

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	502
Land:	Den Demokratiske Republik Congo
Kilde:	IRIN
Titel:	Whoever they met, they would cut and kill: displaced Congolese recount rebel atrocities
Udgivet:	12. juli 2018
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. oktober 2018

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“Whoever they met, they would cut and kill”: displaced Congolese recount rebel atrocities

Alex McBride/IRIN

IRIN gained rare access to civilians and militia leaders in Rutshuru, where two years of tit-for-tat attacks have left villages burnt, more than 100 dead, and communities divided along ethnic lines

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RUTSHURU TERRITORY/The

Democratic Republic of

Congo, 12 July 2018



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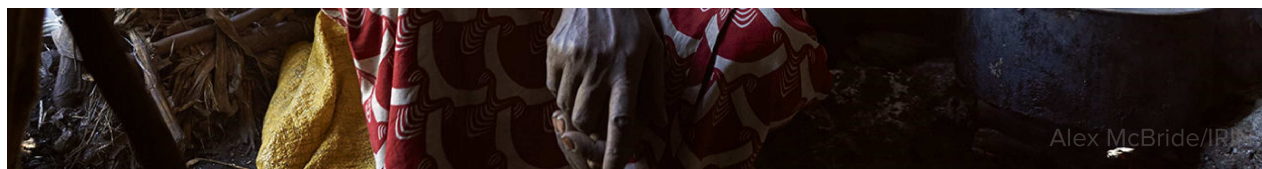
At the camp for displaced people in Rukoro, nobody can remember the last time they saw an aid worker. There are no tents and tarpaulins for the roughly 300 people that live

here – just a collection of tiny,
tunnel-shaped huts tucked out of
sight down a dirt track in this
remote corner of the Democratic
Republic of Congo’s Rutshuru
region.

Eugenia Nzamukosha, one of the residents of Rukoro, would like to return home. She would like to drink water from somewhere better than the dirty pond under the nearby bridge; to eat food more nourishing than the bananas she forages from the bush, or the beans she receives from locals (on a good day).

But Nzamukosha cannot go home because, like the other families here, she has no home to go back to. Last September, men from a militia composed of a different ethnic group entered her village and burnt down the small hut she and her seven children lived in.





Eugenia is a widowed mother of seven. In three separate attacks on her home town of Birundule, her neighbour was killed, her house burnt down, and her son was stabbed.

A few weeks earlier, her son, Moise Nkurunziza, was stabbed in the back and shoulder by his own school teacher, who was from a different ethnic group. In another attack, her neighbour was chased by militiamen, caught, and cut into pieces with machetes.

“When he was dead, [the fighters] put banana leaves on his body and started burning him like a pig,” Nzamukosha said.

“The crisis is ignored”

In May, with the help of the Congo Men’s Network (COMEN), a local NGO that fights against sexual violence in the region, IRIN made a rare visit to villages across Rutshuru, meeting displaced people who told tales of terror at the hands of armed groups.

Rutshuru’s displaced are among 4.5 million people currently uprooted by conflict in the country, the highest number since the beginning of the Congo wars two decades ago. This year more than **13 million Congolese** will need humanitarian assistance, far more than the year before.

For the past two years, whole swathes of Rutshuru and Lubero, two territories in eastern Congo’s North Kivu Province, have been reeling from an inter-communal conflict that is – even by the standards of what has been dubbed the **“world’s most neglected crisis”** – flying under the radar.

Factions of two militias – the Nyatura and the Mai-Mai Mazembe – that claim to defend different ethnic groups have

been burning houses, killing civilians, and dividing communities along ethnic lines. Media reports mention around 100 killings over the past couple of years, but IRIN heard testimony about many more and a large number likely go unreported. Frequent kidnappings, attacks on aid workers, and **challenging conditions for those attempting to document the conflict** mean there has been little attention on the violence.

“The crisis is ignored,” Hubert Masirika of COMEN said, simply.

The violence is one among a series of localised conflicts that have embroiled Congo following President Joseph Kabila’s failure to organise elections and leave office in December 2016 when his second (and constitutionally mandated final) term expired. Kabila has said elections will now be held in December 2018, but he hasn’t publicly ruled out standing for a third term and further delays remain possible.

Read more: The roots of Rutshuru’s conflict

At another settlement for displaced civilians in Kiwanja Parish – a short drive from Rukoro – more than 100 displaced Hutu families live in huts made of dried banana leaves wrapped up in plastic sheeting.

The latest arrival was Vianney Nzamuye. The 45-year-old recalled how he was in his field last December brewing banana beer with his wife and two neighbours when Mazembe fighters armed with rifles, machetes, and spears approached them in the bush.

The militiamen stripped the group naked before tying their hands behind their backs and forcing them to climb inside a hole dug for the fermenting bananas. Next, they “began pouring earth inside and burying us alive,” Nzamuye said. The

group was eventually saved from death after promising to pay a \$60 ransom per person.

Children killed and forced to fight

Standing to Nzamuye’s right was one of the camp’s first residents, Andre Ayubu. The 53-year-old came to Kiwanja 12 months earlier from a village called Luhanga in Lubero, a territory to the north of Rutshuru.

Ayubu recalled how Mazembe combatants stormed his village one evening and killed at least 30 Hutus living in a displacement camp by a UN base. Ayubu helped collect and bury the dead the following morning. Among the bodies, he found five young children who had been impaled on the barbs on a four-metre high thorn bush.

“They didn’t even take any money,” he said of the Mazembe fighters. “They just came to kill and burn everything.”



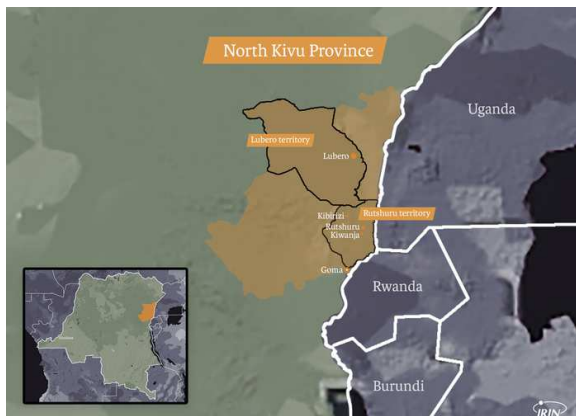
Two Congolese army soldiers keep watch over their base overlooking the town of Kibirizi, North Kivu.

In Kibirizi, a four-hour drive from Rutshuru town on roads stalked by armed groups, IRIN heard similar stories. Eric Kasereka, a local leader among displaced Nande civilians, said he arrived in the small, dusty town in December after Nyatura fighters stormed his village of Bwalanda at 2am.

Kasereka said he saw men slit the throat of an elderly man named Kivhula before tossing his corpse into a burning hut. In the same attack he saw fighters throw a young boy into another burning home while he was still alive. The rebels held the door shut, he said, as the boy burnt to death.

“Whoever they met, they would cut and kill,” he said.

Innocent Kasereka (no relation), a local leader from nearby Kishishe, said a group of Nyatura fighters attacked a school in his village last October while children were still in class. Kasereka said a teacher was cut in the back with a machete while children, some as young as six, were beaten with “big sticks that they would use as spears”.



Now, more than 1,500 Nande households from Kishishe have moved to nearby Kibirizi. But with each new attack the number grows bigger, said Kasereka. “Whenever it happens more people move,”

he said.

According to the UN, both Nyatura and Mazembe have forcibly recruited child soldiers. In Kibirizi, IRIN met five children aged between 15 and 17 who had been separated from a Mazembe faction a month earlier. They sat pressed up

to the wall of an orange-coloured hut, a streak of light shining across their faces.

In the forest they had been part of the same unit, conducting daily patrols with instructions to shoot at Nyatura fighters on sight. Their commanders would give them drugs, alcohol, and magic water that could supposedly protect them from bullets. On several occasions, they were forced to return to their villages and rape women.

“If you refused, they would beat you,” said a 15-year-old whose parents were killed by Nyatura in 2016.

Limited access, little aid

In Rutshuru, most of the displaced are living outside camps in host families that have little to offer. Since arriving in Kibirizi last August, Muhindo, 36, and his family of eight have been forced to move house five times for lack of money. “If you are not able to pay, they chase you away and you move into another place,” he said.



Paul Muhindo, 36, leader of the local displaced community for the villages of Katolo and Ngorobo.

In exchange for cultivating his host’s fields, Muhindo said his family receives a small serving of cassava flour and beans each day, or the equivalent of roughly one dollar. Neither is sufficient.

“The children are severely malnourished,” he said.

Bad roads and insecurity have weakened humanitarian access. In February, two members of the Congolese NGO Hydraulics Without Borders were killed by armed men causing NGOs to suspend their activities for several weeks.

The risk to aid workers is currently so high, in certain areas “a helicopter is necessary for the delivery of humanitarian aid,” the UN’s emergency aid coordination body, OCHA, [said in May](#).

With so many armed groups present in the region and operating autonomously from one-another, “it is impossible to reach an understanding [with them] where we can access the area and not have a security incident,” said one aid worker, who asked not to be named.

Back at the Rukoro camp, there was no clean water or health services on-site and just two latrines for more than 40 families. Five children had died in the past 12 months, according to the mother-of-seven, Nzamukosha; the last of malnutrition just a few days before IRIN’s visit.

“Here, we have nothing at all,” she said.

Meeting the commanders

It is rare to see the commanders who are responsible for these crimes. They hide deep in the forests and hills of Rutshuru and Lubero, in camps that can take hours to reach

even with the strongest vehicles. But in rare interviews, IRIN met two of the most powerful Nyatura commanders: Domi and John Love.

A squat man with a wide smile, Domi stood on the slope of a remote hilltop base in a plain Congolese army uniform sold to him, he said, by a starving army soldier. His baby-faced fighters lounged and chatted in the elephant grass, a few heavy weapons distributed between them. But what he lacked in manpower, he made up for in rhetoric.

“We are sure that one day we can take power,” he said.

While most know Domi, whose real name is Dominique Ndaruhutse, as the leader of a murderous local militia, the warlord and his unit commander, John Love, see themselves differently.

In separate interviews they introduced themselves not as Nyatura but as the military wing of a political group they called the Collective of Movements for Change (CMC).

They described the CMC as a rainbow coalition uniting 10 different armed groups from across the region. Its objective is not to defend ethnic Hutus or fight against opposing militias, they say, but to challenge President Kabila.





A view of Rukoro refugee camp on the outskirts of the town of Rutshuru in North Kivu.

“We are without a legal government since December 2016,” said Love, who, like Domi, denied responsibility for attacks on civilians. “We want the population to vote for their own leaders.”

The CMC is one of a number of new coalitions to emerge in eastern Congo with the stated objective of challenging Kabila. In Butembo, to the north of Rutshuru, is the National Movement of Revolutionaries (MNR), which includes a cluster of mostly Nande Mai-Mai leaders, including some Mazembe factions.

In neighbouring South-Kivu Province is the National People’s Coalition for the Sovereignty of Congo (CNSPC), led by a former national army ally William Yakutumba, whose group Mai-Mai Yakutumba is one of the most powerful in the region.

The coalitions involve groups traditionally considered local militia with local interests and rivalries. Now, said Love, “the primary objective is to eliminate tribal conflict” and challenge central power.

To this end, Domi said the CMC has recently held peace talks with Mazembe. But an agreement has not been reached and Nande and Hutu civilians interviewed by IRIN remain sceptical of both groups’ true intentions.

In Katolo, a small village of tin-roofed huts a short drive from Domi’s position, charred, blackened homes dot the hillside.

Nyatura fighters entered the village one evening last November. They killed nine people and burned down 68 houses, according to Paul Muhindo, chief of the displaced population.

Hundreds of Nande fled to nearby Kibirizi, where they remain, he said, unable to return for fear of Nyatura, “who control the fields [where we farm]”.

If the government does not put an end to armed groups operating in the region, “there is a risk we will never go back home,” added Marcel Kambale, leader of the displaced community in nearby Bambo.

“There is no safety at all,” he said.

(TOP PHOTO: Two Nyatura Domi rebel fighters stand on guard duty in a Nyatura stronghold position outside the town of Nyanzale, North Kivu. CREDIT: Alex McBride/IRIN)

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