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The weight of silence : How the Mobondo revolt is shaking western DRC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Executive summary

Since June 2022, the western part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been in the grip of a major security and humanitarian crisis, long ignored by national authorities and international partners. This conflict, centred in the territory of **Kwamouth** (province of **Maï-Ndombe**), has already claimed more than **5,000 lives**, led to the **displacement of nearly 280,000 people**, and is now affecting five provinces: **Maï-Ndombe, Kwango, Kwilu, Kongo Central** and the rural commune of Maluku in **Kinshasa**. While attention is usually focused on the east of the country, the west is sinking into a spiral of violence whose causes and dynamics are complex, combining conflicts over access to land, the weakening of customary power, socio-economic marginalisation and political exploitation.

This report analyses the root causes of the security crisis affecting western DRC, a conflict on the outskirts of Kinshasa, the country's capital. It aims to shed light on inter-community tensions by placing them in their historical, administrative and socio-economic contexts, while contributing to a better understanding of the armed movement 'Mobondo', which fuels the conflict. By mapping the crisis, the study aims to help develop conflict resolution strategies based on a rigorous analysis of local dynamics.

Research methodology

The study, which focuses on the territory of Kwamouth and the rural commune of Maluku (Kinshasa), is based on a mixed approach combining:

- A **database of more than 328 incidents** recorded by CDJP Kinshasa since the beginning of the crisis in June 2022;
- A **review of existing literature** on the region and the conflict;
- Field surveys conducted between January and September 2025, including **185 semi-structured interviews and 25 focus groups** with affected populations, former Mobondo fighters, local authority representatives, economic players, civil society organisations and academics.

The findings and recommendations of this research are a first step towards a better understanding of the crisis, and underline the need to extend the analysis to other areas that are also affected by the crisis, particularly the territories of Popokabaka and Kenge (Kwango province).

A crisis sparked by a local land dispute turned regional revolt

The trigger for the conflict dates back to **June 2022**, when tensions erupted over the increase in customary taxes imposed by Teke chiefs on Yaka farmers in the village of Masia-Mbe. The murder of a tenant farmer during this protest led to a series of violent reprisals and the formation of a militia named **'Mobondo'**.

Within a few months, this localised revolt evolved into a **widespread armed movement**, mobilising hundreds of young men from marginalised rural communities, frustrated by unequal access to land, unemployment, corruption and the absence of public authority. The violence, initially confined to Kwamouth, spread in 2023 to **Maluku**, in the heart of the 'Bateke Plateau'1, then to the neighbouring provinces of **Kwango** and **Kwilu**, reaching the outskirts of Kinshasa.

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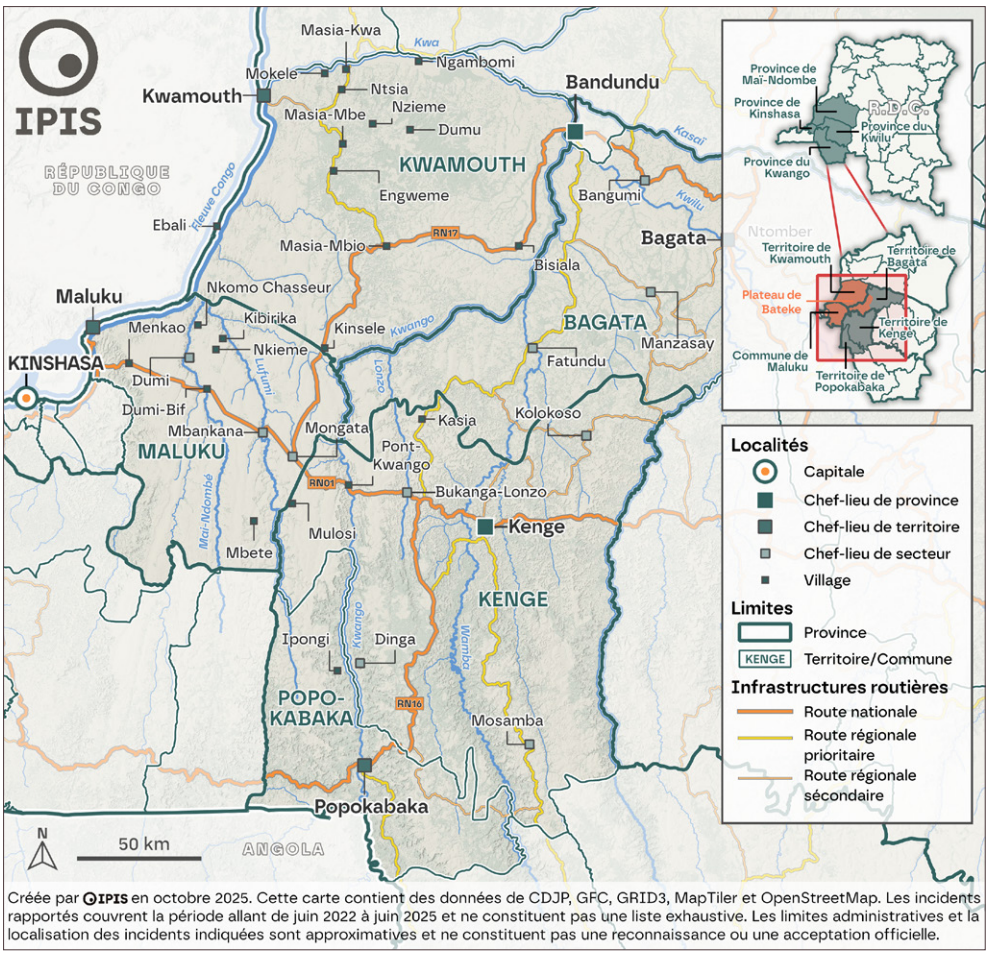

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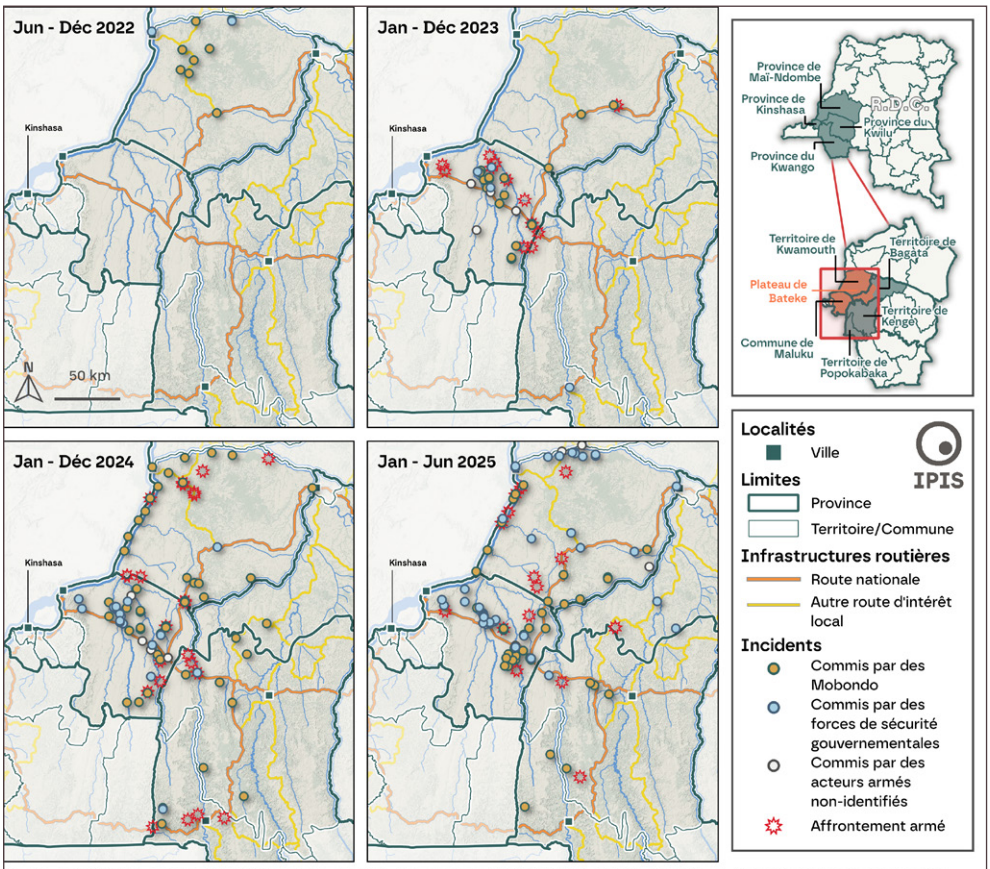
◄ **Areas affected by the Mobondo revolt and the subsequent security and humanitarian crisis.**



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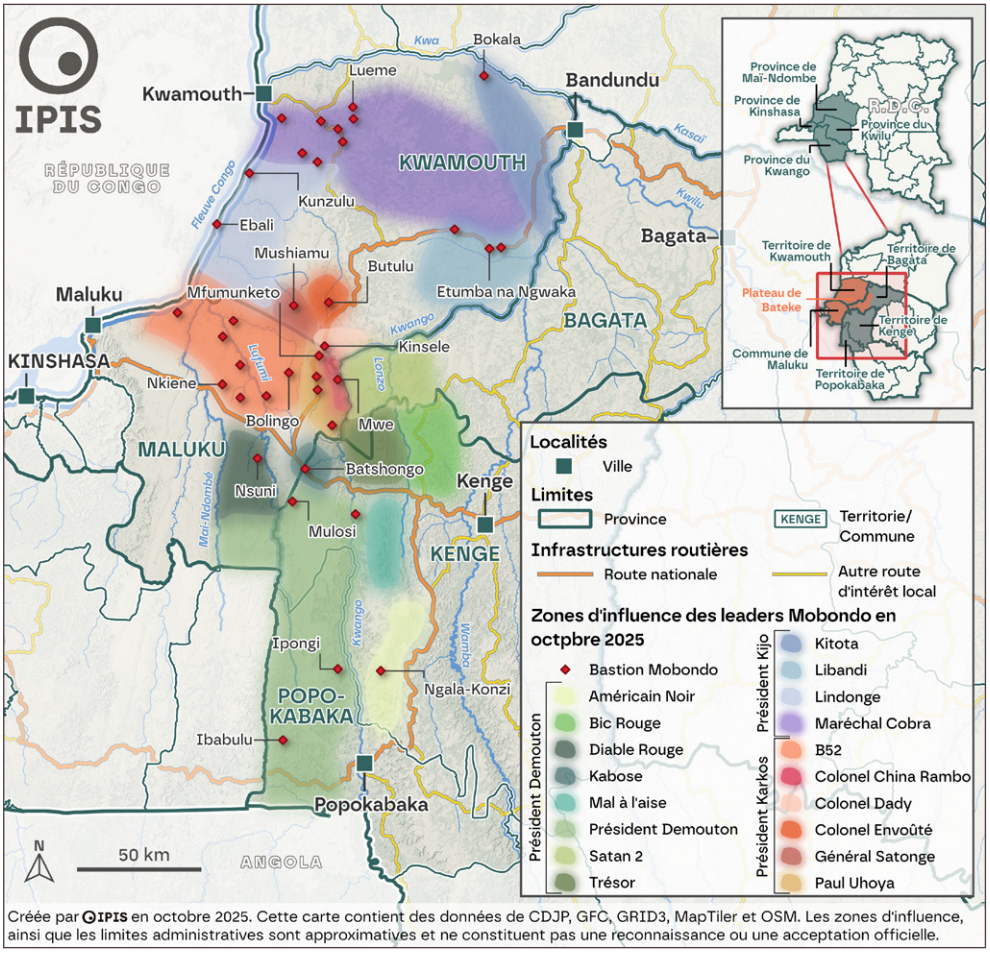
◄ **The spatial distribution of incidents over time highlights the territorial expansion of the crisis.**

The Mobondo: part social movement, mystical militia and criminal enterprise

Rather than a structured armed group, the Mobondo movement is a shifting collection of local factions, organised around self-proclaimed leaders, diverse objectives and traditional beliefs.

The decentralised nature of the Mobondo phenomenon leads to considerable variation in behaviour and demands within the movement, making it difficult to identify the different groups.

Nevertheless, there is also an overall structure to the Mobondo movement. The name 'Kiamvu' Kimona Kumbu Odon is frequently cited as one of the alleged founders of the Mobondo movement and as the instigator of the Teke-Yaka conflict. At lower hierarchical levels, 'presidents' and 'generals' are each responsible for a specific geographical area. The map below shows some of the most important factions. A more detailed picture of the various Mobondo factions and strongholds is provided in the full report's appendices.



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◄ **Location of Mobondo strongholds and the various factions' zones of influence.**

One of the most striking aspects of the 'Mobondo' movement is its mystical nature and the militiamen's use of fetishes, i.e. a set of objects and rituals supposed to make the fighters invincible, a belief shared by both the fighters themselves and their victims.

There are many reasons for joining the movement: the quest for social justice, the promise of access to land, a spirit of revenge against the customary authorities perceived as corrupt, but also opportunism and the pursuit of profit.

> "[The Mobondo leaders] told us they were going to give us a piece of land and some money. But so far, they haven't given us anything concrete."
>
> Interview with former Mobondo fighters, Maluku, May 2025.

Over time, several factions have emerged within the militia. On the Bateke Plateau, attacks primarily target Teke chiefs and their relatives, accused of selling land and exploiting the tenant farmers, with the aim of driving the Teke off the Plateau and seizing control of local land. In Kwango province, groups known as 'Mobondo Kuluna' claim to be part of the movement in order to commit acts of banditry that have no community motivation.

This hybrid nature makes the crisis particularly difficult to contain. The movement has no centralised chain of command: factions act autonomously, rely on local war economies (illegal taxes, extortion, looting, and control of charcoal trade routes) and regularly fragment due to internal rivalries.

Root causes and governance issues

The conflict is rooted in deeper local tensions and issues that go far beyond the simple increase in customary taxes that sparked the violence in the first place.

Socio-economic and land upheavals

The gradual integration of the Bateke Plateau into Kinshasa's peri-urban economy, due to population growth in the capital, has increased pressure on agricultural land. Over the last decades, the region's fertile land has attracted Yaka, Suku and Pelende migrants, seeking livelihoods as a result of poverty and lack of economic opportunities in their home provinces (notably Kwango). Tensions have increased over land tenure practices:

- **Land transformation and customary abuses:** The arrival of migrant populations has profoundly altered the land allocation system. Some farmers now sublet small plots, and the increased profitability of the land has prompted Teke chiefs to unilaterally increase customary taxes (from 1 to 4-5 bags of maize per season).

- **Land grabbing and speculation:** Teke customary authorities have facilitated the massive sale of land to Congolese political elites (such as Laurent Batumona, Vital Kamerhe and Joseph Kabila). These transactions have exacerbated land scarcity and made (small) agricultural producers more vulnerable. This has created a precarious economic situation and heightened tensions within communities.

- **Weakening of customary authority:** The combination of unregulated sales, corruption and succession disputes has undermined the authority of Teke chiefs. Some members of the local elite, accused of 'betraying their ancestors', have favoured other interests to the detriment of their peers, provoking a crisis of legitimacy within the customary authority.

> "When the waters and forests are sold, the [spirits of] the ancestors have nowhere to stay. They're gone and we no longer have protection. The chiefs have sold everything, it's their fault."
>
> Interview with a Teke land chief, Kwamouth, May 2025.

The absence of the Congolese state and impunity

The absence of strong state authority in the country's rural areas is a structural cause of the conflict, allowing it to erupt and rapidly escalate.

- **Failure of governance:** The Congolese state has allowed illegal land transactions to proliferate, while contributing to the scarcity of land through the involvement of certain administrative authorities in the acquisition of titles by political players. The lack of official documentation on leased or sold land exacerbates this opacity.

- **In terms of protection of civilians**, local and customary authorities, who lack the resources, have been unable to contain an unprecedented crisis marked by massacres, looting and arson, while the central government has been slow to respond adequately.

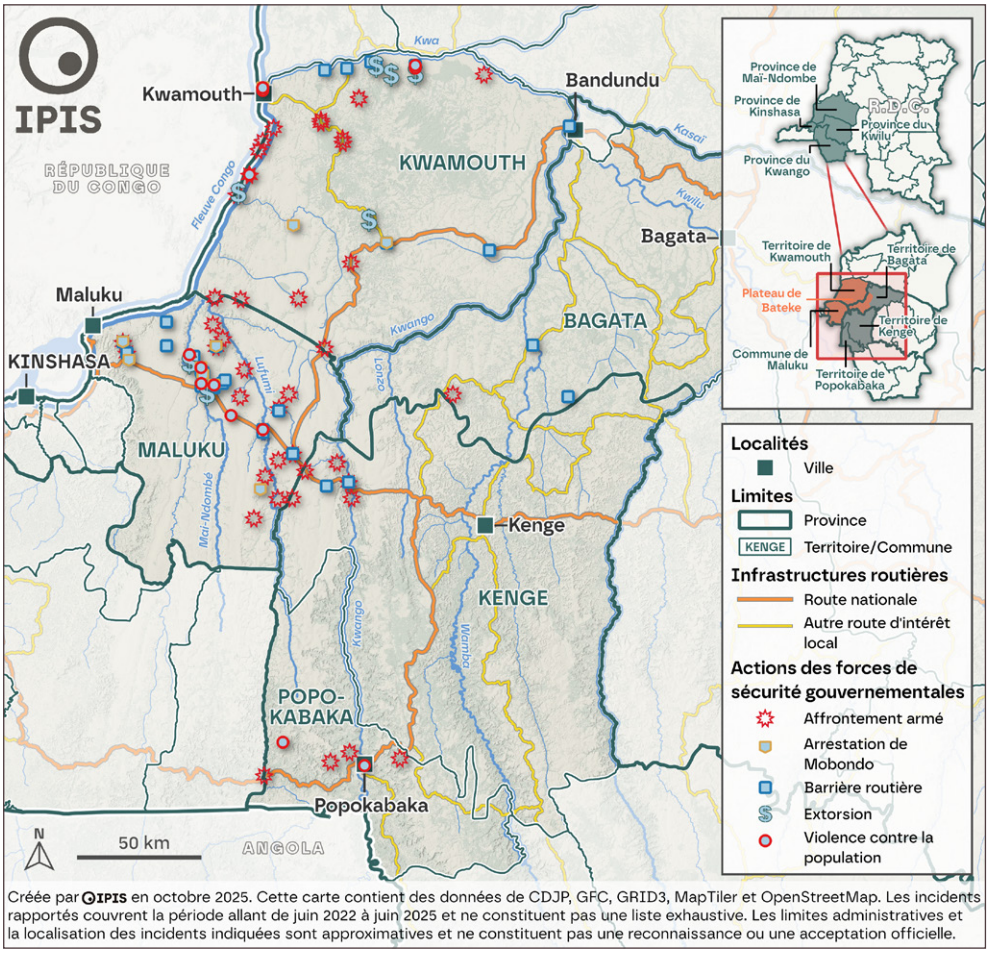
- **The profiteering of members of the security forces:** Although deployed to protect civilians, some elements of the security forces are accused of inaction, extortion of the population and illegal taxation on the roads, as well as collaboration with Mobondo militiamen.

- **Failure of mediation:** The peace initiatives supported by the government, such as the

mediations conducted in 2022 and 2024, and the September 2024 agreement, have not produced the expected results. Fabrice Zombi Kavabioko, known as 'Mini-Kongo', the mediator appointed by the government in 2022, was perceived by the Teke populations as being close to the Yaka elites, which undermined the credibility of the state. Similarly, the appointment of a Teke facilitator in 2024 provoked mistrust among Yaka players. The involvement of players not mandated by local communities in these processes initiated by Kinshasa has accentuated the mistrust and disengagement of the populations concerned.

"The government isn't doing anything about this crisis. Even for those of us who have lost loved ones, it isn't doing anything for us. The traditional chiefs are afraid because others have been killed. The military was sent to protect the people and their property, but they've joined forces with the Mobondo, stealing people's belongings and distributing them among themselves."

Interview with a villager from Kibirika, Maluku, February 2025.



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◀ **Incidents involving Congolese armed forces (FARDC) between June 2022 and June 2025.**

Political exploitation of the crisis

The **rapid spread of the conflict** to neighbouring provinces, after it broke out in Kwamouth, led several local players to suspect the existence of a pre-established plan or 'main noire' orchestrating the violence on the Bateke Plateau. According to this interpretation, the customary tax was merely a pretext used by some to implement Yaka hegemonic ambitions.

Various arguments have been put forward to support this claim. A letter from 2021 from Kiamvu Odon

Kimona, an influential Yaka figure, reportedly challenged the legitimacy of the Teke chiefs, renaming the Bateke Plateau the 'Lunda Plateau'. Testimonies report that he incited disobedience with regard to the payment of customary taxes. Since the start of the crisis in 2022, Yaka chiefs have been installed in several villages on the Bateke Plateau by the Mobondo. In order to erase any claim to Teke property, the Mobondo have even gone so far as to rename the villages they occupy.

However, while there is undoubtedly political and economic exploitation of the conflict, it is difficult to see it as a single, coordinated plan. In fact, various opportunistic players appear to have exploited the crisis to serve their own interests. Hence, the absence of the state and the precarious situation of young people have enabled these conflict entrepreneurs to transform local land tensions into a wave of regional violence.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Mobondo crisis in western DRC reveals the deep divisions in a country seeking peace and social justice. Resulting from a land dispute and exacerbated by political exploitation and the collapse of governance, it threatens coexistence between communities on the outskirts of Kinshasa. Just like the conflicts in eastern DRC and elsewhere, marginalisation, competition for resources, land scarcity, the establishment of armed groups and economic predation risk entrenching this crisis in a lasting cycle of violence.

Given the complexity and sensitivity of the conflict, the authors of the report are advocating a **multidimensional strategy** combining humanitarian action, community mediation and structural reform.

The main **recommendations** are divided into five main areas:

- **Strengthening security and state authority:** combat Mobondo strongholds, implement a genuine disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) strategy, put an end to illegal taxation and abuses, secure freedom of movement (including for humanitarian players), and improve land governance.
- **Prioritise inclusive peace and social cohesion:** support intra- and inter-community dialogue, involve (existing) traditional structures, and coordinate actions with local and international NGOs.
- **Implement justice and reconciliation:** launch an independent investigation, document human rights violations, ensure accountability and promote transitional justice.
- **Promote socio-economic recovery and resilience:** rebuild infrastructure, compensate victims, support employment and entrepreneurship, and integrate protection, assistance and development into a sustainable approach.
- **Mobilise diplomatic and international action:** put the crisis on the bilateral and multilateral agenda, strengthen financial and operational support, coordinate the response between governments, donors, the UN and civil society.

The full report is available in French at: https://ipisresearch.be/publication/the-weight-of-silence-how-the-mobondo-revolt-is-shaking-western-drc/

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