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Conflict in Bukavu: The Rwandan Connection

by
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Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Bukavu is part of the complex crisis in the eastern parts of the DRC (commonly known as the Kivus'). Indeed, the Kivus have been at the centre of three intricately linked conflicts inherited from Belgian colonialism, 30 years of misrule under Mobutu, institutionalisation of ethnic discrimination against the *Banyamulenge* (Congolese Tutsis) and the cross-border spill over of Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan civil wars. Many of the problems in Kivus' were exacerbated by the direct military involvement of Rwanda and Uganda during the 1998 – 2002 war. Some of the major problems also have their origins in a web of foreign troops and proxies fuelling ethnic tensions and are likely to endure unless explicitly addressed in the peace process. Since the regional war in 1998 – 2000, Goma and Bukavu became the hub for rebel activities, with a number of splinter forces (RCD), local militias (*Mai Mai* and *Interahamwe*) and foreign troops (Rwanda and Burundi) fighting for control of the region and its resources. Addressing the intertwined conflict still brewing in the eastern provinces lies at the core of the solution to the fragile peace in the DRC.

Background of the crisis

The main source of the violence in the region is inter-communal resentment against Rwandese Hutus and Tutsi migrants (*Banyamulenge*) who arrived in the eastern Congo in the eighteenth century as cheap labourers under Belgian rule. Over time, the tensions between the *Banyamulenge* and the indigenous Hunde and Nyanga were exploited by tribal chiefs: firstly, to mobilise the indigenous majority to check the *Banyamulenge's* growing political influence in the Kivu's; and secondly, to weaken the *Banyamulenge's* control over land and minerals. During the 30 year Mobutu regime, land ownership became the source of ethnic conflict. The indigenous Hunde and Nyanga felt that Mobutu had unjustifiably allocated land to the *Banyamulenge*, through influential Rwandan Tutsis in Mobutu's government.

The backdrop of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 only added fuel to the already simmering situation in the Kivus. On the back of the Rwandan genocide, thousands of Hutu refugees, among them anti-

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Tutsi extremists spilled across the border into the Kivus. The Hutu extremists subsequently regrouped as *Interahamwe* meaning "those who fight together" and formed the *Rassemblement Democratique pour le Rwanda* and later the *Armee de Liberation du Rwanda* (ALiR). The Mobutu's government helped the ALiR rearm as a strategy to manage conflict in the East. This resulted in continued attacks by the ALiR against Rwanda and Burundi across the highly permeable