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Aid worker diary: the price of gold in DRC

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6 June 2013, South Kivu, DRC: These women were forced to flee their homes when a rebel group attacked their village in early June. More than 1,400 families have been displaced by this recent outbreak of fighting in the Mwenga region of South Kivu. Credit: OCHA/Philippe Kropf

OCHA's Philippe Kropf provides a snapshot of the crisis in South Kivu, on a journey with his colleague Desire Mirindi to the mining town of Kamituga, where fighting between the rebel group Raia Mutomboki and government forces has displaced and terrorized thousands of people.

The young man on the motorcycle is clearly shaken. "There are bodies of several dead soldiers on the road up ahead," he tells my colleague, Desire Mirindi, from OCHA's coordination section in Bukavu. Desire and I are on our way from Bukavu to the mining town of Kamituga about 120 kilometres to the West. Heavy fighting between the national army and the armed group *Raia Mutomboki* recently reached this part of South Kivu province.

We are travelling to Kamituga to meet the local authorities, humanitarian agencies and representatives of civil society to get a clearer picture of the humanitarian fallout from this recent outbreak of violence.

"The fighting started in the town of Isopo, about 25 kilometres to the North-East of Kamituga," Desire explains as our driver navigates our four-wheel drive along a dirt road. "*Raia Mutomboki*

attacked the military positions there. We have arrived at a bad time."

Unspeakable horror

Our first stop is at Kamituga's hospital. The head doctor greets us with horrible news.

"The first two rape victims arrived at this hospital this morning," he tells Desire, shaking his head in despair. "There was one young woman of 18 years and another six-year-old girl." He said he anticipated more arrivals in the next few days.

Rates of sexual violence in eastern DRC are some of the highest in the world. According to the United Nations Population Fund, over 5,000 cases of sexual or gender-based violence were recorded in South Kivu in 2012, which is likely to be an underestimate. Social stigma, lack of access to communication, and a widespread culture of impunity mean that many victims do not report attacks. All parties here have been responsible for these horrific violations of international law.

"The mines of Mwenga are the goal of the *Raia Mutomboki*"

Mwenga Territory is rich in gold and other precious minerals. The streets of Kamituga are lined with shops that buy gold. People here have a relatively high disposable income, in stark contrast with the rest of the country where most people live on less than a dollar a day. "The whole town depends on the gold business," Desire explains. "People choose not to cultivate their fields but rather dig for gold and many children work in the mines."

At night we meet a high ranking government official. "The mines of Mwenga are the goal of the *Raia Mutomboki*," he tells us. "They want to take control of them to buy more weapons and ammunition."

His views are shared by members of the humanitarian community, one of whom tells us: "They (*Raia Mutomboki*) seem to have forgotten about their origins."

Raia Mutomboki was originally a self-defense organization established by villagers in Shabunda in the centre of South Kivu. But the group has turned increasingly violent and is accused of grave human rights abuses over the past couple of years. *Raia Mutomboki* members also pose a threat to humanitarian agencies, and have forced the relocation of three projects from Shabunda territory because of safety concerns. Predictably, the losers are those who need assistance.

The group's attacks on military positions have triggered large movements of people. In January, fighting between *Raia Mutomboki* and government forces caused more than 25,000 people to flee their homes in Walungu and Sabunda territories.

"We have been walking for two days"

The next morning, on the road back to Bukavu, we came across small groups of mostly women and children carrying their belongings with them in. Talking to them, Mirindi learns that they fled Isopo when fighting broke out, seeking safety in Kamituga.

"We've been walking for two days now," one woman tells us. "There was lots of shooting around our village. Some of the young men stayed back and are hiding in the forest. All the others left the village."

We later learned that *Raia Mutomboki* burned 10 houses in Isopo to the ground. Since fighting started at the

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beginning of June, about 1,400 families have been displaced across Mwenga, according to some of our local partners.

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