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ITURI UPDATE

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INTRODUCTION

The overall political and security environment in the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has not significantly improved from the situation at the end of 2003. However, some important political events in December 2003 have given rise to the present conditions in Ituri and its main town, Bunia.

The transitional national government of Kinshasa has been sending high-level representatives to Ituri in order to assert its administrative control over the region. It appears as though there is increased acceptance among the armed groups of the national transition process, and some of the groups have started handing over areas in their control to the Ituri Interim Administration (IIA).

At the same time, a leadership struggle within the main armed militia group in Bunia, the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), has caused some instability. Continued sporadic interethnic violence was also reported in various parts of Ituri. All the known armed groups in Ituri held to their territories despite the fact that the UN Mission to the Congo (MONUC) Task Force II, also known as the 'Ituri Brigade', continued deploying its troops into the hot spots.

It is clear that while there may have been some positive developments on the political scene in Ituri, especially within the armed groups, there has been no major improvement in the security situation outside of Bunia.

CONFLICT INDICATORS

Leadership dispute in the UPC

There were serious squabbles in the Gegere/Hema-dominated armed group, the UPC. Floribert Kisembo, formerly a senior member of the UPC leadership, went on air declaring to have unseated the UPC leader, Thomas Lubanga, who has been held in Kinshasa for the last four months. The overthrow split the thousands of ethnic supporters of this armed group based in Bunia. However, Thomas Lubanga still commands a huge following, and the Kisembo-wing of the UPC is almost non-existent on the ground.

The newly self-proclaimed UPC leader announced immediately his willingness to enter into negotiations with the officials of the Ituri Interim Administration in order to discuss the modalities of handing over control of the territories currently under UPC command, including the Bunia Central market.

Kisembo came under serious threats from supporters of Thomas Lubanga in Bunia, to the extent

that he had to leave for Kinshasa to defuse the situation in Bunia.

Following this takeover announcement, tension was high and there was a potentially serious threat to peace in Bunia, should fighting have broken out between supporters of the two leaders.

Question of Ituri in the unified DRC

During a visit to Ituri on the 31st of January 2004 by the Vice-President of the transitional national government in charge of security, defence and political affairs, Azarias Ruberwa, a crowd of over two hundred pro-Lubanga UPC supporters thronged the town centre brandishing banners that read: “Why visit Ituri without our leaders Thomas Lubanga and Njabu?” and “Where is the place of Ituri in the DRC transition? No to the balkanisation of the Congo!” Among these supporters were also those who were waving the DRC flag. As the UPC supporters were getting rowdy, the MONUC Pakistani troops heavy-handedly snatched the banners from them and demanded that they be still. UPC supporters disapproved and simply walked away in protest.

Continued violence outside of Bunia

In January 2004, the MONUC forces experienced a spate of attacks by the UPC militias outside of Bunia, in Nizi, Drodro and Iga Barriere. At Nizi, MONUC forces arrested 20 heavily armed UPC combatants. The combatants claimed they were under orders to attack by Commandant Ngatanga, whom Thomas Lubanga appointed in early January as the Chief of Staff of UPC troops to replace Floribert Kisembo.

Compared to their UPC counterparts, the FNI combatants are keeping a very low profile and do not seem particularly keen on increasing their political visibility in Bunia. Outside of Bunia, all the armed groups remain as active as ever. Commandant Jerome of the FAPC is unrestrictedly ruling over Mahagi and collecting all tax revenue at the Mahagi border post. The FNI militias continue to run amok in Kpandroma, Reti and all the surrounding areas. The PUSIC forces are still holding and administering Chomia. The UPC, although seemingly subdued in Bunia town, remains strong in Iga Barriere and Fataki, and other areas under its control.

As security outside of Bunia is wanting, the civilian population is subject to frequent attacks and different types of harassment by the militias. A recent assessment mission to Mahagi by COOPI, an Italian NGO, reported of hundreds of rape cases against local women and girls by the FAPC forces.

The conflict also has an indirect effect on the local population. The economy of the country has been at best informal and based on small-scale trade. Trade and agriculture has been adversely affected following pervasive insecurity all over the countryside. Most of the schools that are up and running are found in Bunia, but most of educational and health institutions located in rural areas are not functioning.

Interaction between the different communities that have been in conflict in Ituri – Hemas and Lendus – remains very limited. It is possible that these communities interact deep inside rural Ituri, but unfortunately such cases are not known to the outside world due to the inaccessibility of the rural areas and limited media attention.

Weak presence of the Ituri Interim Administration

So far, the IIA has not been able to pacify and take effective administrative control of Ituri. This is due to several reasons, such as: (a) lack of funds; (b) lack of trust and acceptance by most of the armed groups controlling Ituri; (c) no law enforcement body (police and armed forces); (d) limited logistical capacity; (e) insufficient technical capacity.

However, with support from the MONUC, members of the IIA have conducted a number of

assessment missions into the interior of Ituri in order to prepare a mechanism to assume control over these areas.

PEACE INDICATORS

Robust MONUC deployments

MONUC Task Force II is to be credited for the improvement of the security situation in Bunia. To deal with the serious criminal litigations related to the violent conflict in Ituri, MONUC has offered to cover the living costs of magistrates that have been appointed for Ituri by the Kinshasa government.¹

After completing the deployment of its troops in Marabo, Kasenyi, Chomia, Iga Barriere, Nizi and Fataki, MONUC started sending its Nepalese contingent to Mahagi town on January 29, 2004. According to Dominique AitOuyahia-McAdams, head of MONUC in Bunia, seven hundred troops will be permanently stationed at the Mahagi base within two months. From Mahagi, MONUC is expected to deploy to Kpandroma, Aru and Mongbwalu. Each of these bases will cover a radius of at least thirty kilometres. The logic behind these deployments is for MONUC to secure major centres and cover the main road axes in Ituri, just as it has already done on the economically important Bunia-Kasenyi road.

Consolidation of the authority of the Ituri Interim Administration

The IIA ordered the demolition of a number of kiosks along some 900 metres of the main boulevard in Bunia.² This event was seen as the IIA not only trying to clean up the town but also as a way of asserting its authority on the ground. To carry out this exercise, nearly all the policemen currently under training by UN Civpol were involved in order to dissuade resistance. This serves to demonstrate how urgently the IIA needs a law enforcement force to ensure its actions are taken seriously.

During the recent visit to Ituri, Vice-President Azarias Ruberwa showed one of the strongest gestures of support to the IIA. Besides being welcomed at the airport by Emmanuel Leku, the Ituri Special Co-ordinator, Ruberwa decided to visit the Ituri Special Assembly hall and briefly meet with the delegates of the Assembly. Later on he briefly addressed a huge crowd that had gathered in front of the Assembly hall. Mme Petronille Vaweka, the chairperson of the Ituri Special Assembly, was conspicuously absent, as she has been in Kinshasa fulfilling her duties as a parliamentarian. Her absence has left an institutional and moral void within the IIA, which it has been struggling to fill.

The gesture posed by Vice-President Ruberwa could be interpreted as a strong statement of support and recognition from the transitional national government in Kinshasa to the IIA. Such visits by other officials of the transitional government would most likely contribute to boosting the credibility and legitimacy of the IIA in the eyes of the local population and armed groups in Ituri.

Handover of territories to the Ituri Interim Administration

The Hema-dominated armed group, PUSIC, which controls the areas along the shores of Lake Albert, including the important border posts of Kasenyi and Chomia³, has declared its intention of

¹ A special salary package was to be negotiated for these magistrates with the DRC government. MONUC assumes that with the standard salaries for magistrates afforded by the government in Kinshasa, no magistrate would be motivated to accept an appointment to Ituri, or even if accepted, such a low salary may cause magistrates to become prone to corruption, as has been the case with previous magistrates in Ituri.

² The kiosks had totally besieged Bunia, and the owners do not pay tax. The setting up of kiosks is a type of informal economic activity that sustains the Congolese economy in general and the Iturian economy in particular. Hence, there was a need to control the mushrooming kiosks and give the town a facelift.

³ Substantial revenue can be collected at the Chomia and Kasenyi border posts.

handing over control of these areas to the IIA. Chief Kahwa Mandro resigned as the leader of PUSIC, citing personal reasons for disengaging from politico-military activities. To date, PUSIC is the only group that has handed over some of the territories it controlled to the IIA. Given serious misunderstandings that arose during the implementation of the handover agreement, and after handing over Kasenyi to the IIA, PUSIC felt short-changed and declined to continue the process further. In order to restart the handover process, PUSIC expects the IIA to abide by the terms of their original agreement.⁴

Appointment of magistrates for Ituri

The appointed nine magistrates (five judges, two prosecutors and two court clerks) were sworn in on January 30, 2004 in Bunia. Pending total completion of the repair works at the Bunia central prison, the stage seems set for clearing the backlog of cases of people suspected of criminal offences, who are still in MONUC's custody. The magistrates will also have the task of receiving and hearing new cases to be filed by the members of public seeking legal redress.

High-level delegations from the Transitional National Government to Ituri

There has been a steady flow of delegations coming from Kinshasa to Ituri recently. Vice-President Azarias Ruberwa and the Minister of Civil Service Gustave Tabezi, both visited Bunia at the end of January 2004. Apart from the payment of salary arrears to the civil servants, Mr. Tabezi's mission was also to establish who was entitled to a salary from the government as a civil servant. Many people who entered the public service during the rebellion period had no registration number and consequently could not be paid. Their cases were referred to the appropriate authorities. Discontent remains widespread among this category of civil servants, as the authorities are not able to process the claims at a rapid pace. Even when salaries are paid, they are extremely low – ranging between USD \$5 and \$15 per month.

Rapprochement between armed groups

The events at the demonstration on the 31st of January conveys some rapprochement between the rivals of the major ethnically based armed groups in Ituri, the Lendu-dominated FNI and the Hema-dominated UPC. This might have been induced by the common fate befalling their leaders, Lubanga and Njabu. The possibility of members of these warring communities uniting on certain issues bodes well for the local level peace process.

Improving security in Bunia

The security environment in Bunia has tremendously improved since the Pakistani contingent of the Ituri Brigade started around-the-clock foot patrols across the town. However, there are still persistent reports of continued harassments by UPC militias, especially at nightfall, in some neighbourhoods of Bunia such as Muzipela, Sayo, Bankoko and Simbilyabo. The patrols do not seem to go past a certain radius around the town centre, leaving the rest of the town vulnerable to attacks and harassment by the militias.

CONCLUSION

Although the presence of international peacekeepers has improved the security environment in Bunia, much remains to be done to accompany and sustain the local peace process in Ituri.

⁴ The major contention is about the absorption or the retaining of the armed groups customs and administration officers into the local offices to be taken over by the Ituri Interim Administration, which the latter is not ready to do.

In Bunia, some areas have remained under the administrative control of the UPC, providing a semblance of stability while the local population continues to be subject to continued harassment by these militia groups. It is hoped that the IIA will capitalise on the deployment of MONUC troops and assume authority over all the territories already under MONUC control and the ones to be secured. Otherwise it is likely that the Bunia experience will be repeated all over Ituri.

All aspects of public life in Ituri have been characterised by anarchy and lawlessness. A successful handover of territories to the IIA, with support from MONUC, would be a step towards the restoration of the authority of the state. This would enable the new administration to provide some basic public services to the local population.

The multitude and complexity of armed groups will continue to be a predicament for MONUC peacekeepers. For example, it is not yet known how Commandant Jerome of the FAPC and his forces will react to MONUC's deployment in Mahagi.

The demonstration in Bunia by pro-Lubanga UPC followers indicates that the place of Ituri in the DRC transition process remains a key question. Further, the message claiming a special consideration for Ituri highlights the belief among a cross section of Iturians that Ituri should have a special status in relation to the other three districts that constitute *Province Orientale*.

However, UPC supporters carrying the DRC flag suggests that UPC political extremism and adamant rejection of anything representing the Kinshasa government are waning. Gradually, both the UPC leadership and membership are warming up to the idea that they have to accept the government and its symbols; there is increased acceptance of the transition process in the DRC as a *fait accompli*.

Certain procedures to address administrative and judicial problems in Ituri seem to be underway following the imminent establishment of a court of law. However, some people are left fearing whether the thousands of disgruntled civil servants, not only in Ituri but also in many other places across the DRC, would resort to violence and hence undermine the country's reunification efforts. MONUC, as the guarantor of the peace process in the DRC, should explore ways to maintain calm amongst these people, for example by helping out the government with the necessary funding. The national transitional process is in a very fragile stage and disgruntlement among a large section of society could have a negative impact on stability.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CPV	Commission on Prevention and Verification	OCHA	UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
FAC	Congolese Armed Forces	PIR	Rapid Intervention Police
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation	PRA	People's Redemption Army
FAPC	Popular Armed Forces for the Congo	PUSIC	Party for Unity and Safeguard of the Integrity of Congo
FNI	Nationalist and Integrationist Front	RCD/Goma	Congolese Rally for Democracy/Goma
FPDC	Popular Front for Democracy in Congo	RCD/ML	Congolese Rally for Democracy/Liberation Movement
FRPI	Revolutionary Front for Ituri	TNG	Transitional National Government
IDP	Internally Displaced Person	UNDP	United Nations Development Program
IEMF	Interim Emergency Multi-National Force	UPC	Union of Congolese Patriots
IIA	Ituri Interim Administration	UPDF	Ugandan People's Defence Force
MLC	Congolese Liberation Movement		
MONUC	United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo		