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New phase of lawlessness grips Congo's Kasai region

**Civilians face spiralling violence from government forces, militia
fighters, and armed robbers**

Luke Dennison/IRIN

TSHIKULA/Democratic

Republic of Congo, 28 August

2018



Luke Dennison

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Congo

In the Democratic Republic of
Congo's southern Kasai region, the
mass graves and massacres of 2017
have given way to general
insecurity marked by banditry,
military abuses, and – after two
years of poor harvests – hunger
and malnourishment.

Conflict erupted in Kasai towards the end of 2016 as a new anti-government movement called the Kamuina Nsapu clashed with the Congolese security forces, the FARDC, who were accused of indiscriminately killing civilians during raids against the group.

In late July, 10 months after first **reporting from the ground on the emerging conflict**, which has now **claimed at least 5,000 lives and displaced 1.4 million people**, IRIN returned to the vast jungle region – which is roughly the size of Germany.

The Congolese government plays down abuses by the FARDC, and the Kasai police commissioner insisted in an interview last month that **“everything is peaceful”**, but IRIN found growing lawlessness, new displacement, and experts **warning of worse to come** if action isn't taken soon to end the culture of impunity.



OCHA, the UN's emergency aid coordination body, couldn't provide any more recent figures, but as of May 2018 it said almost 1.3 million of the nine million people in the provinces of Kasai, Kasai-Central, and Kasai-Orientale were still internally

displaced (a drop of only 100,000 since the height of the 2017 conflict) and three million (one in three) needed food assistance.

Late last month in Tshikula, about 50 kilometres southeast of Kananga, the capital and main city in Kasai-Central province, priest Gustav Mbaye smoked a cigarette inside a church compound as he recounted recent militia activity in the area: a young man killed the day before as he returned from Kananga

with a jerry can of oil, an attack at the market the previous Sunday, numerous torched homes, beheadings, and thefts.

Asked if violence was becoming more and more common, he replied, "Yes. We are continually being surprised by the amount and frequency of attacks."

This increase in militia activity is blamed in part on provocations by national army troops who loot and impose illegal taxes on local residents and are responsible for their own attacks in the area.

Standing in the road, often with logs and tree branches blocking the way, soldiers demand travellers pay anywhere between 1,000 and 5,000 Congolese francs (60 US cents and \$3) for passage – an onerous sum for most.

Now that Kamuina Nsapu fighters no longer wear their hallmark red headbands, it has become impossible to distinguish militiamen from the rest of the population. Soldiers act as if everyone is a member, sometimes arresting locals on the premise that wearing rings and bracelets is sufficient evidence of belonging to the group.

READ MORE: The division of the Kamuina Nsapu

When IRIN visited, attacks as recent as the previous night had emptied the surrounding villages, forcing hundreds of displaced people to flock to Tshikula, where host families had taken in as many as possible. One of those displaced, Kandolo M'vita Adolphe, explained how they were becoming an increasing burden to their hosts, who now had even less food for their own families.

Tshikula used to be an agricultural hub, but even after the June-August dry season ends many here won't be able to

return to their fields because of the insecurity, while others will be too malnourished to have the strength to farm.

A massacre remembered

On the outskirts of Kananga in the village of Tshilumba, memories were still fresh of the day in May 2017 when government troops turned up in search of members of the Kamuina Nsapu.

The headman of the village told the soldiers what he believed to be true: that fighters of the militia, which had formed the previous year, no longer operated in his neighbourhood.

Yet, minutes later, the soldiers came under attack. Armed only with machetes and locally made weapons, they didn't stand a chance against the barrage of gunfire that ensued. Neither did the villagers.

Henry Mwabale, the pastor of Tshilumba's Sainte Albertinse Church, became somber and distant as he relived how the soldiers fired indiscriminately on civilians and militiamen alike.





Henry Mwabale stands in front of Sainte Albertinse Church in Tshilumba, where the massacre began in 2017.

“My son is still deaf and traumatised from the shooting,” he said. When the gunfire finally ceased, bodies lay strewn across the sandy pathways that connect the maze of houses in the village.

Mwabale recalled how the bodies were collected and stored in nearby houses until nightfall, when the soldiers used the cover of darkness to bury the corpses in several mass graves not far from the church.

Nobody knows how many bodies lie in the pits, now overgrown with grass.

Returning to ruins

Since the height of the Kamuina Nsapu insurrection around Kananga ended in mid-2017, a relative calm has returned to the area, and many of those who fled have begun to return.

But a new form of insecurity has replaced the earlier conflict. Armed robberies are on the rise, in part due to desperation for

food and money, but also because the authority of the state has been absent since the fighting began in 2016. Police officers and FARDC troops are widely believed to be behind some of the violence. Several are on trial in Kananga for rape.



Armed robbers sit on the steps of the police station in Kananga after having been caught, and beaten, by the local population.

Mwabale, the pastor, said there had been seven robberies in Tshilumba within the past week and that witnesses saw police among the robbers. The banditry has sparked rumours among Kananga residents that the Kamuina Nsapu militia may return in order to protect the population from the many abuses of the authorities.

OCHA estimates that 600 schools were destroyed in 2017 in the fighting between Kamuina Nsapu and government forces, leaving between 150,000 and 200,000 children without education. As of this year, only 88 of those schools have been repaired.

Where once there were verdant crops and solid homes, returnees have found barren fields and piles of rubble. Due to the clashes between Kamuina Nsapu and the FARDC little has been sown here for two straight agricultural seasons.

“Despite a recent lull in fighting in the Kasai region, already-precarious living conditions have significantly deteriorated in recent months, due to the large population displacements, and a lack of access to basic necessities, such as shelter, food, and healthcare,” ALIMA, an NGO that pools international expertise to provide medical help in crisis zones, **wrote in a statement last week.**

“Throughout the region, health workers have fled their posts. Within health centres that are still operational, there isn't enough medical supplies or medications to meet local health needs,” ALIMA said. “At the same time, a disruption to the normal agricultural cycle the past two years has led to an increase in the number of insecure households – some 3.2 million people, according to OCHA.”

In late July, in the Nganza neighbourhood of Kananga, a former Kamuina Nsapu stronghold, a girl stood beneath a palm tree, her skeletal figure marked with the open wounds that botflies leave.

Malnourished children made up much of the caseload of the Saint Martyr health clinic in Kananga. In May, **UNICEF estimated** that 400,000 children in Kasai were severely malnourished and at risk of dying in the absence of urgent assistance.

“The food insecurity is worsening now because of the dry season,” said Jeannette Tshibola, founder of the Mama Muilu health centre in Nganza. “The people here are unable to even have small gardens because the area is waterless.”

Dibaya burns

To the south of Kananga, in Dibaya Territory, where the Kamuina Nsapu uprising began, officials spoke of an

asymmetric conflict, one where civilians continued to be killed and were forced to flee their homes.



FARDC soldiers in Kalomba after an attack by Kamuina Nsapu the previous night that left the village empty.

“There is a long distance between the FARDC base and the stronghold of Kamuina Nsapu in [the towns of] Dibataya and Kamuandu,” said Apashakwa Mikendi, the territory’s senior administrator. “The militia exploits this weakness to attack the population at night when the FARDC have left. By the time the soldiers are able to respond, it’s too late.”

Kamuina Nsapu first took control of Dibaya in the last quarter of 2016, raising their trademark red flag in front of the territory’s administrative offices. During their nearly one-year reign, the population lived in constant fear: anyone who opposed them, or even spoke ill of them, was killed.

Corneille Tumusele, a doctor at Dibaya's hospital, recalled how the militia held him and the other doctors hostage, and, before leaving, ransacked the supplies.

"They came and destroyed everything in the hospital, and stole all of the medicine. It has made it very difficult for us to take care of the population here," he said.

When the militia was finally pushed out by the FARDC in mid-2017, nothing, not even a chair, remained in Dibaya.

Timothée Mukendi, one of three administrators of the territory, said he and his colleagues shared the struggle of the local villagers – having received no salaries in seven months, they were sleeping on floor mats and struggled to find food.



A child, accompanied by his older brother, receives a blood transfusion for acute malnutrition in Dibaya's hospital. This is the only mattress left in the hospital after Kamuina Nsapu militants destroyed and looted the premises last year.

The situation for the doctors working in the local hospital was equally dire: all six of them lived together in a small room. Tumusele lamented the fact that the militia had stolen the hospital's only vehicle. "Without transport for emergencies, mothers in labour are often forced to ride on the back of bicycles," he said. "Many of them die in the middle of the road before reaching the hospital."

Beyond the administrative offices of Dibaya lies the badly scorched village of Tubadi. Locals explained how, in desperation for food, a child set a patch of grass alight to chase out mice to eat. The hot, dry winds sweeping across the plains quickly accelerated the blaze, setting fire to numerous homes around the village.

Similar damage was evident across the territory. Though many of the fires had been set by accident, others were said to have been started by Kamuina Nsapu militia in their attempts to wipe out villages deemed hostile. Homeless and often too weak to rebuild, families in Tubadi took refuge inside the Belgian-built church and prayed.

(TOP PHOTO: A girl in Tshilumba stands in front of the houses where FARDC soldiers stored the bodies from the massacre, before burying them in mass graves. CREDIT: Luke Dennison/IRIN)

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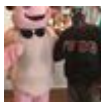
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Lars Helgeby

The damned D R C government should be forced to develop the Kasai region to stop this violence. With no roads and no electricity goods cannot be delivered, crops cannot be grown, the economy cannot be developed and this forces desperate people to fight each other. DRC is the richest country in Africa with enormous potential. I know this because I was there!

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Nkwenge Astone

All this is as a result of poor political dispensation

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Jane Rambo DeHart

Were you able to get to Tshikaji? The Hopital Bon Berger and the nursing school there are still running, as far as I know.

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Anne Davies

I would like to see more coverage on who is doing what, with what tools, to stop the fighting. What's the international advocacy angle?

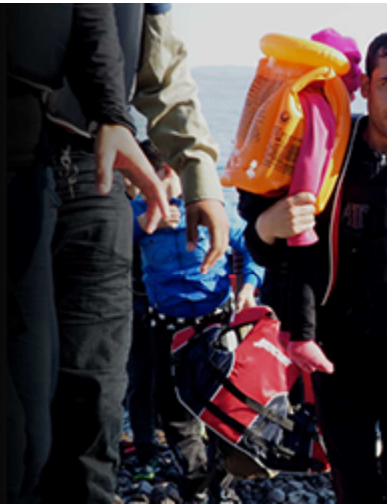
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