



Field Dispatch: Insecurity across the Kivus

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UVIRA, Democratic Republic of Congo –Violence is on the rise in eastern Congo, with attacks by the Rwandan FDLR rebel group increasing in recent months despite U.N. mission chief Roger Meece’s claims of “significant progress regarding the security situation in recent years in eastern DRC,” in a briefing to the U.N. Security Council last month. The Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the U.N. Stabilization Mission in Congo, or MONUSCO, told the council that “the security environment and the related threat to civilian population, our highest priority concern, must be viewed on a localized basis to obtain a full understanding of the remaining threats.”

Civil society representatives here in eastern Congo’s North and South Kivu provinces offer contrasting, far less optimistic assessments, having continuously watched as the long-feared FDLR militia keeps a stranglehold on their villages, committing atrocities to hold their unwilling host communities subdued.

“He has come a long ways to tell long lies,” said a member of the Shabunda civil society group when they heard of Special Representative Meece’s briefing at the Security Council. The FDLR has assaulted Lulingu and Kigulube mining sites on May 22-23 displacing more than 10,000 people in surrounding villages. In the first village, local police elements had fled, so people collected food to entice the attackers to end the onslaught, but the FDLR wouldn’t let up, the civil society group reported. The Norwegian Refugee Council program coordinator told the Enough Project that it had to suspend its programming for two weeks as the security situation worsened on the Shabunda road.

Just days before Meece’s briefing to the Security Council, a U.N. mission to South Kivu, led by Catherine Bragg, the U.N.’s deputy emergency relief coordinator in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, emphasized the ongoing challenges to security, which continue to leave civilians in harm’s way and prevent conflict-affected communities from accessing international assistance. Bragg noted that with 1.5 million displaced persons in the South and North Kivu provinces, the humanitarian situation was worrying. Most of this displacement was triggered by Hutu combatants from the FDLR who moved in throughout South Kivu territories to fill gaps left by the Congolese army units as they went to the army regimentation centers in recent months. As a result, administrators in the villages and towns of Shabunda, Kabare, Fizi, Mwenga, and Kalehe have been calling for the Congolese army to come back, in spite of the abuses perpetrated by the Congolese soldiers. These communities are effectively choosing between the lesser of two evils.

Shortcomings on civilian protection

Caught between an abusive Congolese army and predatory rebel groups including the FDLR and an array of other militias, many Congolese continue to be confused about the role of U.N. peacekeepers in civilian protection. .

Most recently, at least 70 women have been raped near the town of Fizi allegedly by forces commanded by Colonel Kifaru, after he deserted the army with more than 150 fighters. Some troops under Kifaru's command were convicted of crimes against humanity for raping 50 women in the same town on New Year's Day. Although the BBC subsequently reported that Kifaru had "surrendered" to the Congolese army, subsequent comments by Congolese army officials indicate that Kifaru was welcomed back into the army with open arms, and is unlikely to face prosecution.

FLDR attacks are also on the rise in North Kivu. Speaking to local press in Goma, Congo's Minister of Higher Education, Professor Mashako Mamba who barely escaped FDLR attack on in May, 2011 in Katwiguru, fifteen miles from Kiwanja town in northern Goma said, "What we have seen is what the population goes through on a daily basis. The security situation in the east must be of concern to everybody, and authorities must join forces and reinforce existing efforts to better protect the populations and secure security throughout the country."

Three weeks after the attack on the Minister's convoy, an FDLR group in the vicinity of Kiwanja launched an attack inside nearby Virunga National Park, killing a number of civilians as well as some park rangers. In Kiwanja, the community directed its grief at the MONUSCO contingent and the Congolese army by setting up barricades all around MONUSCO base in Kiwanja and roadblocks on the streets. Angry people were shouting "MONUSCO go back home if you can't help kick FDLR out of this country!"

There continues to be deep skepticism regarding the UN role in Congo. As a former Congolese Colonel in Kabare, another hotbed of FDLR's atrocities, told Enough, "Congo has never been as important for the west as Afghanistan or Serbia are, and it does no matter if the UN mission is led by an American because for the Americans, Congolese are still indigenous and in desperate need for civilization. We may cry to death and die to the last one, but since the UN has a different agenda, totally different from what they state officially they are here for, they will never open fire against the FDLR."

The U.N. peacekeeping presence has deterred attacks by armed groups against civilians but only in areas around their bases. For local populations in eastern Congo, the U.N. peacekeepers' mandate has always been an enigma that the U.N. alone understands and can explain, a police officer in Kamituga told the Enough Project in a phone conversation. But the police officer pointed out that not all the blame falls on MONUSCO. "If our own government doesn't make it a priority to protect its people, how do you expect strangers who came here just to make a living to risk their lives attacking ruthless combatants like the FLDR?" he said.

Another Kabila-Kagame deal in the offing?

Perhaps no one is more in need of being able to show progress to secure the Kivus than President Joseph Kabila.

Both in Kigali and Goma, the latest security news indicates backroom deals between Rwandan and Congolese presidents on the possible relocation of 3,000 FDLR combatants further into Congo's Maniema province. The plan would be mutually beneficial: while it would allay Rwanda's security concerns over a possible alliance between the FDLR and Rwandan dissidents, especially general Faustin Kayumba, it also aims to give Joseph Kabila an election campaign boost after failing thus far to provide security to the Kivus since he was elected in 2006. Kabila has reportedly secured the services of former Belgium military intelligence officer Jean Pierre Breyne to lead talks with FDLR leadership generals Sylvester Mudachumura and Gaston Iyamuremye (aka Ramuli). Delegates to the talks also include Jean-Luc Kuye Ndong and Father Rigobert Minani, both members of the Congolese Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

With elections slated for next November, it appears that President Kabila seeks to stabilize the Kivus by re-launching the 2005 Rome Agreement whereby Hutu combatants were offered the option of either settlement in Congo if they accept disarmament or voluntary repatriation to Rwanda. If successful, this would help Kabila meet the commitments he's made to the residents of the Kivu provinces about providing security. However, FDLR leaders have reportedly demanded some steep conditions, including about \$1 million (claiming it was promised to them in Rome talks), direct talks with Kagame to secure leadership positions in his government, and an end to cross-border incursions by the Rwandan military.

Amid rumors of renewed collaboration between Kabila and Kagame to deal with the FDLR threat, civil society groups and opposition politicians fear the possibility of more violence in eastern Congo. Having lived through successive cross-border incursions by Rwanda, many eastern Congolese perceive Rwandan intervention as the primary source of the displacement, killing, rape, and wholesale plunder of their natural resources that has occurred since 1996. In this context, the rumored plans to relocate Hutu combatants and the continuing efforts by the Rwandan government to quell dissident activity in eastern Congo are a cause for concern.