

111th Great Lakes Policy Forum:

“Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda: Dynamics, Obstacles, and Opportunities”

Meeting Report – February 3, 2005

Introduction

The 111th Great Lakes Policy Forum came at a critical time both for the Great Lakes Region and for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. After months of mounting tensions based on threats of invasion, accusations of supplying arms, and possible border breaches, the importance of this month's forum was evident. The panelists included Paul Musafiri Nalwango, the Vice Minister of the Interior for the DRC; Dr. Suliman Baldo, Africa Program Director at International Crisis Group; Ambassador Richard Sezibera, Special Envoy to the Great Lakes from Rwanda; and Dr. Alison Des Forges, Senior Advisor for Human Rights Watch. Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Search for Common Ground's Sub Saharan Africa Programs, facilitated the forum.

The four presenters discussed the history of the relationship between the two countries, the current outlook, and how both have contributed to the present-day dynamic in the Great Lakes Region. The panelists shared various explanations, analyses, and perceptions of the escalating crisis and discussed possible future steps to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. A question and answer session followed the speakers' presentations, offering attendees the opportunity to voice their questions and concerns.

Dynamics

In order to fully understand the current relationship between the DRC and Rwanda, one must look at the internal dynamic within the DRC, as well as the two countries' historical ties. The internal dynamic is marked by two crises. The first crisis is a political one within the DRC government. Actors are unsure of their political futures and are seeking assurances in preparation for the elections, scheduled for 2006. This may explain why political leaders are maintaining command control of their individual forces, hindering the process of military unification. The second crisis stems from the military confrontation between Kinshasa and the hard-line dissidents of the RCD-Goma. These dissidents, along with dissidents of RCD-ML and other groups, contribute to the polarization of certain populations and further undermine the process of unification.

This lack of unity in the DRC, along with the connection between the RCD-Goma and neighboring Rwanda has led to complications and a lack of trust between Kinshasa and Kigali. Problems of stability, coupled with the recent incursion of Rwandan troops into Eastern Congo have further complicated the issue.

Key to understanding the relationship between Rwanda and DRC is the history of a Rwandophone presence in Eastern Congo. As early as 100 years ago, there is evidence of Kinyarwanda speakers in the Kivus. Some came voluntarily; some came as a result of the colonial experience. Today, there is a struggle between two forces of identity among these Rwandophones in Eastern Congo: a person's identity as Hutu or Tutsi, as well as his/her larger

identity as Banyarwandan. The issue has been complicated by 20th century events, including genocide and refugees crisscrossing the border. As a result, it has become increasingly more difficult to differentiate between Congolese and Rwandans.

The Rwandophone identity in Eastern Congo is both political and ethnic and has been a motivating factor for groups seeking to unite Congolese of Hutu and Tutsi origin as one community. Because of past experiences, such groups fear being targeted by the Congolese government. Such fears are manipulated by RCD-Goma hardliners, which leads to polarization from other Congolese who fear oppression from a united Rwandophone community.

Rwanda and the DRC historically lived in relative harmony until the death of Rwandan President Habyarimana in 1994. Their relationship became complicated after the ensuing genocide where two million Rwandan refugees, including armed militia members, crossed into Congo. The existence of armed foreign forces, including the FDLR (Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda) has posed a serious obstacle to improved relations and has been the cause of two wars between the two countries.

Obstacles

The presence of the FDLR in the Kivus represents a great source of contention for both countries and a stiff obstacle toward their reestablishing amicable relations. The group is known by several names, including interahamwe and Ex-FAR (Ex-Forces Armées Rwandaises) and has ties to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. They fled into the Kivus of the DRC after the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) took control of Kigali in 1994.

A portion of the discussion focused on defining both the FDLR and the nature of genocide. It was pointed out that the FDLR is a conglomerate group that has evolved over the years and whose membership, ideology, and practices are not as clear-cut as some believe. The tendency to label them as a genocidal group is very dangerous. Such labels have led to the arming of citizens in the Kivus for the purposes of self-defense. Some argued that based on the number of people killed in the DRC, one could consider the situation as genocidal and that citizens should, therefore, be given the means to defend themselves. However, distributing arms to civilians is very dangerous and has had disastrous consequences in the past.

Panelists cautioned against using the label genocide too liberally. Ethnic violence and killings do not automatically constitute genocide. The FDLR does not discriminate in its killing of Congolese citizens (a key component of genocide), and its leaders disavow genocidal ideology. In addition, a generation has passed since the Rwandan genocide, and many members of the FDLR were not involved in the 1994 genocide.

Opportunities

Regardless of how the FDLR is defined, there was consensus around the issue that the group represents an obstacle that must be dealt with. A central issue is whether or not to engage with the FDLR directly, which was presented by one panelist as preposterous and likened to the US negotiating with Al Qaeda. As direct engagement is generally not considered to be an option,

multilateral efforts will be needed to deal with the FDLR. As members of this group are Rwandan, it is hoped that they will return to Rwanda. With funding from the World Bank, Rwandan authorities have instituted a program of reintegration, which offers one solution for dealing with those members of the FDLR who are not guilty of any crimes.

MONUC has recently established a zone of civilian protection in Eastern Congo between the Kinshasa government and militaries in the East. In addition, Rwanda has removed its forces from the Kivus. The panel unanimously agreed that the international community should be engaged in solving the crises in the Kivus. It was noted that the continued presence of actors connected to the 1994 genocide is not solely a Congolese or Rwandan problem. Rather, the situation in the Kivus warrants the attention and aid of the international community.

The African Union, meeting on January 10th in Libreville, Gabon, declared that it is unacceptable that the FDLR/Ex-FAR/interahamwe continues to destabilize the DRC. The AU Peace and Security Council encouraged member states to commit troops and security assistance to Eastern Congo in order to deal with these armed groups. Neighbors pledged to assist in this, and the DRC will send troops to the East as part of the effort. In addition, DRC and Rwanda have been engaged in discussions for some time. The day before the forum, in fact, bilateral discussions facilitated by Washington took place between the DRC and Rwanda representatives to try and come to some consensus.

The prospect of elections in the DRC (scheduled for 2006) provides another opportunity to stabilize the region and forge a relationship between Kinshasa and Kigali. It is hoped that these elections will lead to more unity and better governance. There are three pending bills in the constitutional draft, and as soon as they are ratified the registration of voters will begin – probably by the end of the year. The issue of absentee ballots for Congolese living outside of the country was weighed against the cost of such an initiative and will continue to be a point of discussion during the coming year.

Conclusion

Rwandans and Congolese have historically lived together in peace, and there has been steady movement of people and sharing of cultures between them. The two peoples have many things in common and must not let their differences be exploited for political purposes. Kinshasa should stick to the revised elections schedule and make logistical provisions for approximately 40,000 polling stations, 200,000 polling workers, and 100,000 policemen needed to ensure fair and uniform elections throughout the country.

Obstacles should be resolved politically through open and dispassionate dialogue and military escalations avoided at all costs. Dealing with the FDLR will provide a big step toward achieving reconciliation between Rwanda and the DRC. Military unification is a precondition for elections and must be encouraged. International actors (Angola, Belgium, and South Africa) can best help this unification by pooling their resources and coordinating their training programs. Finally, the international community must help by engaging with the DRC and Rwanda to rid eastern Congo of threatening forces, by facilitating dialogue between the two governments, and by supporting the preparations for elections in the DRC.