

Banyarwanda

Profile

Banyarwanda are Hutus, Tutsis and Batwa who all speak Kinyarwanda and live along the Rwandan border in Kivu province, together with Hunde, Nyanga and Nande.

Historical context

When colonial boundaries were drawn in the late nineteenth century many Banyarwanda found themselves on the Congolese side of the Rwandan border, in Kivu province. More Banyarwanda subsequently crossed from Rwanda to work on Belgian colonial farms. In the late 1950s (and subsequently) Tutsi refugees fleeing persecution in Rwanda also crossed to Congo; Banyarwanda came to comprise around half the population of North Kivu, yet were widely viewed as 'foreigners' by other ethnic groups. The waves of immigration intensified competition over land. Hunde chiefs in particular, whose ownership of land bestowed a degree of political influence out of proportion to the size (and impoverishment) of their community, bitterly resented expropriation of land (often that traditionally used for hunting) by Banyarwanda settlers. Other groups, notably Nyanga and Nande, were also in competition for land. Questions of land use and ownership, and citizenship underlie many of the conflicts among ethnic communities in eastern DRC - complicated by laws that are poorly written or inconsistently applied.

Although at independence anyone who had lived in the country for ten years was entitled to citizenship, the law was amended in 1981: only those who could trace their ancestry within the country to 1885 were now eligible. The change was primarily aimed at Banyarwanda. From 1991 the nationality issue acquired much greater significance when registration began in anticipation of elections. Conflict escalated in 1992-3 into a virtual civil war, with raids and counter-raids between Banyarwanda and other groups, accompanied by widespread burning of villages and crops. Thousands were killed. Government forces failed to intervene, and there were widespread reports of them participating in or profiting from the violence. An estimated 270,000 people, from all ethnic groups, were displaced.

Though church-led reconciliation initiatives had achieved a good deal, North Kivu was still in chaos when a million Rwandan Hutu refugees arrived in 1994. The Hutu-led Rwandan government had carried out a genocide of Tutsi civilians and then was defeated by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which drove soldiers of the former army and members of a genocidal militia, the Interahamwe, into exile in Zaire and other neighbouring countries. Three-quarters of these refugees crossed the border within a week in July 1994, the largest refugee movement ever recorded. An estimated 70,000 died from cholera and related diseases. They were subject to control and intimidation by Rwandan soldiers loyal to the deposed regime, as well as looting and extortion by Zairian soldiers. In August 1995 Mobutu's authorities began to repatriate refugees to Rwanda, but stopped after international protests. However, in October 1996 Congolese Tutsi (Banyamulenge) militias, supported by Rwandan troops, attacked the refugee camps, provoking the repatriation of most though by no means all of the Hutu refugees. Other

refugees, including soldiers of the former Rwandan army, retreated west, some even as far as the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). The Rwandan army and Kabila's rebel movement followed, slaughtering thousands of Hutu combatants and civilian refugees alike.

Many communities in Zaire, in Kivu and further west, appear to have been subject to serious depredations by Mobutu's retreating army. The army of the RPF-led government invaded the DRC in 1996 and in 1998 to attack these former soldiers and militia, saying they posed a continuing threat to Rwandan security. The second invasion sparked a war that caused the loss of an estimated 3.8 million people, the great majority in eastern DRC.

Rwanda withdrew its troops in 2002, although it still sponsored Congolese militias, and the Congolese government promised to disarm the Hutu groups, but failed to do so. In 2004 Rwanda intervened or threatened to intervene in the Congo three times, each time aggravating disputes between Congolese of Rwandan origin and Congolese of other ethnic groups.

Violence flared in 2004 when an element of the new army, which included former rebel factions, mutinied and seized the town of Bukavu. General Laurent Nkunda, a Banyamulenge officer previously backed by Rwanda, claimed that the new government was doing too little to protect Banyamulenge from Hutu militia attacks. He also complained that Banyamulenge did not have an adequate voice in the transitional government. Rwanda sent troops across the border in November 2004, saying that the move was necessary to defeat Hutu militias that threatened its security, but denied backing Nkunda. Fighting intensified and some army units took the opportunity to target Banyamulenge civilians for execution. Some 100,000 civilians were displaced in the fighting, many to Rwanda and Burundi. The border provided little safety for some refugees; in August 2004 around 160 mostly Banyamulenge refugees were massacred by Hutu militia at a camp in Burundi.

Current issues

The upswing in violence seen in North Kivu in mid-2007 was the most recent episode in the continuing struggle for resources and local control between Congolese Tutsi (known as Banyamulenge) militias and the Hutu *interahamwe* of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), as well as independent raiding groups of often indeterminate allegiance who are looking for material resources rather than any strategic or political advantage. The renegade army officer General Laurent Nkunda, who has been faced with an international arrest warrant for war crimes since 2005, had been maintaining what he describes as the defence of the Banyamulenge. The Nkunda uprising began in earnest in December 2006, provoking immediate population flight estimated at 370,000 people, as the conflict rapidly became a four-cornered one, between Nkunda's National Congress for the People's Defence, FDLR bands, Congolese army units and Mai-Mai militias with little allegiance but to themselves. Attempts by the Congolese army to conquer Nkunda and his force (estimated at 6,000 - 10,000 strong) proved futile. In September 2007, an estimated further 170,000 civilians had fled fighting. Officials from the UN mission in Congo (MONUC) reported locating mass graves of unidentified civilians in areas previously occupied by units of Nkunda's Bravo Brigades. By late 2007, the rebel leader was calling for peace talks - something which Kabila had previously refused to consider, demanding instead that Nkunda integrate his force into the national army.

The Banyamulenge Tutsi issue is an old one in the DRC, dating back to the colonial era, with eastern Congolese Tutsis being marginalised under the former Congolese head of state, Mobutu Sese Seko. Although Banyamulenge were closely associated with his successor, Laurent Kabila, this relationship soured rapidly in the 1999-2001 period, which ended with Kabila's assassination by one of his own Swahili-speaking guard. This resulted in yet more popular anger in the capital Kinshasa, with Banyamulenge being aggressively stereotyped as 'non-Congolese' and an effective fifth column for

neighbouring Rwanda - whose ruling RPF come from the minority Tutsi ethnic group. Many Banyamulenge fled the capital at this time, fearing attack, and sought sanctuary back in the East.

The events in Eastern Congo in 2007 are a continuance of the poisonous ethnic strife which led to the genocide of minority Tutsis and Hutu moderates in Rwanda in 1994. Beyond Nkunda's immediate circumstances, the long-term issue of the insecurity of the Banyamulenge minority in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and how they may best combat this, remains unresolved. The Banyamulenge themselves are divided over the way to a solution. Most acknowledged Banyamulenge political thinkers are in favour of a negotiated political solution, but disapprove strongly of the lack of Banyamulenge representation at either parliament or Senate level. In addition, prejudice against Banyamulenge interests remains entrenched in Kinshasa, including within the administration.