

Kagame's Revenge

Why Rwanda's Leader Is Sowing Chaos in Congo

MICHELA WRONG

The speech was vintage Paul Kagame. Addressing a group of foreign ambassadors in Kigali in February 2023, the Rwandan president complained bitterly of being hounded about his country's involvement in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he stands accused of backing a rebel group that is rapidly gobbling up land and whose members are mostly ethnic Tutsis, like Kagame.

Instead of acknowledging Rwanda's support for the M23 Movement—named after a March 23, 2009, peace accord its fighters say the Congolese government violated—Kagame reminded his audience about another rebel group operating in eastern Congo, this one led by those responsible for Rwanda's 1994 genocide. The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, known by the French acronym FDLR, was founded more than two decades ago by extremist ethnic Hutu soldiers and militia members who fled to Congo after massacring hundreds of thousands of Tutsis.

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According to Kagame, the group still poses an existential threat to Rwanda. “It’s about our lives,” he said of the dangers of the FDLR. “It’s about our story. It’s about our history. It’s about our identity. It’s about our existence.”

The FDLR has long been a scapegoat for Rwanda, blamed whenever Rwandan interference in Congo draws criticism. Kagame both denies backing the M23 and routinely implies that the Hutu extremist group has forced his hand—rhetoric that silences unhappy allies and reminds Rwandans what they owe him for defeating the country’s genocidal government three decades ago. He has been playing the FDLR card incessantly of late, prompting Rwandan officials, civil society organizations, and survivors’ groups in the diaspora to pick up the refrain that a second genocide is imminent, this time targeting not only Tutsis living inside Rwanda but also those living across the border in Congo.

Aside from Kagame loyalists, however, almost no one buys this tired line. Rwanda’s unacknowledged exploits in Congo have long since ceased to be about self-defense or even revenge. They are intended, instead, to assert hegemonic dominance over Rwanda’s neighbors and guarantee access to the natural resources of a vast region that has been only fitfully governed since President Mobutu Sese Seko fled into exile in 1997.

This is not the first time Rwanda has used its M23 proxies to plunge eastern Congo into chaos. In 2012, the group swept across the province of North Kivu and briefly took control of the region’s lakeside capital, Goma. The United States and other Western countries responded by slashing aid to Kigali and threatening to sanction Rwandan officials for aiding and abetting war crimes. This unified international response forced Rwanda to withdraw its support for the rebels, paving the way for their swift defeat.

Now the M23 is back, but Western countries have failed to penalize Kagame for his renewed meddling. Over the last decade, Rwanda has made itself indispensable by supplying disciplined peacekeepers to trouble spots across the continent and, increasingly, by offering to house asylum seekers Europe does not want. As a result, the M23 rebellion has been allowed to escalate, drawing Congo’s neighbors into the conflict and risking a wider regional conflagration. Not since 2012 has Africa’s Great Lakes region been on such a troubling trajectory. But this time, no one is pumping the brakes.

CONGOLESE QUAGMIRE

The M23 movement was established in April 2012 by mutinying Congolese soldiers who accused Congo’s government of breaking a promise to

integrate them into the national army and failing to protect the country's beleaguered Tutsi community. Since it reemerged in November 2021, the insurgency has displaced between 600,000 and 800,000 Congolese, many of whom are either sleeping on the streets of Goma or gathering in makeshift refugee camps rife with cholera. The United Nations, which always struggles to raise funds for Congo, says feeding, housing, and providing medical care to those uprooted by the fighting will push the humanitarian aid bill for the country to a record \$2.25 billion.

The violence these refugees are fleeing has been documented in gut-wrenching detail by human rights groups: gang rapes of women, mass executions of men, and forced recruitment of young boys to serve as porters, guides, and child soldiers. In February, the M23 captured the settlement of Mushaki. Next to fall was the nearby town of Rubaya, where coltan—used in smartphones, laptops, and electric vehicle batteries—is mined, followed by the settlement of Mweso. As of mid-March, the rebels had progressed to the outskirts of Sake, 15 miles northwest of Goma and situated on a main supply route. As the noose around Goma has tightened, the prices of basic foodstuffs have soared.

The spiraling insurgency has brought Congo and Rwanda to the brink of all-out war. Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, who is campaigning for reelection in December, surprised many observers by sending military jets into Rwandan airspace in January, and he appears to have hired eastern European mercenaries to help his notoriously ill-disciplined army. For his part, Kagame has warned that his troops have deployed “massively” along Rwanda’s border with Congo in response to shelling by the FDLR and that he is willing to send them across if necessary. “Both men have painted themselves into a corner with all their public declarations,” Alexis Arieff, an Africa policy specialist at the Congressional Research Service, told me. “I’m not sure [they] wanted to find themselves where they are right now.”

The conflict is also pulling in a growing number of African states. Kenyan soldiers, part of a multinational force dispatched by the East African Community in response to an appeal for help from Tshisekedi, deployed around Goma late last year. Burundian troops joined the EAC force in March and were attacked almost immediately. South Sudanese and Ugandan soldiers are expected to deploy to eastern Congo as well, and

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Angola has said it will send 500 troops to help monitor a cease-fire that has been repeatedly violated. In theory, this international operation is a cheering example of “African solutions to African problems,” a favorite mantra of the African Union. But the incoming army commanders are fast encountering the problem that has long hampered the UN peace-keeping mission in Congo, one of the oldest and largest in the world: the furious contempt of the very communities they are meant to protect.

Already, the Kenyans stand accused of doing little more than creating buffer zones that save the M23 from having to fight the Congolese army. The head of Congo’s National Assembly, Christophe Mboso, has hinted that these troops could be asked to leave if “within a reasonable time” they fail “to support us against the aggressor.” Eastern Congo threatens to become a new quagmire for regional powers.

NOTHING TO SEE HERE

For years, Kagame has denied using Congolese Tutsis as proxy forces. But in December 2022, the UN released a report that finally confirmed the open secret of Rwandan support for the M23. Citing aerial footage along with photographic and video evidence, UN experts described a sophisticated rebel force boasting mortars, machine guns, and long-range firepower thought to be provided by Kigali. Its fighters move in organized columns of 500 militants, sporting helmets, Kevlar jackets, backpacks, and uniforms identical to those used by the Rwandan army. Bintou Keita, the special representative of the UN secretary-general in Congo, told the UN Security Council in June 2022 that the M23 “has behaved more and more like a conventional army rather than an armed group.”

Notwithstanding the damning evidence, Kagame maintains a stance of outraged innocence. The M23 is a purely Congolese problem, he insists, and its fighters—who are almost exclusively Tutsis—are driven by the need to protect their community from the xenophobia that has threatened it since long before he was born. What is more, he points out, the Congolese army has repeatedly gone into battle alongside the reviled FDLR.

Such claims neatly reverse cause and effect. Congolese Tutsis are certainly being targeted by members of other ethnic groups in the provinces of North and South Kivu. They have been stoned in the streets, and their homes and businesses have been burned. But such intercommunal attacks, however vicious and unmerited, are not the cause of the M23 rebellion but a response to it: many Congolese of other ethnicities automatically assume local Tutsis support the rebel

group and have therefore lashed out against them. Congolese Tutsis, in other words, are also victims of the M23's new campaign.

Kagame's claims that the FDLR poses a threat to Rwanda are similarly risible. In the 1990s, a predecessor of the group boasted tens of thousands of fighters who held military exercises in the enormous refugee camps established in the Kivus in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. Their leaders, the ousted generals of the assassinated Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, plotted to invade their country. But time has taken its toll. Many militants have returned to Rwanda to be "re-educated" and join the national army; others have come to regard the Masisi region of eastern Congo as home. The FDLR's fighters, who are thought to number between just 500 and 1,000, threaten the local Congolese population far more than they threaten the Rwandan government.

IGNORE ME AT YOUR PERIL

Ever since Mobutu was pushed into exile by a rebel coalition supported by nine African countries, successive presidents of Congo have struggled to keep the giant state in one piece and its neighbors' hands off its eye-watering resources. During the Second Congo War, which raged from 1998 to 2003, Rwanda and Uganda both profited handsomely from the illegal mining of gold, tin, coltan, diamonds, and tungsten that lie just across the border in eastern Congo, more than 1,500 miles and an entire time zone away from the capital of Kinshasa. This blatant asset stripping eventually morphed into lively cross-border smuggling operations, the proceeds of which still flow into Rwandan and Ugandan coffers.

But the lust for minerals does not by itself explain what is happening in North Kivu today. The area now controlled by the M23 contains few important mines, and the fighting has, if anything, disrupted smuggling activities. The real reason that Kagame has resurrected the M23—and risked both his carefully cultivated image as an African statesman and Rwanda's reputation as a business-friendly, development-oriented state—lies in his hunger for recognition as the region's most important player. The French have a word for this: *incontournable*, or "unavoidable." Kagame has long believed in his right to be *incontournable* not only in Rwanda but also in the region, on the continent, and even in the global arena.

The first M23 insurgency, which climaxed with the seizure of Goma in 2012, came to an end only after exasperated Western donors cut aid to Rwanda. Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union together slashed an estimated \$240 million



Resurgence: M23 rebels near Rumangabo military base, Congo, January 2023

in assistance, according to Rwanda's finance minister, causing Rwandan GDP growth to fall from a projected 7.6 percent to 4.6 percent in 2013. Washington also warned Rwandan officials that they could face prosecution in the International Criminal Court. Abandoned by Kigali and under military pressure from a southern African force that had deployed in the Kivus, the M23 disbanded with impressive speed; by November 2013, its fighters had dispersed to refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda.

For the next eight years, eastern Congo was relatively quiet. After Tshisekedi's contested election in 2019, relations between Congo and Rwanda enjoyed something of a honeymoon, with the leaders of both countries exchanging words of mutual esteem and the Rwandan army conducting anti-FDLR operations in eastern Congo with Tshisekedi's blessing. Kagame even attended the funeral of Tshisekedi's father, Étienne, a veteran politician famous for his long-standing opposition to Mobutu.

But in recent years, the budding friendship has soured. The trigger appears to have been the signature in May 2021 of a surprise deal between Tshisekedi and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni that authorized Uganda to move heavy mechanized equipment into northeastern Congo to clear swaths of equatorial forest and repair roughly 140 miles of road, an infrastructural upgrade that was expected to boost cross-border

trade—both legal and illegal—between the two countries, eliminating the need to move goods through Rwanda. Six months later, Ugandan troops crossed into Congo to neutralize another rebel group known as the Allied Democratic Forces, which was using the region as a base.

The two initiatives appeared to both panic and infuriate Kagame, who viewed them as part of a joint attempt by Tshisekedi and Museveni to sideline him economically and strategically. In April 2022, Congo joined the East African Community, reinforcing the impression that Tshisekedi—who had once seemed anxious to curry favor with Kagame—was now going over Rwanda's head to engage directly with other East African leaders.

By renewing support for the M23, Kagame is reminding the leaders of neighboring countries of his readiness and capacity to destabilize the entire region if any attempt is made to leave him out of the loop. “Ignore me at your peril” is the subtext of the insurgency.

The M23 rebellion has certainly stalled Uganda's plans in eastern Congo. After the M23 seized the Congolese border town of Bunagana last June, the Ugandan authorities were forced to withdraw their road-building equipment and pause plans to upgrade 55 miles of road linking the frontier outpost to Goma. By then, Museveni had approved a fence-mending trip to Kigali by his son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, a general in Uganda's military, an overture that has eased bilateral tensions but done nothing to halt the burgeoning M23 encroachment.

The insurgency's impact is even more damaging in Congo. With the encouragement of the Congolese army, dozens of ragtag Congolese militias that previously had little in common are putting aside their differences to fight what they see as an invading Rwandan-backed force. And with so many African countries now embroiled in the conflict and so many fighters with guns hoping to benefit, the Balkanization of the Kivus and the destabilization of the broader Great Lakes region have become real possibilities.

DITHERING DONORS

Unlike in 2012, Western countries have refused to take muscular action against Kagame this time around, even though Rwanda is arguably more vulnerable to economic pressure. COVID-19 hit the Rwandan economy hard, and a series of prestige projects—including a new airport planned south of Kigali and the expansion of the national carrier, RwandAir—have bitten deep into the government's finances. And although it claims to be progressing toward middle-income status, Rwanda has actually grown more dependent on foreign aid:

between 1994, when a guilt-ridden international community rushed to rescue the shattered country, and 2021, net aid rose from \$1.04 billion to \$1.25 billion.

Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, and the United States—as well as the United Nations and the EU—have all called on Rwanda to halt its support for the M23. So far, however, self-interest has stopped many of them from pulling the economic levers that worked in 2012.

France has proved to be an especially important backer. After spending years repairing a relationship soured by French President François Mitterrand's friendship with Habyarimana, Paris has embraced Kagame as its favorite new African strongman and is grateful for the role his forces have played policing the Central African Republic and Mali, both former French colonies. Kagame also deployed Rwandan peacekeepers to Mozambique in 2021, taking on a jihadi insurgency that had forced the closure of a liquified natural gas plant run by the French giant Total. On a trip to Kinshasa in March, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged 34 million euros (about \$36 million) in humanitarian aid for eastern Congo but seemed determined to avoid blaming Rwanda for the violence there and stressed that any sanctions would have to wait until peace talks had run their course.

The United Kingdom, another high-profile ally of Rwanda, is beholden to Kagame for different reasons. Its Conservative Party, which has long promised voters it is getting tough on illegal immigration, signed a deal with Kigali in 2022 to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing. That agreement is being contested in British courts: an appeal of a ruling that deemed the policy legal was to be heard in late April. Not a single migrant has yet been deported to Rwanda, but London has already paid Kigali 140 million pounds (about \$169 million) for its cooperation. And in March, British Home Secretary Suella Braverman made a lightning trip to Kigali, where she visited two housing estates earmarked for migrants and told journalists that deportations could start by the summer. "Many people in government hope the asylum project won't happen," one British official told me. "But while it's still in the offing, we are having to pander to Kigali over human rights and issues like [Congo]." Kagame also has a loyal friend in Sunak's minister of state for development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, who makes no secret of his admiration for the Rwandan leader.

Over the last decade, Rwanda has made itself indispensable to the West.

The United States has been more outspoken in its criticism of Rwanda. Its relationship with Kagame had already begun to sour before the latest crisis, in part because of his treatment of the rights activist Paul Rusesabagina, a U.S. resident who was renditioned back to Rwanda in 2020 and sentenced to 25 years in prison. It was Tshisekedi, not Kagame, who was honored with a tête-à-tête with U.S. President Joe Biden at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington in December. But thanks to U.S. pressure, Rusesabagina was released in March, removing a key bone of contention between Washington and Kigali and raising the question of whether the Biden administration will continue to push Kagame to withdraw from Congo.

Underlying much of the West's dithering over Rwanda's destabilization of Congo is the realization that Russia—whose foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, traveled to Africa twice in the span of ten days in early 2023—is aggressively forging new friendships on the habitually neglected continent. Of the 39 states that either abstained or voted against a UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to end its yearlong invasion of Ukraine, 17 were African. Western governments would prefer that African countries threatened by Islamist insurgencies turn to Rwanda and its famously disciplined peacekeepers for help instead of to Russia and its notorious Wagner mercenaries.

Pulled in different directions, Rwanda's traditional partners have been unable to forge a common front. According to diplomats in the Great Lakes region, discussions among Western powers have gone little further than debating “smart sanctions” that might target individual M23 and FDLR commanders but not Rwandan or Congolese officials. Such measures would fall far short of the kind of across-the-board aid cuts that prompted Rwanda to pull the plug on the M23 back in 2012.

HERE TO STAY?

While Western donors waver, suspicions are growing that an emboldened Kagame has new ambitions for his proxy force. Today's M23 is different from the one that occupied much of eastern Congo a little more than a decade ago. “This time around, the group's makeup is much less ethnically diverse,” Reagan Miviri, an analyst at the Congolese research institute Ebutuli, told me. “The leadership of the old M23 was Tutsi, but most of the fighters on the ground were actually Hutu. This time almost all of them, whether leaders or fighters, are Tutsi.”

Early this year, M23 commanders put out the word to those who fled their homes during the group's rapid advance across North Kivu that they should come back, calling for schools to be reopened and life in the areas they now occupy to return to something approaching normal. "Officially, the line from the M23 is 'We want to negotiate with the government,' but on the ground, they've been telling people, 'You should return, as we are here to stay,'" said Elicia Henzler, the coordinator of the Kivu Security Tracker, which maps violence in the region. "It's still in its early stages, but it looks as though something approaching a parallel administration is being established in parts of Masisi."

Setting up a puppet administration in North Kivu, staffed by Congolese Tutsis but receiving direction from Kigali, would take Kagame into daring new territory. The last time Rwanda attempted such a thing was in 1998, when it, along with Uganda, installed an armed faction known as the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) as a regional administration in Goma.

Those were different times. International sympathy for Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front—seen as having ended the genocide in Rwanda—was running high, Congo was in chaos, and the rest of the world viewed the RCD's establishment as a regrettable but understandable part of the country's general fragmentation. A year later, the RCD split into competing factions. In 2006, it fizzled out entirely after a poor electoral performance.

Now, the sheen is gone from Kagame's regime. His international reputation has been permanently dented by revelations that his forces massacred Hutu civilians before, during, and after the 1994 genocide. According to the UN refugee agency, some 200,000 Hutus remain unaccounted for after Rwandan troops broke up the refugee camps in eastern Congo, chasing their inhabitants through the forests. Reports from the UN and various watchdog groups detailing how Rwanda then used its proxy guerrilla forces to systematically plunder Congo's assets have hardly improved his image. The Congolese gynecologist and human rights activist Denis Mukwege, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, has made it his mission to highlight Rwanda's toxic role in eastern Congo, and the country's population is angrier at Kigali than ever.

By relentlessly upping the ante, Kagame is making it impossible for either his fellow African heads of state or his Western allies to ignore him. But he is also ensuring that when they reluctantly take action—and take action they eventually must—he will have permanently lost the moral high ground he once claimed, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, as the man who ended the bloodletting in Africa's Great Lakes region. 🌍