facing a major explosion of inter-communal violence” and “...every possibility of a bloodbath”. These remarks show the alarm with which informed observers view the Ituri region.

Faced with these warnings, regional and international efforts are being made to contain the situation in Ituri. However, progress in delivering humanitarian aid and addressing the underlying conflict has been minimal since the bloody takeover of Bunia in August by a relatively new armed faction in the DRC, the Union des patriotes congolais (UPC), led by a Hema, Thomas Lubanga. Ugandan People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) troops remain in Bunia, but have ostensibly pulled out from elsewhere in the DRC.

Four political and military processes are at a turning point in the DRC, all of which will impact on the way events unfold in Ituri in the coming weeks and months: The Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) and follow-up talks brokered by the UN and South Africa have concluded, and MONUC is entering a newly-enlarged phase and a change of emphasis in its mandate. Thirdly, the Ituri Pacification Committee (IPC) had been expected to start work soon, while Uganda had publicly committed to withdrawing the last of its troops based in the DRC before the end of the year.

On the ground, however, the Lubanga-led faction controlling Bunia and a few other locations, the UPC, is surrounded by two other armed movements hostile to it and is already fraught with internal division. A hardline Hema chief and military commander, Kahwa Mandro, is reported to be challenging Lubanga. In August 2002, a minister in the DRC government alleged that Rwanda (despite its public pull-out from the DRC) was supporting the UPC with advisers and supplies, an allegation that a Rwandan spokesman calls “rubbish”. Freelance militia, including remnants of the 1994 Rwandan Hutu army and the Interahamwe, are also reported in the region.

This dangerous situation has reportedly been fuelled by Uganda, which, according to Human Rights Watch, “has played the role of both arsonist and fireman with disastrous consequences for the local population. In their involvement in continuing political feuds among Congolese party leaders, in local ethnic conflicts, and in extracting wealth, Ugandan actors have furthered their own interests at the expense of Congolese whose territory they are occupying”<sup>2</sup>. Added to that is a steady diet of ethnic rhetoric, which has led to increasingly bitter and polarised communities. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation is amongst the worst in the world, and each outbreak of violence increases vulnerability among civilians.

### **III. Humanitarian Overview**

#### Civilians bear the brunt

The DRC is one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, and Ituri, according to a senior NGO official, is the area of “most extreme need” in the DRC. The people of Ituri are subject to extreme harassment from all sides, facing killings, mutilation, rape, plunder and arson. Roads are insecure, and movement can only take place with armed convoys. The results are massive and repeated displacement, poor food security and disease outbreaks. Conflict has damaged social infrastructure such as clinics, schools and hospitals. The widespread destruction of property has left many without a home to go back to. Some internally displaced persons (IDPs) are so desperate that they even lack clothing. Many families have been forced to move several times, each successive displacement increasing the level of vulnerability.

Estimates from the humanitarian community indicate that 500,000 people have been displaced by conflict in Ituri - 100,000 or more in and around the city of Bunia alone, with the second largest group to the south of the regional capital. Urban centres in North Kivu are swelled by IDPs. The western forest area of Nyoka also holds thousands, aid agencies say, while more IDPs have fled to the north, towards Mahagi and beyond. Refugees from Ituri have crossed the border into Uganda, arriving at the border areas of Mahagi, Aru, Nebbi and Bundibugyo, both to the north and south of Lake Albert. Their numbers are unclear, but are estimated to be between 10,000 and 30,000.

Child soldiers are a prominent feature of the military landscape, with active recruitment continuing, especially among IDPs, and in instances where children have become separated from their families. "I've never seen so many child soldiers," one UN official told IRIN following a visit to Bunia. "There were kids aged seven or eight guarding the presidency." UN sources suggest about 50 percent of armed forces members in the region may be under 18.

A recent UN assessment mission to Bunia found that malnutrition in the city was not serious, but was likely to increase due to an inability to cultivate, loss of livestock, and escalating food prices. One member of the mission observed that people were harvesting their crops before maturity so that they would not be stolen. "The situation could be far worse outside Bunia, but this is unknown," the mission participant told IRIN.

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<sup>2</sup> Go to <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/drc/>

## Lack of humanitarian access, security and reliable information

Despite dogged efforts, the impact of the humanitarian community in meeting the needs of Ituri has been very limited since August 2002. Poor security, difficulties in delivering cargo by air to Bunia, and the harassment of aid agencies has left Ituri with the services of a handful of international NGOs, which are largely confined to base. The UPC expelled the only UN aid official permanently based in Bunia in November. Local NGOs, churches and missions have carried a large proportion of the burden of supporting the needy in the region.

"Humanitarian agencies in Ituri, more or less confined to their bases in Bunia and Mahagi, are at present almost entirely unable to assist these [conflict-affected] people, or even to assess their condition," an observer said. Locally recruited staff of NGOs have to be cautious in their movements as there are no-go areas even within Bunia for people of certain ethnic groups. A collective of Ituri NGOs in a recent report said "psychosis and paranoia" prevailed in the region.

"The population is either misinformed or under-informed, which has led to the intoxication of people with false information aimed at pitting certain communities against others," said the local NGO collective. "Moderate leaders have been sidelined on both sides [and] there are not many ways to communicate with the people," a humanitarian official told IRIN.

The UPC has for several months denied humanitarian agencies permission to land air cargo freely in Bunia, although relief supplies could be delivered by air from Beni or Uganda. Air cargo is seen as a revenue opportunity, and the UPC has tried to impose the exclusive use of its own airline, Mbao Pax, for the transport of humanitarian relief. Reaching displaced people in Ituri by road from Beni is frequently impossible or impracticable due to insecurity and poor roads. A weekly passenger service to Bunia is operated by the EC's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), which continues to be the primary donor for humanitarian relief efforts in Ituri.

## Humanitarians targeted

Ituri was "one of the worst areas in the world to work in", a senior humanitarian official told IRIN. Humanitarian workers have been targeted directly and are routinely accused of bias. Supplies and equipment are confiscated or commandeered. Any progress in improving understanding between aid agencies and local authorities, and the promotion of humanitarian principles is further complicated by the regular changes of personnel and factional fragmentation. "The players change all the time," an aid official pointed out. "It's incredibly complicated and dangerous." In the worst single incident in the region, six ICRC personnel were ambushed and murdered on the road from Fataki to Djugu in April 2001.

During a recent UN and donor mission led by Namanga Ngongi, the UN secretary-general's special representative in the DRC, Lubanga gave his assurances that humanitarian actors would be allowed to continue their work in full security in territory controlled by his rebel UPC. Lubanga had been singled out by the UN Security Council in demands for respect for humanitarian intervention. NGO personnel had recently been temporarily detained and an official of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) expelled. However, in a less positive development, once the joint mission departed, forces of the UPC confiscated communication equipment belonging to international NGOs in another round of harassment.

#### **IV. Peace talks: The Congolese Peace Talks**

The Lusaka ceasefire agreement<sup>3</sup> called for the establishment of “inter-Congolese political negotiations involving *les forces vives* [which] shall lead to a new political dispensation and national reconciliation in the DRC. The inter-Congolese political negotiations shall be under the aegis of a neutral facilitator to be agreed upon by the Congolese parties.”

More than three years later, the ICD and follow-up talks mediated by the UN and South Africa have produced a peace agreement billed as “all-inclusive”. However, the transitional government set up in the 17 December agreement signed in Pretoria will have to deal with ongoing conflicts which are unresolved, the most serious of which is Ituri. The UPC, which holds Bunia and some surrounding towns, was not among the rebel groups which signed the Pretoria agreement. Lubanga’s earlier requests for a seat at the table were declined, a diplomat familiar with the process told IRIN. “It will be up to the Congolese to sort out the mess,” the diplomat said.

The ICD process (after a false start in Addis Ababa in October 2001) completed a preliminary phase in Sun City, South Africa, in April 2002. Contentious political and power-sharing issues were deferred to a final round of talks, preparations for which began in October under the chairmanship of UN Special Envoy Moustapha Niasse, appointed in June. The accord determines the make-up of the transitional government and preparations for elections.

Ituri, while a “sideshow”, the diplomat said, “has the capacity to undermine everything”. The Kinshasa newspaper *La Tempête des Tropiques* alleged on 18 December that fighting between the rebel Mouvement de liberation du Congo (MLC) and the Rassemblement congolais pour la democratie-Kisangani-Mouvement de liberation (RCD-K-ML) continued in Ituri until the last minute. Both factions are signatories to the Pretoria agreement. Lubanga remains in control of territory in Ituri and, as such, is a wild card as signatories move to implement the agreement. The diplomatic source admitted the “possibility” that increased fighting in Ituri in the course of 2002 could be linked to jockeying for position in preparation for a new transitional dispensation.

#### **V. Peacekeepers: MONUC**

The UN Security Council enlarged the force strength of MONUC to 8,700 on 4 December 2002. Resolution 1445 specifically requests the UN secretary-general to place more MONUC resources in the Ituri region, security permitting. Of over 440 MONUC military observers in the DRC so far, a maximum of eight have ever been posted to Bunia, let alone the outlying areas. These resources are “woefully inadequate”, according to a senior NGO official.

MONUC’s original mandate<sup>4</sup> mainly concerns the implementation of the Lusaka ceasefire agreement, but does include powers under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to protect civilians “in the areas of its infantry battalions, and as it deems it within its capabilities”. A special report from the UN secretary-general to the UN Security Council on 10 September outlined a twofold approach to Ituri: “promoting accountability from the de facto authorities and launching measures to build confidence between the communities”, while “security responsibilities should continue to be discharged by the UPDF, in an impartial manner”.

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<sup>3</sup> Go to [http://www.usip.org/library/pa/drc/drc\\_07101999\\_toc.html](http://www.usip.org/library/pa/drc/drc_07101999_toc.html)

<sup>4</sup> Go to [http://www.monuc.org/eng/onmonuc/mandat/EN\\_mandat.asp](http://www.monuc.org/eng/onmonuc/mandat/EN_mandat.asp)

Recent comments from the head of MONUC, also the special representative of the UN secretary-general, Namanga Ngongi, in a press briefing on 11 December, underline MONUC's unwillingness to get sucked into the Ituri conflict.

Asked why new MONUC troops would be deployed to Kindu and Kisangani instead of Ituri, Ngongi said new resources were in support of the DDRRR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration) programme. "The Security Council approved the increase of our forces to support the DDRRR programme, which is mainly intended for the foreign armed groups. These groups are not in Ituri, but in South Kivu, in Maniema and in Katanga," he said. Ngongi, the MONUC transcript states, went on to say that in Ituri, "Congolese are fighting among themselves". MONUC nonetheless has an Ituri task force, and is actively trying to reactivate the IPC in consultation with Kampala, most recently in the second week of December.

It is unclear what new actions from MONUC may be expected in Ituri. Several humanitarian sources commended the personal bravery of MONUC observers during intense fighting in Bunia in August 2002. UN observers wielding cameras during the conflict, it is said, were a restraining factor, but at present cannot "protect the civilian population after nightfall", according to one observer. Other roles MONUC could play in Ituri, human rights organisations say, should include investigating human rights abuses to facilitate future prosecutions and accelerate the establishment of Radio Okapi, a radio service jointly managed with the NGO, Fondation Hirondelle, to start broadcasting from Bunia. Also, MONUC indicated in August 2002 it was studying the possibility of training a police force for Bunia as it has in Kisangani.

## **VI. Pull-out: The Luanda Agreement**

In September, the DRC and Uganda entered into a wide-ranging agreement under the auspices of the Angolan government<sup>5</sup>. Among various undertakings, Uganda was to withdraw its troops completely from the DRC by the end of the year, except for some border patrols. The volatile situation in Ituri was recognised as needing special attention before Uganda pulled out. The establishment of the IPC was expected to pave the way for the Ugandan pull-out. An annex to the accord stipulated that the Kinshasa government was expected to take control of Ituri, at least in part, before 50 days had elapsed from the signing of the agreement on 6 September. Uganda's pull-out was expected after 100 days. All these deadlines have been missed. MONUC and the governments of the DRC and Uganda had put together a six-person preparatory team for the IPC, but had been confronted in early October by objections from Lubanga.

A regional analyst suggests that the withdrawal of Ugandan forces could lead to a power vacuum which would result in an upsurge in conflict, with militia and rebel factions (some of whom may not be included in the Pretoria agreement) scrambling for territory in the hope of securing concessions at future negotiations. Furthermore, it is feared that extremists may embark on a programme of "large-scale" ethnic cleansing in Ituri, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>6</sup>

Uganda has been condemned by human rights organisations and UN human rights reports for fuelling the conflict in Ituri by arming and training almost all the militia and rebel factions. The

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<sup>5</sup> For a copy of this agreement, go to [www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/Weblinks.asp](http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/Weblinks.asp)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/10/drc1031.htm>

pursuit of financial gain on the part of senior commanders has been the subject of detailed reports from two UN investigative panels. Nonetheless the UN Security Council on 31 October 2002 asked Uganda, “as long as it maintains forces on the spot, to watch out for the security of the civilian population in and around Bunia”. Even Kinshasa is urging Uganda to avoid a premature departure.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the UPDF has a real rebellion on its hands at home, pursuing rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

Doubts are raised by some observers of the sincerity of the Uganda’s professed desire to pull out. The UN panel on the exploitation of resources in the DRC reported in October 2002<sup>8</sup> that elite networks manipulating the war economy had adapted new strategies to continue their activities after the official pull-out of foreign troops. The report claims that “high-ranking UPDF officers have taken steps to train local militia to serve as a paramilitary force, directly and discreetly under UPDF command, which will be capable of performing the same functions of the UPDF”.

In an interview with IRIN, a Uganda foreign affairs official, Busho Ndinyenka, emphatically denied these claims: “There is no way the Uganda government would be pulling out its forces and doing everything it can to restore peace in Congo, [and] then it allows its officers to fuel the crisis. The UPDF would not fuel such a crisis in Ituri, because it is not a rich part of Congo,” he said.<sup>9</sup>

## **VII. The Ituri Pacification Committee**

The IPC, proposed in the DRC-Uganda Luanda agreement, provides for representatives of parties, political, military economic and social forces and local communities to get together to make peace in the region, with support from MONUC. Three months later, its structure, composition, programme of work and leadership are still unresolved. Kinshasa blames Lubanga for demanding as a precondition to cooperating with the IPC that Ituri be treated as a province (not a district of the larger Orientale Province), which is unacceptable to them.

Ndinyenka, agrees that Lubanga has delayed the launching of the IPC, saying Lubanga felt that Uganda and DRC had “sold him [out]”. It is widely accepted that the IPC must proceed in some form for any progress to be made in resolving the conflict in Ituri. A hint of what might be Uganda’s view of the way forward was given by a UPDF source, who told IRIN that Uganda had proposed a local assembly. “If it [the assembly] is not elected, then it must have broad representatives – local chiefs, notables, religious leaders, the different rebel leaders etc,” he said. Previous peace talks and agreements between community leaders held in Bunia, Kampala and Kinshasa have “helped defuse tensions. However, the lack of follow-up or the non-implementation of agreed measures has impeded the furtherance of reconciliation efforts”, according to a September report by the UN secretary-general.

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<sup>7</sup> See Ituri: Views from Kinshasa, <http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/prsKinshasa.asp>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/s/706B89B947E5993DC1256C590052B353>

<sup>9</sup> See IRIN Interview with Busho Ndinyenka, <http://www.irinnews.org/webspecials/Ituri/prsNdinyenka.asp>

## VIII. Political and Military Forces in Ituri

While the “macro” political and security processes affecting Ituri present a mixed picture, the situation on the ground remains tense and volatile.

Local media reports say that on the military front, the UPC is beleaguered, with forces of Mbusa Nyamwisi’s Armee du peuple congolais (APC), possibly including Rwandan Hutu elements, close to Bunia in the south and challenging the UPC to the north, particularly at Mahagi. In the west, Roger Lumbala’s RCD-National (RCD-N), backed by Jean-Pierre Bemba’s MLC, is challenging both Nyamwisi and the UPC. Libya is allegedly supporting the MLC (it denies the allegations), possibly adding a dangerous new dimension to the conflict, while persistent but unconfirmed rumours suggest Rwanda is backing elements of the UPC (it too denies interfering in the region).

The UPC, although it has tried to broaden its ethnic composition recently, and is largely composed of Hema politicians and militia backed by Hema business interests, is itself divided somewhat along clan lines, between northern Gegere Hemas and a southern Hema-Sud faction. Conflict between the two has resulted in armed forces loyal to Chief Kahwa Mandro spilling into Uganda, according to the Ugandan *The New Vision* newspaper on 9 December.<sup>10</sup> Clashes between Kahwa and Lubanga broke out in Bunia recently, according to the Kinshasa newspaper, *Le Potentiel*.

The two UPC factions are also said by analysts to be divided in their foreign allegiances – Lubanga allied to Rwanda, Kahwa to Uganda. A Kinshasa newspaper claimed that President Yoweri Museveni was fed up with Lubanga, and had recently tried to engineer a meeting between Kahwa and President Joseph Kabila. Lubanga’s foreign affairs minister, Jean-Baptiste Dhetchuvi, told the *The New Vision* on 16 December that the UPDF may be “poised to attack the UPC”. Relations between Rwanda and Uganda had “really deteriorated” recently, a regional analyst told IRIN. If Rwanda were backing parts of the UPC, the analyst said, it would be a continuation of previous proxy conflicts in DRC and would be motivated by a desire to undermine Uganda.

Most observers fear a forcible change of power in Bunia is both likely and highly dangerous, with the town, now largely occupied by Hema, possibly facing ethnic pogroms by invading forces or suffering the fallout from an intra-Hema power struggle between Lubanga and Kahwa.

The UPC’s two main military opponents are the RCD-N and the RCD-K-ML. These two factions on 10 December gave some assurances to MONUC that they would observe a bilateral ceasefire – this comes after a series of towns changing hands, including an RCD-N takeover in Mambasa in early December. Nyamwisi’s RCD-K-ML, in theory a “rebel movement”, is widely reported to be backed by Kinshasa. A report by the UN secretary-general of 18 October suggests that the UPC was “reinforced and resupplied” in June 2002 after the RCD-K-ML and the Kinshasa government had made plans to re-establish government control in Bunia. The report did not state from where the UPC received support.

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.newvision.co.ug/detail.php?mainNewsCategoryId=8&newsCategoryId=13&newsId=102284>

## IX. Background

### Ethnic land disputes fanned

The region of Ituri is a district of the vast Orientale Province and has a population of about 4.5 million, according to aid agencies working there. Figures of the make-up of the population differ widely. The town of Bunia, swelled by displaced families, is thought to hold at least 300,000 people. The main ethnic groups are the Alur, Hema, Lendu, Ngiti, Bira and Ndo-Okebo. On the key question of the relative size of these communities, there are conflicting figures. The Alur are often regarded as the biggest community in the region, but some figures indicate the Lendu are the largest group. The comparative size of the Hema and Lendu is unclear. Confusingly (and ironically, given the hatred that has been whipped up in the name of ethnic identity), the northern Gegere clan of the Hema speak the Lendu language.

The ethnographic database produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics provides the following estimates for the size of larger communities speaking the following languages across all of the DRC, not only in Ituri: Lendu: 750,000; Alur: 500,000; Hema: 160,000; Bira: 120,000; Ndo-Okebo: 100,000 and Ngiti: 100,000. Human Rights Watch, which has researched the Ituri conflict in detail<sup>11</sup>, estimates that the Hema and Lendu account for 40 percent of the total population of Ituri.

There are other smaller ethnic groups indigenous to the region, including the Twa and a wider diversity of groups from other regions, particularly in the towns. Generally speaking, the Hema are associated with livestock rearing and business, and the Lendu with agriculture. A key Lendu grievance is a perception of unjust accumulation of land in Hema hands, inasmuch as Belgian colonial administrators favoured the Hema at independence with large land concessions. As the conflict has escalated, Hema leaders, on their side, have expressed fears of being targeted for “ethnic cleansing” or even genocide. In the ethnic ideology which has poisoned the Great Lakes region, the two are sometimes seen (however inaccurately) as representing two sides of a Bantu-Nilotic clash. A Human Rights Watch researcher has said that “the two groups are now identifying with the Hutu-Tutsi categories that figured in the Rwandan genocide. The Lendu are now thinking of themselves as kin to the Hutu, while the Hema are identifying with the Tutsi.”

Clashes between Hema and Lendu over land ownership and rights over land for grazing have broken out on several occasions in the last three decades. However, the deadliest phase of the tensions between the two communities started in May 1999. Each group attempted to expel the other from contested areas in a policy of local “ethnic cleansing”.

A local NGO suggests that weaknesses in the 1973 land law, which allows occupied land to be purchased and occupants to be evicted two years later without legal recourse, encouraged the strategy of wholesale expulsion. Typically, in order to grab land, loot resources, or chase away the other community, villages, farms and livestock are attacked, looted and burnt. Civilians, including women and children, have been killed and mutilated with traditional weapons (machetes and bows and arrows). Both sides have gained increasing access to conventional weapons backed with communications equipment and more organised command structures. Attacks have become more brutal and barbarous – notoriously, severed heads were reportedly displayed on pikes in city streets in Bunia in January 2001, and human rights testimonies and video footage amply support accounts of devastating violence and cruelty in attacks by all sides.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://docs.hrw.org/cgi-bin/htsearch?words=ituri&method=and&config=all&format=builtin-long>

An attack on Nyankunde hospital in September 2002 included the killing of women and children patients in their beds.

Faction leaders battling for political power and territorial control have needed recruits for their forces, and have used ethnic resentment as a way of motivating and inciting their forces, say political sources from the region. Communities are whipped up into a state of fear or resentment to be ready to serve the interests of faction leaders. “Those who do not have, want to acquire by all means. Those who have, see themselves as victims, so a cycle of violence [ensues],” Ruhigwa Baguma, a former administrator with one of the rebel factions, told IRIN.

The clashes between Hema and Lendu have sucked in other ethnic groups in the region, especially the Ngiti, who have fought alongside the Lendu, and the Bira, who have been associated with the Hema. The Alur ethnic group has on the whole kept out of the conflict. Several peace initiatives in the region have recommended that the governor of the region should be of neither ethnicity, to build confidence in the impartiality of the administration. A period when an Alur, Ernest Uringi Padolo, was governor of the region was regarded as relatively peaceful, partly for this reason.

It is hard to say if any community is most at risk. Amnesty International, in a recent statement, warned of the danger of “genocide” in Ituri, but did not name which ethnic group was threatened with genocide. Lubanga, widely regarded as a Hema hardliner, told IRIN recently that in the areas of Djugua and Irumu the situation was volatile, “because there are many tribes there. All of them are targeted by armed militia and I cannot say that these armed groups target on Hema or Lendu”.

The mistrust between communities has now become hatred, local people say, and will take years – if not generations - to repair. A rebel official involved in previous reconciliation efforts, Jacques Depelchin, told IRIN, however, that he recalled a Hema woman telling him that the “war is not one between Hema and Lendu, but between the rich Hema and the rest of us”. Even matters such as intermarriage between Hema and Lendu can become the pretext for violence. “It’s hatred whichever way you look at it,” said Chief Mugenyi Bomera, a Hema living as a refugee in Uganda, “When they marry our daughters, they mistreat them so that they cannot stay. Now they say we refuse to allow intermarriage. That doesn’t make sense.”

#### Factions, militia and foreign intervention

While the conflicts have a local ethnic dimension, they have been greatly inflamed, human rights and UN investigative reports claim, by the free-for-all among rebel factions and Ugandan army commanders seeking to profit from the DRC’s natural resources and export-import businesses. A diplomat familiar with the DRC told IRIN that Ituri was at the mercy of “warlords, smugglers, bandits and thieves”. Also, Congolese commanders are seeking to grab territory to exchange for power in a new transitional government. “They have an assumption that the bigger the territory they hold, the bigger the support. Those that already control large territories do not want to lose their power base, and are willing to compete for more,” a senior MONUC official said.

Uganda backed rebel groups fighting the late DRC president, Laurent-Desiré Kabila, when rebellion broke out in 1998. Uganda’s reasons for becoming involved were “Uganda’s legitimate security concerns”, according to a foreign ministry statement. Uganda intended to mop up remnants of the Ugandan rebel movements, including the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU). However, detailed allegations from

special UN investigations suggest that conflicts in eastern DRC and the Ituri region provided cover for rampant looting and illegal exploitation of natural resources and tax revenues in the region.

The UPDF has been accused by the UN panels of usually siding with the Hema community, often being paid to do so by wealthy landowners and businesspeople. A notable exception has been a Ugandan commander, Peter Kerim, who was reported by Human Rights Watch to be consistently arming and supporting the Lendu.

In 1999, Uganda was behind the establishment of Ituri as a province in its own right, first in combination with a district to the north, Haut Uele, then later on its own. Uganda installed a governor of the new “province”, Adèle Lotsove, a Hema, who was widely blamed by human rights reports for inflaming the situation still further. She was sacked in December 1999, but later re-emerged as a member of the Hema-dominated UPC.

The “rebels” of Ituri have rarely faced battle with forces allied with Kinshasa until recently. In the looking-glass world of the DRC, a “rebel” group, the RCD-K-ML is now thought to be allied to Kinshasa. Other opposition to the various factions that have held Bunia with Uganda’s blessing has come from the Mayi-Mayi (loosely affiliated pro-Kinshasa militia) and remnants of the Rwandan Hutu militia, the Interahamwe. Insofar as these forces are allied with any group, they have tended to be reported as fighting on the side of the Lendu against the Hema.

A series of rebel splits from 1999 to the present day have resulted in Bunia being a stage for repeated power struggles and skirmishes, as the original RCD begat the RCD-ML and later the RCD-K-ML. At each stage in the fragmentation of the rebel groups, new militia were recruited loyal to one or other commander or faction leader, often half of whom were child soldiers, and deployed not only to fight each other but to whip up insecurity in the countryside and seize strategic villages and commercial opportunities, such as the lucrative Kilo Moto gold mines.

## **X. Resource Exploitation**

The natural wealth of the DRC has become a curse, providing an unending motive for rebel factions and foreign forces on both sides of the DRC war to continue fighting. Not only do the revenues from gold, diamonds, coltan, timber, coffee and other commodities pay for the war but they also provide those who control production and export with very considerable profits.

In the case of Ituri, reports into resource exploitation by two UN panels have come out with damning evidence of freewheeling merchant-warrior networks, whose functions are not only to loot what is already there but to manage the supply of consumer commodities. The isolation of the region contributes to a distorted economy in which the price of livestock has plummeted, for example, while imported goods are highly inflated.

The second UN panel’s report of October 2002 alleged that, unlike Rwanda’s looting of the DRC, which raised hundreds of millions of dollars for the Rwandan army’s coffers, the Ugandan exploitation of Ituri has benefited a handful of UPDF commanders personally. The Ugandan government appointed a judicial commission of inquiry, known as the Porter Commission, in May 2001 to investigate the allegations; it is yet to present its findings.

The UN panel's report suggests that "powerful Hema businessmen and politicians" are trying to "secure greater control over the spoils", and that the rise of Lubanga's UPC is a symptom of competition between local commercial interests and the UPDF commanders.

The resources of the DRC have been of continued interest to foreign business interests from beyond the region. One source of revenue for rebel groups has been the sale of concessions to foreign businesses. These, too, have fuelled the conflict as they provide the rebels with independent revenue and a reason to grab more territory to offer further opportunities to unscrupulous overseas investors.

The prospect of petrodollars in Ituri may have provided a new impetus to the bloody battle for control of Ituri in 2002, analysts say. Geological surveys have indicated potential oil reserves in the Semliki basin, south of Lake Albert. A Canadian firm, Heritage Oil Corporation, has been exploring western Uganda since 1997 and is in the process of drilling a test well in the area called "Turaco-1". In June 2002, Heritage signed an agreement with President Joseph Kabila to gain initial rights to a staggering 3.1 million hectares of eastern DRC, including eastern Ituri. The test well on the Ugandan side of the border has a 20 percent chance of producing oil, officials of Heritage indicate, and is expected to produce results, one way or the other, before early 2003. In another illustration of the links between the security and commercial dimensions of the conflict, a founder and director of Heritage Oil, Anthony (Tony) Buckingham, was the "inspiration behind Sandline [International]", the British private security firm.

Measures to curb the commercial fuel of the conflict have been suggested by the UN panel's report, which recommends reducing development aid flows to offending countries; tighter controls on the trade in conflict goods; travel bans on individuals; freezing of personal assets; and blacklisting of selected companies and individuals from dealings with international financial institutions.

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