

What is the FDLR, and why does its anti-Tutsi ideology endure?

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Four former FDLR officers reveal how its anti-Tutsi ideology took root and endured in Africa.



A rebel soldier from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) stands in a forest outside Pinga in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. File: Lionel Healing/AFP

Musanze, Rwanda – The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) was built on an ideology that cast the Tutsi as enemies, according to four of its former senior officers, who say they were taught to hate

them long before the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group.

“In our history and ideology, Tutsis are referred to as ‘snakes’,” said Anastase Munyaneza, a former FDLR major general.

“The analogy is that if a snake bites you, it injects poison and you die. Therefore, it is better to kill the snake before it bites you.”

The former officers say such ideas were reinforced through Rwanda’s political and military institutions before the 1994 genocide and persisted among those who fled into neighbouring Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), after the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took control of Rwanda in July 1994.

More than three decades later, the FDLR remains a source of regional security concerns, with its presence in eastern DRC a major point of contention between Kigali and Kinshasa.

Al Jazeera met the four former officers, who defected from the FDLR, returned to Rwanda and underwent rehabilitation at the Mutobo demobilisation centre. Their accounts offer an insight into the origins of the

group's ideology, its development in exile, and the networks that have helped it survive.

Where did the ideology come from?

The roots of the anti-Tutsi ideology described by the former officers stretch back decades, to a period when ethnic identities became increasingly politicised and institutionalised in Rwanda.

In November 1959, a Hutu uprising helped bring about the overthrow of Rwanda's monarchy. The period was also marked by violent attacks on Tutsis, the killing of hundreds and the forced exile of thousands to neighbouring countries.

Before colonial rule, Hutu and Tutsi identities were shaped by social, political and economic relationships. Under Belgian rule, these distinctions were increasingly formalised. In the early 1930s, the colonial administration introduced compulsory identity cards classifying Rwandans as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa, reinforcing distinctions that became increasingly rigid.

By independence in 1962, about 120,000 people, mostly Tutsi, had fled the country. Exiles in Tanzania and Zaire who sought to return staged attacks between 1962 and 1967. According to the United Nations, each incident was followed by retaliatory killings of large numbers of Tutsi civilians in Rwanda, prompting further waves of refugees.

By the end of the 1980s, about 480,000 Rwandans were refugees. President Juve-

nal Habyarimana argued that population pressures and limited economic opportunities made it difficult to accommodate large numbers of returning Tutsi refugees.

In 1988, exiles in Uganda founded the RPF to secure their repatriation, according to the UN.

Lieutenant Colonel Idrissa Bizimana said the exiles who launched attacks against Rwanda were branded "Inyenzi", meaning cockroaches.

"When the RPF attacked in 1990, we were told that the same Inyenzi had attacked the country. We grew up being taught to hate them," he said.

Bizimana said they were also taught at school that the Tutsis had come from Ethiopia and had "ruled through hatred for 400 years".

The former officers say these narratives were carried into the military, where they shaped how soldiers were taught to view Tutsis and their place in Rwandan society.

Major-General Munyaneza said the Tutsis were rarely found in the army because they were not welcome.

"In the army, we were taught that the Tutsi were our enemy," he said.

He recalled that soldiers had to seek permission to marry and present their fiancées for approval. If a woman was Tutsi, permission would be denied.

The justification, he said, was that a soldier's in-laws might visit their daughter in the barracks, potentially gaining access to sensitive military information and "passing it on to the enemy".

What did the army do in 1994? How did the FDLR take root in Congo?

The former officers say the ideology they encountered in the military was put into practice during the genocide against the Tutsis in 1994.

Munyaneza said soldiers trained members of the Interahamwe militia, which included men who had retired from, deserted, or been dismissed from the army.

The Interahamwe, the youth militia of the then-ruling National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND) party, participated in the massacres alongside the Presidential Guard and the army, according to the UN tribunal for Rwanda.

Bizimana said members of his battalion hated the Tutsis, and took part in the killings.

“During the genocide against the Tutsi, the battalion was actively involved in the genocide in the area where it was deployed,” he said.

The killings began after a plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down over Kigali on April 6, 1994. The incident triggered approximately 100 days of systematic mass killings, according to the UN.

Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) broadcast messages inciting violence against the Tutsis, including calls to eliminate those described as “cockroaches”.

When the RPF took control of Rwanda in July 1994, ending the genocide, former government officials, soldiers and militiamen who had participated in the killings fled into Zaire.

In eastern Zaire, the UN refugee agency reported that former members of the Rwandan Armed Forces (ex-FAR) took effective control of refugee camps, particularly around Goma.

“That was where we resumed our military activities,” Munyaneza said.

The former soldiers and militia members continued to organise militarily in exile. Their subsequent activities and alliances helped lay the foundations for the armed movement that would become the FDLR.

Munyaneza said a decisive alliance emerged in 1998, when Congolese President Laurent-Desire Kabila fell out with his former ally Rwanda.

At the time, former Rwandan soldiers and militia members were fighting under the name Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR). They reorganised under the FDLR name in 2000.

“Kabila asked us to defeat the Tutsis who had attacked him, promising in return to help us defeat the Tutsi-led government in Rwanda,” Munyaneza said.

What is the FDLR?

Munyaneza said the FDLR was officially established in May 2000 by former Rwandan

army commanders and politicians. It was the latest name adopted by armed groups that had been operating in exile since 1995.

“The names changed, but the same people remained involved,” he said.

He said the group’s purpose was “to overthrow the Tutsi-led government that had defeated us”, referring to the Rwandan government established after the genocide.

The FDLR’s formation after the genocide has been central to its leaders’ attempts to distinguish the organisation from the forces that carried out the killings.

In an April 2005 interview with IRIN, a news agency affiliated with the UN, the FDLR’s then-president, Ignace Murwanashyaka, denied that the organisation as a whole had participated in the genocide.

“The FDLR is a very new movement, which appeared six years after the genocide,” he said.

Murwanashyaka did not rule out the involvement of individual members.

“If one of us is responsible for this crime, you have certainly heard the allegations, but no one can say that the entire organisation committed genocide,” he said.

The group’s leadership has also faced legal action over crimes committed in eastern DRC.

On July 13, 2012, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for FDLR military commander Sylvestre Mudacumura, charging him with nine counts of alleged war crimes committed in eastern DRC between 2009 and 2010.

In September 2015, Murwanashyaka and his deputy, Straton Musoni, were convicted

by a German court for leading a foreign “terrorist” organisation and aiding war crimes committed in eastern DRC.

Who arms and funds the FDLR?

The former officers say the FDLR has relied on a combination of external support and revenue generated through its activities in eastern DRC.

Munyaneza said the group receives financial and logistical support from the Congolese government.

“To this day, the FDLR maintains close ties with the Congolese government,” he said.

Augustin Nshimiyimana, a former FDLR colonel who served as a brigade intelligence officer and later became responsible for external intelligence, described what he said were close operational links between the FDLR, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and Wazalendo groups, a broad label for local armed groups operating in eastern DRC.

“The FARDC, Wazalendo and FDLR live together, fight together, occupy the same positions and receive the same uniforms,” he said.

The FDLR also raises money through its own activities, according to Munyaneza. He listed roadblocks, taxes imposed on miners and mine owners, cannabis, timber, charcoal and elephant ivory among the group’s sources of revenue.

These alleged funding networks help ex-

plain how the FDLR has maintained its operations over decades in exile. Its access to local resources and relationships with other armed actors have also raised concerns about the links between armed groups and the exploitation of eastern DRC's natural resources.

In July 2026, the UN Security Council sanctions committee listed FDLR leader Brigadier General Sebastien Uwimbabazi and commander Gustave Kubwayo. The listings cited activities undermining peace and security in the DRC and Kubwayo's role in the group's targeting of civilians, kidnapping for ransom and illegal exploitation of natural resources.

Is the ideology still alive?

Efforts to address the FDLR have become a central part of diplomatic attempts to ease tensions between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

In February 2025, the UN Security Council called on the Congolese army to stop supporting armed groups, particularly the FDLR.

Under the United States-brokered Washington Accords, signed in 2025, Kinshasa committed to neutralising the FDLR, while Rwanda committed to lifting its defensive measures.

In July 2026, the Congolese government announced that a faction of the FDLR had signed a protocol on disarmament, demobilisation and cantonment.

Rwanda rejected the arrangement, accusing Kinshasa of attempting to evade its obligations under the Washington Accords to

neutralise the group.

The agreement marked a new development in efforts to address the FDLR's presence in eastern DRC, but its implementation and the extent to which it would lead to the group's disarmament remained key questions.

Munyaneza said the FDLR continued to deny the genocide against the Tutsi. He argued that, although the organisation's official political narrative was framed around removing what it described as foreign Tutsi, its underlying intentions were different.

Emilien Mpakaniye, a former FDLR lieutenant colonel who was responsible for securing financial aid at the group's headquarters in eastern DRC in 2008, said the FDLR had also passed its ideology to Congolese armed groups it trained or allied with, describing the organisation as "a coordinator of armed groups in eastern DRC".

The former officers' accounts suggest that the ideology has survived through more than the continued presence of armed fighters. They describe a narrative that was taught in schools, reinforced within the military and carried into exile by men who later helped establish the FDLR.

Whether the group can be dismantled, therefore, is not only a question of disarmament. It also raises questions about the persistence of the ideology that shaped its founders, the networks that have sustained it and its influence on armed groups operating in eastern DRC.

"Officially, the organisation does not say that it intends to kill Tutsis; its political narrative is that it seeks to remove what it describes as foreign Tutsi," Munyaneza said.

“However, among FDLR officers, they know that their mission is to kill Tutsis.”