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Washington's Role in the Renewed Violence in DR Congo

James North
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An M23 soldier guards weapons returned by the government's army in Goma city, November 21, 2012. Reuters/James Akena

At first, the latest awful news from the Democratic Republic of Congo sounds like just another installment of an ongoing saga common in the Western media, "Vicious African Tribal Factions Hate Each Other." Several thousand armed predators who call themselves the M23 Movement and are inappropriately described as "rebels" have just seized control of Goma, a regional

capital, and the renewed fighting is adding to a death toll that has already risen above 5 million since the Second Congo War started in 1998.

Most mainstream Western press reports are treating the upsurge in violence as a purely local or regional dispute, and the conflict may seem incomprehensible to outsiders. In fact, the tragedy is by no means a merely African affair. The outbreak of fighting is also the result of a colossal failure by US foreign policy-makers dating back to the mid-1990s, aided and abetted by an ill-led United Nations peacekeeping force that stood by as the M23 seized Goma.

Rwanda borders DR Congo to the east, and is deeply implicated in the renewed fighting. Two UN investigations this year have already found that Rwanda is sustaining the M23 force; the most recent UN report, in October, charges that M23 is actually ultimately commanded by Rwanda's defense minister, James Kabarebe. Observers in Goma are reporting that M23 is armed with sophisticated weapons, including 120-millimeter mortars and night-vision goggles, which the group could not have acquired on its own.

But ever since Bill Clinton's presidency, American officials have been mesmerized by the post-genocide leader of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. Over the past three administrations, US leaders, along with certain American journalists, have repeatedly and consistently overlooked or made excuses for Rwandan crimes.

Rwanda boasts that its economic growth is turning it into a prosperous high-tech nation, an East African Singapore. In fact, the country is still poor, and 40 percent of the government's budget is foreign aid, which could give the United States, Britain and other large donors tremendous leverage. But despite the persuasive evidence earlier this year that Rwanda was behind M23, all the Obama administration did was cut a token \$200,000 in military aid. In 2011, total US aid to Rwanda was \$107.2 million; the 2012 figure is slated at \$196.4 million.

The M23 armed group is dangerous. A September report by Human Rights Watch found it guilty of "summary executions, rapes, and forced recruitment" in the areas of eastern Congo that it already controlled before it conquered Goma. Human Rights Watch added that "Rwandan officials may be complicit in war crimes through their continued military assistance to M23 forces."

Visitors to Rwanda today are understandably impressed by the reconstruction since the 1994 genocide. Government agencies work efficiently, streets are clean, and investment is pouring in. The Millennium Village project in the Bugesera district of southeastern Rwanda is making significant advances in health and education, in what could be a model for other poor countries.

These unquestionable achievements hide a more sinister reality. Rwanda first invaded the DR Congo in 1996, saying it intended to destroy the former genocidal killers who had been launching attacks while hiding in refugee camps just inside Congo. But in retaliating, the Rwandan army went far beyond a legitimate need to protect its own people. Rwandan soldiers chased and slaughtered refugees deep inside Congo, as painfully documented in *A Continent for the Taking* (2004), a vital book by journalist Howard French, who was there (see also Tristan McConnell, "Rwanda's Other Genocide," [1] *The Nation*, September 17, 2010).

Despite the mounting evidence of Rwanda's dark side, its leader, Paul Kagame, continues to enjoy sympathy among certain American writers. As late as 2009, Philip Gourevitch, who has reported from the region for years, wrote an admiring account in *The New Yorker*, in which he noted without comment that Kagame won the 2003 election with 95 percent of the vote but failed to mention that Kagame had arrested his predecessor as president on questionable charges and jailed him for three years. Another otherwise able journalist, Stephen Kinzer, published *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It* (2008), an uncritical embarrassment that Kagame could have used as his campaign biography.

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Over the years, Rwanda has continued to intervene in eastern Congo. It claims it is there to prevent the resurgence of the *génocidaires*, but the former killers are no longer a significant force. Rwanda's real aim is more venal; it is stealing minerals from eastern Congo, which has significant deposits of gold, cassiterite and coltan. Rwanda's support for the M23 these days is mainly a cross-border thievery racket, which has been documented by UN inquiries.

But the UN itself is also responsible for the tragedy in eastern Congo. The UN has an 18,000-strong multinational peacekeeping force already stationed in the country, including troops right in Goma. The UN force, known as Monusco by its French initials, stood by as M23 invaded and seized the city. Congolese critics have for years bitterly disparaged Monusco as merely "tourists." In an October report, the respected International Crisis Group also indicted the UN troops for passivity: "Despite Monusco's superiority in numbers and firepower, it has not opposed the advance of M23 and it has therefore failed to carry out the essential element of its mandate: to protect the civilian population."

So far, the M23 invaders who are occupying Goma have not started to kill civilians, although that could change quickly, based on the armed band's history of murder and rape. But simply by launching attacks in an already fragile environment, the Rwandan/M23 alliance is in effect sentencing thousands of Congolese people to death.

The country is the poorest in the world; 70 percent of its people are already undernourished. More than 95 percent of those who have died so far in Congo did not perish during actual combat (for more, particularly on the exploitation of Congo's mineral-rich Katanga province by Western multinationals, see North, "Economic Crimes in Congo," [3] *The Nation*, July 24, 2012). By not stopping M23 months ago, the UN peacekeeping force guaranteed that disease and hunger will claim even more victims from among the exhausted and weak civilians who are fleeing for their lives.

The crisis in eastern Congo may look like an African failure, but it is not. The overwhelming majority of the Congolese people are not violent, and are simply trying to survive with courage and humanity. The crisis is an American failure. It is a failure by the world community. And without dramatic reversals in policy, innocent African people will continue to pay with their lives for mistakes made by the powerful, elsewhere.