

Rwanda on the offensive in Congo War

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Rwandan troops and rebel forces of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) have routed government troops of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The RCD has taken over the towns of Peta and Pweto in the DRC province of Katanga. Thousands of refugees have been forced to flee over the border into Zambia, along with 3,000 deserting DRC troops. Among those fleeing were 200 Zimbabwean troops, putting more pressure on Harare to pull out their 11,000 troops that are supporting the DRC government in the war. It is not yet clear whether this latest Rwandan offensive marks a change in a war, which has effectively become a stalemate.

For Rwanda to take the Katangan capital of Lubumbashi, or, as is more likely, the key diamond-producing area of Mbuji-Mayi further to the west in Kasai province, would threaten the collapse of the DRC forces. However, such a military undertaking would stretch the limited resources of Rwanda, to an extent that could not be sustained for long.

The Congo war has continued since August 1998 when DRC President Laurent Kabila was nearly ousted by Rwandan and Ugandan forces that had earlier helped him to come to power. Kabila, intent on pursuing the interests of his own clique based mainly in Katanga, particularly resented Rwandan domination of his army.

Kabila obtained military backing from Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, who were concerned that the governments of Rwanda and Uganda, backed by the United States, would take control of this huge country and thus dominate central Africa. The Angolan government was also concerned that UNITA rebel forces with which they have been at war for 25 years were using the DRC as a supply base. Zimbabwe was offered shares in the DRC's diamond and mineral wealth in return for its support.

Rwanda and Uganda also claimed their involvement in the Congo was because rebel groups were using it as a base to attack their countries. The extremist Hutu militia the *Interahamwe*, comprising the remains of the Rwandan regime that had carried out the genocide in 1994, have regrouped in the Congo and are the main fighters in

Kabila's army. Having recruited up to 40,000 men, and fighting on the front line of the war, they also conduct guerrilla operations from the eastern Congo into Rwanda itself.

As well as attempting to rout their opponents, both Uganda and Rwanda are using the wealth of the eastern Congo—gold, diamonds and timber—to boost their own economies. This became clear when the Ugandan and Rwandan-backed factions of the RCD fell out, essentially over control of resources. Fighting broke out between Rwandan and Ugandan troops in August 1999 in the city of Kisangani in a six-day battle that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. There has been tension and further clashes between the two countries since.

Another Ugandan faction, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), led by millionaire businessman Jean-Pierre Bemba, is based in the northern Equateur region. Bemba has had some military successes this year and now threatens to take the town of Mbandaka, which could give him access to the DRC capital Kinshasa by moving down the River Congo. Bemba appears to have revived the economy in the northern region to some degree and built up a system of patronage amongst local leaders. This contrasts with the other Ugandan and Rwandan proxy organisations, as well as the Kabila regime itself, which have all alienated the local populations by looting and imposing brutal conditions.

It would be wrong to conceive of the war as just between the armies of Uganda, Rwanda and their proxies on one side (also including the small army of Burundi) and the DRC army backed by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia on the other. Although there is a frontline dividing the country, below which the DRC controls Kinshasa in the west connected to Mbuji Mayi and then through to Katanga in the southeast, there are only tens of thousands of regular troops fighting in vast regions of jungle. After three decades of rule by Mobutu and widespread looting, the country's economy virtually collapsed and few roads remain open. But as well as *Interahamwe* guerrillas fighting Rwanda in the east, there

are also Hutu militias fighting from within the DRC against the Tutsi-dominated Burundi regime. The situation is made even more complicated by both sides in the war having mobilised various tribal groupings, especially in the east. Ethnic divisions that were encouraged by the Belgian colonial rulers of the Congo—these include the Tutsi and Hutu tribal groupings that extend out of Rwanda—were also whipped up by Mobutu. As a result thousands have been killed during the present war in ethnic massacres.

The war has created a humanitarian disaster. In May this year one NGO estimated that 1.7 million people have died, 200,000 in fighting and the rest due to malnutrition and disease. Some two million people have been displaced by the conflict and of these a quarter of a million have fled to neighboring countries as refugees. There are also fears of a famine within the city of Kinshasa, which has a population of 4.5 to 6 million. It is not only a shortage of food being delivered into the city but also the collapse of the economy—inflation is now running at an annual rate of 300 percent—which means many people are unable to afford what food is available.

Western governments and aid agencies have largely ignored this tragedy. Only a quarter of the \$37 million requested for relief operations by the UN this year has been raised. Instability and transport problems throughout much of the country have meant charities are reluctant to get involved. They have also been accused of helping—even if unwittingly—the various armed gangs involved. In the period following the Rwandan genocide relief camps for the population fleeing Rwanda into the Congo were being used as bases for *Interahamwe* militias.

Two recent reports on the Congo war, one in the *Economist* magazine, the other from the International Crisis Group (ICG) think-tank, discuss the possibility of a settlement. The Lusaka peace deal agreed by the DRC government, both wings of the RCD, the MLC and the intervening countries in summer 1999 has all but collapsed. It was supposed to lead to a ceasefire observed by UN monitors, the withdrawal of foreign troops and eventually a 5,000 strong UN peacekeeping force being deployed. All other groups such as the *Interahamwe* were supposed to be disarmed and were not party to the talks.

All the participants ignored the agreement and continued the war. Western governments are clearly responsible for this situation. The fate of the Congo, as well as Rwanda and Burundi from the mid-1990s, is the outcome of decades of rule by brutal regimes supported during the Cold War by the West. Rwanda and Uganda

were supported by the United States in their recent interventions. Although the conflict between them led to the threat of IMF loans being withdrawn, the *Economist* states, “It is hard to see how these poor countries can fight without outside resources. Their meagre defence budgets (Uganda's is allegedly \$100m this year) cannot possibly sustain their operations in the Congo.” It would also be surprising if the huge increase in *Interhamwe* troops was not connected with covert finance from France, the country that backed them when they were in power.

The ICG report makes clear that the US directed the Lusaka peace process, particularly by its UN ambassador Richard Holbrooke. The US proposed an “African solution to African problems” approach, which was supposed to enable the participants to negotiate a deal amongst themselves with minimal cost to the UN. One of the main issues it failed to address was how forces such as the *Interahamwe* could be disarmed if the Rwandans had been unable to achieve it over six years. President Chirac of France opposed this approach, fearing it will lead to a break-up of the Congo, and has proposed an internationally (i.e. French) led regional conference to end the war.

Since Kabila has proved a major stumbling block to any negotiations, even falling out with his supposed backer President Mugabe of Zimbabwe, the Western powers are agreed that he should be removed. Presumably the present military initiative by Rwanda is designed to put more pressure on the DRC for his removal. As the ICG report makes clear, the US will continue to push for a deal because they want to “guarantee their strategic interests in the region” which includes “safe exploitation of the Angolan oilfields” and access to the rare metal deposits to be found in the east of the DRC.



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