



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# THE KIDNAPPING BUSINESS

CRIMINALITY IN EASTERN  
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Justin Mwetaminwa | Marc-André Lagrange  
Thierry Vircoulon

MAY 2023



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the people of North and South Kivu who accepted to be interviewed despite the current risks. Former hostages and their families – some of whom have chosen to remain anonymous – are the backbone of this research and have helped guide and inform this paper.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Justin Mwetaminwa** is an independent analyst based in Bukavu, South Kivu. He has worked for the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo and is currently an independent consultant for NGOs and think tanks, including the French Institute of International Relations.

**Marc-André Lagrange** is a senior researcher on conflict, humanitarian and security issues in central Africa. He previously worked with the International Crisis Group as senior analyst and spent several years working in the Democratic Republic of Congo in various capacities. He frequently collaborates with the French Institute of International Relations.

**Thierry Vircoulon** coordinates the French Institute of International Relations' Observatory of Central and Southern Africa. He has worked for the French Foreign Ministry, the European Commission, the International Crisis Group and the Institute for Political Studies in Paris. He has written extensively on security, governance and development issues in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

© 2023 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.  
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Global Initiative.

Cover: © *Erberto Zani/Alamy Stock Photo*  
Cartography: Genene Hart

Please direct inquiries to:  
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland  
[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
History of a crime .....	2
<b>Kidnapping expands in the Kivus</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Methods .....	6
Failure to respond .....	9
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Recommendations .....	13
Notes .....	14

## SUMMARY

Over the past seven years, kidnapping has become a widespread business in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Members of all segments of society are kidnapped, and many people – not only the members of armed groups – have become kidnapers.

This policy brief shows how this crime has developed and how the uncertain political context of 2016–2018 worsened this phenomenon. In its analysis of who kidnapers target and how they operate, this paper underscores the importance of telephone money-transfer systems and the passivity of the police and judicial authorities. Some authorities, particularly in the military, are even complicit in kidnappings. Kivuans therefore distrust the security forces, and the community has mobilized to put pressure on the authorities to demand justice.

The kidnapping business provides insight into the criminalization of the security services more broadly and the reasons why a growing segment of the population is being pushed into criminal activity in order to survive.

Mobile phones play a key role in kidnappings not only to contact relatives and negotiate ransoms but also to facilitate money transfers. This demonstrates how criminals adapt to new technologies, even in a non-industrialized society.

The government's declaration of a state of emergency in 2021 has had no impact on this crime problem. As kidnapping still goes unpunished in North and South Kivu, communities have been developing coping strategies that may help mitigate this problem but cannot solve it. Communities should organize to put pressure on the government to take action against kidnapers.



## INTRODUCTION

In the provinces of North and South Kivu in the DRC, a new form of organized crime has developed over the past seven years, aggravating the climate of structural insecurity in which the population lives: widespread kidnapping. While elsewhere this crime usually targets the elite,<sup>1</sup> in these two provinces it targets all sectors of the population. This new, more generalized approach to kidnapping is now beginning to be exported to other provinces.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to distinguish between abduction and kidnapping, as the latter includes a demand for ransom. Abduction is a well-established criminal tactic in the region because of the large number of armed groups that use it as a form of forced recruitment for labour and combat.<sup>3</sup> These forced recruitments mainly involve young men, adolescents and even children in rural areas and have various motivations: the need for labour on illegal mining sites,<sup>4</sup> the need for trackers (who help armed groups venture into unfamiliar territory) and the need for real and fake combatants. Since the announcement of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation and Stabilization programme on 5 July 2021,<sup>5</sup> there has been an upsurge in abductions of young people by armed groups in North Kivu, who seek to increase the number of their troops.<sup>6</sup> In addition, child abductions can sometimes be part of human trafficking or the organ trade.<sup>7</sup>

Kidnapping, on the other hand, was for a long time only a threat to foreigners in eastern DRC. In 2001, 26 employees of a Thai company were taken hostage by a Mai-Mai group – a community-based militia – in response to the publication of the UN Panel of Experts' report on the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, members of the NGOs Save the Children and Solidarités as well as members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were taken hostage in Rutshuru territory in North Kivu.<sup>9</sup> And in 2018, tourists were kidnapped in Virunga Park in North Kivu.<sup>10</sup> These kidnappings were aimed at ransoming vulnerable foreigners with the means to pay. However, although foreigners continue to be targeted, kidnapping has evolved in recent years and now affects the Congolese as well.

This policy brief explores how kidnapping has developed in eastern DRC, analyzes who kidnappers target and how they operate, and examines the lack of a robust law enforcement response to the crime. This paper is based on local media reports and a wide range of interviews with police officers, civil servants, magistrates and lawyers, civil society activists, local researchers, members of international organizations and kidnapping victims. The testimonies of these former hostages, adults and children, are the cornerstone of this study.



After months of tensions, conservation director Emmanuel de Merode returns to Virguna National Park, where two British tourists were kidnapped in 2018. © Brent Stirton/Getty Images

## History of a crime

In Rutshuru territory, the practice of kidnapping took off in 2012. In reaction to the pro-Rwandan rebellion of the March 23 Movement (M23), which broke out in this territory at the beginning of 2012 and was defeated at the end of 2013, the Congolese army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC) and its local auxiliaries, in particular the Hutu Nyatura militias and affiliates, turned to kidnapping. In retaliation against M23, the army and their allies unleashed a campaign of kidnappings targeting local public figures who supported the rebellion.<sup>11</sup> After the defeat of M23, the Hutu armed group led by Emmanuel Biriko Manoti was not satisfied with the remuneration it received from the Congolese army and continued this lucrative activity on its own account.<sup>12</sup>

This practice became widespread in Rutshuru territory, where the Hutu and Hunde communities had long been at odds. The kidnappings were mainly carried out by armed groups, targeting Congolese and benefiting from the local administration's complicity.<sup>13</sup> Authorities and security services attributed the abductions to the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda, FDLR). From 2015 onwards, Rutshuru territory became the centre of kidnapping in North Kivu.<sup>14</sup> Kidnapping was a by-product of the conflict between M23 and the Congolese army: it was in this context that it became a tactical form of violence directed against Congolese targets.

The years 2016 through 2018 saw kidnapping evolve. During this period, the DRC experienced a political crisis when Joseph Kabila's government refused to organize constitutionally mandated elections in 2016, until national and international pressure finally drove the government to hold elections at the end of 2018. During this political crisis, tensions between the government, on one hand, and the opposition and many civil society organizations, on the other, were high and led to several brutal confrontations.<sup>15</sup>

In this context of polarization between pro- and anti-Kabila groups and political repression, kidnappings increased in North and South Kivu, particularly in the capitals of these two provinces, Goma and Bukavu. Security services estimated that 158 children were kidnapped in Goma in 2017.<sup>16</sup> While kidnappings at the time spared no social group, politicians and members of civil society organizations who opposed the government's refusal to organize elections were particularly targeted.<sup>17</sup> Goma and Bukavu were seen as cities hostile to the government: one of the main associations fighting the Kabila regime (La Lucha) originated in Goma, while Bukavu and South Kivu more broadly are considered the birthplace of civil society activism in the DRC.<sup>18</sup>

In Goma and Bukavu, this dark period has left its mark. The kidnappers mainly kidnapped children as they were an easy target, and some hostages were tortured and sometimes murdered, even after the ransoms had been paid.<sup>19</sup> This brutality during the period of postponed elections was perceived locally as a repressive tactic of the regime directly tied to the political crisis. With the future of many politicians uncertain and electoral violence a well-established political tactic, political actors financed the creation of their own militias or gangs. The political instrumentalization of urban gangs during this period, which has been documented and analyzed in the case of Kinshasa,<sup>20</sup> did not spare Goma and Bukavu. The gangs that politicians created are said to have carried out numerous kidnappings in order to support themselves. This period of political crisis was therefore pivotal in the process of kidnapping becoming commonplace in eastern DRC.





## KIDNAPPING EXPANDS IN THE KIVUS

All local and international organizations responsible for monitoring the security situation and human rights violations in the two provinces agree that kidnapping is widespread, although complete data on the phenomenon is lacking and is not consistent across organizations. Despite this incomplete record keeping and the fact that the families of the victims sometimes conceal these crimes, kidnappings are reported every day in North and South Kivu. In and around the small town of Bukoma (in Rutshuru territory), between 2017 and 2020, Human Rights Watch documented the kidnapping of around 170 people in 23 separate incidents.<sup>21</sup> According to civil society sources, around 700 kidnappings were reported in South Kivu in 2020,<sup>22</sup> and the Baraka-Fizi-Minembwe road is particularly prone to kidnapping. Numerous armed groups roam this 135-kilometre road, which runs through a forested area that is difficult to access, where there are few villages and it is easy to hide.

Although foreigners and Congolese staff of international NGOs are still prime targets, victims are no longer just the social elite of urban areas. Now, even the poorest segments of the population and residents of rural areas and remote villages are kidnapped. A study of 79 cases of kidnapping in the chiefdoms of Bwisha and Bwito in North Kivu between March and October 2021 shows that the victims are mainly farmers and small traders, as well as some clergy members and teachers.<sup>23</sup> In rural areas, village notables are not the only ones targeted: peasants are kidnapped in their fields. Similarly, in the poorest districts of Goma, children have been kidnapped for ransoms of US\$50.<sup>24</sup> On the roads, truckers and motorbike taxi drivers are kidnapped.

While in most cases, the kidnappers' motive is the ransom payment, they sometimes have other aims. In the case of land conflicts, which are common in North and South Kivu, one of the parties resorts to kidnapping the other in order to dissuade them from claiming the property. The victims are released once they have agreed to drop their claim and have paid a ransom.<sup>25</sup> This type of kidnapping sometimes takes place within the same family.

Extortion has become a widely practised form of retaliation, a normal way of settling scores. Issues related to politics or mining, professional conflicts and family disputes (over adultery or inheritance, for instance) sometimes lead to kidnapping. For example, the establishment of mining companies in South Kivu, which are perceived as competitors by Congolese artisanal gold miners, has been accompanied

by a series of kidnappings that began in 2017 and is still ongoing. Similarly, some kidnappings of NGO employees are motivated by professional disputes such as dismissals.<sup>26</sup>

Kidnapping has become so commonplace that fake kidnappings are sometimes organized. Students have extorted money from their families by pretending to be kidnapped, and NGO employees have done the same to their employers. Sometimes the victim and the kidnappers know each other and may even be neighbours.<sup>27</sup>

## Noteworthy incidents

### The Bisimwa Ciharamagara case

**N**urse Bisimwa Ciharamagara claimed that he was kidnapped on 9 September 2021 at Place de l'Indépendance in Bukavu by his own brothers in a family dispute. His brothers felt aggrieved by their father, who had given a large part of the family plot to Bisimwa. He was detained for eight days, and the victim's father had to pay US\$3 000 to obtain his son's freedom.<sup>28</sup>

### The Congo Bluant Minerals case

**I**n November 2019, the Chinese mining company Congo Bluant Minerals was the victim of two kidnappings. On 21 November 2019, armed men, probably members of the Raia Mutomboki armed group, attacked the Kitumba gold mining site on the banks of the Elila River in Mwenga territory. They kidnapped three Chinese workers. The three abductees were found a month later, on 21 December 2019, in the Ngandja sector in Fizi territory after being abandoned in the forest by their captors. Ill and very weak, the hostages explained that their captors had asked them to leave the territory of Mwenga and to stop their gold mining activities in the Wamuzimu chiefdom. On the night of 24–25 November 2019, Raia Mutomboki militia members attacked a Congo Bluant Minerals mining site in Shabunda territory and abducted three Chinese employees. The employees were also released. The company, which is accused by the local population of illegally exploiting gold sites, has not confirmed whether a ransom was paid for their release.<sup>29</sup>

### The Batachoka Jongo case

On 28 October 2019, at the instigation of a member of the party of the former minister of rural development Justin Bitakwira, the Mai-Mai Smuzizi group abducted Batachoka Jongo Joseph, manager of the Kiringye Community Development Centre, which supervises farmers in the Ruzizi Plain. The kidnappers held the hostage for two days, tortured him and demanded a ransom of US\$50 000. After negotiations, a ransom of US\$610, a goat and a crate of beer were handed over to the kidnappers. To facilitate the release of the hostage, the speaker of the Provincial Assembly and the governor intervened in the negotiation. The aim of the kidnapping was to intimidate a civil society actor who was an opponent of Bitakwira's party. As the victim recognized the party member behind his kidnapping, the latter was sent to Kinshasa to avoid arrest.<sup>30</sup>

### A false kidnapping

**A**ccording to the victim's father, his 23-year-old son made a plan for his friends to hold him incommunicado and inform his parents that he had been kidnapped on 23 October 2020. The young man was held at a secret location by his fellow students for five days and was only released after the boy's father had paid a ransom of US\$2 500. The scam was exposed when they used the ransom pay for a celebration.<sup>31</sup> ■





Congolese soldiers patrol the road linking the towns of Kibirizi and Bwito in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu. Rutshuru has become a hotspot for kidnappings and recruitment of rebel soldiers within the region.

© Alex McBride/AFP via Getty Images

## Methods

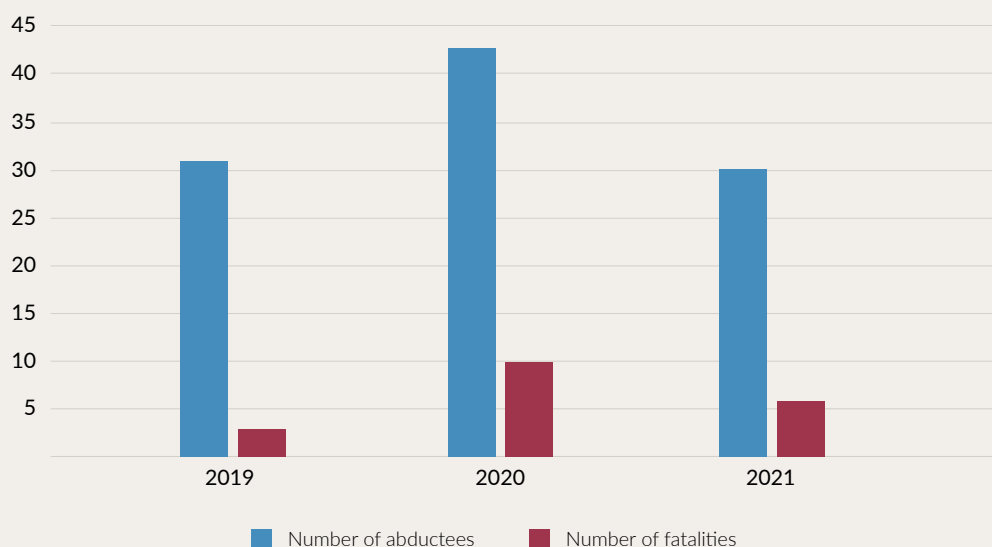
Kidnappers attack their victims after school,<sup>32</sup> at home, in the fields and on the roads. Some of the busy commercial roads from Goma and Bukavu are particularly dangerous. Whereas road banditry used to consist of intercepting buses to rob their passengers, it now consists of taking them hostage.

National and foreign employees of international organizations operating in North and South Kivu, as well as their children, are prime targets because of their financial status. Mining companies operating in the region have been targeted by kidnappers, as have NGOs and UN agencies. In February 2021, an attempted kidnapping of a World Food Programme convoy on the Goma–Rutshuru road resulted in the death of the Italian ambassador to the DRC, his bodyguard and a driver.<sup>33</sup> On 30 November 2021, two ICRC staff members were kidnapped on the Goma–Saké road in North Kivu before being released on 10 December.<sup>34</sup> As a result, NGOs, UN agencies and private companies have put in place safety measures such as UN peacekeeper escorts for UN agency convoys and the hiring of Congolese military personnel by Chinese mining companies.<sup>35</sup>

Hostages are held for periods ranging from a few hours to a month. The kidnappers call the families of the hostages to demand ransoms that vary from US\$200 to US\$2 500 for villagers or small traders and from US\$500 to US\$5 000 for Congolese employees of international NGOs. The ransom for foreigners can reach tens of thousands of dollars. In rural areas, kidnappers demand not only cash but also food and everyday goods such as chickens, telephones, cases of beer or cigarettes. Kidnappers often use violence either at the time of the abduction if the hostages resist or during the detention in order to dissuade them from fleeing or to put pressure on their family or employer.<sup>36</sup> In most cases, victims are released after the ransom is paid; when the ransom is not paid, the victims are usually executed.



**FIGURE 1** Common kidnapping routes in North and South Kivu provinces, DRC.



**FIGURE 2** Kidnappings of international NGO staff in eastern DRC, 2019–2021.

NOTE: Because kidnappings are underreported and not systematically counted, the data here does not reflect all kidnappings of international personnel during this period.

Intermediaries are mobilized when the hostages are important figures and therefore large ransoms are involved. These intermediaries act as negotiators and are often authorities such as traditional chiefs, mayors, members of the local administration or even armed groups leaders. In one notable case, a well-known armed group leader, Yakutumba, played the role of negotiator in the release of four employees of the NGO International Medical Corps (IMC) who were kidnapped at the beginning of October 2021 by armed men in the village of Kalongwe in South Kivu. Yakutumba negotiated the ransom at the request of the army that is supposed to be fighting him.<sup>37</sup>

Mobile phones play a key role in kidnappings not only to contact relatives and negotiate ransoms but also to facilitate money transfers.<sup>38</sup> Kidnappers no longer ask for cash but instead demand that money be transferred to telephone numbers through mobile payment platforms. They sometimes have several dozen numbers and ask for money to be sent to different numbers. The only payments that are still made the old-fashioned way, with cash left at sites indicated by the kidnappers, are those from very poor people in rural areas.

Although kidnappings take place all year, they tend to increase before the end-of-year festivities and before the start of the school year – periods when the need for money is particularly acute in Congolese households. This indicates that the kidnappers participate in traditional festivals and their children attend school: rather than being outlaws living on the margins of society, the kidnappers are ordinary citizens.



## Failure to respond

The authorities' response to this widespread phenomenon is entirely inadequate. As kidnapping goes unpunished in North and South Kivu, communities are developing coping strategies that unfortunately do not solve the problem.

The Congolese National Police (Police Nationale Congolaise, PNC) and the justice system are overwhelmed by the scale of this crime and do not give it the attention it deserves. While the PNC investigates the kidnapping of foreigners, it does not treat the kidnappings of Congolese the same way. In the case of child kidnappings, the PNC usually encourages families to pay ransoms. According to a mother of three children who were taken hostage, when she informed a police officer of the kidnapping, he advised her to pay the kidnappers, who pocketed US\$1 500.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, without the intervention of the relevant embassies in Kinshasa, the authorities in the Kivus pay little attention to the kidnapping of foreigners.<sup>40</sup>

The police and judicial response can worsen the situation, and members of the police force are sometimes kidnapped themselves.<sup>41</sup> Arrests and trials are rare compared to the number of known kidnappings, and their outcome can be disappointing. In Goma, for example, a kidnapping gang of women was tried in 2017, but most of the accused were released due to lack of evidence.<sup>42</sup> During the course of 2021, around 20 kidnapping cases were dealt with by the civilian courts and around 10 by the military courts of South Kivu,<sup>43</sup> while civil society organizations recorded 60 cases of kidnapping in July 2021 alone in just one territory, Uvira. The authorities' response therefore falls far short of addressing the problem. Moreover, kidnappers are rarely convicted at trial due to lack of evidence even though in rural areas they are often known by their victims and neighbours.<sup>44</sup>

On 3 May 2021, the president declared a state of emergency in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu to 'contain these serious threats and secure the population and their property'.<sup>45</sup> The civilian authorities were replaced by the military authorities. Initially planned for one month, the state of emergency was extended and is still in force as of May 2023. However, the state of emergency has not reduced crime in general or kidnappings in particular in North Kivu.<sup>46</sup> In South Kivu, in 2022, due to the absence of response from the militaries deployed in the Hauts-Plateaux, the armed group Yakutumba substituted the authorities and fought against kidnappers.<sup>47</sup>



The police station in Bukavu, South Kivu. Lack of resources hampers the police response to kidnappings in eastern DRC.

*Photo: Justin Mwetaminwa*

The inadequacy of the police and judicial response to this form of crime is due to their lack of professionalism and resources, the lack of cooperation from mobile-phone companies, corruption and the involvement of the military. Because kidnappers almost always use mobile phones, they could be traced to locate and identify the perpetrators. However, telephone providers refuse to divulge data during kidnappings. They only share that data with the criminal justice system several weeks after the incident, at which point it is too late to use it to find the kidnappers. Their collaboration is generally limited to providing evidence during trials, and some see their reluctance to become more involved in the fight against kidnappings as a form of complicity.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, corruption is systemic in the police and judiciary, and they are frequently accused of being bribed by arrested kidnappers or even of being accomplices to their crimes. These accusations of complicity even come from within the ranks of the police.<sup>49</sup>

There is also evidence of complicity between kidnappers and soldiers. In addition to the arrest of a captain who had deserted and his men who were committing kidnappings on the road leading from the Kahuzi-Biega Park to Bunyakiri (South Kivu), many people wonder about the ease with which kidnappings take place near military installations. For example, the Goma–Rutshuru road is one of the most dangerous, despite the heavy deployment of the Congolese army, which has troops permanently stationed there because it is a strategic route. Many sources believe that kidnappings on this road are co-organized by the military, gangs and armed groups (particularly the FDLR, against whom the Congolese army is supposed to be fighting).<sup>50</sup> In November 2021, the kidnapping of two ICRC staff on the Goma–Saké road took place near a military post.<sup>51</sup>

In February 2021, in the villages of Luvungi and Lemera in South Kivu (Ruzizi Plain), four people were kidnapped by armed men in civilian clothes. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of US\$2 500 per hostage, but during the negotiations, two of them were identified as the bodyguards of the colonel commanding the battalion based in Luvungi. After spending four months in Luvungi, the colonel was able to buy a US\$45 000 4x4. The inhabitants of the area organized demonstrations to demand he be replaced and were successful.<sup>52</sup>

In 2020 in North Kivu, two alleged kidnappers, Héritier Garuku and Claude Fate, took refuge with the 3416th infantry regiment, whose involvement in kidnappings has been publicly denounced by the community.<sup>53</sup> Although the military prosecutor and the Rutshuru prosecutor's office repeatedly requested the transfer of the two kidnappers, the commander of the regiment never acceded to their requests. The two suspects were finally transferred to the military base in Rumangabo to escape the Rutshuru military prosecutor's investigation.<sup>54</sup> That prosecutor, Major William Assani, was assassinated by unknown persons on 3 March 2021 during a trip between Goma and Rutshuru. The ambush took place in Katale, an area where the 3416th regiment is deployed.<sup>55</sup>

Faced with the passivity and even complicity of the security services and the judiciary, civilians have developed several coping strategies. The first is mistrust of security forces. Thus, in most cases, family members of hostages avoid informing the police or other authorities about the kidnapping so as not to worsen their situation. They are afraid of being forced to pay additional money to the police to investigate and endangering the hostages due to the police force's probable complicity with kidnappers.<sup>56</sup>

Another strategy is to put collective public pressure on the authorities. In North and South Kivu, there have already been community mobilizations against certain officers who were perceived as gang leaders. These mobilizations, which are often supported by local associations and elected officials,

sometimes result in the removal of the person in question. Beyond this kind of short-term solution, some elected officials attempt to put pressure on all the security actors. For example, following the resurgence of kidnappings and child murders in the town of Uvira at the beginning of 2021, the national deputy for Uvira, Claude Misare, asked the security services and local chiefs to strengthen the town's security.<sup>57</sup> He challenged the mayor of the town, called on the General Directorate for Migration to better control entries at the Congolese–Burundian border and encouraged the population to report anything suspicious and people who did not have identity papers.<sup>58</sup>

Lastly, another strategy involves mob justice. Since 2020, in Rutshuru territory, which has been severely affected by kidnappings, the homes of the families of alleged kidnappers have been burnt down and several people suspected of being kidnappers have been killed.<sup>59</sup> Lynchings are not uncommon,<sup>60</sup> and, during the kidnapping of children in Uvira, angry inhabitants organized a demonstration on 30 June 2021 with the aim of finding the criminals responsible and bringing them to justice. The demonstration resulted in three deaths: an alleged kidnapper, a police officer and a young demonstrator. None of these strategies have been successful in reducing kidnappings.





## CONCLUSION

**T**he intensification of the kidnapping business in eastern DRC is a relatively recent criminal phenomenon. For two decades, the UN has documented the crimes committed by armed groups and Congolese security forces.<sup>61</sup> The new practice of kidnapping by these two entities confirms the constant diversification of their sources of funding. From the illegal exploitation of mining sites to the charcoal trade, to illegal tolls on the roads and trafficking of all kinds, armed groups and the military exploit all the economic opportunities that the use of coercion offers them. In doing so, they play a leading role in the criminal economy of the region. Kidnapping is a new form of racketeering that they have added to their extensive extortion apparatus – an apparatus that allows them to live off the population and contributes to its impoverishment.

Kidnappings increase insecurity in the towns and villages of North and South Kivu and have a range of negative consequences for residents. Victims often suffer physical and psychological trauma, including mental illness due to post-traumatic stress. When victims have suffered sexual violence, they may be stigmatized and rejected by their families or husbands. Former hostages who are farmers are afraid to cultivate their fields and lose their livelihood as a result.

As kidnappings no longer spare the poor, they increase financial precarity. In order to pay the ransoms, victims' families are sometimes forced to borrow money or sell their few possessions (houses or land), leaving them without any source of income. Except in the case of Congolese employees of international organizations, the families of the kidnapped bear the burden of the ransom on their own, which causes serious financial difficulties.<sup>62</sup>

The kidnapping business reveals the close-knit relationship between the security forces and the forces driving insecurity in the Kivus. The army's cooperation with criminal actors means that the military has reversed its mission: instead of fighting the armed groups, it has established a way to operate with them – providing them with weapons, information, even protection – and has piggybacked on their criminal activities.

Ultimately, the security forces are no longer a resource in the fight against crime, as they are largely responsible for it. The police cannot curb the abuses of the army, which historically has enjoyed exorbitant privileges. The government's declaration of a state of emergency has only increase the army's power, making a stronger police response impossible. Since the police and military authorities will not address the kidnapping business, Kivuans must organize to force the government to act against kidnapers.

As kidnapping has become more widespread, both kidnapers and victims come from all social sectors. Driven by poverty, ordinary people turn to kidnapping, becoming more professional over time. They



The kidnapping business reveals the close-knit relationship between the security forces and the forces driving insecurity in North and South Kivu. © Alex McBride/AFP via Getty Images

are often not full-time kidnapers: they participate in legal and illegal activities and form armed bands or gangs that are relatively short-lived (as evident in the seasonal nature of kidnappings). The social expansion of brigandage is a symptom of a growing part of the population turning to opportunistic crime as a survival strategy. This criminalization of society leads to trivialization and an increase in violence, creating a vicious cycle over time: poverty leads to the criminalization of society, which leads to an increase in violence, leading to more poverty.

The kidnapping business also demonstrates how criminals quickly adopt new technologies, even in a non-industrialized society. The 'mobile money' system, which is becoming widespread among the Kivuan population, was immediately taken up by kidnapers to reduce the risk of identification, or even arrest, when receiving a ransom payment.

## Recommendations

To curb the widespread use of kidnappings in the eastern DRC, the following actions are recommended:

- Opinion leaders (including the media, elected representatives, civil society organizations and churches) should demand a regular rotation of military units in the Kivus. Units should not be stationed for more than one year in the same territory.
- Journalists should investigate the criminal activities of military units and their involvement in the kidnapping business. Based on these investigations, the communities concerned should publicly and collectively put pressure on government authorities to enact criminal sanctions against the soldiers responsible rather than just relocating them.
- Anti-kidnapping training should be organized for particularly affected or targeted groups (including employees of NGOs, bus drivers and students). Although some international organizations already provide this training, it should be extended to the Congolese through professional organizations and educational institutions.
- Preventive actions must be taken. Since poverty drives the criminalization of society, the government and donors must make the fight against poverty a priority in this region while also bolstering security efforts.
- To curb the use of mobile phone money transfers for ransom payments, telephone companies must cooperate fully and promptly in investigations. The Congolese government must take up this issue and reach an agreement with phone providers regarding how they will work with the police and judicial system.



## NOTES

- 1 Julian Rademeyer, Held to ransom: An overview of Mozambique's kidnapping crisis, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), 20 December 2015, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/held-to-ransom-an-overview-of-mozambiques-kidnapping-crisis>.
- 2 *Kidnappings à Lubumbashi: Les autorités appellent les enfants à la vigilance*, Radio Okapi, 24 July 2021, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/07/24/actualite/securite/kidnappings-lubumbashi-les-autorites-appellent-les-enfants-la>.
- 3 There are approximately 120 armed groups in eastern DRC. Congo Research Group and NYU Center on International Cooperation, The landscape of armed groups in Eastern DRC, Kivu Security Tracker, February 2021, <https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/39/2021%20KST%20report%20EN.pdf>.
- 4 Human Rights Center, *Vivre dans la peur: Une étude réalisée au sein de la population sur la paix, la justice et la reconstruction sociale dans l'est de la république*, August 2008, <https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/living-with-fear-french-trans.-august-2008.pdf>.
- 5 RDC: Félix Tshisekedi crée le Programme de désarmement, démobilisation, relèvement, communautaire et stabilisation, Actualite.CD, 5 July 2021, <https://actualite.cd/2021/07/05/rdc-felix-tshisekedi-cree-le-programme-de-desarmement-demobilisation-relevement>.
- 6 Interviews with members of civil society, Goma and Rutshuru, November 2011.
- 7 Interview with a child protection police officer, Goma, 3 November 2021.
- 8 Conflict Research Group, Conflict and social transformation in Eastern DRC, 2004.
- 9 Agence d'Information d'Afrique Centrale, *Nord Kivu: Les trois humanitaires enlevés enfin libres*, 8 March 2016, <https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/nord-kivu-les-trois-humanitaires-enlevés-enfin-libres-47167>; Three ICRC workers kidnapped in DRC, News24, <https://www.news24.com/News24/three-icrc-workers-kidnapped-in-drc-20160503>.
- 10 *RD Congo: Deux touristes britanniques enlevés avec leur chauffeur*, *Le Parisien*, 12 May 2018, <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/rd-congo-deux-touristes-britanniques-enlevés-avec-leur-chauffeur-12-05-2018-7712139.php>.
- 11 Interview with members of civil society, Goma and Rutshuru, November 2021.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Interviews with members of civil society, Goma, November 2021.
- 14 Human Rights Watch, DR Congo: Kidnappings skyrocket in east, 16 December 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/dr-congo-kidnappings-skyrocket-east>; *DRC: Des imams Tanzaniens kidnappés à Rutshuru*, Radio Okapi, 5 August 2015, <https://www.radiookapi.net/actualite/2015/08/05/rdc-des-imams-tanzaniens-kidnappés-rutshuru>; *Nord-Kivu: Une ONG dénonce la récurrence des kidnappings à Rutshuru et Lubero*, Radio Okapi, 31 October 2016, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2016/10/31/actualite/securite/nord-kivu-une-ong-denonce-la-recurrence-des-kidnappings-rutshuru-et>; Ester Nsapu, *RDC: L'insupportable business du kidnapping dans le Rutshuru*, *La Libre Afrique*, 26 April 2018, <https://afrique.lalibre.be/18374/rdc-linsupportable-business-du-kidnapping-dans-le-rutshuru/>.
- 15 For more, see Jean Batory and Thierry Vircoulon, 2017, *une année non électorale: Cartographie analytique des 'points chauds' de la République Démocratique du Congo*, French Institute of International Relations, March 2018, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/2017-une-annee-non-electorale-cartographie-analytique-points-chauds-de>.
- 16 *Goma au défi des violents raptés d'enfants*, VOA, 20 November 2017, <https://www.voaafric.com/a/maman-on-me-tue-en-rdc-goma-au-defi-des-violents-raptés-d-enfants/4126280.html>; En RDC, les enfants volés de Goma, *Le Monde*, 8 February 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/02/08/en-rdc-les-enfants-voles-de-goma\\_5253829\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/02/08/en-rdc-les-enfants-voles-de-goma_5253829_3212.html); Cosmas Kakola, *A Goma, les kidnappeurs d'enfants sont nos voisins*, Habari RDC, 23 December 2017, <https://habarirdc.net/kidnappeurs-enfants-goma-voisins-payer-rancon-nord-kivu-rdc/>.
- 17 Interviews with members of civil society, Bukavu and Goma, July 2017 and November 2021.



- 18 Due to its long-standing community networks, South Kivu was the first DRC province to set up a Regional Council of Development NGOs and was followed by the other provinces in the 1990s.
- 19 *Est de la RDC: Le kidnapping d'enfants, un business florissant*, Anadolu Agency, 16 June 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/est-de-la-rdc-le-kidnapping-denfants-un-business-florissant/842898>.
- 20 Marc-André Lagrange and Thierry Vircoulon, *Criminals or vigilantes? The Kuluna gangs of the Democratic Republic of Congo*, GI-TOC, May 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kuluna-gangs-democratic-republic-congo/>.
- 21 Human Rights Watch, *DR Congo: Gangs kidnap, rape in national park*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/30/dr-congo-gangs-kidnap-rape-national-park>.
- 22 Interviews with NGO members, Goma, November 2021.
- 23 *Synergie des jeunes pour le développement et les droits humains, Fiche de monitoring des incidents de kidnapping dans le territoire de Rutshuru*, March to October 2021.
- 24 Interview with members of civil society, Goma, November 2021.
- 25 Interview with civil society coordination office, Bukavu, 22 October 2021.
- 26 Telephone interview with NGO member, Goma, January 2022.
- 27 *A Goma, les kidnappeurs d'enfants sont nos voisins*, Habari RDC, 23 December 2017, <https://habarirdc.net/kidnappeurs-enfants-goma-voisins-payer-rancon-nord-kivu-rdc/>.
- 28 Interview with Bisimwa Ciharamagara, Bukavu, 8 November 2021.
- 29 Telephone interview with the public relations officer of Congo Bluant Mineral, 20 October 2021; *Sud-Kivu: Les 3 sujets chinois enlevés depuis un mois dans le Mwenga, retrouvés dans un état critique à Lulimba*, L'Interview.CD, 22 December 2019, <https://l'interview.cd/sud-kivu-les-3-sujets-chinois-enleves-depuis-un-mois-dans-le-mwenga-retrouves-dans-un-etat-critique-a-lulimba>; Ministry of Mines, *Note d'information du 13 janvier 2020 à la bienveillante attention de son excellence M. le Premier ministre*, 13 January 2020; Action des Chrétiens Activistes des Droits de l'Homme à Shabunda and the International Peace Information Service, *Analyse des incidents dans la chaîne d'approvisionnement de l'exploitation minière artisanale dans le territoire de Shabunda (Sud-Kivu)*, May 2020, [https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/07.2020\\_Voix\\_du\\_Congo\\_ACADOSHA.pdf](https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/07.2020_Voix_du_Congo_ACADOSHA.pdf).
- 30 Telephone interview with victim Batachoka Jongo Joseph, 21 October 2021.
- 31 Interview with the founder of the Maman Sophie School, Goma, 9 September 2021.
- 32 *Nord-Kivu: Tentative d'enlèvement des élèves dans une école à Beni*, Radio Okupa, 12 May 2021, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/05/12/actualite/securite/nord-kivu-tentative-denlevement-des-eleves-dans-une-ecole-beni>.
- 33 *RD Congo: L'ambassadeur d'Italie a-t-il été victime du 'business du kidnapping'?*, *Le Soir*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.lesoir.be/356967/article/2021-02-23/rd-congo-lambassadeur-ditalie-t-il-ete-victime-du-business-du-kidnapping>.
- 34 Interview with ICRC staff, Goma, December 2021.
- 35 Interview with NGO members, Goma, November 2021; Justin Mwetaminwa and Thierry Vircoulon, *Un scandale sino-congolais: L'exploitation illégale des mines et des forêts par les entreprises chinoises au Sud-Kivu*, October 2021.
- 36 Interviews with victims in the villages of Luvungi and Sange and with members of the anti-gang police in South Kivu, French Institute of International Relations, October 2021.
- 37 Interview with a family member of one of the victims, Bukavu, 8 October 2021; *RDC: Après quatre jours d'otage, les trois agents de IMC et un infirmier sont libérés par des bandits armés à Fizi*, Actualité.CD, 9 October 2021, <https://actualite.cd/2021/10/09/rdc-apres-quatre-jours-dotage-les-trois-agents-de-imc-et-un-infirmier-sont-liberes-par>.
- 38 Like other African countries, the DRC has seen a real craze for 'mobile money' in recent years. All cellular telephone operators in the DRC offer mobile payment systems (money transfer, savings, credit recharging, bill payment, etc.), without the subscriber's telephone number being linked to a bank account. It is estimated that there are currently more than 2 million active users of telephone-based financial services in the DRC, out of a total of 35 million mobile phone subscribers. *RDC: L'inclusion financière par le 'mobile banking'*, Financial Afrik, 8 July 2016, <https://www.financialafrik.com/2016/07/08/rdc-linclusion-financiere-par-le-mobile-banking/>.
- 39 Interview with mother of children kidnapped in July 2021, Bukavu, November 2021.
- 40 Telephone interviews with NGO members, Goma, January 2022.
- 41 *RDC: Un commandant de la police kidnappé par des miliciens à Lubero*, Radio Okapi, 1 July 2017, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2017/07/01/actualite/securite/rdc-un-commandant-de-la-police-kidnappe-par-des-miliciens-lubero>.
- 42 *Femmes accusées de kidnapping: 2 peines de prison et 3 acquittements prononcés*, Radio Okapi, 8 June 2017, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2017/06/08/actualite/justice/femmes-accusees-de-kidnapping-2-peines-de-prison-et-3-acquittements>.
- 43 Interview with the first president of the Military Court of South Kivu, Bukavu, 10 November 2021.
- 44 Interviews with members of civil society, Goma and Rutshuru, November 2021.
- 45 *Ordonnance du 3 mai 2021 portant proclamation de l'état de siège sur une partie de la République Démocratique du Congo*, Office of the President of the DRC, 3 May 2021.

- 46 *Goma, ville sous état de siège: À Goma, les kidnappings d'enfants continuent*, Radio France Internationale, 13 November 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/reportage-afrique/20211112-goma-ville-sous-%C3%A9tat-de-si%C3%A8ge-2-3-%E2%80%93-%C3%A0-goma-les-kidnapping-d-enfants-continuent>; Adolphe Agenonga, *Est de la RDC: Le paradoxe d'un état de siège et d'une insécurité grandissante*, Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité, 2021, <https://grip.org/est-rdc-paradoxe-etat-siege-insecurite-grandissante>.
- 47 Interview with NGO members, Bukavu, December 2022.
- 48 This assertion was often repeated during interviews and was publicly uttered during a radio programme devoted to the problem of kidnappings. *Comment mettre fin au phénomène kidnapping*, Radio Okapi, 1 December 2020, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/12/01/emissions/okapi-service/comment-mettre-fin-au-phenomene-kidnapping>.
- 49 Interview with a member of the PNC Provincial Commissariat, Bukavu, 10 November 2021.
- 50 Interviews with NGO members, Goma, November 2021.
- 51 Interview with ICRC staff, Goma, December 2021.
- 52 Telephone interviews with members of civil society in Luvungi and Lemera, 10 November 2021.
- 53 TV programme on the public mobilization against the 3416th regiment: *Nord-Kivu: La population de Rutshuru réclame la mutation du 3416 Régiment FARDC*, B-One TV Congo, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoZlkeUc7kU>.
- 54 Interviews with members of civil society, Goma and Rutshuru, November 2021.
- 55 *Nord-Kivu: L'auditeur militaire du Parquet de Rutshuru est mort dans une ambuscade des hommes armés à Katala*, Radio Okapi, 3 March 2021, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/03/03/actualite/securite/nord-kivu-lauditeur-militaire-du-parquet-de-rutshuru-est-mort-dans-une>.
- 56 Interviews with NGO members, Goma, November 2021.
- 57 Statement by National MP Claude Misare following the kidnapping of two school children from the same family (Christian Kalulu and his sister Héléne Fatuma) on their way to school on 28 June 2021.
- 58 *Phénomène kidnapping et tueries d'enfants à Uvira: Le député Claude Misare invite les services de sécurité et les autorités locales à jouer pleinement leur rôle*, L'Interview.CD, 3 July 2021, <https://l'interview.cd/phenomene-kidnapping-et-tueries-denfants-a-uvira-le-depute-claude-misare-invite-les-services-de-securite-et-les-autorites-locales-a-jouer-pleinement-leur-role/>.
- 59 Interviews with members of civil society, Rutshuru, November 2021.
- 60 *Nord-Kivu: 6 jeunes présumés kidnappeurs d'un enfant lynchés par la population à Kitshanga*, Radio Okapi, 8 March 2021, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2021/03/08/actualite/securite/nord-kivu-6-jeunes-presumes-kidnappeurs-dun-enfant-lynches-par-la>.
- 61 The United Nations Joint Human Rights Office in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the UN Group of Experts on the DRC have produced reports on this subject.
- 62 *Enlèvement des enfants à Goma: Le calvaire des parents pauvres pour payer les rançons*, Radio Okapi, 12 June 2017, <https://www.radiookapi.net/2017/06/12/actualite/societe/enlevement-des-enfants-goma-le-calvaire-des-parents-pauvres-pour-payer>.



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

**ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)