

A deadly reversal

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, yesterday's victims have become today's aggressors

hope that newspapers do not represent public opinion. If they do, it means that we consider the Home Secretary's love affair more important than the resumption of the most deadly conflict since the second world war. On Sunday, the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), already responsible for 3.8 million deaths, started again. If you missed it, you're in good company.

The Rwandan army appears to have crossed back into north-eastern DRC. Rival factions of the Congolese army – some of them loyal to Rwanda – have started fighting each other. As usual, it's the civilians who are being killed – and raped and tortured and forced to flee into the forest. Last week, before the fighting resumed, the International Rescue Committee reported that over 1,000 people a day are still dying from disease and malnutrition caused by the last conflict. Nearly half of them are children under five.

Rwanda has already invaded the DRC (or Zaire, as it used to be called), twice. In both cases it appeared to have justification. The Interahamwe militias who had killed 800,000 Rwandans fled there after the genocide in 1994. They were sheltered first by President Mobutu, then by President Kabila. They wanted to reinvade Rwanda and resume the genocide.

But after moving into the eastern DRC for the second time, in 1998, Rwanda more or less forgot about the genocidaires. It had found something more interesting: minerals. Better armed than the other forces in the region, the Rwandan army concentrated on seeking to monopolise the trade in diamonds and coltan. By 1999, according to a report

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for the UN security council, 80% of the Rwandan military budget – around \$320m a year – was coming from minerals stolen from the DRC.

The six African armies that had been drawn into the conflict, their proxy militias and the government of the DRC started fighting a monumental turf war over the mines. Millions of people fled their homes. Thousands were captured and forced to mine or to work as prostitutes. Rwanda's operation was by far the most efficient. It was controlled directly from the capital, Kigali, according to Amnesty International. Even after 2002, when the armies officially withdrew, the Rwandan government left its men in the eastern DRC to continue running the mines. The latest invasion appears to be a thinly-disguised attempt to deal with the militias which threaten its lucrative business.

Though we are rightly exercised about the atrocities in Darfur, it is hard to find anyone who gives a damn about the Congo. This is partly because we are used to seeing the Rwandan government forces as the good guys - the people who first suffered at the hands of the genocidaires, and then drove them out of their country. It's hard to adjust to the fact that good guys can become bad ones, harder still to recognise that they can become some of the world's bloodiest war criminals.

Those who believe that Paul Kagame's government can do no wrong concentrate their attacks on a report published in 2002 by the UN. They allege that it has been subject to power-play between the members of the security council. But they fail to explain why Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group, Global Witness, the British all-party parliamentary group and the US state department have all, independently, come to the same conclusions.

The reports produced by these bodies run to hundreds of pages, full of eye-witness accounts and the direct testimony of both survivors and perpetrators. They make horrifying reading. They state that troops have repeatedly raped children as young as three; have sliced off the genitals of women who resist being raped; have forced women and children to work in terrifying conditions in the mines: scores have been buried alive. They have torched villages, looted homes, killed those who resist or those who appear to have helped the other side, and forced millions to flee into the jungle. Most of the 3.8 million have died of malnutrition and disease; but had the marauding armies filled them with lead, they could scarcely have had greater responsibility for their deaths.

The reports give the names of both agents and victims, the dates of the crimes, the precise locations, the value of the stolen resources and the names of the people and companies who bought them. It is very hard to see how they could all be disputed.

Some, such as the Africa specialist and former Guardian journalist Victoria Brittain, have argued that Rwanda's critics have confused "the disciplined Rwandan army and

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the chaotic rebel groups”. While all the armed forces who have fought in the DRC since 1998 have committed atrocities, the Rwandan army is named in the documents again and again. The US state department, for example, summarises “numerous credible reports” of regular Rwandan troops “killing, torturing, or raping” people in north and south Kivu and northern Maniema Province.

It is not easy to see, anyway, where the moral difference lies between killing people and commissioning others to do so on your behalf. Rwanda’s proxy, the RCD-Goma militia, has committed innumerable atrocities all over the east. The Rwandan government is directly responsible for both its formation and its survival. In June this year, Global Witness reported that “the RCD was put together in Kigali [the Rwandan capital] rather than in the Congo” and “still remained highly dependent on its Rwandan backers to finance its military deployment in the region”. Amnesty International reports that the Rwandan army supplied this force with “rocket launchers, armoured cars, machine guns, light artillery, mortars and landmines”.

None of the reports disputes that the DRC’s government in Kinshasa has also been responsible for crimes against humanity in the east of the country. But in much of this region, its writ hardly runs. As a UN report leaked to the BBC last week confirms, Rwanda and its proxy militias are the most powerful forces in the eastern DRC. They control most of the minerals trade and have been involved in almost all the fighting.

Rwanda could have wiped out the Interahamwe – which is now a much smaller and weaker force than it used to be – years ago. As the International Crisis Group points out, “Rwanda had exclusive and total military control over the eastern half of the Congo between 1996 and 2002 and failed to neutralise and repatriate all its nationals.” Instead, it has repeatedly used its presence as an excuse to occupy the mineral-rich regions. As the British parliamentary group reports, the Rwandan army was often “located in areas where the Interahamwe did not exist, or were at least 50km away.” In some places, the army has even formed alliances with the Interahamwe to control the mines. Now, using the old excuse, the Rwandan government is dragging the eastern Congo back into war.

It would not be hard for the international community to defuse the world’s most deadly conflict. Rwanda is a tiny, frail state, which would collapse without foreign aid, over one third of which comes from Britain. But nothing will happen until we wake up to this dreadful war, and stop pretending that the victims of atrocious crimes cannot also be perpetrators.