Human security from below, a case study from the Ituri district, Democratic Republic of Congo

Joost van Puijenbroek

Introduction
The district of Ituri is characterized by the existence of many different ethnic groups, enormous natural wealth and a great number of conflicts (partly as a result of this). Since the last conflict broke out in 2003, a relative stability has been restored, but the security situation is still fragile. The army and police are currently the main Human Rights abusers and there are still residual militia groups which are active. Distrust between the population and the state security agencies is profound. The capacity of the police to assure security is both qualitatively and quantitatively far below what is needed. In this light, several bottom-up approaches to human security can be identified, each with the goal of assuring a certain level of security in the communities and creating an interface between the population and authorities and security agents. These approaches will be discussed in this article.

Geographic, social and historic background
The Ituri district is situated in the North East of the Democratic Republic of Congo, bordering Uganda and, in the extreme northern part, Sudan. The district has a surface of 65,658 square kilometers which is about twice the land surface of the Netherlands. In total the district has around 4 million inhabitants who are very unevenly spread over the district. The district is composed of five territories: Aru, Mahagi, Djugu, Irumu and Mambasa. Population density in Mahagi, Djugu and Irumu varies from 100 to sometimes even 500 inhabitants per square kilometer. Mambasa is half the surface of Ituri, but is extremely sparsely populated and consists mostly of tropical forest. The capital of the district is the city of Bunia.

All ethnic family groups (bantou, Sudanese, pygme, nilotic) are present in Ituri. The Lugbara and Kakwa in Aru are Sudanese, the Alur (Mahagi) and the Hema (Irumu and Djugu) nilotic, while the Lendu and others are bantou. In Mambasa the majority of the population are pygme. During the past hundred years, cycles of conflict occurred between the Hema and Lendu in the territories of Irumu and Djugu. The socio-political organization of these groups differs profoundly.

1 Joost van Puijenbroek is programme leader for IKV Pax Christi the Great Lakes Region. In his work he especially focuses on the Ituri region where he manages a community-based peace building programme with a significant security aspect. The present article is based on the experiences from that programme over the past few years.

2 With the new constitution the district of Ituri is to become a province. As local elections have not yet taken place and the provincial assembly is not yet in place, here we still use the term district.
The Lendu form a segmented society where lineage is the highest level of organization. They are farmers with a traditional way of production. The Hema have a hierarchical system in which all power belongs to a central authority. This rendered the Hema tribe well capable of organizing an army, contrary to the segmented society of the Lendu, which was characterized by continuous internal conflicts.

The differences in social organization form the basis of the unbalanced relationship between the two groups. This was further reinforced by, among other things, the differences in production (farmers versus livestock owners, subsistence versus livestock trade) and the relation to the colonial power (in the beginning colonial control was entirely through the Hema chiefs). Generally speaking, the Hema-Lendu relationship is characterized by a profound feeling of superiority and inferiority, respectively, which became a cause of cyclic violence around every ten years over the past hundred years.

Of all clashes the one that started in 1999 was to become the longest and heaviest conflict in terms of human and material costs. Almost every ethnic group had its own militia3. For a while Uganda occupied the area and took a role generally seen as one of pyromaniac firemen: arming every militia group and in doing so making themselves indispensable for keeping the peace. In March 2003 a peace agreement was signed that comprised the establishment of an Ituri Peace Commission under the facilitation of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force Mission d’Observation des Nations Unies au Congo (MONUC) and the departure of Ugandan troops. When these troops left in May 2003, fighting broke out between the militia groups of the Lendu and the Hema over control of the capital Bunia.

The fighting resulted in the deployment of a French-led European Union (EU) force under UN mandate called Operation Artemis. A force of 1500 troops was established to assure the security in the capital Bunia. The mandate was limited to the capital for a period of merely three months. The objective of the operation was to restore order in the capital and to prepare the field for the arrival of a full UN brigade. This was realized by the end of August 2003 when the last French troops left. In the course of the autumn of 2003 and the whole of 2004 the MONUC slowly deployed forces all over the sensitive parts of Ituri.4

Slowly, a certain level of peace and security returned to the region, but all militia groups were still present and active. A first phase of a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme was started in early 2005 followed by a second phase in 2006. In total around 31,200 combatants have been demobilized of whom 11,021 are children. At the end of the second phase there still remained close to 6,500 militia members active within three militia groups.

---

3 Five militia groups were active, each connected to an ethnic group FNI Lendu, UPC Hema, PUSIC Hema, PRPI N’giti, FPDC Alur, FAPC non-ethnic, Aru-based).

4 Only Mambasa had no MONUC contingent.