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Beyond the Jihadist Label: Understanding the ADF's Multilayered Violence

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Abstract

This report argues that violence attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo cannot be understood through a single lens, such as jihadism, but must instead be analysed as a multilayered phenomenon in which ideological, military, political, and economic logics coexist and overlap. While the ADF's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and subsequent financial and ideological links are real and consequential, an exclusive focus on jihadism obscures the group's deep embeddedness in local and regional political economies of violence. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in eastern Congo and Uganda, the article shows how ADF violence is intertwined with taxation, trade, resource extraction, and local power struggles, and how the ADF label itself has become a franchise used by a wide range of actors to conceal or legitimise violence. It concludes that monocausal readings - including recent attempts to frame ADF violence primarily as sectarian or anti-Christian - flatten a far more complex reality and hinder a proper understanding of the drivers of violence in eastern Congo. The ADF, in other words, is not an exception to the Congolese conflict dynamics, but an extreme and particularly violent crystallisation of it.

A NEGLECTED EPICENTRE OF VIOLENCE

For several years, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have been associated with some of the deadliest violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). And yet, paradoxically, the group has attracted remarkably little sustained attention in either media or policy circles. This neglect is all the more striking given the scale and brutality of the attacks commonly attributed to the group. According to the United Nations, between 13 and 19 November last year alone, such attacks killed at least 89 people, including at least 20 women and an unknown number of children (MONUSCO 2025). Earlier, on 8 and 9 September, 72 people were killed during a funeral in Ntoyo village in Lubero territory (ICG 2025). A 2025 report by the UN Security Council further shows that between late November 2024 and late March 2025, a period that coincided with the peak of the M23 offensive and the capture of Goma and Bukavu, the ADF nevertheless remained the single deadliest perpetrator of violence in North Kivu and Ituri, being responsible for at least 455 civilian deaths (UN Security Council 2025).

Despite this scale of violence, attacks attributed to the ADF remain remarkably marginal in international media coverage and policy debates, especially when compared to other armed groups in eastern Congo, such as M23. This relative invisibility is not merely a problem of attention; it also reflects a deeper analytical narrowing in how the group has come to be understood. This report argues that this narrowing is analytically misleading. ADF violence cannot be understood through a single lens - whether jihadist, criminal, or local. Instead, it is best seen as a multilayered and composite phenomenon, in which different logics of violence - ideological, military, political, and economic - coexist, overlap, and are often deliberately entangled. Sometimes these layers reinforce each other; at other times they point in different directions. But in practice, most ADF-related attacks are shaped by several of these logics at once.

In this report, we unpack the different logics that drive violence attributed to the ADF, and show how they intersect in practice. We first situate the ADF within the post-2019 jihadist/Islamic State framing, before turning to the group's embeddedness in eastern Congo's local political economy of violence - taxation, trade, and resource extraction. We then examine how the "ADF" label has become porous and franchised, including through "fake ADF" dynamics and collaboration with other armed actors and state elements, which complicates attribution and motive. The conclusion draws out the implications for understanding - and responding to - ADF-related violence beyond monocausal frames.



THE ADF AS JIHADIST GROUP

In earlier periods, the ADF did attract a certain amount of academic and policy interest, particularly concerning its nature. Was the group primarily a Ugandan-origin rebel movement that had become embedded in Congolese political and economic networks (Flummerfelt and Verweijen 2021, Scorgie 2022, Titeca 2016)? Or was it better understood as part of transnational jihadist dynamics (Candland et al. 2021)? This debate largely came to an end after the ADF formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2019; and especially once a number of studies in 2023 documented financial transfers from the Islamic State to the ADF (UN Security Council 2023; Weiss et al 2023). Since then, the dominant - and often the only - lens through which the group has been analysed has been that of jihadism and terrorism.

The relatively small number of studies that still focus on the ADF have almost exclusively examined its links to the Islamic State, including questions of ideology (O'Farrell et al 2024), financing (Weiss et al 2023), the evolution of the links with IS (Warner 2021), and the group's role in broader jihadist security threats (Makosso and Collinet 2021). This research has produced important and valuable insights, particularly regarding the group's external connections, propaganda strategies, ideology, and the adoption of new tactics such as improvised explosive devices.

Yet taken on its own, this framing is insufficient. Analysing the ADF primarily, or even exclusively, through a jihadist lens obscures more than it explains about the ADF's presence and tactics in eastern Congo. While similar debates have been intensely pursued for other jihadist groups,¹ they have been largely absent in the case of the ADF. This report does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of these discussions, but rather to foreground the complexity of the group and to reopen analytical space for thinking beyond a single explanatory lens.

Based on long-term research and extensive fieldwork in Eastern DRC and Uganda,² this report argues that ADF is driven not only by ideological or religious factors, but also—and crucially—by its deep embeddedness in local, national, and regional political and economic dynamics. Jihadism is real and consequential, but it is only one layer in a complex and entangled system of violence.

THE LOCAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ADF VIOLENCE

One of the most striking features of the ADF is the consistency of its modus operandi over time. Wherever the group establishes itself, it systematically builds relations with key political and economic actors. These relations are not incidental. They are central to how the group survives, finances itself, consolidates control – all of which have an impact on violence attributed to the group.³

Historically, the ADF has been deeply involved in trade in commodities such as cacao, timber coffee, or cannabis. With regards to cacao, quite some research (Agenonga Chober 2025; UN Security Council 2021) has shown how violence often intensifies around harvesting periods, when competition over access, taxation, and control becomes more acute. In more recent years, the group has expanded its business interests towards mining areas, particularly in Ituri, where from 2023 onwards it established itself around a number of mining sites. This move led to violent clashes with other armed groups seeking to secure or retain access to these resources (Mwetaminwa 2024: 13).

Similarly, the ADF has also historically used what amounts to a rudimentary but effective system of governance and extraction in these areas. Farmers are required to pay a monthly tax, in return for which they receive a token, or jeton. This system has, for instance, been implemented in recent years in Lubero (Manguredjipa) and in Mambasa territories, in North Kivu and Ituri provinces respectively.⁴

Through these activities, the group has built up dense and shifting relations with a wide range of local actors - attracting the interest of small local traders but also others: bigger entrepreneurs, senior army officials, politicians and customary leaders. More broadly, the group's embeddedness in local society extends well beyond trade and taxation alone. Civilians are paid for information, for carrying goods, and for supplying food; and some customary chiefs and local politicians transmit messages, manage compliance, or instrumentalise ADF elements to intimidate rivals and settle scores. Their involvement spans a spectrum from coerced compliance to active collaboration and often combines both. In this sense, the ADF itself has become socially entangled in Eastern Congolese society.⁵ Importantly, in doing so, the ADF very much mirrors the practices of other armed actors in Eastern DRC: it uses tools and repertoires which are widely shared across the region's armed landscape.

FAKE ADF, AND THE FRANCHISING OF VIOLENCE AT THE LOCAL LEVELS

Over time, this entanglement has generated an additional and even more destabilising dynamic: the gradual erosion of clear boundaries between what does and what does not count as 'ADF violence'. In practice, one can distinguish between several different forms or registers of violence that are associated with the ADF.

To begin with, some attacks are carried out by actors who are not ADF at all, but who nevertheless use the ADF label in order to conceal their own acts of violence. Over time, the ADF label itself evolved into a kind of umbrella or brand, used by former or current rebels, criminal groups, and local strongmen to conceal their identity and motivations. This 'fake ADF' phenomenon is not a marginal phenomenon, and can happen for a variety of reasons. In conflicts between or among customary chiefs, it for example is a common occurrence. This can happen to settle succession conflicts – in which a heir to the throne is killed by competitors – violence which is then attributed to the ADF (de la Plaga and Titeca 2025).

Economic considerations are equally crucial to understanding this 'fake ADF' phenomenon, of which the cacao trade constitutes one of the most salient examples. Several reports refer to armed actors posing as ADF to operate along the cacao trade routes: Mai-Mai groups; groups of young men also known as the "Tentera" backed by cacao businessmen, and various criminal entrepreneurs – all of which have repeatedly been arrested for staging attacks under the ADF label (Mwetaminwa 2024: 10, Agenonga Chober 2025; UN Security Council 2021). As the old mayor of Beni – long an epicenter of ADF violence – complained in 2024: "Fake ADFs in search of rural products, mainly cocoa, are still at risk of harming the population even after the eradication of real ADF if nothing is undertaken." (Ruzizilaplume 2024). Similarly, an *Administrateur de Territoire* (of Irumi, Ituri) complained in the same period how: "At the moment, there are fake ADF operating. In truth, the spectre of the real ADF continues to haunt the Congolese. Today, people are being killed because of cocoa-related disputes. It is simply hatred." (Radio Okapi 2024). This phenomenon is not limited to the cacao trade alone, but extends in other spheres of business.

Local administrators, MPs, civil society organisations, and army officers have all warned that even if the "real" ADF were to be militarily defeated, ADF-branded violence would likely continue, driven by local conflicts, land disputes, and struggles over cacao and other resources. In this context, ADF violence has become a franchise. The ADF label acquires a life of its own, used by a wide range of actors to terrorize the populations, settle scores, or engage in predation, while at the same time making attribution politically and analytically extremely difficult.⁶

Second, the difference between both 'real' and 'fake' ADF attacks is not a black and white difference: There is also violence in which ADF elements collaborate with local militias, Mai-Mai groups, FARDC elements or criminal networks. The most striking example of this was the Beni 2014 violence between 2014 and 2016, in which nearly 700 people were killed

(HRW 2016). Whereas this violence was put on the ADF, the picture was more complicated, involving both government soldiers, (other) rebel elements, and also fighters from the ADF (CRG 2017). Along the same lines, there have been more recent reports of arrest of various rebels – Mai Mai, but also others - who collaborated with the ADF in attacks, and also staged attacks as the ADF (Radio Okapi 2021). Collaboration between non-ADF actors - both civilians and other armed groups - and the ADF exists along a spectrum. At one end are armed actors who directly participate in ADF attacks; at the other are more indirect and passive forms of involvement, such as providing information about targets or facilitating operations through commercial or logistical support.⁷

Our research in the Bashu area provided a range of manifestations of this spectrum and intertwining between the different actors. One interlocutor for example described how in certain places, large parts of the local population are enmeshed in everyday economic and logistical relations with the ADF, but also with other armed actors:

“In some areas of Bashu such as Mutendero, over 30 per cent of the population collaborate with ADF. X is a farmer and works with the ADF as a guide. The ADF and the Mai-Mai get their beer from X's place. X also has a cassava and maize flour mill that serves everyone: farmers, FARDC, Mai-Mai and ADF”.⁸

This kind of everyday entanglement also helps explain why attribution is so difficult, and why this opacity is further compounded by long-standing and well-documented allegations against elements of the Congolese armed forces. This again was most evident during the wave of violence in Beni between 2014 and 2016, when multiple investigations showed that FARDC elements were involved in organising and carrying out killings (CRG 2016, 2017). While there is no evidence that such involvement has taken place in a similarly systematic and organised manner in recent years, persistent concerns about FARDC complicity remain. These range from accusations of passivity or deliberate inaction - given that several ADF attacks occurred in the immediate vicinity of army positions - to claims that soldiers have sold weapons and ammunition to the ADF, participated in the cacao and gold economies, warned armed groups ahead of operations, or even directly taken part in, or staged, attacks. The emergence of the Wazalendo and other so-called “self-defence” groups has further added to this complexity. Although officially presented as auxiliaries in the fight against the ADF, some of these groups are themselves accused of predation, collusion, or of posing as ADF fighters.⁹

Part of this behaviour is clearly driven by economic incentives—but it cannot be reduced to them alone. It also fits a broader pattern that has been described as a *pompier-pyromane* (firefighter–arsonist) dynamic (Verweijen 2017). In this logic, Congolese politico-military entrepreneurs help provoke or facilitate violence, only to then present themselves as indispensable to its containment—thereby accumulating not only material resources, but also power and political capital. The result is a security landscape in which uniforms, allegiances, and identities are fluid, and in which violence is often both politically instrumentalised and economically motivated.

Lastly, also ‘real’ ADF violence has been part and parcel of these dynamics: On the one hand, the ADF itself uses violence for political, economic, and social purposes. On the other hand, ADF violence is also instrumentalised by others for similar ends. An example of the former is provided by our research in the Bapere area (Lubero, North Kivu), which shows that in the second half of last year ADF attacks in an increasing number of cases specifically targeted communities that refused to pay taxes to the group. An example of the latter dynamic emerges from interviews conducted over the past years, which indicate that from the early 2000s onwards, civilians began paying ADF elements for what were locally referred to as ‘dirty missions’.¹⁰ As one local official explained to us in 2024, farmers and traders started giving ADF commanders bribes for disappearances and murders, turning the group into a violent service provider in local disputes.¹¹ These dynamics have continued throughout the ADF's existence. Our research shows how ADF were being used as what can best be described

as mercenaries, in which they are hired to commit violent acts, to settle political, economic or social scores. Similarly, local leaders established links with ADF factions to bolster their positions in a variety of conflicts – whether this was a conflict with state authorities or other chiefs (UN Security Council 2016: 39-40). The ADF has also played an important role in stoking local tensions for a variety of purposes including recruitment.¹²

More broadly, the porousness of the ADF label should be read as symptomatic of the wider political economy of armed mobilisation in eastern Congo. The tactics described above are not exceptional to the ADF, but form part of a common repertoire through which violence circulates across shifting alliances and uncertain—or deliberately obscured—chains of command.

...AND THE FRANCHIZING OF THE ADF AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL(S)

Importantly, these political motives are not strictly local – the instrumentalization of ADF violence also takes place at regional and national level. In the crowded and fragmented landscape of armed groups in eastern Congo, the ADF has long been instrumentalised by political and government figures— which the 2024 UN Group of Experts report summarized as “over the years, ADF has established close links with several FARDC elements and DRC authorities, including prominent figures” (UN Security Council 2024: 57). Earlier research has shown how Congolese political and military elites have, at times, tolerated or even directly used the ADF as a buffer against rival armed groups, or as a way to block their territorial expansion (Titeca and Vlassenroot 2012).

This instrumentalisation of ADF violence does not stop at Congo’s borders. For years, there have been persistent rumours about murky relationships between elements of the Ugandan security establishment and the ADF. While earlier research already showed how the group could function as a politically convenient threat narrative (Titeca and Fahey 2016), events over the past year suggest that this dynamic has gone even further.

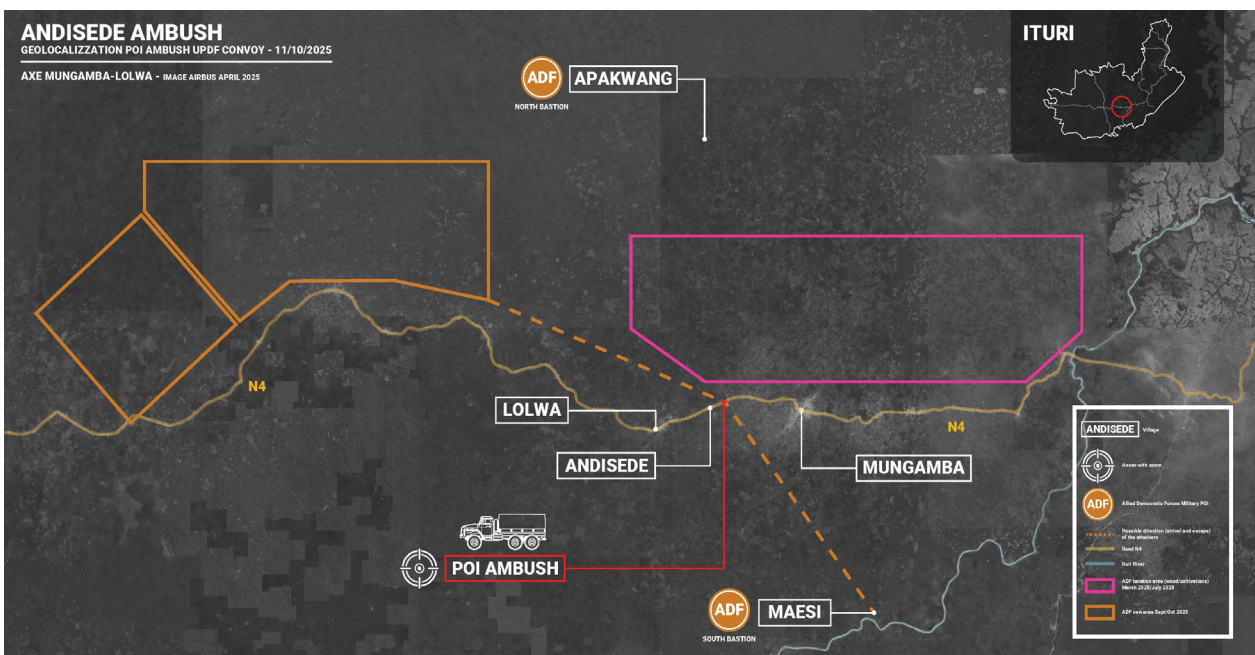
In June 2025, two suicide bombings occurred in Kampala, both of which were attributed to the ADF (Kiiza 2025). However, it soon became clear that while ADF operatives were indeed involved, the attacks had been orchestrated by elements – military commanders - within the Ugandan security services themselves (Kitunzi 2025). The logic was simple: by inflating the threat, they could attract more resources, more influence, and more political leverage — particularly for military intelligence. A number of commanders were arrested, and a commission of inquiry was established, but many fundamental questions remain unanswered (Aine 2025). The main commander who had been arrested, Major General Birungi, was the former head of Uganda’s military intelligence; and had also been temporarily in charge of Operation Shujaa, against the ADF.

THE VARIOUS DRIVERS OF THE ADF VIOLENCE

The main takeaway from the above is that ADF attacks can be driven by a variety of logics. Moreover, one and the same attack in itself is almost never driven by a single logic. They combine, in varying proportions, military, economic, political, and ideological motivations. When the FARDC or the UPDF launch offensives, the ADF often responds with attacks against civilians. But these attacks are rarely “just” retaliation to military attacks. They are also used to secure supplies, to reassert control over taxation systems and trade routes, to punish specific individuals (often collaborators who have betrayed them),¹³ or to reshape local power relations. All of these factors are not peripheral to the conflict. They also structure where violence occurs, when it intensifies, and whom it targets.



A good illustration is the attack on a Ugandan army convoy on the 11th October 2025 in eastern Congo, an operation that was also claimed by the Islamic State – and of which we provide an infographic below. This attack can be read on at least three levels at once. First, it can be understood as a response to Operation Shujaa, the joint Ugandan–Congolese military offensive against the group, which was conducted with particular intensity in that area at the time. The incident can therefore be understood as retaliation for earlier strikes against ADF troops and bases. Second, it was framed by ISIL as part of a global jihadist struggle, who claimed the killing of “3 Ugandan army soldiers in a bloody attack and a sophisticated ambush by the mujahideen in eastern Congo” (Al-Naba 2025). Third, and crucially, it was also about local political economy: our field research showed how the ADF had recently set up a taxation and trade system in the area, and the Ugandan operations were disrupting it. The ambush was therefore a way to reassert control over that system; and push away threats.



This multilayered nature of specific attack was not limited to this example but was also evident in a number of the group's large-scale attacks. On 22 January 2023 in Makungwe, for instance, 23 people were killed and 13 others abducted in an operation that was attributed to the ADF, and claimed by the Islamic State the following day. At the same time, however, the assault also focused on seizing medical supplies and on destroying the house of the local chief. In this way, the operation combined immediate logistical objectives with a deliberate message of intimidation and punishment. Our research shows that the local chief was not a random victim, but a deliberately chosen target of the ADF: the chief was killed due to a series of disputes within the family over the customary power structure. Moreover, he was opposed to efforts of a competing entity to acquire property and exploitation rights over communal land.¹⁴

Incidents of this kind make it difficult to draw unambiguous conclusions about the nature of ADF violence. On the one hand, the Makungwe attack can plausibly be read as an example of 'real' ADF violence, as it displays several of its typical features: a high civilian death toll and the systematic raiding of a medical facility, reflecting the group's chronic need for medical supplies. On the other hand, it is equally possible that the ADF label was used here as a convenient cover. As shown elsewhere (de la Plaga and Titeca 2025), customary and local power struggles have repeatedly instrumentalised the ADF name to mask their own violence, and targeted killings in particular have often been carried out under this guise.

This difficulty illustrates one of the most troubling and consequential features of ADF violence: the near absence of serious forensic and investigative research in its core areas of operation—a gap that has long prompted persistent calls by local civil society actors and politicians in affected areas for more thorough investigations.¹⁵ This deficit is partly a result of the difficult operating environment—both in terms of security constraints and physical access—but it is also, and more fundamentally, a matter of political priorities. Compared to groups such as the M23, the ADF remains strikingly under-studied. In both Kinshasa and Kampala, there is a notable lack of sustained political and analytical interest in developing a deeper understanding of the group. Despite the extremely high levels of violence and civilian killings, ADF violence is widely seen as posing only a limited threat to state or regional security, and it therefore remains low on the political agenda.



CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE JIHADIST LABEL

Understanding the ADF's links to the Islamic State matters. But the group cannot be understood primarily - let alone exclusively - as a Congolese franchise of global jihad. What this article has shown is that ADF violence is fundamentally multilayered: military, political, and economic logics coexist, overlap, and are constantly recombined in practice. Most attacks are not driven by a single motive, but by several at once.

Treating the ADF only as a jihadist organisation therefore obscures more than it explains. It directs attention away from the local and regional political economies of violence that sustain the conflict, from the ways in which ADF violence is entangled with trade networks, local power struggles, military entrepreneurship, and state actors, and from how the ADF label itself has become a resource that many different actors instrumentalise. As long as these dynamics remain unaddressed, the ADF threat will continue to be misunderstood—and violence will continue, with or without the ADF itself.

None of this means that the jihadist dimension is irrelevant. It clearly structures parts of the group's internal organisation, its propaganda, and some of its recruitment, and there are real ideological influences and material connections. But these elements are constantly embedded in, and reshaped by, much more local, tactical, and opportunistic logics. Even attacks that are claimed in the name of global jihad are often simultaneously about taxation, territorial control, punishment, or the settling of very local scores. The ADF does not stand outside the Congolese political economy of violence - it is deeply part of it.

This is also why recent attempts to frame ADF violence primarily as a campaign against Christians (e.g. Sitawa and Suba 2026) are analytically misleading. While religious identity can be mobilised in discourse and propaganda, and while some attacks do target Christian communities, this is rarely the sole or even the main driver of violence. Such framings flatten a much more complex reality and risk reinforcing precisely the kind of monocausal reading that this report has sought to challenge.



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Endnotes

- 1 See for example for Boko Haram (e.g. Higazi et al 2018) the IS-Sahel Province (ISSP) and the IS-West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Ranieri et al 2025)
- 2 This report draws on longstanding research in the Ituri and the Kivu provinces in the DRC; and Uganda, for the last 20 years. For this specific report, research was carried out between April 2024 and October 2025—a period during which around 120 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of actors such as customary chiefs, local officials, civil society members and former combatants.
- 3 Current estimates suggest that the ADF today counts somewhere between roughly 700 and 1,300 or even 1,500 combatants, depending not only on the actual size of the group but also on what qualifies as a “combatant,” with higher estimates including children as combatants. This is significantly less than in earlier periods, largely as a result of sustained military pressure, in particular through joint FARDC-UPDF operations under Operation Shujaa.
- 4 These practices are not unique: these kinds of predatory actions are also used by many other groups in Eastern DRC.
- 5 Interviews with traders, customary chiefs, journalists, former combatants, between April 2024 and September 2025.
- 6 Interviews with traders, customary chiefs, journalists, former combatants, between April 2024 and September 2025.
- 7 Interviews with traders, customary chiefs, journalists, former combatants, between April 2024 and September 2025.
- 8 Interview local notable, Bashu, October 2024.
- 9 There for example have been accusations of sale of ammunition to the ADF by Wazalendo (RFI 2024). Similarly, our research shows that Wazalendo elements have been staging ADF-style attacks.
- 10 Interview local official, Bashu, October 2024.
- 11 Interview local official, Bashu, October 2024.
- 12 For example, in 2020 and 2021 in Southern Ituri, the ADF actively exploited inter-community tensions between the Nyali-Tchabi and the Hutu community. The ADF first organized an attack against the Hutu community, in order to blame the Nyali-Tchabi; and then approached the Hutu community to offer their protection, in exchange for collaboration and recruits. The recruits were consequently dispersed over several camps and groups; and used for operations and attacks. (UN Security Council: 2022: 67-68).
- 13 These actors occupy an intrinsically dangerous and ambiguous position: they are essential to the functioning of the system, yet they are also frequently arrested by the state or targeted - and sometimes executed- by the ADF itself on suspicion of treason or embezzlement.
- 14 Interviews with traders, customary chiefs, journalists, former combatants, between April 2024 and September 2025.
- 15 In these calls, often mention is made to the involvement of the local military forces. The MP Jean-Baptiste Muhindo for example called for investigations into the FARDC in the area “so that ‘this mafia within their ranks’ can be swiftly identified, in order to apply appropriate sanctions and to rotate the troops who have been stationed in this area for too long.” <https://www.radiookapi.net/2022/04/21/actualite/securite/beni-pres-de-50-personnes-tuees-par-les-adf-depuis-le-debut-de-ce-mois>





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