

Part 3 – Evolution of the security situation in the Pool region (1998-2011)

One of the main characteristics of the Pool region since 1998 has been the lack of public security forces. With the exception of a few localities—Kinkala, Boko, and Louingui—the police and gendarmerie corps left the area in 1998 when the first wave of violence shook the region. They did not come back until the start of Operation KIMIA at the end of 2010. This permitted many abuses by armed groups, some of which are reported below.

Another characteristic of the Pool region rarely mentioned in institutional reports is that Ninja bases have persisted in certain localities—Madzia, Matoumbou, Voula, Kibouendé, and Missafou—until recently, posing a direct threat to the local population. Outside the political evolution of the armed movement, some localities were still held hostage by free-riding Ninja commanders seven years after the last wave of violence in the region in 2002-03. These commanders generally appeared detached from any chain of command and seemed to pursue personal gain. This section provides several examples of such situations.

1. The diversity of local security situations in the Pool region

Localities in the Pool region have been affected very differently by the war, even during its worst phases. Two periods of open war can be identified: 1998-99 and 2002-03.¹⁴ The second period of open war was followed by a period of more diffuse violence during 2003-10. A clear finding of the focus groups was the striking regional variation in the violence experienced by different localities during this period.

Different experiences during periods of open war: 1998-99 and 2002-03

Kinkala, like the villages of Linzolo and Louingui, experienced open war in 1998-99, but not in 2002-03, when other nearby localities were affected by the resumption of violence. Focus group participants in Kinkala recalled that the Ninjas first attacked the town in October 1998 but were rapidly pushed back by the national army. Kinkala was empty for approximately two weeks before the population returned.

Kinkala was attacked again in December 1998. This time the Ninjas defeated the army and established a base in Kinkala for six months until the peace agreement was signed in May 1999. During that period, most of the population was living hidden in the bush, but some individuals and families politically close to the Mouvement Congolais pour la Démocratie et le Développement Intégral (MCDDI, Kolélas' political party) remained in town. The interviewees stated that during the Ninja occupation, several youth from Kinkala joined the Ninjas; some were driven by genuine interest, others were coerced. When the national army re-entered Kinkala in May 1999, the population in the bush was asked to repopulate the town. The army delivered *laisser-passer*¹⁵ to the ones who did so in an attempt to keep control of entries and exits. However, many arbitrary arrests and killings occurred in the beginning. In particular, the local youth were

14 We leave out the events of 1993 and 1997 which, although linked when analyzing the chronology of conflict from a political angle, were more targeted at Brazzaville.

15 The *laisser-passer* was an entry/exit control document, which was issued by the national army to returning residents.

often suspected of being Ninjas and were particularly at risk of retaliation. The interviewees pointed out that because of this many people chose to relocate elsewhere or to send at-risk family members to alternate locations as precautionary measures.

The village of Matoumbou, remotely located seven kilometers from Kinkala, experienced open war in 1998. The village emptied completely after it was bombed by a helicopter in April 2002. Kinkala was the closest urban center and became an obvious destination for Matoumbou's displaced population. The displaced population also experienced arbitrary violence and retaliatory behavior. In Kinkala, members of the focus group recalled a tragic event in which forty of the displaced youth from Matoumbou disappeared after arriving in Kinkala. The locals believe that they were all killed by an army commander who had ostensibly labeled them "Ninjas".

In April and May of 2002, shortly after the February presidential elections, combat operations between the national army and the Ninjas resumed in certain localities. Some localities—Boko Center, Louingui Center, and Linzolo—remained unoccupied, but Ninja activity in surrounding towns and villages impeded people's ability to access their fields.

The villages of Masembo-Loubaki and Ngoma Tsé Tsé Gare were greatly affected by the events of 2002-03. Houses in Ngoma Tsé Tsé Gare were left unscathed by the 1998-99 fighting, but many homes were burned down in 2002, when the population left due to fighting in the village. From the focus group, we learned that many of the displaced households remain squatters in an empty area in Kinsoundi, the closest town on the main road in the Ngoma Tsé Tsé district. They regularly commute to the village to work in their fields for a couple of days at a time. The resumption of economic activities in Ngoma Tsé Tsé Gare has been slow since 2003 and has likely been hampered by its remote location. Currently, there are not enough businesses in the village to provide regular and sufficient supplies. Therefore, the population that remains must go to Brazzaville regularly to bring back what it needs.

In Masembo-Loubaki, the focus group described this period as "village destruction."¹⁶ The local understanding of the situation was that combat resumed there because the government had disrespected the agreement to integrate ex-combatants into the na-

tional army. As retaliation for starting the uprising, Masembo-Loubaki was completely destroyed. "Even the fruit trees were cut down"¹⁷.

While the initial Ninja movement of 1998-2002 was primarily seen as a popular uprising in the northern districts (emerging in response to the myriad abuses against civilians caused by the public security forces in the Pool region in 1997-1998), the southern districts¹⁸ (Boko, Loumo, Louingui) saw the Ninja phenomenon as an invasion. In Boko, the civilian population assisted the national army in pushing back the Ninjas from their zones in 2002-03. Some were temporarily armed and deployed in the southern districts. The resurgence of violence was quickly tamed in 2003, and the area has not experienced Ninja activity since then.

The period of diffuse violence and "fixed" Ninja bases: 2003-10

Open fighting between the Ninjas and the national army officially stopped in 2003. Nevertheless, the Ninjas have until recently continued to occupy several strategic locations in the Pool region—the districts of Mindouli, Kindamba, Vinza, and Mayama, as well as in the district of Kinkala, including the visited sites of Matoumbou, Madzia, Missafou, and Voula. Focus groups reported that these Ninja bases were a major source of abuse against civilians. Many of these bases were finally disbanded in mid-2010.

Control over key infrastructure and compulsory taxation occurred through several channels. In places located on the railroad *Chemin de Fer Congo Océan* (CFCO), the Ninja's ensured train security until 2009-10 as the result of an informal political agreement, which became pretext for abusive taxation. Ninja elements also had a monopoly on providing security for the mobile phone antenna stations (airtel, MTN)¹⁹.

16 Focus group, May 2011.

17 It is worth noting here that one of the events that triggered the 1998 insurgency was the arbitrary killing on 9 October 1998 of 22 civilians by representatives of the national army in the locality. This event, combined with similar cases of abuses perpetrated by FAC elements in the Pool region, fueled a popular movement of revolt. Since a lot of Masembo's inhabitants joined the Ninja movement in 1998 to end the arbitrary harassment by the public security forces, the quasi destruction of the locality sent a strong sign to the insurgents.

18 The southern districts of the Pool region are mainly composed of Bacongos while the other districts in the Pool are primarily Laris.

19 Some ex-combatants continue to provide security for the stations, but it is no longer their monopoly. They once had complete control, but now they are employed like other civilians.

Furthermore, Ninjas commonly provided compulsory escorts to trucks carrying merchandise (especially charcoal freight). Racketeering was also common, taking the form of checkpoints on main roads (locally called *bouchons*), especially on the Route Nationale 1 (RN1), the main road linking Brazzaville to Kinkala. The practice was put to an end in Voula when the road was paved in 2008. There was also regular racketeering of the local residents. In the towns of Voula, Missafou, and Matoumbou, Ninjas demanded heavy fines for no apparent reason, and the people had no choice but to pay if they did not have enough money themselves,

they had to find ways to borrow some. Forced labor was also a problem in some places, such as Madzia and Missafou. Finally, excessive taxation on safou (a tropical fruit) and other agricultural products was reported in several localities.

Matoumbou was located in the “red zone” until recently. It experienced the 1998-99 war, was bombed in 2002, and was home to a particularly violent Ninja group between 2003 and 2010.

The situation in Voula was similar. The village was strategically located on the RN1. Until 2008, Ninjas collected compulsory taxes at checkpoints from passers-by and trucks. Focus group participants reported various incidents, such as one in 2004, when Ninjas tied up nine residents and burned their feet. According to the assembly, they wanted to burn them alive on the grounds of alleged witchcraft. On request of the village chief, the *sous-préfet* from Kinkala intervened and paid the Ninjas CFA 60,000 (US\$125) to release the prisoners.

Another noteworthy incident happened in 2009 when the Ninjas forbade the population from voting in the presidential elections. On the day of the election, they burned all the ballot boxes under the pretext that the electoral register did not match the current locality register (the 2002 version was then used). The same day, a woman was gang raped, and thirty people, in-



Matoumbou Station along the Chemin de Fer Congo Océan

cluding several members of pro-government political parties, were forced to leave home for several weeks. The interviewees also stressed that the Ninjas intervened in routine disputes, bypassing the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. For instance, when there was a dispute between two village residents, the individuals had to settle their accounts with the Ninjas in addition going through the *chefferie* (the local traditional authority). At times they were forced to pay heavy fines which, according to the testimonies received, could vary between CFA 50,000 and CFA 300,000—quite significant by local standards. If they did not have the money, they had to find a way to borrow it.

Between 2004 and 2007, no less than four armed groups with 900 Ninjas were spread throughout Missafou, an important train station on the CFCO railroad in the district of Mindouli. These groups gradually diminished after 2007. Focus group participants discussed the many abuses committed by these individuals during that period, including attacks on trains and trucks, physical harassment, excessive taxation on *safou*, forced labor, non-authorized use of land, kidnapping, and heavy fines. The population was defenseless. It is reported that even the locals in Missafou, who had been drawn into the armed movement, were committing abuses. Ntumi sent his brother and a few other trustworthy men to Missafou in 2005 to try

to restore order by taming the free riding elements, but not all abuses stopped. For instance, attacks on trains continued until the start of the military operation in the Pool in 2010, as did unauthorized land cultivation whereby Ninjas exploited land without the land owner's permission. Right before the deployment of Operation KINZOUNOU in 2010, about 400 Ninjas still remained in Missafou. Most fled when the military arrived, yet it is estimated that about 100 stayed, including some natives of Missafou. Those who stayed are said to be generally accepted by the population.²⁰

A few areas that had a Ninja post until recently, such as the village of Massembo-Loubaki in the district of Mindouli, were managed by a commander who was from the locality. That was also the case in Linzolo during the period of open war in 1998-99. In those cases, abuses by the Ninjas were much rarer, with the exception of sporadic attacks by uncontrolled elements. In Massembo-Loubaki, the Ninja base was located in the village until 2004, when it was replaced by one outside the village.

Recently, some of the problematic Ninja bases in the districts of Kinkala and Mindouli have been dismantled. This is the result of several factors, including general frustration amongst the population, the 2009 disarmament operation, and the deployment in 2010 of two successive military operations—Operation KINZOUNOU, which ran from May to October, and Operation KIMIA, which commenced in October. For instance, in Matoumbou, following another train robbery and kidnapping, but prior to the military operation, the *chefferie* decided to rid the town of the Ninja base that had been abusing the town for seven years. Between 200 and 300 youths from Matoumbou were armed and summarily negotiated the Ninjas' departure. According to the focus group participants, the talks lasted about a month. Sometimes, the groups exchanged fire, but eventually the Ninjas left. At the time of the interviews, only five ex-combatants remained in Matoumbou out of an *écurie*²¹ of 100. All five seemed to be socially accepted.

2. The recent military response by the State (2010 to date)

Between June and September 2010, Operation KINZOUNOU was deployed in the Pool region to secure the Kinkala-Mindouli axis for the July legislative

elections in Mindouli and the August independence ceremony. The operation was based in Kinkala and conducted mobile patrols between Kinkala and Mindouli.

In October–November 2010, Operation KIMIA was deployed to restore security in the Pool region and to reinstall the public security forces and administrative authorities. The operation was composed of elements of three corps: gendarmerie, police, and national army. Several fixed stations were established throughout localities. They were temporarily given authority over settling civil disputes, thereby reinstalling a judicial system in the Pool region that had been missing for more than a decade. Since the start of these operations, the military has ensured the security of all trains (passengers and freight), a task formerly monopolized by the Ninjas. Operation KIMIA has also collected weapons from ex-combatants, although this was not its primary objective (see part 5, section 1).

Both operations were generally well-perceived by the population, who saw them as a positive shift to get rid of the oppressive Ninja groups and as an end to the pervasive climate of impunity in the region. As soon as the military operation was deployed in Kinkala, for instance, locals from Voula visited Kinkala many times to ask military and administrative authorities to free their village. Focus group participants recalled that the Ninja group shrank from 50 members in 2009 to 30 in 2010. It presently comprises only eight to ten members, including two or three natives of Voula.²² The community members interviewed said that they wanted Ninjas from outside Voula to leave, while those former Ninjas who were natives of Voula could stay. A few days before the focus group was held, the community had organized a march and had formally requested that the Ninjas leave. About 20 ex-combatants left the village at that time. Some moved close by, mostly in hiding, while some moved farther away. Their leader, Tex Wiler, has not been seen since March 2011. The community believes he sought refuge at

20 Focus group Missafou, May 2011.

21 An *écurie* designates a Ninja commander and his elements. In some locations, there was only one *écurie*, as in Matoumbou and Voula. In other locations, there were several – there were three in Kibouendé and four in Missafou.

22 According to the group interviewed, there were about three hundred Ninjas when the base was set up in 2002. The number decreased in 2004 with the death of its first charismatic commander, nicknamed Titus.



Ex-combatant selling palm oil in Loutéhété (outside the PNDDR framework)

Ntumi's compound in Soumona. One ex-combatant who stayed explained during an interview that he was waiting for the end of the school year before transferring his family elsewhere, as his children were enrolled in Kinkala.

Ex-combatants had diverse perspectives on the military operations. Individual interviews highlighted that some did not see them as a problem, while others feared them to the extent that they moved away as a precautionary measure. It is worth keeping in mind that the Republic of Congo has a long history of violent purges against any form of opposition, armed or not.²³ For instance, an ex-combatant met in Brazzaville, who was a member of the group of individuals brought in by Ntumi's *directeur de cabinet*, explained that while he had not been active in the movement since 2004, he felt threatened by Operation KINZOUNOU and chose to move closer to Ntumi in Soumona for protection. He lacked the means to bring his wife and family with him and therefore left them behind in Massembo-Loubaki. He coped on his own by selling wood and visiting Massembo occasionally to work in his field. When home, he encountered the military on several occasions but was not harassed. He did, however, know of three other ex-combatants from Massembo who had been arrested and were set free only after paying a fine.

A young ex-combatant who had spent nearly all his life in an armed movement and interviewed in Loutéhété explained his experience with Operation KIMIA. He had joined Ntumi's movement in 2002 at the age of twelve to protect his family—his sister was particularly at risk since she was the wife of the village chief. After the ceasefire, he joined a group of thieves who roamed the surrounding area; as he put it, “we had to eat.” He left the group in early 2010, soon after Ntumi took his position in Brazzaville on December 28, 2009. After an attack on a car close to Loutéhété was reported to the army in February

2010, he said he was harassed by the soldiers of Operation KIMIA because he was known to have been part of the group of thieves. Consequently, he was suspected of being involved in the attack. When he showed the military the paperwork that proved he had sold his weapon in 2009, he was left in peace. He now grows cassava, makes charcoal, and sells medicine in the village.

During the focus group with ex-combatants conducted in Brazzaville, participants mentioned that in Missafou and Massembo-Loubaki, Operation KIMIA paid the village chiefs to denounce ex-combatants. This information corroborated other information collected from an individual interview with the former military commander in charge of Operation KIMIA in Kibouendé. Some informants were rewarded for helping to find weapons. Ex-combatants who willingly gave up their weapons were also given a small reward. The État Major in Kinkala provided the money for those rewards based on the written recommendation of the Lieutenant in charge in the locality.

In terms of security, Operations KINZOUNOU and

23 See the works of Bazenguissa-Ganga.

24 Focus group, Missafou, May 2011.

KIMIA have had a positive influence in the localities visited. Social disorder is much less frequent now and more linked to residual banditry rather than a latent military threat. In the areas of Matoumbou and Madzia between January and August 2011, there were only two cases of attacks on vehicles (January 17 and March 16). In Missafou, where Operation KIMIA is based, the remaining ex-combatants and others who do not own land have started to pay rent for their agricultural plots. Before KIMIA, they were using the land without the permission of the land owners.²⁴

In several of the localities visited, such as Missafou and Matoumbou, the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Interior had recently sent delegations to identify land for the construction of the gendarmerie and police buildings. In some areas, this constitutes

the the first genuine sign of the re-establishment of public security forces after a 13 year absence.

It is important to recall that public security forces committed many abuses in the Pool region at the end of the 1990s and were to a great extent a trigger for the initial popular uprising in 1998. However, the picture is quite different today. With the current President facing no strong political opposition, it is unlikely that such a situation will repeat itself. The local population also seems genuinely relieved to see the return of public security forces, which is an indicator of a change in the popular attitude towards security forces. The KIMIA officer in charge in Missafou even mentioned that the military station was overwhelmed by requests for judicial help.