

**Beni-Lubero Under Attack:
Retaliations against the Tutsi and Hema Minority**

11 June 2003

While a French-led intervention force has started deploying its forces in Bunia in Ituri province (DRC), another front is erupting at an alarming rate in the territory of Beni-Lubero. On 11 June 2003, representatives of the RCD-Goma, a rebel movement supported by Rwanda, confirmed their take-over of the locality of Kanyabayonga, on the Rwandan border. The locality was captured from the RCD-ML, which controls the territory of Beni-Lubero. In the weekend of 7-8 June 2003, RCD-Goma forces already captured three other localities in South-Lubero, Bunyatenge, Muhanga and Bingi. The move is causing a panic among the populations of Beni and Butembo, which risk to fall victim to another brutal offensive from the south.

Beni, a commercial town near the Ugandan border, has attracted the attention of many neighbouring rebel movements, who are all hungry to take over the city's thriving economic activities. The town is an important transit post for coffee and other resources. Today, passenger planes are flying regularly to Kinshasa, which has become the RCD-ML's main ally. In December 2002, the forces of Jean Pierre Bemba (the MLC) advanced on the city through neighbouring Mambassa, but were stopped by the outcry of a local priest about alleged acts of cannibalism against the local Pygmy population. In April this year, RCD-Goma forces occupied some localities in South Lubero for a brief period. But after an alarm cry of the bishop of Beni-Butembo, Mgr Melchisedech Sikuli, and the leaders of the RCD-ML movement, these troops had to withdraw. However, RCD-Goma troops have continued to infiltrate the territory for the last few months, reportedly in conjunction with local militias.

The RCD-Goma offensive is a clear violation of the Accord of Lusaka and the 2002 peace agreements of Sun City and Pretoria. The RCD-ML has already condemned the offensive as a strategy to undermine the peace process in the DRC. Speculations exist that the RCD-Goma is deliberately blocking the peace process to enhance its position within the future Congolese army, a position which has been disputed by enemy rebel leaders. Another possibility is that the RCD-Goma plans to join forces with the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) of Thomas Lubanga in Ituri, who have reportedly been receiving logistical support from Rwanda at least since January 2003. In case of an attack, the population of Beni and Butembo risks to fall victim to severe retaliations.

Retaliations

What is more worrying, is that the renewed threat from the South is causing retaliations against non-locals of the Beni-Butembo area. On 11 June, a number of local *khadafi*, who are selling petrol along the main road in Beni town, were throwing stones in windows of local NGO's. An angry mob invaded the local Hotel Beni, where a number of international observers were stationed. Later on that day, a MONUC vehicle was attacked by angry bystanders while passing on the main road. After this incident, all MONUC personnel has been advised to stay inside.

The MONUC representation in North Kivu has long been criticised for its passive role in what is commonly described as a "Rwandan" offensive. The attack against international observers follows an appeal from the local mayor of Beni on 11 June, to manifest against "the Rwandans, who are in

complicity with MONUC to attack our town." At the same time, the head-of-staff of the APC, the RCD-ML's armed wing, transmitted a message on the local radio asking young men to enrol against the "Rwandan" attack, according to local sources. It appears that these messages form part of a wider discourse of xenophobia, which has been forwarded by local opinion leaders. This message is increasingly threatening the local Tutsi and Hema population in the region.

In fact, the retaliations and accusations against non-origins of the Beni and Butembo area are taking an ever more worrying shape. For example, on 23 March 2003 the Banyamulenge commander Mukalay Mushonda was arrested and tortured by APC forces at the Military Intelligence Headquarters in Beni. Afterwards, he was taken to the Presidential Protection Unit (PPU) and placed in a pit, where he has stayed for the last two months. Mukalay is commonly seen as the key representative of the Banyamulenge community in Beni-Lubero, because of his long term military experience. At PPU headquarters, he has been threatened to be killed once the RCD-Goma initiates its offensive on Beni-Lubero. On 7 June, Mukalay was again tortured and beaten by the APC military. He managed to escape his death only because of his loud shouting, according to local sources.

The faith of Mukalay and other residents of Tutsi and Hema origin in Beni Lubero risks to deteriorate rapidly if they are not defended through outside intervention. Today, the streets of Beni are roamed by dispersed factions of Mayi-Mayi militias, RCD-ML soldiers and even Lendu fighters, who have been supplied and armed by the Kinshasa government. The thousands of Hema refugees that are descending from the troubled Ituri province are reported to be threatened and even forced to flee by these militias, which the local rebel movement is no more able to control. This in itself is a very worrying trend. If any offensive is due to develop in Beni-Lubero, the main victims will probably be the Tutsi and Hema minorities.

The role of Kinshasa

Kinshasa is playing an increasingly vicious role in the conflicts in Ituri and North Kivu. Unable to recuperate the eastern part of the country by military means, it has clearly opted for a war-by-proxy through its ally of the RCD-ML, which has trained Lendu militias to recapture its lost territory in Ituri (the RCD-ML controlled Ituri before it was taken over by the UPC). Although Kinshasa denies its presence in North Kivu and Ituri, the Ugandan newspaper the Monitor reported the arrival of 1.500 government troops at Beni airport from Mbuji Maji at the end of May. The RCD-ML has acknowledged the significant presence of FAC in Beni. Congolese troops were also cited in the massacre against southern Hema in Tchomia (31 May), in which close to 300 people were killed. Whether these allegations are true or not, the role of Kinshasa is increasingly perceived as a threat to the peace process, both by international observers and people in the field. Its increasingly war-like language has been interpreted as an essential obstacle to a peaceful solution to the conflict, especially in eastern Congo, where people continue to die every day as a result of this brutal war.

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