

Unpacking Rwanda's Involvement in DR Congo and the International Response

Written by Danielle Beswick

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DANIELLE BESWICK, DEC 19 2012

At the centre of Africa lies the continent's third largest state. It was renamed Zaire after decolonisation and, in 1997, became the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). This vast territory borders nine states, including Rwanda. Relations between the two are rocky to say the least, characterised since 1996 by Rwandan intervention and involvement, both overt and covert, in its much larger neighbour. The most recent episode in this saga was sparked by a UN Group of Experts report accusing Rwanda of providing weapons, recruits and military leadership for the 'M23', a Congolese rebel group which seized the town of Goma in November 2012. This short essay will explain the current crisis by putting these latest developments in a historical context. It will also briefly outline the international response to the recent allegations and Rwanda's involvement in DR Congo more broadly.

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide

At the root of Rwanda's involvement in DR Congo is the experience which defines the Rwandan Government's approach to both domestic and foreign policy – the 1994 genocide. Over the course of three months in 1994, members of the majority Hutu ethnic group (which make up around 85% of the population), organized and led by political and military leaders, killed over 800,000 members of the minority Tutsi group. The United Nations force in Rwanda at the time (UNAMIR) failed to protect civilians or to challenge the killers. The killings were eventually halted by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a mainly Tutsi rebel group that had been engaged in a civil war with the Government since 1990. The RPF were taking part in a peace process to negotiate their entry into Rwandan politics when the genocide began. In the face of UN and international inaction, the armed wing of the RPF fought the genocidal militias (known in Kinyarwanda as *Interahamwe*) and ended the genocide. However, the Hutu military and political leaders who had organized the genocide terrified Hutu civilians by claiming the RPF would seek revenge upon them if they stayed in Rwanda. Under cover of the French 'Operation Turquoise,' which established a 'safe zone' for civilians close to the Zairian border, over a million Hutu fled to Zaire, with hundreds of thousands of others fleeing to Uganda and Tanzania.

The First Congo War

Prior to the 1994 genocide Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko had been a close ally of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana. As Tutsi faced renewed violence and persecution in Rwanda from 1990, Zaire's own Tutsi minority in the east, the area bordering Rwanda, also faced increasing marginalisation from political and public life. The influx of refugees after the genocide therefore put further pressure on an already fragile region. Though the RPF had ended the genocide with its capture of Kigali in July 1994, it remained insecure as long as large numbers of Hutu, up to a quarter of the Rwandan population, were based in refugee camps on its border with Zaire. The UN and international agencies were unable to separate ordinary Hutu refugees from the genocidal militias, who used the structures of these camps to organise, train and sustain their forces, planning an armed return to Rwanda (Barber, 1997). Martin describes how the leader of a Rwandan Hutu nationalist party boasted in exile "even if the RPF has won a military victory it will not have the power. It has only the bullets; we have the population" (Martin, 1998: 159). These refugee forces conducted regular raids and attacks, both within Zaire on local Tutsi and across the border into Rwanda. By 1996, recognising that UN and Zairian authorities would not act to disarm genocide perpetrators or separate them

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from other refugees, the Rwandan regime acted to neutralise the threat.

Rwanda's involvement in the first DR Congo war was therefore a response to two interlinked issues. Firstly, the presence of Rwandan refugees intermixed with perpetrators of genocide posed a continuing threat to the Rwanda government and Rwandan Tutsi more broadly. Secondly, President Mobutu was considered by the RPF to be unwilling or unable to disarm militias and secure the border with Rwanda. Rwanda, along with Uganda, responded by supporting an uprising in Eastern Zaire by a Tutsi rebel group, backing Laurent Kabila as leader of an insurgent movement (the ADFL).[1] During this first DR Congo war the refugee camps in Zaire were largely emptied of Hutu refugees who had arrived since 1994. While most returned to Rwanda, a hardcore of around 30,000 retreated deeper into Zaire's forests. During the conflict other African states, notably Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, had intervened on Mobutu's behalf. Despite this expression of solidarity between some African leaders and the Congolese president, the ADFL, heavily backed by Rwanda, took Kinshasa in May 1997 and declared Kabila president.[2]

The Second Congo War

The second DR Congo war emerged from similar dynamics to the first but proved to be a much more complex conflict. Kabila's authority was severely hampered by the presence of Rwandan and Ugandan troops in his territory and the presence in his Government of foreign 'advisers.' For example, Rwandan James Kabarebe had become the DRC Army Chief of Staff, such arrangements reflected the fact Kabila's rule in DR Congo would not have been possible without the support of Rwanda, establishing a sentiment often heard in the region that 'The road to Kinshasa (DR Congo capital) runs through Kigali (Rwandan capital)'. Given his reliance on the Rwandan military in overthrowing Mobutu, as McNulty points out: "It is all the more ironic that, when faced in 1998 with both the dissatisfaction of his erstwhile regional allies, and suggestions at home that the ineffective Government was packed with 'Rwandans', Kabila should choose in turn to stoke ethnic hostility against Rwandans and 'Tutsis'..." (1999: 55) In seeking to reinforce his control, in the east in particular, Kabila called for all 'foreigners' to leave the DRC. Facing a regime in Kinshasa that it believed was actively supporting Rwandan genocidal militia, and dwindling influence over its former ally, Rwanda reinvaded in 1998.

Following a similar pattern to the earlier conflict, Rwanda worked with and through a local rebel group in Eastern Congo, the Congolese Rally for Democracy. By 2002, Rwandan and Rwandan-backed forces occupied an area 27 times the size of Rwanda within the DRC. A significant turning point in the Second Congo War came with the assassination of Laurent Kabila by a bodyguard and the accession of his son, Joseph, who continues to rule in 2012 following elections in 2006 and 2011. Rwanda did not officially withdraw all of its troops until 2003, though there are reports that they retain considerable economic ties to the East. A UN Panel of Experts report in 2001 accused individuals, military and Government representatives from Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe of plundering resources from the Congolese territory occupied by their forces (United Nations, 2001). It has become increasingly common for critics of Rwanda's interventionism to define such policies as motivated primarily by this access to mineral resources.

Rwanda's Role Since 2003

Since the end of the Second Congo War Rwanda has continued to face allegations of interference in DR Congo and support for Tutsi rebel groups there. Two particularly high profile episodes relate to rebellions by former Congolese Army soldiers, the CNDP under the leadership of Laurent Nkunda (2008-9), and the M23 (2012-ongoing).

DR Congo's army has been a primary source of insecurity for Congolese civilians in the East, made up of an 'alphabet soup' of rebel groups and former Zairian armed forces. Integrating the many factions into a coherent and effective force, to deal with the many external rebel groups which use Congo's ill-policed territory as a base of operations, has been a challenging and largely unsuccessful exercise. Nkunda had previously fought with the Rwandan-backed ADFL to overthrow Mobutu and with the Rwandan-backed RCD to challenge Laurent Kabila. Following the Second Congo War he was integrated into the DR Congo Army but, when the DR Congo Government tried to move Nkunda and those previously under his command away from the East, and their links to both the bulk of the Congolese Tutsi population and their former (and some argue continued) Rwandan backers, they defected to

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form the CNDP and challenge the Government. Nkunda's forces seized and held the capital of the North Kivu province which borders Rwanda (Goma), demonstrating the weakness of the Congolese Army and the world's largest UN peacekeeping force (MONUC) based in DR Congo. In 2009, Nkunda was arrested by Rwandan forces after threatening to topple Kabila's government, suggesting that whilst Rwanda may have supported his attempts to carve out some autonomy for the East they could not support another full scale intervention and military campaign (see Beswick, 2009).

This history of interference in Eastern Congo, direct and indirect, using military forces and via proxies, underpinned by security concerns and natural resource-based connections to the region, brings us to the present situation with the M23.

The M23 takes its name from the date on which Nkunda's CNDP former rebels negotiated their integration into the DR Congo Army and the status of CNDP as a political party IN 2009. In April 2012 many of these former CNDP soldiers (over 500, though estimates vary) deserted the Army citing poor conditions in the military and Congolese Government failures to implement a 2008 peace agreement. By November the group, in a cycle now familiar to the residents of Eastern Congo, had seized Goma. A UN Group of Experts gathering evidence and testimony from members of rebel groups, armed forces, Government officials and international observers, amongst others, reported in November that Rwanda, and to a lesser extent Uganda, were providing support for the M23. In Rwanda's case this included arms, recruits and military leadership for the group from within the Rwandan military. The strength of evidence and extent of Rwanda's control and direction of the M23 has been hotly debated (see e.g. UK Parliament, 2012) but donors, including the UK – a strong supporter of the Rwandan regime (see Beswick, 2011 and 2012) – have been sufficiently convinced to respond more strongly than during previous Congo crises.

International Response

Rwanda is a heavily aid dependent state with over 40% of its budget provided by donors. In 2012, as a direct result of concerns over its links to the M23 group, it has seen suspension and cancellation of aid by its key donors, including the EU (suspended US\$90 million), UK (withheld \$34 million), Sweden (suspended over \$10 million), Germany (suspended \$26 million), the Netherlands (cancelled \$6 million to the justice sector) and the US (cancelled \$200,000 in military aid).

Rwandan Response

Rwanda continues to be led by the RPF and President Paul Kagame, commander of the forces that ended the genocide. As such, despite its aid dependence, Rwanda is a fiercely proud country and the RPF is, perhaps rightly, skeptical of the depth of the international community's commitment to Rwanda's security and to peace in the region. The failings of the UN via MONUC and its successor MONUSCO have only served to reinforce this skepticism and sense of self-reliance in Kigali. Another consideration to add here is that Rwanda has become one of the top 10 providers of troops to UN peacekeeping missions, primarily operating in Darfur. Censuring Rwanda for its involvement in DR Congo could put this at risk, making UN and donor engagement with Rwanda politically more complex than just a case of whether to cut or maintain aid (Beswick, 2010).

Having said this, Rwanda has shown some willingness to engage with peace negotiations in the region working alongside other states within the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) to negotiate a withdrawal of M23 from Goma. This may reflect the RPF leadership's concern at the international response to the UN report on Rwanda's role in the latest DR Congo crisis, more severe than that experienced during the Nkunda crisis. Current discussions suggest an African Union force could be deployed in the East to provide stability where the Congolese Army and UN forces have been unable to do so. However, until the factors which underpin Rwandan involvement in Eastern DR Congo – the presence of genocidal militias and the fundamental weaknesses of the Congolese state, both in terms of providing security for its citizens and building an inclusive national identity that improves the lives of all those living in the East – the conflict may be temporarily managed but it will likely remain unresolved (International Crisis Group, 2012).

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[1] Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre.

[2] Mobutu went into exile and died in 1997.

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