

Border in Name Only: Arms Trafficking and Armed Groups at the DRC–Sudan Border

By Joshua Marks



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Acronyms and abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DDR	disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FAPC	Forces armées du peuple congolais
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo
GoS	Government of Sudan
GoSS	Government of Southern Sudan
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
LRA	Lord’s Resistance Army
MONUC	Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo
PDF	Popular Defence Forces
PKM	Pulemyot Kalashnikova Modernizirovanniy (gas-operated Russian general-purpose machine gun)
RCD	Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie
RPK	Ruchnoy Pulemyot Kalashnikova (Russian light machine gun similar to an AK-47)
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLM/A	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/ Army
UNMIS	United Nations Mission in Sudan
UPDF	Ugandan People’s Defence Force

About the author

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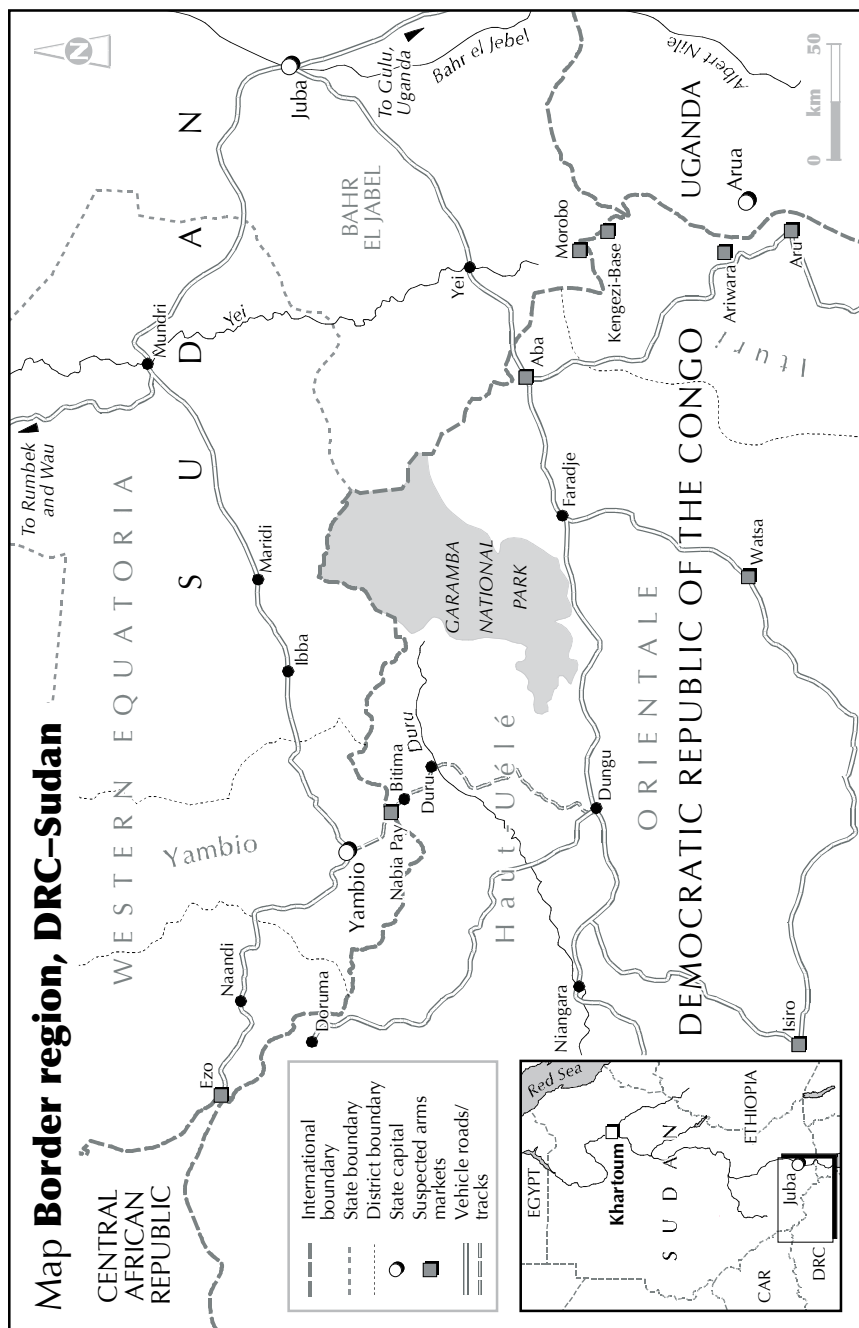
Abstract

Small arms trafficking across the western half of the border between Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has remained largely unexamined. The legacy of armed conflict in both countries, the presence of armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) on both sides of the border, and poor border control would suggest the possibility of a robust trade in small arms. This study finds that the trade is in fact modest, and overwhelmingly in one direction, from Sudan to DRC. Evidence reported here suggests that South Sudanese communities remain saturated with small arms, while, in northern DRC, rigorous civilian disarmament efforts by the army and a lack of perceived need for arms among civilians have kept demand low. These findings help illuminate the importance of demand factors in driving small arms acquisition in a highly insecure region.

I. Summary

This study explores the unregulated small arms trade on the western portion of the border between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, and the influence that armed conflict has had on this trade. This section of the 628-km border between the two countries has rarely been examined by arms researchers, but several factors suggest that a robust trade in weapons might take place across it. Minimal border controls, inaccessible terrain, a common cross-border ethnicity and culture, and, crucially, protracted conflicts and militia-led violence in South Sudan and northern DRC are factors that lead to the assumption that arms trafficking might be robust in the area. While this study cannot quantify precisely the small arms trade between DRC and Sudan, it seeks to identify general trends in small arms flows in the region. It finds that:

- Contrary to expectation, small arms trafficking is limited and occurs in small-scale transactions at markets on the Sudanese side of the border. The trade is generally one-way, with arms moving from South Sudan to DRC.
- Demand is weak on both sides of the border, although the potential for an increase exists. In Sudan a surplus of residual small arms from the second North-South civil war (1983–2005) limits civilian interest in acquisitions from across the border. Demand remains low in DRC because of the limited use of small arms by civilians—generally for hunting—and because of disarmament efforts by DRC's military authorities.
- The remoteness of the area and the decrepit condition of cross-border routes, particularly the Duru-Yambio road, restrict trade of all types between DRC and Sudan.
- Armed civilians move easily in and out of both countries and these movements go undetected. Poachers and a group of nomadic pastoralists, the Mbororo, have crossed the border for years, rarely hampered by local authorities and ignored or tolerated by civilians.



- Current and former soldiers from the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) have exploited their ethnic links on the Congolese side of the border to trade in guns and other merchandise.
- More recently, the Ugandan rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has managed to remain hidden in the dense border region.

These findings are based on field research conducted in August 2006 in the Haut Uélé and Ituri Districts (Province Orientale) of DRC and Yambio County (Western Equatoria state) in South Sudan, supplemented by research in Kinshasa (DRC), Kampala (Uganda), and the United States. The author conducted more than 100 interviews with humanitarian workers, UN and national military personnel, civilians, missionaries, and others.

In presenting a picture of unregulated arms trafficking in one of Sudan’s more remote border areas, this report confirms previous observations generated by research on cross-border arms trafficking elsewhere in the Horn of Africa and the central African region. It also supports scholarship that emphasizes the importance of the demand factors that influence arms acquisition.

II. Background: geography, history, and recent conflict

The cross-border small arms trade cannot be understood without some appreciation of the geography and history of the region, as well as the social and economic dynamics at play. As was the case elsewhere in Africa, colonial powers in this region imposed borders that cut through ethnic groups and this has led to strong cross-border ethnic, cultural, and economic ties. In addition to these ties, a number of factors influence cross-border trade, including trade in small arms, in the region. These include the nature of the geography, the placement of ethnic groups on both sides of the border, the lack of border controls, and the history of recent conflicts in both Sudan and DRC.

Much of the border area is characterized by gallery forest, marshland, and savannah ranging from dense woodland to almost treeless grassland. One of the most prominent features—and an obvious focus for traffickers and armed groups—is Garamba National Park, DRC. Created as a national park in 1938 under Belgian rule, Garamba contains savannah and rich gallery forests and becomes Lantoto Game Reserve across the border in Sudan (UNESCO, 1984). On its 4,920 km² expanse roam a range of highly prized animals that lure poachers from the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, and Libya.¹ Despite the efforts of a well-armed and professional team of rangers, and an international conservation project, poachers continue to stalk Garamba. The LRA has also used the area as a safe haven.

Monitoring of the shared border is weak. Border posts have been erected on a number of paths that link Dungu Territory in DRC with Western Equatoria in Sudan. These house a small number of officials from customs, immigration, national intelligence, and the national police. A handful of customs officials are also located on the border in Faradje and Aba Territories (DRC) but, in general, the presence of civilian authority is extremely limited. There are no border guards in Garamba National Park.² Furthermore, as of August 2006 the UN mission in DRC (MONUC) had no presence in the north except

for a military observation team of fewer than ten people in Aba,³ while the UN mission in Sudan (UNMIS)—based in Equatoria region, an area the size of Austria—had 700 soldiers, mainly deployed to protect UN installations and humanitarian convoys (UNSC, 2006c).

Just as forest overlaps the national boundary, so do ethnic groups. From the east to the western fringe of the border, ethnic groups living on both sides include the Logo and Kakwa (from Aba to Faradje), and the Azande (from Faradje to eastern CAR) (de Schlippe, 1956). Given that these groups share long histories, Congolese and Sudanese cross easily and rely on their local knowledge to facilitate cross-border trade.⁴

Two civil wars—one in DRC (the second Congolese civil war of 1998–2003) and the other in South Sudan (the second Sudanese civil war of 1983–2005)—and a history of armed rebellion have had important consequences that mark the region today. Shortly after DRC independence in 1960, the Haute Uélé area experienced unrest that caused migration between the two neighbouring countries. After the suppression of the 1964 Simba rebellion in Kivu and Orientale provinces of what is now DRC, Congolese Azande fled to Sudan and many never returned.⁵ Over 30 years later, the five-year DRC civil war was ignited in DRC's eastern provinces by Ugandan and Rwandan proxy forces disgruntled with the rule of DRC's new president, Laurent Désiré Kabila. The conflict spread to northern DRC in late 1998 when the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), the main Rwanda-backed rebel group, persuaded the SPLA to join its fight against the government in Haut Uélé. In September and October 1998 the SPLA looted Dungu, using Sudanese Azande refugees as guides (HRW, 1999). Amid the turmoil caused by a conflict that laid waste the eastern part of the country in 2000, SPLA forces entered DRC further east at Kengezi-Base and Aba, and remained for several years (Radio Okapi, 2005c).

During this period some 17,000 Sudanese refugees fled back to Yambio in South Sudan. They included Azande who had fled to Dungu in Haut Uélé to escape the second Sudanese civil war (HRW, 1999).⁶ After battles between Khartoum's Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the SPLA, up to 71,000 Sudanese fled to northern DRC, including some 36,000 into Dungu Territory (UNHCR, 2000).⁷ Although most who arrived in Dungu left within a few years, others

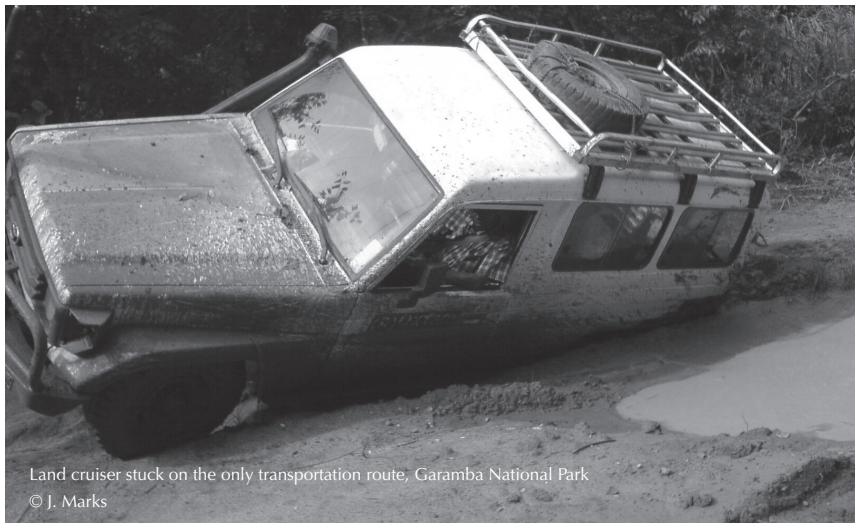
retained their refugee status and remained either in the refugee camps or with local kinsmen.⁸ By August 2006 the number of Sudanese refugees in Dungu had dwindled to 2,400–2,500, of whom 1,200–1,500 were located in four refugee sites.⁹

The influx of Sudanese Azande from one conflict-ridden country to another led to tension especially after the SPLA paid Sudanese Azande to scout Congolese homes for opportunities to loot. For the Congolese, who had housed the refugees only to be ransacked by the SPLA, the events of September and October 1998 soured relations with their Sudanese kin. As one remarked, ‘They were well received, they were well integrated [in Congolese society] so we couldn’t understand why these people came to pillage us... they wiped out the place’.¹⁰ In 1999 some Congolese reacted by forming a local defence militia, stealing arms from SPLA elements and attacking Sudanese soldiers.¹¹ As a result cross-border trade, which had declined since the second Sudanese civil war, was further eroded. Despite abundant harvests and a previously thriving trade in coffee and palm oil, few products crossed the border and the main road between the two countries fell into greater disrepair (MacGaffey, 1991).¹²

Nine years after the SPLA incursion into Dungu, trade has not markedly increased.¹³ Although relations between Sudanese and Congolese have since

warmed, most economic transactions are small and are conducted by motorcycle, bicycle, or on foot. Most trade occurs at the weekly market in Nabia Pay where Sudanese sell manufactured goods such as bicycles, clothes, and household goods, and Congolese trade manioc, maize, and peanuts.¹⁴

One of the biggest impediments to trade, whether unregulated or formal, is the condition of the roads. The road from Duru in DRC to Yambio in South Sudan is unpaved and so narrow that it scarcely permits motorcycle traffic in places. In contrast to the Sudanese side of the border, where water pumps and stalls line some stretches, the road in DRC has few stalls and, as of August 2006, no wells. Given its lack of amenities, fewer villages are located on the Congolese side, and traffic is sparse and less regulated. The net effect on the small arms trade is hard to quantify. On the one hand, it impedes large shipments by road but, on the other hand, traffic is generally unmonitored, thereby reducing the chance of interdiction.¹⁵ 📌



Land cruiser stuck on the only transportation route, Garamba National Park
© J. Marks

III. An overview of the cross-border small arms trade

Supply and demand in Sudan

Field research conducted in Yambio County, Dungu Territory, and, to a lesser extent, in Aba, Aru, and Faradje in DRC suggests that the current small arms trade is limited to micro-traffic, with most weapons coming from Sudan and crossing into DRC. The scale of the trade is unclear, but probably not large. Neither local villagers nor officials suggested that arms were over-abundant in the area, and visual assessments confirmed this assessment.

That arms are sourced from Sudan is not surprising given the country's protracted conflicts. The two civil wars in South Sudan¹⁶ ushered in well over USD 1 billion worth of arms to all parties. Indeed, the United States alone transferred close to USD 1 billion in the 1970s and 1980s (HRW, 1998).¹⁷ Between 2001 and 2003 the United Kingdom sold GBP 515,000 (over USD 1 million) worth of weapons to Sudan. About 80 per cent of this was made up of bombs, grenades, ammunition, and mines (Milmo and Holt, 2006).

Many arms found their way to irregular and proxy forces in the South. Typical weapons include those listed in Table 1. One Ugandan group based in the South is the LRA, which from 1994 received small arms, including AK-47s and derivatives, recoilless rifles, mortars, anti-aircraft guns, and general-purpose machine guns (GPMGs) (IRIN, 2006a). Estimates put the number of small arms transferred from the Government of Sudan (GoS) to the LRA in the tens of thousands (Bevan, 2006). The GoS sponsored other armed groups and entities in the South, including the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), the Murle tribal militia, various armed civilian groups, and the 'White Army,' a Nuer youth-based tribal militia.¹⁸

The forces opposed to the GoS, notably the SPLA, acquired weapons from elsewhere. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report based on two

Table 1
Selection of GoS weapons transfers to South Sudan

AK-47 and derivatives
Recoilless rifles (SPG-9 Kopye and B10)
Mortars
12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns
RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades)
GPMGs (general purpose machine guns)
Pistols (type unidentified)

Sources: IRIN (2006a)

years of research in the late 1990s, rebel groups accumulated arms indirectly and directly from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda, as well as from engagements with the SAF, the PDF, and government-backed militias operating in the South. Weapons recovered in battle with the SAF included light weapons and heavy weapons such as Soviet tanks (HRW, 1998). Uganda also shipped arms to the SPLA, gave it permission to train its fighters on Ugandan soil, and occasionally lent troops to fight SAF units (Bevan, 2006). On several occasions Uganda served as a trans-shipment route for arms destined for the SPLA, including over 100 crates of ammunition in July 1997 and one crate containing rocket-propelled grenades (HRW, 1998).

Rebel leaders encouraged civilians to take up arms to fight what they perceived to be a liberation struggle against a repressive Arab Islamist regime.¹⁹ Even after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM, the SPLA's political wing) and the GoS in January 2005, weapons carrying is widespread (see Table 2). The field visits in late 2006 found widespread arms carrying among civilians. When queried, several civilians indicated that the conflict—and arms carrying—would continue until after the CPA-mandated referendum on South Sudan's secession.²⁰

There have been no national, bilateral, or multilateral efforts to disarm and reintegrate fighters in Western Equatoria state to date. Although the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of armed groups is a central

Table 2
Small arms identified in Dungu, DRC, and Yambio County, South Sudan

Kalashnikov derivatives [†]
FN-FAL weaponry
G3
Lee Enfield rifle

[†]Most of the weapons observed were Kalashnikov derivatives.

Sources: Observation and interviews

component of the CPA, it has yet to proceed beyond the planning demobilization of women and children associated with these groups. By the end of 2006, the UN had DDR units in seven southern states, but not in Western Equatoria (UNMIS, 2006). Border areas are also likely to be low priorities for disarmament initiatives.²¹

Former and current SPLA soldiers and civilians have been selling small arms in local markets, and occasionally transporting them to DRC.²² According to one source, SPLA members sold weapons in Western Equatoria in the second half of 2005 and early 2006.²³ Each of these reports, however, concerned small shipments. One former SPLA officer was alleged to have regularly transported small arms and light weapons from Sudan to Aba in 2000–03. Working with 30 or more people, this officer was involved in small-scale shipments of usually fewer than 50 weapons.²⁴

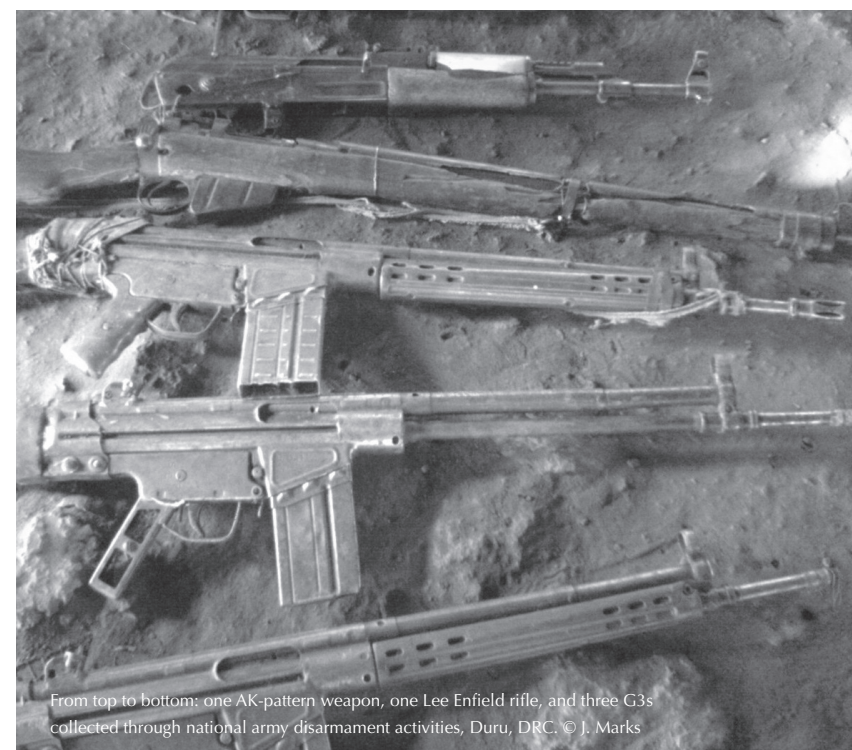
The most common place to sell arms is in local markets where citizens of Sudan and DRC interact (see Table 3). These include Nabia Pay, on the border with DRC in Yambio; Ezo, on the border with CAR and near the DRC border with Western Equatoria; Aba, near the Sudanese border in Haut Uélé; Kengezi-Base,²⁵ near Aba and by the Sudanese border; Morobo, in Bahr al Jebel state, Sudan; Watsa and Isiro (DRC); and as far south as Ariwara in Aru Territory.²⁶ The sale price depends on demand. According to various sources, an AK-47 sells in Aba for USD 10–12, compared to USD 20 for the same weapon on the black market in Ituri, south of Haut Uélé (Lewis, 2006).²⁷ At Nabia Pay on the Sudanese side of the border, an AK-47 or derivative sells for USD 15–20, while a ‘bowl’ of ammunition is valued at USD 10.²⁸

Table 3
Suspected arms markets in the DRC–Sudan border area

Market/town	Province/state	Country
Ariwara	Orientale	DRC
Ezo	Western Equatoria	Sudan
Isiro	Orientale	DRC
Kengezi-Base	Orientale	DRC
Morobo	Bahr al Jebel	Sudan
Nabia Pay [†]	Western Equatoria/ Orientale	Sudan/DRC
Watsa	Orientale	DRC

[†]Nabia Pay market is on the border between South Sudan and DRC.

Sources: Observation and interviews



From top to bottom: one AK-pattern weapon, one Lee Enfield rifle, and three G3s collected through national army disarmament activities, Duru, DRC. © J. Marks

While it was not possible to verify reports about most of these locations, informants in Nabia Pay confirmed that small arms were regularly sold at its Saturday market, although this had been clandestine since August 2006 because of the arrest of arms sellers (see below).²⁹ Sudanese civilians transport arms belonging to SPLA soldiers or ex-rebels to the market. The number sold has never been high, however. As is noted above, motorcycles or bicycles are the primary means of transportation.

Demand in DRC

The extent of the arms trade along the western portion of the DRC–Sudan border is a reflection of supply and demand in border areas. Recent scholarship suggests that demand is a crucial aspect of the small arms market dynamic (Atwood, Glatz and Muggah, 2006). A supply-side approach to arms trafficking often fails to consider *why* arms are traded. In Dungu, where supply-side analysis is extremely hampered, insights into the motivation behind the acquisition of small arms is essential to understanding the low level of the small arms trade in the area.

Three aspects of demand in the region are worth noting. First, the Azande use guns primarily to hunt indigenous animals, which does not require a steady flow of arms or ammunition. It is likely that their arms supply is already sufficient for this purpose. The Azande had access to firearms even before King Leopold II’s colonization of the country in the 1880s. They acquired rifles from Arab traders in 1870 and, according to accounts, in the late 19th century and early 20th century Azande royalty possessed hundreds of rifles, some acquired during battles with Belgian soldiers. Evidence of the importance the Azande attached to firearms is provided by the fact that words for rifle, gunpowder, and rifle-company existed in their language at that time (Evans-Pritchard, 1971). Today Azande hunting methods, although well-integrated into their culture, do not generate a large demand for arms. Small arms are used sparingly and handed down from father to son.³⁰

Second, the Congolese war did not create the same demand for weapons in Haut Uélé as the civil war did in South Sudan. The second Sudanese civil war mobilized large swathes of civilians who were encouraged to bear arms on

Table 4
The dynamics of demand in Dungu Territory, DRC

Demand in Dungu, DRC	Buyer(s)	Supplier(s) ^a
Hunting	Civilians (esp. Azande)	SPLA, FARDC, civilians (DRC and Sudan)
Poaching	Civilians; professional, and traditional poachers	Libyan, Chadian, Congolese, and Sudanese actors
Self-defence	Civilians	Civilians, ex-combatants (DRC and possibly Sudan)
Rebel activity [†]	Rebel combatants (SPLA, MLC ^b , RCD-G ^c , FAC ^d)	MLC, RCD-G, FAC, SPLA

Notes:

[†] Rebel demand existed primarily during the battles in Dungu Territory in late 1998. It is unclear whether such demand persists.

^a These include actors who willingly supplied weapons and whose stocks were stolen or captured.

^b Mouvement de Libération du Congo.

^c Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie-Goma.

^d Forces Armées du Peuple Congolaises (the former name of today’s FARDC).

Sources: Interviews; HRW (1999)

ideological and defensive grounds. In contrast, the Congolese conflict that ended in 2003 was motivated by financial opportunity as much as by grievances and civilians in Haut Uélé did not play an extensive a role. The civil war only seriously affected Dungu Territory in 1998 and 1999 when the RCD battled for control of the area. Thereafter, the area remained at the periphery of the conflict. The Congolese war centred on Ituri, the Kivu provinces further east, and Katanga in the south-east; demand for weapons derived from there and not from Haut Uélé.³¹

Third, the Congolese army’s informal disarmament initiatives discouraged civilians from carrying any kind of firearm in Dungu. When it returned to the area in 2003, the army’s Park Regiment sought to re-establish its control by forcibly disarming civilians and torturing the leader of the local self-defence militia.³² Civilians were officially allowed to carry non-combat firearms, but the military confiscated all types of other weapons. In July and August 2006 firearms collected within a 90-km radius of Duru included AK-47 derivatives, G3s, and hunting rifles.³³ The campaign subdued the local population but the

army's tactics did not eradicate civilian gun possession. By August 2006 the local defence group had collapsed under the military's programme of disarmament, intimidation, and torture, but the chronic abuses against the local population in Dungu Territory may yet revive demand for arms among civilians (see Table 4 for an overview of demand dynamics). Indeed, recent reports claim that civilians in the area may have re-established the local defence force to protect themselves from the army.³⁴

In contrast, local gun-control initiatives in Yambio County in South Sudan have not stopped small arms sales there. When Sudanese security forces arrested civilians for selling arms at Nabia Pay market on 28 July 2006, civilians complained that the arrests were directed at vendors who, they claimed, were innocent intermediaries for the real arms sellers. A day later the detainees were released without charge.³⁵ 🗨️

IV. Armed groups along the border

The lack of government authority along the Sudan-DRC border limits the amount of accessible information on the supply of and demand for arms in the area. Without extensive field work it is impossible to map the social and business networks that facilitate the arms trade in Dungu Territory and Western Equatoria where people easily travel undetected. Assessing the presence of armed groups in the area, however, can help fill in the picture. In ungoverned spaces such groups are important vectors for arms circulation since they generate demand for weapons, and play a role in the sourcing of weapons that come to market. These factors influence the availability and price of weapons on offer.

Of the armed groups in the border area, the LRA has the most intimidating presence. Although other armed elements, Mbororo nomads, and poachers also affect local security, no group garners more attention than the LRA. In the light of the on-again, off-again negotiations with the movement in Juba and the havoc it could cause should it choose to wage a violent campaign against Congolese civilians, this section focuses primarily on the LRA.³⁶

The Lord's Resistance Army

Background and recent events

The LRA was first observed in DRC in 2005, but its presence in South Sudan dates back to the 1990s when it first established bases with GoS support (AP, 2006b; UNSC, 2006c). Its presence was part of a deal with GoS after LRA offensives in early 1992 and late 1993 (Prunier, 2004). Khartoum's calculations were more strategic than ideological—although certain LRA members professed conversion to Islam, the movement's importance lay in its ability to disrupt the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), which was then aiding the SPLA. By the time the CPA was signed in January 2005, Khartoum was

widely believed to have ended its support for the LRA, but a number of sources maintain that GoS provided intelligence, logistical aid, and weapons well into 2006 (ICG, 2006b; Schomerus, 2007). Reports claim that GoS Antonov cargo planes dropped materials near LRA camps around Yei (South Sudan), Garamba (DRC), and along the Juba-Torit road (South Sudan) in late 2005 and 2006 (*Africa Confidential*, 2005; *Africa Confidential*, 2006a; ICG, 2006a; Schomerus, 2007).³⁷

Although the CPA raised hopes for a durable peace in Sudan, the LRA has continued to destabilize areas of the South in 2006 and 2007. In August and September 2005 LRA fighters crossed the Nile from Eastern Equatoria towards Western Equatoria and Bahr al Jebel, expanding the group's presence beyond its customary domain (ICG, 2006b). Dozens of attacks followed in areas west of the Nile (ICG, 2006b), including against humanitarian officials and UPDF positions in Western Equatoria (*Africa Confidential*, 2005). The aim of many operations was to obtain food from unprotected villages but they also targeted civilians, causing people in Western Equatoria to flee (Refugees International, 2006). The strikes have added a further level of insecurity in the state where ethnic skirmishes between Dinka and Azande in late 2005 had already shaken several towns and villages, and where by 2006 other armed groups were carrying out copycat attacks attributed to the LRA.³⁸

While these attacks were affecting Western Equatoria, Government of South Sudan (GoSS) Vice-President Riek Machar—who had been linked to the LRA in the 1990s³⁹—was trying to mediate between the Ugandan government and the LRA. His efforts bore fruit in mid-April when the SPLA and the LRA agreed to stop attacking one another (*Africa Confidential*, 2006a).

The LRA's presence in DRC has been less entrenched. Reports first emerged that a group of 300–350 LRA fighters led by Vincent Otti, the group's second-in-command, had crossed into DRC from Sudan on 18 September 2005 (Radio Okapi, 2005c; *Christian Science Monitor*, 2005). Over the next two months, reports noted that one LRA group had entered DRC in the north-east near Aba and Kengezi-Base, while another group had penetrated further west into Dungu Territory and north-west of Garamba National Park.⁴⁰ These forays were understandable given the decline in support from GoS and the increasingly successful joint SPLA-Ugandan operations against the LRA. Seeking

cover, the group found the dense, verdant forests of northern DRC attractive destinations.

DRC was no sanctuary, however. Within days of the LRA's first sighting there, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni threatened to deploy UPDF soldiers to root out the group. In the first week of October 2005, DRC commando units made up of 300 soldiers arrived in the Aru and Aba regions (Radio Okapi, 2005b; Radio Okapi, 2005a). Despite a call by Vincent Otti in December for peace talks, a team of Guatemalan Special Forces affiliated with MONUC conducted missions in Garamba Park in January 2006 (AFP, 2006a). Captured LRA fighters described life in Garamba as difficult even for a rebel group inured to bush life after 19 years. The rank and file, renowned for their mobility, slept in trees during the day, travelled by night, and fed off jungle fruit when game was unavailable (Xinhua, 2006; ICG, 2004).⁴¹ In more settled areas, LRA fighters apparently cultivated crops, but also stole livestock, grain, and other produce from the local population (*Africa Confidential*, 2005).⁴²

Tensions over the LRA presence came to a head on 23 January 2006. After 17 days of trekking through Garamba National Park to capture Vincent Otti, the 70-man Guatemalan force came under fire from a group of 200 LRA hiding with Otti (Rosenberg, 2006). In a pitched battle, and with back-up support delayed, eight Guatemalan soldiers died and five were wounded (UNSC, 2006c; Radio Okapi, 2006c). Although it was unclear whether the UN soldiers died from friendly fire or enemy fire, the UN cancelled its operations in Garamba and reduced its presence to a military observation team in Aba (UPI, 2006; Rosenberg, 2006). Rather than withdraw from Garamba, however, the LRA increased its presence following the clash. Some days after the debacle, LRA's chief Joseph Kony entered Garamba with a group of soldiers to join Otti near the Aka river north-west of the park (AFP, 2006a).⁴³ From then on, the LRA contingent alternated between the woodland areas of Western Equatoria, north-west Garamba National Park, and the Duru area of Dungu Territory, and could be seen openly at local markets.⁴⁴

The continued presence of the LRA in DRC angered the Government of Uganda. With little confidence in diplomacy, it lobbied the UN Security Council for military intervention, suggesting that MONUC was ineffective (UNSC, 2006c). In April 2006 some 120 Ugandan soldiers were spotted near

Aba, near the border with Eastern Equatoria, where they skirmished with DRC soldiers (AFP, 2006b).⁴⁵

Despite tensions between the Government of Uganda and DRC, initiatives by South Sudan have opened up other options for resolving the LRA problem. The GoSS offered the LRA three choices: engage in peace talks with the Ugandan government and accept South Sudanese mediation; leave South Sudan; or remain and suffer the consequences of further attacks (Allio, 2006a).⁴⁶ In May 2006 the LRA agreed to negotiate with Uganda and Riek Machar responded with USD 20,000 in cash, food supplies, and assurances of regular aid in future (AP, 2006a).⁴⁷ After some delay, talks between the two parties began in Juba on 14 July 2006. Little more than one month later both parties signed a cessation of hostilities, which required the gathering of all LRA fighters into two camps in South Sudan (Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, 2006).

Subsequently, LRA demands to change the mediator and move the location of the talks brought negotiations to a standstill. The ceasefire lapsed on 28 February 2007 without further commitments and amid allegations of violations. The parties resumed talks in Juba on 26 April. With the outcome of the talks uncertain, observers are now speaking of an 'LRA-Sudan' group, an LRA off-shoot or another group imitating the vicious tactics of the LRA (*Africa Confidential*, 2006b; Schomerus, 2007).

LRA strength in DRC

By September 2006 the LRA was in decline as a fighting force. While its ranks had swollen to over 2,000 in 1994 (Prunier, 2004), its current membership is thought to be in the hundreds, with under 400 in DRC as of August 2006.⁴⁸ The UN announced in June 2006 that the group was no longer a 'credible military force' (UNSC, 2006c). However, this assessment is contested. Clement Wani, Governor of Bahr al Jebel in 2005–06, insisted that the LRA had at least 1,200–1,500 men under its command. The International Crisis Group also maintains that troop strength may be in the thousands, quoting one estimate of 2,000–2,500 soldiers, with an equal number of women and children as camp followers (ICG, 2006b).

What is clear is that the LRA remains well-equipped. Witnesses allege that

male and female LRA soldiers passing through Duru and Faradje, near the Ugandan border, were carrying more than one small arm each, including machine guns, AK-47 derivatives, and RPGs. According to one analyst, the LRA's inventory includes PKM and Type 81/RPK light machine guns, and B-10 and 60 mm mortars (Bevan, 2006).

As the LRA's overall troop strength has reduced, it has become more dispersed. In August 2006 two—possibly breakaway—groups emerged from Aba and Garamba heading for Uganda's eastern border. By mid-August one group composed of two or three sub-groups was seen passing close to the DRC villages of Vorani and Kubula, near Faradje.⁴⁹ MONUC could not confirm that they were LRA, but villagers and local authorities said they wore the uniforms and dreadlocks characteristic of the group, spoke local languages poorly, and numbered perhaps 300.⁵⁰ Fewer than 100 soldiers from this group fought the DRC army on 25 August at Ameri and Kusu—north of Mahagi, and some 50 km west of the Ugandan border—resulting in the death of one LRA fighter (Radio Okapi, 2006b).⁵¹ The battle ended when the DRC units received news of the truce that was due to be signed the following day.⁵² At the same time, an LRA group further north, but heading south to link with the first, skirmished with DRC forces on 2 or 3 September, resulting in another LRA fatality and three abducted children (Allio, 2006b). More recently, unconfirmed newspaper reports allege that the LRA leadership and up to 400 fighters have since moved west into CAR and that Otti is in neither DRC nor Sudan (Allio, 2007; Mugerwa and Sebikali, 2007; Muhumuza, 2007).⁵³

Despite the LRA's fierce reputation, its presence in DRC has not posed an immediate threat. Wary of making more enemies and conscious of the fact that it is unwelcome, the movement has taken care to avoid attacking Congolese civilians or confronting UN or DRC soldiers. In line with this there were no confirmed reports of attacks against DRC civilians as of September 2006. Nearly all reported abuses attributed to the LRA in Congo have been limited to looting, stealing, and forced billeting in civilian homes.⁵⁴ Congolese also claim the LRA avoids using them as porters, preferring to capture Sudanese for this task.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, with the Juba negotiations still in process and the number of looted households increasing, the LRA remains a potential menace to local


populations. As noted above, wayward LRA fighters in Mahagi and Aru have fought the DRC army twice. The potential threat of the group along the DRC–Sudan border is compounded by the absence of a reliable DRC military force. An elite and better disciplined commando unit was based in Aba as of August 2006, but the 350 DRC troops in Dungu territory belonged to the non-integrated Park Regiment, which lacks separate barracks and is composed of many ex-rebels.⁵⁶ In the Duru area of Dungu Territory civilians repeatedly complain that DRC soldiers carry out systematic looting against the population. If the LRA were to change tack and target the population, many doubt that the Congolese military in Dungu could defend them.

Other armed elements

Other armed elements also traverse the DRC–Sudan border, but these pose fewer problems for local people. The two most significant categories are poachers, essentially a loose assortment of several groups; and the nomadic pastoralist group the Mbororo.

Operating in small numbers, armed poachers hail from Sudan, DRC, Libya, and Chad and focus their operations on Garamba National Park, where, among other animals, they hunt elephant for their tusks and the closely monitored and rare rhinoceros—prized for its horn.⁵⁷ Civilians report no problems with the poachers, but Garamba officials consider them the biggest threat to the park’s wildlife and its rangers. The poachers are equipped with heavy and light weapons, including RPGs, mortars, and Kalashnikov derivatives.⁵⁸ The best-known group is commanded by a former SPLA lieutenant known simply as ‘Michael’.⁵⁹ His operational base is near Faradje, and his men are well-armed. He has previously threatened local authorities and led deadly clashes against rangers.⁶⁰

The Mbororo present a lesser threat. These pastoralists of Fulani origin are found in 18 African countries, including CAR, Cameroon, and several West African countries (Survival, 2006). They migrate to Western Equatoria and Dungu Territory during the dry season and carry small arms to protect their cattle. They are suspected of small-scale poaching, selling traditional medicine, and arms trafficking, with possible links to the LRA and ex-rebels in

Ituri and Uganda.⁶¹ Some claim that Mbororo activities are well known, but their poaching and alleged arms trading could not be confirmed.⁶² 

V. Conclusions

This examination of the cross-border arms trade and armed groups in the DRC–Sudan border area fits with well-known patterns of trafficking in un-governed spaces, but presents some unexpected findings.

While porous borders and histories of conflict create fertile environments for the circulation of small arms, they are not sufficient in themselves for the cross-border trafficking of arms. The DRC–Sudan border area presents a mix of elements that, on the face of it, makes it ripe for a strong trade in small arms. These include a network of unmonitored trails, little or no state presence, dense and verdant forest cover, and a recent history of armed conflict on both sides of the border. Nonetheless, among the communities living in the area, demand for weapons remains limited. While Sudanese communities are saturated with small arms left over from the second civil war, the Azande in DRC have little need for weapons for three main reasons: civilians had little incentive to participate in the Congolese conflict; Azande hunting habits do not require many guns; and disarmament initiatives by the DRC army have discouraged the population from acquiring arms. Poor roads and the remote location also reduce flows of small arms to Dungen Territory.

Despite the current low demand for weapons, recent experience has shown that border communities remain vulnerable to the spillover effects of conflict and to armed groups. In 1998 the SPLA crossed the border, ransacked parts of Haut Uélé, and, because border controls hardly existed, remained unencumbered for years in other areas of northern DRC. Seven years after its arrival, the LRA nearly brought a conflict that originated in Uganda into northern DRC. The recently-renewed Juba peace negotiations have not eliminated the potential LRA threat to communities on both sides of the border. Should it decide to go on the offensive, there is currently little or no military presence to oppose the group. 🗨

Notes

- 1 Author interview with humanitarian worker, Aru, DRC, 17 August 2006.
- 2 Author interview with analyst, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 September 2006.
- 3 Author interview with UN military observers, Aba, DRC, 19 August 2006.
- 4 For a more detailed study of the Azande see De Schlippe (1956), and Evans-Pritchard (1971). Both are somewhat dated in their attitudes and use of language but still contain important insights.
- 5 In 2006 there was an assisted repatriation of refugees from the Simba rebellion back to DRC.
- 6 Author interview with Congolese humanitarian worker, Dungen, DRC, 25 August 2006.
- 7 Thousands of refugees also fled to other parts of north-east DRC. Refugee camps for South Sudanese exist as far south as Isiro and Aru, as well as at several other areas along the border.
- 8 Author interview with Congolese humanitarian worker, Dungen, DRC, 25 August 2006.
- 9 Author interview with Congolese humanitarian worker, Dungen, DRC, 25 August 2006.
- 10 Author interview with Congolese NGO officer, Dungen, DRC, 21 August 2006.
- 11 Author interview with ex-local defence leader, Duru, DRC, 24 August 2006. The militia eventually dissolved when Congolese army officials, fearing a threat to their command, tortured one of the leaders and forced civilians to abandon the group.
- 12 Author interview with community leader, Dungen, DRC, 21 August 2006.
- 13 Author interview, Duru, DRC, 22 August 2006 and other interviews.
- 14 Author interviews with Sudanese civilians, Nabia Pay, Sudan, 22 August 2006.
- 15 The author observed seven youths illegally crossing the border to transport Congolese goods into Sudan. Although Congolese border officials are posted nearby, they are unable to monitor all the paths that cross the border.
- 16 The first civil war lasted from 1955 to 1972.
- 17 According to a 1991 US Library of Congress study, Sudan received USD 154 million in US military grants and USD 161 million in US sales credits from 1976 until 1986, when US military assistance virtually ended. The peak for grant aid came in fiscal year 1982, when the Sudanese government received USD 101 million, roughly two-thirds of all US military assistance to sub-Saharan Africa (Metz, 1991).
- 18 Tribal militias include the Rufa'a in southern Blue Nile, the Fertit in western Bahr al Ghazal, the Taposa, Lotuko, Mundari and Acholi militias in Equatoria, and the Murle in Jonglei state. The use of tribal militias by the GoS increased in the 1980s (Johnson, 2003).
- 19 Author interview with Sudanese civilian involved in the Sudanese civil war, Nabia Pay, Sudan, 22 August 2006.
- 20 Author interview with Sudanese civilians, Nabia Pay, Sudan, 22 August 2006.
- 21 For more on GoSS efforts to disarm civilians in South Sudan, see Small Arms Survey (2006b).

- 22 Author interview with western diplomat, Kampala, Uganda, 31 March 2006 and others.
- 23 Author interview with senior humanitarian officer, Yambio, Sudan, 24 August 2006.
- 24 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006.
- 25 Some SPLA fighters took refuge in Kengezi-Base for nearly five years so links to Sudanese rebels in the town are strong (Radio Okapi, 2005a).
- 26 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006 and others.
- 27 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006.
- 28 Author interview with analyst, Bunia, DRC, 31 December 2006. The analyst's sources were DRC officials at the Sudanese border.
- 29 Author interviews with Sudanese at Nabia Pay, Sudan, 22 August 2006.
- 30 Author interview with former militia leader, Duru, DRC, 24 August 2006.
- 31 For more information on small arms transfers into DRC see AI (2005), and UNSC (2004), (2005a), (2005b), (2006a), (2006b), and (2006d).
- 32 Author interviews with former militia leader, Duru, DRC, 24 August 2006; FARDC officer, Duru, DRC, 22 August 2006; and community leader, Duru, DRC, 22 August 2006. Congolese officials, civilians, and community leaders also accused the military and other Congolese authorities of hiring Azande hunters to poach for them, using loaned weapons. Author interview with territorial official, Dungu, DRC, 25 August 2006; and community leader, Duru, DRC, 24 August 2006.
- 33 Based on an examination of collected small arms at a military camp.
- 34 Author interview with analyst, Bunia, DRC, 31 December 2006.
- 35 Author interview with Congolese authorities, Bitima, DRC, 22 August 2006.
- 36 Although there have been reports of an Azande militia in the Yambio area, Sudan, this could not be verified.
- 37 Author interviews with multilateral organization officers, Bunia, DRC, 24 March 2006; senior official, Yambio, Sudan, 24 August 2006; and others.
- 38 Author interview with religious officials, Yambio, Sudan, 23 August 2006.
- 39 According to press reports, Machar had links to Joseph Kony in the 1990s when they were both fighting the SPLA on behalf of Khartoum (*Africa Confidential*, 2006a).
- 40 Author interview with UN officer, Kampala, Uganda, 30 March 2006.
- 41 Author interview with Congolese territorial official, Faradje, DRC, 19 August 2006.
- 42 Author interview with UN Officer, Yambio, Sudan, 23 August 2006.
- 43 Author interview with UN officer, Yambio, Sudan, 23 August 2006.
- 44 Focus group interviews with civilians, Duru, DRC, 22 August 2006; and interview with UN senior officer, Yambio, Sudan, 23 August 2006.
- 45 Author interview with former UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 30 August 2006.
- 46 Author interview with senior official, Yambio, Sudan, 24 August 2006.
- 47 Author interview with senior UN official, Yambio, Sudan, 23 August 2006.
- 48 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006.
- 49 Author interview with DRC territorial official, Faradje, DRC, 19 August 2006.
- 50 Author interview with DRC territorial official, Faradje, DRC, 19 August 2006.
- 51 Author interview with humanitarian official, Bunia, DRC, 28 August 2006.
- 52 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006.
- 53 Electronic communication with UNMIS official, 2 February 2007.
- 54 Author interview with community leaders, Duru, DRC, 21–23 August 2006 and others.
- 55 Author interview with focus group, Duru, DRC, 22 August 2006.
- 56 Author interview with DRC territorial official, Dungu, DRC, 28 August 2006.
- 57 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006; electronic communication with former LRA analyst, Vienna, 14 September 2006.
- 58 Electronic communication with former LRA analyst, Vienna, 14 September 2006.
- 59 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006; electronic communication with former LRA analyst, Vienna, 14 September 2006.
- 60 Author interview with UN military officer, Kinshasa, DRC, 29 August 2006.
- 61 Author interview with small arms expert, Kinshasa, DRC, 11 December 2006 and others. The two rebel groups noted were James Nyakuni's FAPC (Forces armées du peuple congolais) and the West Nile Bank Front.
- 62 Author interview with small arms expert, Kinshasa, DRC, 11 December 2006.

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warmed, most economic transactions are small and are conducted by motorcycle, bicycle, or on foot. Most trade occurs at the weekly market in Nabia Pay where Sudanese sell manufactured goods such as bicycles, clothes, and household goods, and Congolese trade manioc, maize, and peanuts.¹⁴

One of the biggest impediments to trade, whether unregulated or formal, is the condition of the roads. The road from Duru in DRC to Yambio in South Sudan is unpaved and so narrow that it scarcely permits motorcycle traffic in places. In contrast to the Sudanese side of the border, where water pumps and stalls line some stretches, the road in DRC has few stalls and, as of August 2006, no wells. Given its lack of amenities, fewer villages are located on the Congolese side, and traffic is sparse and less regulated. The net effect on the small arms trade is hard to quantify. On the one hand, it impedes large shipments by road but, on the other hand, traffic is generally unmonitored, thereby reducing the chance of interdiction.¹⁵ 🗨️