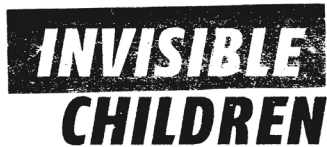




LRA CRISIS TRACKER

2017 ANNUAL BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2018



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ABOUT THE LRA CRISIS TRACKER

Data reflected in this brief was collected as part of the LRA Crisis Tracker, an initiative of [Invisible Children](#). The LRA Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting initiative which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in the Mbomou Uele border region. Through publication of regular reports and sharing of collected data, the LRA Crisis Tracker aims to help overcome the current deficit of relevant and timely information related to armed group activity and to support improved policy and protection responses. For a comprehensive guide to the LRA Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit LRACrisisTracker.com

In the interest of continually strengthening the LRA Crisis Tracker dataset, Invisible Children welcomes new sources of current or historical reports of armed group activity in the Mbomou Uele border region. To contribute information to the LRA Crisis Tracker, please contact Paul Ronan (paul@invisiblechildren.com).



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Armed group violence escalated considerably in the Mbomou Uele border region in 2017 compared to 2016, killing hundreds of civilians while forcing tens of thousands of others to flee their homes and alter or abandon livelihood strategies. In total, Invisible Children's LRA Crisis Tracker initiative recorded 272 attacks against civilians in 2017¹ in the Mbomou Uele border region, which includes the prefectures of Haute Kotto, Mbomou, and Haut Mbomou in eastern Central African Republic (CAR) and the provinces of Haut Uele and Bas Uele in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In eastern CAR, ex-Seleka and anti-balaka combatants greatly expanded their areas of operation, taking advantage of the withdrawal of troops from Uganda and the United States from Mbomou and Haut Mbomou following the end of operations to pursue the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Ex-Seleka and anti-balaka groups were not only responsible for massive human rights violations, their attacks escalated intercommunal tensions that sparked violence committed by armed civilians not affiliated with armed groups. They also frequently targeted humanitarian actors and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA), killing a total of 13 peacekeepers in the three prefectures in 2017.

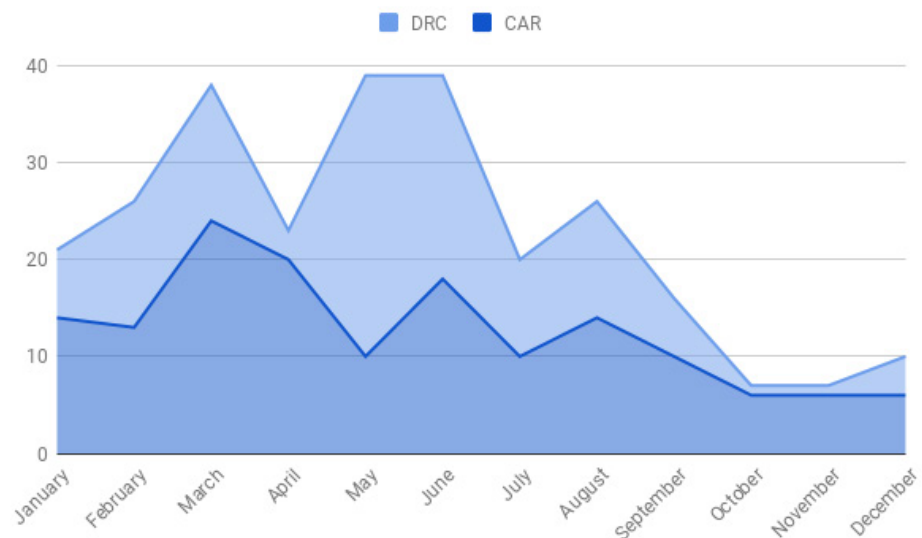
In an encouraging trend, abductions by the LRA in eastern CAR dropped by 70% from 2016 to 2017. LRA groups did frequently attack remote artisanal mining areas in Haute Kotto prefecture, an area in which defectors reported that LRA leader Joseph Kony continued to operate.

Civilians in DRC's Haut Uele and Bas Uele provinces were threatened primarily by transnational armed actors, including the LRA, armed poachers, and South Sudanese

militias. LRA attacks on civilians in Haut Uele peaked from May-August as an LRA group traveled to and from Garamba National Park, where it collected ivory under orders from Kony. This trend, as well as other attacks on civilians by poachers in Haut Uele, highlighted the link between human and wildlife security in the region.

Armed group activity in the Mbomou Uele border region had massive ripple effects on the lives of civilians in 2017, forcing many to abandon, limit, or alter their livelihood strategies. Disaggregated data on attacks against civilians recorded in 2017 demonstrates clear patterns in the risks civilians face based on their location and exposure to specific armed groups. In CAR, attacks by ex-Seleka factions and anti-balaka groups primarily targeted civilians in communities. LRA attacks in both CAR and DRC were more likely to target civilians as they traveled along roads (often to and from markets) or were hunting, fishing, farming, or herding cattle in remote, sparsely populated areas.

Attacks against civilians in Mbomou Uele, 2017



I. BATTLE FOR CONTROL OF EASTERN CAR

Violence against civilians in Haute Kotto, Mbomou, and Haut Mbomou escalated sharply in 2017, far outpacing violence in those prefectures in any year since the latest outbreak of widespread hostilities in CAR in late 2012. Anti-balaka groups and ex-Seleka factions, such as the Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC) and the Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC), were largely responsible for the escalation. Each armed group recruited from particular religious and ethnic demographics and frequently targeting civilians based on perceived ethnic or religious identity.

These dynamics, far from reflecting inherent ethnic or religious animosity, nonetheless exposed social divisions widened by decades of political marginalization, lack of economic opportunity, and the absence of credible state authority and services.² However, the opportunistic nature of armed group activity belied the misperception that armed groups are primarily a manifestation of social divisions. Armed groups often extorted or abused the very community groups they claimed to protect. They also periodically formed seemingly incongruous alliances as they battled for control of major towns, trading routes, and artisanal mining areas, including joint efforts by the FPRC and anti-balaka groups to target UPC fighters in mid-2017.

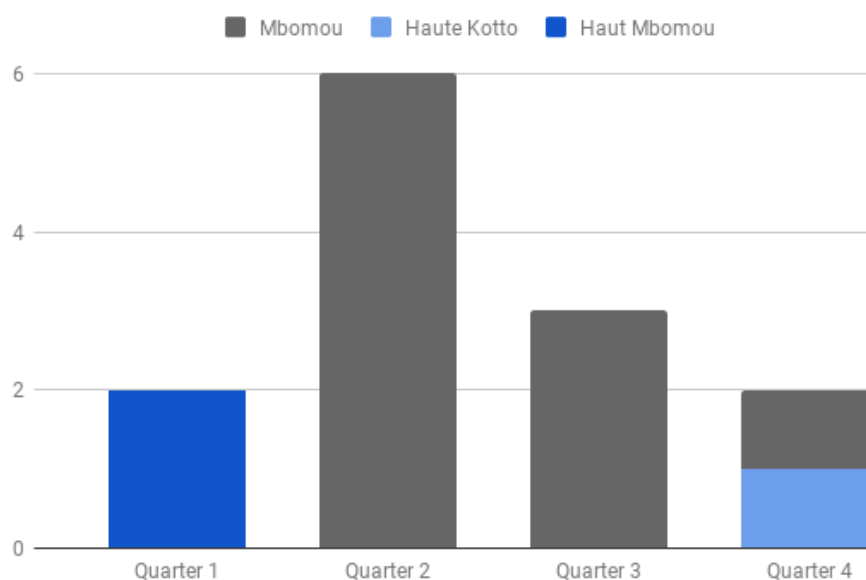
Decisions by international forces in the region played a significant role in the escalation of violence in eastern CAR. In February 2017, MINUSCA peacekeepers forced UPC and FPRC combatants out of the city of Bambari in Ouaka prefecture, leading these groups to expand their operations in Haute Kotto, Mbomou, and, eventually, Haut Mbomou.³ MINUSCA subsequently struggled to stem the tide of armed group activity in the latter three prefectures, including in larger towns such as Bria, Bangassou, and Zemio.

The security vacuum was compounded by the decision of the United States and Uganda to end operations against the LRA in April 2017, withdrawing troops that had been stationed throughout Mbomou and Haut Mbomou prefectures. Though these forces had no mandate to prevent violence by ex-Seleka and anti-balaka factions, their presence in locations such as Dembia, Zemio, Mboki, and Obo played a stabilizing role in the two prefectures. However, Ugandan troops also left behind a legacy of sexual abuse, particularly in Obo.⁴

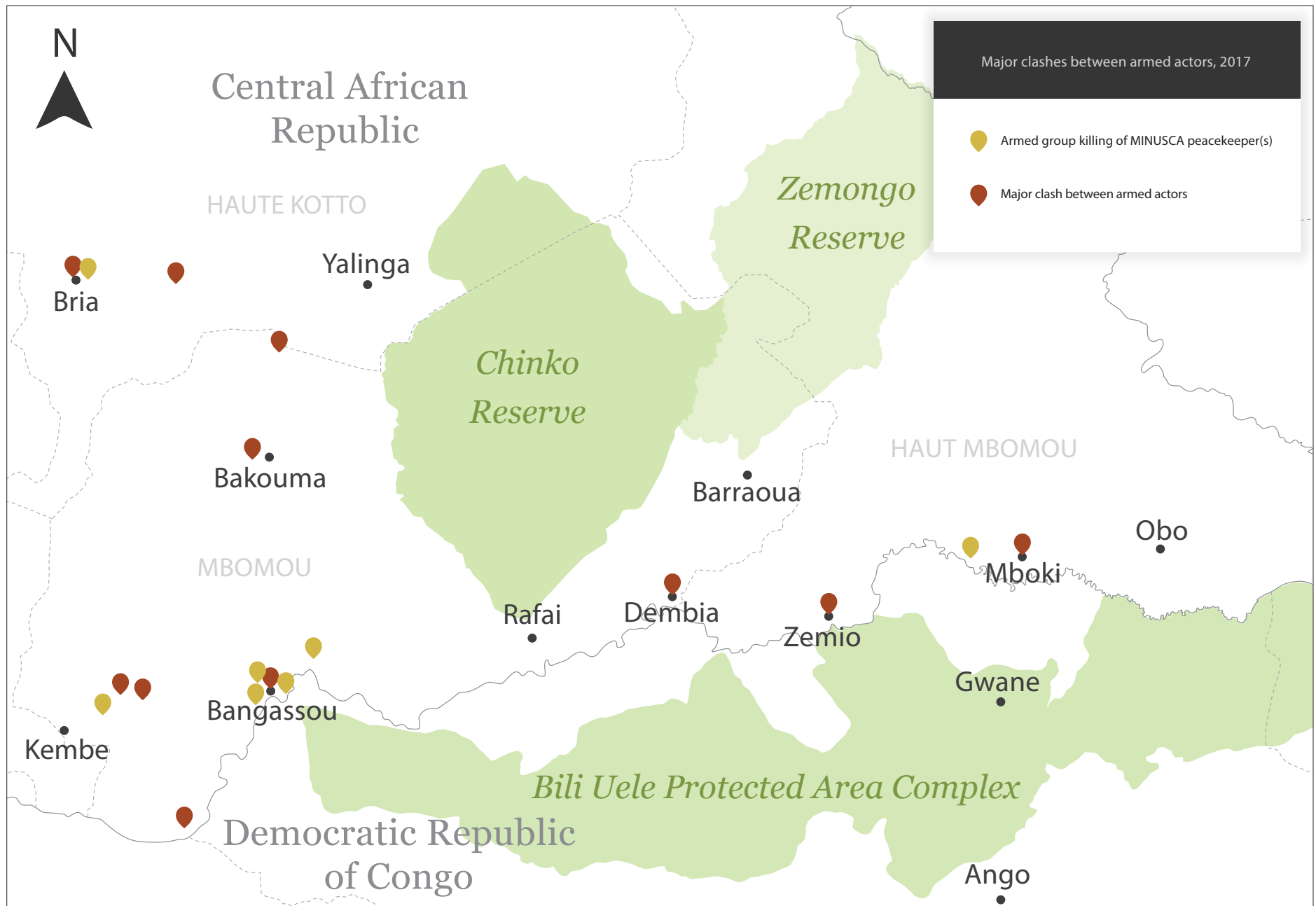
Ex-Seleka and anti-balaka armed groups, particularly the latter, frequently targeted international actors in eastern CAR in 2017. 13 of the 14 MINUSCA peacekeepers killed in CAR in 2017 were killed in the east of

the country, including ten in Mbomou prefecture alone.⁵ Armed groups also frequently targeted humanitarian actors in eastern CAR, particularly in communities such as Bria, Bangassou, and Zemio.

MINUSCA peacekeepers killed by armed groups, 2017



Major clashes between armed actors, 2017



II. DEEPENING INTERCOMMUNAL DIVIDES

In addition to its direct impact on victims, armed group violence in eastern CAR escalated intercommunal tensions. While such tensions do not inherently result in violence by entire groups, they were a motivating factor for isolated civilians to take up arms. In many cases, the distinction between “armed group” and “armed civilians” was blurry, including with anti-balaka groups. Some anti-balaka groups, such as those in and near Bakouma and Bangassou in Mbomou prefecture, were well-organized, supported by outside fighters and funding, and had strong links to national politicians.⁶ In other communities, anti-balaka groups were composed of residents more motivated by local grievances and interests who had little or no coordination with outside groups. They often evolved from so-called “auto-defense” groups that were active in recent years to repel the LRA. Some auto-defense groups, such as the one in Mboki, were multi-ethnic.⁷ The evolution of such groups into more sectarian anti-balaka forces reflects the social fragmentation in the country since the outbreak of widespread hostilities in 2013.

The ripple effect of armed group attacks on intercommunal tension was evident in Mbomou and Haut Mbomou prefecture in 2017. In May 2017, sophisticated anti-balaka attacks in Bangassou and surrounding towns consistently targeted Muslim and particularly Peuhl communities, leading to escalated tensions in neighboring prefectures. In June 2017, armed civilians from the Muslim community in Zemio mounted several attacks on the local Christian community, in part to pre-emptively undermine budding anti-balaka activity there. More than two dozen civilians were killed during sporadic fighting in the following weeks, resulting in much of the Christian community fleeing across the border to Bas Uele province in DRC. Refugee populations in Bas Uele have little protection from the LRA and other armed groups operating in Bas Uele. They also pose a challenge to wildlife conservation efforts in the Bili Uele Protected Area Complex.⁸

Weeks later, intercommunal tension continued to spread east towards Mboki, resulting in clashes that left the Muslim community in control of the town. As a result, many Christian residents fled further east to Obo, perceiving it to be more safe. Such religious and ethnic sorting in displacement patterns creates another barrier to repairing the torn social fabric of communities. In late 2017, the UPC, composed predominantly of Muslims from the Peuhl ethnic group, took control of Mboki, exacerbating tensions within the diverse Muslim community in eastern CAR. Local taxes imposed by UPC fighters have angered Chadian and Sudanese merchants, causing protests. The UPC has also created divisions within the Peuhl community. Though some younger Peuhl have reportedly joined the UPC’s ranks, many local Peuhl elders fear that the group’s actions will damage delicate intercommunal relations and lead to more threats to the Peuhl community, a minority in the region.

Local mediation mechanisms, sometimes referred to as Peace Committees, have provided a platform for representatives from diverse community groups to communicate and reduce intercommunal tension, with the aim of preventing incidents from sparking cycles of violence. On July 14, an unidentified armed group brutally murdered five Peuhl civilians, including two women and a young girl, near Obo, in CAR’s Haut Mbomou prefecture. The incident happened just weeks after the outbreak of intercommunal violence in Zemio, further west in Haut Mbomou, in which at least 12 people were killed. Immediately following the incident, members of the Peace Committee in Obo, along with local authorities, met to reduce tensions and prevent the incident from triggering retaliatory violence.

Obo has remained relatively peaceful since then, and the Peace Committee has continued to take steps to mitigate local tensions. In August, the Peace Committee elected representatives from the community of people displaced to Obo from other communities in an effort to ensure the Committee understood and was responsive to their needs.

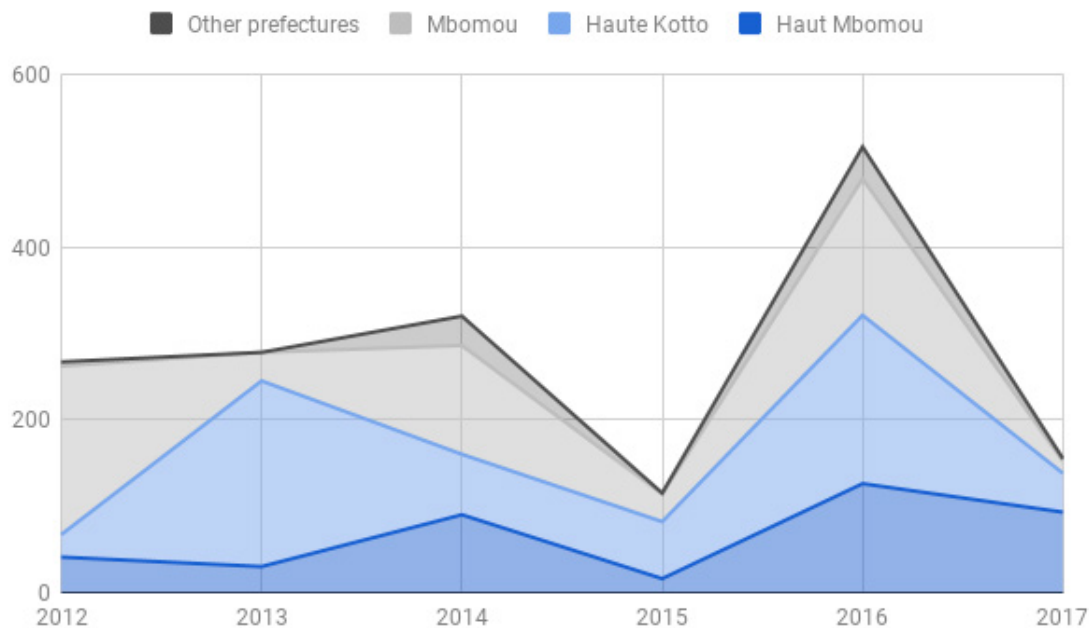


III. LRA ABDUCTIONS DROP IN EASTERN CAR

One of the few encouraging trends in armed group activity in eastern CAR was a 70% drop in LRA abductions, from 516 in 2016 to 155 in 2017. The dramatic reduction in abductions likely reflects more the strategic decision-making of LRA leadership than a reduced capacity to commit violence. Very few of the Ugandan fighters who comprise the LRA's core have defected in recent years (see graph on page 9), and there is little evidence that Ugandan or US troops killed many LRA combatants in recent years. A similar drop in LRA abductions in 2015 preceded a spike in 2016, cautioning against assumptions that the downward trend will inevitably continue.

The isolated, fragmented nature of the LRA command structure makes it difficult to determine exactly what motivated the decision to reduce abductions in 2017, but several factors were likely at play. In early 2016, abductions in CAR spiked following orders by Kony to recruit children and youth.⁹ There is no evidence that Kony has given similar orders since then, and LRA abductions tailed off in the latter half of 2016 and remained relatively consistent throughout 2017. Also, LRA abductions dropped primarily in Haute Kotto and Mbomou prefectures, where attacks by other armed groups escalated most in 2017, while remaining consistent or even increasing in relatively stable areas such as Haut Mbomou and the Ueles region in DRC. This indicates LRA groups may have been avoiding more volatile areas of eastern CAR.

LRA abductions in eastern CAR, 2012–2017



The most notable LRA activity in eastern CAR in 2017 was a series of attacks and sightings in the artisanal mining areas of northeastern Haute Kotto prefecture. A group led by Aligac, a senior LRA commander close to LRA leader Joseph Kony, met with community leaders near Sam Ouandja in July. They expressed interest in defecting and asked for food and supplies before abruptly disappearing into the bush, mirroring a similar tactic used by an LRA group in eastern CAR in late 2013.

Defectors from the LRA reported that Kony continued to operate primarily along the border of Haute Kotto and the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave. Since 2010, Kony has operated primarily in this area, with periodic forays further south into CAR's Haut Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures.

IV. RIPPLE EFFECTS OF LRA ABDUCTIONS

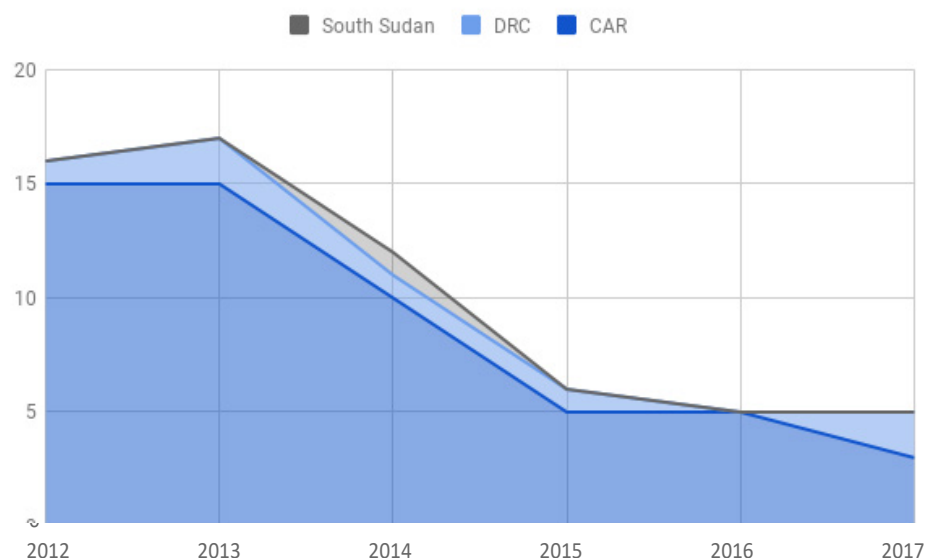
Being abducted by the LRA has long-lasting ripple effects on the lives of survivors. The vast majority of people abducted by the group in 2017 were adults forced to porter looted goods into the bush before being released, but such short-term abductions are often accompanied by beatings and can be highly traumatic. In addition, the foodstuffs and other supplies survivors porter to remote LRA camps often comprise the outputs of months of their labor and financial resources. For people already living on the margins in conflict-affected areas, such experiences can have devastating impacts.

Abductees forced into extended captivity, primarily children and youth, also serve as porters, as well as forced wives to commanders and low-level fighters. Those lucky enough to escape often do so after months in captivity when they are hundreds of kilometers from their homes. Due to widespread insecurity, poor roads, and a reduction in humanitarian services, at least 14 LRA returnees remain stranded in remote communities, unable to reach their homes or receive appropriate medical and psychosocial care.

Local Peace Committees often fill in the gap in caring for LRA returnees when national and international initiatives fail to respond in a timely fashion. In 2017, two young Central African men and one Congolese boy escaped LRA groups operating near Sam Ouandja, a remote mining outpost in Haute Kotto prefecture. In each case, the Sam Ouandja Peace Committee provided the escapees with basic medical care and placed them with local host families. Committee members also utilized the local HF radio to notify humanitarian actors of their escape and to allow the two Central African escapees to speak with their family members in other areas of CAR. Still, months after their escape, the escapees have yet to return to their families.

Even the post-defection experiences of seasoned LRA combatants highlight the broken repatriation and reintegration process in eastern CAR. In April 2016, an LRA fighter named Opiyo Samuel Murefu, an Ugandan abducted as a child by the LRA, defected in CAR's Mbomou prefecture. Though he was a low-level fighter and showed clear signs of mental trauma, he was quickly incarcerated in Bangui. Throughout 2016 and 2017, as judicial proceedings regarding his case were frequently stalled, he went on several hunger strikes and his mental health continued to deteriorate. In January 2018, with no resolution to his case in sight, he died in custody in Bangui.

Ugandan LRA combatant defections, 2012–2017



In December 2017, another low-level Ugandan LRA combatant escaped from the LRA, arriving in Obo, CAR. To date, he remains incarcerated at the gendarmerie in Obo as authorities decide how his case will be handled. Should he face a similar fate as Opiyo, the rate of defections of Ugandan LRA combatants, which has dropped significantly since 2013, will likely continue to fall.

V. POACHING-RELATED VIOLENCE IN HAUT UELE

Unlike in CAR, LRA abductions in DRC's Ueles region increased slightly, from 232 in 2016 to 244 in 2017. Nearly half of those abductions occurred between May-August 2017 in a narrow band of Haut Uele stretching from the border with CAR to Garamba National Park and its surrounding hunting reserves. In early May, LRA forces were responsible for a cluster of attacks near the Congolese community of Bambangana, relatively close to the border with CAR. LRA forces then steadily migrated southeast towards Garamba, committing their first attacks on communities adjacent to Garamba in late May and early June. The LRA remained active near the park until early July, when attack reports showed the group returning towards the border with CAR. The group's movement towards CAR closely retraced their incoming route, ending with the temporary abduction of 13 people near Bambangana on August 24.

Civilians who escaped from the LRA during this period reported that the LRA was led by senior commanders Owila and Ladere, who were executing orders from Kony to collect ivory. Congolese civilians temporarily abducted near Bambangana on August 24, as the group departed from the Garamba region, reported that Owila's group possessed at least 16 pieces of ivory. It is unclear whether any ivory collected by the group was taken from elephants killed in 2017 or unearthed from caches buried by LRA groups in previous years.

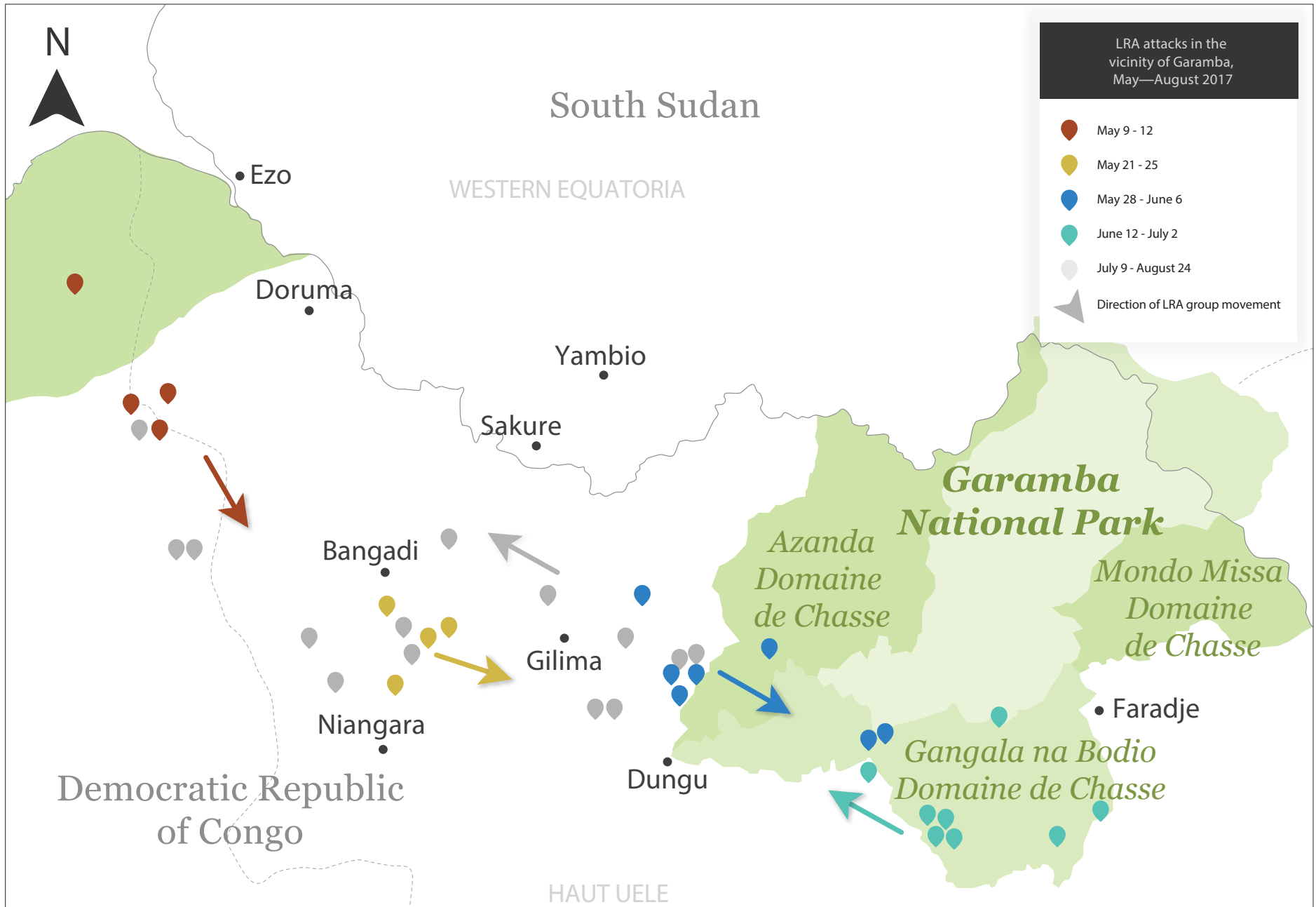
The LRA's modus operandi in Haut Uele in mid-2017 reinforces what has become an established pattern of violence linking threats to human and wildlife security in the Garamba region. Similar spikes in LRA attacks on civilians west and south of Garamba coincided with LRA poaching missions in 2012, 2014, 2015, and 2016. Though Owila and Ladere's group evaded detection following August 2017, their direction of travel and historic LRA trafficking patterns indicate that this LRA group likely transported the ivory to Kony's group near Kafia Kingi.

The LRA was not the only armed group to target civilians and wildlife in the region. Sudanese, South Sudanese, and local armed groups all reportedly operated within the Garamba region during 2017.¹⁰ Though it is often difficult to determine which groups are responsible for specific poaching incidents, Garamba park authorities believe Sudanese armed groups poached the most elephants in 2017 and were also responsible for killing one park ranger and one Congolese soldier.¹¹ However, Garamba park authorities reported a 45% reduction of elephant poaching from 2016 to 2017, as well as a 65% reduction in the poaching of other wildlife, a sign that counter-wildlife trafficking measures are having a positive impact.¹²

Garamba park authorities were also active in responding to armed group attacks against civilians in 2017. On January 11, armed men traveling from the direction of Garamba and carrying ivory abducted three Congolese men, a father and his two sons, who were fishing in the bush. They forced the men to transport looted goods for a day before shooting the three men. One of the sons survived and was able to make it to a nearby community. After being alerted about the incident from the HF radio early warning system, Garamba park authorities evacuated the survivor to a local hospital.



LRA attacks in the vicinity of Garamba, May–August 2017

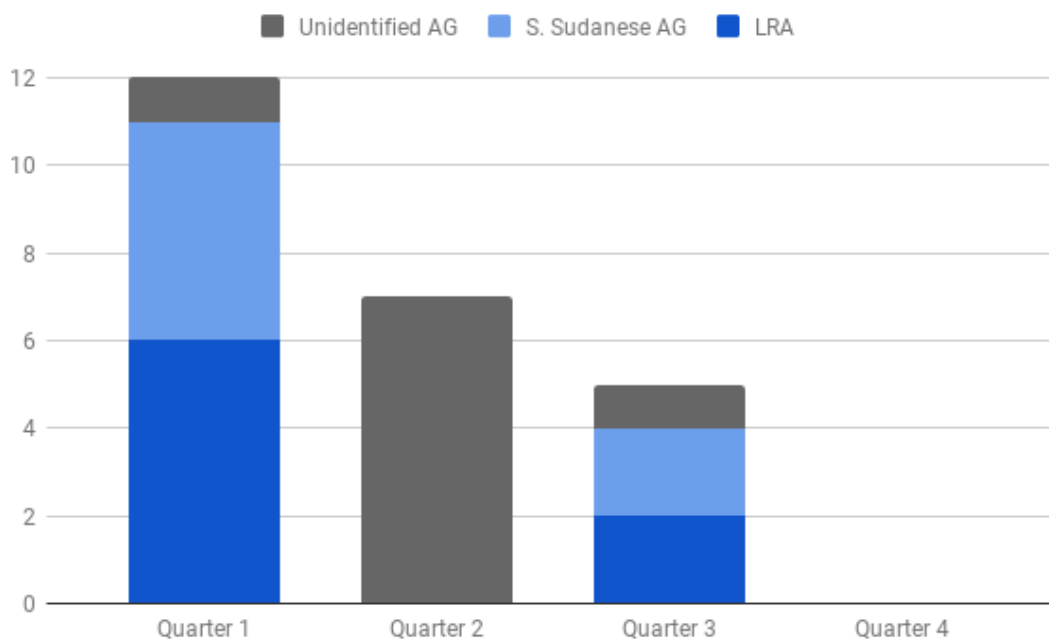


VI. SOUTH SUDAN'S CONFLICT SPILLS INTO DRC

South Sudan's former Western Equatoria State has strong connections to neighboring areas of DRC's Haut Uele province and CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture, with the Azande ethnic group spanning the tri-border region and people frequently crossing borders to visit family, hunt or fish, and attend weekly markets. Armed groups have frequently exploited these fluid borders, taking advantage of restrictions that borders place on national militaries and UN peacekeepers. In August 2016, hundreds of South Sudanese combatants and dependents from Riek Machar's Sudan People's Liberation Movement / Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) crossed into Garamba from South Sudan, fleeing forces from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).¹³

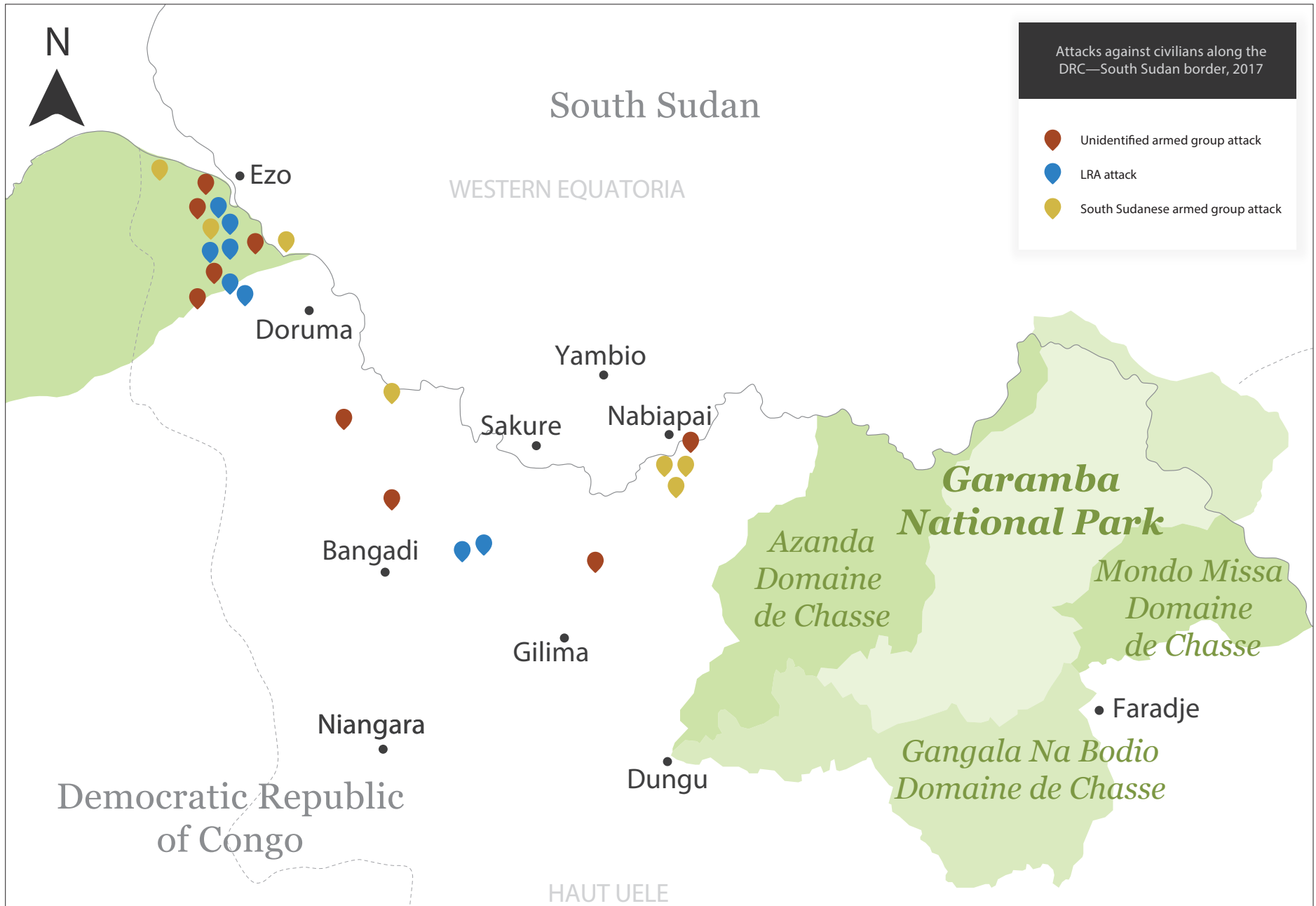
In the following months, conflict between the SPLA and a collection of opposition forces escalated in South Sudan's former Western Equatoria and Central Equatoria States. Equatorian opposition militias, associated with the SPLA-IO but more rooted in local grievances, became more active, including in predominantly Azande areas near the border of DRC and CAR. As in eastern CAR, some of these militias evolved, in part, from self-defense groups that had previously mobilized against the LRA. Widespread abuses against civilians by the SPLA and national security agencies, as well as opposition militias, forced tens of thousands of South Sudanese to flee areas of former Western Equatoria. Many took refuge in and near Congolese border towns such as Doruma, DRC. Tens of thousands of others fled into neighboring Haut Mbomou prefecture in CAR, with most settling in the town of Obo, though many have since returned home.¹⁴

Attacks against civilians along the DRC-South Sudan border, 2017



In September 2016, South Sudanese opposition militias began crossing into DRC's Haut Uele province to evade SPLA forces, loot supplies, and recruit among Congolese Azande. In 2017, South Sudanese armed groups were responsible for at least seven attacks in Haut Uele within 25km of the DRC-South Sudan border between Garamba and the border's convergence with the Central African border (see map on page 13). The LRA was also active along this border region, committing eight attacks within 25km of the border in 2017. The perpetrators of an additional nine attacks on civilians in this region could not be reliably identified, but many were likely the work of South Sudanese armed groups or the LRA.

Attacks against civilians along the DRC–South Sudan border, 2017



VII. IMPACT OF ARMED GROUPS ON LIVELIHOODS

There are few opportunities for economic mobility in the Mbomou Uele border region, and the livelihoods of many civilians provide little more than basic necessities. Armed group violence in 2017 exacerbated the challenges people face, displacing tens of thousands of civilians. Many civilians, both displaced and non-displaced, were forced to abandon, limit, or alter their livelihood activities as they navigated the threats posed by armed groups.

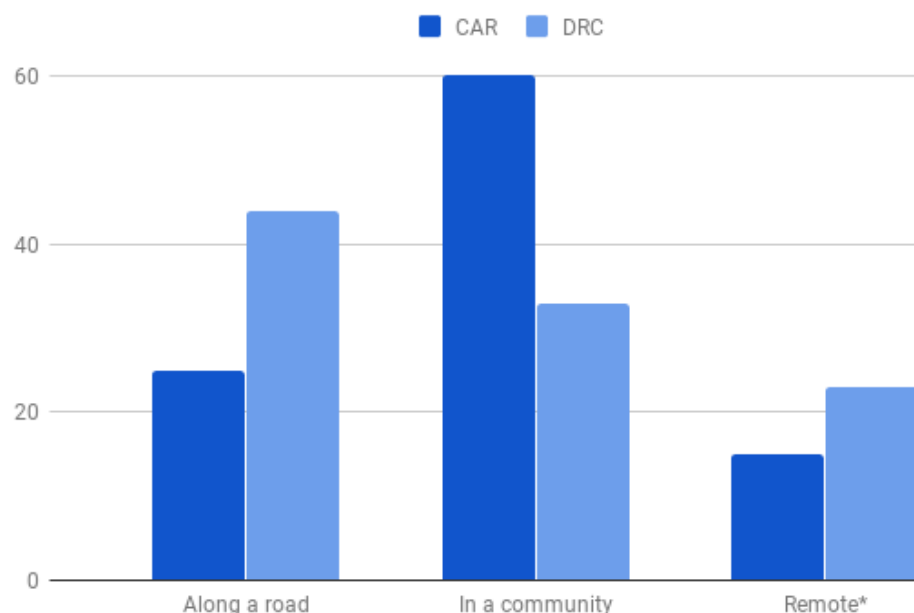
Disaggregated data on 266 attacks on civilians recorded by the LRA Crisis Tracker in 2017 demonstrates clear patterns in the risks civilians face based on their location and exposure to specific armed groups. In eastern CAR, 60% of armed group attacks on civilians in 2017 occurred within communities, while 25% occurred along a road and 15% occurred in more sparsely populated areas where civilians were targeted while farming, fishing, herding cattle, or hunting. In DRC's Ueles region, civilians were more likely to be targeted while traveling along roads (44% of all attacks) compared to within communities (33%) or while pursuing livelihood activities in sparsely populated areas (23%). Five incidents in the latter category were clashes between armed Peuhl, sometimes herding cattle, and non-Peuhl farmers or hunters, highlighting the presence of intercommunal tensions somewhat similar to those in eastern CAR.

Within eastern CAR, the most common type of attack location varied significantly depending on the armed group. 85% of attacks by ex-Seleka, anti-balaka, and armed Peuhl civilians took place within a community, including many in larger towns such as Bria, Bangassou, and Zemio. Reported attacks by these groups on people traveling along roads were rare (13% of all attacks), as were attacks targeting civilians in more remote areas as they farmed, fished, hunted, or herded cattle (5%).

Patterns of LRA attacks in eastern CAR showed a notable difference in where civilians were targeted. Only 42% of LRA attacks took place within a community, and those were often in smaller villages.

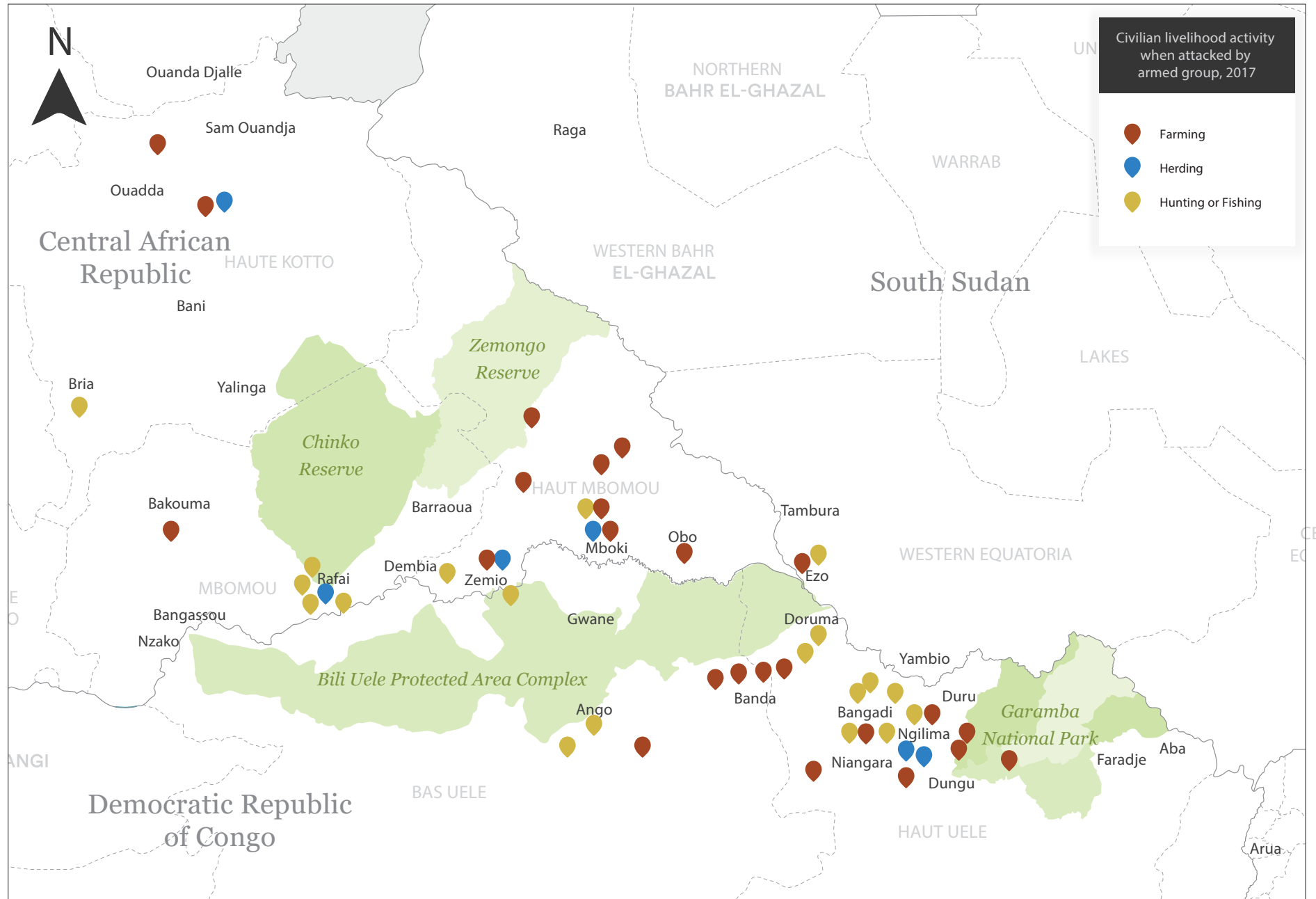
30% of LRA attacks occurred along roads, where LRA groups would frequently ambush isolated bicyclists and motorcyclists. Many such victims were traveling with goods to local markets. The remaining 20% of attacks targeted civilians as they were in fields or remote fishing, herding, and hunting areas.

Location of armed group attacks against civilians by %, 2017



* "Remote" refers to attacks on civilians in remote areas as they were farming, fishing, herding, or hunting

Civilian livelihood activity when attacked by armed group, 2017



VIII. CONCLUSION

Patterns in armed group activity in the Mbomou Uele border region in 2017 highlight how dynamic the day-to-day security environment is for civilians in the Mbomou Uele border region. In eastern CAR, the dramatic drop in LRA attacks and abductions in 2017 provided little relief as attacks by ex-Seleka, anti-balaka, and armed civilians skyrocketed. In the Ueles region of DRC, civilians remained at high risk of attack by transnational armed groups, including groups participating in the illicit wildlife trade. The volatile history of armed group activity in the Mbomou Uele border region cautions against overreliance on previous trends to predict future activity. In lieu of predictions, the following questions help illuminate issues that will have a critical influence on the region's future:

Will the 2017 spike in violence in eastern CAR be repeated? Though violence by ex-Seleka and anti-balaka began to drop in late 2017, these groups remain capable of widespread violence and retain control over vast swaths of eastern CAR. The planned deployment of MINUSCA reinforcements and the slow extension of state authorities in eastern CAR could be stabilizing factors but may not be sufficient to prevent another escalation of violence against civilians.

How will transnational and national security dynamics interact in the Ueles region? Congolese civilians in the Ueles region will be faced with a host of challenges in 2018, including predatory attacks by transnational armed groups, the presence of South Sudanese and Central African refugees, tension between Peuhl and other ethnic groups, and contentious domestic politics related to the scheduling of national and local elections. As has happened in eastern CAR and South Sudan's former Western Equatoria State, social stressors could lead to the mobilization of local armed groups and an increase in intercommunal violence.

Will the LRA try to rebuild in the absence of Ugandan and US troops? Kony and the LRA effectively outlasted operations by Ugandan and US forces, and with their withdrawal no force in the region is capable of effectively and consistently pursuing the rebel group. Though LRA violence dropped in 2017, the group remains capable of forcibly conscripting children and youth and attacking civilians in remote, sparsely-populated areas.



END NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise stated, information about LRA violence, activity, and internal dynamics is taken from the LRA Crisis Tracker (www.LRACrisisTracker.com) and interviews conducted by personnel from Invisible Children. LRA Crisis Tracker statistics cited in this report are accurate as of 25 February 2018.
- ² Invisible Children, “Escalating Violence in Eastern CAR Poses Grave Threat to Civilians,” 12 June 2017.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Central African Republic: Ugandan Troops Harm Women, Girls,” 15 May 2017.
- ⁵ UN Department of Public Information, “At Least 71 United Nations, Associated Personnel Killed in Malicious Attacks against Peacekeeping Operations during 2017,” 26 January 2018.
- ⁶ UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, “Letter dated 6 December 2017 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2339(2017),” S/2017/1023, UN Security Council, 6 December 2017.
- ⁷ Invisible Children, “Escalating Violence in Eastern CAR Poses Grave Threat to Civilians,” 12 June 2017.
- ⁸ Email exchange with African Wildlife Foundation, February 2018.
- ⁹ Invisible Children and The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, “LRA Crisis Tracker 2016 Midyear Security Brief,” August 2016.
- ¹⁰ Email exchange with African Parks Congo, February 2018.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Small Arms Survey, “Spreading Fallout: The Collapse of the ARCSS and New Conflict Along the Equatorias-DRC Border,” May 2017.
- ¹⁴ REACH, “Tambura Displacement Brief,” November 2017.

