

Dogged leader thrusts aside fears over Rwanda poll
William Wallis, *Financial Times (London)*, 8/19/2003

Paul Kagame, Rwanda's president, is "unapologetic" about the role his troops have played in the war in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo. He would send them straight back if his country's security were at stake. But in an interview with the *Financial Times* before next week's presidential election in Rwanda - the first since the 1994 genocide - Gen Kagame said he had asked the country's prosecutor-general to investigate United Nations reports that his army orchestrated the plunder of resources during its four-year occupation of eastern Congo.

Under international pressure, Rwanda withdrew its troops from Congo last year. But reports persist that it continues to arm rebel proxies, undermining prospects for a new power-sharing government in Kinshasa set up to end the war. International concern is also mounting about the manner in which Gen Kagame is running his own country. Last week the Netherlands said it had frozen aid to help pay for the elections because of concerns about the disappearance of opposition politicians ahead of the vote. Dogged as ever in his avowed determination to restore stability to Rwanda, the 46-year-old general, appears unmoved.

"We are not responsible for the problems of the Congo," he says, insisting that turmoil and dictatorship there had been claiming lives long before his troops marched over the border in 1998, sparking a war that has led to at least 3m deaths. "We would not shy away from moving back to Congo if anything threatened our security here. We are not even apologetic about it." Nor is Gen Kagame concerned that by punching well beyond its weight in the region, tiny Rwanda may have made more new enemies in Congo than it has eliminated old ones. The region's problems go back decades, he says, underlining that parts of Congo were ruled from Rwanda before Africa's borders were drawn by colonial powers. "I don't see why you even think it is important that Congolese hate Rwandans. Maybe we shall hate them also," he says. "Or why did part of Rwanda have to be carved out and taken to Congo? I am not responsible for that."

Gen Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front came to power in 1994 after defeating extremists as they tried to exterminate Rwanda's Tutsi minority. That defeat won Gen Kagame - himself a Tutsi - a near decade of deference from the wider world, which had failed to act to prevent the genocide. It may also have won him the benefit of the doubt when many suspected his pursuit of Hutu extremists in Congo was disguising expansionary aims. But that decade is drawing to a close. International politicians such as Clare Short in Britain, Jan Pronk in the Netherlands and Bill Clinton in the US, who helped underpin Rwanda's economic recovery with aid and backed Gen Kagame as he consolidated control of Rwanda and influence over the region, are no longer in office.

While remnants of the Hutu forces, which carried out the genocide, are still at large in Congo's lawless east, few of Rwanda's allies see them as a sufficient threat to justify fresh incursions. When aid to Rwanda comes up at IMF board meetings the outcome is no longer guaranteed. This may be one reason why President Kagame felt the need to hold elections in spite of the still fragile state of Rwandan society. "Well, most likely I am going to win," he says. "The meaning of that is increased legitimacy and a very clear mandate based on the choice of the people. This gives us more confidence, more tools to continue the process of rebuilding the country."

Given Rwanda's recent history, it is not surprising that the vote is taking place in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Dozens of supporters of Gen Kagame's main challenger, Faustin Twagirimungu, the former Hutu prime minister, have reportedly been arrested. But Gen Kagame brushed off concerns that there is little free and fair about the elections. The vote will take place in secret and is guided by a constitution which proscribes the promotion of ethnic division. His opponents, he suggested, are weak and visionless and have been playing the ethnic card in contravention of the rules. If he wins, it would not be because Rwandans fear any other result, he suggested, but because of the effort he says his movement has put in to restoring stability and allowing Rwanda the space to heal. The same obstinate logic won him backing over the years from countries such as Britain and the US, despite the damage his army has done next door. But as international attention focuses on attempts to give neighbouring Congo its own space to recover, that logic no longer wins as much support.