



AT RISK, YET STILL RESILIENT

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND YOUTH IN
EASTERN CAR AND NORTHEASTERN DRC

September 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

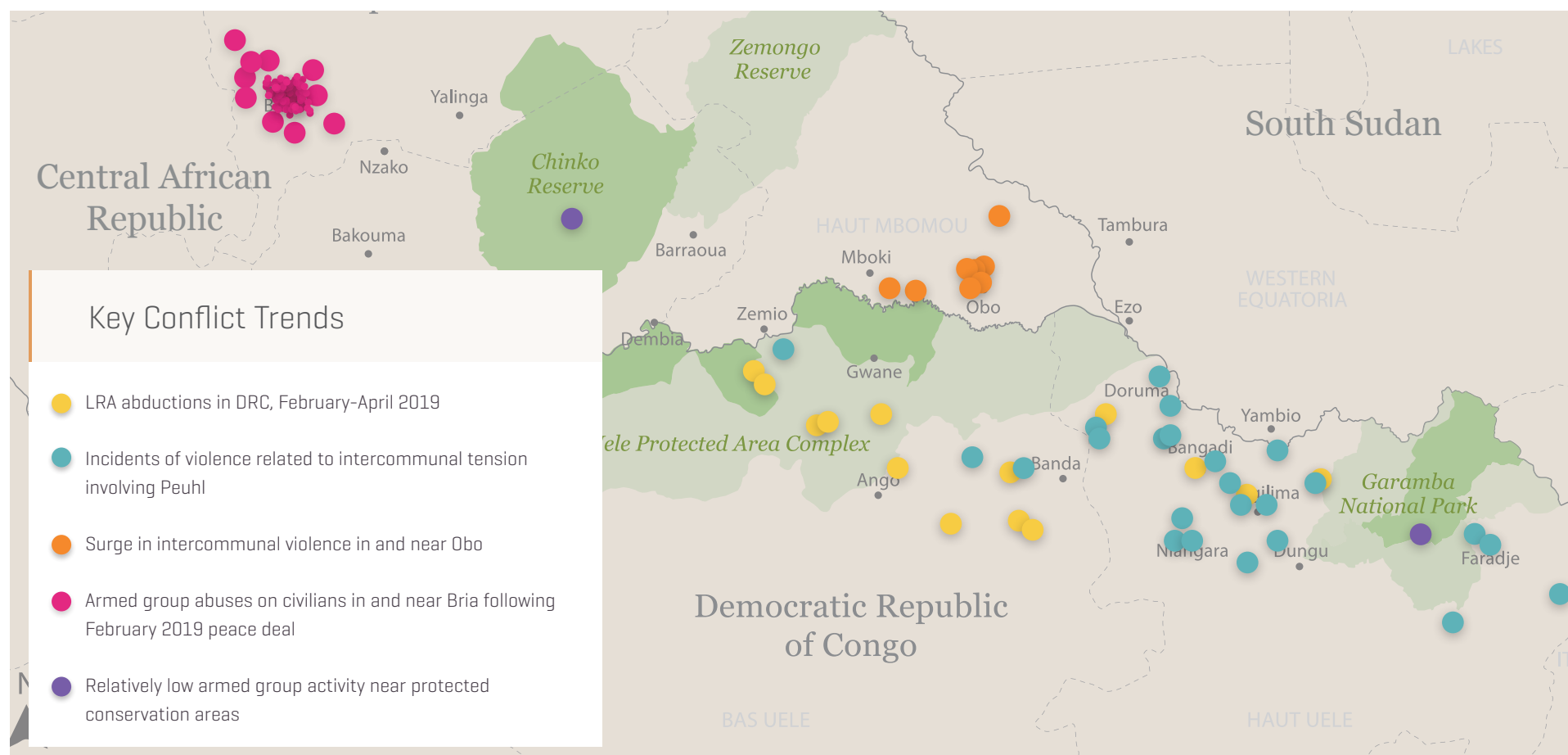
Armed groups and intercommunal violence continue to menace civilians across the border region between eastern Central African Republic (CAR) and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). From January–September 2019, the Crisis Tracker recorded 314 attacks on civilians by armed groups or armed civilians during which 72 civilians were killed and 265 others abducted.¹ **Section I** of this report provides a visual overview of key trends in armed group activity in this region so far in 2019, particularly in the Uele region of DRC and the prefectures of Haute Kotto, Haut Mbomou, and Mbomou in eastern CAR.

Subsequent sections of the report focus on the impact of violence on women and youth in the eastern CAR–DRC border region, as well as the responses of women and youth to persistent insecurity and risk. **Section II** focuses on how weak state responses to violence contribute to violence against women and youth. **Section III** examines incidents in which armed groups targeted women and youth pursuing livelihood activities such as farming and trading. **Section IV** examines a spike in youth abductions in DRC's Uele region by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and unidentified armed groups from 2019 in which 29 children and youth were abducted, 25 of whom remain missing and presumed in captivity. **Section V** exposes the lack of services for children and youth who escape the LRA, including inadequate mechanisms for reunifying them with their families and providing them with reintegration assistance.

I. CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN EASTERN CAR AND NORTHEASTERN DRC

Violence against women and youth along the eastern CAR–DRC border took place in the context of broader trends of insecurity in the region. In eastern CAR’s Haute Kotto prefecture, ex-Seleka and anti-balaka continued to attack civilians despite signing a peace agreement with the CAR government in February 2019. These groups committed at least 98 attacks against civilians in the months after the accord was signed. In Haut Mbomou prefecture, armed groups party to the agreement were less active, but attacks by the LRA and intercommunal violence involving the Peuhl ethnic minority, other Central African ethnic groups, and South Sudanese refugees killed ten people. Intercommunal tensions between Peuhl and other ethnic groups have also been a major source of insecurity in DRC’s Uele region, with escalating violence since June resulting in seven civilian deaths. Abductions by the LRA and unidentified armed groups also increased in the Uele region in 2019 compared to 2018.

There have been scattered bright spots of improved security compared to previous years, particularly in CAR’s Mbomou prefecture and in areas of DRC surrounding Garamba National Park. In addition, civilians continued to demonstrate resilience in the face of insecurity, responding through local organizations that mediate intercommunal tension, manage a regional High Frequency (HF) radio Early Warning System (EWS), and assist survivors of armed group violence.



II. WEAK STATE RESPONSES TO SECURITY CHALLENGES PUT WOMEN AND YOUTH AT RISK

Armed groups and other armed actors committed at least 314 attacks on civilians in the eastern CAR-DRC border region between January and September 2019. Women and youth were among the victims in more than half of these attacks, including 36 women and youth who were killed and 169 who were abducted.²

In both eastern CAR and DRC's Uele region, weak state responses to insecurity contribute to the conditions that leave women and youth at risk. In CAR, state authorities are absent or under-resourced in the eastern prefectures of Haut Mbomou, Mbomou, and Haute Kotto. The Central African military (FACA) and gendarmes are only deployed in a handful of towns, with the majority of communities being controlled by armed groups. Despite signing a peace agreement in February 2019, armed groups continued to attack civilians.

The Crisis Tracker documented the highest levels of violence against civilians, including women and children, in Haute Kotto prefecture, particularly in the city of Bria. Armed groups and even mobs periodically took advantage of the lack of state presence to abuse women and youth in the name of enforcing their perception of social norms or laws. On seven occasions so far in 2019, armed groups and mobs attacked or detained women and children accused of witchcraft, severely beating them. For example, on May 9, anti-balaka elements detained and assaulted a woman accused of witchcraft in the PK3 displaced persons' camp in Bria. On June 17, fighters from the Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC) ex-Seleka faction illegally detained an elderly woman in Aigbando, accusing her of practicing witchcraft.

On at least three occasions, women or youth in Haute Kotto were arbitrarily detained or assaulted by armed group combatants after being accused of "crimes" ranging from adultery to theft. In some communities, particularly in northeastern Haute Kotto, the ex-Seleka faction Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC) attempted to forcibly recruit Peuhl children or force their families to contribute cash or cattle to the group.

Local Leaders Respond to Insecurity

With few representatives of state authorities in Haute Kotto prefecture, local civil society groups have taken a leading role in mitigating risks to women and youth. Such groups often mediate with armed group members to release women and youth who have been arbitrarily detained. They have also utilized the regional HF radio EWS in innovative manners, including by communicating credit so that traders do not have to carry as much cash on dangerous roads.

In Bria and communities near the border with Sudan's Darfur region, local activists, including women, have played a key role in mediating conflict between farmers and pastoralist groups, including those crossing into CAR from Darfur. Such mediation, which includes compensation agreements for crops damaged by cattle, can help prevent local disputes from sparking intercommunal tensions that can lead to violence or be instrumentalized by armed groups.



Photo credit: Nathan Garcia, June 2019

In DRC's Uele region, the presence of state authorities is more prominent. However, local authorities have yet to adequately respond to escalating intercommunal tensions between members of the Peuhl ethnic minority and other ethnic groups, one of the most pressing sources of insecurity in the region. Intercommunal relations between members of the Peuhl ethnic minority and other ethnic groups in this region are complex, dynamic, and vary across communities. Tensions are often linked to Peuhl livestock trampling crops of local farmers. Local authorities are often perceived to be instrumentalizing local anti-Peuhl sentiment for political purposes, or interfering with local agreements intended to compensate farmers for crops damaged by Peuhl cattle by confiscating payments for themselves.

Intercommunal tensions have escalated since June 2019, when youth groups organized demonstrations in several major towns to ask local authorities to take action against the presence of the Peuhl in DRC. In total, Peuhl women and youth were also targeted by mobs and armed civilians, as well as armed groups, in at least seven attacks in 2019. For example, on July 27, an angry mob prevented six Peuhl from entering the market in Kana. On March 31, an angry mob attacked six Peuhl civilians, including one woman and one boy, on their way to the Ngilima market. The assailants injured the boy and looted six donkeys, money, and phones from the Peuhl.

Armed Peuhl were also responsible for attacks against women, such as a May 25 incident initiated when four Peuhl, armed with two automatic weapons and machetes, entered Diagbe, DRC, looking for their lost donkey. The men looted a woman and threatened others, warning the prefect that community members should not enter the bush. On September 1, a group of Peuhl fired into the air in Amadi, DRC, after a local government official ordered them to leave the region. A civilian was injured by a stray bullet.

III. TARGETING WOMEN AND YOUTH DURING LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

Women and youth endure particular risks from violence during their everyday pursuit of livelihoods. Of the 166 incidents of violence against women and youth documented so far in 2019 in the eastern CAR–DRC border region, 27 occurred while the victim was pursuing a livelihood activity. Of these 27 incidents, nine occurred while the victims were trading. They were scattered across the border region, including a series of LRA attacks on four women, four girls, and six boys who were held captive for several hours after being looted in Bambangana, DRC, and an attack on five women and four children being forced to porter looted goods by ex-Seleka (FPRC) fighters in Mbarou, CAR. In five other incidents, including lootings and temporary captivity, women and/or youth were targeted while farming.

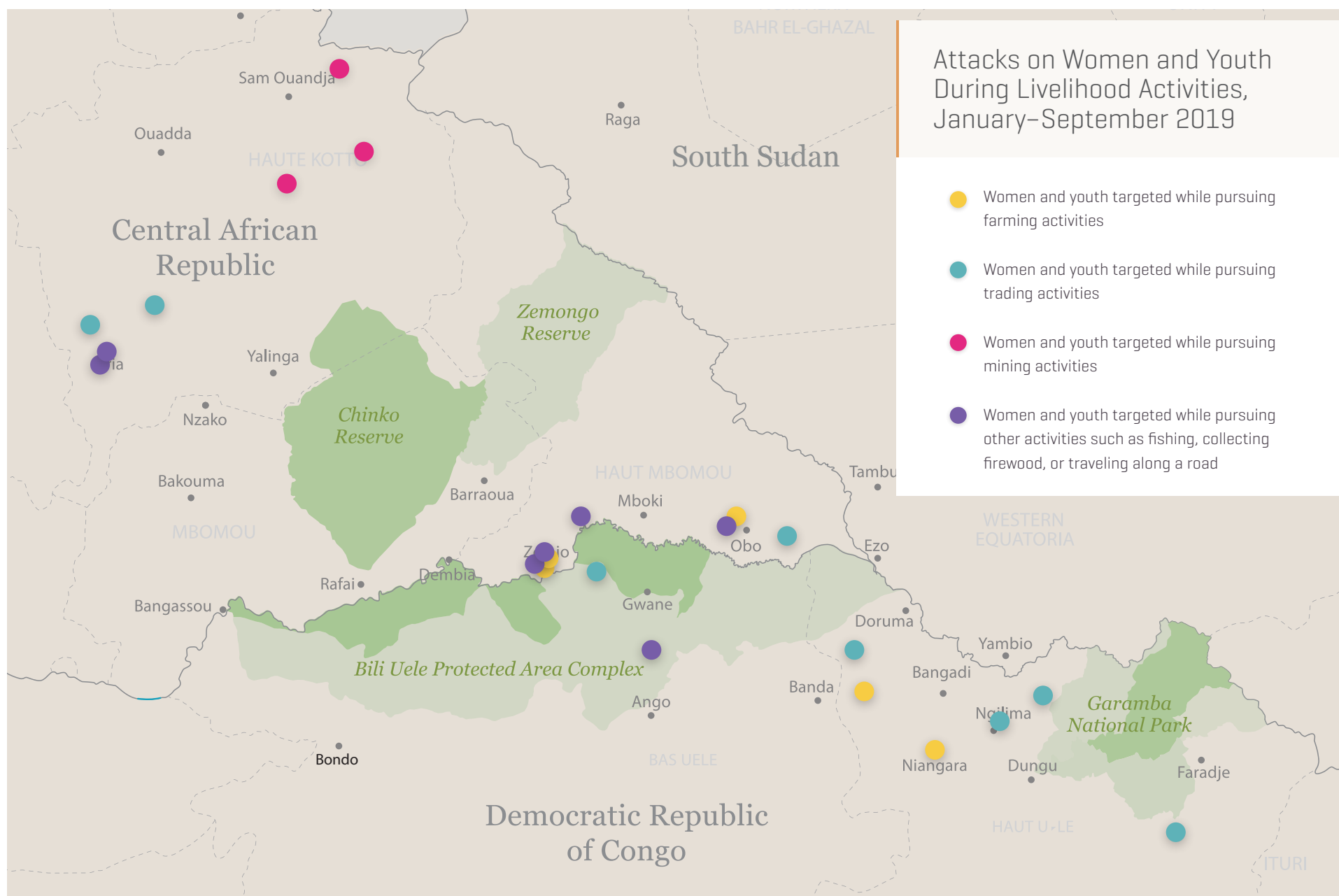
On four occasions women or youth were attacked while engaged in mining activities, with these incidents clustered in the gold- and diamond-mining areas near the border between CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture and Sudan's Darfur region. In that same part of Haute Kotto, LRA forces were responsible for a January 28 attack in which they looted cattle from a Peuhl woman and her children. The remaining attacks on women and youth engaged in livelihood activities included an attack on ten women as they were fishing near Obo, CAR, on January 22 and the killing of a young girl who was traveling with her father and uncle near Obo on February 5.

These incidents highlight the calculations that many women and youth must make each day to weigh the risk of armed group violence versus the need to provide for themselves and their families. Many women and youth are members of households that are in or near poverty even during times of peace and have little savings or financial cushion, meaning that they have little choice but to pursue livelihood activities when there is a risk of an armed group attack.



Photo credit: Nathan Garcia, June 2019

Even in areas where armed group activity is relatively limited, other forms of insecurity can imperil livelihood activities. In CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture, attacks near the town of Obo have increased significantly following the withdrawal of troops from the African Union LRA Regional Task Force (AU-RTF). Though tasked with pursuing the LRA, the AU-RTF troops also discouraged other forms of insecurity. In early 2019, a surge of banditry and intercommunal violence erupted near Obo, where civilians were periodically targeted while working in their fields, traveling along the Obo-Mboki or Obo-Bambouti axes, or hunting. Women interviewed in Obo in February 2019 reported that they were too afraid to go to their field without their husband or at least one man accompanying them, as they were worried about being sexually assaulted by unidentified armed men that were operating in the area.



IV. DOZENS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH MISSING FOLLOWING SURGE IN ABDUCTIONS IN DRC

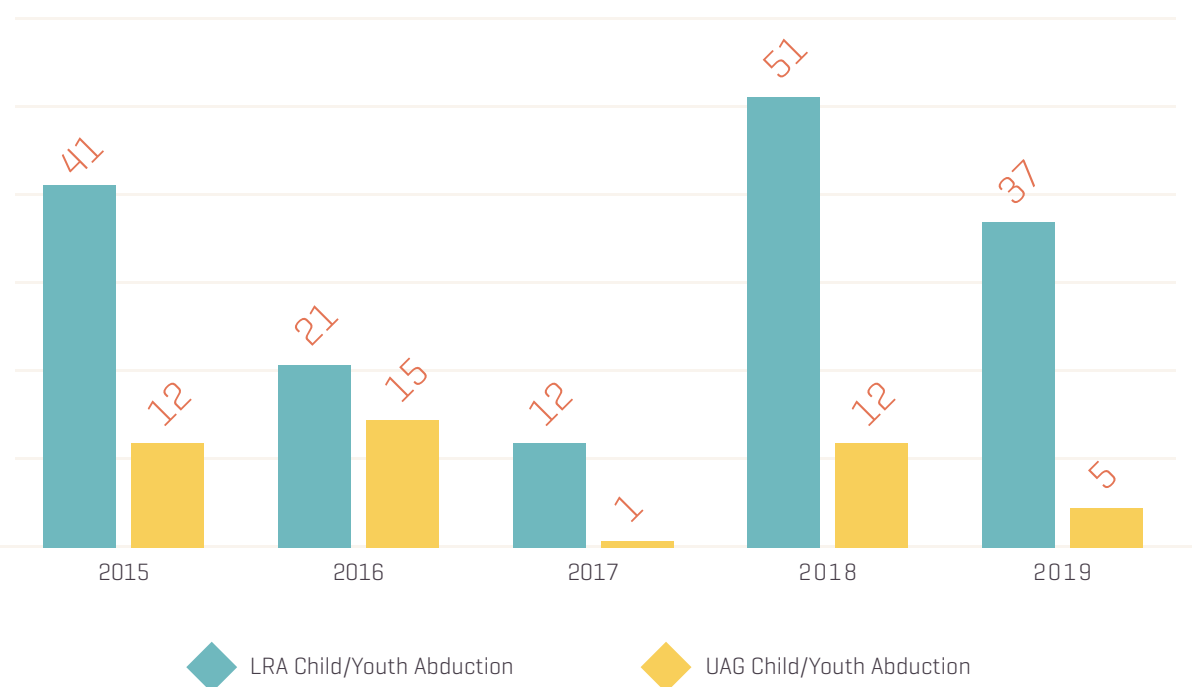
The LRA has been active in Bas Uele and Haut Uele provinces of northeastern DRC for over a decade, and has abducted more than 4,500 Congolese men, women, and children since then. Unidentified armed groups (UAGs) have been responsible for hundreds of additional abductions in the Uele region during that time period. From January–September 2019, the LRA abducted 172 Congolese civilians, including 29 children and youth, while UAGs abducted 11 civilians, including five children and youth. LRA forces also abducted eight children and youth in CAR, bringing its total so far in 2019 to 37 (see graph below).

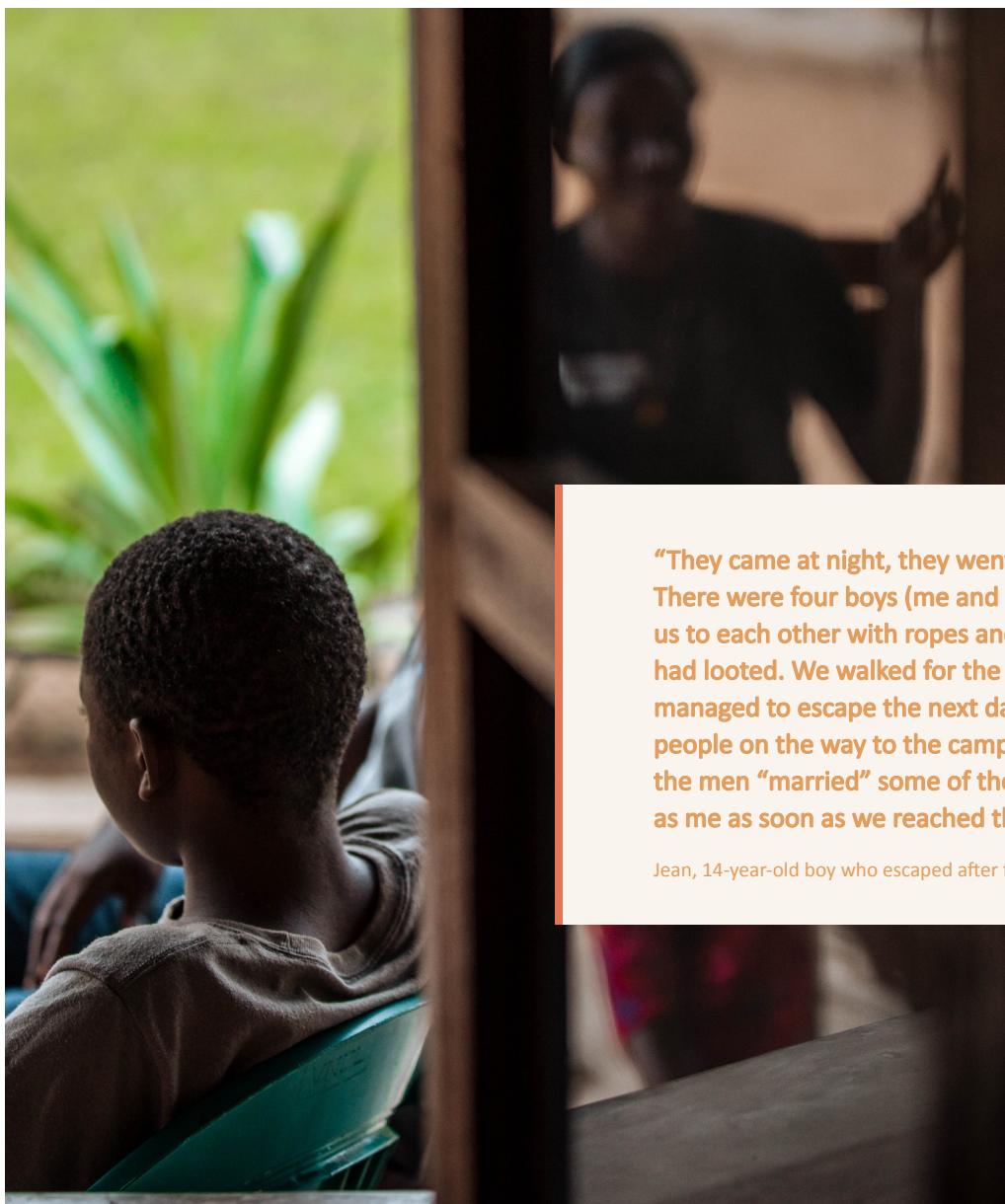
A majority of these abductees have been adult males forced to temporarily porter looted goods to camps in the bush before being released or escaping within days of their abduction. However, children and youth abducted by the LRA are often held in captivity, with females entering into forced marriages with LRA combatants. Both male and female children and youth are forced to do dangerous, backbreaking labor for highly mobile LRA groups, such as portering looted goods, collecting firewood and water, and setting up camps.

Of the 29 children and youth abducted in the Uele region by the LRA so far in 2019, 25 remain missing and presumed in captivity. In comparison, the LRA abducted 30 children and youth in DRC between January–September 2018, 13 of whom remain missing. Eleven children and youth abducted in 2019 and 17 abducted in 2018 have escaped and been reunited with their families with the help of Invisible Children, the Congolese civil society organization Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), and other actors. All five children and youth abducted by UAGs in the Uele region so far in 2019 remain missing and presumed in captivity.

The communities most affected by these mass abductions are communities located west of Garamba National Park in DRC. These communities lack security forces capable of reacting quickly in case of emergency, and are surrounded by very poor roads and a dense forest, making it easy for armed groups to hide and escape with their captives.

LRA Abductions of Children and Youth in CAR and DRC, 2015–2019





“They came at night, they went into the houses, they took the children. There were four boys (me and my brothers) and five girls. They tied us to each other with ropes and they forced us to carry rice that they had looted. We walked for the whole night and day. My three brothers managed to escape the next day. The group also abducted some other people on the way to the camp and some others were released. Some of the men “married” some of the girls who were abducted on the same day as me as soon as we reached the camp.”

Jean, 14-year-old boy who escaped after five months in captivity⁴

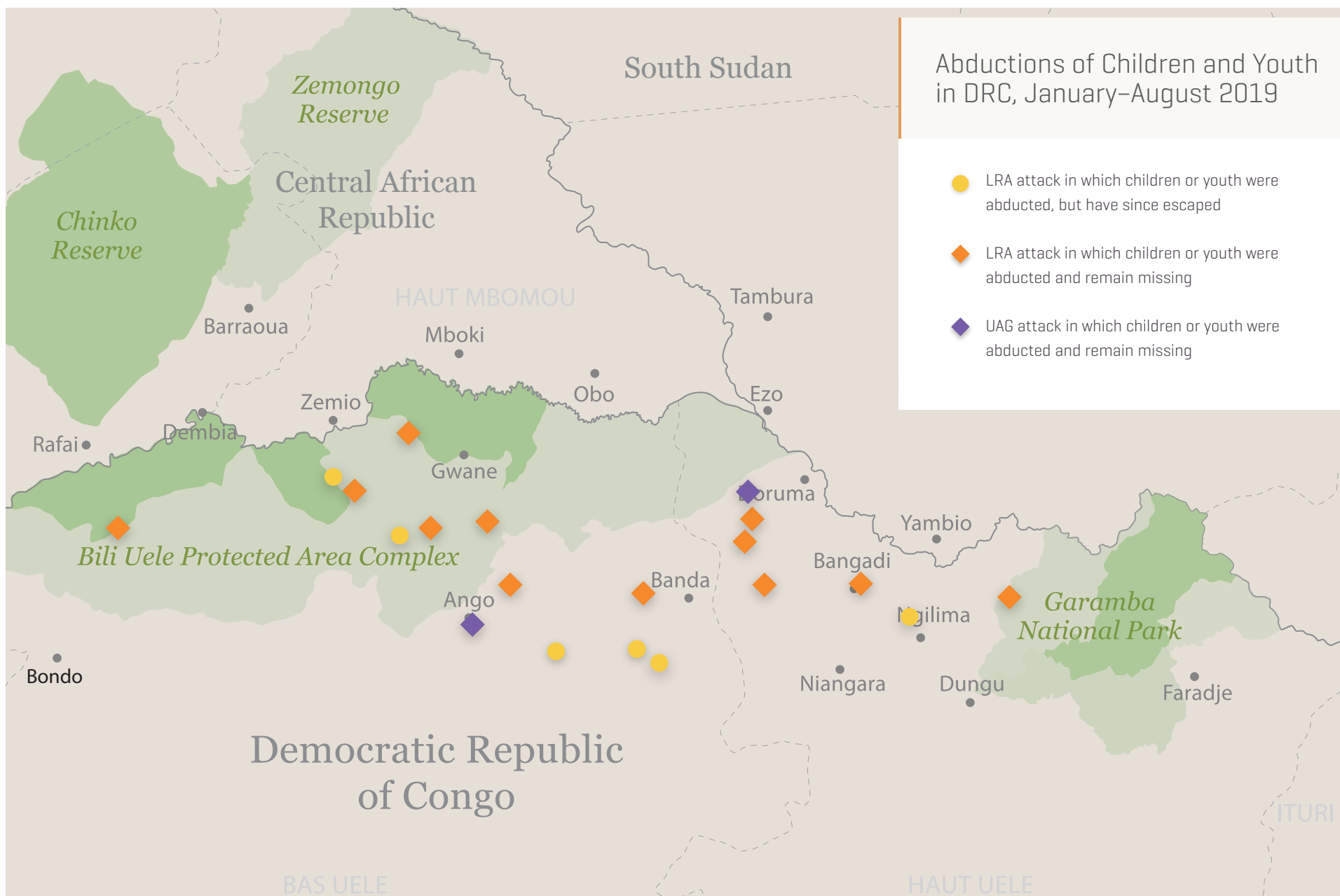
Crisis Tracker data on LRA abductions in DRC over the past decade demonstrates that communities west of Garamba are often targeted at the beginning of the year, during the dry season, as it is easier for the LRA to operate and move quickly in the bush. Moreover, the LRA groups responsible for abductions are sometimes tasked with gathering ivory that they then bring to LRA leader Joseph Kony, who oversees its exchange for supplies with traders in the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave.³ A recent escapee explained that as he was being brought to a camp, he saw another LRA group bring children who had recently been abducted, as well as a number of tusks. However, Garamba park personnel have succeeded in drastically reducing elephant poaching in recent years, and it is unlikely that the LRA has poached elephants in Garamba so far in

2019. The LRA may have instead accessed tusks poached in previous years that were cached in DRC, a tactic the group has reportedly used before.

Escapees from the 2019 surge of abductions declared that their LRA captors brought them to a camp located in or near the Bili-Uele protected area south of the CAR–DRC border. There,

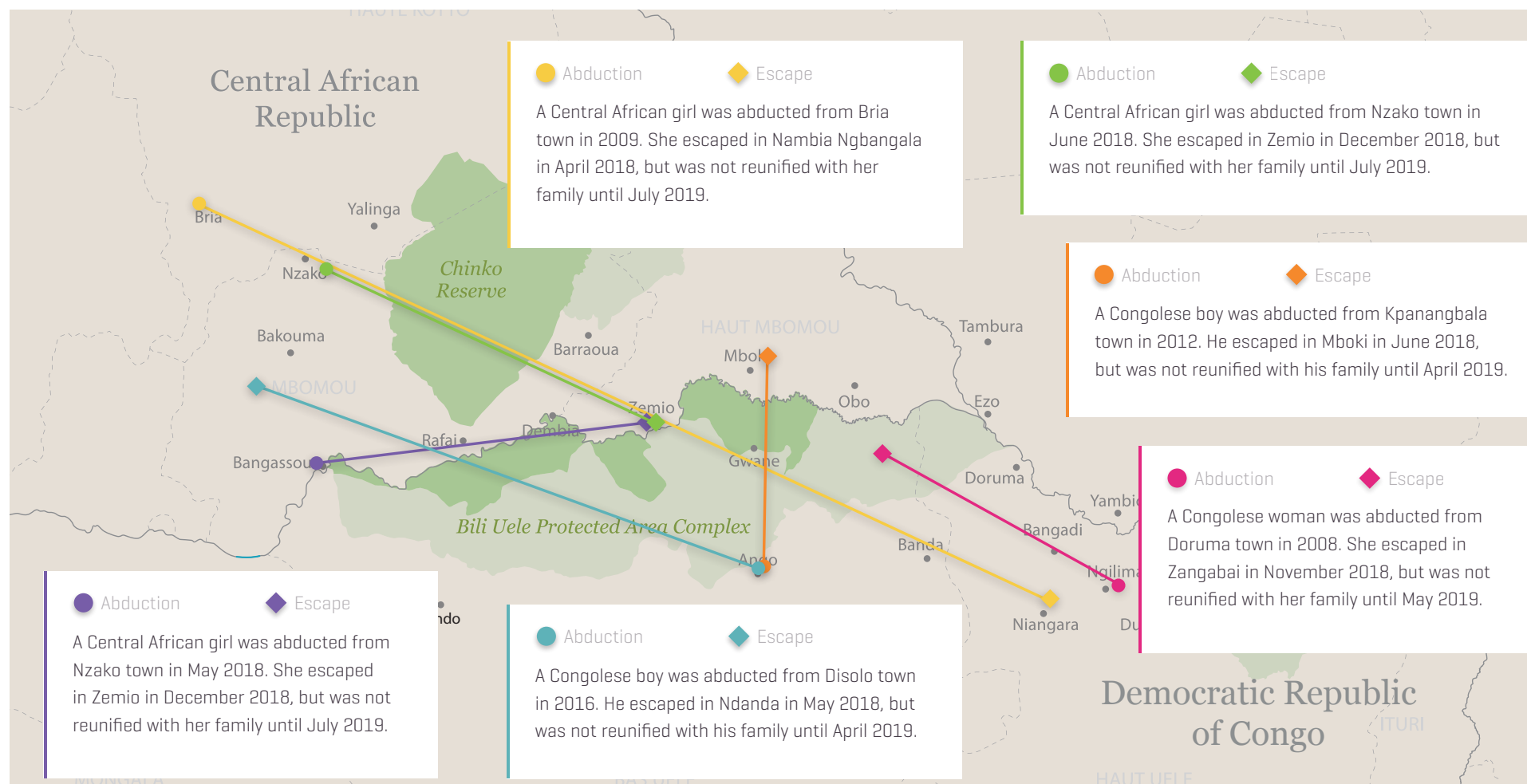
multiple LRA groups converged to gather all the children they had abducted in the previous months and weeks. The LRA has reportedly set up houses made of wood and straw in the camp and have fields where they grow cassava, bananas, and groundnuts. Historically, LRA groups have also trafficked children abducted in DRC to Kafia Kingi, where Kony gives orders for them to be split into different groups.

Photo credit: Nathan Garcia, June 2019



V. LACK OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO ESCAPE THE LRA

At the peak of the international counter-LRA effort from 2010-2016, multiple organizations supported initiatives to encourage LRA defections and help escapees be reunited with their families. Since 2017, troops from the AU-RTF have ceased counter-LRA operations, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in DRC (MONUSCO) has closed bases in the Uele region, and multiple humanitarian organizations have withdrawn from LRA-affected areas. As a result, defection messaging targeting the LRA has effectively halted and family tracing and reunification services for abductees who do manage to escape have waned considerably. Since 2017, 62 women and children who escaped from the LRA have had to wait at least three months between their escape and their reunification—a period sometimes longer than the length of time they were in captivity. Reunifications are often made more difficult because the LRA trafficks abductees across vast distances, meaning that abductees escape hundreds of kilometers from their homes, sometimes in a neighboring country.



Invisible Children and its local partners, particularly the Congolese organization Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), have collaborated to improve the quality and speed of the reunification process, collaborating closely with local authorities, UN agencies, and other aid organizations. In late 2018, SAIPED and Invisible Children worked with local authorities in both countries to repatriate ten Congolese boys who had all escaped LRA captivity in CAR to reunite them via plane with their families in remote communities. All returnees had been in contact with their families through the HF radio EWS, which is used as a tool to communicate with the most remote areas and help with tracing the families of the returnees who flee the LRA. In total, Invisible Children and its partners have reunited 72 escapees, including 50 children, with their families since July 2018.

Even after they are reunified with their families, children, youth, and women who escape from the LRA often face a lack of reintegration services. For women who come out of the LRA with children, reintegration can be especially challenging because of the stigmas attached to having children while in captivity. It is difficult and complicated for them to get the psychosocial support that is essential after such a traumatic experience. Returnees also need support in order to establish a livelihood and contribute meaningfully to their communities when they return. Unfortunately, funding for vocational training is scarce.



Juliette was only 11 years old when she was abducted by the LRA near Niangara, in 2009. She spent eight years in captivity, where she was forced to be a porter, a cook, and later a “wife” to a husband she did not choose, an LRA commander. After managing to escape from the LRA in the middle of the night, Juliette found that being a returnee from the LRA was its own form of hardship. Three-months pregnant, she was cared for by an organization that reunited her with her family just after giving birth. A few weeks after being reunited with her family, Juliette faced extensive stigma, and was accused of being a spy for the LRA. Her family struggled to accept her, especially as she had had no education, having been abducted at the age of 11. The Peace Committee in Nambia Ngbangala reached out to Invisible Children to see if there was anything the organization could provide to help the young woman get back on her feet and start her own income-generating activities. Because the situation with her family was tense, Invisible Children and SAIPED arranged for Juliette to stay with a host family—one that had been trained on trauma-healing and welcoming LRA returnees—for an eight-month period so she could be trained as a tailor. Juliette accepted and completed her training after eight months, received a sewing machine, and set up her own shop. She is now able to independently provide for herself and her daughter.

CONCLUSION

Civilians living in the eastern CAR-DRC border region, including women and youth, face a range of threats to their safety and security each day, including as they pursue livelihood activities. Armed groups, particularly in eastern CAR, continue to prey on civilians in the absence of state authorities, often enforcing their own interpretations of legal and social norms. In DRC, intercommunal tensions involving the Peuhl ethnic minority have escalated in 2019, leading to periodic violence towards vulnerable civilians in markets, fields, and other everyday spaces. On both sides of the border, the LRA continues to loot civilians and abduct children and youth, with escapees facing difficult paths to reunification and reintegration.

Community-based leaders and organizations continue to play a vital role in mitigating the risk of violence to civilians, including via the regional HF radio EWS. They have also helped mediate intercommunal tensions, in some cases preventing such tensions from spiralling into future violence. In eastern CAR, national authorities and international actors such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) must do more to improve security and civilian protection in eastern CAR, including in major towns such as Bria. Improved day-to-day security will help create conditions for community-based peacebuilding interventions to take root and reinforce implementation of the peace agreement between the national government and armed groups.

International interventions should also seek to foster opportunities for learning and exchange across borders in areas with similar conflict dynamics. For example, Congolese communities experiencing escalating intercommunal tensions between Peuhl and other ethnic groups may be able to learn from local Peace Committees in CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture, where there have been encouraging examples of cooperation between Peuhl and non-Peuhl leaders to resolve sources of tension, such as cattle damage to crops.

With LRA abductions and violence continuing two years after the end of substantial international efforts to address the LRA crisis, the international community should revisit its current hands-off approach. Relatively small investments in defection messaging via FM radio and other mediums—a proven strategy that takes advantage of widespread disillusionment within the LRA—would undermine the group's ability to continue preying on civilians. Simultaneously, additional resources are needed to help Ugandans, Congolese, and Central Africans who escape captivity to reunite with their families, resume interrupted educations, develop sustainable livelihood skills, and receive psychosocial counseling.

ENDNOTES

¹Unless otherwise stated, information about armed group activity and intercommunal tensions is taken from the Crisis Tracker database and interviews conducted by personnel from Invisible Children. Statistics cited in this report are accurate as of September 25, 2019.

²In this report, “children” is defined as people between the ages of 1-17 and youth is defined as people between the ages of 18-30.

³For more information on LRA activity in and near the Kafia Kingi enclave, including its history of trafficking ivory, see LRA Crisis Tracker, “Dominic Ongwen’s Domino Effect: How the Fallout from a Former Child Soldier’s Defection is Undermining Joseph Kony’s Control Over the LRA,” January 2017.

⁴All names in this report have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals. Photos used in this report do now show people whose individual stories have been shared.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Invisible Children would like to recognize and thank all those who contributed to the making of this report, particularly the community-based Peace Committees in the tri-border region of eastern CAR, northeastern DRC, and southwestern South Sudan whose invaluable contributions to the early warning system make the Crisis Tracker project possible. Invisible Children also thanks its partners in managing the EWS in 2019, including the Dungu-Doruma Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix (CDJP) and the Ango-based Commission Paroissiale Justice et Paix (CPJP) in Democratic Republic of Congo.

ABOUT THE CRISIS TRACKER

Data reflected in this brief was collected as part of the Crisis Tracker, a project of Invisible Children. The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in the tri-border region. Through publication of regular reports and sharing of collected data, the 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 Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit CrisisTracker.org

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



Endnotes

- ¹ Unless otherwise stated, information about armed group violence, activity, and internal dynamics is taken from the LRA Crisis Tracker database and interviews conducted by personnel from Invisible Children. Statistics cited in this report are accurate as of 24 July 2018.
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