

Looking for Genocide in Central Africa The Risks of a False Positive

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April 7, 2005

The enormous costs—moral, political, economic--of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the resulting sense of guilt at international inaction spur us all to heightened fear of another genocide, particularly in this region where the horrible precedent still looms so large. To neglect warning signs would be unacceptable but misidentifying the signs carries risks of its own, including heightening the very ethnic tensions that we all seek to dampen.

What are the most visible signs of potential ethnic conflict in eastern DRC?

Against Congolese Tutsi/Banyamulenge/Congolese speakers of Kinyarwanda:

- History of past discrimination and violence against these groups
- Anti-Tutsi pronouncements by Kinshasa-based politicians and media
- Violence against a dozen or so Banyamulenge at time of Bukavu uprising, resulting in flight of many Banyamulenge/Tutsi from parts of South Kivu
- Massacre of 162 Congolese refugees (largely Banyamulenge) at Gatumba refugee camp, Burundi
- Local rejection of Banyamulenge by other people of South Kivu, both in pronouncements by “civil society” and in displays of violence when they tried to return from Burundi
- Tracts and other demonstrations of hostility in Goma
- Mortar attack by MaiMai on Hutu village at time of Kanyabayonga combat
- Accusations of planned attacks with Rwandan support

Against other Congolese groups (e.g., Hunde/ Nande/Shi):

- Replacement of customary authorities by Hutu
- Continued existence of former LDF loyal to Gov. Serafuli
- Distribution of arms to Hutu civilians
- Attack on Buramba civilians
- Accusations of plans for genocide/ accusations of collaboration with ex-FAR/Interahamwe and insistence that past violence must be avoided at all costs
- Explicit threats of Rwandan invasion (August, November) and support of Bukavu mutiny, incursion of Rwandan troops in November
- Repeated statements of determination to prevent any further violence

Are these precursors of genocide?

Probably not. A genocide, particularly like that of 1994, requires effective state mobilization of military/police and large numbers of civilians who have been prepared for action by propaganda, organization, training, and distribution of arms.

Deterrents to genocide

Against Tutsi/Banyamulenge/other Congolese Rwandaphones:

- The DRC government is weak, divided, with no effective control over North Kivu. The part of RCD-Goma dominated by Serafuli and the ex-ANC LDF forces attached to this group at this time form an effective barrier to take-over by FARDC units loyal to Kinshasa and thus can protect Rwandaphone groups. Only if this balance of forces were to shift drastically permitting the Kinshasa-controlled forces to take control of the region would there be a more realistic risk of large-scale civilian killings of Rwandaphone peoples.
- The situation in South Kivu is different: RCD-Goma forces have no further control there and FARDC forces loyal to Kinshasa pose a greater risk to the relatively small number of Banyamulenge still residing in towns like Uvira or Bukavu. Most Banyamulenge have removed themselves from danger, however, either by choosing to live in Rwanda or Burundi, or by withdrawing to the plateau controlled by Masunzu. The present collaboration between Masunzu and Kinshasa as well as the difficulty of getting up on to the plateau offer some guarantee of safety to the Banyamulenge.
- Were there to be large-scale outright attacks on Tutsu/Banyamulenge/Congolese Rwandaphones in either South or North Kivu, Rwanda would invade; while many in Kinshasa see no advantage of ending all combat, establishing real peace, and moving to elections, still few have any desire to see a new Rwandan military intervention in the east.

Against other Congolese groups in North Kivu:

- Serafuli cannot count on complete support either from within RCD-G or among the Rwandaphone population: some Hutu distrust the strategy of close links to Rwanda and remain hostile to Tutsi
- As the massive and rapid deployment of FARDC forces in late December showed, Kinshasa would likely muster the maximum force possible against any North Kivu forces engaged in a genocide, seeing this as an opportunity to end RCD-G control of the region

MONUC as deterrent

Monuc has frequently failed to protect civilians, but increased international attention to resolving problems in the DRC—in addition perhaps to the loss of some of their own peacekeepers—have led to a more vigorous attitude on the part of at least some. It is at least possible (we wish we could say “it is likely” or even “it is certain”) that Monuc would intervene in case of a genocide.

Crying Wolf: Claims of genocide or preparations for genocide

Rwanda has a strong interest in maintaining strong influence in eastern DRC. With the expansion of Kinshasa’s control in South Kivu and the fissures in RCD-Goma, it has become increasingly important for Rwanda to keep North Kivu friendly for reasons of security, economic profit (minerals, trade/tax revenue, land) and politics (having a voice in Congolese decisions).

Of these interests, Rwanda has always put forward its security needs as primordial; it increases the importance of these needs and assures greater international receptivity for them by associating them with genocide. For years Rwandan authorities defined the FDLR as a genocidal force, but some have recently admitted that the majority of FDLR combatants did not participate in the genocide. According to one Rwandan intelligence official, Rwandan authorities are interested in ensuring the return of ten to twelve per cent of the current FDLR force, whom he defined as “the political leadership,” not as the worst genocidal criminals. When asked to identify genocidal criminals in the FDLR leadership, he supplied only two names, one of whom does not appear on official lists of category one criminals. In recent months, Rwandan officials (Rwandan Ambassador to the U.N., Pres. Kagame) have sought to roll over genocidal guilt on to the next generation, claiming Rwanda has the right to preventive action (including attacks in the DRC) against young people who have not committed genocide but who *might* commit genocide.

In the last year, Rwanda has broadened the scope of its defined security tasks to include protecting not just Tutsi in Rwanda but all Tutsi in the Great Lakes region. Since last year, Rwanda has twice threatened to invade the DRC to protect Congolese Tutsi/Banyamulenge or in retaliation for an attack against them. Simultaneous with statements by these groups—and perhaps in coordination with them—Rwandan authorities have insisted upon the participation of ex-FAR and Interahamwe in the attacks on the Congolese Tutsi. The mention that assailants used machetes, introduced into statements by Rwandans and others, clearly elicited memories of the Rwandan genocide. The information, which was wrong, was quickly seized on by the international press and helped reinforce the idea that those involved in the Rwandan genocide had participated in these more recent killings.

Congolese Tutsi/Banyamulenge/Rwandaphones and Rwandan authorities assert that others are planning genocidal attacks on Tutsi, often in secret meetings. These accusations are replicated on the other side by allegations that Congolese Rwandaphones are necessarily preparing to assist a Rwandan invasion of the DRC. In an atmosphere of such fear and intrigue, all such claims must be treated with great skepticism and accepted only with very substantial proof. (Similar accusations are now circulating regarding a planned genocide of Tutsi in Burundi).

Over-hasty conclusions about genocide—planned or under way—carry the large cost of further raising levels of fear and inviting a cycle of reciprocal recriminations and accusations. In this way, unsubstantiated allegations themselves become a force increasing the likelihood of ethnic violence.

If the above signs are not precursors to genocide, then what?

- Political and moral leaders must insist on an end to verbal or physical attacks on others, both because they are wrong and because such attacks can lead to further violence.

- Authorities must prosecute crimes, regardless of identity of victim or perpetrator.
- North Kivu authorities must halt the distribution of arms to civilians and must collect the arms already distributed.
- Ignoring these warning signs could lead to widespread and systematic killings of civilians on an ethnic basis with enormous loss of life. This would be crimes against humanity, yet another tragedy for the Congolese people, and could also embolden others elsewhere to choose genocide.