

DRC-RWANDA: Interview with Rwandan Great Lakes Special Envoy Richard Sezibera

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Ambassador Richard Sezibera

KIGALI, 13 May 2004 (IRIN) - Continuing insecurity in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) once again threatens to escalate into a large-scale war. There have been reports of renewed fighting between the Rwandan Hutu rebels who perpetrated the 1994 genocide in their country and the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie-Goma, a former rebel faction once backed by Rwanda.

The UN Mission in the DRC, known as MONUC, recently accused Rwanda of resending troops into the DRC.

For Rwanda's view on the fighting and actions it might take should the situation deteriorate, IRIN sought an interview with President Paul Kagame's special envoy to the Great Lakes region, Ambassador Richard Sezibera. The following are excerpts from that interview, conducted in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, on 6 May.

QUESTION: Does the fighting in eastern DRC threaten Rwanda's security?

ANSWER: Yes, of course. Over the last one month, the genocidaire forces [which perpetrated the 1994 genocide] operating on the territory of the DRC launched attacks on different parts of Rwanda: in the southern parts in Nyungwe Forest and, in the north, in the areas of Gisenyi and Ruhengeri.

These attacks were the result of long periods of preparation. They [the genocidaires] have been trying to launch attacks on our territory for some months now. The first attempts were foiled because Maj-Gen [Paul] Rwarakabije [a former overall commander of the Hutu rebels in the DRC] returned [to Rwanda on 16 November 2003], and this caused them to put their plans on hold.

The extremists' commanders on the ground and also the extremist political leaders of FDLR [Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda] managed to reorganise themselves and, in spite of continued desertions of senior commanders, these hardline commanders reorganised and launched attacks on Rwanda.

It is worrying, because we have pointed out the danger both to the DRC government and to the international community through MONUC; we have shared with them the different operations planned against Rwanda, including the most recent one. We shared information about where these groups are, what they are doing, who

their leaders are, and we have asked the international community to take control of the situation and prevent them from attacking our country, but they [the international community] seem to be doing nothing.

Q: What exactly is behind the renewed attacks, since the Hutu rebels have been silent for the past three or so years?

A: It is difficult to know, but there have been a number of developments in the DRC which may not be conducive for these groups. When the transitional government in the DRC was set up, some of these groups lay low, because they did not know what was in store for them.

But recently they have also come under pressure on the ground, both from the official declaration made by the Kinshasa government that they are no longer required on the territory of the DRC, and also military pressure on the ground from their former allies like the Mayi-Mayi who have turned hostile against them. The Congolese seem to want to go for elections sometime next year, and the people in eastern Congo are beginning to feel that these groups are a danger to them.

So I think there has been a lot of pressure building up on them to move from the territory of DRC; that might explain the resurgence of attacks.

The timing of the recent attacks is significant, because they began at the time we were commemorating the 10th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, which may have been an attempt to make a statement that they are still present in the DRC.

However, even if they do not attack us today, we know that they will attack tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, because we know that it is their declared objective to overthrow the Rwandan government and complete the genocide they began in 1994.

Q: You have signed a number of agreements with the DRC government: the Lusaka peace accord, the Pretoria treaty and others. Are you satisfied with the DRC government's efforts to fulfil its commitments?

A: I think the agreements could have been implemented faster. The Lusaka agreement had four main issues: the ceasefire provision, the inter-Congolese dialogue, the withdrawal of foreign forces and then the DDRRR [Demobilisation, Disarmament, Repatriation, Reintegration and Reinsertion of ex-combatants]. Of all the four, the only one that has not been implemented is the DDRRR, and yet these groups are [at] the root of the problems in the DRC.

We signed the Pretoria agreement, which had two components: one was the withdrawal of Rwandan troops from the DRC, and the other was the DDRRR. In order to advance the peace process in the DRC

and allow the inter-Congolese dialogue to occur in a good atmosphere, Rwanda took the risk of withdrawing her troops from the DRC even before DDRRR had been done.

Now, with the formation of a new government in Kinshasa, the government accepted that all agreements entered into by the previous government were binding on the current government. So they had to implement the Pretoria agreement among other agreements.

We have been disappointed by the [slow] speed of DDRRR, and again, when the heads of state met in Pretoria in November last year, they agreed to set up a bilateral mechanism to deal with the outstanding issue of DDRRR. We have invited our colleagues from the DRC; it has taken a number of months [and] they have not yet come, but we hope they can come quickly.

Secondly, we have been rather surprised at the lack of support by some in the [DRC] government for the verification mechanisms under both the Lusaka and Pretoria agreements. As you remember, Lusaka had the Political Committee and Joint Military Commission. These were fora in which compliance with these agreements was monitored in a neutral and objective manner.

Unfortunately, the DRC has been uncomfortable with these mechanisms and they are now not operational. This causes a problem, because every time you have an issue like we had recently with these incursions, there's no mechanism to discuss them. This is a problem which we have raised with all concerned. These problems are still there; we have no fora in which to address them, so you get an acceleration of tensions.

Q: Do you still maintain that the DRC government is still supporting these elements?

A: There's no doubt about it. Either they receive moral support, political support or, in some cases, military support. If the supply of arms and ammunition were cut off effectively, if the political and diplomatic support ceased, then they would turn into mere armed bandits; they would not pose a military threat to Rwanda.

Q: So what will Rwanda do if the attacks persist?

A: We have reached out to the government of DRC and we have expressed our interest in collaborating with that government in any way they would deem appropriate for us to be able to deal with this issue.

We have requested that if the DRC can deal with this group themselves, we would be supportive in this endeavour; if they need the assistance of others, we are willing to work together with them to go out and look for that assistance. If they need a more robust assistance from the international community, we are willing to go

out with them to fix that assistance. And if they are willing to carry out joint military operations or any other assistance, we are willing to do so. What we are not willing to do is simply to sit back and watch these people come to complete the genocide.

Q: Your government forces were recently sighted by a UN verification team in the Bunagana zone of eastern DRC and reportedly surrounded a UN patrol, forcing them away from this area. What do you make of these accusations?

A: If Rwanda needs to go back to the DRC, it will be open and known... On the one hand they say Rwanda has gone in secretly, and on the other they say battalions of Rwandan troops [are there]. Now, how do you hide a battalion of troops even if you wanted to? I have heard about 20,000 troops. How do you hide 20,000 men? I do not understand.

Q: So are you denying attacking MONUC observers in Bunagana?

A: We have explained that the allegations by MONUC were false. There were no Rwandan troops in Bunagana as they alleged on 21 April. In that area, MONUC officers and officials met a Congolese commander with a Rwandan name, who was there with his troops. We found it unacceptable that MONUC should simply make such allegations. The man told them who he was and what forces he belonged to.

Secondly, we have shown MONUC our deployment positions inside Rwanda. We have told them to go and arrest any Rwandan who is away from the deployments we have shown them. They are free to do anything they want with any Rwandan soldier they capture or arrest in the DRC.

Q: What do you estimate to be the size of Hutu rebel forces in eastern DRC?

A: It is difficult to have a precise figure because of many reasons. Every day there are armed men who cross over to Rwanda because of the approach we have taken of calling upon those who want to return voluntarily to come... So many keep coming every day, but at the same time they also keep recruiting. There might be also a sizeable number of these troops within the former FAC [Forces armées congolaises] integrated within the command. You might recall that recently such a group was reported in the Mbandaka area of Congo: a group of organised Interahamwe [Hutu extremist militia] and ex-FAR [Forces armées rwandaises: the former Rwandan army] who were part of the FAC.

But we know that those who are involved in operations in the Kivus are well over 15,000.

Q: Are you now able to speak to the new DRC government directly, or do you have to go through third parties?

A: We talk to them directly at all levels. We talk to the different members of the DRC government. The problem we have is that of the many agreements that we have, very little has been done [to implement them]. Maybe it is because of the nature of the government that they do things slowly. But we have been very understanding, we have been patient, but I think at some point something needs to be done, otherwise we shall lose the momentum.

We have also proposed an ambassador to the DRC in order to have more regular contact between the DRC and us, so the intention is to continue with dialogue.