



On the road between Kashuga and Mweso, Masisi, North Kivu, February 2013. A group of women and girls returning from the market. Photo: Therese Wagner/Oxfam

IN THE BALANCE

Searching for protection in eastern DRC

As 2014 starts, there are reasons to hope that peace may be in sight in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). National initiatives and committed regional and international political engagement in 2013 led to important advances and new framework agreements to resolve the conflict and insecurity. However, the people Oxfam talked to across eastern DRC reported that their situation remains precarious, particularly in remote areas where there is little state presence. Ongoing national, regional and international engagement is needed, as well as efforts to ensure that high level agreements and initiatives are systematically linked to community experiences. Without these, it is possible that this rare opportunity will be wasted.

As 2014 begins, there is some cause to be optimistic that an end is in sight to decades of armed conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Political and military achievements in 2013, including increased regional cooperation and the military defeat of the armed group, the M23, offer a window of opportunity to improve the situation for civilians.

However, optimism must be tempered with a strong dose of realism. The recent military victory by the government is only a first step towards stability in a region plagued by decades of extreme violence, lawlessness and the lack of accountable state authorities. Much of North and South Kivu are still under the control of other armed groups and regional relations remain fragile.

Oxfam spoke to people in 30 conflict-affected communities in North and South Kivu between August and December 2013.¹ They echoed what Oxfam has heard in its regular surveys since 2007.² Positive effects of political and military initiatives have yet to be felt in communities. People explained how they continue to be relentlessly squeezed for economic gain by armed actors, state and traditional authorities. The everyday violence and exploitation they live with is entrenched in day-to-day relationships, not only with armed groups but also with the national army, the police, and prominent local figures. In some areas, people reported an increase in violence and abuse towards the end of 2013, as armed groups prepared either to disarm or for potential military operations against them. Communities around disarmament camps particularly reported an increase in protection abuses.

People told Oxfam that the violence they experience continues to flourish because the state does not consistently protect them, and state authorities themselves frequently present threats to people's protection. Too often, members of the police and army are left to find their own ways to survive for themselves and their families. They are poorly supported by their hierarchy and resort to living off the population. High levels of violence and weak governance feed off and perpetuate each other.

Faced with a lack of effective protection from state authorities, communities explained that they are obliged to find ways to protect themselves. They described how many of the initiatives they take, such as seeking protection from an armed group or avoiding going to their fields, are only short-term solutions. In the longer term they say that repercussions on household incomes, social relations and physical security can be severe. In some cases, community-based strategies do result in increased protection. Several communities reported positive results when they were able to negotiate with local leaders and state authorities and to find a solution together with them. Several communities mentioned the positive influence of MONUSCO, the UN Stabilization Mission in DRC, particularly when it was able to establish strong contacts directly with communities.

In spite of a poor record, the majority of communities still see state institutions as the solution to their security. People say that a police and army presence is a step towards legitimate authority, but asked that the police and other civil authorities replace the army as rapidly as possible, and that they build on good practice, such as meeting with the population to understand the problems they face.

While there may be some cause for optimism at the beginning of 2014, there is still a long way to go before state authorities have the presence, accountability and legitimacy in eastern DRC to ensure the safety of the people living there.

To maintain momentum, national, regional and international actors must stay engaged and listen to communities' experiences at this critical moment, ensuring long-term political commitment to security in the Great Lakes region. Lessons learnt from the past must be reflected in the decisions made, and thorough, deep-rooted reform of national institutions, particularly the army, must be implemented. The opportunity presented by the events of 2013 should not be wasted; if it is, a 2014 survey of protection threats faced by communities risks revealing the same problems all over again.

To avoid this, and to capitalize on such a unique moment, the **Government of DRC** should rapidly improve the accountability of state authorities, with a view to improving their effectiveness as protection actors. It should reinforce and extend civilian state presence, particularly to remote and rural areas, and include wide community participation and consultation in the government decisions that affect communities' protection. It should ensure that armed groups are given realistic and sustainable opportunities to end their activities, including non-military solutions and community-level peace building and reconciliation.

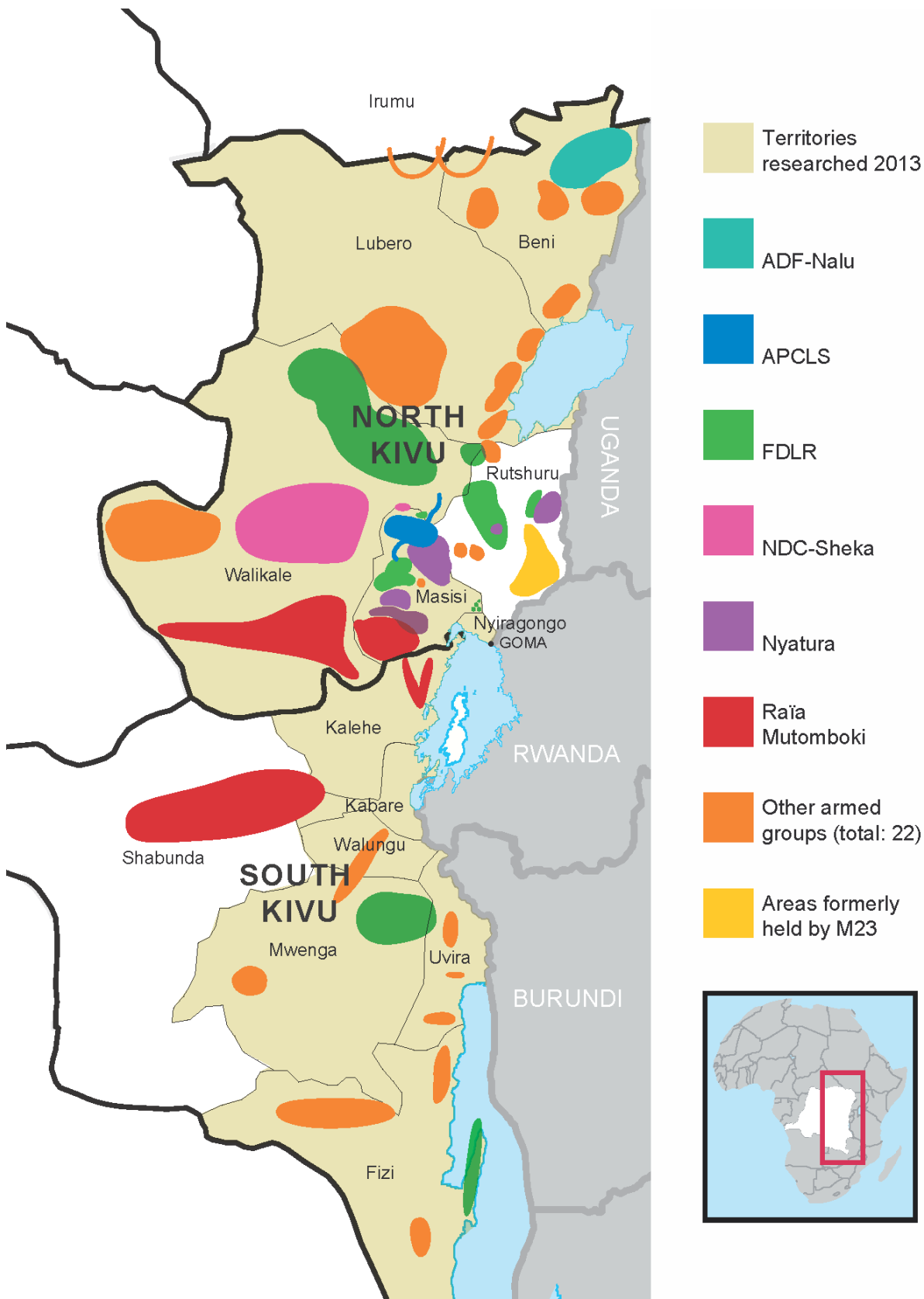
Governments in the region and other African Union member states should support the DRC government through maintaining commitments to regional stability laid out in the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF), providing encouragement and technical support to the DRC in fulfilling its own commitments under the PSCF, and ensuring that high-level engagement on the situation in eastern DRC continues.

MONUSCO's role in the protection of civilians remains a critical part of its mandate. In addition, coordination and coherence between political and military initiatives is needed, as is support to the effective restoration of state authorities; particularly in remote, rural areas. Protection of civilians must be the priority during military operations and communication with communities further reinforced and institutionalized.

International governments have an important role to play in supporting the DRC and other governments in the region to realize commitments under the PSCF and to maintain inclusive and transparent political dialogue at local, national and regional levels.

MAP OF NORTH KIVU AND SOUTH KIVU, EASTERN DRC

The approximate areas under control of various armed groups at the end of 2013, and the areas in which Oxfam carried out its 2013 survey



NOTES

- 1 In 2013, Oxfam supported nine local partners to collect the perceptions of 1,800 individuals in 30 conflict-affected communities in North and South Kivu through a mix of focus groups and key informant interviews. Findings from interviews in August and September 2013 were updated with the communities in November. They have been complemented by interviews with community members involved in Oxfam's protection programme in the Kivu provinces in November and December 2013.
- 2 See for example, Oxfam (2012) 'Commodities of War: Communities speak out on the true cost of conflict in eastern DRC', Oxfam, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/commodities-of-war-communities-speak-out-on-the-true-cost-of-conflict-in-easter-252424>
And Oxfam (2009) 'Waking the Devil: The impact of forced disarmament on civilians in the Kivus', Oxfam International, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/waking-the-devil-the-impact-of-forced-disarmament-on-civilians-in-the-kivus-115061>

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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