

SOLACE GLOBAL

LATEST

TRAVEL ADVISORY





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Cross-Border Clashes, Lake Edward

KEY POINTS

- Six fishermen were abducted from Lake Edward on 19 May 2018.
- Congolese troops and militias have previously taken civilians hostage and attacked Ugandan law enforcement.
- The region contains a number of national parks, potentially exposing travellers to future incursions.



SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Armed Conflict: Six Ugandan fishermen failed to return from a fishing expedition on Lake Edward overnight between 19 and 20 May 2018. Based on previous events, local law enforcement have indicated that they were most likely kidnapped by armed Congolese militias operating in the area. Two similar abductions of fishermen happened earlier in 2018, with the victims eventually returned unharmed, but without their fishing equipment or catch.

Lake Edward borders Queen Elizabeth National Park, one of Uganda's principal tourist attractions, and is also suspected to sit above significant oil reserves. As a result, the lake and its surroundings represent significant potential assets to the Ugandan and



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Congolese governments.

The border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) runs north-south through the lake, dividing it roughly one-third, two-thirds between Uganda and DRC respectively.

Local tribal communities are divided either side of the national border and, as a result, it remains porous. Over ten thousand people have fled into Uganda from the DRC since the start of 2018, driven by a violence and instability within the fractured country.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

The recent abductions represent the latest in a series of kidnappings and clashes in the area of Lake Edward dating back over a decade, but with a notable increase in reported incidents through the first half of 2018. In addition to the two kidnappings earlier this year, significant armed clashes occurred in 2007, 2012, and 2016, resulting in the confirmed deaths of a Canadian oil surveyor, three Ugandan police officers and an unspecified number of locals civilians. In these incidents, and a number of other non-fatal abduction or robbery incidents, the aggressors have been observed to wear DRC army uniforms or other equipment tying them to militias operating in Congo.

The DRC's unrest has principally been focused on the political tensions in Kinshasa and the struggle for control of the mineral-rich Katanga province further south. Unrest in the regions bordering Uganda remain at least partly isolated from these; the province of North and South Kivu remains ethnically divided and largely unintegrated with the state as a whole. As of January 2018, at least 18 distinct militia groups vied for control of a single region of North Kivu. Congolese troops retain notional control of major highways, however, the situation beyond that is reported to be anarchic at best. In some regions, Congolese forces have struck up cordial relations with the militias they are intended to oppose, using their combined strength to impose monopolies upon the local population, allowing the troops and militiamen to significantly boost their paltry official salaries. This chaotic situation stems from a combination of the DRC's inescapable poverty, and the ongoing ethnic issues stemming from the Rwandan genocide; the refugees from which drastically upended the ethnic and tribal status quo.

These groups have proven willing to target foreigners, with various armed groups conducting coordinated attacks against UN peacekeepers, and showing willingness to kidnap western civilians. Most recently, two British nationals were kidnapped, and their escort killed, during early May 2018 in the DRC's Virunga National Park. Although their release was successfully negotiated, such positive outcomes can not be guaranteed in a country where gratuitous violence and sexual assault are key weapons in the arsenals of many groups.

Uganda has conducted cross-border raids into Kivu Province with regular forces as recently as December 2017. These raids generally targeted the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a group which initially formed as an ethnically- and religiously-motivated insurgency in Uganda. However, the continued state of unrest in DRC's Kivu Province has provided them with an operating environment more permissive than in Ugandan territory. Circumstantial reporting has highlighted limited connections between the ADF and Congolese forces within the DRC. However, this link is likely due to shared local interests relating to the aforementioned endemic corruption, rather than a more formal partnership aimed at coordinated operations across the Ugandan border.

As long as the DRC's government remains ineffective, with strongman governance and corruption the norm at all levels of administrative and military authority, the unrest in Northern Kivu is likely to continue. Extensive refugee movements into Uganda promising to create an environment susceptible to further violence. However, these issues remain geographically- and politically-isolated from other crises in DRC, so the escalating tensions in Kinshasa or Katanga are unlikely to directly lead to a significant increase in the tempo of clashes around Lake Edward. Reports suggesting that DRC troops or officials participated in these attacks should be seen through the lens of local corruption and criminal activity, rather than as coordinated military operations.



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SECURITY ADVICE

MODERATE ARMED CONFLICT RISK



Travellers are advised that travel to remote areas of the Ugandan border should be carefully planned and co-ordinated in order to avoid the risk of cross-border violence. A high level of situational awareness should be maintained alongside ongoing monitoring of local contacts and media sources in order to identify potential threats and arrange appropriate mitigation.

Solace Global would advise clients to employ enhanced security measures when visiting Uganda – airport meet and greet and a locally vetted driver for the length of a visit should be minimum security precaution. Travellers may also wish to employ executive protection, depending on the role and profile of their trip. If travelling to isolated areas, the use of off-road capable 4X4 vehicles is strongly recommended, and these should be equipped to conduct routine maintenance or handle mechanical breakdowns.

Appropriate communications equipment is also essential, either cell phones with reception on local networks, or VHF or satellite communications as appropriate. These may be augmented with by satellite tracking and emergency location systems. All travellers are advised to utilise travel tracking and intelligence software in order to support situational awareness and ensure the ability to alert others in the event of an emergency.



Solace Global remains available to provide the full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients. Solace Global is also able to provide comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, tracking, response, and evacuation services.

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