

Uganda accused of helping to fuel eastern Congo fighting

Mark Turner and William Wallis, *Financial Times (London)*, 05/15/03

The Ugandan army helped to ignite fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern town of Bunia, senior United Nations sources in Kinshasa said yesterday. They added that the UN Security Council had failed to act on months of warnings over the threat of mass killings in the area. Western diplomats and UN sources in Kinshasa said there was strong evidence that the Ugandan army had supplied weapons to both ethnic militias battling each other for control of the Ituri region of north-eastern Congo up to the day Uganda withdrew its occupying force from the area last week. They saw this as a cynical ploy to provide a pretext for maintaining control of the region's immense gold reserves and other commercial interests but said divisions within the Ugandan army may also have played a role.

Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's president, this week criticised the UN for not doing enough to intervene in the conflict. He is expected to join Joseph Kabila, president of Congo, and other leaders and militia representatives in Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian capital, today for talks on the fighting, as thousands in Bunia seek refuge with the UN. The crisis sparked by Uganda's withdrawal from Bunia could, some UN officials fear, become the UN's biggest failure in Africa since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The worst outcome would see a weak UN force unable to prevent mass killings while escalating conflict across eastern Congo precipitates the collapse of the wider Congo peace agreement, destabilising much of east and central Africa.

The UN's peacekeeping department was yesterday in talks with France and other countries - possibly including South Africa and Pakistan - to provide a robust rapid reaction force that would remain in place until a UN brigade-sized force moved into the area. UN officials are expected to report to the Security Council by tomorrow or Monday. Officials said the rapid reaction force would probably require a Security Council resolution.

Uganda is one of seven African countries that have participated in the war in the Congo which broke out in 1998 when Ugandan and Rwandan-backed rebels attempted to overthrow the government in Kinshasa. Uganda's troops were the last to pull out, months after the withdrawal of the other foreign armies which have signed up to South African facilitated peace accords.

UN sources said they had made clear in reports to the Security Council since last year that the UN force in Bunia (Monuc) had neither the strength nor mandate to contain the threat of bloodshed. The force of fewer than 5,000 is already stretched monitoring ceasefire agreements across several front lines in a country four times the size of France. "We have been reporting to New York for months that Uganda has been constantly interfering in Ituri, arming different sides," said a senior Monuc source. "The problem is that the permanent members on the Security Council do not agree on what to do."

UN sources and western diplomats said Uganda had left fresh supplies of weapons and uniforms with ethnic Hema fighters as Uganda withdrew the remnants of its occupying force last week. The sources said rival Lendu militiamen had also received fresh supplies from the Ugandan army, including heavy weaponry. They argued that no solution would be complete without stronger pressure on both Uganda and its erstwhile ally Rwanda to abstain from meddling in the area. The Security Council faces a decision on whether to equip Monuc with a rapid reaction force with a mandate to shoot to protect civilians, or cede to a South African-led initiative to send in an intervention force under the banner of the African Union.

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