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Fighting Fire with Fire in Eastern Congo

The Wazalendo Phenomenon and the Outsourcing of Warfare

CONGO RESEARCH GROUP
GROUPE D'ÉTUDE SUR LE CONGO

Center on International Cooperation
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EBUTELI

The **Congo Research Group (CRG)** was founded in 2015 to promote rigorous, independent research into the violence that affects millions of Congolese. This requires a broad approach. For us, the roots of this violence can be found in a history of predatory governance that dates back to the colonial period and that connects the hillsides of the Kivus with political intrigue and corruption in Kinshasa, as well as in the capitals of Europe, China, and North America. Today, CRG's research aims to explain the complicated interplay among politics, violence, and political economy in the Congo to a wide audience.

Ebuteli is a Congolese research institute covering politics, governance and violence. Ebuteli ("staircase", in Lingala) has made it its mission to promote, through rigorous research, an informed debate to find solutions to the many challenges facing the DRC. In an environment very often clouded by easy-to-spread rumours, Ebuteli hopes its work will contribute to constructive discussions on issues of great national importance.

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Cover photo: A young fighter from the APCLS (Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain), an armed group led by Janvier Karairi and member of the Wazalendo coalition. © Philémon Barbier

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Glossary of Acronyms

AFC	*Alliance Fleuve Congo*
AFDL	*Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre*
ALiR	*Armée de libération du Rwanda*
ANCDH*	*Alliance des nationalistes congolais pour la défense de droits humains*
APCLS*	*Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain*
CMC*	*Collectif des mouvements pour le changement* (two factions: FDP and FAPC)
CNDP	*Congrès national pour la défense du peuple*
CNPSC***	*Coalition nationale du peuple pour la souveraineté du Congo*
CPC-Art. 64***	*Coalition des patriotes congolais pour l'application de l'article 64*
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAC	East African Community
EACRF	East African Community Regional Force
FABB***	*Forces armées Biloze Bishambuke*
FAR-Yira Force**	*Force d'action rapide-Yira*
FARDC	*Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo*
FCR**	*Front commun de la résistance*
FDDP*	*Forces dévoués pour la défense de la patrie*
FDLR	*Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*
FNJMN	*Foi naturelle judaïque et messianique vers les nations*
FPDC**	*Forces des patriotes pour la défense du Congo*
FPP/AP**	*Front des patriotes pour la paix/Armée du peuple*
M23	*Mouvement du 23 mars*
MFP	*Mouvement du front populaire*
MNLDK	*Mouvement national pour la libération durable du Kongo*
MPA	*Mouvement patriotique d'autodéfense*
NDC-Rénové*	*Nduma Defense of Congo-Rénové* (two factions led by Guidon and Mapenzi)
Nyatura	Umbrella term for Congolese Hutu armed groups
PARECO	*Patriotes résistants congolais*
PARECO-FF*	*Patriotes résistants congolais-Force de frappe*
P-DDRCS	*Programme de désarmement, démobilisation, relèvement communautaire et stabilisation*
RAD	*Réserve armée de la défense*
RCD	*Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie*
RDF	Rwanda Defence Force
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
RUD-Urunana	*Rassemblement unité et démocratie–Urunana*
SADC	South African Development Community
SAMIRDC	SADC Mission in the DRC
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Forces
UPLC**	*Union des Patriotes pour la Libération du Congo*
VDP	*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*

*	Part of the VDP Petit Nord
**	Part of the VDP Grand Nord
***	Part of the broader Wazalendo universe

Summary

This report traces the evolution of the *Wazalendo* ("patriots") phenomenon, an eclectic coalition of armed groups which became key allies of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in its fight against the March 23 movement (M23) and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) dating back to at least 2022. It investigates the emergence of the term "Wazalendo," the history, and rationale behind this outsourcing of violence, and the impact on local communities.

The Wazalendo are a continuation of a longstanding strategy in the region to outsource warfare to armed groups due to the weakness of the security services, in addition to the potential profits and the populist dividend that this backing can provide to politicians.

Since at least the mid-1990s, Congolese conflicts have featured the use of armed groups as proxies. Rwanda and Uganda have both backed Congolese armed groups on various occasions in the past decades, and the Congolese army has frequently used armed groups against its armed rivals. The return of the M23 to active fighting in November 2021 has triggered a new era of proxy warfare.

Confronted with an oversized but inefficient army, Kinshasa outsourced counterinsurgency to an array of actors: private security contractors, the Burundian army, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebels, and numerous Congolese armed groups now commonly referred to as *Wazalendo*.

Most of the groups who fall under this label existed before; some of them previously fought each other. They have diverse motivations: on one hand, a sense of nationalism, but also the opportunity to access funding and positions in the national army and possibly to secure impunity for past crimes.

This report studies two of the main clusters of *Wazalendo*, located in the southern and northern parts of North Kivu province, respectively. It argues that the approach of backing local armed groups will create a hefty political mortgage for years to come, as it further militarizes society, exacerbates the humanitarian crisis, and entrenches the conflict. Further, the report concludes by pointing to the long-term importance of reforming the Congolese state, its security forces, and its approach to the conflict.

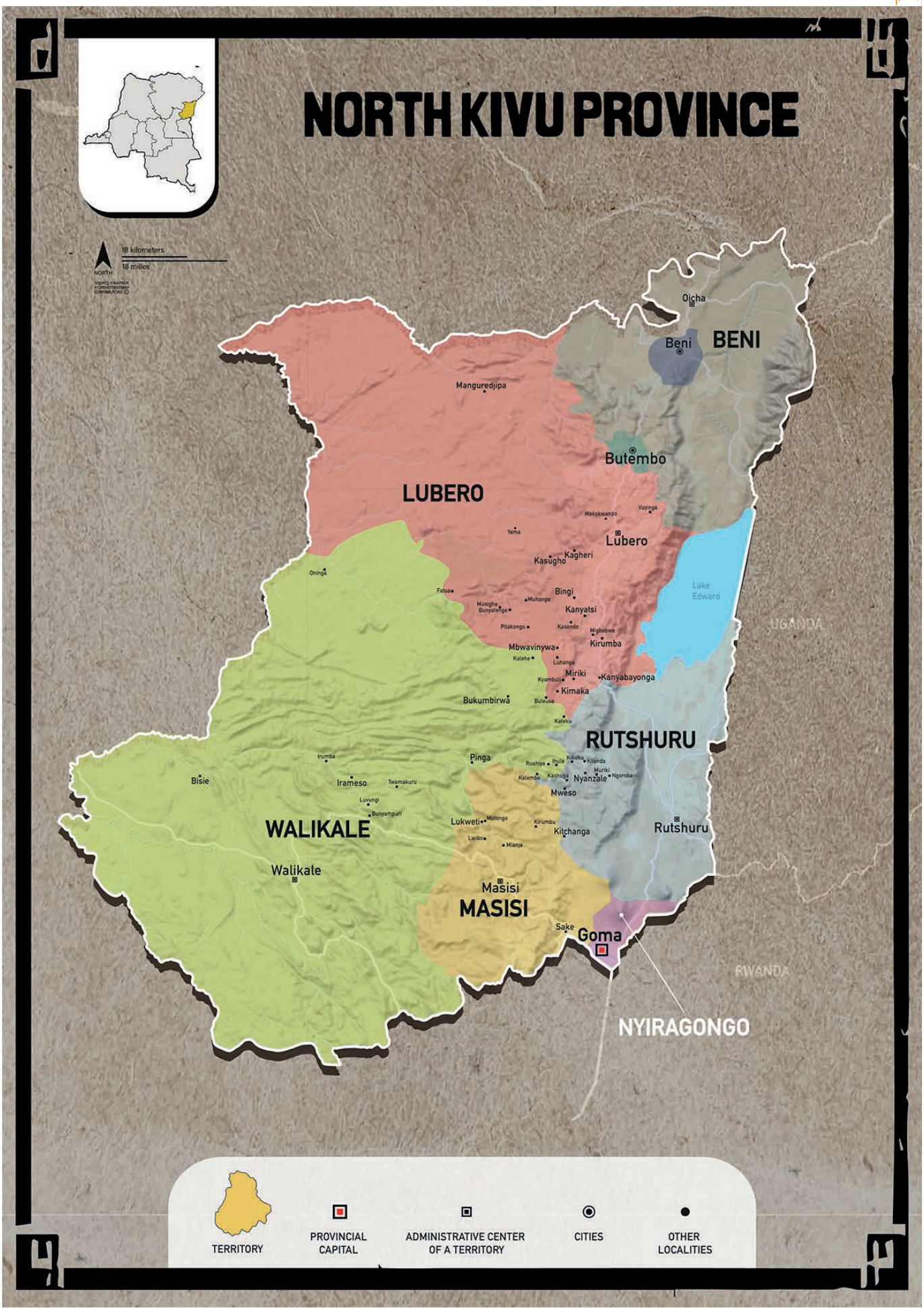

Figure 1: Map of North Kivu Province

Cycles of Conflict and the Outsourcing of Violence

The *Wazalendo* are the latest attempt of the Congolese army to outsource counterinsurgency. When Rwanda and Uganda supported the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) in 1998, the Congolese government reacted by backing local Mai-Mai groups, as well as the FDLR, which emerged out of the militias and army that participated in the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. Between 2015 and 2020, DRC and Rwanda agreed to use the Nduma Defense of Congo–Rénové (NDC–R), a Congolese armed group, to tackle the FDLR.[1] This approach turned previous alliances upside down but confirmed the Congolese army's tried and tested strategy of subcontracting part of its responsibilities to armed groups.

The return of the M23 rebellion to active fighting in November 2021 inaugurated a new phase of the Congolese conflict. After nearly a decade of declining foreign involvement and a growing fragmentation of Congolese armed groups,[2] the resurgence of the M23 has plunged the Great Lakes region into its most serious diplomatic and security crisis since the late 1990s.

The M23, with significant backing from the RDF, quickly expanded its territory in early 2022. At the same time, and confronted with serious weaknesses—overlapping and unclear chains of command, a lack of discipline and morale, and extensive corruption—the Congolese army fell back on partnerships with other forces: private security contractors, peacekeeping missions from the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and Congolese and foreign armed groups. It is in this context that they also began backing the *Wazalendo*.

Three other developments created fertile ground for the *Wazalendo* phenomenon:

- **2021**: The elaboration of a new disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program, the program for disarmament, demobilization, community recovery and stabilization (P-DDRCS).
- **2022**: A short-lived dialogue with armed groups mediated by Kenya.
- **2023**: The establishment of the *Réserve armée de la défense* (RAD), which incorporated local armed groups into state structures.

These initiatives contributed to the rise of the *Wazalendo*. The Nairobi process, intended to broker peace between the government and armed groups, as well as the launch of the P-DDRCS, which initially barred armed groups from being integrated into the army but is now interpreted otherwise, signaled the willingness to legitimize and potentially reward belligerents with positions or payouts, as past peace processes have done. The announcement of the RAD further motivated existing and new armed groups to bank on a military rather than a civilian future. These initiatives happened against the backdrop of a history of integrating armed groups into the national army, and of politicians seeking the backing of such groups to bolster their standing locally, both of which encouraged armed mobilization.[3]

While most *Wazalendo* groups had previously existed as armed groups and already had ties with the FARDC, the renewed M23 crisis has prompted a more ambitious attempt to outsource warfare than in past cycles of the conflict, by incorporating them officially into government structures and encouraging them to form coalitions.

The emergence of the Wazalendo

In late 2022 or early 2023, a year after the start of military escalation between the M23 and the FARDC, the term Wazalendo began surfacing among armed groups in South Kivu province who were fighting against Banyamulenge groups. The term, which means "patriots" in Swahili, is used in common parlance but had not previously been applied as an armed group label. Over time, other armed groups adopted the moniker to rebrand and signal their allegiance to a broad coalition supporting the FARDC against M23/RDF, including many groups that had previously fought the national army. At the same time, the term was picked up by politicians addressing the M23 crisis, notably in a speech by the Minister of Higher Education Muhindo Nzangi in March 2023.[4]

Not every group adopting the term is allied with the government or engages on the frontlines against M23. One early example that rose to tragic prominence is a politico-religious sect called *Foi naturelle judaïque messianique vers les nations* (FNJMN) in Goma. On August 30, 2023, members of the Republican Guard killed between 50 and 150 FNJMN adepts during a demonstration against the inaction of UN peacekeepers.[5] The sect, which was not armed, also referred to itself as *Wazalendo*.

Figure 2: Meeting between Colonel Tokolonga and armed group leaders in Pinga, May 2022

Despite consistent efforts by FARDC to create a common front against M23, many armed groups in the *Petit Nord*—the area of North Kivu comprising Rutshuru, Masisi, Walikale, and Nyiragongo territories, in addition to the city of Goma—only half-heartedly participated in joint operations at the start of the current M23 conflict. Distrust toward FARDC and discord within the coalition were the main reasons for this hesitation.[6] It took until May 2022, when FARDC Colonel Salomon Tokolonga brokered a first alliance of armed groups at a meeting in Pinga, Walikale territory, to overcome these hesitations (see Figure 2).[7] The main *Wazalendo* groups in this area were NDC–R[8], the *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* (APCLS), the *Alliance des nationalistes congolais pour la défense de droits humains* (ANCDH), and the *Collectif des mouvements pour le changement* (CMC). This approach was then expanded to other areas in North Kivu province.

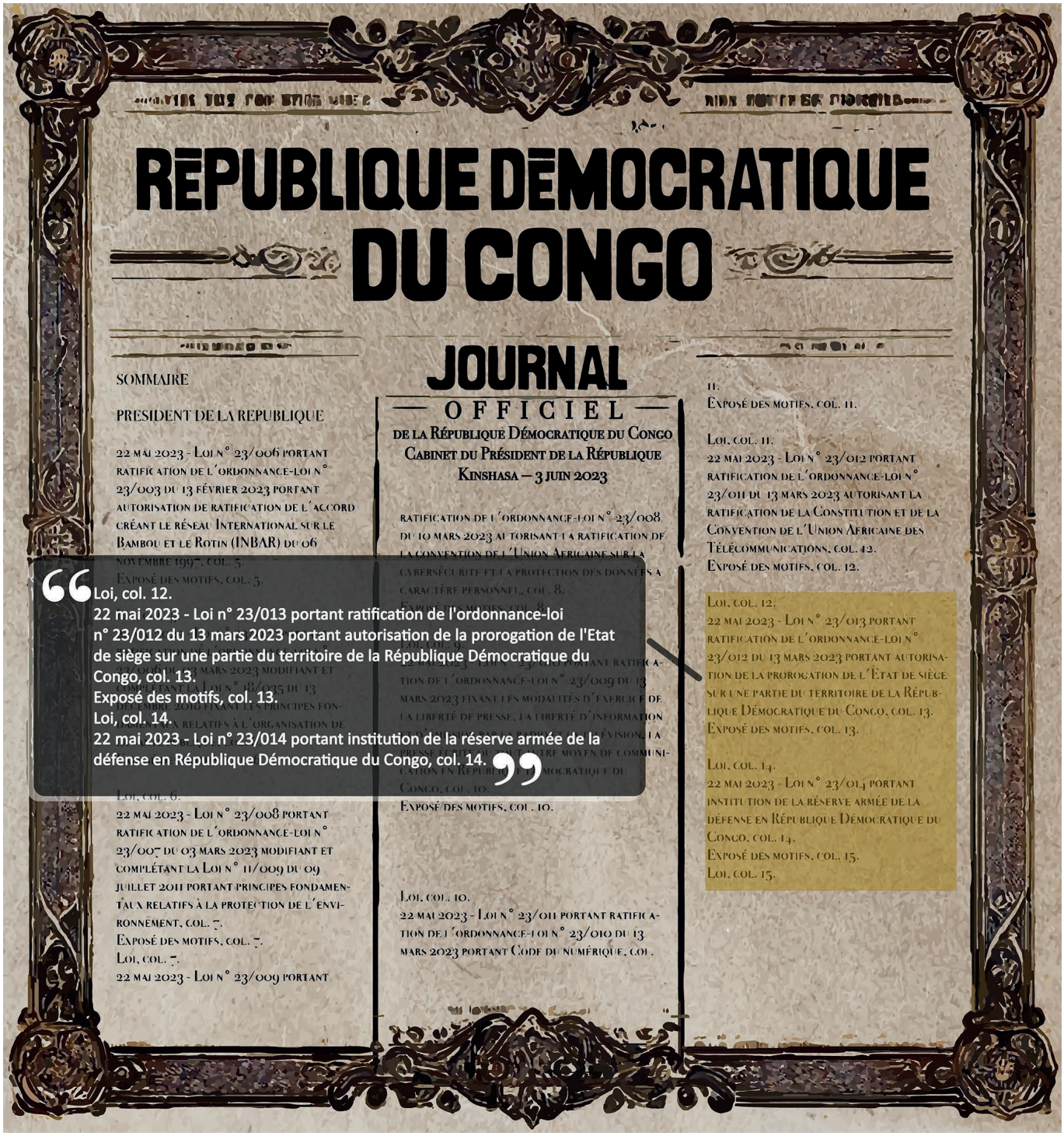

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Figure 3: Graphic depicting an excerpt of the law constituting the RAD

In May 2023, the Congolese government passed a law creating an army reserve force, intending to federate armed groups identifying as Wazalendo and supporting the FARDC (see Figure 3). David Padiri Bulenda and Janvier Mayanga wa Gishuba, two FARDC generals who themselves had been armed group leaders in the past, were nominated to oversee the establishment of the RAD and to coordinate *Wazalendo* factions on the ground.[9]

Despite trying to paper over existing antagonisms between groups to unite against the M23, the *Wazalendo* coalition had a bumpy start in 2022 and 2023 amid infighting and competition over supplies. Army commanders were accused of favoring certain groups over others in allocating resources, leading to confusion and mistrust. Due to overlapping hierarchies and frequent command reshuffles, coordination between FARDC officers and *Wazalendo* was often marred by contradictory instructions, intelligence leaks, and jealousy among groups. Nonetheless, *Wazalendo* groups fought on the frontlines against the M23 throughout this period.

After a shaky ceasefire from March to September 2023, fighting between the M23–RDF alliance and the Congolese government resumed. The FARDC coalition—comprising Wazalendo, Rwandan FDLR rebels, Burundian troops, and private contractors—landed a series of battlefield wins. This trend, however, was quickly reversed as M23 launched a counteroffensive and gained further ground until another, shaky ceasefire decreased fighting from July to December 2024 as negotiations between Kinshasa and Kigali took place in Luanda under the auspices of the African Union (AU). Those talks, however, collapsed in mid-December 2024, and fighting escalated again, as the M23 took control of the cities of Goma and Bukavu on January 27 and February 16, 2025, respectively.

Bringing Populism Back In

The emergence of the Wazalendo and their appeal are hard to grasp without understanding the history of this brand of nationalism. The importance of ideology, ideas, and discourse as drivers of violence has been well established in conflict in the Congo.[10] Identitarian reflexes tend to gain greater currency during watershed moments, especially when notions of national identity are challenged. In the early twenty-first century, these tendencies have been amplified by the intensified use of social media in the Congo and beyond.[11]

Figure 4: then Deputy Prime Minister of defense Jean-Pierre Bemba before a statement thanking the Wazalendo

The repeated invasion of the Eastern Congo by foreign countries, as well as the humiliating performance by the national army has produced popular mobilization since the 1990s. Expressions such as "balkanization," referring to foreign attempts to break up the country to benefit from the country's resource wealth, have entered common parlance.

The invasions have also fomented nationalist, sometimes xenophobic, sentiment against communities who are cast as foreigners, especially the Tutsi, Banyamulenge, and Hema but also the wider Kinyarwanda-speaking population. The participation of these groups in various rebellions, which have also carried out widespread abuses against civilian populations, has reinforced the tendency by some politicians—including the former minister Justin Bitakwira, the current minister Muhindo Nzangi, and others—to resort to divisive invective and xenophobia to bolster their popularity.[12]

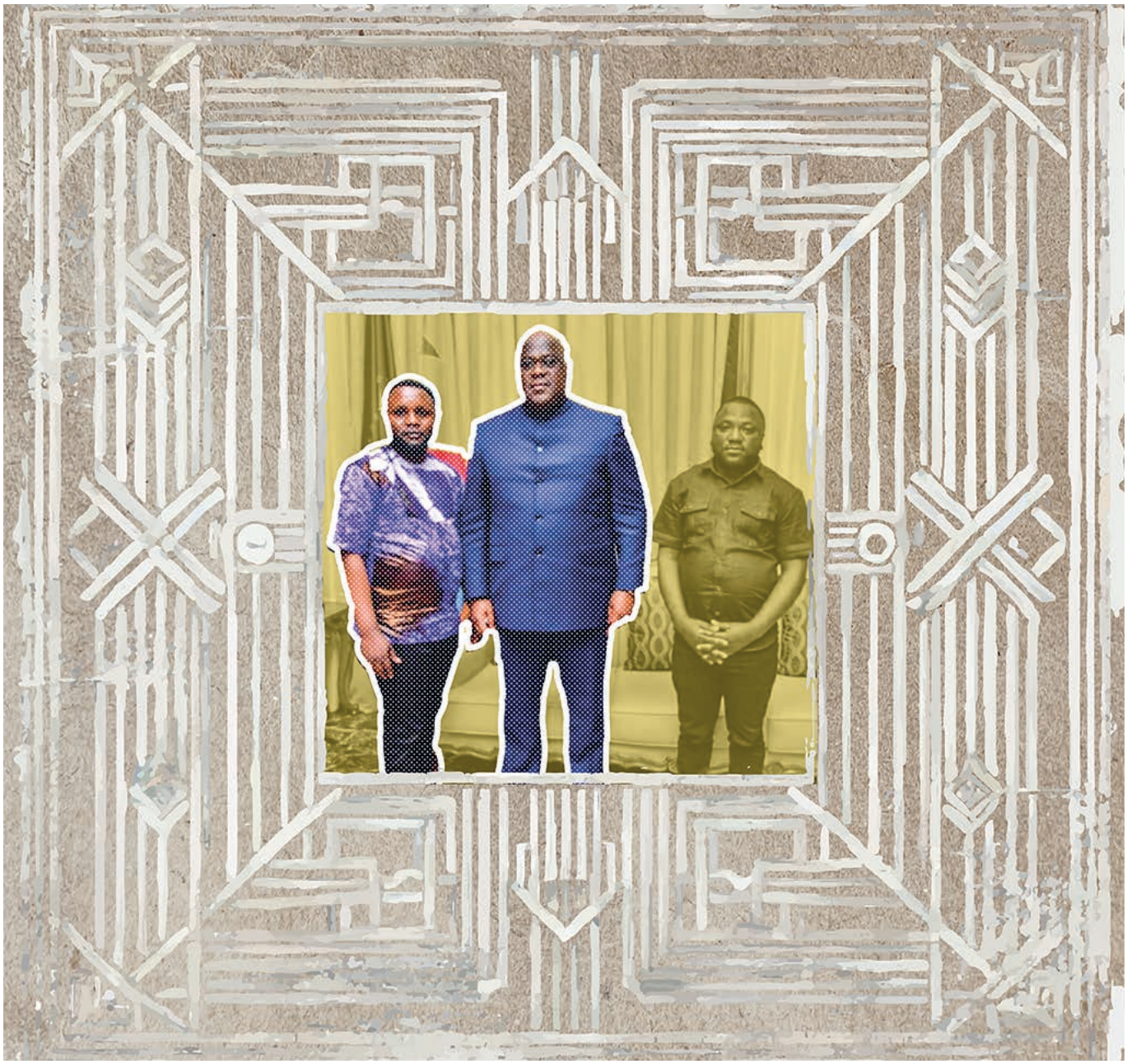


Figure 5: President Tshisekedi meeting with Jules Mulumba in Kinshasa, December 2023

This resort to populism and xenophobia has not always prevailed. At several points, President Tshisekedi has declared unambiguously that the Banyamulenge, a Tutsi community from South Kivu, are Congolese citizens. However, the resurgence of the M23, a rebellion perceived as a Tutsi movement but including leaders and troops from other communities, has reinvigorated nationalist sentiments that dip into ethnic chauvinism. In response to the M23's advance, there have been instances of lynching and attacks against Tutsi or Congolese Kinyarwanda speakers considered foreigners.[13]

During his campaign for re-election, President Tshisekedi highlighted the threat posed by Rwanda and the M23 and publicly thanked the "brave *Wazalendo*," a departure from his rhetoric several years prior, when he had declared a state of siege in order to eradicate armed groups. In December 2023, President Tshisekedi received Jules Mulumba, the CMC's longtime spokesperson known for his extremist stance towards Tutsi, and after the fall of Goma, he commended the *Wazalendo*'s contributions alongside the FARDC (see Figure 5). These stances have helped normalize the *Wazalendo* as well as their rhetoric as part of legitimate self-defense against "invaders," a term that has been deployed to refer to the RDF but also the M23 and, at times, the Congolese Tutsi community at large.[14]

On the other side of the conflict, the Rwandan government and M23 have played up anti-Rwandophone and anti-Tutsi xenophobia in statements and communiqués reacting to specific incidents but also increasingly to justify the M23's resurgence and, implicitly, RDF support. People close to the Rwandan government have used social media to showcase cases of lynchings and popular justice against Tutsi, including fake ones.[15] Both sides of the conflict have therefore engaged in populist identity politics forming the broader landscape in which the *Wazalendo* have thrived.

Timeline of key events

JAN 2023
More consistent use of the term among South Kivu Mai-Mai groups.

FEB 2023
First mention of the term in reference to an armed group in North Kivu, Rusayo, later Kiwanja and Kitchanga area.
Brief Rubaya takeover by M23, then back to Pareco-FF and ANCDH.

MAR 2023
Consistent use of the term in North Kivu by APCLS and several Nyatura factions Speech by National Minister Muhindo Nzangi mentioning the term Wazalendo.
Arrival of CNPSC combatants in Goma.

APR 2023
Adoption of the law creating the RAD by the national assembly, announcement of 6000 elements in North Kivu.
Beginning of the EAC-brokered ceasefire and the EACRF deployment in North Kivu.

MAY 2023
RAD law passed by parliament.

JUN 2023
FARDC chief of staff meets Wazalendo groups in Tongo and Bukombo. Publication of RAD law in the Journal officiel, excluding "convicted" individuals.

AUG 2023
Massacre of unarmed group in Goma calling themselves Wazalendo by army units.

SEPT 2023
Defense Minister Jean-Pierre Bemba recognizes and applauds the Wazalendo New North Kivu Governor Cirimwani meets VDP and FDLR in Mubambiro and Goma.
Creation of VDP and introduction of coloured "brassards" to distinguish factions Bilateral deployment of FDNB troops in FARDC attire in Masisi.

OCT 2023
End of EAC ceasefire and VDP offensive on Kitchanga.
Military trial of FARDC officers involved in Wazalendo massacre.

NOV 2023
Different South Kivu armed groups send Wazalendo to North Kivu Establishment of "Task Force Joint Operations" North Kivu between FNDB and FARDC.

DEC 2023
Withdrawal of East African Community Regional Force (EACRF), deployment of Southern African Development Community Mission in the DRC (Samidrc). Creation of the FCR around FPP/AP and defection of the MPA to M23.
President Tshisekedi receives Jules Mulumba in Kinshasa.

JAN 2024
UPLC, FPP/AP use 'Wazalendo' label against ADF in Grand Nord and Ituri.

MAR 2024
Infight and false accusations of M23 collaboration among South Kivu "Wazalendo".

APR 2024
APCLS communiqué on arms bearing in Goma. 48 Wazalendo leaders flew to Kinshasa, meetings with senior Congolese officials from the Government and the army.

JUN 2024
Lubero administrator meets "Wazalendo" groups and Kichanda Yira delegation.

SEPT 2024
FARDC operations aiming at Omega, tension between FARDC and VDP.

DEC 2024
Collapse of the Luanda talks between DRC and Rwanda.
M23 advances in southern Lubero without much resistance.

JAN 2025
Heavy fighting around Masisi territory and M23 advance to Kalehe.
Death of General Cirimwami.
Entry of M23 into Goma and urban fighting including Wazalendo

FEB 2025
Entry of M23 into Bukavu and further progression in South Kivu.

The Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie

Since 2022, a growing number of armed groups have adopted the name *Wazalendo* to portray themselves as patriotic defenders against the M23 and to position themselves in the context of the RAD legislation and the P-DDRCS, although not all of these groups are involved in the fighting against M23. This section zooms in on two clusters of the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP), *Wazalendo* groups closely linked to the M23 crisis, and scrutinizes their impact on conflict dynamics and civilian populations.

The first example is the VDP in the *Petit Nord* area of North Kivu (Goma, Masisi, Rutshuru, Nyiragongo, and Walikale territories), initially formed in May 2022 and formally created in September 2023. While they are perhaps the most organized and visible FARDC proxy in the fight against M23, a closer look at the coalition shows the limited coherence among its different constituent groups, some of which had been fighting each other as recently as 2021.

The second example concerns a set of VDP factions in the *Grand Nord* area, comprising the territories of Lubero, Beni, and the city of Butembo, where political and economic interests have long shaped the way elites and armed groups interact. The *Grand Nord* VDP have engaged in a more limited way against the M23, notably during the latter's progress into Lubero territory in late 2024.

While not generally considered part of the *Wazalendo* given they are a foreign entity, the FDLR also played a role in the mobilization against M23 and RDF troops deployed in eastern Congo. The FDLR have been a key element in conflict dynamics for several decades, as well as a key ally for the government in Kinshasa in its battle against Rwandan-backed insurgencies since 1998.[16] During this time, there have also been periods of collaboration between the two countries, for example the 2009 *Umoja Wetu* operations, when Rwanda and DRC jointly fought the FDLR, and from 2015 to 2020, when RDF and FARDC joint operations eliminated several senior leaders of the group and both countries backed the NDC-R against the FDLR. After the return of the M23 in 2021, the FDLR switched back to being an ally for the Congolese government, and on occasion, trainers for some of the members of the Congolese coalition. In this capacity, they often collaborated with *Wazalendo* groups, especially the ones such as the CMC, a Congolese Hutu armed group with deep ties to the FDLR. The Rwandan rebels' involvement in the conflict and their deep imbrication with Congolese armed groups have contributed to both military and diplomatic escalation, and have offered Rwanda and the M23 a key argument to denounce Kinshasa.

Petit Nord: Mixing oil and water

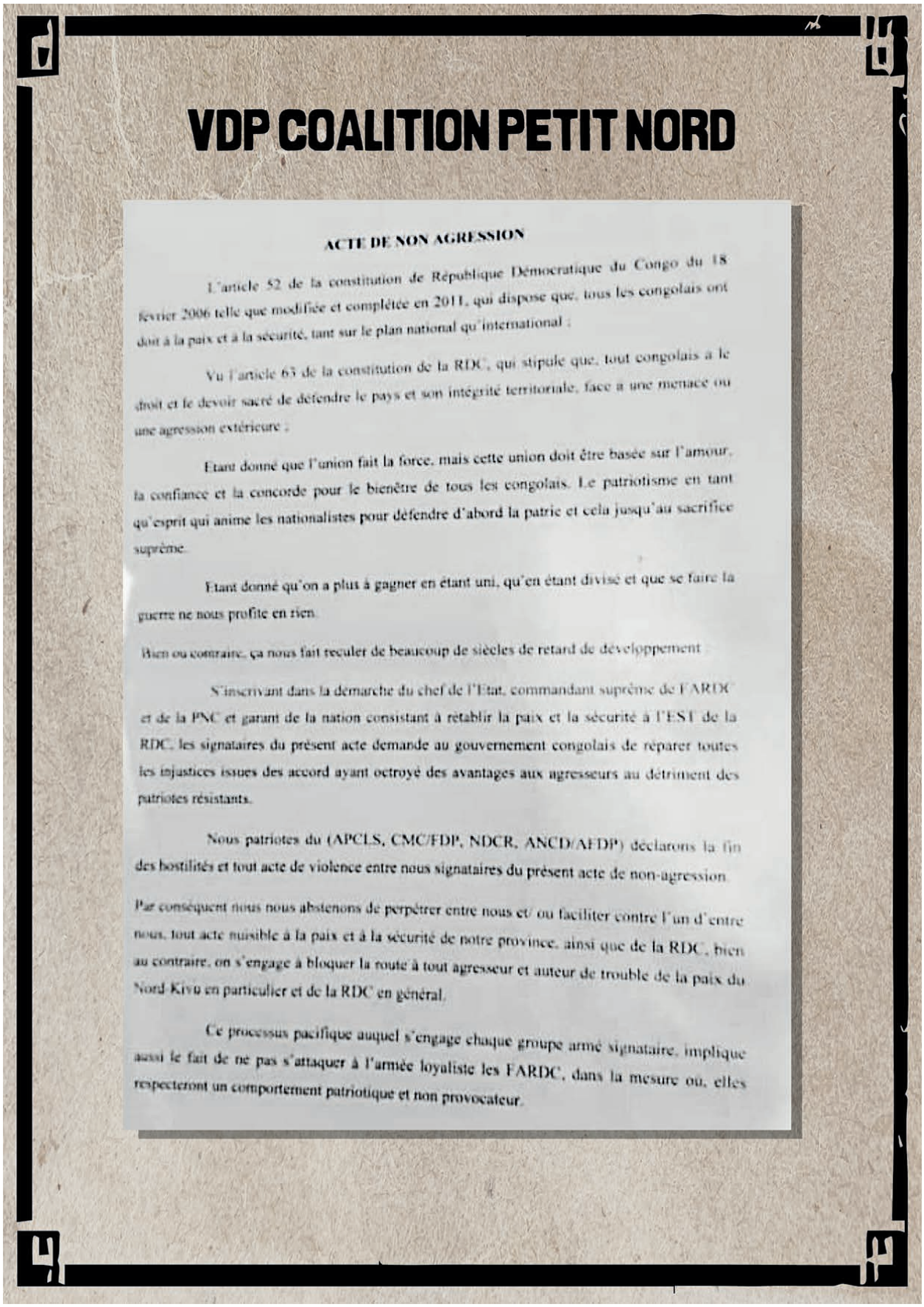
The Petit Nord of North Kivu is one of the nexuses of conflict in eastern Congo. Given its geopolitical context, located close to the Rwandan border, and featuring deep-seated contestation over land and identity, this area close to Goma has been an incubator of insurgencies for three decades. Most of these insurgents are motivated both by local agendas and by opposition to successive Rwandan-backed rebellions.

From 1998–2004, Mai-Mai groups from Masisi and Walikale supported the Congolese army against the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) and the Rwandan army. From 2006–2009, various armed groups formed in opposition to the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) rebellion, again supporting the Congolese army—the *Coalition des Patriotes Congolais Résistants* (PARECO) and the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS). Finally, in 2012–2013, armed groups such as the Nyatura, an array of groups that recruit from the Hutu community, also joined the Congolese army against the M23. In all these episodes, the FDLR was part of the conflict landscape, partnering with FARDC and local armed groups against Rwandan-backed armed groups. Following the defeat of the M23 in 2013, the Congolese government partnered sporadically with the RDF against the FDLR, at times backing local armed groups such as the NDC-Rénové in these operations.[17]

The FARDC's partnerships with armed groups received a new lease with the emergence of the M23 in November 2021. A *Wazalendo* coalition formed in the *Petit Nord* in 2022, forming the core of what would later take the name of VDP. That term may have been inspired from groups that emerged in Burkina Faso in 2019 when the government there backed local militias in their fight against a jihadi insurgency. The *Wazalendo* of the *Petit Nord* include a wide array of armed groups: APCLS, NDC-R, Nyatura groups such as CMC and ANCDH, and—unofficially—the FDLR.

The groundwork for this *Wazalendo* coalition was laid in May 2022. Half a year into the renewed M23 crisis, FARDC officers organized a meeting with armed group leaders in Pinga, a town on the border between Masisi and Walikale territories. While the Congolese army had already begun to use armed groups (including the Nyatura and FDLR) to counter the M23's progress in Rutshuru since late 2021,

this was the first attempt to create a more coherent alliance and resulted in a non-aggression pact between the above-mentioned groups, which had been engaged in fighting amongst each other (see Figure 6). Despite frequent, minor reshuffles, the core cast of the coalition was formalized in September 2023 around the groups present at the Pinga meeting—NDC–R, CMC, APCLS, ANCDH, and FDLR. To varying degrees, these groups have been involved in fighting M23 in Rutshuru and Masisi territories, as well as around the city of Goma. Yet the alliance's



VDP COALITION PETIT NORD

ACTE DE NON AGRESSION

L'article 52 de la constitution de République Démocratique du Congo du 18 février 2006 telle que modifiée et complétée en 2011, qui dispose que, tous les congolais ont droit à la paix et à la sécurité, tant sur le plan national qu'international ;

Vu l'article 63 de la constitution de la RDC, qui stipule que, tout congolais a le droit et le devoir sacré de défendre le pays et son intégrité territoriale, face a une menace ou une agression extérieure ;

Etant donné que l'union fait la force, mais cette union doit être basée sur l'amour, la confiance et la concorde pour le bienêtre de tous les congolais. Le patriotisme en tant qu'esprit qui anime les nationalistes pour défendre d'abord la patrie et cela jusqu'au sacrifice suprême.

Etant donné qu'on a plus à gagner en étant uni, qu'en étant divisé et que se faire la guerre ne nous profite en rien.

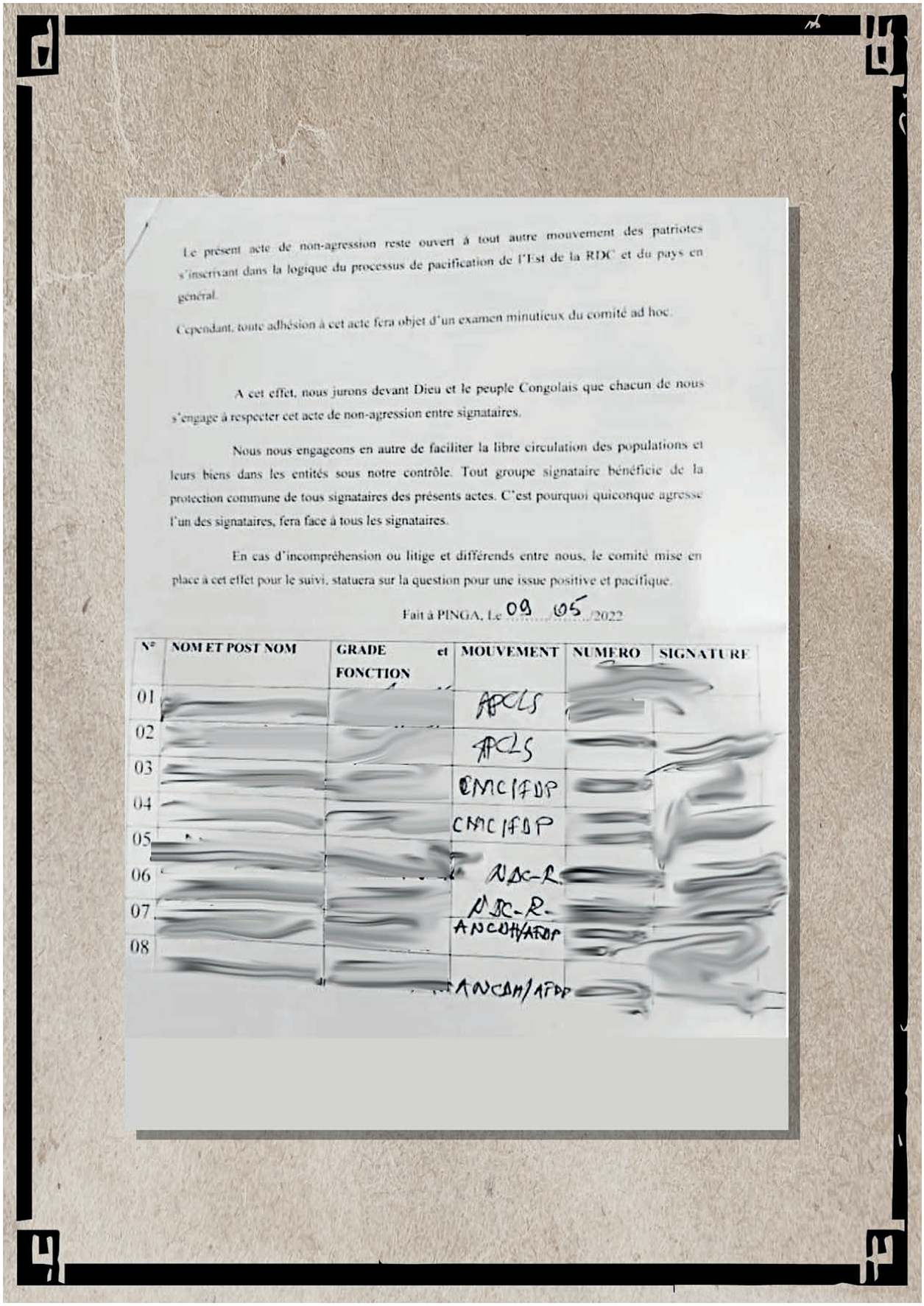
Bien ou contraire, ça nous fait reculer de beaucoup de siècles de retard de développement

S'inscrivant dans la démarche du chef de l'Etat, commandant suprême de FARDC et de la PNC et garant de la nation consistant à rétablir la paix et la sécurité à l'EST de la RDC, les signataires du présent acte demande au gouvernement congolais de réparer toutes les injustices issues des accord ayant octroyé des avantages aux agresseurs au détriment des patriotes résistants.

Nous patriotes du (APCLS, CMC/FDP, NDCR, ANCD/AFDP) déclarons la fin des hostilités et tout acte de violence entre nous signataires du présent acte de non-agression

Par conséquent nous nous abstenons de perpétrer entre nous et/ ou faciliter contre l'un d'entre nous, tout acte nuisible à la paix et à la sécurité de notre province, ainsi que de la RDC, bien au contraire, on s'engage à bloquer la route à tout agresseur et auteur de trouble de la paix du Nord-Kivu en particulier et de la RDC en général.

Ce processus pacifique auquel s'engage chaque groupe armé signataire, implique aussi le fait de ne pas s'attaquer à l'armée loyaliste les FARDC, dans la mesure où, elles respecteront un comportement patriotique et non provocateur.



Le présent acte de non-agression reste ouvert à tout autre mouvement des patriotes s'inscrivant dans la logique du processus de pacification de l'Est de la RDC et du pays en général.

Cependant, toute adhésion à cet acte fera objet d'un examen minutieux du comité ad hoc.

A cet effet, nous jurons devant Dieu et le peuple Congolais que chacun de nous s'engage à respecter cet acte de non-agression entre signataires.

Nous nous engageons en autre de faciliter la libre circulation des populations et leurs biens dans les entités sous notre contrôle. Tout groupe signataire bénéficie de la protection commune de tous signataires des présents actes. C'est pourquoi quiconque agresse l'un des signataires, fera face à tous les signataires.

En cas d'incompréhension ou litige et différends entre nous, le comité mise en place à cet effet pour le suivi, statuera sur la question pour une issue positive et pacifique.

Fait à PINGA, Le 09 05 /2022

N°	NOM ET POST NOM	GRADE et FONCTION	MOUVEMENT	NUMERO	SIGNATURE
01			APCLS		
02			APCLS		
03			CMC/FDP		
04			CMC/FDP		
05					
06			NDC-R		
07			NDC-R		
08			ANCDH/AFDP		
			ANCDH/AFDP		

Figure 6: Non-aggression pact between future VDP factions in Petit Nord

public appearances remained rare, with some members maintaining their own separate identity. No formal communiqué announced its creation.

Instead, the initial VDP press statements were concerned with political score-settling and counterpropaganda aimed at M23. While the different leaders speaking on behalf of VDP use similar logos and letterheads, press releases are generally published by specific factions—usually CMC or NDC–R. The coalition's rhetoric foregrounds anti-Rwandan invective to justify resistance to foreign aggression, aligning with common patterns of mobilization in eastern Congo, comparable to the Mai-Mai and Raia Mutomboki movements in previous phases of the conflict. In addition, the VDP *Petit Nord* factions adopted a common identification by equipping combatants with group-specific colored armbands: blue-green for the NDC–R, yellow for the APCLS, purple for the CMC, and red for the ANCDH.

Throughout this period, the FARDC provided support to these groups. Key examples include meetings throughout the second half of 2023 with the former deputy chief of staff of the army and a general tasked with

N°	GP VDP	S/COMDT	TYPE MUN				
			X39mm	X54mm	Cart 12,7mm	Roq 40mm	Bombe 60mm
01	APCLS	KAMBUZI	48 760	14 931	1 600	50	25
02	APCLS	MBITEZIMANA	37 800	12 200		30	25
03	APCLS	GILBA	42 760	15 091	1 500	60	20
04	APCLS	ELIE	48 760	15 971	1 400	50	10
05	UPCRN	GENTIL	48 760	13 091		65	10
06	CLD	OBEDI	40 000	11 840		12	
07	FDDP	1Bn DEFENDER	48 760	21 931	1 986	65	20
08	FDDP	2Bn FIDEL	47 760	17 571	1 300	67	20
09	FDDP	3Bn DE GUERRE	48 760	81 971		55	20
10	ANCDH/AFDP	IGNACE	75 960	24 131	1 700	75	20
11	MMK	KIFUAFUA	20 800	7 080		06	
12	KIFUAFUA	KIRIKICHO	20 800	7 080		06	
13	APDC/RN	JESUS	26 800	11 960		08	
14	PARECO/FF	KIGINGI	26 800	15 600	1 100	14	10
15	PARECO	MAHORO	37 800	16 731	1 200	18	10
16	GIV	MAROCAIN	29 060	11 840		08	
17	FPDC/ML	LUSHEKE	2 800				
18	CMC	DOMI	109 760	23 935	9 120	110	24
19	CMC	TEBUKA	15 300	17 600	1 700	24	
20	UFDPC	MBOKANI	15 300	8 560			
21	MPA/APA	NYINZIMA	15 800	12 260		08	
22	FPK	MANYUMBA	7 800	6 800			
23	FAR W	CHERIBIN	10 800	6 800			
24	UPLC	MAYANI	35 900	20 127		18	20
25	FPP/AP	KABIDON	35 800	15 600	1 600	12	10
26	NDC/R	GUIDON	39 800	20 139	1 500	40	10
27	CMC	RAPIDE	30 300	14 600		08	10
28	UPLC	CHARLES	21 800	6 800			
29	UPCRN	KIDUDU	10 000	6 800			
30	CNC	BIGABO	28 300	16 000		08	10
31	APCLS	NGOWA	15 800	6 800			
32	VDP (ITURI)	OLIVIER	9 000			24	10
Stock en Reserve			**66.000**	**8 800**	**0**	**27**	**0**
TOTAL GEN			**1 120.400**	**790.280**	**25 706**	**868**	**284**

Figure 7: List of ammunition provided to VDP factions between December 2023 and April 2024

"coordinating" armed groups in the context of the RAD, as well as a meeting with the North Kivu military governor.[18]

An internal document by the North Kivu military government showcases the systematic, massive transfer of ammunition to the VDP, with more than 1.1 million 7.62x39mm rounds (for AK47-type rifles) and almost 0.8 million 7.62x54mm rounds (for PKM-type machine guns) from January to April 2024 alone. The VDP in *Petit-Nord* received nearly one million AK rounds and 0.7 million PKM rounds (see Figure 7). Images on social media also show combatants with sophisticated assault rifles and high-end portable grenade launchers (see Figure 8).

As the most active member of the *Wazalendo* phenomenon, the *Petit Nord* VDP also found a place on the national political scene. Despite the fact that several of their leaders—Jules Mulumba, Dominique Ndaruhutse,

Figure 8: CMC combatants with modern armament

and Guidon Shimiray—were under European Union (EU) or United Nations (UN) sanctions, and Guidon also had a Congolese warrant for his arrest, they attended meetings with Congolese political and military leaders and were featured in national media. Jules Mulumba, the spokesperson of the CMC known for his close relations with the FDLR, was received by President Felix Tshisekedi in December 2023.[19] Other VDP leaders, such as Shimiray and Ndaruhutse, attended meetings in Kinshasa and Goma, having been transported in FARDC and private military contractor aircraft and vehicles (see Figure 9).

Nonetheless, the relationship between VDP and FARDC has not been free of challenges: VDP commanders complain that the FARDC handed out ammunition to them while at the same time supplying rival non-VDP armed groups. FARDC officers deplore the multiplicity of chains of command through which senior army leaders vie for power both within individual VDP groups as well as between them.

This fragmentation also exists within the VDP. Each of its constituent armed groups still retains its own internal hierarchy, leading to an uneven overall structure where some groups appear more coherent than others—for example, the ANCDH, whose roots go back to a set of inchoate Nyatura groups, are not as well organized at the CMC or NDC-R. The VDP members' operational zones overlap, and occasional skirmishes and general disagreements have prevented the deployment of a fully integrated force. Until mid-2023, prior to their formal establishment, VDP members operated mostly on the basis of the FARDC-brokered Pinga non-aggression pact and struggled to organize coordinated military campaigns against the M23.

In late 2023, coinciding with the appearance of the VDP label, its members were successful in launching operations to briefly reconquer strategic locations such as Kitchanga. However, due to squabbles over the distribution of FARDC supplies and overlapping and competing chains of command, these military successes remained short-lived. Moreover, the proliferation of FARDC allies—including private contractors, the FDLR, and Burundian troops—further undermined their performance, in contrast with the superior coordination and equipment of M23 and RDF units.

FARDC support to these proxies also had a significant impact on the political economy of the conflict. *Wazalendo* factions were empowered and emboldened, increasing their presence at local markets and in mines. Smaller groups on the periphery of the VDP, including PARECO-FF and others, shared control with FARDC units over the coltan mines in Rubaya until the M23's takeover in April 2024. VDP deployment across Masisi led to a rise in violent taxation on key roads, including those between Sake-Pinga, Sake-Masisi, and Bihambwe-Rubaya. This included both random, haphazard taxation and more sophisticated systems that charged different rates for vehicles transporting goods and passengers—impacting prices of charcoal and agricultural produce in markets in Goma. The harassment reached such high levels that some traders felt compelled to periodically halt the supply of certain goods, for example, the important potato production in southern Masisi. Goma, already full of FARDC, experienced further militarization with the influx of VDP combatants arriving to accompany leadership delegations or as detachments to be based on the outskirts of the city, close to the frontlines.

The outsourcing of counterinsurgency by the FARDC also offered a new lifeline to an FDLR that had been weakened by early 2021 due to targeted joint operations by RDF and FARDC. By 2022, however, as part of the larger offensive against the M23, the FDLR began receiving significant support from the FARDC.[20] It also benefited indirectly from government support to its traditional allies, such as the CMC and the FDDP. The FDLR revitalized some of its economic ventures—known as "non-conventional logistics" in the group's own parlance—and intensified recruitment campaigns to replace losses incurred during the joint M23/RDF advance towards some of the FDLR's historic strongholds in eastern Bwito area. Its involvement and its deep imbrication with Congolese armed groups contributed to both military and diplomatic escalation, and have offered Rwanda and the M23 a key argument to denounce Kinshasa.

Grand Nord: Searching for common ground

The *Grand Nord* (Lubero and Beni) VDP coalition shows a similarly eclectic set of armed groups as the *Petit Nord* and were influenced by developments there. Here, too, the Congolese government sought to rally support for its offensive against the M23 by backing local armed groups. Much like in the *Petit Nord*, these alliances were fraught with disagreements and tensions.

And yet, there are differences with the *Wazalendo* further to the south. While the groups involved are all from the Nande ethnic community, the different armed groups there also have fractious relations with each other that reflect socio-political schisms between the interest groups that fund and support them. In that sense, the evolution of the *Wazalendo* in Lubero is closely linked to the relations between Kinshasa and the Nande politico-

Figure 9: VDP leaders posing during their trip to Kinshasa in April 2024

economic establishment.

A key development in security dynamics in the Grand Nord occurred in November 2021. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Kampala, the Ugandan army asked the DRC government to enter its territory to pursue the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels that it blamed for the attack. Given the sordid history between the two countries—Uganda occupied the eastern DRC between 1998 and 2002 and the Congolese government successfully launched a case against Uganda at the International Court of Justice for pillaging its territory—these proposed operations stirred controversy. Arguing that these operations could contribute to stability—and probably sensing that a renewed Ugandan intervention could boost their political stature—a Congolese delegation from the Grand Nord met with President Tshisekedi in Kinshasa. It consisted of Mbusa Nyamwisi, a former rebel leader and government minister at that time; Bishop Paluku Melchisedech, the head of the Catholic diocese of Butembo; Julien Paluku, a government minister; and delegates from the Kyaghanda Yira ethnic association (see Figure 10). Eventually, the government authorized joint operations with the Ugandan army, dubbed "Operation Shujaa."[21]

The other development that influenced links between elites and the armed groups were the 2023 elections. Beginning in 2023, government and opposition politicians began reaching out to armed groups to gain access for campaigning. At the same time, the Tshisekedi camp worked to secure the backing of Nande elites, many of whom had been embittered by years of marginalization at the national level and saw an alliance with the Tshisekedi coalition as an opportunity to gain greater political clout. Delays pushed the elections towards the end of 2023, coinciding with increased *Wazalendo* mobilization and the adoption of the RAD legislation.[22] While the law does not foresee wholesale integration of armed groups into the reserve force, politicians in the Grand Nord interpreted it as such and used it in campaign speeches to gain sympathy among combatants. This created a wave of enthusiasm and local politicians positioned themselves as being the brokers to unite the scattered, uneven mosaic of Mai-Mai groups in the *Grand Nord*.

The initial mobilization was relatively fragmented. Between 2019 and 2021, there were five relevant armed groups in the area: UPLC, FPP/AP, Jackson Muhukambuto's MFP, Baraka Lolwako's group (including several factions), and the MNLDK of Kyandenga.

The divisions within the local elite can be illustrated with the case of Crispin Mbindule of the *Parlement Furu* and Tembos Yotama of the *Veranda Mutsanga*, Butembo's two main social pressure groups—groups that engage

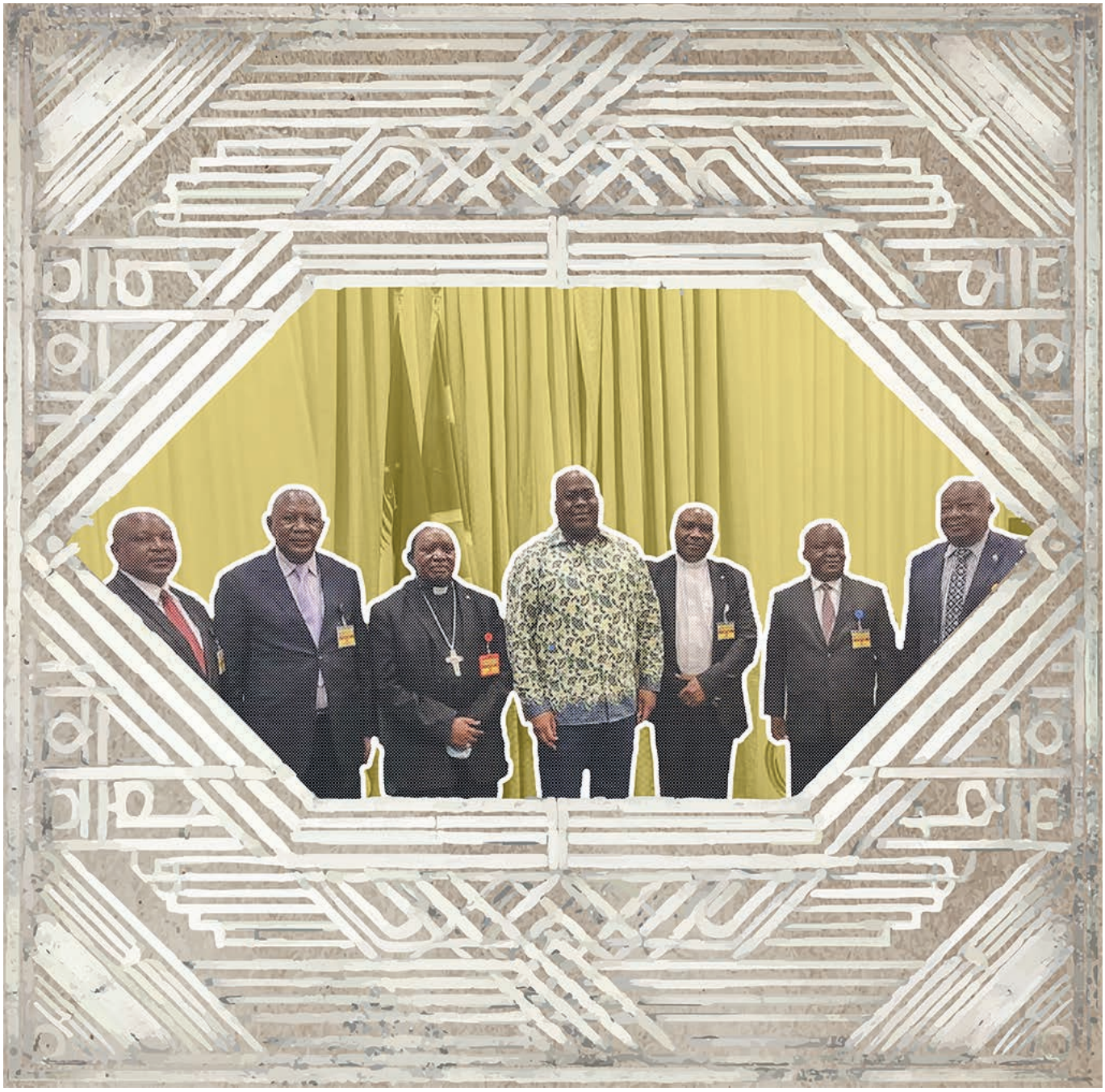


Figure 10: Grand Nord elites meeting President Tshisekedi in November 2021

in cultural activities and popular mobilization that can at times turn violent. Historic rivals, in 2023 they both ran for seats in parliament representing the same national coalition around Tshisekedi. Mbindule won and replaced Yotama in parliament. This led Yotama to rethink his approach so as not to lose political clout, moving closer to Mbindule who had become a key broker, alongside Muhindo Nzangi, between Kinshasa, the FARDC,[23] and the *Grand Nord* armed groups.

In 2022, Kinshasa sent several delegations to rally the Grand Nord's main political and economic heavyweights, pressure groups, and armed actors, both for anti-M23 operations, as well as for the upcoming election campaign. During the second half of 2023, meetings brokered by Butembo bishop Melchisedech brought together representatives from FPP/AP, UPLC, FARDC, local politicians, business leaders and leaders of the Kyaghanda Yira. Since then, other armed groups have joined the fray, but FPP/AP and UPLC retained a dominant position given their superior strength and solid relations with FARDC dating back to before the M23's resurgence.[24] Their strong relations with the FARDC and political leaders offered a wide range of freedom to these armed groups, allowing them to develop taxation and forced labor systems in their areas of control and to engage in dispute resolution.[25]

The exclusion of some armed groups during the 2023 meetings created jealousy and tension. In early 2024, Kinshasa mandated Mbindule to liaise with the different *Grand Nord* groups to forge greater unity. Muhindo Nzangi and Saidi Balikwisha, another local parliamentarian, were tasked with mobilizing new recruits, and Tembos Yotama and Jonathan Mugheni with fundraising. By early 2024, around ten armed groups identified themselves as the *Grand Nord* branch of the VDP. On June 14, 2024, a rare North Kivu-wide *Wazalendo* meeting took place in Buleusa, with Guidon Shimiray and Kabidon Kasereka from the VDP of the *Petit Nord*, reaffirming loose but persistent ties across VDP factions (see Figure 11).

As the M23 advanced towards Lubero in mid-2024, the army sent another delegation to rally the *Wazalendo*, led by colonels Buli Bukubwa, Hilaire Kombi, and Alain Kiwewa. They met with *Kyaghanda Yira* representatives, pressure groups, and *Wazalendo* factions deployed alongside FARDC on the frontlines. By July 2024, there were around 20 different *Wazalendo* groups in the *Grand Nord*, according to a count done by the delegation, including larger, more coherent Mai-Mai and smaller groups.[27] In the talks, distinct demands emerged, highlighting the cleavages between the groups. Many of the groups close to *Veranda Mutsanga* (including FAR/Yira Force, FPDC/ML, Mai-Mai Ngane, Mai-Mai Vukondi, Bana Bateseka) refused to recognize the leadership of FPP/AP and UPLC. The latter, in turn, were intent on preventing Kakule Sikuli Lafontaine's FPDC-ML from attending the meetings.[28]

Finally, an agreement was struck between FARDC and *Wazalendo* to focus on the fight against M23 at the expense of anti-ADF operations and to redeploy from Beni to Lubero. Tensions resurfaced when the leader of the Mai-Mai Bana Bateseka was arrested in August 2024, and his group accused Mbindule and the UPLC's Kambale Mayani of embezzling government funds earmarked for the *Grand Nord* VDP. Almost all VDP factions in the *Grand Nord*, except some Nande groups from Kibirizi, sent troops to fight the M23 but maintained headquarters in their traditional strongholds. UPLC and FPP/AP preferred to send lightly equipped units and to keep their heavier, more valuable weapons behind, while strengthening their presence in ADF areas, especially Mambasa and Lubero. This may be one reason FARDC officers had limited trust in the *Grand Nord* VDP, which in turn could explain the uneven provision of supplies over time and across factions. The indiscipline of the Wazalendo, who often had little training and shoddy command-and-control, also provoked concern, as combatants would often harass and abuse civilians.

These problems eventually prompted the military governor General Peter Cirimwami to order the "real" *Wazalendo* to identify themselves to the FARDC (see Figure 12). Resulting mistrust and confusion over what Cirimwami called "true" and "false" *Wazalendo* caused a new low in FARDC-VDP relations. In addition, several armed groups retained positions in Beni and continued to support Operation *Shujaa* by conducting reconnaissance for them. On the side of the army, frustrations increased as well, as they suffered numerous defeats against M23.

Figure 11: Meeting between Kabidon and Guidon in June 2024

Figure 12: Human rights violations by VDP combatants

Aiming to ease tensions and rebuild morale, the FARDC leadership organized another round of meetings. These talks resulted in a new agreement with armed groups pledging to end conflicts amongst themselves and collaborate more closely with the army. The government committed to integrating *Wazalendo* factions into the RAD. Moreover, a VDP "synergy," a kind of coordinating body, was established in the presence of the FARDC deputy chief of staff. FPP/AP leader Kabidon Kasereka was appointed commander, seconded by UPLC's Kambale Mayani and John Maangayiko as spokesman. In mid-September, armed groups formally pledged to end internal conflicts, refrain from territorial disputes and align with the FARDC's strategy. In a subsequent meeting attended by the provincial VDP coordination, details for the supply and support of *Grand Nord Wazalendo* factions and a ban on all roadblocks was decided. Despite these efforts, internal strife continued, albeit to a lesser degree.

Soon afterwards, the Grand Nord VDP upped their demands from the government as tensions between the groups persisted. Various smaller armed groups believed that the FPP/AP and the UPLC were receiving the bulk of the support, while conflicts continued between *Veranda Mutsanga* and FPP/AP. In addition, there were persistent rumors about FARDC officers selling ammunition intended as supplies for the VDP, which further rankled the combatants.

In and around Beni, several combatants were arrested by FARDC for continuously engaging on the ADF frontline after this was denounced by local authorities and civil society representatives, who wanted them to focus on the M23. In October 2024, the FARDC sent another delegation to Butembo in view of opening up a RAD training center for VDP combatants to address some of these problems. Once identified and trained, VDP were to be issued RAD identity cards and paid by the government.

In the meantime, the M23 began its December offensive toward Kirumba and Alimbongo. Within weeks, they captured several villages, forcing FARDC and VDP to retreat, provoking numerous defections. A key factor in the collapse of the FARDC frontline was the sudden withdrawal of the FPP/AP. Led by Kabidon, around 500 combatants moved northwards into Tshopo province, depriving the FARDC of its strongest and most reliable proxy. The timing of the withdrawal raised suspicions, leading many to believe FPP/AP had concluded a form of non-aggression pact with the M23. Kabidon only returned to his headquarters around Bunyatenge and Musigha in late December, with M23 positions recently established in the immediate vicinity.

In the end, numerous groups in Lubero and Beni deployed along the frontlines against the M23, playing an important role in the FARDC strategy of pinning down the M23 across the broad frontline: FPP/AP deployed in early stages of the conflict during the M23's advance on Rwindi and, until mid-2024, maintained at least two brigades in Rutshuru, becoming one of the most active VDP factions. UPLC sent hundreds of combatants to the frontline in late March 2024. The Leopards group engaged in Rutshuru alongside CMC. FAR combatants operated on two fronts: in the north between Lubero and Butembo and in the south on the Masisi-Sake axis embedded with APCLS. Conversely, Guidon Shimiray's NDC-R has been operating in south Lubero alongside FPP/AP and in Walikale against M23 and since August 2024, following the meeting between Guidon Shimiray and Kabidon Kasereka, in Bapere area in support of Operation *Shujaa* against ADF.

VDP COALITION GRAND NORD

2. **TABLEAUX RECAPITULATIFS DES GROUPES WAZALENDO IDENTIFIES :**

BENI

No	DATE D'IDENTIFICATION	NOM DU GROUPE	CHEF DU GROUPE	LOCALISATION	EFFECTIF	NOMBRE D'ARMES
01	15-06-2024	UPLC	KAMBALE MAYANI GERMAIN	KALUNGUTA/ SECT RUWENZORI	1500	AK 47 : 82 PKM :07 RPG7 :06 MOR 60 :11
02	15 -06-2024	VICTIMES DES MASSACRES	MWAMI MATEMBELA	BENI VILLE	800	AK47 : 15 PKM : 03 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
03	16-06-2024	BANA MUTESEKA /ORPHELINS DES MASSACRES	RIGUEN MICHEL KAMBALE	ISALE	700	AK47 :35 PKM :03 RPG7 :04 MOR 60:00
04	17-06-2024	ART 63/64	KAMBALE NGENDO	MULEKE	800	AK47 :15 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
05	17-06-2024	CLITOK	MBUSA MUVUNGA	BULIKI	85	AK47 :03 PKM 00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
06	17-06-2024	FAR/BENI	KAKULE MAJOYCE	OICHA	240	AK 47 :08 PKM 00 RPG7 00 MOPR60 00
07	IDM	MAZEMBE/VHUWATHIKANIA	KAMBALE SIWAKANIA MUDUNDO	KIKINGI	215	AK :13 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
08	Sous-Total effectif		4340			

BUTEMB0

NO	DATE	NOM DU GROUPE	CHEF DU GROUPE	LOCALISATION	EFFECTIF	NOMBRE D'ARMES
01	17-06-2024	FAC /USHINDI NI WETU	EKONDA HANGI	BUTEMBO	193	AK47:07 PKM 00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
02	17-06-2024	FPC	MUMBERE LWANZO	BUTEMBO	300	AK47 :17 PKM :00 RPG7 :0 MOR60:00
03	17-06-2024	INTERVENTION DU PEUPLE	NGANI MUYISA	BUTEMBO	250	AK47 :15 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
04	17-06-2024	WAZALENDO/ISALE	KAKULE KAVAYIRA	BUTEMBO	250	AK47 :00 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
05	17-06-2024	GROUPE D'AUTODEFENCE	KAYAFA BONANE	BUTEMBO	15	AK47 :15 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
06	Sous-Total effectif		1008			

LUBERO

NO	DATE	NOM DU GROUPE	CHEF DU GROUPE	LOCALISATION	EFFECTIF	NOMBRE D'ARMES
01	28-06-2024	FPP/AP	KASEREKA KASYANO KABIDO	LUBERO	3000	AK47 :250 PKM :15 RPG7 :10 MOR60 :01
02	IDEM	MJP/BINZA	SURAMBAYA	BINZA	534	AK47 :27 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
03	IDM	FAR W	KAMBALE MUSILAMU ROGER	LUBERO	2712	AK47 :45 PKM :01 RPG7 :01 MOR60 :00
04	IDM	FPLC	VOLONTE MUMBERE KATOKERO	BINZA	657	AK47 :30 PKM : 01 RPG7 : 01 MOR60 : 00
04	IDM	LEOPARD	ISAAC MISONIA	LUBERO	600	AK47 :30 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
05	IDM	FPY	WABO JOSAPHAT	LUBERO	105	AK47 :17 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
06	IDM	MCLP	KAKULE TUMBA MUSOLINI	LUBERO	300	AK47 :30 PKM :00 RPG7 :00 MOR60 :00
07	IDM	YIRA FORCE	MUMBERE MAGHALAMIRA MABIZE	MUNOLI/LUBERO	300	AK47 : 08 PKM : 00 RPG7 : 00 MOR : 00
08	Sous-Total effectif		8208			

Au total nous avons enregistré treize mille cinq cent cinquante six (13.556) combattants.

Figure 13: Documents on and by Grand Nord VDP factions

Outsourcing Counter-insurgency: Causes and consequences

The emergence of the *Wazalendo* phenomenon suggests both continuity and change in core trends in the region. How should we interpret the *Wazalendo* analytically, as a player in the broader Congolese conflict?

One of the defining features of armed mobilization in eastern Congo over the past years has been the Congolese army's use of armed groups as proxies against its enemies. During this most recent M23 conflict, the outsourcing of warfare by Kinshasa has not been limited to the *Wazalendo* and the FDLR. In the context of military escalation and mounting criticism of the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO, the first-ever EAC peacekeeping force was deployed to eastern Congo in March 2023 to oversee a temporary ceasefire. In late 2023, Kinshasa sent it back over allegations of partiality in favor of Rwanda. A SADC peacekeeping force replaced it in 2024, facing in turn accusations of partiality by Kigali. In parallel, Kinshasa contracted private military companies from France and Romania and concluded an agreement with Burundi to send troops in support (both in regular Burundian uniforms and undercover with FARDC attire), triggering a serious deterioration of Rwanda-Burundi relations.

The causes of outsourcing

Why has this approach proved so durable? There are several reasons. Outsourcing is more efficient in terms of the military budget required and the human cost for the army; at the same time, it provides significant economic opportunities for political and military elites and allows them to project power and influence in places that were difficult to access.

The Congolese army is weak, suffering from overlapping chains of command, deep-rooted racketeering and corruption networks, and a lack of training and meritocratic promotion. Instead of addressing some of these deep-rooted problems—which could trigger a dangerous backlash and will take time—military leadership has resorted to outsourcing some of their core tasks.

In this context, some commanders take the initiative to seek out local allies, whom they see as more reliable. General Mayanga, who is one of the FARDC generals in charge of the RAD, said during the first M23 rebellion in 2012 that often local militias were more reliable.

> *"Because of integration, Kinshasa couldn't trust many of its own commanders, some of whom were former RCD officers and therefore close to the CNDP. We needed our own army."* [29]

In addition, the use of local armed groups provides plausible deniability for fighting to continue during ceasefires, as has frequently been the case with the M23 conflict.

Economic incentives mattered as well. Outsourcing usually comes with a budget and opportunities for kickbacks, embezzlement, and rents from local extortion and taxation rackets. Nonetheless, for the central government these kinds of coalitions can also amount to "counterinsurgency on the cheap," as it does not require setting up expensive supply chains to lodge, feed, and provide health care to soldiers.

Local commanders have consistently argued that using local militias is more efficient.[30] For example, in the case of their collaboration with the NDC-R against the FDLR, the group brought a deep knowledge of the local terrain and society to the table, as well as the ability to deploy in far-flung areas for little cost. Army commanders have also claimed that the morale of these local militias is often higher. In return, the group also provided the army the ability to get involved in local protection rackets around gold and other trade, providing a source of income to the armed group and FARDC commanders.[31] By funding armed groups behind the front lines—as the Congolese army has consistently done—they can also tie their enemies down and disperse their troops.

Finally, a key reason the government has supported armed groups has been to dilute the leverage of their rivals at the negotiating table. During the 2008 Amani Conference, for example, the government mobilized armed groups for the sole purpose of preventing the CNDP from monopolizing the talks.[32] These precedents have encouraged other armed groups, and political elites connected to them, to mobilize in the hope of obtaining political and military positions.

The consequences of outsourcing

The practice of outsourcing violence, while at times contributing to battlefield successes, has had several negative consequences.

It has reinforced the entrenching of conflict through the recruitment of combatants who will be difficult to demobilize and by the strengthening of the hand of local strongmen. Since most armed groups recruit along ethnic lines, and many of these groups have faced off with each other in the past, these recruitment sprees have also increased the possibility of future conflict between armed groups. Millions of weapons and rounds of ammunition have been distributed, and thousands of new recruits have been drawn into *Wazalendo* ranks, creating problems for years to come.

These groups receive military supplies from the government but otherwise largely live off the backs of the local population. This leads them to extort money, a practice that is often accompanied by violence and abuse. This has militarized local society even more, leading to high levels of everyday violence, as well as higher prices for common goods, due to the taxes imposed by armed groups.

The volatility of this practice was clearly put on display following the escalation of violence that took place in mid-January 2025. In both Goma and Bukavu, as the M23 entered town, many FARDC and *Wazalendo* jettisoned their weapons, while others used their equipment to survive through stealing and burglary. This, along with the occupation by the M23, has led to a wave of violent crime in both cities. In the Ruzizi Plain and Uvira, in contrast, the retreat en masse of the FARDC from the front lines further north led to clashes between the national army and the *Wazalendo*, who accused the army of treason.

Conclusion

This report examines the VDP, part of the *Wazalendo* phenomenon, an eclectic ensemble of armed groups fighting the M23 and Rwandan troops alongside the Congolese army. The story of the Wazalendo reflects long-standing patterns of the conflict, notably the use of proxy forces by the various governments, as well as the attempts by armed groups to take advantage of conflict for political and economic gain.

Some factions performed in a relatively disciplined fashion on the frontline, especially wherever FARDC commanders were open to integrating them in FARDC camps. Despite shortages in weapons, ammunition and rations—and knowing they face a much better equipped adversary—the VDP often appeared to be more committed to fighting than FARDC, including in *Petit Nord*.

Nonetheless, the coalition of *Wazalendo*, private contractors, and Burundian troops subcontracted by Kinshasa failed to stop the advance of M23 and RDF. The conflict escalated in December 2024 and led to the fall of Bukavu and Goma. The conflict has now reached an inflection point. Whether the conflict continues to escalate or now heads toward negotiations, the Wazalendo will play important roles at the local and national levels. The centrifugal momentum created by this outsourcing of violence will render peacebuilding efforts at the local level more difficult and could make it difficult to rein in spoilers during peace talks between the Congolese government, the M23 and Rwanda.

In conclusion, this report points to two dynamics that scholars have highlighted with regards to African politics more broadly: involution and extraversion. The first concerns the Congolese army's unwillingness to put an end to a conflict that was peripheral for the government and had become a source of livelihood for many combatants. This has led to involution, a turning inwards of the conflict, which has become an end in itself, the fighting carried forward by its own momentum, exceeding the intent of any individual actor. The ambition to win the war is replaced by tactical objectives of a proliferation of actors, who attempt to secure material or political benefits from it. The case of the Wazalendo is a good example of this.

The second, closely related logic is extraversion, a practice whereby political elites in weak countries—or in this case, armed groups—convert their dependency on more powerful allies into a resource.[33] The concept has been developed to explain how post-colonial African elites have used their reliance on outside powers for political gain. Congolese armed groups like the Wazalendo act in similar ways, never seeking to become completely autonomous, as their fate and profits depend on relations with much more powerful state actors.

These logics point to the fundamental stakes of the conflict in the eastern DRC. While in part the violence has its roots in regional dynamics, in particular the ambitions of Rwandan, Ugandan, and Burundian elites in the region, in large part the insecurity is also fueled by these logics at the heart of the Congolese state and society. As we can see, instead of trying to reinforce and reform state institutions, successive governments have engaged in policies that have fragmented and undermined the state, to the benefit of elites inside and outside of the government. Any long-term peace process will have to take these dynamics into account.

Endnotes

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15. Email from western diplomat based in Kigali who shared three videos sent by people close to the Rwandan government. After examination, these were proven to be instances of popular justice that did not concern the Tutsi community.

16. Prior to 2000, the FDLR were called the Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR) and consisted of two main wings.

17. *Congo Research Group*, "For the army, with the army, like the army. The Rise of Guidon Shimiray and the NDC–Rénové in the Eastern Congo," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, 2021, https://www.congoresearchgroup.org/en/2021/01/25/for-the-army-with-the-army/.

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22. In March 2023, education minister Muhindo Nzangi announced at a press conference in Goma that local self-defense forces could join the armed re serve that assists FARDC in military operations. A draft ordinance-law establishing the RAD was adopted by parliament in April 2023 and promulgated by President Tshisekedi in May 2023.

23. In early 2024, the army's Operation Sukola I leadership tasked Crispin Mbindule with managing funds earmarked for consolidating the *Grand Nord Wazalendo* coalition and engaging Mai-Mai groups around Beni, Butembo and Lubero.

24. A July 2024 military delegation estimated the FPP/AP at 1,500 combatants, and the UPLC at around 3,000. While the FPP/AP was particularly active on the northern front of anti-FDLR operations before the M23 resurgence between 2015 and 2020, the FARDC also supplied UPLC for several years to fight the ADF around Beni and heavily influenced the group's internal logics, such as by arresting long-time UPLC co-commander Kilalo during a meeting with FARDC in Beni.

25. The UPLC has periodically been accused in local civil society of orchestrating ADF-style massacres to justify its role as a protecting force.

26. This included the FPP/AP, UPLC, Bana Bateseka, Léopards, Force d'action rapide (ex-Yira Force), Article 63, Congolais debout pour la résistance/Force Publique (Kakule Sikuli Lafontaine's latest formation, Force des patriotes pour la défense du Congo/Mouvement de libération (FPDC-ML) and Muhindo Simisi's group. Lafontaine died in October 2024. His latest armed group was not yet officially born but participated in several meetings held in Lubero between July 2024 and September 2024, and members of the group said they sent elements to the front between May and July 2024. Muhindo Simisi Obed, supported by parts of Butembo's business elite, was the first group enlisting the VDP platform but later changed sides and was named mayor of Kirumba by the M23 during its northern advance.

27. Most of these groups had previously served as FARDC proxies in military operations against ADF and M23.

28. During the mission, the delegation met privately with Lafontaine and held a closed-door meeting with Lafontaine, Mayani, Kabido, Bishop Melchisedech, business representatives of the FEC, and Kyaghanda Yira.

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CONGO RESEARCH GROUP

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