

## RWANDA: THE GUIDING HAND OF THE MARCH 23<sup>RD</sup> MOVEMENT

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At the fore of unrest in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is the March 23<sup>rd</sup> Movement (M23)—named after a botched peace deal signed on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009—which earned an unprecedented notoriety and posted spectacular successes during its 19 month rebellion. This was a rebellion defined by the avaricious intentions of neighboring Rwanda, but veiled and publicly predicated on addressing political grievances—a messy quagmire steeped in viciousness startling even to such a war-weary region. Although the M23 uprising is pegged as a civil war, it has an unmistakable Rwandan flavor. Rwanda spurred the M23 conflict as an ingenious proxy for a self-motivated adventure of economic imperialism. A comprehensive ceasefire, multilateral sanctions and mining reform could have defused the conflict and considerably mitigated its costs.

This paper will begin with a brief historical account of the M23 rebellion and will be structured around the following questions:

1. What competing arguments exist for the cause[s] of the rebellion? Specifically, what was the nature of Rwandan incitement and involvement?
2. What could the Congolese state/international community have done to avert the conflict or mitigate its cost?

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The word ‘conflict’ fails to capture the wanton violence endemic to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for the better part of a generation. This ‘conflict’ has manifested itself through a “litany of insurgencies, skirmishes, massacres, systemized rapes, and refugee crises”<sup>1</sup> that are a persistent reality for millions of Congolese. Since 1996, it is estimated that over 5.4 million people, mostly civilians, have died<sup>2</sup>—more casualties than in all interstate wars since WWII combined—in what historian Gérard Prunier has dubbed ‘Africa’s World War,’ because of extensive intervention by countries such as Zimbabwe, Angola and Rwanda. Today, the volatile Kivu provinces are infested with over 40 insurgent groups<sup>3</sup> including the mythical Mai Mai who spray themselves “with magic water to protect themselves from bullets,”<sup>4</sup> Ugandan Joseph Kony’s elusive Lord’s Resistance Army and a slew of other militias

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armed with everything from 50mm canons to wooden clubs. However, no movement has been as successful as M23.

The history of eastern Congo is frighteningly complex: a tale of capricious ethnic tensions, fluid demographic shifts and a region burdened with pervasive violence. However, in order to fully understand the causes of M23's rise to rebellion, it is essential to comprehend that M23 did not spring forth from the ether. It was rather the final, most cohesive incarnation of an organic evolution of rebel groups operating in the rugged eastern DRC. The National Congress for the Defense of the People, known by its French acronym CNDP, was the precursor to M23. Comprised mostly of ethnic Tutsis from the central Great Lakes region, the CNDP were hardened veterans of the campaign to overthrow Juvenal Habyarimana's Hutu government in Rwanda in 1994. Following those efforts, the CNDP then fought to depose Sese Seko Mobutu in 1996 and became a nagging thorn in President Joseph Kabila's side by 2009, controlling broad swathes of Kivu provinces and constantly fighting the Hutu Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). In tandem with the U.N., a loose coalition of western governments brokered a peace deal on March 23, 2009 in which the CNDP integrated into the Congolese military (FARDC) with hopes of bringing peace and stability to the embattled eastern Congo. In May 2012, merely three years later, the peace accord was shattered: over 600 hundred former CNDP soldiers, under the dual command of General Sultani Makenga and Bosco 'The Terminator' Ntagana, defected from the FARDC and fled into the densely-forested Virunga mountains, birthing the M23 movement.

**WHAT COMPETING ARGUMENTS EXIST FOR THE CAUSE[S] OF THE REBELLION? SPECIFICALLY, WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF RWANDAN INCITEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT?**

The reasons for the defection and subsequent cause of the protracted 19-month rebellion have prompted vigorous scholarly debate and are as numerous as the rebel groups wreaking havoc in the eastern DRC. The common narrative for M23's call to arms is twofold. The first element of its justification was the failure of Kinshasa to honor provisions brokered during the 2009 peace agreement: increased pay, promotions based on merit rather than ethnicity, and more cohesive and equitable integration into the FARDC apparatus.<sup>5</sup> The M23 leadership also demanded that Joseph Kabila's regime "become accountable to its people, end corruption [and] the mistreatment of minority groups."<sup>6</sup> These grievances appear legitimate; Kinshasa had indeed failed to adequately grant CNDP officials the promised number of high-level positions in the FARDC and willfully neglected their commitment in facilitating the return of Tutsi refugees.<sup>7</sup> However, closer examination reveals that many former CNDP soldiers were in fact granted lucrative postings and abused their newfound privilege to "accumulate wealth through illegal taxation, cross-border smuggling and protection rackets."<sup>8</sup> The reintegration process botched the crucial *integration* element, permitting the CNDP troops to "maintain parallel chains of command with the army"<sup>9</sup>—these soldiers were

effectively operating autonomously behind a veneer of assimilation.<sup>10</sup> Complaints by non-CNDP soldiers within the FARDC of this ‘special status’ prompted Kinshasa to threaten stamping out this blatant corruption by reassigning top officers to far-flung postings.<sup>11</sup> It was the fear that their privileges would end that prompted the ex-CNDP troops to rebrand themselves as M23, although they cited the aforementioned grievances as their justification.

The mutiny initially failed—M23 was too weak and disorganized—and its cause seemed doomed, but a benevolent benefactor mysteriously resuscitated it. This guiding hand was Rwanda—the shady engineer of the M23 rebellion. Paul Kagame has vociferously denied supporting M23, dismissing such claims as “ludicrous”<sup>12</sup> and publicly “condemned all forms of external support”<sup>13</sup> to the rebels. Kagame’s words were hollow. He consciously omitted Rwanda’s precedent of meddling in the eastern Congo. Actually, prior to the birth of M23, Rwanda had openly supported the CNDP in hopes of denying the ‘Hutu Power’-FLDR a Kivu base from which to consolidate power and threaten Rwanda. Furthermore, Kagame rejected an extensive United Nations report that accused Kigali of providing direct “support to M23 rebels, facilitation of recruitment, encouragement...of FARDC desertions as well as the provision of arms and ammunition, intelligence, and political advice.”<sup>14</sup> This critical evidence of direct Rwandan intervention begs the question: why and how would Rwanda support a ‘foreign’ rebel group while openly denying its patronage?

A widely held belief is that Rwanda encouraged the M23 rebellion in order to address long-standing security concerns rooted in the Kivus. Ever since Kagame’s Revolutionary Patriotic Front (RPF) drove the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, including the fanatical *Interahamwe* and Hutu-power ideologues, into the DRC in mid-1994, these extremists have been operating in the rural hinterlands of the Kivu region. Rwanda’s concern is evidenced by its previous support of the majority Tutsi CNDP and is buttressed by the belief that “as long as any of these elements continue to operate in the Congo...they pose a threat greater than the sum of their current troop numbers, as they continue to be fueled by the ideology that fueled the genocide.”<sup>15</sup> Kagame, ever the shrewd politician, was able to exploit Western guilt for failure to intervene in the 1994 genocide to his own ends—launching a series of incursions into Congolese territory starting in 1996 and continuing in some form or another, until the rise of M23 in May 2012.

However, by May 2012, the security argument was no longer credible. The threat posed by the FLDR and its allies was negligible and Rwanda’s sallies into Congolese territory to eradicate these fanatical Hutus had become unpopular with the international community. Critics of Kagame accused his administration of pursuing “cold-blooded ethnic revenge”<sup>16</sup> and being driven by a “sense of entitlement and invincibility [influenced] more [by] its military might than its ethnic affiliation.”<sup>17</sup> Military analysts also pointed to the fact that the military capabilities of these Hutu groups—numbering no more than 2,500 poorly-armed, disorganized men<sup>18</sup>—were “no match for Rwandan forces amounting to 700,000 men under arms and a sophis-

ticated military arsenal, consisting of armored personnel carriers, tanks and helicopters.”<sup>19</sup> What had once been a battle of David vs. Goliath had devolved into that of a playground bully tormenting his weak and disheveled subordinate. Still, if Rwanda ever did have to answer for its involvement in enflaming the M23 uprising, its defense of protecting security interests—even if empirically spurious—is difficult to dispute considering the traumatic events in its recent history.

The answer for Rwanda’s involvement in the M23 conflict is greed. Because security intervention was no longer an option, Rwanda stimulated the M23 rebellion through clever manipulation and creative diplomacy while feigning ignorance at accusations of its involvement. M23 was the perfect façade to fuel Kigali’s economic motives and promoting destabilization in the DRC created a smokescreen, masking Rwanda’s extractive intent. Kagame’s regime feigned ignorance at accusations of its involvement, masquerading behind bogus security and humanitarian concerns while thrusting its rapacious hands into the DRC’s mineral reserves.

In M23, Rwanda saw the vehicle through which it could voraciously consume the eastern DRC’s rich mineral reserves, valued at a staggering \$24 trillion.<sup>20</sup> These resources include an estimated 30%<sup>21</sup> of the world’s diamonds, copper, cobalt and a slew of valuable rare-earth minerals including cassiterite (tin ore), tantalum and the increasingly lucrative coltan. The eastern DRC is extraordinarily rugged, heavily forested and overwhelmed by abject poverty. Kinshasa, located over 1,500 km to the west, has historically found it difficult to project power in this embattled region and is handicapped by its own status as the capital of a failed state.<sup>22</sup>

Under these conditions, Rwanda realized that it could craft M23 as a viable, popular alternative to Kinshasa’s corrupt government. A young teenager at a M23 recruiting station affirmed this forecast, telling a Western journalist “I want M23 to take over the Congo, because all the young people you see here don’t have jobs. When they take over the country, they’ll create jobs. That’s what they told us.”<sup>23</sup> Shortly after the outbreak of fighting in May 2012, the Congolese Security Minister Richard Muyej claimed, “M23 is another name for Rwanda. It’s all part of Rwanda’s Machiavellian destabilization plan of the east.”<sup>24</sup> Rwanda predicted that by inciting and then propping up M23’s insurgency, it could create a political buffer zone in a chaotic fringe region, shielding itself from international scrutiny and enabling unprecedented access to the Kivus’ mineral riches.

Rwanda’s desire to exploit the eastern DRC’s mineral resources by enabling an M23 insurgency stems from its economic insecurity and desire to be a regional hegemon. As a small, land-locked country with minimal natural resources and a burgeoning population mostly oriented toward subsistence agriculture, Rwanda has faced difficulty in diversifying economically. Rwanda suffers from a chronic trade deficit—where imports dwarf the traditional exports of coffee and tea—and minerals (from next door) are essential in reducing the deficit.<sup>25</sup> Ever since Rwanda’s initial incursions into the DRC in the late nineties, it is estimated that Rwandan mining revenues have increased at a rate of 10% every year.<sup>26</sup> With their presence in the Kivu provinces

becoming unpalatable by 2012, Rwanda was keen to ensure “continued access to Congo’s economic wealth,”<sup>27</sup> maintain their lucrative extractive presence and boost mining revenues. With added economic security, Rwanda could peg itself as a regional power, building upon its sense of moral entitlement and further extending its influence throughout Central Africa.<sup>28</sup>

In the destabilized DRC, commerce is “militarized.”<sup>29</sup> The profits go to the player with the biggest stick and this stick is cunningly wielded by Rwanda through its M23 proxy. M23 is bigger, badder and meaner than its competitors. Although the illicit nature of Rwanda’s economic ventures in the Congo is difficult to quantify, it is apparent that the “economic activity in Rwanda today goes far beyond what either the Rwandan economy alone or the current level of international investment could support.”<sup>30</sup> One highly developed area of downtown Kigali is even jokingly referred to as ‘Merci Congo’ in reference to the minerals smuggled out of the DRC, rebranded as Rwandan and exported to international markets.<sup>31</sup> Critics of Kagame’s M23 escape openly accuse him of looting Congo’s minerals, declaring that it is “official state policy.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, by continually denying involvement in the M23 mutiny, Kigali was able to continue funneling resources into Rwanda with minimal harassment.

#### **WHAT COULD THE CONGOLESE STATE/INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HAVE DONE TO AVERT THE CONFLICT OR MITIGATE ITS COST?**

It is clear that the causes of the M23 uprising are multifaceted, but Rwanda’s direct involvement and selfish interests are difficult to reject. Measures to prevent M23’s rise, such as the provision of basic services, increased investment in infrastructure or a firm military commitment, would indeed discourage rebel groups from taking up arms. However, because of Kinshasa’s woefully weak governance and continuous history of violence in the eastern DRC, conflict, in the context of May 2012, was an ever-present reality.

Instead, the Congolese state and international community could have worked in tandem, addressing immediate concerns and then tackling systemic issues, in order to mitigate the severity of the conflict. Foremost among these ‘immediate’ concerns should have been a formalized ceasefire between Kinshasa and the M23 leadership brokered and enforced by the 20,000-men strong MONUSCO contingent deployed in the eastern DRC. This period of relative tranquility could have significantly reduced the potential for escalation and would have created the opportunity for Kinshasa and MONUSCO to engage in grassroots peace initiatives in regional areas where tensions were running high.<sup>33</sup> In addition, “explicit condemnation by the UN security council, African Union, and ICGLR of external involvement in the fighting,”<sup>34</sup> while nominally symbolic, paves the way for more sustained pressure on Rwanda’s benefaction.

The most effective method[s] of mitigating the conflict and preventing its resurgence are multilateral sanctions and mining sector reform. A year prior to the M23 mutiny, foreign aid accounted for roughly a quarter of Rwanda’s GDP.<sup>35</sup> By threatening to halt the flow of foreign dollars into Kigali’s coffers unless his regime ceased

its tacit funding of M23, the international donor community might have increased its leverage over Kigali. Furthermore, many Western nations, in order to atone for failing to act during the 1994 genocide, have exclusive arms deals with the Rwandan military. By imposing an arms embargo on Rwanda, the international community could severely constrict Kigali's capacity to outfit M23 with military supplies.<sup>36</sup> Finally, it is unlikely that as Rwanda continues to prosper, its interest in the DRC's minerals will subside—M23 was a sham to cover for Rwandan exploitation. Through a vigorous, multilateral effort, the international community, Kinshasa and Kigali could have devoted serious effort into comprehensive mining reform. A MONUSCO report advocated the formation of 'Islands of Stability' in rural areas—the "creation of public administrations...trade regimes from the ground up,"<sup>37</sup> with the hope that these 'islands' would engender positive economic activity. By increasing transparency, encouraging the investment of legitimate foreign dollars and regulating small-scale mining, this initiative could have spurred the process of bringing jobs to an impoverished area and generating far greater revenues for the entire region.<sup>38</sup>

From the surface, the M23 insurgency appears to be nothing more than yet another ethnically motivated, anti-government conflict. Closer examination reveals a war that was 'civil' in name, but in reality, anything but. Rwanda created an insurgency and skillfully and quietly embroiled itself in the conflict in the pursuit of material gains. The DRC and international community were slow to act, neglecting the establishment of a comprehensive ceasefire, imposition of sanctions and embargos and mining reform. The 19-month insurgency displaced thousands and further dragged the eastern DRC into an abysmal pit of chronic instability.

## NOTES

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