

The hidden complexity behind the presumed M23 attack



A couple of days ago reports started circulating that Sultani Makenga's M23 rebel force overran a couple of Congolese army (FARDC) positions in the Virunga Park, not so far from Jomba and close to the Rwandan border. They were said to have occupied two small villages. Hundreds of villagers fled to Uganda and the FARDC started screaming that the rebels had crossed from Rwanda into Congo and that they were actively supported by the RDF (Rwandan army). Immediately after that a whole army of Twitter warriors jumped on the occasion to accuse Uganda or Rwanda of mingling in Congolese affairs. Some of them were even posting articles that were several years old to prove their narrative. Others were just shouting to shout, as they often do! Without understanding what is really at stake. An interesting fact was, however, that the American embassy in Kinshasa had issued a warning for its citizens in Goma that the city might get under attack very soon. The Rwandan and the Ugandan government denied any involvement, in the meanwhile the M23 allowed the FARDC to return to the positions they had lost and they withdrew again into the surrounding hills. An M23 officer appeared on the social media to confirm this. Today I followed a vivid discussion on Twitter about the visit of the FARDC chief of Staff to Kigali: a lot of his fellow countrymen accused him of treason and others saw this as vital evidence that the bond between the two countries was still very strong. This paper is not about the 'rights' and the 'wrongs' from media influencers in Kinshasa, Kigali or in Kampala. I'll just try to summarize my own findings about the current situation in North-Kivu. I might be wrong about some details – nobody is able to unravel completely the dense complexity of that region – but I think that they might help to shed some extra light on this chaos.

M23

The M23 was chased out of North-Kivu by the UN and by the FARDC. They didn't put up a fight to defend themselves, they didn't lose any soldiers and they withdrew into Uganda where they were put up in a couple of camps. Some of its better known leaders such as Bertrand Bizimwa installed themselves in Kampala. The M23 was founded by a couple of FARDC officers who were integrated into the army after the collapse of Laurent Nkunda's

CNDP. Nkunda's collaborators were never well received in the FARDC and most of them were not happy at all there. When Sulatani Makenga found out that he and some of his men were going to be killed he decided to desert and to start a new rebellion. The FARDC had, once again, no answer to that and Makenga was able to move into Goma again. Media outlets in Kinshasa started fuming with stories about Rwanda's involvement in Makenga's moves, the international community followed this narrative and allowed the UN to fly in South-African special forces and Aardvark helicopters to clean up the province once and for all of these 'Rwandans'. I say 'Rwandans' because that was what they were called by many Congolese and even by some of my really badly informed colleagues that I met in a couple of nifty hotels in Goma. In fact the M23 was composed nearly completely of Congolese Bagogwe-Tutsi's and Congolese Hutu's. After the departure of the M23 the FARDC claimed the victory, the general who was in charge of the FARDC troops during this offensive was declared a national hero but the poor guy was killed later that in another conflict, probably by his own colleagues. Heroism in the FARDC is dangerous business! And the M23 ended up in Uganda.

Failed negotiations

The negotiations about the return of the M23 rebels to Congo never produced any results. I was in close contact with them during all this time. So they got frustrated and they broke out of their encampments. Some of them fled to Rwanda, others into the DRC. But the bulk of the forces found shelter in the Virunga Park, very close to a couple of volcanos. In the meanwhile they kept repeating that they were being forgotten and neglected by the international community and the Congolese government and they were even attacked a couple of times by Congolese forces that were given access to Uganda to attack the rebels from the rear. For the rest they kept quite; living circumstances were very tough for them high up in this volcanic region. In the meanwhile not even a cat had paid attention to the fact that nearly all the Bagogwe-Tutsi's in Masisi had been chased off their land, that many of them were killed. They fled to Rwanda and to Uganda. The OIM set up a whole program to relocate many of them to the US or to Australia. This operation was not mediatized either. The idea was to empty North-Kivu of its Tutsi's and solve the problem like that. In 1994, before the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi's in Rwanda, there were approximatively 230.000 Tutsi's living in North-Kivu. Today only 15.000 remain. Those who fled and even many of those who still live there lost their land, their houses and their cattle. The rebellions their sons and daughters had signed up did not have the results they were looking for. Their leaders such as Laurent Nkunda had made big mistakes as well, their Rwandan brothers and sisters had to abandon them under the immense pressure of the international community and know they were confronted with an uncertain future in refugee camps in Uganda and in Rwanda. The international community who had been eager to brush their leaders out of the DRC did not move one finger to put pressure on the Congolese government to re-integrate them into the DRC. So they got frustrated and they decided to take their future into their own hands, once again. The outside world looked at all this from afar and stood by.

FDLR

In exchange for the departure of the M23 the Rwandan government was promised that the Hutu extremist rebel group FDLR would be the next to be dealt with. But nothing was done about that. A couple of small offensives against the FDLR were set up but they only had PR-purposes. It was clear that the utterly corrupt and highly undisciplined FARDC that had ongoing deals with the FDLR in the charcoal and mineral business would never give up their buddies. The FDLR was even able to provide logistics and favors for the so called Nyatura, a rebel group that consisted mainly of Congolese Hutu's. More than 70 percent of the total population of North-Kivu is Hutu. Their grandfathers and -mothers were moved to this area from Rwanda by the Belgians in the 1920-ies because they were considered to be better farm hands than the local Congolese ethnical groups. The RDF set up a couple of smaller military operations with the FARDC to dislodge the FDLR and the Nyatura. This could have worked but the Rwandan government was accused again of meddling in Congolese affairs. From 1996 until recently nothing really changed in all this. Except for one thing: the worsening relationship between Uganda and Rwanda and the worsening political instability in the DRC. The new elected president Tshisekedi had not managed to bring stability to the Kivu's. Instead of working with local politicians to find a solution he had all pushed them aside, some even in jail. The nomination of a new military governor in Goma had an adverse effect on things and the Congolese Hutu's started to get the impression that they were targeted. And this pushed them towards local Hutu extremists who had another agenda. Tshisekedi had made a big mess of it, one that could easily be compared to the ones of the two Kabila's.

Hutu mobilization

About one month ago I started to receive messages from my contacts in Masisi that things were getting really bad. I was covering the Cabo del Gado debacle in Mozambique and What's App is not my favorite tool to communicate. So I decided to go to Gisenyi and to Goma for a couple of days to talk to my informants. What I found out was worrisome! And this was before the presumed M23 attack.

My contacts were clear: there was (and there is) a mobilization going on in Masisi of the local Hutu community. In the border area between Goma and Ishasha, near the Rwindi Park, the FDLR and the Nyatura are getting stronger by the day. Collaborators of the former governor of the province, Eugene Serafuli, are mobilizing the Hutu majority with the support of his relative Philemon Mateke, a minister in the government of Yoweri Museveni. When president Tshisekedi appointed a military governor in Goma the Hutu majority was looking at this as a move to curb the growing political power of the Hutu lobby. Two years ago the Nyatura Hutu militia was nearly neutralized and the FDLR was in the defensive. Now they are back in full swing and stronger than ever. According to my contacts the money and the weapons are flowing in from Uganda. Hutu mobilisers are moving from village to village in the Rutshuru plain and in Masisi to convince the locals (mainly Hutu) that they are being discriminated by the central government in Kinshasa and that Rwanda is behind all that. The Hutu's have been in competition for years with the Nande community in the 'grand nord' of the province for the governor seat. This 'grand nord' is the scene of another bloody conflict between the extremist Muslim organization ADF-Nalu and the FARDC. I will not go into detail about that as this requires another detailed paper. My contacts even mentioned that there are a couple of 'outside Hutu's' moving around in Masisi who claim to live in Europe and who came here to set up a new alliance that would join all the Hutu organizations in the African Great Lakes Region against their enemies. And their most important enemy is still Rwanda. In several Hutu parishes and schools in Masisi the messes is now being read in 'kihutu', the Hutu-Kinyarwanda dialect. Young kids in schools are being asked to communicate in that language as well.

With a very weak FARDC and a very weak local administration the authorities in Goma and in Kinshasa have no answer to the fact that the Hutu lobby is getting more and more aggressive towards other local ethnical groups such as the Hunde, the Tutsi and the Nyanga. FARDC officers prefer to collaborate with the Nyatura and the FDLR to avoid attacks and to participate in the whole monkey business with charcoal, minerals, incoming traffic from Uganda, etc.

If we project this reality into the Rwanda-Uganda picture things become clearer. The relationship between Uganda and Rwanda is very bad for the moment; the border between the two countries has already been closed for a couple of years. Rwanda is accusing Uganda to shelter and to feed opposition-rebel groups such as the P5 (a coalition of Hutu extremists, the RNC of renegade general Kayumba Nyamwasa and old school Hutu leaders such as Faustin Twagiramungu). During the past years the involvement of the Burundian and the Ugandan government in all this has become obvious. An offspring organization of the P5, the FLN of Paul Rusesebagina, tried to infiltrate Rwanda via the Nyungwe forest on the border with Burundi. With the active support of the Burundian army and the Hutu extremist militia Inbonerakure. FDLR elements were recruited in Masisi and in Rutshuru, brought to Uganda and sent to Burundi from there to join this lot. The bulk of Rusesebagina's little army consisted of FDLR-CNRD elements. The relatively boneless Rusesebagina served as front man for this group and he was steered by others. The plan didn't work; he was arrested. He's currently serving a 25 year jail sentence in Rwanda and his little army was disbanded. Rusesebagina is probably worth more for the anti-Kigali lobby in jail than in his office chair in Brussels. Their PR-machine is at full swing to prove this thesis.

Rwanda has been playing recently the cards of the Congolese president Tshisekedi. Their collaboration with the two Kabila's was troublesome and they lost their best collaborators in the Kivu's. Collaborating with the new guy in Kinshasa was nearly the only option left. At first this worked relatively well and they were able to set up a couple of operations to neutralize P5 activities in the southern parts of the Kivu's and in the Rutshuru area to neutralize their influence. But this new guy didn't make himself very popular in Kinshasa: he curbed the authority of the CENI, the institution that has to supervise the democratic level of the upcoming new elections, he managed to make himself very unpopular with most of his political collaborators in the eastern part of the country, he broke the 'menage a deux' alliance with Joseph Kabila and he was accused of the mismanagement of the economic

development of the country. The chances that he'll make it for another term in office are becoming very slim. And if he does he'll be walking on very thin ice..... In all this chaos other groups can thrive. While the international community is concentrating on the more visible aspects of it other constructions can be set up behind the curtains.

Rwanda vs Uganda

After the adventures of Nkunda and Makenga, several years ago, Rwanda adopted a more pragmatic attitude towards the Congolese Kivu's: as their own economy was booming and as the country was developing very fast they wanted to strengthen their business ties with the two provinces. Their presence in the DRC had always been motivated by the drive to keep the borders clean from infiltrators. They pulled out and left the provinces clear of RDF troops. Instead they reinforced their positions at the Rwandan side of the border and they cranked up their intel capacities in the DRC, in Burundi and in Uganda. As well as in Europe from where the orders to destabilize the country often originated. It was Rwanda's wish to see the Kivu prosper and to develop itself and to engage in a cleaner way of doing business with the Congolese. But also that seemed to be a problem!

My contacts in Goma told me that Uganda recently appointed a consul in the city to promote doing business via Kampala. A couple of years most of the goods in Goma that originated from the Kenyan harbor Mombasa came in via Uganda and Rwanda. The Bunagana crossing and the border post between Ishasha and Congo were considered to be unsafe given the fact that the roads from the border to Goma were in really bad shape and infested with FDLR- and Nyatura bandits. And Rwanda started relying more on Dar es Salaam to import their goods and to channel them to the DRC. This was a big thorn in the eye of the Ugandan government. Nowadays the Ugandan consul in Goma is approaching local business people with customs deals that are more lucrative and "easier going" than the stricter Rwandan approach, they get the guarantee that their trucks will not be attacked or stopped by local militia members such as the Nyatura, etc. And this is becoming a thorn in the eye of the Rwandan business community. Combine this with the quasi certainty that both the FDLR and the Nyatura receive logistics, money and probably also weapons from Uganda and this hot potato risks burning itself in the pan. If the FDLR would try to infiltrate Rwanda via the Virunga's or if the new Hutu mobilization in the Masisi area would result in new attacks on Tutsi's this could be seen as a new provocation by Kigali. And it could put the whole region aflame. The anti-Kigali lobby already tried to do that by allowing Rusesebagina & co set up his nitwit FLN rebel group in Burundi. But they failed. This time the NISS, the Rwandan intel administration, is also well aware what is going on in North-Kivu. Rwanda has put some of its eggs in Tshisekedi's basket and they are also talking again now to the Hutu extremist regime in Bujumbura. But they would probably never allow coordinated infiltrations out of two neighboring countries. Especially not when Uganda's role in all this is becoming so obvious. Rwanda already clashed with Ugandan troops in the too often 'forgotten past' in Kisangani. They gave them a serious beating! They are also nearly convinced that the whole ADF-Nalu set up in the Beni and Butembo region is just another construction of Museveni to justify a UDFP incursion there. Peace in the Masisi and Rutshuru area in the DRC is essential for Rwanda to secure their border with the DRC. The anti-Kigali lobby knows very well that Rwanda can only be neutralized if they manage to lure the country into a bigger conflict so that the international community can step in to condemn it again and to force it to talk to its opposition, even when this opposition is still largely under the control of Hutu extremists. Museveni is playing with fire; with his shaky old hands he might manage to light up a couple of matches to ignite the fuse but this bomb might also explode in his own face.

Add to this that the Hutu extremist lobby in Brussels managed to convince many European politicians that there was a double genocide in Rwanda, that Kagame introduced a system of terror and horror to arrest opponents and that the 'true European model of democracy' is the only way out to solve the problems in the region. If you scratch off the paint of this construction you'll see that they just want to justify a new war that will enable them to get back into Kigali. All this was well illustrated in the way that a lot of European media covered the Rusesebagina affair. Sorry for using the verb 'covering' because none of them made the effort to come to Rwanda and talk to the victims of the FLN in Nyungwe. Filming the living room of the Hotel Rwanda hero's daughter in Brussels during the trial was their only answer. The tears of the poor girl were easier to catch than the misery of the people who lost relatives in Nyabimata and Bweyeye. Other groups that have clear links to the FDLR and the Hutu extremist lobby, such as Jambo SPRL, are allowed to spit out their biased views as well.

Conclusion

My contacts in M23 circles tell me that they didn't infiltrate via Rwanda but that they attacked a couple of FARDC positions to wake up the outside world that they still exist and that their problems have been neglected and forgotten. And they didn't run back to Rwanda either after allowing the FARDC back into its previous positions. They just withdrew back into the surrounding hills where the FARDC is too scared to follow them. The clock is ticking for them as well, especially because they are observing how the FDLR and the Nyatura are growing again in strength. I would not be surprised to see coordinated attacks of extremist Hutu's on the Rwandan border in the north of the country in the coming months. If these attacks would be backed up by attacks and infiltrations on the border with Burundi, in the south of the country, we would have to face a completely new scenario. I personally doubt that the FDLR will have the capacity to do this in an effective way. But they are present in Burundi and they are sharing beers there with the Willy Nyamitwe's and other radicals who are hiding themselves under the umbrella of the local president. They are all adepts of the same Hutu power ideology. Some of the prominent FDLR arms smugglers and mobilizers that were or still are present in Burundi were recently also spotted in North-Kivu. A couple of them even have European passports. And they didn't pass through Rwanda to visit their friends!

The fact that most of the Bagogwe in Masisi lost all their land and cattle is a thorn in the eye of the Tutsi community worldwide. The fact that the M23 problem wasn't followed up, as well. The international community was very naïve to think that shipping the Masisi Tutsi's to far away countries was going to solve the problem. It did nothing to help and solve the M23 problem. And it did nothing to solve the problem of the stolen land, the houses and their cattle. For the Tutsi community in Congo and even for those who had to flee all this remains unsettled business.

The fact that the Hutu lobby is mobilizing forces in North-Kivu and militarizing and manipulating its youth again into a new radical structure is known as well by several observers on the spot. They are receiving fat salaries for that. Just like they knew very well that the Burundian army and the Imbonerakure were allowing the FLN to set up their bases in Burundi. The uselessness of the UN force and their civilian colleagues in Congo has been proven extensively, local politicians are manipulating the population for their own benefit and the international public opinion is put asleep with cliché's and papers of well-paid NGO- and UN-consultants. The show must go on! The local population is paying the price for that. But at the end of the day another conflict might erupt that will be more violent and deadly as the eruption of the Nyaragongo volcano. Those who know the history of the Kivu's remember well the mobilization of the so called 'Magrevi', Congolese Hutu militias, who organized killing raids against local Tutsi's in 1991 and 1993. At that time they were financed and equipped by the Rwandan akazu, the clique around Juvenal Habyarimana. Mobutu had promised them extra land in North-Kivu and the Tutsi's would not be welcome any longer there..... It was the same akazu that organized the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi's. The FDLR was founded in the offspring of that defeated akazu in Congo. And the relatives, the supporters and the children of that radical group are now steering the Hutu lobby.

Rwanda is trying to collaborate with the DRC to solve this problem. It never worked in the past but this is their only chance to deal with it on short notice. A bilateral agreement to set up a joint military force to push these militia's back might defuse this ticking bomb for a while. The UN and the international community are not committing themselves in such a project, they never do. They only wake up when people are dying and after that they start to produce papers that put the blame of what happened on others so that they can cover up their own lack of responsibility for not having stopped it when those poor devils were still alive. The opposition against Tshisekedi is growing and blaming Rwanda for all the misery in the DRC has become an easy way to get more votes. The Ugandans might not like this either! So allow me to be skeptical about the outcome of this possible plan.

I admit that I'm drawing a 'worst case scenario' picture by putting this paper online. Please prove me wrong and do something about it!

Marc Hoogstejns

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