

Fighting in Congo Rekindles Ethnic Hatreds

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

A Congolese woman at a camp in North Kivu, eastern Congo, was one of thousands who have been displaced by recent fighting.

MUSHAKE, [Congo](#) — Andre Simwerayi looked on with satisfaction as the army blasted rockets over a verdant hillside, pummeling what officers said were the positions of forces loyal to a renegade Congolese Tutsi general.

“If the bombs don’t do the job, we are ready with machetes to finish it ourselves,” said Mr. Simwerayi, 31, a street tough standing nearby in a tattered trench coat.

“We must crush the inyenzi,” he spat, using a word made notorious by the genocide against Tutsi in neighboring [Rwanda](#) more than a decade ago. It means cockroaches.

The recent clashes in eastern Congo between the army and the troops of the dissident general have exacted a grievous toll on a region ravaged by a decade of war. Around 400,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, thousands of women have been raped and hundreds of children have been press-ganged into militias, the [United Nations](#) says, raising alarm among diplomats the world over.

But the fighting is also rekindling the kind of ethnic hatred that previously dragged this region into the most deadly conflict since World War II.

It began with the Rwandan genocide, in which Hutu extremists killed 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in 1994. Many of the genocide's perpetrators fled into Congo, igniting regional conflicts that were fueled by the plunder of Congo's minerals, lasted for nearly a decade and killed, by some estimates, as many as four million people through violence, disease and hunger.

Now a new wave of anti-Tutsi sentiment is sweeping Congo, driven by deep anger over the renegade Tutsi general. Many see his rebellion as a proxy for Rwanda, to the east, whose army occupied vast parts of Congo during the most devastating chapter of the regional war and plundered millions of dollars' worth of minerals from the country, according to many analysts, diplomats and human rights workers.

The current battle is in many ways a throwback to the earliest and most difficult questions at the heart of the Congo war, and also a reflection of longstanding hostilities toward Tutsi, who are widely viewed here as being more Rwandan than Congolese.

Many Congolese Tutsi see themselves as members of an especially vulnerable minority, one that has already suffered through genocide and whose position in Congo has always been precarious. But many other Congolese see Tutsi, many of whom have been in Congo for generations, as foreign interlopers with outsize economic and political influence.

At the center of this latest rebellion is the renegade general, Laurent Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi with longstanding ties to the Tutsi-led Rwandan government. He has refused to integrate his men into Congo's national army, as the other militias that fought in the sprawling civil war have done, arguing that Tutsi face unique perils that require his special protection.

"Our enemies have the ideology of genocide," General Nkunda said in December at his hide-out in lush eastern Congo. "We are fearing they will continue their genocide in Congo."

Like many of Congo's historical figures, General Nkunda, a tall, rail-thin 40-year-old with angular features, has developed a cult of personality. He has a penchant for flamboyant accessories: in a recent interview he cradled a black cane topped by a silver eagle's head. Other times he has worn a button that says "Rebels for Christ." He likes to refer to himself in the third person.

"Is Nkunda the problem?" he demanded. "Why? How can Nkunda be to blame? I am only trying to protect my people."

General Nkunda said Congo's small Tutsi minority was vulnerable to attack by militias, particularly the remnants of the Hutu extremist forces that carried out the genocide in Rwanda. Many of the extremists still roam the jungles of eastern Congo, and he has demanded that this militia be disbanded and that Tutsi refugees who fled into Rwanda be allowed to return.

Many Congolese Tutsi share his fears. "We are always seen as outsiders, but we are Congolese," said Sanvura Birida, who lives with her four children in a camp for displaced people in territory controlled by General Nkunda. "The government does not protect us."

But that feeling of vulnerability does not always mean people are being personally victimized.

"In response to the cumulative deaths of fewer than 20 Tutsi over the past two years, Nkunda has launched offensives that have killed over 100 persons and displaced hundreds of thousands," said a report published in October by the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit organization that seeks to prevent or resolve deadly conflicts. "While Nkunda has defended the Tutsi minority in North Kivu, he has become a potential danger to the community's security as a whole."

Representatives of his militia and others involved in recent fighting were expected to participate in a peace conference called by the government and originally scheduled to begin Jan. 6. It has been delayed by logistical problems, according to Reuters.

In many ways, Congo's Tutsi are a people apart, an unusual minority with influence but also problems beyond its size.

These differences are reflected in a unique way of life. When the Congolese Army routed General Nkunda's forces in one of the strategic towns they occupied in a recent, ultimately failed push, the army celebrated with stiff pulls of rotgut whiskey.

But when General Nkunda's men routed the army with a much smaller force a few days later, they toasted their victory with cups of milk from the most prized of Tutsi possessions, dairy cows.

This reputation for sobriety and determination helps explain why Tutsi have been so successful in business, according to Tutsi community leaders in Goma, the regional capital.

"When we were investing and working, the Congolese were listening to music and playing football," said Modeste Makabuza Ngoga, a Tutsi who is one of Goma's richest men, with

investments in transportation, telecommunications, tin ore and the gasoline trade, among other things. “Are we to be blamed for that?”

But the history of the region tells a different story. Before the elections of 2006, the area was controlled by a Rwandan-backed rebel group turned political party, the Congolese Rally for Democracy. It helped Mr. Makabuza Ngoga and other Tutsi build fortunes through patronage of the state government and special deals to buy valuable agricultural land, according to analysts and Western diplomats in the region.

Wealth also helps fuel the Tutsi sense of vulnerability. A power-sharing agreement that ended the war in 2003 enabled a party dominated by a handful of Tutsi to essentially control one quarter of the country, which is the size of Western Europe, and thus considerable wealth. But in the election, the first democratic vote in Congo in more than four decades, only one Tutsi from this region was elected to the National Assembly.

Some of Goma’s wealthy Tutsi feel so unsafe that they sleep in Gisenyi, a town just inside the Rwandan border, a fact that reinforces the common perception that Congolese Tutsi are more Rwandan than Congolese.

Rwanda’s history is a powerful touchstone for Congo’s Tutsi. Similar disparities — a small group controlling considerable wealth and influence, amid a powerful sense of grievance from the majority — helped create the conditions that led to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Like many African ethnic groups, the Tutsi were divided in the 19th century among the European colonies; in the case of the Tutsi, those areas became Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. In each of these places, they have at times been co-opted and cultivated as a favored elite by those in power.

That trend began with [Mobutu Sese Seko](#), Congo’s longtime ruler, after independence and later included Laurent D. Kabila, who became president after rebelling in 1996 with backing from Rwanda and Uganda.

These alliances allowed Tutsi to dominate the economy and political life of much of North Kivu Province here, with its tin mines, rich pastureland and transportation links to the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. Large parts of the province’s best farming and grazing land is controlled by a handful of Tutsi owners, according to analysts and human rights workers.

But at times allies of the Tutsi have turned on them, sometimes savagely. In 1983, facing pressure from other ethnic groups in the region, Mr. Mobutu revoked citizenship for residents who could not trace their roots in Congo to 1885, effectively turning thousands of Tutsi and Hutu into stateless people. A decade later, ethnic violence exploded in North Kivu. As many as 10,000 people were killed, and 250,000 Hutu and Tutsi fled.

Until the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Congolese Hutu and Tutsi coexisted relatively peacefully and in many ways faced the same kinds of persecution from other ethnic groups that considered them outsiders. But when the Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide flooded into Congo, tensions rose between Congolese Hutu and Tutsi as well.

These Hutu extremists made common cause with the Mobutu government. When Mr. Mobutu fell in 1997, Mr. Kabila took power, and an unknown number of Rwandan Hutu refugees were killed. Mr. Kabila broke with his Rwandan allies, who in 1998 sponsored another rebellion, this time led by Congolese Tutsi. Mr. Kabila joined forces with the Hutus behind the genocide, igniting a second civil war in Congo.

Joseph Dunia Ruyenzi, a human rights activist in Goma, said that despite this history, Tutsi must put their trust in the fledgling democracy of Congo.

“All Congolese must see themselves as Congolese first, and as having a stake in peace and prosperity,” he said. “Our only option is to be in this together.”