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In the DRC, over three decades of neglect and abuse under former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko left a weak state geared towards predation and extraction of profit from the nation's prodigious natural wealth rather than care of its citizens. With up to 250 ethnic groups and a tradition of clientelism, political manipulation of ethnicity to maintain the balance of power was a common, if complex, phenomenon. Recent history has been shaped largely by events in the Great Lakes: after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Hutu extremist perpetrators were among hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees who fled to eastern DRC to escape the advance of the Uganda-based Tutsi force which assumed power in Rwanda.

Hutu extremists carried on attacking Tutsis in the region from bases in the DRC, and in 1997 Rwanda invaded the DRC to dislodge them. Other neighbouring countries joined the conflict, driven in part by the prospect of profit from the region's mineral resources. What followed was 'Africa's World War', lasting over a decade and ultimately involving nine African nations.

In recent years the DRC has seen ongoing conflict between armed groups, some of them local and some formed with the backing of other countries, despite the presence from 2000 of a succession of UN peacekeeping missions. At the end of 2013, nearly 500,000 DRC citizens remained refugees, while an estimated 2.7 million were internally displaced.

A significant number of the latter had been displaced repeatedly and often for protracted periods due to cyclic violence, including ethnic violence, in the region over nearly two decades. In areas such as Masisi, North Kivu, these struggles have at times pitted Banyarwanda people of Rwandan ancestry (both Hutu and Tutsi), perceived as 'foreign' by some, against militias from groups claiming a longer history in the local area. One such militia is the primarily Hunde Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), which in February and March reportedly forced at least 3,000 people to flee their homes in Kitchanga town by attacking members of the Banyarwanda community there.

In eastern DRC grave abuses of human rights and humanitarian law – including ethnically motivated attacks on civilians – have continued. Those responsible included the largely ethnic Tutsi Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) rebel group. DRC security forces deployed against it; and

smaller armed groups took advantage of the vacuum left by the army's focus on the M23 to seize control of resource-rich areas.

M23 emerged in April 2012 with the mutiny within DRC army ranks of a group of mainly ethnic Tutsis. Fighting between the M23 mutineers and the army was particularly fierce, and both sides were accused of abuses against the civilian population. After factional fighting within the group, M23 leader Bosco Ntaganda surrendered to International Criminal Court custody in March. Proceedings against him, for crimes against humanity and war crimes in 2002-3 while leader of another armed group, were set to begin in 2014.

The M23 continued fighting under different leaders. The UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) deployed a 3,000-strong African-led Intervention Brigade against it around the city of Goma in August; NGOs and others expressed concern at the potential human rights and humanitarian ramifications of heightened UN military involvement. UN and DRC army forces made successive gains and, in early November, the M23 admitted defeat. A peace deal was signed in December.

M23 had been reported, including by the UN, to have received financial and other support from Rwanda; some sources indicated that international pressure on the Rwandan government and the subsequent withdrawal of this support was a key factor in its defeat. However, a UN Independent Expert's report at year's end was said to indicate that some M23 elements may have resumed recruitment and other activities in Rwanda and Uganda. In December, DRC troops reportedly killed dozens of armed youths who attacked official buildings in Kinshasa, reportedly out of anger at what they claimed were President Kabila's overly close ties to Rwanda.

More than 40 armed groups operate in eastern DRC, including the predominantly Hutu Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), the leaders and members of which include some perpetrators of the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda. The FDLR has continued to be accused of ethnically oriented violence and other abuses; in October authorities and UN representatives suggested that it, and the group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), would be the army's new focus.

Like the FDLR and the APCLS, many of the armed groups in eastern DRC are allied with specific ethnic groups, giving an inter-ethnic dimension to their conflict with the DRC army and with each other. They have reportedly committed serious abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law; and are reported to target people whom they suspect, due to their ethnicity, of supporting their opponents.

For instance, in resource-rich areas of South Kivu and Katanga provinces, the army clashed with groups including Raia Mutomboki, displacing tens of thousands. Raia Mutomboki ('angry citizens' in Swahili), nominally formed to protect locals from the FDLR, has been accused of avoiding confrontation with FDLR combatants, instead targeting their dependents and other ethnic Hutu civilians.

Sexual violence has been an egregious feature of the DRC conflict. In spite of increasing domestic and international scrutiny it is still widespread, and to date very few alleged perpetrators have been brought to justice. In its 2013 review of the DRC the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women raised particular concerns about the situation of indigenous women, particularly Batwa, around gender-based violence, land rights, access to public services and involvement in decision-making.

In December, the UN reported that a number of armed groups in North and South Kivu had expressed willingness to negotiate a peace. Also in December the government adopted an emergency programme for North Kivu, including humanitarian support, justice and intercommunal reconciliation.

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