

Wanted Congolese Rebel Leader Turns Himself In to U.S. Embassy
18 March 2013
By Jeffrey Gettleman



NAIROBI, Kenya — Bosco Ntaganda, a Congolese rebel general accused of massacring civilians and building an army of child soldiers — considered one of Africa’s most wanted men — surprisingly turned himself in to the American Embassy in Rwanda on Monday, saying he wanted to be sent to the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Ntaganda, a boyish-looking rebel commander who was nicknamed the Terminator, has been wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges for more than six years, sometimes hiding out in the thickly forested hills of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo or other times appearing in public, as when he would cavalierly play tennis at a fancy hotel in one of Congo’s bigger towns.

Victoria Nuland, the State Department spokeswoman, said Mr. Ntaganda walked into the embassy in Kigali, Rwanda’s capital, on Monday morning and “specifically asked to be transferred to the I.C.C.” Ms. Nuland said she could not answer why, after years of being on the run, he chose to turn himself in to American diplomats but said “we are working to facilitate his request.”

In the past few weeks, Mr. Ntaganda has been attacked by fighters in his own rebel group, the so-called M23, which is widely believed to be covertly supported by Rwanda. The M23 recently split, partly over the issue of whether or not to turn in Mr. Ntaganda, and scores of M23 fighters fled to Rwanda, where they were immediately disarmed.

But for Mr. Ntaganda, the options were dwindling.

“The Rwandans would have killed him,” said Barnabé Kikaya bin Karubi, Congo’s ambassador to Britain. “He knew too much.”

He added, “His only chance to stay alive was to turn himself in to the Americans or whomever.”

Some analysts have posed another theory — that Rwanda secretly arranged for Mr. Ntaganda to surrender. Otherwise, they said, it would have been very difficult for someone as notorious as him to travel undetected through Rwanda, a small, tightly run country full of police checkpoints. Adding to these suspicions is the fact that the person to break the news that Mr. Ntaganda had suddenly surfaced at the American Embassy was Rwanda’s foreign minister, Louise Mushikiwabo — in a Twitter message.

Rwanda has strenuously denied the growing body of evidence that higher-ups in the Rwandan military were working closely with Mr. Ntaganda or other rebels to dominate the lucrative mineral trade in eastern Congo. But several Western nations, including the United States, believed the links and

recently cut aid to Rwanda, putting officials there under unprecedented pressure to distance themselves from Congolese rebel groups.

Eastern Congo has been a toxic hodgepodge of rebel groups for years, with several of them linked back to Rwanda. Millions of people have died from malnutrition and disease connected to the relentless conflict, and hundreds of thousands of women have been raped. Congo plunged into chaos in 1996 when Rwanda covertly backed an insurrection; today, large slices remain no-go zones where marauding men pillage, rape and kill with total impunity.

According to prosecutors at the I.C.C., Mr. Ntaganda was one of the worst of Congo's brutal rebel leaders. In the first set of charges against him, filed in 2006, prosecutors said he extensively used "children under the age of 15 to participate actively in hostilities" while he was a rebel commander in 2002 and 2003. Though the United States is not a member of the court, the Obama administration has indicated support for it.

Last year, prosecutors expanded the allegations, accusing Mr. Ntaganda of spearheading civilian massacres and using rape and murder as a way to ethnically cleanse certain areas of Congo. Mr. Ntaganda has hopped from rebel army to rebel army, and in 2008, human rights groups said he oversaw the slaughter of scores of civilians in the eastern Congo town of Kiwanja, where residents were pulled out of their homes and shot in the head in front of their families.

"Bosco Ntaganda is not called the Terminator for nothing," said Sasha Lezhnev, a senior policy analyst for the Enough Project, an American anti-genocide organization. "The U.S. should immediately hand him over to the International Criminal Court for trial. This would send serious signals to current and future warlords."

Background information on Mr. Ntaganda is thin, but reports from human rights groups indicate he was born in Rwanda around 1973 and grew up partly in Congo. An ethnic Tutsi, he served in the Tutsi-led Rwandan Army, became a rebel commander in Congo and then joined the Congolese government army in 2009 as part of a deal to pacify eastern Congo. He was often seen hanging around Goma, one of Congo's biggest cities, playing tennis at the Ihusi Hotel or swigging drinks at various nightclubs.

Last spring, Mr. Ntaganda and other Tutsi soldiers mutinied, calling themselves the M23 and claiming the Congolese government had marginalized them. In November, the M23 captured Goma, sending spikes of alarm across this part of Africa and even into Western capitals. Congo, it seemed, was getting very shaky again.

Mr. Karubi said that it is "good news Bosco is no longer out there killing people" but that "the most important thing for Congo right now is the intervention brigade."

He was referring to a recent plan by neighboring countries to send in heavily armed peacekeepers to fight rebel groups.

"We need to secure our borders," he said, "but Rwanda has no interest in that."