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# How not to report on Eastern Congo

BY

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Western media coverage of the DRC conflict is riddled with inaccuracies, oversimplifications, and racial bias—reinforcing dangerous narratives rather than informing the world.

The first victim of war is not truth, as the adage says. It's peace. But indeed, truth follows shortly after. Over a month ago, the Congolese armed group M23 took over the city of Goma, capital of North Kivu. Thousands have been killed in the latest escalation of a conflict that has a long and complex history. The M23 has been fighting the Congolese army (FARDC) and its many allies, including foreign mercenaries, local militia groups known as Wazalendo, soldiers from the Burundian and South African armies, and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The FDLR was founded by members of the Interahame, militiamen who committed the 1994 Rwandan genocide against Tutsis and fled to the DRC at the end of the genocide. As of early March, the M23 has taken control of the city of Bukavu, and after refusing peace talks on multiple occasions, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi has finally agreed to attend direct talks with the M23.

We should encourage the media to give attention to conflicts that are often ignored. The less visibility, the more the risks of escalation and human rights violation; and with public scrutiny also comes the opportunity to apply diplomatic pressures, better understand conflicts, and ultimately encourage dialogue. But visibility can also come with harmful distortions. And unfortunately, the current coverage of the crisis in the DRC has mostly been inaccurate, poorly

contextualized, misguided, and dangerously stereotypical. Below are four egregious examples that illustrate this sloppiness.

First, the media coverage so far has emphasized that M23 is Rwanda-backed, a proxy of Rwanda, and that the DRC is being invaded by a foreign force. Although there is evidence that Rwanda is supporting the M23, the foreign invasion narrative is, at best, misleading and, at worst, dangerously inaccurate.

M23 rebels are as Congolese as the Congolese army; in fact, many used to be in the Congolese army. The group was established in 2012 by soldiers disgruntled with their work conditions and, most importantly, with the treatment of their ethnic group: Tutsi Congolese citizens called the Banyamulenge. For decades, the Banyamulenge have faced discrimination, violent attacks, and the threat of extermination or exile. They are targeted because of their ethnicity, deemed Tutsi “foreigners.” On social media, anti-Banyamulenge hate speech is endemic. Political and military leaders, diasporic actors, and community leaders promise that those who are deemed to side with the Tutsis “will be decisively crushed, like corn in the mill.” These voices promise to “clean the Banyarwanda” from cities and claim that this is a war “against the Tutsis.” Messages calling on killing Banyamulenge are widely circulated. This violent ideology of ethnic hatred is supported and encouraged by the continued presence and violent activities of the genocidal force FDLR in the DRC.

Reducing the current situation to a foreign invasion is very dangerous, because it lends support to the ideologies of genocide and xenophobia that underpin the treatment of Banyamulenge in Eastern Congo, and it reinforces a dangerous narrative that is driving violence against these populations. In addition, the simplistic framing fails to recognize that the M23 today is part of the Congo River Alliance (AFC), a multiethnic *Congolese* coalition of 17 political parties, two political groups, and several armed militias. In fact, the AFC is led by a Congolese politician Corneille Nangaa, who until recently, worked in the electoral commission that ratified the election of current Congolese President Tshisekedi. And while the M23 initially formed as a self-defense group to defend the Banyamulenge, it has evolved to be in broader opposition to corruption and bad governance in the country.

There is little doubt that the Rwandan government is supporting the M23. Since 1994, the Rwandan government has consistently stated that it won't be at peace until members of the FLDR are arrested and tried in Rwanda. That the FDLR has been able to continue to train, organize, and kill right next to the Rwandan border and to spread their ideology of hate is profoundly destabilizing for the entire region—and it explains in part why the crisis implicates both Rwanda and the DRC. But reducing the situation in Eastern Congo to a Rwandan invasion is misleading.

Second, some of the coverage is blatantly inaccurate. Take this *Al Jazeera* report, which states: “M23 says it is defending ethnic Tutsis, who fled to the DRC amid the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.” This sentence confuses the M23 (the movement claiming to defend Congolese ethnic Tutsis known as Banyamulenge) with the FDLR (the movement created by Rwandan militaries and militiamen who committed the genocide and fled to Congo in 1994). So, let’s make this clear: Those who fled from Rwanda to Congo in 1994 were the pro-Hutu extremist soldiers and militias who committed the genocide. The ethnic Tutsi Banyamulenge did not flee to the DRC amid the genocide. They were already in Congo. If you wonder why there are ethnic Tutsis on both sides of the DRC–Rwanda border, it stems from the arbitrary colonial partition of Africa in the 19th century. This is an issue all over the continent. But insofar as the borders are now what they are, denying that the Banyamulenge are Congolese is false and dangerous.

Then, as a third example, consider this report by Ruth Maclean, the West Africa bureau chief for *The New York Times*. Maclean provides a simple story to understand why “Rwanda-back rebels” are fighting: “In their telling, they’re protecting ethnic Tutsis, the minority group massacred in a 1994 genocide, some of whom also live in Congo. But experts say the real reason is Congo’s rare minerals, which power our phones and devices. Congo’s mines are making the rebels—and their patrons in Rwanda—rich.” The readers are not told who these experts are. Any concerns about the treatment of the Banyamulenge communities are brushed aside. Instead, for Maclean, the *real* explanation for the crisis is simple: the greed of the M23 and the Rwandan government.

In an accompanying video explainer, she talks again of the real motivations of the M23 and Rwanda: “UN experts say the rebels are in fact exploiting Eastern Congo for mineral wealth.” As evidence, the viewer is shown—for four brief seconds—a screenshot of a UN report. But if you pause the video to read the document, it tells a different story. The highlighted section of the report focuses on “abuses by Wazalendo” and reads “Armed groups in South Kivu continued to exploit the AFC/M23 crisis to remobilize, consolidate and expand territorial control and exploit natural resources.” In other words, the excerpt shows that Wazalendo groups (i.e., militias allied with the Congolese army who are fighting against the M23) profit from the crisis by exploiting natural resources. Such a mix-up is perhaps what you get for asking your West African bureau chief to cover a conflict in Central/East Africa.

This is not to suggest that the M23 has not exploited mines or funded its army through illegal mining. The point here is about basic journalistic principles and misattribution. In a paper that prides itself on employing the “best” journalists in the world, blatant factual inaccuracy and distortion go unchecked, ultimately feeding a reductive and one-sided narrative. Conflicts in Africa deserve fact-checked reporting too.

Last example: Take this report by *The Associated Press*, titled “Rwanda-Backed Rebels Move Deeper into Eastern Congo as UN Reports Executions and Rapes.” This report was taken up by

other news organizations, including CBS and CBC. The headlines imply that the M23 rebels are responsible for gang rapes. But a look at the UN statement tells a different story: The UN Commission for Human Rights has documented “cases of conflict-related sexual violence by the (Congolese) army and allied Wazalendo fighters” and was in the process of “verifying reports that 52 women were raped by Congolese troops in South Kivu, including alleged reports of gang rape.” Where the UN report assigns these cases of sexual violence to the Congolese army and its allied militias, sloppy headlines attribute them to the “Rwanda-backed rebels.” To be clear, the M23 is likely also responsible for abuses. The same report holds the M23 responsible for 12 summary executions, and the UN has levelled serious accusations over the years against the M23. Human rights violations should always be called out, whoever is behind them. But this is yet another example of misattribution and demonstrates an evident lack of journalistic accuracy in the reporting of the Eastern Congo crisis.

The cumulative effect of this inaccurate, sloppy, confused, and confusing coverage is the creation of a dangerous narrative: A group of ruthless violent foreigners, who are Tutsis, are invading the Congo so that Rwanda can take over the country’s riches. As Ruth Maclean puts it: “They’re taking land, they’re making money, and they’re reaping the benefits.” This rhetoric aligns with the genocidal conspiracy theory that calls to fight against the establishment of an imaginary Tutsi-Hima empire. We are reminded time and time again that Rwanda President Paul Kagame himself is a Tutsi and—mistakenly—that his government is Tutsi-dominated; but we are almost never told that Rwanda post-1994 succeeded in getting rid of ethnic labels to ensure that people in the country today are simply Rwandans. We are told about the mineral riches of Congo, but little is said about the current exploitation of the mineral resources by foreign entities and corporations from China, North America, Europe, and elsewhere with the blessing of Congolese authorities—an industrial scale, country-wide billion-dollar exploitation that pales in comparison to the profits the M23 is reported to have made from minerals to fund its advance (\$800,000 per month, according to recent UN estimates).

Most importantly perhaps, so very little is said about the Congolese army working hand in hand with the FDLR. We are rarely told that the Congolese president has publicly and repeatedly vowed to wage war against Rwanda and bragged about acquiring weapons capable of reaching Kigali. Do we see images of the Franco-Romanian mercenaries who had been hired by the Congolese army, fleeing the fighting in Congo and heading to Rwanda for surrender? These private security contractors are linked to networks of former French militaries involved in various conflicts across Africa since the 1990s (including in Rwanda in 1994). How ironic, then, that coverage of the conflict consistently calls Rwanda the “darling of the West,” when Western operatives such as these mercenaries are barely discussed; when most Western countries have intensely denounced Rwanda in the latest escalation of the conflict; and when Western media so overwhelmingly blame Rwanda for the crisis.

These basic factual inaccuracies, distortions, and lack of context would not pass editorial scrutiny if the conflict was not happening in Africa. This is part of a long and tired tradition. These biases are as much the result of structural forces shaping international news production as the reflection of culturally and sociologically ingrained racism in the journalistic field. Shrinking budgets for foreign news has further accelerated the reliance on news agencies as the primary draft of journalistic coverage. This phenomenon is acute in reporting African news and often contributes to the establishment of a single narrative in the early stages of developing news stories. The treatment of “Africa” as a distinct journalistic beat has historically been full of racist assumptions that deny the complexity, humanity, and diversity of African experiences; and it explains why leading news organizations like *The New York Times* assume that their bureau chief based in Nigeria will be well-equipped to write about a conflict in the DRC. The confusion of the M23 with the FDLR, or the misattribution of the UN report findings, are as much factual inaccuracies resulting from time pressure as they are the reflection of deeply ingrained stereotypes that all parties in African conflicts are equally and necessarily violent, ruthless, and irrational.

As a recent book by media scholar j. Siguru Wahutu reminds us, it is also essential to pay attention to the role of African news organizations in shaping news narratives about African conflicts. In part, the distortions mirror the rhetorical line defended by the Congolese government—one that finds resonance in Congolese media. Seen from Kinshasa, mainstream news organizations like Radio-Télévision nationale congolaise (RTNC) have branded the latest escalation in the conflict as “l’aggression Rwandaise” (the Rwandan aggression). Meanwhile, local radio and social media are seeing an increase in anti-Tutsi rhetoric and xenophobic sentiment. This locally driven political narrative compounds long-standing ideological biases in Western media to result in a low-quality, reductive, and ultimately dangerous reporting both within and outside the continent.

We can have different perspectives on the conflict and opposing theories about the geopolitics of the region, but these should be grounded on verified facts rather than sloppy coverage. Such poor reporting is unfair to the Congolese victims of the crisis. It’s also insulting to the journalists, African and foreign, who strive for fair reporting of intricate conflicts in the face of precarious and dangerous conditions. The situation is complex and volatile. The priority should be civilians, and the last thing the crisis needs is sloppy reporting likely to inflame the tensions.

On the longer term, there is a lot that international news organizations can do to improve their coverage: implementing media-monitoring teams within news organizations to evaluate whether coverage contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes; encouraging journalists to seek out a broader range of sources and voices, with a view towards the widely available yet consistently sidelined African expertise; ensuring consistent use of editorial and fact-checking standards; centering multilingualism as a core skill for correspondents working across Africa;

greater staff diversity across the news production chain (notably, by including African journalists in senior-level positions); reconsidering the usefulness of the “Africa correspondent” job description; to name a few. Many of these initiatives are low-cost. What they primarily require is a willingness within the journalistic field to reconsider how things have been done for too long.

In the meantime, what we can hope for is more humility from journalists who think the conflict is a simple story, more accuracy and contextualization from news organizations, and an acute understanding that news narratives have real-world consequences.

#### About the Author

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