



UPC Crimes in Ituri (2002 – 2003)

Summary

Background

The second Congo war began in 1998 and involved the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government forces of Laurent Kabila, which were supported by Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, against several rebel movements backed by Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Despite the signing of the Lusaka Peace Accords in 1999, followed by agreements for the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan forces from the Congo in 2002, fighting in the northeastern province of Ituri intensified as local surrogates carried on the battles of national and international actors.

Ituri is one of the richest areas in the Congo with deposits of gold, diamonds, oil and timber. It is also home to 18 different ethnic groups, with the Hema/Gegere and Lendu/Ngiti communities representing about 40 percent of the inhabitants. Ethnic identity assumed growing importance after a local land dispute in 1999 between the Hema and Lendu was exacerbated by the occupying Ugandan army and national rebel groups who wanted to expand their power base. The broader war in the Congo and the availability of political and military support from external actors – notably Uganda and Rwanda – fuelled the growth of armed political groups based on ethnic loyalties. Chief among these were the Hema-dominated Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), the Lendu-dominated Front for National Integration (FNI), the southern Hema-dominated Party for Unity and Safeguarding of the Integrity of Congo (PUSIC), and the mixed People's Armed Forces of Congo (FAPC).

Between 2002 and 2004 these Ituri armed groups attempted to gain recognition on the national scene, with their leaders hoping for positions in the Kinshasa-based transitional government and in the newly integrated army. Local militia leaders frequently switched alliances, playing off various outside rivals and changing sides as their interests dictated. They attempted to control huge swathes of territory and strategic sites, including gold mines and lucrative customs posts, in order to enhance the importance of their movements. Control of strategic sites allowed the armed groups to win much-needed financial and political support from outside backers. Competition for control of natural resources, particularly gold, was a major factor in prolonging the armed conflict in Ituri.

UPC takes control of Bunia

In August 2002, the UPC militia, together with the Ugandan army, launched an offensive to take control of Bunia, the main town in Ituri. In the process, UPC combatants deliberately killed Lendu civilians and others, such as Nande and Bira, who were seen as Lendu allies. Lendu militia also

targeted and killed Hema civilians during the fighting. Both sides looted and burned houses, displacing large numbers of civilians. After the governor of Ituri and the Congolese army were pushed out of Bunia on August 9, UPC combatants continued killing Lendu, Nande, and Bira civilians near the main hospital and near the central prison in Bunia. Several mass graves were subsequently discovered in various parts of the town, including one with 26 bodies, many of them women and children with bullet wounds in their backs.

From August 2002 to March 2003, the UPC controlled Bunia and the immediate surrounding area, forming a government under Thomas Lubanga, the leader of the UPC. Although on paper the UPC government appeared representative with a number of ministers from other ethnic groups, in practice it was controlled by the Gegere – the northern branch of the Hema ethnic group. Some representatives of other ethnic groups joined the movement and its government under duress. Those unwilling to join the UPC or its government fled or went into hiding when they heard they had been nominated to government posts.

Massacre at Songolo

The UPC moved south after establishing its hold over Bunia and surrounding areas. On August 31, 2002, the UPC attacked the town of Songolo with the help of Bira combatants. Civilians who could not flee the fighting were deliberately killed, some in their sleep, including women and children. One witness to the massacre counted 82 bodies; another put the number of dead at 140

Massacre at Mongbwalu

The gold mining town of Mongbwalu was attacked by UPC forces and their allies in November 2002. UPC combatants systematically killed anyone of Lendu ethnicity that they found, going from one house to another. Civilians were imprisoned by the UPC at a military camp, where detainees of Lendu ethnicity were killed while those of other ethnic groups were released. An estimated 200 people were killed in and around Mongbwalu during the UPC attack

Massacre at Kilo

Following the attack on Mongbwalu, UPC forces attacked a number of villages nearby, including Kilo, Kobu, Lipri, Bambu and Mbijo. UPC forces took Kilo on December 6, 2002, and several days later UPC commanders ordered the deliberate killing of scores of civilians. UPC combatants detained men, women and children whom they took to be Lendu and forced them to dig their own graves before killing them.

Based on witness statements, information from local human rights organizations and other sources, Human Rights Watch estimates that of the total two thousand civilians killed in Mongbwalu and its surrounding villages from November 2002 to June 2003, at least 800 were killed in the attacks led

by the UPC in late 2002 and early 2003. Over 140,000 people were displaced by the series of attacks, forced to live in camps or in the forest.

Arbitrary arrests, executions and enforced disappearances

After taking control of Mongbwalu, Hema combatants arbitrarily detained and, in some cases, summarily executed civilians suspected of being Lendu or of having helped the Lendu. One man, detained on the grounds that his brothers had helped the Lendu, was beaten for two days and then confined in a bathroom with four others at UPC headquarters. He said that two of the four were elderly Lendu men and killed while the other two, who were not Lendu, also were taken away on the tenth day, just before his release. Another witness related having been arbitrarily imprisoned at a military camp, and said that he saw combatants choose prisoners to kill based on their ethnicity.

One of the best known persons to be summarily executed was Abbe Boniface Bwanalunga, the elderly priest of Mongbwalu parish, who was arrested with three nuns and two other men on November 25, 2002. Targeted because of his ethnicity, Abbe Bwanalunga was the first priest killed as part of the Ituri conflict

Child soldiers, sexual violence and inhumane acts

There are frequent reports of the forcible recruitment of children by the UPC. In November 2002, the UPC reportedly entered the Ecole Primaire of Mudzi Pela and forcibly rounded up the entire fifth grade, some 40 children, for military service. A similar operation was carried out in Salongo where the UPC surrounded a neighborhood and then abducted all the children they could find. Children as young as 7, including girls, have been recruited for military service. Many observers have described the UPC force as “an army of children.”

Combatants of all armed groups in Ituri have also committed rape and other forms of sexual violence there. In some cases, women and girls have been raped as part of a general attack while in others women and girls have been raped simply due to their ethnicity. Some victims have been forced to leave with the rapists and have not been seen since. In addition, members of the most important armed groups in Ituri, including the UPC, have carried out inhumane acts, such as cannibalism and deliberate mutilation of corpses.