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**Genocide Warning: The Vulnerability of
Banyamulenge ‘Invaders’**

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Abstract

In the Eastern Congo, a little-noticed genocidal threat has been emerging in South Kivu which is in part the legacy of colonial and post-colonial patterns of excluding those known as the Banyamulenge from those defined as 'autochthonous' in the region. Instead, defined as 'immigrants', the vulnerability of the Banyamulenge is easily denied. In the past, the Banyamulenge's involuntary involvement in armed insurgencies alongside Rwandan troops worsened their reputation, as well as radicalizing their Maimai (Mayi-Mayi) opponents. These armed groups have now vowed to wipe out the Banyamulenge community. The most recent confrontations have involved foreign armed groups from neighboring countries, including Burundians opposition groups. This genocide alert is based on the evidence of a serious intent to destroy villages and kill cattle so Banyamulenge can no longer occupy their few remaining localities and sustain themselves at all in their homeland areas of Minembwe and Bijombo. Local Maimai, armed groups, combine the surrounding Babembe, Banyindu and Bafuliro communities, and are supported militarily and financially by Burundians opposition. Regular and systematic attacks on the Banyamulenge are justified by calling these Congolese citizens 'invaders' and accusing them of being outsiders. Between October 2018 and May 2019, narratives emerged in media and on social media seem to presage a rapid movement towards the real risk of genocide.

Keywords

Genocide, Hamitic, Bantu, Autochthony, Banyamulenge, Invaders.

Genocide Warning

The Vulnerability of Banyamulenge ‘Invaders’

1 Introduction

There is an almost unnoticed humanitarian crisis unfolding in Eastern DRC and especially in South Kivu, which is particularly affecting the Banyamulenge population. Given their past experiences, being victims of targeted attacks that has speeded up in recent months, there is an overlooked risk of genocide. During the successive wars in the country, I will show how Banyamulenge have been victims, and not only perpetrators, of violence. What makes their position more dangerous and vulnerable today is that their status as full Congolese citizens has been contested for decades, and their identity continues to be conflated with that of Tutsi in neighbouring Rwanda.

Given the resentment that has simmered between local Maimai rebel groups and Banyamulenge communities, rejection of President Kabila also grounded on contesting his conciliatory policies towards the Banyamulenge communities (Alida 2017, Stearns et al, 2013). Instead, the Banyamulenge are still consistently portrayed in the media, and especially in social media, as ‘invaders’ in the region, long after they broke free of their former alliance with the Rwandan army, the RPA. In the wider DRC diaspora, most social media have painted the Banyamulenge Congolese as the source of all evil in the East of the country, and have equated them with former President Joseph Kabila, now removed from power, and formerly associated with this small and now beleaguered community.

For decades, the Eastern Congo has been going through recurrent violent conflicts that have reinforced a toxic colonial legacy of ‘race’ that polarized ‘autochthonous’ Congolese and set them against supposedly ‘invader’ groups, notably the Banyamulenge people. In the specific context of North and South Kivu, ‘invaders’ are defined as those who use “military and cunning, aliens..” and serve as the “Trojan Horse” of neighbouring countries, aiding the hegemonic expansionism, notably of Rwanda (Hoffman, 2007:94, Jackson, 2007:494, Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). Whenever tensions rise in the Kivus, media and leaders resort to these narratives of ‘invaders’, who are in a numerical minority and highly vulnerable to being targeted. The Banyamulenge have repeatedly been targeted as outsiders, first in 1996, then in 1998, and again in 2004. However most alarmingly, recent attacks on this community within the past year seem to now have the aim of ‘finishing off the job’. Public officials have in the past been openly calling for the extermination of the Banyamulenge as ‘vermin’.¹ This article seeks to alert the international community to this clear and present danger of genocide.

¹ For instance, a former Chief of Staff of Laurent Desire Kabila has referred to Banyamulenge and Tutsi in general as ‘vermin, microbes’ to be systematically and methodically dealt with. Some clues of Ndombasi’s speech, its subsequent mobilization and style of killing can be found on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqmRZRW7UzU>. The speech has been reproduced within local militias in Eastern Congo.

The current political climate in the region of South Kivu covering Minembwe, Bijombo and the Highlands of Uvira-Fizi territories, is particularly worrying.² This warning builds on the classification of Genocide Watch, in which ten steps are identified as signaling an unfolding genocide or mass killing.³ Several of these stages have been attempted and currently the stage of active persecution has been reached but has been hidden by blaming the victims collectively as ‘invaders’. The tragic truth of genocide is being hidden in accusatory language. What is happening at this stage involves systematic denial of the vulnerability of the Banyamulenge, who are consistently portrayed (as were the Jews in Europe between the wars) as being the source of evil, of conflict and of suffering.

In this vein, since at least 1998, political campaigns have been painting the Banyamulenge as the principal perpetrators of massacres during rebel insurgencies across Eastern Congo, and even in the neighbouring Central African Republic (Ndahinda, 2013). Within Congolese society, these narratives have undermined any sense of humanity in relation to the ‘Banyamulenge question’ on the part of most commentators and political actors. This bias against vulnerability, regarding a people who are now facing their own extinction, once and for all, may be the filter that explains a startling failure to report on the crisis, whether in the Great Lakes region of Africa, or internationally and among NGOs and the UN. International actors working in the region thus appear to share the same view, that Banyamulenge people – civilians included – cannot be victims, since they are viewed, by definition, as perpetrators.

2 ‘Race’ as the Legacy of Colonial Rule

Banyamulenge are contested-small community living in South-Kivu province; mainly, in Uvira, Fizi, Mwenga territories (Vlassenroot 2002). Some members of the Banyamulenge community have moved to Katanga Province from 1967-69. Following intense targeted attacks over their villages, Banyamulenge in Katanga (Vyura and Moba) were forced to leave this region in 1998. Being a contested community and living in a state with feeble schemes of updating data collection (the last census was done in 1984), Banyamulenge’s exact number is unknown and contested. Their eponym (toponym) is too contested as their estimation (Kakozi-Katembo 2005, Kibiswa 2015, Muhindo-Kambere 1996). However, some estimation ranges their figure between 50,000 and 400,000 as per different source (Mutambo-Jondwe 1997, Reyntjens & Marysse 1996, Stearns 2013). There have been debates have been going on over their exact figure. Consequent to cycle of wars, some have fled to different regions (the great lakes region) or settled as refugees outside of Africa.

² The paper lends the definition of genocide from Simon (1996:244) stipulating that “Genocide is the intentional killing of members of a group, negatively identified by perpetrators, because of their actual or perceived group affiliation”.

³ For details on the classification of 10 stages leading to Genocide, see Stanton, Gregory in “*The Ten Stages of Genocide*” accessible at <http://genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html> (accessed on 30th September 2019)

Like other migrations in the Eastern Congo region, their exact period of settlement in what became Congo is not subjected to debate. However, most accounts of historians agree that they settled well before the arrival of colonizers. However, colonial archives have portrayed them as ‘Ruandas or Banyaruandas’ who settled in the South-Kivu region between XVIII^e and XIX^e century (Hiernaux 1965, Reyntjens and Marysse 1996, Weis 1959). Being cattle herders, they have later adopted sedentarism lifestyle for seeking grazing pastures. Therefore, they formed later agglomerations in which colonial administration could organize them into political organizations. However, Banyamulenge are said to have been discriminated and victims of their stance against the colonial rule (Weis 1959). As indicates Vlassenroot (2002), (Stearns 2013) among others, the colonial administration could have favored large ethnic communities in merging customary chieftaincies and Banyamulenge were left without their own customary chieftaincies. The decisions could have been motivated by how they felt ‘nilotes’ as ‘new-comers’.

The colonial legacy polarized the ‘Bantu’ and ‘Nilotic’ peoples of the entire Great Lakes region of the continent, bringing in the poisonous ideology of racial differences. This led to the reproduction of so-called ‘autochthonous’ and ‘invader’ groups of people. Those defined as ‘Bantu’ ethnic groups were viewed as ‘natives’ while the ‘Nilotic—Hamitic’ people, sharply distinguished from Bantu by European ideas about race, were considered to have come from Ethiopia or Egypt and to be outsiders (Hintjens 2001: 29). Race theories have not been abandoned in the African Great Lakes region. Whereas in Europe it has become politically unacceptable to refer to someone as ‘Aryan’ or ‘Semitic’, in the African Great Lakes region, the toxic power of ‘race’ labels continues to operate at the daily level of discourse and actions. The Banyamulenge are thus assimilated with the Tutsi, who according to the Hamitic hypothesis of ‘race theory’, are Nilotes or even Semites (Hiernaux 1965, Sanders 1969). To reflect on how this situation of being classified as ‘outsiders’ arose, Jackson (2006:107) reflects that during the colonial era:

"Nilotes"—supposedly the Tutsi in Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, the Hima in Uganda, and variously one or two other ethnic groups—were depicted as historical invaders and dispossessors all the way from the Horn of Africa: allochthons par excellence for the entire region.”⁴

Jackson stresses that this myth of Nilotic people as ‘invaders’ still operates today, and has led many local militias, including the Maimai⁵ militias in Eastern DRC, to consider Banyamulenge as Tutsi invaders who should leave and vacate ‘their own lands’ for the benefit of the indigenous or ‘autochthonous’ Bantu people of the region. The Maimai (or Mayi-Mayi) combatants are motivated by the sense of repelling these supposed invaders from the land. A form of depression has also been noted in the Maimai combatants, which is expressed in their ultimate dream of expelling all ‘Tutsis’ from their land and

⁴ See Jackson, Stephen (2006) ‘Sons of Which Soil? The Language and Politics of Autochthony in Eastern DR Congo’. *African Studies Review*, 49:2 (2006) pp.95–124.

⁵ For the sake of keeping a single spelling, this article uses Maimai. However, this is a heterogenous group, differently spelled into the literature. They either called Maimai, Mai Mai, Mayimayi or simply Mai, meaning water as part of the historical beliefs in the power of witchcraft to turn bullets into water (Fox et al. 1965, Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, Verhaegen 1967)

from their country. According to this dream, the end result would be so valuable – namely the restoration of their lands – that it becomes honorable to kill as many Banyamulenge as one can. In this vein, Bøas and Dunn (2014:154) have underscored that

This is the melancholy of the Mai-Mai: the sense of being deprived of something, something that has been lost by the Congolese people. Why are the Congolese so poor, yet Congo so abundant in natural resources, they ask. And in this question lies a nostalgia for a past lost; a past that can only be brought back if certainty about people and places can be re-established... In this narrative the culprits are the Tutsi, who are portrayed as ‘alien’ exploiters of Congo and the Congolese.⁶

These colonial racial characterizations of entire communities that have lived in DRC for centuries, have been fuelling recent violence, including the targeted massacring of Banyamulenge civilians (Mathys 2017, Ngonga, 2003). Researchers have documented the widely shared ideology among armed Maimai groups in the Kivus, of protecting their lands against all ‘invaders’, whether from outside or their ‘home-grown’ allies within the country (Mwaka-Bwenge 2003:79, Stearns et al, 2013:28). This everlasting battle as Hoffman points out in his study (Hoffman 2007) involves an on-going war between ‘Bantu’ and ‘Tutsi’ from the Maimai perspective. Following the 1998, foreign armies, including the Rwandan Patriotic Army, intervened and fought in Congo on what is known as the African World War (Prunier 2009, Turner 2007). Hoffman undertook his field research while many of these armies had withdrawn including the Rwandan one. Even though the Rwandan army had withdrawn from Congo, Hoffman (2007:84) trying to respond to why Maimai are considering to be in a state of war; he come up with an idea that the latter groups felt that Rwandans

“are still represented in the country, not only in the form of the Banyamulenge and the Banyarwanda communities, but equally in the institutions of power they are thought to have infiltrated: “the Mai-Mai are in a defensive position.””

For some years now, the ideological battle around identity has moved from the phase of initial symbolization (in the language of Greg Stanton) to mobilization for ethnic cleansing and hate speech (Hintjens 2006). As for the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi, Hintjens (2006) suggested that those known as ‘Banyarwanda’ in Eastern DRC are widely referred to as ‘snakes’, with the logical outcome that the recommended action is to chase them “out of farmland areas with pangas, or knives”, notes Hintjens (2006: 607). These narratives reflecting on colonial accounts have strikingly been disseminated outside of the Congo as notes (Ndahinda 2013:493) in the Bemba Banyamulenge case before the International Criminal Court (ICC). Individuals (less than 10) with limited role with the Bemba’s rebellion are amalgamated to an entire ethnic community. In South Kivu Province in particular, where most remaining Banyamulenge live, they are yet of relevance (Verweijen and Brabant

⁶ Bøas, Morten and Kevin Dunn (2014) ‘Peeling the onion: autochthony in North Kivu, DRC’. *Peacebuilding*, 2:2, 141-156, DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2014.910381

2017:16).⁷ The discourses around ‘invaders’ who have collaborated with Rwandan armed forces in the past, and thus are viewed as having been a bridge to hegemonic ambitions of the neighboring country, remain the dominant ‘trope’ in local media when referring to the Banyamulenge.

The formation of armed groups in Eastern DRC continues to be along strictly ethnic and ‘race’ lines, and this fact alone is highly significant for the risks of genocide against a now-isolated group like the Banyamulenge. Conflict and warfare in DRC have become ‘racialized’ as well as ‘ethnified’, and mobilization is as much along lines of ‘Bantu’ versus ‘Nilotic’ or ‘Hamitic’, as along ethnic lines, per se. The distinctions of ‘race’ introduced by the Belgians in the late nineteenth century, pristine European ‘race science’, remains today the dominant lens through which armed groups interpret vulnerability and armed aggression. Illustratively, Christophe Kwebe Kimpele, a well-known Congolese journalist (between 1974-94) and presently exiled in Europe, declared that there would not be presidential elections in 2017-18 because the country is under occupation of 545 Tutsi military officers. In his statement, one can read that he would prefer an ‘occupation’ of Hutu than Tutsi. Moreover, Kwebe stresses on the Kivu’s occupation by invaders to be chased by guns not elections.⁸ These racial strategies of singling Tutsi or Banyamulenge that have been used in many circumstances to mobilize combatants.

This is why Maimai groups commonly affiliate to the Babembe, Bafuliro and Banyindu communities, which are seen as ‘Bantu’, and therefore ethnic communities which consider themselves unquestionably ‘autochthonous’ to the Congo. Others who are ‘Nilotic’ or ‘Hamitic’, thereby come to be defined as ‘new-comers’, despite the lack of evidence for this supposition, and are therefore implicated as ‘foreigners’ and ‘invaders’. The Banyamulenge stand accused of having ‘Rwandan’ origin, and yet are equated not with the Hutu ‘Bantu’ majority, but with the Tutsi minority, showing how ‘race’ also trumps nationality as a vector of identity conflict and genocidal ideology today.

⁷ See for instance (Imbole 2018) on the declaration of Catholic Bishop Bodika Timothé of the former Bandundu Province, calling Banyamulenge cattle vendors in the Western Province as ‘invaders whose doubtful morphology are dangerous’. He was referring to the presence of Banyamulenge who were crossing the region to find potential market in Kinshasa. Everything was written on them. The former Prime Minister Adolphe Muzito has called an investigation to determine who are these vendors (see: <https://www.radiookapi.net/2018/02/13/actualite/societe/affaire-des-zebus-adolphe-muzito-appelle-des-mesures-dapaisement-pour>)

⁸ For details on Kwebe Kimpele’s interviews in French, see the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nEbFIjQNLy&t=90s> (accessed on 15th October 2019). With a datable stance on how customary chieftaincies are being exterminated by Tutsi in the Kivus, he calls those newly appointed as “de pacotille”, meaning useless. In the same vein, Christian Sita Mampuya, a leading Congolese figure in South Africa, has claimed that Minembwe Rural Municipality as part of invasion of foreigners willing to occupy Congo’s land (see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KqCijD5t4o&t=293s>). Besides countless demonstrations contesting Minembwe Rural Municipality around the World (Arizona, Brussels, Manchester, Kinshasa, Goma, Bukavu..), the 2018 influential Presidential Candidate Martin Fayulu has too claimed Minembwe Rural Municipality is part of annexing parts of Congo to neighboring countries (see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZxErT85BIw&feature=youtu.be>)

3 Banyamulenge ‘invaders’: Contested autochthony

Despite having been resident in the territory that is now DRC for centuries, the Banyamulenge are viewed as perpetual ‘foreigners’ who can legitimately be resisted – and even massacred - through armed force (Bøås & Dunn 2014; Jackson 2006; Mathys 2017; Sanders 1969). As Verweijen (2015a:166) has extensively documented, ‘autochthony’ discourses play a key role in armed mobilization in Fizi territory, the region where most of the remaining DRC Banyamulenge community now lives.

Verweijen makes analogies with the situation in Kosovo, comparing attacks in Minembwe on a vulnerable enclave community identified as ethnically – in this case racially – distinct from the majority, as comparable to attacks on Albanians in Kosovo. Now, as throughout history, genocide and mass atrocities in South Kivu are being justified by claims of ‘legitimate self-defence’ by those who claim to be more ‘local’ than others living in the area, perceived as ‘invaders’. In her study, Verweijen (2015a:166) suggests that, from this defensive perspective:

“For the Mai-Mai [in Fizi territory], taking up arms is not a manifestation of bellicose intentions but rather a legitimate act of self-protection needed to ward off the supposed aggression of the Banyamulenge and defend the territorial integrity of both Fizi and the Congo”

A cycle of racialized violence and armed mobilization over many years has resulted in a sense of collective victimization among virtually all the ethnic communities of the region and has increased popular prejudice among these communities in the process. In recent years, however, the Banyamulenge of Eastern DRC, especially in South Kivu, have started to look more and more isolated. They now find themselves in an extremely vulnerable position, a position that is becoming increasingly threatening to their survival.⁹

The historical record makes it quite clear that the Banyamulenge were settled permanently in the region now called DRC, within the country’s borders, well before the 1885 Berlin Conference (Ntanyoma 2019; Prunier 2009). Historically, the myth that Banyamulenge people might pose a threat to other ‘Bantu’ Congolese people first arose during the 1960s. At that time, anti-Byamulenge prejudices were first openly expressed during the last stages of the Simba-Mulele rebellion (Muzuri, 1983, Stearns 2013, Vlassenroot, 2002). Initially some Banyamulenge had fought in this rebellion against the authorities in Kinshasa, but once Simba-Mulele rebels started looting Banyamulenge cattle, claiming from a rather crude Marxist perspective that Banyamulenge were part of the capitalist class, the Banyamulenge found themselves victims of

⁹ For details over how circle of violence and the vulnerability of Banyamulenge in South-Kivu, one can see Stearns et al. (2013) in “Mai-Mai Yakutumba: Resistance and Racketeering in Fizi, South-Kivu”; Vlassenroot, Koen (2013) in “South-Kivu: Identity, Territory, and Power in Eastern Congo”; Vlassenroot, Koen (2002) in “Citizenship, identity formation & conflict in South Kivu: the case of the Banyamulenge”; Court, Anthony (2013) in “The Banyamulenge of South Kivu: The ‘Nationality Question’”; Verweijen, Judith (2015) in “From Autochthony to Violence? Discursive and Coercive Social Practices of the Mai-Mai in Fizi, Eastern DR Congo”; Baaz, Maria Eriksson and Judith Verweijen, (2013) in “The volatility of a Half-cooked Bouillabaisse: Rebel-Military Integration and Conflict Dynamics in the Eastern DRC” among others.

the Mulelists and were forced to defend themselves against their erstwhile comrades-in-arms (Stearns, 2013, Vlassenroot 2002). This episode set the tone for future political manipulation involving on-going contestation of the Congolese citizenship of Banyamulenge people.

Following on from this, President Mobutu changed the nationality laws of Zaire in the 1970s and 1980s, excluding Banyamulenge from full citizenship. The National Sovereign Conference, a democratic experiment in 1992-1995, the Banyamulenge were equated with a Rwandan 'third column' inside Zaire. The community started to be attacked physically by Maimai 'defense' militias, after Banyamulenge soldiers had been more or less forcibly recruited into the invading forces led by the Rwandan army, which helped Laurent Kabila to seize power.

Squeezed from all sides by fighting in the region, the Banyamulenge started to be systematically attacked by MaiMai from the late-1990s, as the toxic ideology behind the Rwanda genocide spilled into what then became the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Rwandan invasion of Zaire, and imposition of regime change, posed new problems for the Banyamulenge's reputation as 'invaders'. Today they find themselves almost entirely without allies, and literally hemmed in on all sides by the Maimai. And, as discussed below, neither the national army (FARDC) nor 20,000 United Nations MONUSCO troops have so far been able to provide the security needed to avoid wholesale massacres of the Banyamulenge by the armed forces surrounding them, and now closing in, day by day.

From a distorted colonial legacy of 'race' which suggested that Nilotic or Hamitic people had something in common, after the Rwanda genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) considered the Banyamulenge as natural allies to the persecuted Tutsi within Rwanda. Caught in the growing hostility of other Congolese, and the insecurity of Eastern Zaire/DRC, the Banyamulenge started to cooperate militarily with the Rwandan army from around 1996. From this time on, the perception of Banyamulenge as outsiders, allied with other 'invaders from Rwanda' was reinforced, especially among the Maimai militias in South Kivu. Banyamulenge soldiers' involvement in the 1996 rebellion, alongside Rwandan forces, and in the subsequent overthrow of President Mobutu, reinforced existing tensions between Maimai and Banyamulenge armed groups in South Kivu (Stearns 2013, Turner 2007). The alliance with RPA undermined already weak social cohesion among the Banyamulenge and their neighbouring 'Bantu' communities in South-Kivu (Reid 2014). This alliance had its problems from the start, as the RPA hardly respected these auxiliary fighters. Even so, it had the unfortunate consequence of seeming to confirm the prejudices of many Congolese that the Banyamulenge, were essentially 'Rwandans' living in their midst. Consequently, there evolved growing resentment and hostility from neighboring communities in South Kivu in particular.

Meanwhile, neighbouring communities had become victims of the killings and massacres carried out by Rwandan and allied armed groups, and these deaths and the suffering they experienced started to be attributed to their immediate neighbors, the Banyamulenge, viewed as allies of the RPA. The

Maimai were understandably unforgiving about the role of the Banyamulenge at the ‘forefront of rebellion’ for regime change, alongside the RPA.

However, Banyamulenge fighters soon became tired of being involved in the proxy wars being fought by Rwanda in the Congo, and revoked their initial support for the Rwandan army, which continued to operate in Eastern DRC after 1998 in the form of a rebel alliance known as *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) (Vlassenroot 2013). To a large extent, however, the damage was done, and the label of ‘invader’ stuck.

With roots in Banyamulenge resistance to Rwandan control, in 2002 an armed resistance group known as Gumino¹⁰ was created by Masunzu, a disaffected military officer (Stearns 2013, Vlassenroot 2013). Whilst commander with the Laurent Kabila’s army, Masunzu had (in)voluntarily joined the 1998 rebel’s movement, namely the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) that was supported by Rwanda. His group was mainly composed by Banyamulenge soldiers who fought the RCD and RPA (now RDF) between February to September 2002 (Ntanyoma 2019:225). Since then, Masunzu’s group forms the core part of Gumino and had split several times under pressure from neighboring militias, especially the Maimai. After two successive waves of integration of these fighters into the FARDC, the Congolese national army, in 2005 and in 2011 (J. Stearns 2013:8), remnants of the group were so weakened they were unable to counter mounting threats from neighbouring Maimai groups.

4 Prelude to a Genocide: Security Vacuum to Economic Crime

Of course, the national army, the FARDC, is supposed to provide security and protection for all Congolese citizens. Yet in South-Kivu we see what a failed state looks like in the non-functioning of the national army. Underpaid, FARDC forces are also poorly equipped and are quite unable to protect local populations or their property. In practice, FARDC soldiers are so weak they tend to ally themselves with other armed groups in order to be able to operate, often fighting against other FARDC soldiers in different alliances. This situation has worsened the problem of attacks on civilians, since there is no armed force to protect them.

More senior FARDC officers justify their failure to protect civilians behind claims of neutrality. Yet in a region as fragmented as South Kivu, the national army has behaved more or less like other irregular armed groups and resembles the rag-tag militias it is supposed to combat, like militias. In recent clashes, FARDC officers have been quite openly partisan. They remain less well equipped than many irregular soldiers, who are often can pay themselves, and have better morale, than soldiers in the regular army. FARDC soldiers

¹⁰ Gumino is an armed group recruiting mainly from Banyamulenge community. Gumino would literally mean “stay here” in Kinyamulenge, the language spoken by this community. Gumino stands as an offspring of 2002 Masunzu’s resistance under *Forces Républicaines Fédéralistes* (FRF). Since then, it split into Gumino (Bisogo-Makanika) and then Gumino (Tawimbi-Nyamusaraba). Details can be found in (Stearns 2013:26-40, Vlassenroot 2002:512)

have been accused of standing indifferent while local armed groups are attacking civilians, or worse of collaborating in such attacks. The FARDC is historically distrusted by local communities in South Kivu, who are more likely to see soldiers of the national army as abusers than protectors. As one FARDC officer, interviewed by the researcher stated:

We are part of the community which we came from. And that community is still highly polarized for several reasons. Whenever the army fails to meet the challenge of providing security for local population, the consequences are twofold. On the one hand, a victim will simply conclude that we did nothing to protect them because of the community they belong to. This is part of the explanation of what is happening in Beni (North-Kivu).¹¹ Secondly, we are also human. Just imagine when facing a challenge of not being able to respond to a threat affecting your own parents, sisters and brothers...sometimes, we can behave madly in hoping to save something or at least save your face in front of your relatives.¹²

One of the polarizations he refers to is between agriculturalists and pastoralists. The practice of transhumance results in accusations against Banyamulenge that their cattle are regularly accused to devastate the fields of nearby agriculturalists. The presence of cows during a dry season when crops are failing can provoke envy, and disputes can lead to wider clashes between farmers and cattle herders, in this case also between those thought of as 'Bantu' and 'Nilotic'. It happens that cattle belonging to those not seen as 'invaders' are accommodated. The large-scale cattle raiding against the Banyamulenge in Fizi, Itombwe and Uvira regions, was mentioned earlier, and started long before and widened around 2016 (Verweijen and Brabant 2017). Cattle looting often followed violent disputes between farmers and herders over boundaries, water use and pasturage in the region (Stearns et al 2013). At times, cattle raiding has been preceded by a form of taxation known as *Ituro*, a kind of levy that targets mainly pastoral communities such as the Banyamulenge. Traditionally, local chiefs could levy *Ituro*, but since wars started in DRC, armed groups have been appropriating *Ituro* for themselves, as if they were chiefs. As tax money is collected and reallocated by armed groups, this can become another source of local tensions and attacks.

Besides grievances between farmers and cattle herders, the looting of cattle results from the security vacuum that has arisen in South Kivu region. When cows are looted by local militias, FARDC may either turn a blind eye, or even be involved in profiting from the sale of stolen cattle, and the purchasing of arms and weaponry. In the past, military officers in South Kivu were accused of favoring cattle herders above farmers, since herders could 'buy' protection in exchange for cattle. Bad experiences by all sides with army units,

¹¹ As he talked the Beni's case, he intended to mean how local population has been accusing the national army, specifically those belonging some ethnic groups. There have been alleged accusations that FARDC commanders who belong to 'Rwandophones' are part of the plot to exterminate local communities, namely Banande. This can be viewed from the Nande-Banyarwanda (Hutu-Tutsi) deep-seated struggles over power and resources.

¹² Informal discussions with a Senior Officer Michel Rukunda (Uvira, 10th April 2019)

has meanwhile weakened the legitimacy and status of FARDC troops, eroding trust.

There are also indications that FARDC is not even able or willing to curb the intervention of foreign armed groups. The army's lack of equipment and logistical supplies leads to low morale and explains how several foreign armies could become established on DRC soil, without any real challenge from the FARDC. This continuing presence of foreign armed groups in Eastern DRC has not been much reported on since 2015 or so. By late December 2018, there has been the only official declaration (to our best knowledge) around the presence of foreign armed groups in South-Kivu. The Congolese's Defence Minister referred to groups causing a threat against Kagame's regime in Rwanda while these groups threatened more Congolese local population in South-Kivu but also the regime of Nkurunziza in Burundi (Independent 2019, RFI 2019). The December 2018 declaration requested a Monusco support to curb Rwandan forces activism though it largely intended to cool down mounting over the presidential elections' flaws.

Such foreign armed groups also tend to be more motivated and better equipped than the Congolese army.¹³ Foreign armed groups cross borders as a means of making money, and this may allow some FARDC officers to be paid sums that exceed their meagre salaries. Facilitating cross-border movements, including of armed combatants, can be a lucrative business and may even involve top military people on both sides of the borders. Foreign combatants who are intercepted can generally be released following the payment of a relatively small sum to those guarding them. Foreign armed groups in South Kivu destabilize an already fragile situation, in 'democratic transition' since the 2018 elections. This undoubtedly places the lives of Banyamulenge in particular danger. Many foreign groups have allied with the historical enemies of the Banyamulenge, the Maimai, whose ideological stance is hostile to their 'invader' neighbours.

Since FARDC army officers are suspected of supporting one armed group against another during inter-community clashes, the deployment of some military officers in the High Plateau of Minembwe-Uvira has been heavily contested. This kind of contestation can be ethnically motivated, revealing a complex picture that includes intra- as well as inter-community conflicts and armed struggles. Military officers and Generals are often so keen to take the lead, that there is splintering around issues of leadership. Many civilians in South Kivu suspect that some senior FARDC officers and Generals conspire to allow armed groups to cross the border from neighbouring countries, allowing them to undertake military operations that gain power, prestige and money for both senior FARDC personnel and those armed groups.

Within this security vacuum, local communities are confronted with signs of the radical criminalization and 'medievalization'¹⁴ of violence (Kalyvas 2006:

¹³ Interview with FM (Ruzizi Plain, 6th April 2019) and AG (Uvira, 5th April 2019 Uvira) had too raised his fear over what makes military officers to blind their eyes.

¹⁴ Criminalization—Mediavalization of violence refers to a situation in which violence creates popular prejudice and collective victimization. "Small-Irregular wars" reflect an environment where violent conflict has no frontiers between civilians and armed men;

55). Gradually, norms of army neutrality and discipline have been overtaken by popular prejudices, reinforced by the conditions of perpetual lawlessness across the region. This situation of lawlessness reinforces a sense of collective victimization among the Banyamulenge, who feel particularly threatened today, as a group. In a ‘security void’, this sense of threat is not counter-balanced by any protective military capacity. Instead, the logic is one of revenge and the result is an intensification of violence, in turn reinforcing the sense of collective victimization (Stearns 2011). Thinking through these complexities requires dexterity, but here the task is a more urgent one; to point to the present and persistent risk of genocide against the Banyamulenge of South Kivu.

5 The Clear and Present Danger of Genocide

The developments that led to the most recent threats since March 2019 against Banyamulenge, involve an internationalization of war in South Kivu once again. The clear and present threat of extermination of remaining Banyamulenge in South Kivu, is signalled by the coalition of Maimai militias from three neighbouring (surrounding) ethnic communities supported with assistance from Burundi in terms of arms and supplies. The most recent wave of attacks on the community is thus built on much wider alliances and a broader coalition than in the past.

Fearing the consequences of being left unprotected, after Gumino fighters were reintegrated into the FARDC, local Banyamulenge civilians have started organizing themselves into defense group of their own, in parallel to the Maimai (Verweijen and Brabant, 2017:18). These defense groups are known as *Twirwaneho*, meaning something like ‘let us fend for ourselves’.¹⁵ Some commentators (see Verweijen and Brabant 2017) have compared the *Twirwaneho* to Maimai groups, although the primary mission of the *Twirwaneho* is to protect property, cattle and housing. Given the serious and apparently unfillable security vacuum in South Kivu region, discussed in the following section, the Banyamulenge defence groups seek to prevent attacks by neighboring armed groups.

Unfortunately, arming for self-defence can serve to reproduce or even increase the level of threat to the community, rather than providing effective protection for civilians.

Given the wider security vacuum in South Kivu, self-defence groups may have the perverse outcome of intensifying attacks on innocent civilians on all sides. As one group, in this case the Banyamulenge, feels threatened and fears armed attacks, they organize for self-defence, in order to curb the threat. This in turn legitimates their opponents rearming themselves, claiming this is needed to reinforce their own military capacity as a precautionary measure

that is, there is no distinction between civilians and combatants. See Kaylvas (2003; 2006) for details.

¹⁵ *Twirwaneho*, sometimes called *Twigwaneho* may also means “Let’s defend ourselves”. For details over how this group has been formed, see (Verweijen and Brabant 2017:18)

against the possibility of being attacked by the other side. All local communities can, with good reason, claim to have been victimized, by violence inflicted by neighbouring or proxy armed groups over the past twenty years or so. Nonetheless, each armed group views the plight of their own communities as worse than those of any other, tending to disregard the suffering, deaths and displacement of all others (Stearns 2011).

In this unsettled context, even very minor incidents can lead to inter-community violence involving heavy guns. Incidents which in the past could be peacefully resolved, now spark violent responses; a friendly football match can provoke armed confrontation. Repeated massacres and destruction of property continue to fuel memories of past hostilities, with the result that all civilian communities in the South Kivu region have suffered unjustly and have a real sense of grievance and trauma. In this way, even self-defence-based groups arming themselves can produce a vicious cycle of violent irregular warfare. However, what the Banyamulenge are now facing is something far more dangerous than two-sided warfare. They are facing the prospect of being surrounded, eliminated and disappearing altogether from the DRC. They are facing the clear and present danger of genocide.

Macro-level politics has a part to play in the present risk of genocide. The December 2018 elections removed President Joseph Kabila from power. Since he was seen by most Maimai as being ‘of Rwandan descent’ himself, his conciliatory policies towards the Banyamulenge fighters and community made him – and them – suspect. Thereintegration of Banyamulenge fighters into the FARDC, for instance, now backfired against his erstwhile presumed allies, who were left high and dry, without defences (Alida 2017, Jackson 2006:104).

The whole problem of persecution has been amplified by the growing role of social media in recent years in DRC, where all kinds of hate speech thrives.¹⁶ The international community and regional bodies are also neglecting the ongoing violence and its impacts, which is now decimating the Banyamulenge people remaining in South Kivu. By relying on local organizations as sources of information, international actors may be driven towards accepting narratives from wider campaigns that aim to portray Banyamulenge as the source of all evil, as abusers rather than as those facing abuse. They now stand to lose everything they have, including not only their properties but also their lives, and the very future of their community. Whilst international actors characterize the fighting as a communal conflict, the Banyamulenge around Minembwe and Mikenke face genocide.¹⁷ Concentrated in just a few villages clustered in and around these two towns, the remaining Banyamulenge have been accused of collusion and are now confronted with three allied local militias from three different ethnic communities, all allied to foreign groups.

¹⁶ For instance, one can check Honore Ngbanda, a former advisor to President Mobutu on Minembwe https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=77sMtKdBuiA). Along many Congolese channels, campaigns against a Rural Municipality have been going on for a while. The National South Africa TV has given an audience to Christian Mampuya in which he contested the existence of Banyamulenge: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=2KqcyjD5t4o

¹⁷ From the wider region of roughly 3,000 Km², almost all villages of Banyamulenge were systematically burnt to ashes and they are not allowed to flee in different directions as do other members of their neighboring communities. Besides this type of concentration camps, Banyamulenge are regularly attacked from all sides and their properties systematically looted.

Between March and September 2019, more than 30,000 cows were pillaged in South Kivu alone.¹⁸ This was hardly reported on at all. The main aim of such massive theft was both to impoverish and immiserate the Banyamulenge owners, but also to sell the stolen cattle to obtain military supplies in order to continue attacks. In July 2019, Deutsch Welle reported that around 140,000 people ended up homeless in 2019 following these attacks, these numbers being added to the millions of existing IDPs in DRC (Bashi 2019). Adding this huge loss of livestock to the existing economic hardship, the Banyamulenge also suffered from the burning down of an estimated 140 villages between April 2017 and early October 2019. The resulting devastation now extends from Bijombo to Minembwe via Itombwe and Kamombo. And whereas the region of Bijombo-Minembwe is inhabited by four main ethnic groups, the burned down Banyamulenge villages represented almost three quarters of the estimates 200 destroyed in total in the region during this time. Due to security situation and lack of attention, there has been scanty information collected on the exact number of deaths. The number of people displaced can be estimated at around 300,000 from a region of 3 to 4 thousand square kilometres.¹⁹

School and health facilities throughout the region has also been decimated. Yet the Banyamulenge community have had no choice but to remain in Minembwe and are currently concentrated in Minembwe town centre and in Mikenke. They are encircled on all sides by hostile, ideologically-driven Maimai forces and by Burundi; they cannot flee in any direction. Facing weekly military attacks, they are targeted, and their remaining properties and cattle stolen, being chased to within 3 kilometers of Minembwe rural municipality offices and the MONUSCO base in Minembwe town itself. Central Minembwe itself comprises around ten villages, which are now hosting the entire remaining Banyamulenge population that has fled destruction in the entire surrounding area, their former villages burnt to ashes. This is an extremely precarious and dangerous situation, considering the ‘invader’ ideology of Maimai armed groups, and the support these militias are now receiving from well-trained Burundian armed groups. Each day, there are reports of attacks to destroy any remaining hopes for a Banyamulenge homeland within South Kivu, or in DRC for that matter. The Maimai attacks are especially intense, as they believe this could be their last opportunity to finally get ‘rid themselves’ of these ‘invaders’. So far, the FARDC has stood by indifferently, but this may not continue indefinitely; soon even they may feel compelled to defend Banyamulenge civilians from the slaughter that may lie ahead.

‘Proxy war’ seems to have raised its ugly head in the region again, so that clashes concerning outside parties have once again lethal consequences for local people. By visiting on Banyamulenge and their neighbours a form of genocidal warfare, it is hoped that direct confrontation between the military

¹⁸ The Voice of America reportage from the ground had reported around 26.850 cattle looted between March-August 2019. Recent incidents that have been recorded in September culminated to around 6000 cows looted by Maimai militias in a coalition with Burundian groups.

¹⁹ The 3,000-4,000 Km² is tentative estimation to give an idea of how large this region facing the humanitarian tragedy is.

forces of Rwanda and Burundi can be avoided. South Kivu's situation has become a ticking time bomb for the civilian population and for the Banyamulenge in particular. Despite UN Group of Experts' report on the establishment of foreign groups in The Uvira High Plateau (UNGoE 2019, UNGoE 2018, UNGoE 2016), it seems that there have been lack of attention to the renewed recent violence in the form of proxy warfare and violence against civilians in Eastern DRC. The failure to rightly frame this human tragedy is more or less linked to the powerful personal, political and business interests—biases of several actors including Congolese military and Monusco officials. As has strongly indicated (Autesserre 2012:8), most of these international actors operating in Congo failed due to an

over-reliance on official data from UN and Congolese authorities, poor relationships between international interveners and their Congolese counterparts, lack of access to the most unstable areas, and the staff's inability to speak local languages.

As armed men keep crossing DRC borders to reinforce Maimai groups attacking the Banyamulenge, this community's situation becomes increasingly untenable. Various sources (Africa Confidential 2019, KST 2019) have suggested that RDF has crossed the Congolese border (under yet undisclosed agreement) to fight Rwandan groups operating in Congo and opposed to Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rule in Rwanda. There are even rumours that RPA elements may be hidden within the DRC national army in North-Kivu and have been fighting the FDLR in this way. RPA forces are also said to have penetrated Burundian rebels operating in South Kivu against the Banyamulenge, showing how former allies can sometimes become the most dangerous of enemies. Several reports confirm that Burundian and Rwandan involvement is more than simply a local rumor (Nichols 2016, UNGoE 2016, UNGoE 2018). This situation has created what is now an urgent humanitarian crisis in South-Kivu in which Banyamulenge are now arguably the most vulnerable community in the region. However, the risk facing this community remains contested—unnoticed as there have been wider politically and social medias campaigns since 1996 up to recently to make them viewed as dominant, privileged and militaristic.

The latest phase of proxy war, and the resulting humanitarian crisis facing this region, started unexpectedly, following a relatively peaceful situation in South Kivu. Between March 2017 and August 2018, Bijombo *groupement* came under heavy gunfire, with clashes opposing local armed groups affiliated along ethnic or 'race' lines. The immediate trigger for these armed confrontations was an incident in which a gunman attacked a civilian and raided a solar torch battery. The victim and the assailant belonged to different communities, and so reprisals started almost immediately to target the community of the assailant, leading ultimately to many dying, over the theft of a solar battery.²⁰ The rapid escalation of something quite mundane, resulted in some families being shot at home, including one police officer who was a 'Bantu', and seen as an autochthonous native of the region. Within weeks, the armed clashes started to escalate to the widespread burning of villages and the pillaging of

²⁰ Interviews avec Moise (2018)

Banyamulenge cows, as already mentioned. As in the past, the FARDC seemed to lack the will or capacity to prevent further clashes and MONUSCO did not intervene to enforce the peace, in spite of being at hand.

Another kind of warfare has taken place through social media, which has facilitated well-coordinated demonstrations in DRC cities, and around the world, from New York and Brussels to Manchester, Goma, Bukavu and Kinshasa. In all these demonstrations, there is the same call on all Congolese to support ‘clearing out’ Minembwe Rural municipality, which is represented as having been taken over by ‘foreigners’. Contestation of the Banyamulenge IDP presence in Minembwe Rural municipality rests on a claim that this represents the Rwandan annexation of the Kivus, rather than the desperate plight of an internally displaced population of Congolese. In this way, combatants are mobilized around what is claimed to be the ‘noble’ cause of protecting the land of DRC against the alleged ‘invaders’, with whom Banyamulenge Congolese are equated. This large-scale mobilization has led local combatants to realize that it may even be possible to get rid of the ‘invaders’ in their midst once and for all. Following countless attacks, Banyamulenge have left their villages, from Mibunda-Itombwe, which has been attacked at least eight times, from Kamombo neighbourhood, which has been attacked five times, and from Minembwe neighbourhood, which has been attacked at least six times. Burundian groups have taken in these attacks on civilians, alongside Maimai armed groups. These allies all appear to be fighting a proxy war with Rwanda; yet Rwanda is not at all supporting their erstwhile ‘adoptees’, the Banyamulenge. Instead, the RPA appears to be disguising itself within those attacking and seeking to wipe out the Banyamulenge community. If this situation is allowed to continue, and there are many further assaults on this community, the outcome will be simply: the remaining Banyamulenge people will quite simply be wiped off the map.

6 Conclusion

Failed and delayed processes of electoral democratization in both Burundi (2015) and in the Congo (2016), pushed South Kivu and Eastern DRC into a renewed cycle of irregular and proxy warfare after 2015. This has resulted in renewed violence targeting civilians, including Banyamulenge civilians. The Maimai ideology of fighting ‘invaders’ has resulted in a situation on the ground in which armed rebels from three other ethnic communities are supported by well-trained Burundian rebels, and now threaten to decimate the Banyamulenge ‘once and for all’. This is a cause for extreme concern, and I have shown why this crisis should now be considered an international priority in terms of genocide prevention. Having personally witnessed the war over many years, I am filled with a sense of despair at the non-recognition of the slow genocide taking place of the Banyamulenge people of South Kivu. One regional neighbour after another has now rejected the Banyamulenge as refugees. This includes Rwanda and Burundi, their supposed ‘natural allies’. Non-recognition of the vulnerability of the Banyamulenge community is the core problem. It creates a complete impasse for those left living in South Kivu, who have rapidly become ‘citizens of nowhere’, apparently wanted by nobody.

Each step towards wiping out entirely the Banyamulenge of Eastern Congo has followed the '10 stages of genocide', from the 1960s onwards. When the Banyamulenge were forced to leave Ngandja localities in South Kivu, they were fleeing the Simba-Mulele rebels who had started to attack the community as 'privileged elites' because of their cattle. Today, when Banyamulenge want to pasture their cattle in Ngandja, they are accused of being 'invaders' once again. Post-independence, the Banyamulenge have been expelled from Katanga Province (Vyura and Moba) in 1998 and their cattle were decimated in looting by local militias supported by Laurent Kabila's army (which the Banyamulenge fighters had helped put in place). After expulsion from Katanga, thousands of Banyamulenge were forced to relocate in South Kivu. Between 1996 and 1998, the Banyamulenge were again chased out of Ngandja and Mirimba, as 'snake-vermin', fleeing to different provinces in Congo. These killings followed the public announcement made by the 1996 governor²¹ of South-Kivu who called Banyamulenge to leave the homeland or face military strikes (Stearns 2011:58). The Governor's declaration led to hundred Banyamulenge selectively killed by security services in their villages in South-Kivu. The same move happened in 1998 when rebellion erupted to overthrow Laurent Kabila. His Cabinet Chief of Staff called for an extinction of 'vermin Tutsi'. Consequently, thousands of Banyamulenge soldiers were killed all over the Congo while serving in the national army (Ntanyoma 2019). Repeated incidents in which Banyamulenge have been killed or expelled as 'foreigners', are the precedent that reinforces the urgency of seeing the current mobilization via social media as part of a campaign of genocide against this community. The danger of genocide needs to be brought to the attention of world opinion.

The wars and violence in Eastern DRC has led to serious loss of life, trauma and violence for all local communities, and not just for the Banyamulenge community. However, whilst other communities have united under the banner of autochtony and 'Bantu' loyalties, the Banyamulenge have almost no allies. Their situation of extreme vulnerability now needs to be acknowledged and should be a priority for the international community, since it involves the distinct risk of all-out genocide. There would be economic motives for this genocide, since the Banyamulenge's right to use and own their lands have been contested. Meanwhile the national army remains incapable of protecting civilians, and can even turn on civilians, something that places the Banyamulenge people as a whole in danger. Recent reports confirm that members of the Banyamulenge community from across the region are now concentrated in a few small villages, around six to ten in total. As they lose their land to seizure and their cattle to looting, these 'invaders' are becoming more and more impoverished and vulnerable to attack. Their cattle, their main economic activity, are mostly gone now. Even the long-term presence of 20,000 MONUSCO forces, there to protect civilians from 'irregular wars', provides no security whatsoever to the Banyamulenge still alive in this region.

²¹ Lwabanji Lwaboshi Ngabo is the 1996 South-Kivu governor who announced to expel Banyamulenge within a week. By mid-2019, he has been appointed as the Provincial Interior and Security Minister in South-Kivu. His nomination has revived these bad memories during the period of intense contestation of Banyamulenge in South-Kivu.

Urgent attention is now required from the international community. The media and our leaders must speak about before it is too late for another group of this our human family.

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