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## Intercommunal conflict in Djugu & Mahagi territories, Ituri province, DRC

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### Highlights

- The conflict in Ituri has persisted since 2017 but the situation deteriorated considerably since the start of 2023 in Djugu and Mahagi with militants targeting civilians, schools and hospitals.
- In the past 6 months, militants have killed 532 civilians. Another 189 civilians have been injured.
- There are 1 million displaced people in Djugu and Mahagi, and the safety of children is becoming a significant concern. Ituri now ranks second out of DRC's 26 provinces for the highest number of grave violations against children.
- UNICEF is responding to the humanitarian needs of displaced people and host communities including WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), child protection, distribution of essential household items, education, nutrition.
- The humanitarian response needed to save lives and meet the needs of displaced children and their families urgently requires scaling up in both IDP sites and also neighbouring communities.

### Situation overview

Violence against civilians has persisted in Ituri province since 2017. The conflict is fuelled by intercommunal tensions over land and economic interests. Since the start of 2023, the situation has deteriorated significantly in Djugu and Mahagi territories as a result of violence by armed forces. The conflict has had a significant impact on children and women, with armed groups targeting civilians as well as schools and hospitals. This crisis is cyclical with waves of outbreaks of violence and displacement. Attacks typically increase during the harvest months (June and July; October to December), followed by a period of relative calm during which people risk returning to their homes and villages.

Djugu remains the epicentre of the crisis. There is significant displacement of people within Djugu and towards Mahagi and the town of Bunia, the provincial capital, which is in Irumu territory. Since 2021, violence has extended to Mahagi territory and the northern outskirts of Bunia with the creation of new militias.

During the past 6 months, 532<sup>1</sup> civilians have been killed by militants, and an additional 189 civilians have been injured. As of 31 March 2023, OCHA estimates that there are 700,000<sup>2</sup> internally displaced people in Djugu and more than 300,000<sup>3</sup> displaced people in Mahagi. One in three of those people was newly displaced between December 2022 and March 2023 having returned

<sup>1</sup> MONUSCO, SMGP note, mai 2023

<sup>2</sup> OCHA Ituri, Rapport de la Commission Mouvement de Population, avril 2023

<sup>3</sup> OCHA Ituri, Rapport de la Commission Mouvement de Population, avril 2023

to their villages between June 2022 and October 2022 following the previous waves of displacement in December 2021 and January 2022.

In January 2023, there was a massive influx of people to the Rhoe spontaneous IDP sites following attacks around Drodro. This resulted in the number of the people at the Rhoe camp doubling to 70 000<sup>4</sup> from 35 000, substantially increasing the strain on already inadequate infrastructure and services. In March 2023, clashes in Aungba and Kambala in Mahagi led to the displacement of people to Mahagi, Rimba and Kandoy. In total, 162,873 people fled to Mahagi. In April 2023, about 250 people, including 21 children, mainly in Djugu territory, were killed in attacks on their villages. Similarly, four health facilities and three schools were attacked and vandalized.

The conflict and resultant displacement are affecting children and women in a number of ways, and the safety and protection of children is a matter of serious concern. Grave violations of children's rights<sup>5</sup> have increased significantly in Djugu and Mahagi since the beginning of the year with Ituri ranking second out of DRC's 26 provinces for the highest number of grave violations against children. Of particular concern is the rise in the number of children being killed and maimed, being abducted or who are casualties of abandoned explosive remnants of war. The conflict is also preventing children from going to school or getting the health care they need.

Teaching was suspended at 21 schools in March/April 2023, putting about 1,200 students at risk of being unable to complete the academic year. The provincial primary and secondary education authority estimate that nearly 700,000 children are not going to school because of conflict or displacement in Djugu and Mahagi territories.

A demobilization and community re-integration programme<sup>6</sup> was officially launched on 17 April 2023. Of the 105 militants who surrendered, 10 children were removed and placed into temporary care in Bunia, while they are documented and their families are found.

Suspected cases of meningitis have been reported at camps in Rhoe and Drodro. Women especially are struggling to get the health care they need. At least four women die due to complications from pregnancy or childbirth every week in the province. According to the nutrition cluster, 32 out of 36 health zones in the province are under nutritional surveillance and require preventive actions. Sixteen health zones hosting displaced people are not supported because of lack of funds hampering the care of 115,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

The humanitarian response needed to save lives and meet the needs of displaced children and their families is currently insufficient – particularly in the camps. At the Rhoe camp, where there are 70,000 people, only 8 litres of clean water per person per day are available, which is well below 15 litres per day recommended by humanitarian standards. There is one latrine for 70 people – again, well below the humanitarian standard of one latrine for 50 people in emergency contexts.

Humanitarian access is a growing challenge due to insecurity. A convoy carrying humanitarian supplies was attacked in Fataki in Djugu territory late in April 2023. Reaching displaced people in the mining areas of Mungwalu, Bambu, Damas and Kilo is difficult because of the remote location and the extremely bad condition of the roads. The lack of economic opportunities for families displaced in this area increases the risk of economic exploitation of children, especially at artisanal gold mining sites.

The security situation remains uncertain despite the accession of the main arms groups to the demobilization programme. Militants were seen in villages surrounding the Rhoe/Drodro, Bule and Loda camps in Fataki, raising fears of further targeted attacks on these camps.

## UNICEF's response

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2017, UNICEF has been responding to the needs of displaced people and host communities through a response that covers: WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), child protection, distribution of non-food items (NFIs), nutrition and education in affected territories.

Despite the highly volatile and unpredictable environment, UNICEF and partners continue to assist the most vulnerable affected by this crisis as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> CHOP Ituri, Plan de Reponse Djugu, mars 2023

<sup>5</sup> The six grave violations are: Killing and maiming of children; Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups; Sexual violence against children; Attacks against schools or hospitals; Abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children.

<sup>6</sup> PDDRC-S Programme de Desarmement, Demobilisation, Reinsertion Communautaire et Stabilisation

Between January 2023 and March 2023, UNICEF and its partner Programme de Promotion des Soins de Sante Primaire (PPSSP) distributed emergency supplies (NFI and WASH kits) to 16,137 people in Lita and Drodro in Djugu territory to improve their living conditions and preserve their dignity. These distributions went to people from various communities to mitigate the risks of stoking inter-communal tensions and to strengthen community acceptance. UNICEF provided medical supplies to the health center in Biringi (where displaced people from Aungba are staying) allowing 661 people, including 284 children, to receive primary health care treatment.



### Child protection, gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)

UNICEF's child protection interventions included prevention activities and responding to the significant protection needs of children while strengthening the foundations of the child protection system.

In collaboration with child protection partners, UNICEF continued to provide essential mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) to 3,005 crisis-affected children, including 1,319 girls, in Drodro, Fataki and Lita health zone Djugu territory. Among them, 218 children, including 71 girls, with serious signs of psychological distress received specialized care by clinical psychologists assigned by UNICEF. In addition, 57 unaccompanied children (including 30 girls) received community-based alternative care while efforts were made to trace and unite them with their families. A total of 23 children (including 5 girls) were released from armed groups and are receiving comprehensive and individualized care and assistance. Twenty-four children (including 9 girls) who were victims of other forms of violence were identified and assisted using an individual case management approach.

Together with its partners, UNICEF assisted 138 survivors of gender-based violence<sup>7</sup> (1 boy, 38 women, 99 girls), providing a comprehensive package of health, psychosocial and psychological services. They were also given dignity kits. Furthermore, 3,168 women, girls and boys in were supported with risk mitigation and prevention interventions to address gender-based violence through UNICEF-supported programmes, including access to safe reporting channels on sexual exploitation and abuse.

UNICEF also renewed its partnerships with the non-governmental organizations SOFEPADI and AJEDEC to scale-up the response for the children who are either displaced or in host communities. These interventions are in 16 out of 36 health zones in Ituri.

To improve the care provided to survivors of gender-based violence, 30 nurses and doctors (including 12 women) were trained in the clinical management of rape and 33 health areas were supported to set up referral pathways. To scale up birth registration services, 80 community focal points, including 29 women, participated in a training session on birth registration. As a result, the births of 299 displaced children and children from host communities (including 154 girls) were registered and their birth certificates issued.

In Mahagi, UNICEF reinforced the capacities of four community-based child protection units (RECOPE) and supported the revitalization of the Child Protection Sub Working Group (CPSWG) to ensure the effective coordination of child protection interventions and to ensure that child protection actors can identify, monitor, report and respond to children's risks and



*A little boy plays with a truck made out of a sardine tin and bottle tops that social workers helped him make at a child-friendly space in the Rhoe camp. UNICEF/DRC/2023/Gutcher.*



*A child arrives for lessons at a temporary learning space established at the Rhoe camp.*

<sup>7</sup> Including 105 survivors of rape

vulnerabilities. Of the group, 32 members, including eight women, received training in coordination, individual case management and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA).



### Water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH)

UNICEF and partners PPSSP and Social Development Centre (SDC) established three new water sources and constructed of 21 latrines and three shower blocks in three schools, one health centre and at the Loda displacement camp. This has given 7,000 people living in the village of Fataki and at the Loda camp access to safe drinking water and appropriate hygiene and sanitation facilities. 36 volunteers from water point management committees and 72 pupils who are members of school hygiene brigades were also trained in the daily management and maintenance of the community water sources. Three boreholes are under construction at the Rhoé displacement camp and in nearby communities. This will increase the availability of water to 10 litres per person per day from 8 litres at the camp.



*Onlookers cheer as a UNICEF drilling team hits water in the Rhoé camp for a new borehole. A new borehole at the Rhoé camps will increase water supply to 10 litres per person per day from 8 litres. UNICEF/DRC/2023/Mulala.*



### Education

UNICEF and its partner Association des Jeunes pour le Développement Communautaire (AJEDEC) distributed school kits to 10,320 children, teaching kits to 166 teachers, other school supplies, recreational kits and furniture for 71 classes in 17 primary schools that welcomed displaced children in Rwampara. This will help ensure that children affected by armed conflict in Ituri can continue to learn. In Drodro, school supplies and teaching kits were distributed to 1,344 children and 120 teachers in the 12 primary schools that welcomed displaced children living in the Rhoé camp. Also in Drodro, three temporary learning spaces are being built to increase the capacity of schools in the areas that have welcomed children living with host families.



### Nutrition

UNICEF and its partners continued nutrition activities in Bunia, Rwampara, Rethy, Bambu, Jiba, Nizi, Drodro and Tchomia. A total of 15,688 people including caregivers, voluntary community health worker and health practitioners were taught about using MUAC tapes to measure children's upper arm circumference to identify those who might be undernourished. This resulted in 28,165 children under the age of five being screened by volunteer community health workers, 25,681 by mothers and other caregivers, and 1,522 by health practitioners. Amongst those children, 810 were admitted for acute malnutrition treatment in outreach treatment unit and intensive treatment unit. At the end of treatment period, 801 children had recovered (with nine children returning to their home villages before treatment ended). UNICEF and partners also helped 40,004 women and other caregivers to learn about good infant and young child feeding practices.

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