

Congo Facing a Third War?

Possible Repercussions of the Gatumba Massacre

Denis M. Tull

A massacre of Congolese Tutsis at Gatumba refugee camp threatens to disrupt the regional peace process. The refugees, 163 Banyamulenge from South Kivu, were murdered on August 13 at the Gatumba camp in Burundi, close to the Congolese border. Responsibility for the killings was claimed by the Burundian FNL, the only rebel organization still boycotting the Burundi peace process. Paradoxically, the brutal massacre will probably represent only a limited risk to the relatively advanced political transition in Burundi, but a much greater danger for the neighboring state of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which the massacre has brought to the verge of its third war in less than a decade.

The current crisis began in June with the occupation of Bukavu (South Kivu) by General Laurent Nkunda and Colonel Jules Mutebusi, two renegade officers of the Congolese RCD, who have refused to integrate their forces into the national army. After they withdrew from Bukavu, forces loyal to Kabila took revenge, committing massacres on the Banyamulenge in the town. About 25,000 Banyamulenge fled to Burundi, some of them to Gatumba refugee camp.

Although the Burundian FNL rebels have claimed responsibility for the latest massacre at Gatumba, it is by no means clear that the claim is true. Survivors believe the murders were carried out by Congolese government forces or Mai Mai militias integrated in the Congolese army, an opinion that is also held by the Burundian govern-

ment. Congolese Vice-President Azarias Ruberwa, president of the former RCD rebellion and himself a Banyamulenge, shares this interpretation, as does the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan government, which additionally accuses the Rwandan Hutu rebels (FDLR) of complicity. Preliminary findings by the UN indicate that the carnage was carried out jointly by Mai Mai militias and Rwandan Hutu rebels.

At this point in time none of the three versions can be ruled out. If the perpetrators come from the ranks of the Burundian and/or Rwandan Hutu rebels, the massacre would have to be seen as a deliberate attempt to bring down two peace processes—the Burundian and above all the Congolese. The Rwandan and Burundian reactions, immediately threatening renewed military intervention in Congo,

follow precisely this logic. Despite the standstill in the Congolese transition, both rebel groups have seen their safe havens in eastern Congo shrinking, and from the perspective of the extremist leaders of the two Hutu groups, a political solution to the conflicts with their respective home governments is either impossible (FDLR/Rwanda) or unlikely to succeed (FNL/Burundi).

The consequences of the atrocity could turn out to be even more serious if Congolese government soldiers or Mai Mai militias were actually involved. This would confirm the suspicion of the Congolese Tutsis in North and South Kivu that they are deliberate targets of pogroms or even genocide by the “autochthonous” ethnic groups of the Kivus, who can probably rely on the support of extremists in the capital, Kinshasa. If that happened, it would have a devastating effect on the already fragile social fabric of both Kivu provinces, where the Congolese citizenship of the Banyarwanda is still a matter of great controversy, and local militia leaders would gain in popularity and support again, as happened in 1992 and 1996—in view of the state’s failure to protect local ethnic groups, the militias are regarded as the sole guarantors of (ethnically organized) security. It is also conceivable that Banyarwanda in the RCD could persuade Vice-President Ruberwa to leave the government. Ruberwa himself has already announced that he has suspended his participation in the government.

Renewed intervention by Rwanda would be just as ominous. Since withdrawing from the Congo, Rwanda has moved to supplying arms to local proxy militias (including Nkunda’s). Kigali’s argument that the Congolese Tutsis in the Kivus were facing genocide has been used before to justify Rwandan intervention, in 1996 and 1998. Current reporting often ignores that the Congolese Tutsis have (at best) mixed feelings about the Rwandan claim to act as their protector. The widespread belief among the autochthonous population groups that the Congolese Tutsis are in

league with the regime in Kigali has made the Tutsis targets for radical politicians positioning themselves as proponents of Congolese nationalism.

A New MONUC?

The Gatumba massacre occurred during a phase where the United Nations are conducting a critical review of the MONUC mission in Congo. On August 16, 2004, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan presented a modified operational concept for MONUC, and the UN Security Council will have to agree the details of a new mandate by the end of September. The central aspects of the concept include deploying twelve additional battalions, which would increase the size of the mission from 10,800 to 23,900 men, as well as expanding logistical capacities (attack helicopters, transport, air- and waterborne surveillance). Operationally, the concept proposes that MONUC should play a more active role in restoring a minimum of security and order in Congo, which would largely depend on improving the mission’s crisis-reaction capability. Additionally, MONUC should possess the military superiority to deter armed groups from sabotaging the peace process—opponents of peace are found in all factions of the transitional government. Another aim is more effective monitoring of the arms embargo imposed on Congo, with MONUC concentrating on those strategically sensitive areas (Kinshasa, the Kivus, Katanga, Kasai) that represent the greatest danger to the transition process. Finally, the more robust mission should help to speed up disarmament of the estimated 8,000–10,000 Rwandan FDLR rebels.

Although Annan’s proposed expansion of the MONUC mission is unexpectedly large by UN standards, it is quite appropriate given the size of the country, the crisis of the peace process, and the serious danger of a third war that threatens to engulf the whole Great Lakes region. In comparison to the UN missions in Sierra Leone (12,500) and Liberia (15,000) we are still talking

Abbreviations

FDLR Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda
FNL Forces Nationales de Libération
MONUC Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo
RCD Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie

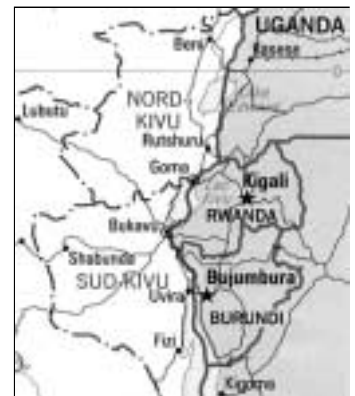
about a modest force (Congo is about the size of western Europe). Reinforcing the UN's military capabilities in eastern Congo is a sensible and long overdue measure. Establishing security should be the overarching goal of the mission. For too long the UN has clung to the belief that the transitional government possessed the will and the means to achieve this minimal goal under its own steam.

The new concept offers the preconditions for effective support of the peace process. Nonetheless, five potential complications should be pointed out:

1. MONUC plainly wishes to continue to adhere to the principle of voluntary disarmament of the Rwandan and Burundian rebels in Congo, while at the same time hoping they will be disarmed by the Congolese army. This optimism is unfounded, because firstly the creation of an army is still a distant prospect—as the Bukavu crisis demonstrated; secondly there are those inside the government who continue to view the foreign rebels as a strategically valuable bargaining chip in the conflict with Rwanda. The UN Security Council should consider giving MONUC a more aggressive stance against the Rwandan rebels, allowing it to resort to use of force if necessary.
2. Even though the peace process is deadlocked, MONUC seems unwilling to put back the planned date for presidential elections (July 2005). Given that neither the reform of the security sector nor the demobilization process will have reached an advanced stage by July 2005, rigid adherence to this date is a tremendous risk. For opponents of peace and election losers alike the fighters represent an enormous recruiting reservoir for a new rebellion, which the weak state security organs would be hard pushed to control. It remains doubtful whether MONUC itself would be willing to confront a new rebellion with military means. The Pretoria Agreement opens up the possibility of postponing the elections by a year—an option that should be given serious con-

sideration. Surveys conducted during the war have shown that peace and security—not elections and democracy—are the top priorities for the Congolese population. As long as these are absent the exertion of democratic rights will remain a futile exercise. If MONUC insists on the elections going forward, it must at least make preparations for a worst case scenario.

3. The mission must be given the means to effectively monitor eastern Congo and the 2500-kilometer eastern border, in order to put a stop to movements of armed militias and foreign soldiers and smuggling of arms and raw materials. Presence on the ground must be reinforced by surveillance of the region by air, and if possible by satellite. Western states should provide the mission with the corresponding capacity and relevant information.
4. MONUC still seems to underestimate the consequences of ethnic polarization in the Kivu provinces. Until these conflicts are resolved—including the issue of the Congolese nationality of the Rwandophone population groups, which has been exacerbated by the June crisis in Bukavu and the Gatumba massacre—peace will remain a dream, in Kivu and the rest of the country. It is more urgent than ever for MONUC to set up peace-building programs in cooperation with donors, in order to find local solutions to problems rooted in conflicts over local power and land access. Confidence-building measures with the long-term aim of local reconciliation are necessary—especially with an eye to the elections—to prevent escalation and avert a repetition of the ethnic clashes that occurred in Kivu during and after 1992 in course of the attempted democratization of the country. MONUC has for too long concentrated on the political elites in the government in Kinshasa.
5. Greater participation by industrialized states in the UN peacekeeping force, which is overwhelmingly made up of



soldiers from developing countries, is unlikely unless France offers to provide troops, as it did for Operation Artemis. It is, however, doubtful whether that would be accepted by Rwanda, whose bilateral relations with Paris recently hit a new low. It would, however, significantly increase the prospects of success for a new MONUC if battle-tested soldiers with appropriate language skills (Swahili, French) were to make up a sizable contingent of the new peacekeeping force.

Artemis in Ituri and the mission in Sierra Leone—moves determinedly to implement a precise mandate. This is a necessary precondition for saving the Congo peace process from collapse. At the same time, the crisis gives the Western states, including Germany, an opportunity to reexamine the goals, strategies, and instruments of their policies (including development cooperation) toward (post-)conflict states. Last but not least, we must also ask whether the power-sharing agreements that ensue from crisis diplomacy—see also Sierra Leone after Lomé (1998) and Liberia after Abuja (1996)—represent adequate means of resolving conflicts in Africa.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

Background

The current crisis is merely the most recent and clearest symptom of the stagnation afflicting the Congolese peace process, which was supposed to end the civil war that has persisted since 1998.

After 13 months the formal unity of the government is the only tangible success of the peace process, whose deadlock has so far prevented the major challenges of the transition process from being tackled. The government represents a central authority only in name, possessing neither the will nor the means to set up a unified national administration and army to enforce its authority. Nor has it taken any concrete steps to begin demobilizing and reintegrating the estimated 330,000 fighters for whom there will be no room in the new army (planned size 100,000).

Conclusion

The concept presented by Annan to the Security Council would for the first time create the preconditions for reducing the enormous discrepancy between the expectations placed on MONUC and its actual capabilities. In line with the Brahimi Report, it starts from realistic—rather than optimistic—assumptions, and particularly for that reason deserves the support of the Security Council members, including Germany. A reformed MONUC has good prospects of success, as long as the mission—like