

Burundi massacre and the continuing conflict in the Congo

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A brutal massacre of 160 women and children took place on August 13 at the Gatumba refugee camp, Burundi. The attack came at 10.00 p.m., leaving mutilated bodies, many of them burnt, scattered throughout the camp to be found the next morning. A further 100 were injured with machete and bullet wounds.

The Gatumba camp is at the northern tip of Lake Tanganyika, one kilometre over the border from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The women and children were from the Tutsi ethnic group, known as the Banyamulenge—Tutsis who live in the DRC rather than neighbouring Rwanda or Burundi.

At the end of May and beginning of June this year warring factions drove out around 36,000 residents from the Bukavu area of eastern Congo. The Banyamulenge are the predominant ethnic group in the Bukavu area. Three thousand of those displaced went over the border into Rwanda and another 3,600 ended up in Gatumba. On arriving at the Gatumba transit camp, the Banyamulenge were separated from other ethnic groups. The refugees had been demanding the United Nations peacekeeping force in Burundi (ONUB) move them out of the camp, as they feared an attack from over the border by the ex-Rwandan Armed Forces and Interahamwe (FDLR). These are the rump of the pre-1994 Rwandan army and militias from the Hutu ethnic group that fled into the DRC after carrying out the massacre of up to one million, mainly Tutsis, in Rwanda.

Another Hutu extremist group, the Forces for National Liberation (FNL) based in Burundi, claimed responsibility for the massacre in the camp. The FNL is the military wing of the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (PALIPEHUTU). It is the only rebel group continuing to fight against the government in Burundi in the 11-year-old civil war in that country.

The UN carried out an investigation into the massacre and Secretary General Kofi Annan announced this week that the attacks were carried out by the FDLR and an associated militia from the Congolese Mayi-Mayi ethnic group, rather than the FNL. Eyewitness reports said that the FNL had attacked a nearby base of the Burundi armed forces, and only later claimed that they had attacked the refugee camp because the Banyamulenge in the camp were giving support to the Burundi army. Whatever the details, which are still disputed, there is no

doubt that Hutu extremist groups were responsible.

Whilst it is no longer powerful enough to take on the Rwandan army, the FDLR's existence provides Rwanda with justification for its involvement in eastern Congo. According to the International Crisis Group, between 8,000 and 12,000 FDLR militia are still at large in the Kivu provinces in Eastern Congo. Following the massacre by the Hutu groups, both the Rwandan and Burundi government threatened to retaliate and follow them into the Congo. In turn the Kinshasa transitional government in the DRC responded by saying it would be forced to act in the face of an invasion.

The shaky transitional government itself, established in the Congo only last year, also threatened to fall apart. Azarias Ruberwa, leader of the Rwandan-backed rebels, the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), and one of the vice presidents, announced that he was pulling out of the government—saying that it had broken down and claiming that genocide was occurring. The possibility of a return to full-scale war sent alarm bells ringing in the western capitals. South African President Thabo Mbeki met Ruberwa last week and persuaded him to return to the government, but there is a strong possibility of escalating conflict.

Intermittent fighting has in fact continued in the eastern provinces of the Congo—Ituri in the north and North and South Kivu further south—despite the series of peace deals imposed by the west, culminating in the agreement signed in April 2003 in Sun City, South Africa, which were supposed to have halted the war that began in the Congo in 1998. After the transitional government was established in the DRC in June 2003 the UN Mission in the Congo (MONUC) was deployed, with some 10,000 troops, but it has done little to prevent the fighting in the east.

The fact that Hutu extremist militias are able to continue operations with impunity in eastern Congo typifies the lack of real concern by the western powers for the peace and security of the Congo's population. The small UN detachment in a country the size of Western Europe is little more than window dressing for a series of negotiations and manoeuvres, led by the United States with the assistance of South Africa, to prevent the break up of the Congo and the destabilisation of the whole of Africa that the war was threatening. The transitional

government is made up of contending factions of warlords and place-seekers and the DRC army is being put together out of poorly trained forces from the various militias, many of them involved in war crimes over the last few years.

In addition to the Congo, another peace process is under way in Burundi, where the UN Operation in Burundi (ONUB) has some 5,000 troops. For the last three years there has been a power-sharing transitional government in place, with South Africa attempting to mitigate the conflicts between elites that has kept a civil war continuing since 1993.

As in the Congo, the war in this tiny neighbouring country now threatens to escalate. After the massacre ONUB had to suspend negotiations with the Hutu rebels in the FNL. Meanwhile, with elections scheduled this October Uprona, the main Tutsi party, has opposed the power-sharing agreement. As the dominant political party in Burundi where the minority Tutsis have always held power, Uprona claims that not enough parliamentary seats will go to Tutsis in the 60-40 division between Hutus and Tutsis that the South African negotiators have attempted to impose.

During the war the eastern part of the DRC was under the control of Ugandan or Rwandan forces, as well as rebel groups backed by these countries. Under pressure from the West, Uganda and Rwanda were supposed to have withdrawn from these eastern provinces. But whilst troops from Uganda and Rwanda are no longer openly deployed in the Congo, both countries continue to operate through local proxies and both exploit the DRC's mineral resources. Although warlords and demagogic politicians have persistently whipped up ethnic hatred, the real driving force behind the conflicts is continues to be interests of various elites in the Congo's huge natural resources.

The battle for control of Bukavu (the capital of South Kivu) in May and June was between the DRC army and troops belonging to a RCD faction based in Goma on the border with Rwanda. Leaders of the RCD-Goma, covertly backed by Rwanda, were supposed to have been integrated into the government army but defected. As well as tens of thousands of Banyamulenge and others fleeing from the region, hundreds were killed. Human Rights Watch reported summary executions, rape and looting being carried out by all the soldiers involved. RCD-Goma forces only withdrew from Bukavu after Belgian foreign minister Louis Michel threatened to bring in the European Union rapid reaction force (such a force was deployed for three months in the Ituri region last year).

Fighting broke out again in Ituri in July this year between rival militias over the control of a gold mine, 100 km north of the main city of Bunia. Whilst Bunia is supposed to be under the control of MONUC forces, following last year's intervention by the European Union (EU), according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), armed militias control areas of the city. In the Ituri region as a whole, whilst the ethnic clashes that led to the EU intervention appear to have subsided,

there are seven different militias exploiting the mineral wealth and imposing taxes on the population. A recent UN report states that Uganda is supplying arms to at least two of these groups, whilst the ICG says that other groups are supported from southern Sudan and from Rwanda.

The transitional government in Kinshasa appears to be increasingly unstable as competing factions vie over the political and economic spoils. President Joseph Kabila, the man backed by the US to steer through the transitional government to elections, was threatened by a coup attempt in June. A member of his Presidential Guard was said to be involved. How this coup attempt is connected to the various elites is not known.

No confidence can be placed in the United Nations intervention to help the Congo's population, even if the number of UN troops is doubled as Annan has recommended. The UN, acting on behalf of the US and other western governments, allowed the peace negotiations to drag on for three years while some 3.5 million people were killed in the Congo. In the interests of keeping the conflict under control most of the contending factions and militias, whatever war crimes they had committed, were brought by the US and western governments into the negotiations and political power divided up between them.

Exploitation of the Congo's natural wealth continues to benefit tiny elites and leaders of militias who then trade with the west. In 2002 the UN Security Council released a report stating that 85 multinational companies were profiting from mineral and other resources originating in the Congo. No action has been taken against such trade and investment—in fact it has increased, particularly with South African companies that have recently gained concessions from the DRC government as well as petroleum and diamond concessions awarded to western companies Heritage Oil and Gas, and Diamond Works.

Apart from thousands of refugees in both the Congo and Burundi dependent on food aid, the population as a whole faces poverty and an insecure future. The United Nations Development Programme's human development index list places the DRC and Burundi at 168 and 173 out of 177 countries. Western countries pledged financial assistance to enable the DRC to deal with the social catastrophe yet the recent grant from the World Bank amounts to \$60 million, i.e., one dollar per head of population in a country the size of Western Europe.



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