

Questions on the Conflict in North Kivu **By Andrew Peterson**

What are the historical roots of the complex current state of affairs?

In 1961, after 50 years of colonial plunder, the first Prime Minister of the newly independent Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated. After having asked both the United States and United Nations for support, and being denied, Lumumba had turned to the Soviet Union for help and was in turn labeled a Communist. As a result, the Belgians, with the tacit support of the United States, condemned this democratically elected leader to death.

Out of the violence that followed, military leader Mobutu Sésé Seko – supported by the CIA – took control of the country, declared himself leader, and proceeded to rule the country as one of Africa's most corrupt and brutal leaders for the next three decades. During this time he received billions of dollars of support from western governments, the IMF and the World Bank. A significant part of this (perhaps \$4-5 billion) ended up in Mobutu's own bank account or that of his cronies; but the support continued as Mobutu was considered an ally in the Cold War. Support dwindled with the end of the Cold War and Mobutu's government began to crumble even further.

What led to Rwandan and Ugandan involvement in the Congo?

While people of Rwandan origin have been living in eastern Congo since the late 19th century, much of the current conflict traces its origins to the influx of 1.2 million Hutus that fled Rwanda fearing reprisal attacks as the 1994 genocide ended. Among them were an unknown number of “*genocidaires*” (those responsible for the genocide), including members of the former (Hutu) government and armed forces and also members of the Hutu “*interahamwe*” militias. These refugees gathered in internally displaced persons camps (IDPs), including some 800,000 outside the city of Goma in North Kivu, just across the border from Rwanda. Conditions were terrible with an estimated 50,000 dying of cholera.

These IDP camps came to be controlled by the military forces of the former government of Rwanda, which began to forcibly coerce people to join their fight. They hoped to return to Rwanda and complete the “work” of the genocide, making guerrilla raids into northwest Rwanda. The Government of Rwanda did not appreciate being attacked by these militias, and in 1996 they were joined by Uganda and Burundi, as well as some nascent militias, in overthrowing Mobutu's corrupt government. Support for Mobutu was so low that hardly any of his troops put up much of a fight and the invading troops were able to make their way to the capital in a matter of months. Laurent-Désiré Kabila was declared leader of the new “Democratic Republic of the Congo.”

Kabila had difficulty holding the large country together. To consolidate his power and put to rest the idea that he was a puppet of Rwanda, he expelled the Rwandan members of his government. This angered the Rwandans and led, in 1998, to a second attempt to overthrow the Congolese leadership.

However, under Kabila, the Congolese government was able to enlist the support of Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola and the fighting soon deadlocked with no group able to control more than their own part of the country. By 2003 this “Second Congo War” had become the deadliest war since WWII with an estimated 5.4 million deaths. Most of these were preventable civilian deaths from disease and malnutrition, the result of people being displaced from their homes and unable to access humanitarian aid and health care.

What has happened since the Second Congo War ended in 2003?

While the violence has never fully stopped, the Second Congo War is said to have ended after many of the militias, including those supported by Rwanda and Uganda, signed the 2002 Global and All-Inclusive Agreement with the Congolese government. The agreement paved the way for a transitional government until national elections could be held, theoretically unifying the whole country under one political and military authority, while Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia agreed to withdraw their troops.

Unfortunately, while some progress was made, it was difficult to integrate the existing militias into the national army, as stipulated in the 2002 agreement. Instead, local militias continued to operate under the authority of local leaders and to control the population and resource extraction within their areas.

Who is Laurent Nkunda and where did he come from?

Laurent Nkunda is a Tutsi born in North Kivu who was trained by Rwanda and who fought with Rwandan troops in the two Congo wars. The 2002 agreement sought to integrate him into the national Congolese army, which he did for a while, rising to the rank of General in command of two brigades.

When the elections that were called for in the 2002 agreement successfully occurred in 2006, many Tutsi in North Kivu felt they had lost political power. They continued to feel vulnerable to attacks by Hutu *genocidaire* forces, often, they felt, supported by the Congolese troops. Responding to these concerns, Nkunda began to operate independently of the Congolese army and proclaimed himself the protector of Congolese Tutsi against the Hutu *genocidaires*. At the same time, however, he was quite effective in using his military force to exploit resources and increase his own power and influence.

Who are the other groups fighting in North Kivu?

There are many armed groups in the region, but to simplify, the main actors are:

- **CNDP** – (Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple) – Laurent Nkunda's forces
- **FDLR** – (Forces Démocratiques de la Libération du Rwanda) originally included Rwandan Hutus involved in the genocide who wanted to retake power in Rwanda, though now also made up of recruits who were not so involved
- **Mai-Mai militias** – referring not to any particular group of a specific ethnic or political affiliation but rather to a number of small militias that fight to protect local communities, mostly in response to the intrusion of Rwandan militias
- **FARDC** – (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo) – National Army of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- **MONUC**— (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) 17,000 UN peacekeeping forces in the DRC

Why have people been arriving at IDP camps outside Goma?

In January 2008, Nkunda's forces signed a peace agreement with the Congolese government agreeing to cease fighting and disarm in exchange for amnesty as well as pursuit and disarmament of the Hutu militias (FDLR) by the Congolese government. However, Nkunda's forces soon resumed fighting claiming that the government's fight against the FDLR was progressing too slowly. As Nkunda's forces have expanded the territory they control in North Kivu, civilians have fled. Of approximately 600,000 displaced people in the province, some 250,000 have found their way to camps outside Goma.