



## **Held for ransom: Kidnappings in the Kivus**

SITUATION REPORT

MAY 2018

On May 11, a vehicle belonging to the Virunga National Park was ambushed by unidentified gunmen on the road heading north from Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. A park ranger was killed, and two tourists and the driver of the vehicle were kidnapped for two days before being released.

The incident was tragic, but unfortunately far from an isolated one. In the past 20 years, 176 rangers have been killed in the Virunga National Park, and kidnapping is a frequent occurrence in the area. An analysis by the Kivu Security Tracker shows that there have been 75 kidnappings with 159 victims since May 2017 in the surrounding area.

The incident also shines a spotlight on the widespread use of kidnapping in eastern Congo in general. While data regarding kidnappings is difficult to obtain, the provinces of North and South Kivu have rates as high as almost any other country in the world.

### **Attack on the Virunga Vehicle**

On May 11, a jeep belonging to the Virunga National Park and carrying two British tourists was headed north from Goma toward the park headquarters at Rumangabo. Between the villages of Kibati and Kibumba, the jeep was ambushed by four armed men, [according](#) to the driver, who was injured in the attack. The assailants killed the ranger, [Rachel Makissa Baraka](#), who was accompanying the tourists, and kidnapped the two tourists and the wounded driver. They later released the driver with instructions to ask for \$200,000 in ransom for the tourists. After two days, the tourists were released in unknown circumstances.

While the ransom amount was high, kidnappings in this area are frequent. In the past year, 159 people have been kidnapped in the vicinity, including Rutshuru and Nyiragongo territories and the town of Goma. If we expand the analysis to the related category of abductions—which can include kidnappings if no ransom was demanded, but also forced recruitment and forced portage—the number of victims during this period in this area rises to 300.

Most of these attacks happened along the busy road leading from Goma to Rutshuru town, and along the two roads that lead from Rutshuru to the Ugandan border. This points to the dangers of ordinary travel in the province, and to the impact that criminality has on trade in the region. Human Rights Watch had focused attention on this phenomenon in a 2015 [report](#), attributing many of the attacks to unidentified bandits.

While the KST was unable to determine who was responsible for this attack on the Virunga vehicle, an analysis of KST shows that a variety of actors have carried out kidnappings in this area in the past year, including 40 carried out by unknown groups. The Rwandan *Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda–Forces combattants abacunguzi* (FDLR-FOCA), who have camps to the west of the Goma-Rutshuru road, is the group best known for these operations, with thirteen kidnappings, including some close to the site where the Virunga National Park vehicle was attacked.

According to local sources contacted by both Congo Research Group (CRG) and HRW—who manage the KST together—kidnappings in this area are often carried out by networks of former members of armed groups and the army who operate in complicity with local officials and army officers, who then receive a cut of the ransoms. It is noteworthy that this road features a heavy presence of the Congolese national army, and the attack took place within several hundred meters of two army checkpoints.

### **Kidnapping: a widespread phenomenon**

It is difficult to gather data on kidnapping, as the families of many victims are afraid of jeopardizing the safety of the victims, and perpetrators often specifically warn families not to report the attacks. Nonetheless, the KST data on kidnapping in the Kivus reveals an extremely high frequency of kidnappings in the area.

[According](#) to the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Lebanon had 17 kidnappings per 100,000 people, the highest rate of kidnapping among the countries that reported data in 2015, the most recent compilation of statistics. By way of comparison, North Kivu and South Kivu had a kidnapping rate of around 5 per 100,000, or 15 per 100,000 if we include all abductions.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these kidnappings are concentrated along the main roads leading north from Goma toward Butembo and the Ugandan border; and along the Bukavu-Walikale road. The high number of attacks on these trade routes has required many businesspeople to rely on FARDC, MONUSCO, and Virunga park convoys for protection and has undermined public safety and economic development.

*The Kivu Security Tracker is a joint project of Human Rights Watch and the Congo Research Group.*

**Website:** <https://kivusecurity.org>

**Twitter:** @kivusecurity

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/KivuTracker/>

**Email:** [info@kivusecurity.org](mailto:info@kivusecurity.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> In some countries, however, where kidnapping has become a significant problem, there have been attempts to use other means to [approximate](#) the number of people kidnapped. Whereas official statistics in Mexico [suggest](#) that around 1,200 people there are kidnapped each year, a series of [household polls](#) in 2014 put that figure at around 100,000, or 78 kidnappings per 100,000 people. In Venezuela, an NGO [put](#) the rate of kidnapping at around 92 people per 100,000, far higher than [official](#) statistics.



Figure 1 Kidnappings in North and South Kivu between May 11, 2017 and May 11, 2018