

Waning Cohesion

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FDLR-FOCA

In a declaration issued on 30 December 2013, leaders of the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, FDLR) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ‘committed themselves to put down their weapons and rather undertake a political struggle’. By mid-2014, some 200 combatants of the estimated 1,400-strong force had surrendered and turned in weapons, raising hopes that the claim was being followed by concrete action. While the FDLR has not demobilized in its entirety—and was the target of new attacks by the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (Armed Forces of the DRC, FARDC) in early 2015—these figures illustrate the dramatic decline in the group’s strength, down from an estimated 11,500 men in 2002.

This chapter analyses armed groups’ internal cohesion and control mechanisms, including procedures for the acquisition, management, and use of weapons and ammunition. Specifically, it examines the formation and the evolution of the FDLR and its armed wing, the Forces Combattantes Abacunguzi (Abacunguzi Fighting Forces, FOCA), arguably one of the most enduring and destabilizing of the many armed groups operating in the eastern DRC (see Map 7.1). The chapter also examines the factors, internal and external, that have contributed to the recent weakening of the FDLR–FOCA.

The chapter’s main findings include:

- The FDLR–FOCA put in place state-like institutions and procedures to control territory and refugee camps in the DRC, while the structure of its armed wing resembled that of a regular army. Such unusually strong organizational control mechanisms were critical to the group’s ability to generate income, recruit new combatants, and carry out military operations.
- The FDLR–FOCA sourced its weapons primarily from other armed actors in the region—either through battlefield capture or support received from allies. Standing orders issued by the group’s military command placed great importance on the need for combat units to acquire new weapons and to use ammunition sparingly.
- The group’s small arms holdings are diverse but ageing. Little is known about the current size and state of its light weapons stockpiles, however.
- External interventions, including the military operations that targeted the FDLR–FOCA in 2009–11, and the UN’s demobilization programme, dealt severe blows to the group’s internal cohesion and accelerated its decline.



As part of their demobilization and reintegration process, former FDLR members set to return to civilian life in Rwanda attend classes on politics and history, including the 1994 genocide, held in Mutobo, Rwanda, April 2014. © Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

- While the current weakened state of the FDLR–FOCA represents an opportunity for regional peace efforts, the remaining force has gone into hiding by mingling with the civilian population, putting the latter at risk in the event of further military attacks.

The FDLR adopted 'state-like' structures and regulations.

Long considered one of the principal obstacles to peace in the region, the FDLR–FOCA appears severely weakened and no longer able to threaten the government in Kigali. The loss of Kinshasa as a key supporter, especially in the 2009–12 period, and international pressure on its leadership, followed by joint Congolese–Rwandan attacks on its positions, seem to have eroded the group's cohesion and, consequently, its overall strength. The killing and arrests of many of the group's leaders and commanders, along with the formation of splinter factions, constitute serious strains on the group's decision-making processes. In response to its military retreat, the FDLR–FOCA has also lost control over much of the territory and resources it once held, poisoning morale and accelerating the desertion and repatriation of combatants to Rwanda. From a 'state within a state' with a unifying objective—reclaiming power in Rwanda—the organization has transformed into a loose grouping of armed factions in hiding that are essentially preoccupied with their daily survival.

Yet the current weakened state of the FDLR–FOCA should not be taken as the group's epitaph. The structures it previously established could easily be revived should the region's strategic alliances shift once more and become more favourable to the movement—as they have in the past. The international community and regional leaders will therefore need to maintain their efforts to neutralize the FDLR–FOCA through complementary military and diplomatic means. They would also do well to understand the factors that underpinned the group's formerly high levels of cohesion, so as to be able to counter them again, should the FDLR–FOCA revive in the future. As this chapter describes, the aggressive international and military pressure on the FDLR leadership, combined with the implementation of credible demobilization and repatriation programmes that targeted commanders and facilitated the desertion of the rank and file, are policies that accelerated the group's decline.

A disorganized FDLR–FOCA also presents new challenges. The group's weapons holdings, perhaps ageing but largely unknown, have now dispersed with the combatants in hiding. This complicates prospects for a comprehensive demobilization and disarmament programme, as agreements with the group's leadership may not translate into participation of the various small units that currently constitute the group. The FDLR–FOCA's waning cohesion may also be bad news for civilians, who have already suffered greatly from the group's reprisal attacks and criminal activities. With group commanders and combatants hiding in communities, civilians are at risk of being caught in the crossfire. Keeping military pressure on the FDLR–FOCA under these new conditions is a major challenge for the international community and the Congolese government. Maintaining the option for exiled Rwandan Hutus to return to Rwanda under good conditions will be crucial. ■

Map 7.1 Approximate areas of influence of selected armed groups in the eastern DRC, October 2014

