

Will Botched State Department Diplomacy Lead to a Third Congo War?



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U.S. policy in Congo is enabling the slide toward ethnic violence against Congolese Tutsis.

by Michael Rubin 

The deadliest conflict of the twenty-first century has not been in Ukraine, Gaza, Libya, Afghanistan, or Sudan but rather in the Democratic Republic of Congo. By some estimates, the Second Congo War (1998-2003) caused more than 350,000

violent deaths and upwards of five million excess civilian deaths. Even if the real number is only half that much, as some suggest, the sum of deaths is still an order of magnitude greater than the 2003–2005 Darfur slaughter. Today, State Department and UN policies fan the flames of conflict and threaten to reignite war.

Diplomatic Neglect Catalyzes War

The first problem is neglect. The United States can spend tens of billions of dollars on diplomacy and intelligence, but if inaction rules the day, problems metastasize.

Hamas tunnels and genocidal ambitions were neither secret to the United States nor the United Nations. Still, successive administrations in Washington and multiple secretaries-general in New York chose to look the other way, enabling a bad situation to grow exponentially worse.

The same is true with Lebanon, where the world watched as Hezbollah rearmed following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War but did nothing. Terror threats do not build arsenals of sophisticated missiles and drones if they do not envision utilizing them.

Neglect also characterized U.S. inaction to Russia's rise. In a 2012 debate with Republican challenger Mitt Romney, President Barack Obama mocked Romney's description of Russia as a geopolitical foe. "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back, because the Cold War's been over for 20 years," he said. Even after Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Germany, with U.S. support, doubled down on NordStream-2 and the Russian energy trade.

The same neglect characterizes U.S. policy toward the Great Lakes region of Africa. For most in the West, the anti-Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda ended in 1994 when the Rwandan Patriotic Front drove Hutu extremists and French-backed Interahamwe militias across the border into the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Zaire as it was

then known. Just as the United Nations allowed armed Palestinian militants to seek refuge and ultimately dominate refugee camps along the border with Israel, so too did the same UN bureaucrats allow armed Hutu *génocidaires* to transform UN camps into armed terror bases. And, just as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) transformed schools into engines for anti-Semitic incitement, so too has the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees allowed refugee camps in eastern Congo to teach a new generation of Hutus genocidal hatred for Tutsis, not only in Rwanda but across the region.

A Second Tutsi Genocide?

The narrative in eastern Congo is remarkably similar to that which predated genocide three decades ago. At its core is eugenics, introduced by the Belgians more than a century ago. Hutu *génocidaires* argued that the Tutsi, based on the shape of their skulls, were Nilotic migrants from the Ethiopian highlands. Essentially, just as anti-Semites dismiss the legitimacy of Jewish presence in Israel by labeling Jews “settler-colonists,” so Hutu supremacists argue now that the Tutsi fundamentally are illegitimate implants.

Just as Jews do not dismiss the eliminationist rhetoric of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah because of the memory of the Holocaust, Rwandans—both Tutsi and Hutu—do not dismiss the threat that Hutu supremacists voice as mere bombast.

Joseph Kabila, president of the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2001–2019, used the last years of his rule to reconcile with Rwanda. Both countries prospered as they shared intelligence to stymie criminal groups and cooperated on energy projects along their border. That relationship continued initially under Félix Antoine Tshisekedi, Kabila’s successor. But, as Tshisekedi’s administration floundered against the backdrop of corruption and incompetence and in the run-up to his 2023 reelection bid, Tshisekedi turned toward ethnic incitement in eastern Congo. His government’s major theme? The Tutsis living in Congo were implants and not real Congolese. On June 18, 2022, Congolese in the Bandalungwa municipality within the capital, Kinshasa, rampaged through the streets chanting,

“Yo Rwandais toko kata yo kingo,” which translates to “You, Rwandan, we shall slit your throat.”

Shortly after, a mob of machete-wielding Congolese in Kinshasa announced “Operation Chase Out Rwandans.” Congolese Tutsi women reported rapists telling them that the Democratic Republic of Congo is not for Tutsis. On February 3, 2023, for example, Muhindo Nzangi, the minister of Higher Education, urged his audience to clap for the Mai-Mai militia guilty of atrocities against Tutsi. The Mai-Mai’s self-proclaimed general, John Makanaki Kasimbira, suggested the Hutu and Mai-Mai form a militia “aimed at exterminating all Tutsi.” Leaflets in Kalemie, a city on the Congolese shore of Lake Tanganyika, told Tutsis they must leave within six days or be killed. While the United Nations often embraces moral equivalence, Congolese incitement grew so pronounced that its special adviser on the Prevention of Genocide warned about the vociferousness of anti-Tutsi hate speech.

Congolese Tutsis Will Defend Themselves

As eastern Congo descended into lawlessness, militias thrived. Some were criminal mafias, others ethnic gangs, and still others essentially local protection militias. The May 31 United Nations’ “Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” sent to me by the Congolese (but not yet online), finds “The official use of Wazalendo armed groups by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to fight the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) resulted in armed groups across the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo calling themselves Wazalendo to legitimize their existence and criminal activities.” In essence, the Tshisekedi lit a wildfire that now burns out of control. The UN now warns that the ethnic tension now risks sparking “a wider regional crisis.”

Alas, the Biden administration misreads the situation. Just as the White House and State Department approach the Israel-Hamas conflict with moral equivalence, so too do they confuse *génocidaire* and victim in eastern Congo. The issue is not

chicken-and-egg. The M23 exists in eastern Congo to defend ethnic Tutsis from a grave and growing threat of genocide. Whereas many Hutu gangs encouraged by Tshisekedi openly embrace ethnic cleansing, M23 appears to beseech locals to remain in place regardless of their ethnicity.

By castigating M23 as a foreign force under Rwandan command and control, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and USAID Administrator Samantha Power, however, confuse right and wrong, as well as fiction and fact. Rwandan Tutsis may sympathize with co-ethnicists facing October 7-like pogroms in eastern Congo. Still, the State Department has been unable to demonstrate the transfer of equipment or military units from Rwanda into Congo. Arguments suggesting interplay between Rwandan and M23 commanders rest upon eugenics, as Hutus argue not only do all Tutsis look alike, but also they are alike. In effect, Blinken's moral equivalence and Power's acceptance of anti-Rwanda polemics affirm extremist rhetoric that has lit the fuse toward a regional explosion and encouraged Tshisekedi and his allies to continue to encourage ethnic cleansing.

U.S. Neglect Benefits China, Not Peace

Adding to the perfect storm has been Tshisekedi's military. In June 2022, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2641 that lifted the requirement that Kinshasa report its military purchases. Authorities in both Kigali and Kinshasa say the policy change was a culmination of a multiyear lobbying campaign by Michael Hammer, the U.S. ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo, from December 2018 until June 2022. Tshisekedi subsequently went on a shopping spree for Chinese drones that coincided with Beijing's renegotiation of cobalt mining rights. In effect, China paid Tshisekedi for Congolese resources, and the Congolese leader turned around and used that money to invest in Chinese arms. For Chinese President Xi Jinping, it is a triple win: he secures the cobalt China needs for next-generation batteries, wins contracts for Chinese military industry, and undermines Rwanda,

whose leadership embraces moderation, free market capitalism, and seeks good relations with the West.

U.S. policy in the Great Lakes region of Africa right now is to kick the can down the road. Neither Biden, Blinken, nor Power understands the road is rapidly ending. Rhetoric alone will not prevent the eruption of war. Rather, the Biden administration and its successor should take a zero-tolerance approach to genocidal rhetoric and ethnic incitement. As the thirtieth anniversary of Rwanda's liberation from *génocidaires* approaches on July 4, the United States should use its Security Council seat not to enable Chinese military sales but rather to demand the UN expel militants from its camps.

Hamas did not build its tunnels to seek peace, nor has Hezbollah armed itself with missiles. They are precursors to war. The State Department should, therefore, demand that Tshisekedi warehouse Chinese drones and cut the contracts he has given East European mercenaries who have flooded the eastern region to bolster Congo's military.

If the Biden administration instead chooses neglect, the world should prepare for a third Congo War, one that could leave millions dead and all Congolese will lose.

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