

The eastern DR Congo: dynamics of conflict

G rard Prunier

Open Democracy, 18 November 2008

Since August 2008 the situation in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has grown progressively worse in ways that seem hard to understand. An overview of the events and processes that led to the resurgence of conflict, however, can explain what is happening and what kind of intervention can contribute to resolving it.

The DR Congo, devastated by years of civil and foreign wars between 1996 and 2003, had managed to sign a peace agreement, disarm most of the combatants, navigate the dangers of a transition period (2003-06), and finally (in July-October 2006) hold successful democratic elections. But the eastern part of the country had never healed. Why?

The heart of the answer is that the eastern problem had existed before the war, was made worse by the war and was not addressed by the peace agreement. The eastern Congo is a dense ethnic mix where Banyarwanda (people of Rwandese ethnic origin) make up a large segment of the population, at least in North Kivu where they represent about 40% of the total (in South Kivu, the Rwandese-speaking Banyamulenge are only about 4%). The high population densities (reaching almost 300 people / square km around Goma) are an important fac-

tor in the development of strong tensions around landholding. These tensions were worsened by two factors :

* during the colonial era the Belgians brought thousands of Banyarwanda from Rwanda to work in the Kivus. But they were salaried workers on Belgian plantations and did not own land. When the Belgians left these people wound up as landless peasants since the local tribes (Bahunde, Banyanga, Banande) were not ready to make room for them

* after the 1960-65 civil war which followed the Belgians' departure, Joseph-D sir  Mobutu emerged as the state's authoritarian ruler. His personal secretary Barth l my Bisen-gimana was a Rwandese Tutsi who favoured his fellow tribesmen and helped them acquire land illegally. Since the Banyamulenge in South Kivu had fought in the civil war on Mobutu's side, the Rwandophone population became globally identified with Mobutu, a political perception which increased tension with the generally anti-Mobutu eastern tribes.

Rwanda and DRC : context of conflict

By the early 1990s when Zaire (as it had been known since 1971, on Mobutu's orders) began to sink into a catas-

trophic economic crisis, the land tensions in the east escalated into a localised ethno-civil war. By 1992 there was full-scale fighting in North Kivu, particularly in Masisi, with thousands of casualties. Since neighbouring Rwanda had been in a state of civil war between Tutsi and Hutu since October 1990, local Congolese Banyarwanda crossed the border to enlist in the conflict. One of them was the future General Laurent Nkunda who joined the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), now in power in Kigali.

Then in June 1994, following the Rwandese genocide, hundreds of thousands of Rwandese Hutu peasants crossed the border in the other direction, fleeing the victorious RPF. They were led by soldiers and politicians of the defeated génocidaire regime who were hoping to get Mobutu's support to keep fighting the RPF. Their presence pushed the agrarian tensions to a pitch because they allied themselves with the anti-Tutsi camp in the local civil strife.

Their eventual defeat in November 1996 when the RPF army invaded Zaire did not mark an end to the problems. The invaders also entered the fray, but this time in support of the Tutsi elements. Laurent Nkunda had come back with them and he quickly became one of the leaders of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), the "rebel" Congolese movement which was generally perceived as a puppet of the invading Rwandese army (in the 2006 presidential elections, its leader Azarias Ruberwa who was a candidate, got 2% of the vote). During the course of the second civil war (1998-2002), Nkunda and his men fought on the Rwandese side against the Congolese government. All sides committed atrocities as the

conflict unfolded, but those committed by the RCD soldiers were particularly hated because they were committed as allies and auxiliaries of a foreign invading army.

The FDLR : a web of influence

Meanwhile a rump of the former Hutu armed refugee groups who had come in 1994 had managed to implant themselves in the area under the name Front Démocratique pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). In theory they were the enemies of the invading Tutsi-dominated Rwandese army. But in practice it was much more complex :

* in order to finance themselves, they began mining some the non-ferrous metals North Kivu and South Kivu are replete with. But commercialisation was a problem. Some FDLR elements started to work with their RPF "enemies", selling them the columbium-tantalite, the gold or the niobium ore they were mining

* in addition, the RPF had recruited a good number of Hutu soldiers into its ranks, including former génocidaires who had been languishing in jail since 1994. Those started to deal with their FDLR "enemies".

Thus when Rwanda "evacuated" the Kivus in 2002 after the Sun City (South Africa) peace agreement, it maintained a strong presence in the region through demobilised soldiers, through local Tutsi (and even Hutu) who had become their commercial agents, through militiamen and local administrators who, being underpaid, were open to Rwandese financial blandishments. Rwandese businessmen kept exploiting the local mines with the help of locally-recruited artisanal

creuseurs (diggers) and flying out the ore in small planes operating from illegal landing strips.

By then the problem was essentially politico-economic : how long could the unnatural FDLR/RPF de facto alliance centred on mining be kept while the political aims of the two partners were fundamentally opposed ? In December 2004, The Rwandan president Paul Kagame's then special envoy for the Great Lakes, Richard Sezibera (Rwanda's health minister since 28 October 2008), declared to an interviewer from the International Crisis Group : "The FDLR no longer constitutes an immediate threat to our government but they are a security problem to people's lives, property and to our economic growth".

The FDLR, which still has a fighting strength of perhaps 6,000 men, is in a very ambiguous position because :

- * through its genocidal image, it still retains the capacity to trigger strong reactions in Kigali

- * at the same time, it has long worked as a partner of some business circles in Kigali

- * locally, it is deeply implanted in the Kivus and it has become largely "congolised", including through marriages with local women

- * it is still used, off and on, by anti-RPF elements in Kinshasa who continue to smart at the results of the 1998-2003 war - and to dream of making Rwanda pay for the approximately 3.8 million casualties it has caused in the Congo during those years

- * nevertheless, the FDLR continues to behave with extreme violence locally, pillaging and raping at the slightest provocation. This is a deliberate move to keep their nuisance capacity visible and avoid being taken for granted

by their Kinshasa "allies".

The Laurent Nkunda factor

All this helps explain why General Laurent Nkunda is perhaps the most dangerous segment of the armed groups in the east. To calling Nkunda "a rogue general" as the media does repeatedly is no help in understanding who or what he is. After 1998 he became one of the main RCD officers and he played a key role in the Kisangani massacre of 2002. He was charged with crimes against humanity in September 2005 by the DR Congo government, which caused him to be reluctant to come to Kinshasa when he was appointed to the new army since he feared a trap.

In May-June 2004 he tried to take over Bukavu in a vain attempt to derail the transition to the elections. Then he laid low for a couple of years, still refusing to dissolve his Tutsi forces into the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), the new "national" army. In November 2006 he rebelled again and attacked Goma, probably intending to hold it for ransom and to get some kind of pardon-cum-position for him and his men at the end of the adventure.

After losing about 300 of his fighters to the fire of the Pakistani battalion of the United Nations Mission in DR Congo (Monuc), he went to the negotiation table and accepted the integration of his men into the FARDC. But in a further switch, on 30 December 2006 he created the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP), a political armed militia which he tried to present as a political tool to "clean up Congolese politics".

At first this did not represent much of a threat. But the problem grew when the Kinshasa government, far from capitalising on the success the July-October 2006 elections represented, seemed to go to sleep after that. For the past two years the Congolese government has looked like a beached whale, incapable of moving in spite of its bulk. This created an opportunity which Nkunda has exploited (see David Mugnier, "How to end a war", 3 December 2007).

Under the fold of his demagogic populist CNDP banner, he started to recruit all sorts of malcontents, mostly Tutsi of course but also Hutu Banyarwanda from Masisi and even a lot of flotsam and jetsam from various tribes who began to drift towards him as the pressure from Monuc and its demobilisation programmes from other regions liberated a lot of former fighters into military unemployment.

Nkunda went further, even across the borders, and started to recruit young unemployed Tutsi men in both Rwanda and Burundi, offering them spurious hopes of non-existent civilian jobs. Some of them deserted and surrendered to Monuc, but his movement grew. By his own account Nkunda (several of whose close allies, including chief-of-staff Bosco Ntaganda, have been indicted by the International Criminal Court) now has around 12,000 men, probably an exaggerated figure. But his men are good, much better than the poorly-disciplined FARDC. The worst aspect of his manoeuvring is that he has kicked the FDLR back into action and reopened all the sores of the east - such as when they massacred a whole village in cold blood at Kanyola in South Kivu in May 2007, having accused the villagers of working with the

CNDP.

Why do we see such zigzagging on Nkunda's part? Mostly because there is not a single coherent policy in Kigali to either support or disown him. It depends on the fluctuation of the political atmosphere there (see « *The DR Congo's political opportunity* », 14 March 2007). Since the well-organised electoral "victories" of the RPF (Paul Kagame got 96% of the vote in the 2003 presidential election and his party got forty-two of the fifty-three contested seats in the September 2008 parliamentary "election", with the "opposition" immediately deciding to support the government), there is no Hutu opposition worth the name. Just mentioning such a term is labeled "divisionism" and can get you twenty years in jail. So the political game is played among Tutsi. And the Tutsi do not agree on how to deal with the Congo in general and with Laurent Nkunda in particular.

Some, like President Kagame himself, want to put the past behind them, develop Rwanda along extremely modernistic lines and turn the country into the Singapore of Africa. But others do not believe in such a possibility and still see the Congo as a mineral mother-lode waiting to be exploited; they include some of Kagame's closest associates such as the semi-exiled ambassador Kayumba Nyamwasa and army chief-of-staff James Kabarebe (one of the ten Rwandan officials indicted by a French arrest warrant from 2006, which led to the arrest of Rwanda's head of protocol in Frankfurt on 9 November 2008).

A wider explosion ?

The outcome of the United States presidential election on 4 November 2008 is an encouragement for the latter group. After all, it was the Africanists around Bill Clinton (who are now Barack Obama's men and women) who supported the Kigali invasion of the DR Congo while it was Republican secretary of state Colin Powell who brought it to a halt in 2001. Have the Democrats changed their views on the region or do they still believe in the fiction that Rwanda only intervenes in the Congo in order to keep the ugly génocidaires at bay? In any case the situation in the DRC is now more serious than it has been at any point since the signature of the 2002 peace agreement (see *From Genocide to Continental War : The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa*, C Hurst, 2008).

But does it actually mean the situation has returned to that of 1998, and the DR Congo is about to explode into another civil war? Probably not. Why? Because there are several fundamental differences :

- * Rwanda, even if it is involved, is involved at a marginal and contradictory level .

- * in 1998, pro-Kigali elements controlled large segments of the Forces Armées Congolaises (FAC), the then Congolese national army. The initial onslaught was carried out through an internal rebellion of the armed forces. Not so today. Nkunda controls only an army of unofficial militiamen

- * in 1998 the regime of Laurent-Désiré Kabila was very weak, hardly legitimate and did not have any serious international support. Today his son Joseph Kabila is strongly suppor-

ted by the internal community after overseeing a flawed but clearly democratic election

- * the Congolese economy was at the time in complete disarray while today it is only in poor shape, with possibilities of picking up

- * President Kagame could count on the almost unlimited sympathy of the world which felt guilty for its neglect during the genocide. Not so today. His moral credibility has been seriously damaged by the horrors his troops committed in the DR Congo during 1998-2002 and his political standing is increasingly being questioned, both by legal action going back to the genocide period (reflected in the French indictment and Frankfurt arrest) and by his electoral "triumphs" (which are a throwback to the worst days of fake African political unanimity)

- * the diplomatic context, reflected in the current visit to the region of the United Nations envoy (and Nigeria's former president) Olusegun Obasanjo, is more favourable to negotiation

- * In 1998 there was no United Nations peacekeeping force in eastern DR Congo. If the international community decides to straighten out its act, Monuc could make the difference.

Gérard Prunier is research professor at the University of Paris. He is the author of *The Rwanda Crisis : History of a Genocide* (C Hurst, 1998), *Darfur : The Ambiguous Genocide* (C Hurst, revised edition, 2007), and *From Genocide to Continental War : The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa* (C Hurst, 2006)

Also by Gérard Prunier in openDemocracy :

"Darfur's Sudan problem" (15 September 2006)

"The DR Congo's political oppor-

- tunity" (14 March 2007)
- "Chad, the CAR and Darfur : dynamics of conflict" (18 April 2007)
- "Chad's tragedy" (7 September 2007)
- "Sudan between war and peace" (1 November 2007)
- "Khartoum's calculated fever" (5 December 2007)
- "Kenya : roots of crisis" (7 January 2008)
- "Chad : between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war" (19 February 2008)
- "Kenya : histories of hidden war" (29 February 2008)
- "Sudan in a fix" (26 June 2008)
- "Sudan's Omar al-Bashir : a useful war criminal" (15 October 2008)