



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Eastern DRC Tensions: The Rise of Lubanga's Militia and Its Regional Implications



Author:



Atef Mahmoud Dobal

Researcher in political science

Published by:
African Narratives



AFRICAN NARRATIVES



Executive Summary

This paper examines the escalating tensions in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), focusing on the re-emergence of former warlord Thomas Lubanga through the establishment of the Convention for the Revolution of the People (CRP) militia. The rise of this new militia is not an isolated event but is deeply rooted in the long history of conflict in Ituri province, where ethnic grievances and state weakness have fueled cycles of violence. The CRP's significance is amplified by its association with a figure whose legacy is embedded in past atrocities, raising critical questions about the state's capacity to confront internationally convicted actors and the implications of either militarily confronting or politically integrating them.

Field data reveals the militia's expanding activities, highlighting how Lubanga is translating his on-the-ground presence into political leverage. Repeated clashes with the Congolese army (FARDC) underscore the fragility of the security

apparatus, while the militia's geographic expansion indicates an attempt to impose a regional presence beyond Ituri. This situation generates direct humanitarian risks and places the government in a dilemma: pursue a security-driven response or seek long-term political solutions.

This paper explores three potential scenarios: the continuation of the status quo, marked by low-intensity violence; a major security escalation that risks severe humanitarian and political fallout; or a negotiated integration that could reduce violence but raises questions about the legitimacy of engaging with an actor previously convicted by the International Criminal Court. The paper concludes that the CRP crisis embodies a multidimensional challenge for both the Congolese state and the international community, requiring a comprehensive approach that addresses its security, political, and humanitarian dimensions simultaneously.

I. Introduction

The Ituri province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is witnessing a renewed escalation of armed group activity, most notably the expansion of the Convention for the Revolution of the People (CRP) militia. The group is led by Thomas Lubanga, a former warlord convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for recruiting and using child soldiers. The group is led by Thomas Lubanga, a former warlord convicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for recruiting and using child soldiers. Lubanga's re-emergence from his Ituri stronghold represents an attempt to restore his credibility as a negotiating actor, pushing the region to the brink of a new phase of complex violence. The CRP's activities open another chapter in Ituri's protracted conflict, which has been marked by ethnic clashes between the Hema and Lendu communities since the late 1990s. These conflicts have historically

been rooted in disputes over land and natural resources, particularly gold mines.

Lubanga's name is synonymous with this history; his leadership of the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) and its military wing, the Patriotic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (FPLC), was central to the violence in Ituri between 2002 and 2003, for which he was convicted of war crimes by the ICC. After his release in 2020, Lubanga gradually returned to the scene, establishing the CRP and expanding its activities through recruitment and recurring clashes with the Congolese army (FARDC). This development comes as the FARDC is already stretched thin by the advances of the M23 rebels in other parts of eastern Congo. This paper aims to assess the security and political dimensions of this reconfigured conflict, analyze its implications, and outline possible scenarios for de-escalation or further violence.

I. Historical Background

The name of Thomas Lubanga emerged in the early 2000s as one of the most prominent militia leaders in the Ituri province of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2002, he founded the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) and its military wing, the Patriotic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (FPLC), both of which played a pivotal role in the ethnic conflicts between the Hema and Lendu communities. These conflicts witnessed grave human rights violations, most notably the recruitment and use of children in combat. In 2012, the International Criminal Court (ICC) convicted him, making him the first individual ever found guilty by the Court since its establishment, sentencing him to 14 years in

prison.

After his release in 2020, upon serving his sentence, Lubanga gradually returned to the scene in Ituri, where he worked to rebuild his political and military networks. He established a new rebel militia under the name Convention for the Revolution of the People (CRP), determined to overthrow the government in Ituri province, and began expanding its activities. Through this militia, Lubanga seeks to reposition himself within the political and security equation by engaging in recurrent clashes with the Congolese army (FARDC) in the province, while simultaneously conducting recruitment and mobilization campaigns for new fighters. This development

1 International Criminal Court (ICC). "Lubanga Case: The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo." ICC, 14 Mar. 2012. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/drc/lubanga?utm.com>

2 Human Rights Watch. "International Justice in Democratic Republic of Congo." HRW, background/report. https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgroundunder/ij/lubangaq-na1106?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3 International Justice Monitor. "Background: Thomas Lubanga Dyilo." IJMonitor. https://www.ijmonitor.org/thomas-lubanga-background/?utm_source=chatgpt.com



comes at a time when the Congolese army is facing unprecedented advances by the March 23 Movement (M23) rebels in other areas of eastern Congo.

Such dynamics reflect Lubanga's attempt to capitalize on his legacy as a warlord in order to impose himself as a relevant party in any poten-

tial negotiated settlement concerning the conflicts in eastern Congo, particularly in light of the government's pursuit of broader national reconciliation with armed groups, and the international pressure to end the protracted violence in the region.

II. Current Field Realities in Ituri

The areas north of Bunia, the provincial capital of Ituri, are witnessing a marked escalation in CRP activity. The militia has seized control of several villages along Lake Albert and appears intent on expanding its operations. In response, the FARDC has launched counter-operations north of Tchomia—an important military and commercial hub on Lake Albert near the Ugandan border—but these efforts have failed to achieve decisive territorial gains.

These confrontations underscore the continued fragility of the security situation and the inability of government forces to establish lasting control. The CRP has deployed armed elements across

three distinct areas of Ituri, reflecting its growing operational capacity.

Its advance into areas surrounding Lake Albert, adjacent to the Ugandan border, poses broader regional security risks. This area is a vital corridor for trade and river transport connecting eastern Congo to Ugandan markets, and the militia's presence there heightens the danger of instability spilling across the border. Lubanga's moves can be interpreted as an attempt to project regional influence and leverage territorial expansion as a bargaining tool with the central government in Kinshasa.

4 "Convicted War Criminal Lubanga Announces New Rebel Group in East Congo." Reuters, 31 Mar. 2025, by Sonia Rolley. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/convicted-war-criminal-lubanga-announces-new-rebel-group-east-congo-2025-03-31/>

5 "Africa File, May 1, 2025: AU, Turkey and United States Surge to Halt Al-Shabaab; DRC Peace Talks; Uganda's Role in the Eastern DRC." Critical Threats, 1 May 2025. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-may-1-2025-au-turkey-and-united-states-surge-to-halt-al-shabaab-drc-peace-talks-ugandas-role-in-the-eastern-drc>

6 "Convicted War Criminal Lubanga Announces New Rebel Group in East Congo." Reuters, 31 Mar. 2025, by Sonia Rolley. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/convicted-war-criminal-lubanga-announces-new-rebel-group-east-congo-2025-03-31/?utm.com>

7 "Eastern DRC: Convicted Ex-Warlord Thomas Lubanga Has a New Militia." The Africa Report, Apr. 2025. <https://www.theafricareport.com/392655/eastern-drc-convicted-ex-warlord-thomas-lubanga-has-a-new-militia/?utm.com>

III. Analysis of the Current Situation: Dimensions and Implications

The current situation in Ituri reveals complexities that go beyond isolated incidents of violence. This section provides an analytical perspective on the security, political, and regional dimensions of the crisis.

1. The Security Dimension:

The confrontations between the CRP and the FARDC highlight a fragile security environment. These clashes have resulted in civilian casualties and triggered new waves of displacement, with more than 200 civilians killed and around 100,000 displaced. The government has so far failed to impose stable control. The militia's ability to maintain an armed presence, despite the FARDC's numerical superiority, reflects structural gaps in the formal security apparatus and weaknesses in coordination between government forces and international partners.

2. The Political Dimension:

Lubanga's resurgence is a calculated attempt to reassert himself as an indispensable actor in

eastern Congo's power dynamics. His mobilization of the CRP coincided with government efforts to open negotiations with other armed groups, providing him with an opportunity to use military strength as leverage to secure a seat at the table. This strategy allows him to reclaim political legitimacy, transforming his image from that of a convicted war criminal to a negotiating partner in the peace process.

3. The Regional Dimension

The CRP's activities around Lake Albert introduce a sensitive regional dimension. The presence of an armed militia in this area raises fears of cross-border destabilization through arms trafficking or the disruption of trade networks. Given Uganda's history of military intervention in eastern Congo, the CRP's expansion into this area could be interpreted as an effort to create dynamics that the Congolese government and the international community cannot ignore, thereby strengthening Lubanga's regional leverage.

8 "Convicted War Criminal Lubanga Announces New Rebel Group in East Congo." Reuters, 31 Mar. 2025, by Sonia Rolley. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/convicted-war-criminal-lubanga-announces-new-rebel-group-east-congo-2025-03-31/?utm.com>



IV. Possible Scenarios

Building on the preceding analysis, this section explores three potential scenarios for the trajectory of the crisis in eastern Congo.

1. Maintaining the Status Quo (Most Likely):

In the short term, the CRP is likely to continue its limited military operations through sporadic attacks against the FARDC, while retaining the ability to expand around Lake Albert. This strategy allows Lubanga to maintain a disruptive military presence that undermines the government and perpetuates instability, without incurring the costs of a full-scale campaign. This scenario would reproduce past patterns of violence, accompanied by civilian displacement and a further erosion of trust in state institutions.

2. Large-Scale Security Escalation:

The Congolese government, facing intensified attacks or regional pressure, may launch a wide-ranging military campaign against the CRP. While such an operation could deliver tactical

gains, it carries substantial risks for civilians, including fresh waves of displacement and human rights violations that could undermine the government's legitimacy. Furthermore, a costly or failed campaign could backfire, strengthening the CRP's narrative as a force resisting state overreach and potentially pushing Lubanga to forge alliances with other rebel groups like the M23.

3. Negotiated Integration: Lubanga may seek to leverage the CRP's activities as a political bargaining chip to re-enter the negotiating arena. The militia's expansion appears aligned with his ambition of reclaiming political relevance. With effective mediation, the CRP could be incorporated into a negotiation process in exchange for guarantees regarding the integration of its fighters and limited political concessions. While this scenario could reduce violence, it raises contentious questions about the legitimacy of involving a leader convicted by the ICC in a political settlement, a move that could weaken the government's credibility.





V. Conclusion

The re-emergence of Thomas Lubanga and the CRP militia is not merely a repetition of a familiar cycle of violence but a dangerous shift in the trajectory of conflict in eastern DRC. Lubanga's exploitation of his historical legacy and a fractured social base underscores that armed rebellion in the region is a manifestation of deeper structural issues: marginalization, state weakness, and the absence of transitional justice. The challenge facing the Congolese government and the international community is two-fold: how to restore security without legitimizing leaders convicted of war crimes, and how to do so without exacerbating civilian suffering through heavy-handed security responses. The crisis is further complicated by its regional dimension, with tensions around Lake Albert raising the possibility of friction with Uganda or other unexpected interventions. The CRP crisis represents a critical test of the Congolese state's capacity to break free from the vicious cycle of violence and of the international community's seriousness in addressing the structural roots of conflict rather than its symptoms alone. Without a comprehensive response that balances security, political, and humanitarian dimensions, the region is likely to remain a hotspot of instability, not only within the DRC but across the wider Great Lakes region.