

# Congo-Zaire's 1996-97 Civil War in the Context of Evolving Patterns of Military Conflict in Africa in the Era of Independence

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# **Congo-Zaire's 1996-97 Civil War in the Context of Evolving Patterns of Military Conflict in Africa in the Era of Independence**

by *William G. Thom*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The overthrow of Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko, for 31 years a fixture of political dominance in central Africa, in an eight month military campaign, was a shocking development. To understand the downfall of Mobutu's Zaire, an appreciation of both the military realities and the regional political dynamics of the 1990s is required. Further, this article will make the case that the war in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DROC), fits into the fabric of evolving patterns of military conflict in sub-Saharan Africa that have unfolded during the era of independence.

This study consists of three principal sections. The first provides some background. The second section, which forms the bulk of the study, is a fairly detailed descriptive analysis of the 1996-97 war in the former Zaire. Its purpose is two fold: to provide an accurate account of what actually occurred in a military sense, and to supply evidence to support the main contention that this conflict was characteristic of the African wars of the 1990s. Finally, the third section is mostly analytical, working toward several conclusions.

## **ORIGINS**

A useful starting point is 1 October 1990, when a Tutsi army in exile invaded northern Rwanda from Uganda. The small central African lake countries of Rwanda and Burundi, Belgian mandate colonies until the early 1960s, each have seen profound violence resulting from caste conflict between the Hutu majority and the historically dominant Tutsi minority. By the time of Rwanda's independence in 1962, the Hutu majority had established its political dominance. The October 1990 invasion set in motion a sequence of events that led to the proxy warfare that ultimately resulted in President Mobutu's defeat six and one half years later. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its military wing, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), was largely composed of Rwandan Tutsis who fled ethnic violence in their homeland in 1959 and became known as the "59ers." Many established themselves in Uganda, and later helped Yoweri Museveni win his war against the Ugandan government of Milton Obote in 1986. Many of these ethnic Tutsis subsequently participated in the transition of Museveni's rebel army into the regular Ugandan Army, some rising to very high positions. Among these children of Rwandan exiles was Fred Rwigyema, the second-in-command of Museveni's army, who planned the RPA's advance into northern Rwanda in 1990. General Rwigyema, however, was killed on the first day of the campaign. According to one account, he was allegedly murdered by fellow RPA officers, but the circumstances of his death remain shrouded in mystery. As a result, another Tutsi officer of the Ugandan Army, who had been attending the US Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was recalled to take over the leadership of the RPA. This man was Major Paul Kagame, once the chief of intelligence for Museveni's army, and currently the Vice President and

Minister of Defense of Rwanda. Kagame is generally regarded by the media and other observers of the political scene in central Africa as the mastermind of the 1996-97 campaign in Zaire.[1](#)

The RPA's 1990 advance into Rwanda was blocked by the largely French-trained, Hutu-dominated Rwandan Armed Forces (known by the French acronym FAR) and troops of Mobutu's Zairian Armed Forces (or FAZ) sent to support the regime of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana. After bitter fighting that degenerated into trench warfare in some locations, a stalemate ensued until the tragic events of 6 April 1994. On that day the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, returning from peace talks in Tanzania, were killed in a suspicious plane crash near Kigali. Their aircraft was apparently shot down by Hutu extremists opposed to a negotiated peace that they saw as selling out Hutu interests. This incident set off the infamous, nearly instantaneous, mass killing of Tutsis and moderate Hutus by Hutu extremists throughout Rwanda, i.e., the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that killed at least half a million people. It also re-ignited the civil war in which the RPA finally drove the FAR out of the Rwandan capital on 4 July of that year.

French forces intervened unilaterally in southwestern Rwanda in June 1994 under the banner of OPERATION TURQUOISE, a belated effort to stop the slaughter and provide protection for both Hutus and Tutsis. The effect, however, was to interpose French military forces between the advancing RPA under now Major General Kagame, and that part of Rwanda still under the nominal control of the FAR and allied Hutu militia known as the Interahamwe ("one together"). By July, however, Hutus began fleeing Rwanda into eastern Zaire in large numbers; ultimately an estimated 1.2 million Hutus took up residence in Zairian refugee camps. Among these Hutu refugees were armed members of the FAR (by now referred to as the "ex-FAR") and the Interahamwe consisting of organized militia groups. These two organizations almost immediately melded together to form one insurgent force.[2](#) (I will subsequently refer to members of these two elements as Hutu militants to distinguish them from true refugees.)

The ex-FAR surrendered their heavy weapons (i.e., about 40 pieces of equipment including armored vehicles and artillery) to Zairian authorities, but were allowed to keep small arms and light infantry weapons (i.e., automatic rifles, machine guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades [RPGs], hand grenades, etc). Once more, the Hutu militants not only established separate military camps, but they also controlled the refugee camps. Hutu gunman distributed UN-provided food and other assistance. The militants wanted to run the camps and keep control over the Hutu refugees to achieve their own ends: building a base from which to launch an eventual counter-attack into Rwanda.[3](#) At the same time, they began launching guerrilla raids into western Rwanda.

There are two points of interest here. First, if there was any lingering doubt where Zaire stood, the Mobutu regime's cooperation with the Hutu militants further painted Kinshasa as "pro-Hutu." Perhaps more realistically, Kinshasa's control over the east -- including the provinces of North and South Kivu where the Hutu refugees settled -- was weak. FAZ strength in these provinces normally amounted to no more than a few thousand troops, while the ex-FAR and other militants were thought to number upwards of 40,000. Some

sources, however, placed the number of armed Hutu militants as high as 100,000.<sup>4</sup> In a practical sense, it would have been nearly impossible for the FAZ to control 1.2 million refugees in the Kivus containing tens of thousands of armed militants without reaching some arrangement. Zaire then, acquiesced in the activities of the Hutu militants, if it did not provide outright support to them, in part because of its inability to project effective power in the east to deal with a sizable army in exile. Local Zairian officials also found that dealing with desperate Rwandan refugees seeking arms and ammunition was a lucrative business.

The second point concerns French influence and notions of an Anglo-American conspiracy. The French had been committed economically, politically and militarily to the defeated Hutu regime in Kigali. Paris was embittered by its experience with Operation Turquoise and the negative international reaction. The fact that the victorious RPF was led by people raised in Uganda who spoke English was seen by alarmists in the Francophone world as a blow to French prestige and influence in Africa. Paul Kagame and company seemed poised to turn Rwanda into a Tutsi-dominated, English-speaking country. Further, rumors of an Anglo-Saxon grand design, a Tutsi plot for regional domination and even a covert US role in Rwanda, began to fly.<sup>5</sup>

The war in Zaire then, grew out of Zairian inability to maintain central governmental authority in remote regions exacerbated by ethnic conflict in the east, Mobutu's historical support for the Hutu in Rwanda and the weakness of his forces to effectively control the militants. The ex-FAR and its allies posed a threat to the new masters of Rwanda, one that would not be looked upon casually by a regime in Kigali that saw at least half a million Tutsis murdered. The threat of an armed Hutu insurgency launched into Rwanda from eastern Zaire behind a screen of refugees, many of whom were seen as perpetrators of genocide, was taken with deadly seriousness in Kigali. Further, Rwanda would not stand by and allow genocidal acts to be perpetrated against Tutsi communities in Zaire. This issue became the focus of all Rwandan decision-making. As early as December 1994, Kagame was warning the international community that if it could not attenuate this problem, he would.<sup>6</sup>

When it became apparent that leaders of the international community would not act to remove the armed Hutu threat from eastern Zaire, despite repeated complaints by Kigali, informal talks among regional African leaders ended in plans for a home grown solution formulated in Kigali. The outgrowth was a military campaign designed to break the militants' hold over the true refugees, return those refugees to Rwanda, destroy the ex-FAR and its allies, and -- most shocking of all possibly eliminate the sympathetic Mobutu government in Kinshasa. The culmination of these regional forces was the swift military campaign in which troops of a curious rebel alliance sped over the vast territory of Zaire, famed for its impassable roads and impenetrable forests, and dispatched the regime of one of independent Africa's most durable leaders. The civil war in Zaire is said to have "pitted a disciplined David against a degenerate Goliath," but a closer examination will show this to be a superficial military analysis.<sup>7</sup>

## **PATTERNS OF CONFLICT**

While the Zairian civil war is fascinating in its own right, it is also of interest as a recent and compelling example of evolving conflict in Africa's era of independence. In the post independence era, there are at least three identifiable periods of warfare in modern Africa. These include the period of modern liberation wars, roughly from 1960 to the mid-1970s; the period of interstate wars and large scale civil wars, from the mid-70s to early 1990s; and the period of proxy border wars and economic insurgencies in the 1990s. Each of these periods is not sacrosanct. Many exceptions can be found, as is frequently the case with dynamic political-military phenomena. Nevertheless, the types of conflicts identified with each period represent the most significant wars in scope or political impact. These periods speak to different motivations, concepts and strategies; although some tactical dictates remain constant.

### **Wars of Liberation**

Most of Africa had been under direct foreign (i.e., extra-African) domination for about 75 years when the colonial period ended. The Cold War, of course, brought other major external patrons. The civil war in Zaire is an example -- perhaps the first in this century -- of a military conflict fought by Africans for a completely African agenda. That is, the war was conducted for reasons that mattered chiefly to Africans. Non-African powers, for all practical purposes, did not take sides. Liberation wars were, of course, fought throughout the colonial period. After 1960, the focus was on those countries yet to be liberated. Finishing the job of decolonization in Africa was a natural cause for the communist world powers. Indigenous African liberation movements against Portuguese colonialism, and the other white minority governments of southern Africa, saw the communist powers as their "natural allies." The liberation wars of Africa -- involving the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea, Cape Verde and Sao Tome & Principe; and the white minority governments of southern Rhodesia, South West Africa, and South Africa -- were in step in the 1960s and 1970s with the great struggles in southeast Asia, also billed by the communist powers as anti-colonial liberation struggles. These communist powers -- especially the former Soviet Union, Cuba and China -- offered a doctrine (e.g., Maoist thought) and heroic figures (e.g., Ernesto "Che" Guevara) as well as practical military support (arms and training). Almost by default, the West was left in a weak, politically indefensible position. While disagreeing in principle with rule by undemocratic minorities, the Western democracies could not take strong action against Lisbon's policies (Portugal being a NATO member), and could only fret over economic investments in white minority regimes that conveniently aligned themselves with the anti-communist movement. The argument for supporting anti-communist governments, regardless of their human rights or racial policies, was a compelling one to many in the West.<sup>8</sup>

The guerrilla wars launched in the 1960s in Portuguese Africa, white-controlled southern Africa, Eritrea (against Ethiopian imperialism), the Ogaden, and southern Sudan were lightly armed insurgencies motivated by the prospect of liberation from European (or Ethiopian, Sudanese) oppression. The strategy was to bleed the minority regime into giving up the cause of colonial or racial domination. The tactics employed were bush guerrilla warfare using land mines, ambushes and occasional attacks on military or police

facilities. The insurgents were lightly armed with the weapons that would become the standard suit of the African guerrilla fighter for the next 35 years: the AK-47 assault rifle and other Soviet designed small arms, the ubiquitous RPG, 60 and 82-mm light mortars, machine guns and recoilless rifles. These wars were characterized by few firefights with the opposition, "attacks by fire" from a distance against military targets, and the use of land mines. There were few outright military victories for the insurgents, but they continually wore down their opponents, eventually making it prohibitively expensive in human lives to continue the fight.

### **Interstate and Large Scale Civil Wars**

By the mid-1970s, however, some African armies had achieved sufficient growth in their capabilities to launch military campaigns against their neighbors; others were benefactors of Soviet largess in the face of serious insurgencies of their own. The latter resulted in large-scale semi-conventional civil wars in the two largest Soviet client states: Ethiopia and Angola. In July 1977, the Somali National Army (SNA) under Somali strongman President Mohammed Siad Barre, fearing the loss of its Cold War support from Moscow, launched an invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia in support of insurgents operating in the area. The objective was to seize the Ogaden region peopled by ethnic Somalis before Moscow swung its full weight behind its new Marxist ally in east Africa. The invasion was turned back in early 1978 by a combination of forces: the Ethiopian Marxist mass army created by Chairman Mengistu Haile Miriam, Soviet arms and advisors, and Cuban combat troops. This was a conventional war, not an insurgency. Armor, artillery, combat aircraft and ground formations at the brigade and division level, were employed by the opposing camps.

In late 1978, Tanzania responded to a provocation by Uganda's Idi Amin with a full-scale invasion of his country, ultimately causing the dictator to flee into exile. Again, this was a war fought with armor and artillery, across great distances, with brigade level formations. This was an African conventional war fought for a noble cause: to rid Africa of one of the world's most infamous tyrants. Tanzania prevailed, chasing the remnants of Amin's army all the way to the border with Sudan. The entire campaign lasted about nine months.

In December 1985, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Mali fought a five day border conflict that became known as the "Christmas War." This indecisive skirmish was surprising in that Mali was able to deploy its vintage Soviet armor across the border. Perhaps a mere footnote to modern military history in the region, but once again an example of a Soviet-backed African military engaging in a small-scale conventional type war with a neighbor. The message is that African armies, even small forces such as those of Mali, had reached a state of maturity by the late 1970s and early 1980s that enabled them to wage a more conventional type of war. For the first time, African armies were beginning to act as the coercive arm of the state in external affairs.

By the 1980s Angola and Ethiopia were controlled by Marxist regimes that were shaped into military monoliths by billions of dollars of Soviet hardware. Holding out the promise of communist success stories for Moscow, the regimes in Addis Ababa and Luanda

received vast amounts of military equipment, training, advisory support and even combat forces, from Russia and Cuba. Both African countries faced growing threats from insurgents some of whom were backed by the West.

Chairman Mengistu's Ethiopia faced challenges from Eritrean and Tigrean insurgent armies that were increasing in strength and sophistication. Mengistu reacted by continuing to expand his revolutionary mass army which eventually totaled nearly half a million men. Organized in formations ranging from division to corps to army, the Ethiopian military employed hundreds of tanks, thousands of lighter armored vehicles, hundreds of field artillery pieces, a variety of air defense weaponry including surface to air missiles, and millions of small arms and other infantry weapons. As Mengistu's war with the insurgents evolved toward conclusion in the late 1980s, the fighting was mostly conventional in nature (the rebels having become semi-conventional forces themselves as they moved toward closure with their enemy) and on a scale not previously seen in sub-Saharan Africa. While the Mengistu regime was fighting for a lost socialist cause, the rebels were variously seeking independence (Eritrea) and liberation (the Tigrean-led front in Ethiopia).

In Angola, the Marxist-oriented regime in Luanda faced a growing menace from the UNITA movement led by the dynamic Jonas Savimbi. UNITA had lost out during Angola's 1975-76 civil war, but had emerged as a champion of the anti-communist cause; it also received direct support from Apartheid South Africa. For its part, the government in Luanda was backed by Soviet arms and advisors, and ultimately up to 50,000 Cuban troops. From the early-1980s the government and UNITA, with their respective allies, squared off in a war that featured both classic guerrilla and conventional tactics. UNITA tried to press its advantage through a guerrilla campaign, but its defense of a liberated zone in the southeast gave the government forces a target against which to employ more conventional force. The best example of this was the almost annual government campaigns into the southeast to capture Mavinga in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The involvement of more advanced Cuban and South African forces made this one of the most sophisticated conflicts to ever occur in sub-Saharan Africa. Again, thousands of pieces of hardware -- including armor, artillery and combat aircraft -- were employed by opposing forces that numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

This second phase of military conflict involved opposing armies of greater size, fighting over immense territories, seeking to control strategic locations. These armies used conventional heavy ground weapons, and even combat aircraft in pursuit of their goals. Their objectives were either national goals as in the case of Somalia and Tanzania, or ideological civil wars on a vast scale as in Angola and Ethiopia. It may be argued that the latter simply masked the desires of rival national leaders, but these conflicts were played out in the litany of the Cold War.

### **Proxy Border Wars and Economic Insurgency**

When the Cold War ended, a surge of political energy erupted from within Africa. In the early 1990s a rash of internal conflicts beset the continent from Djibouti to Liberia, and

from Sierra Leone to Rwanda. Previously some had argued that superpower dabbling in Africa either created or exacerbated local conflicts. It now seems clear, however, that the absence of superpower competition had actually stimulated internal conflict. When the lid blew off in the 1990s, it revealed old rivalries coming to the surface, in some cases exploding into bitter internal conflicts. The pattern of ethnically-based conflict was not new to Africa, but the efficiency of modern weapons employed in inter-ethnic disputes was.

Likewise, fragile states once moored to the communist powers or the Western camp, in the 1990s became more vulnerable than ever. Somalia, cut adrift, devolved into civil war and eventually incessant factional fighting resulting in complete state collapse. Liberia became ungovernable when its civil war degenerated into faction fighting. Neighboring Sierra Leone suffered a similar fate. Rwanda and Burundi produced devastating civil wars, and in the case of Rwanda, the most wanton destruction of human life since the holocaust of World War II. Military mutinies and insurrection racked the Central African Republic in 1996-97, and factional fighting leading to civil war affected Congo-Brazzaville in 1997. Finally, the recent civil war to oust the late President Mobutu in the new DROC takes its place in the Pantheon of modern African military history. In these wars of the 1990s, the toll in human life and suffering was often enormous.

Two distinct features characterize most of these conflicts of the 1990s: their proxy nature, and often their economic motivations. While neighboring or regional states in Africa have occasionally supported insurgencies against local enemies, this practice has expanded in the '90s to become a recognized tool of modern African statecraft. In the absence of European and superpower overlords, African states have found it both convenient and rewarding to back rebel armies pitted against regional enemies, on occasion surreptitiously deploying their own troops to battle across the old colonial borders. The 1990s wars in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Sudan, have -- according to various media accounts -- featured indigenous guerrilla forces armed, equipped -- and even led -- by foreign powers from within Africa. Two sets of interests emerged in these struggles: those of the movements themselves, and those of their external patrons. When these interests were shared, the conflicts became wars by proxy serving foreign benefactors. The 1998-99 war in the DROC is a case in point.

The other feature that characterizes the wars of the 1990s is economic vice ideological motivation. That is, armed opposition movements grow out of organized banditry and are chiefly interested in exploiting the conflict for material gain. The rebel factions competing for power in Liberia were not only striving for power for power's sake, they were running economically exploitative businesses on the way, e.g., timber concessions, port fees, mining interests for sale, etc. A similar pattern emerged in Sierra Leone where diamonds were the main focus. Somalia's warlords still compete for control of meager local trade, livestock exports and food producing areas. In fact, food brought in by relief agencies can, and often does, become a prize to be fought over by local armed factions. In eastern Zaire, for example, Hutu militants controlled the distribution of food in refugee camps, an activity that helped raise money. The rise of economic insurgency is in actuality related to the growth of large-scale, well armed and organized, banditry. Where



soldiers are not paid, or otherwise suitably compensated, armed insurgents will emerge and gravitate toward the control of economic activity, whether it be stealing by the barrel of the gun, or a more sophisticated sale of concessions in territory controlled by the faction.

### **Some Tactical Constants**

Through these three phases of military activity in Africa south of the Sahara during the post-colonial period some characteristics of warfare have remained fairly constant. Firstly, these conflicts were mostly internal wars, even if they were wars exported by local regional powers. Still, many African armies have been incapable of waging war across their borders all through the independence era. The exceptions have been where superpower largess and other unique local factors produced reasonably capable field forces (the Ethiopia-Somalia Ogaden War and the Chad-Libya War are good examples).

Secondly, unconventional style fighting has predominated. There are few examples of large formations of troops and machines of war maneuvering across recognized battlefields to close with an enemy force in decisive combat. Rather, unconventional guerrilla tactics predominate, usually even when conventional-style armies are employed. Breakdowns in training and a lack of conventional combat experience have often led armies to fall back on the simple unconventional tactics they perform best, i.e., setting an ambush, infiltrating target areas, breaking off an engagement quickly when outnumbered, etc. In other words, Africans are prone to employing guerrilla type tactics whether they are in a conventional army or not. Insurgents and faction fighters, of course, use guerrilla tactics exclusively, often adding a colorful local twist e.g., exploiting the belief in the supernatural. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Kamajoh militiamen wear various charms to protect them in battle.

Perhaps for some of the reasons explained above, little close or sustained head to head fighting takes place. Instead, firing weapons from a distance, and various forms of attacks by fire (i.e., the firing on a target with no attempt to assault the objective), are the common features. In some cases such mock battle tactics echo traditional fighting tactics of the pre-firearm era in Africa. The result is that casualties among the combatants themselves are often surprisingly light. Civilians, however, usually bear the brunt of the losses because of poor fire control, the nature of small-scale guerrilla engagements and attendant human rights abuses.

Ethnic identity almost always plays a part in motivating combatants in African wars. As such, ethnic tensions play a part in most African conflicts a well-known phenomenon and one by no means unique to Africa. When state systems collapse, and countries are thrown into a state of extended conflict, the people often turn to family, lineage, clan or larger ethnic group for protection. This facilitates the recruitment of fighters along ethnic lines, and serves as a strong motivating factor.

The conclusion then, is that we have three identifiable periods of military conflict in Africa since 1960. At the same time, running through these periods are some constants.

## CONGO-ZAIRE'S 1996-97 CIVIL WAR

Kigali saw the situation in eastern Zaire in mid-1996 as unacceptable. Some 40,000 Hutu militants had achieved effective control of refugee camps in North and South Kivu Provinces. While these camps were run by the UN, other international relief agencies and NGOs, the militants had effective control of the refugee population. Members of the ex-FAR and the Interahamwe Hutu militia distributed relief supplies, collected taxes and generally kept camp occupants in line. Refugees were organized by communes, which facilitated control by the militants. The latter were at first despised by the FAZ and Zairian officials, but local officials soon realized that the refugees represented a money-making opportunity. Zairian authorities became involved in money changing for the refugees, and FAZ troops volunteered for a UN funded camp security guard force known as the CZSC (Congo-Zaire Security Contingent). The well paid CZSC consisted of three battalions numbering some 1,500 troops; most of them were members of Mobutu's Special Presidential Division (DSP) generally regarded as an "elite" force independent of the regular FAZ.<sup>9</sup>

The ex-FAR and the other militants were already using the refugees as a shield for their military activities, and had made forays into Rwanda. General Paul Kagame viewed this as untenable, threatening his country's security indefinitely. The international community was not only unprepared to correct this situation, but was in fact aiding the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide by providing relief aid. The refugee camps in Zaire hid the murderers among the innocent, and perpetuated the protection of those responsible for the slaughter in Rwanda. In post-war interviews, General Kagame said that he warned the international community, and told the West that he would take military action against the camps and the Mobutu regime if this intolerable situation continued. He claimed that the UN and Western countries were insensitive to his requests, even though he told them bluntly "either you do something about the camps or face the consequences."<sup>10</sup>

Kagame, according to media accounts, returned from a trip to New York and Washington in August 1996 believing war in eastern Zaire was inevitable.<sup>11</sup> There is evidence, however, that Rwandan training of Congolese Tutsi and other Zairian rebel forces was already well underway by this time. Some rebels claim to have been trained in Rwanda one year prior to the start of the war in October 1996. Rwandan agents had been busy recruiting fighters from among disaffected anti-Mobutu groups in eastern Zaire. This effort helped produce the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL-CZ) or simply, the Alliance. All this time, not only was no progress made in demilitarizing and dismantling the refugee camps, but there were reports -- unconfirmed but well sourced -- that Zairian authorities were training the ex-FAR troops in the use of heavy weapons, including artillery and rockets.<sup>12</sup> Documents captured at Mungunga Camp indicated that an ex-FAR invasion of Rwanda was being planned.<sup>13</sup>

In a broader sense, there were at least two over-arching motivations for Rwanda to intervene in Zaire: to ensure the security of the new Tutsi-dominated government in Kigali, and revenge against the Hutu militants responsible for the genocide against the Tutsi. The governments of Uganda and Burundi were sympathetic and supported

Rwanda's position. Later, Angola supported Rwanda as well, but Luanda was more narrowly focused on undermining its rival UNITA and eventually the overthrow of Mobutu.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Zambia and Zimbabwe also backed Rwanda. General Kagame was not intimidated by Mobutu or France. In 1990 he took command of the forces that invaded Rwanda from Uganda, and fought well against the French-trained FAR and Mobutu's FAZ. Mobutu had sent FAZ troops into Rwanda in fall 1990 to help turn back the rebel invasion. In April 1994 he led the 8-10,000 strong RPA (which built to a force level of 40,000 by July) to victory against the FAR's 30,000 troops backed by tens of thousands of Hutu militia.

By mid-summer 1996, Kigali had rallied an assortment of anti-Mobutuists eager to join the anticipated armed struggle. Among them was Laurent Kabila, a long-time oppositionist, and an unreconstructed Zairian rebel of the first order. Kabila's revolutionary credentials go back to the painful birth of the Congo (Zaire) in the early 1960s. He was a follower of the legendary Patrice Lumumba, and a functionary in the short-lived regime of Antoine Gizenga in 1964. After Mobutu consolidated his control over the country, however, Kabila fled to the extreme southeast and established the insurgent Popular Revolutionary Party (PRP). In those difficult days Kabila became a hardened Marxist; Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary hero, spent six months with Kabila at his base in the mountains around Fizi. Guevara was reportedly not impressed with Kabila's skill as a soldier, but thought him a good orator capable of motivating his troops.<sup>15</sup>

Kabila built a tiny revolutionary enclave and was never politically co-opted by Mobutu as many oppositionists were. As a minor player in a remote corner of the country, he posed no direct threat to Kinshasa, but was a continuing irritant. The PRP's guerrilla campaign was all but non-existent; Kabila has never been credited as much of a military strategist. But, in November 1984 the PRP seized the port of Moba on Lake Tanganyika. General Mahele led the FAZ counterattack that recovered Moba, sent Kabila and his PRP back into obscurity in the hills, and helped build Mahele's reputation as Mobutu's best field commander. More recently, Kabila established ties to Uganda's President Museveni and Sudanese guerrilla leader John Garang. His link to the Tutsi diaspora in central Africa was reportedly a former military officer, General Adrien Kanombi.<sup>16</sup>

At the outset of war then, the Rwanda-backed force consisted mainly of ethnic Tutsis, many of them residents of eastern Zaire, and a collection of various other anti-Mobutu partisans. When the battle for eastern Zaire and control of the refugees opened in October, Rwanda and its rebel "seed force" were ready. The military effort with limited objectives of breaking the Hutu militant's hold on the 1.2 million estimated Rwandan refugees and neutralizing their capability to strike into Rwanda, was to be accomplished mainly with a conglomerate proxy force held together by the RPA. The scene was set for a proxy border war with limited expectations. In reality, Mobutu's Zaire was about to be injected with a rapidly mutating virus -- one that would ultimately lead to its demise.<sup>17</sup>

## **The Opposing Forces**

At the start of the war, Mobutu had a formidable army on paper. The armed forces numbered between 50,000 and 60,000 personnel organized into several services. The air and naval wings were insignificant; the ground forces dominant. The regular army or FAZ (I will use FAZ as a generic term to identify the armed forces) was the largest single component. The 10,000 strong DSP was a semi-autonomous element of the army; it was, relatively speaking, the best armed and trained unit in the FAZ. The Armed Forces Military Intelligence and Action Service (SARM), a light infantry force controlled by the military intelligence organization, was also relatively well trained, but a much smaller unit than the DSP. Two other organizations are worth mentioning, more for their size than for their capabilities. The Civil Guard and the Gendarmerie were both sizable paramilitary organizations but lacked any effective combat power. Again, on paper, the FAZ was well equipped with tanks, field artillery and multiple rocket launchers (MRLs). Its operational jet combat aircraft and armed helicopters were mostly acquired during the war. Nevertheless, the FAZ as a combat force was one of the worst armies in the world.

The FAZ was one of those Third World armies never really intended to fight against a serious military threat. Rather, it was designed to insure the survival of a dictatorial regime by cracking down on domestic opposition while remaining sufficiently weak as not to threaten the regime itself. Major formations of the FAZ have been trained over the years by just about everyone: the Belgians, French, Israelis, South Africans, Chinese, North Koreans and the US. The results were all the same: modest temporary improvements with rapid reversion to corruption, indiscipline and general fecklessness. Mobutu was used to calling on his Cold War allies to protect him from any real threats as occurred in the 1977 and 1978 incursions by the ex-Katangan Gendarmes based in Angola into Shaba (now Katanga) Province. Further, the end of the Cold War also saw the end of any real training in the FAZ. In effect, a bad army got worse in the 1990s. When the war in eastern Zaire began, the FAZ was found woefully inadequate. The visionary General Kagame knew the true picture of Mobutu's vulnerability, and gambled that Mobutu's Western friends would not feel up to protecting him one more time. After the war Kagame told newsmen:

There are not many people who thought that Mobutu was very weak. They thought of Mobutu as a big monster that would not be defeated . . . they thought little Rwanda and big Zaire . . . only when we started did they look at the map and see the possibilities.<sup>18</sup> The rebel forces were anything but a cohesive whole. Nevertheless, they were held together by the RPA and they contained many combat veterans with service experience in Rwanda and Uganda. The initial strength of the rebels was about 2,500. They were lightly equipped with assault rifles, RPG launchers and light mortars. Light weapons had been flooding into central Africa for years prior to the war. According to an October 1996 UN assessment, hundreds of tons of illegal arms reached the Great Lakes region in the previous two years, with 18 countries involved in the shipments. Some arms reached the militant-controlled refugee camps, some went to established governments, still others were destined for insurgent groups. For example, between February and May 1996 over 150 tons of arms were shipped into Goma and Uvira by air, according to the UN report. Goma airport was described as a strategic pipeline for arms to the Hutu militants.<sup>19</sup> Arms were also flown into the area to support Rwanda, Uganda and presumably the ADFL.<sup>20</sup>

As the Alliance forces grew during the war they became even more disparate. Soldiers from different regions and ethnic groups (e.g., Katangans, ethnic Tutsis, Kasaians and various local militias) were not well integrated into the Alliance command structure. As many of these elements tended to operate independently there was potential for clashes between them. For example, local disputes between Banyamulenge and non-Banyamulenge troops in the ADFL at times resulted in exchanges of gun fire.<sup>21</sup> The Banyamulenge, ethnic Tutsis, were native to South Kivu Province and formed the backbone of the rebel alliance, especially in the early stages of the struggle. Other fighters who joined the alliance were mostly non-Tutsi; many of them resented the Banyamulenge and their ties to the now largely Tutsi-dominated Rwanda. The Banyamulenge were perceived as favorites of Kigali and more Rwandan than Congolese.

### **The Fighting Begins: Phase One**

The actual course of the war can be divided into three phases. The first phase of combat in October and November 1996 took place in the Kivus and had the immediate objectives of controlling the border towns and major refugee camps. The second phase, December 1996 through mid-March 1997, was the rebel breakout from the eastern frontier into Haut Zaire Province, and the turn westward pursuing the remaining refugees on the road to Kisangani. The final phase was the rapid advance to control the remaining strategic regions of the country culminating in the fall of Kinshasa in late May 1997.

Preparation for combat in eastern Zaire began with the August-September infiltration of Rwandan-trained Banyamulenge and Banyamasisi ethnic Tutsi fighters into South and North Kivu respectively. The Banyamasisi were Tutsis reportedly indigenous to the North Kivu region. About 15,000 of them occupied a refugee camp on the border at Goma and Gesinye which facilitated their recruitment by the RPA.<sup>22</sup> They had been harassed and persecuted by the FAZ and the Hutu militants throughout 1995-96. The Banyamulenge to the south came to believe that they would suffer a similar fate. The initial pre-combat infiltration into the mountains totalled about 1,200 armed men, 200 Banyamasisi in the north and 1,000 Banyamulenge in the south. These troops were drawn from a population of about 280,000 ethnic kinsmen living in eastern Zaire. A significant, though undetermined, number were veterans of the RPA. In early October the RPA itself had ten battalions, roughly 5,000 light infantry troops, facing Zaire from its side of the border. These forces were about equally divided between the north (opposite Goma) and the south (opposite Bukavu). On the other side of the ledger, FAZ forces in the border area around Lake Kivu totalled about 3,500 troops of which only about 2,000 were considered to be effective. There were three battalions in the Goma area: two CZSC camp security units, and a battalion from the 31st Paratroop Brigade. To the north of Goma were a para-commando battalion, a Civil Guard battalion, and a SARM company. To the south in the Bukavu area the FAZ had a CZSC battalion, a paratroop battalion and another SARM company.<sup>23</sup> On paper, the FAZ was not overmatched, but in reality they would prove to be a much inferior fighting force. In addition to the FAZ of course, there were the 40,000 Hutu militants, most of whom were armed. Ultimately, they would do most of the fighting as FAZ cohesion and discipline crumbled in the first months of the war.

War came to eastern Zaire on 4 October when Banyamulenge rebels attacked Lemera, a village north of Uvira containing an army post and a hospital. Just prior to that date, Rwanda reacted to reports of preparations for an ex-FAR attack on the Banyamulenge, by resupplying the rebels in the Mulenge Mountains. Kigali also had reports of an ex-FAR plan to launch a major invasion of Rwanda. The Banyamulenge performed beyond anyone's expectations at Lemera, and the FAZ was reportedly stunned by their effectiveness. The rebels infiltrated some of their number into the town, signaled the attack by dropping a mortar shell into the FAZ garrison area, advanced from several directions simultaneously, but left an escape route for the defenders. The rebels reportedly coordinated their attack using inexpensive off-the-shelf radios.<sup>24</sup> At this time the FAZ was not conditioned to accept automatic defeat, although the pattern described above would often be repeated. The question for Kinshasa on 4 October was whether this attack was an isolated incident or something more.

As if to add a sense of calamity, three days later the Zairian Vice Governor of South Kivu announced that the Banyamulenge were to be expelled from Zaire. Any Banyamulenge that would not leave in two weeks time would be declared outlaws. This ill-timed statement acted as an accelerant. About 16 October a large column of rebel troops crossed into South Kivu from Rwanda via Burundi's Cibitoke Province. Once on the Zairian side of the Ruzizi Valley, they moved north to attack Uvira and then Bukavu. All three major border towns, including Goma, fell to the rebels and RPA troops by early November. Uvira fell on 10 October and Bukavu on the 27th. Regular RPA units participated in these operations in support of the rebels. On 1 November Goma was attacked from the north and from the east (i.e., from within Rwanda). Rwandan gun boats also reportedly fired on the town from Lake Kivu. FAZ resistance soon collapsed.<sup>25</sup>

Kinshasa reacted to these attacks, and sent reinforcements to the Kivus. At least two batteries of field artillery totaling about 12 guns, part of a DSP battalion, and additional SARM troops were deployed to the border region, but had no appreciable effect on the outcome. In fact, their presence could have been counterproductive. FAZ troops that had not been based in the area were much more likely to loot, because they did not identify with the local population. This reinforcement was one of the few major redeployments of FAZ forces to occur throughout the war.<sup>26</sup>

In this early phase rebel/RPA attacks were more carefully planned and professionally executed. There was FAZ resistance, but the extent and sustainability of that resistance was unknown. The tactical problems faced by the rebels in north and south Kivu were different. The Hutu refugee population was dealt with more severely in the south. The Banyamulenge were stronger there, and perhaps had scores to settle with the Hutus. In the north, where there were more refugees but fewer rebels, the camp occupants were treated more leniently. After the war began, the Banyamasisi in the north were joined by 550 Congolese rebels, bringing rebel forces in North Kivu up to 750 men. From the perspective of Kigali, this force was still inadequate for the task of defeating the local FAZ and the Hutu militants, and dispersing the refugee camps. The operation was growing and needed an indigenous, non-Tutsi ally. Enter Kabila and the ADFL.<sup>27</sup>



Up to this point, the conflict had been mainly a proxy war with ethnic Tutsis from Zaire battling regular FAZ troops and the Rwandan Hutu militants on behalf of Kigali's new rulers. The timely emergence of the ADFL to carry the war further was a major turning point. On 1 November, former small-time Marxist revolutionary Laurent Kabila emerged at Uvira as the "spokesman" for the new rebel alliance. Soon thereafter, Kabila was calling himself the leader of the revolution. Kabila became the right man in the right place at the right time.

The crisis in Zaire, and specifically the looming human rights tragedy, centered on the fate of the one million-plus Rwandan Hutu refugees in the country. The international community reacted in October by setting about to form a multinational force (MNF), under UN sanction, to enter eastern Zaire and secure the safety of the refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva strongly backed the action, and Canada agreed to lead the force which was to include the participation of the US and other Western powers as well as African nations. The MNF, however, posed a threat to Rwanda's plans to rid itself of the Hutu militant threat, and to Kabila's desires to oust Mobutu. Kigali could not operate freely in eastern Zaire, and ensure the eradication of the militant threat, in the midst of thousands of foreign troops running a large-scale humanitarian operation. Rwanda and the Alliance moved to preempt the MNF by removing the reason for its creation -- the hundreds of thousands of refugees. General Kagame was to say after the war that what he most feared was the insertion of the Canadian-led and US-backed MNF into eastern Zaire. Such an occurrence would have perpetuated the refugee camps where the bulk of the residents were virtually held hostage by the militants. Even if overt ex-FAR control of the camps was terminated, they would still serve as a screen for surreptitious militant activities.

Rwanda and its surrogates responded by attacking Kimbumba refugee camp in North Kivu in early November. The DSP and the Hutu militants tried to defend the camp, but some 200,000 people fled eastward to the Mugunga camp, swelling that facility to over half a million people. On 15 November, the Alliance forces attacked Mugunga camp setting in motion one of the largest spontaneous mass repatriations in modern history. These attacks were engineered to hit the camp guard force, not the helpless refugees, and to strike at the rear (western) side of the camps to drive the refugees eastward, i.e., back toward Rwanda. Civilian casualties inevitably occurred in the chaos of conflict, but these actions were designed -- and were fairly well executed -- to minimize refugee fatalities while herding them back toward Rwanda. More than 500,000 refugees returned to Rwanda in the days and weeks following the Mugunga operation, although significant numbers did manage to flee deeper into Zaire. The attack actually splintered the refugees at Mugunga into three groups: the largest group turned east toward Rwanda, another fled south, and still another went northwest. The result, however, was that the argument for deploying the MNF quickly collapsed after Mugunga, and no Western troops ever deployed to eastern Zaire.[28](#)

It is true that the fighting in the early weeks of the war was mostly light and sporadic, and that actions were limited to a shallow penetration of Zairian territory, but the civilian

population suffered nonetheless. Over 9,000 people reportedly perished -- the bulk of them civilians -- in the first weeks of the war.[29](#)

### **Expanding the Scope of the War Taking Control of the East: Phase Two**

By early December 1996, Rwanda's objectives had been only partially accomplished. Most of the Hutu refugees had been liberated from the militants and returned to Rwanda, and FAZ and ex- FAR control of the border zone and the largest refugee camps had been broken. Still, there was talk of a FAZ counteroffensive yet to come, and most of the Hutu militants had fled westward deeper into Zaire along with some remaining refugees. The business at hand was not finished. On 4 December Ambassador Richard Bogosian, the US State Department's Coordinator for Rwanda and Burundi, stated to a House of Representatives committee that:

The rebel alliance now claims to be focusing on a broader agenda to wrest political power from Zairian President Mobutu. Their capability to do so is uncertain and we remain deeply concerned about instability or worse in Zaire.[30](#)

After the war, Kagame claimed that the decision to broaden the conflict into a crusade to oust the Mobutu regime was taken in Kigali. Others believe the suddenly prominent role of the ADFL in the conflict led to the establishment of new objectives beyond those of the RPA.[31](#)

In the first days of December, Alliance forces moved on Beni, a FAZ garrison town north of Goma defended by about 1,000 soldiers. The FAZ detected an oncoming rebel force of about 500 men, and decided to intercept them before they reached the town. The FAZ force was itself ambushed, however, and Beni fell to Alliance rebels on 3 December. This rebel victory at Beni was significant for several reasons. For one, it eliminated a FAZ presence that hemmed in Alliance forces in the north. Taking Beni opened the way into Haut Zaire Province. It also marked a transition to a war of expanded objectives for the rebels and their supporters. This was no longer a purely RPA orchestrated border war.

Beni was also the last clash in which the Alliance announced FAZ casualties. They found that the FAZ would be less willing to put up a fight if they believed the rebels would let them escape or treat them with civility if they surrendered. Some FAZ troops began defecting to the rebels, something Kabila wanted to encourage. Alliance policy was to take the weapon and uniform from a captured FAZ soldier, but allow him to keep his money and personal effects.[32](#)

As the rebels moved north, there were also reports of Ugandan troops becoming involved in the fighting. Ugandan forces were reported at Kisinde in the far northeast, and as the rebels northern campaign into Haut Zaire unfolded, these reports became more numerous. Alliance forces continued the march north at a measured pace -- major towns in the north tended to fall at three week intervals, probably owing to RPA supply capabilities. Bunia, 225 miles north of Goma, fell on 24 or 25 December. The timing was significant. President Mobutu had just returned from more than four months in Europe for medical treatment for prostate cancer on the 16th of the month. Belief that the Zairian leader



would reinvigorate the FAZ defense was dashed by the fall of Bunia; the ailing president's aura of invincibility was damaged.

A combined force of ADFL, RPA and Ugandan troops approached the town, whose garrison had been reinforced by Kinshasa with troops from the 31st Paratroop Brigade. The FAZ troops at Bunia first resisted the attack, but soon ran out of ammunition. When the town fell the paratroopers defected to the rebels.<sup>33</sup> ADFL claims to have occupied both Bunia and Walikali were confirmed by independent sources on 27 December. Bunia reportedly fell after a 12 hour battle. Walikali was taken after two days of heavy fighting, marking the most westerly advance of rebel forces to that date, and causing concern in Kisangani about 300 kilometers away.<sup>34</sup>

The Christmastime fall of Bunia began a general pillaging retreat westward by FAZ troops. The garrison at Bunia had been made up mostly of Civil Guard troops; they looted each village they passed through over the next two weeks as they moved west in the general direction of Kisangani, Zaire's third largest city and the most strategic target in eastern Zaire. At the same time, General Mahele Bakongo Lieko replaced General Eluki Monga Aundu as FAZ Chief of Staff. This move was seen as a sign of desperation, as Mahele had three things going against him in Mobutu's eyes: he was not a member of the president's Ngbandi ethnic group, he was an extremely competent commander by Zairian standards and he was popular with the troops. Mobutu liked his top military leaders to be lackluster, malleable and above all ethnic followers. General Mahale was the closest thing Zaire had to a proven professional military leader. Before he chased Kabila out of Moba in 1984, he led the airborne assault on Kolwezi airport in 1978 securing that objective before the French went into action and received most of the credit for driving the Katangan incursionists out. His appointment led to an immediate rise in optimism, but Mahele was never able to gain effective control over what was becoming an even more polyglot collection of forces. The command structure was badly frayed, and without a unified command his talents were wasted.

By the New Year the rebel army had grown to about 6,000 and included ex-FAZ troops in its ranks as well as ethnic Tutsis from Zaire, RPA cadres and other Congolese rebels. Aside from this active force, there might have also been local recruits used for rear area guard duty, although RPA units probably assisted in this task as well. Alliance forces were also moving west by January in pursuit of the FAZ, the ex-FAR and the remaining refugees. In fact, three fronts were emerging: a northern front in Haut Zaire threatening Watsa and Isiro; a central front approaching Kisangani on two axes; and a southern front facing Fizi and Kalemie. Rebel progress was greatest in the north, slower in the center and slowest in the south. The latter was the result of stiff resistance mainly by the Babembe people in the Fizi area who were enemies of the Tutsi. Destruction in South Kivu was great: up to 70 percent of the houses were destroyed in some areas as were half the bridges between Uvira and Fizi. Local militias and other anti-alliance forces were eventually forced to flee; many went into Burundi including at least one 200-man FAZ battalion composed of Babembe troops.<sup>35</sup>

Kinshasa was, however, pressing for a FAZ counteroffensive. Mahele established his forward headquarters for the war in the east at Kisangani which the FAZ called Sector N (or north); Sector C (or center) was at Kindu; Sector S (or south) was at Kalemie. Although Kisangani was the key command post for the war in the east, no Zairian government official, military or otherwise, ever visited the city with the exception of Mahele himself, greatly contributing to Kinshasa's ignorance. The forces available for the counteroffensive were disparate, unreliable and uncoordinated. In addition to the variety of FAZ forces scattered about the theater of operations, there were the Hutu militants and mercenaries. From north to south, at Watsa the FAZ were being trained by some 30 West European mercenaries led by an aging Belgian soldier of fortune, Christian Tavernier. At Bafwasende, there were "Katangans," possibly a cover name for UNITA troops from Angola, or simply local Katangese from Shaba Province recruited to fight for Kinshasa. At Walikali, the defenders were mainly ex-FAR; the same was true at Kindu. At Kalemie, the forces were for the most part Babembe as mentioned earlier. Back in Kisangani were the East European mercenaries, mainly Serbs, who operated the FAZ's handful of recently delivered attack helicopters and light strike aircraft, and also comprised a company-sized combat infantry unit.[36](#)

Ambassador Bogosian summed up the increasingly serious situation for Kinshasa when he addressed Congress in December:

The FAZ . . . has been thoroughly discredited in eastern Zaire having fled in the face of rebel attacks. Tension is rife in Kisangani, almost 500 kilometers west of Goma, where the FAZ is regrouping . . . there are reports that the Government may be seeking to hire foreign mercenaries . . .[37](#)

The December-January period also saw an overall shift in the nature of the war on both sides. For the rebel alliance the conflict graduated from a proxy border war by Rwanda, into a broader based, internationally-backed, civil war to oust Mobutu and his cronies. For the government, it was becoming clear that the FAZ alone could not defeat or even contain the rebellion. Thus, the recruitment of mercenaries. From January on, mercenaries and other non-Zairian forces became the Mobutu regime's principal defense. Kagame strongly asserts that the ex-FAR were doing more of the fighting for Mobutu than the FAZ. Tens of thousands of men from the genocidal army and the Hutu militias of the previous regime in Kigali came to constitute the core of Mobutu's defense force.[38](#)

While the world awaited the much ballyhooed Zairian counteroffensive in January, ADFL forces began moving westward: on the Walikali-Lubutu road to Kisangani (the southerly route), and to the same city by way of Bafwasende (the northerly route). The FAZ was under pressure to produce some kind of victory, and by mid-January advanced from Kisangani on these two axes. These operations in Sector North were to be the only serious offensive actions undertaken by the FAZ and, indeed, constituted a very weak effort. An advance from Kalemie in Sector South faltered immediately, and there was never any offensive activity from Kindu in Sector Center. These operations were carried out by battalion-sized formations (i.e., 500 to 700 men). Between 20 and 25 January the two government advances from Kisangani were repelled. After reaching Bafwasende, the

FAZ was decisively defeated at Nia Nia, and the attack toward Walikali was turned back at the Oso River after several days of combat.

The failure of the counteroffensive, which was eclipsed by the ADFL's continued advances, accelerated the complete demoralization of the FAZ and other forces in Kinshasa's employ. The FAZ forces used in the offensive were small and feeble. The attack helicopters flew a few missions, but were ineffective and soon ran out of ordnance. The white mercenaries also proved ineffective in training the FAZ, improving their morale or fighting the rebels. After these defeats, the European mercenaries either disengaged or pulled back to Kisangani. From the failure of the counteroffensive in January to the fall of Kisangani on 15 March, it was all downhill for the government.

If there was any doubt about the widening scope of the war, it was dispelled by the arrival of additional foreign troop support for the rebel alliance. Angola entered the war in mid-February when Katangan troops of the regular Angolan Army (i.e., the FAA) began arriving by plane in Bukavu, according to press reports. With the defeat of the FAZ offensive there was no need for these forces other than to press the attack against Kisangani and eventually the rest of Zaire.<sup>39</sup> Mercenary leader Tavernier admitted in a late February interview that the FAZ was in a bad position. He claimed that there were "well organized armed units coming from Uganda." These forces were very effective, carrying out well conceived attacks on government positions in the northeast where Tavernier was operating. The balance is "running against us . . . it is an unfortunate situation with almost no logistics."<sup>40</sup>

Between late January and mid-March the government's military position in the east continued to decline. Tavernier's FAZ troops were routed at Watsa on 25 January, and abandoned Isiro on 10 February. "Katangan" forces fighting for the government deserted for lack of pay and left the key town of Bafwaswunde undefended. Ex-FAR forces on the Lubutu axis were defeated on 6 March and thereafter ceased to be an effective barrier to Alliance advances. The East European mercenaries pulled back and refused to fight because of lack of pay. The Babembe kept resisting in the Fizi area until they were finally driven out by 8 February; the strategic lake port of Kalemie fell to the rebels the same day. The way to Zaire's military headquarters in the east now lay open.<sup>41</sup>

The big prize in the east was, of course, Kisangani. In February, Tavernier predicted that the battle for the city would be decisive, and he was correct. He claimed that the ADFL and its backers -- they included Rwandan and Ugandan forces as well as Katangan troops from the FAA's 24th Regiment -- had 6,000 troops moving on multiple approaches toward Kisangani. He conceded the rebels had the advantage of mobility; the FAZ's only advantage was "the depth of the battlefield."<sup>42</sup> The latter seems to imply that the FAZ still had a lot of territory left between Kisangani and Kinshasa. The Alliance forces took their time moving in on Kisangani, expecting a major fight with the defenders. Following the defeat of the FAZ counteroffensive in January, Alliance forces took nearly two months to close in on the city regarded as the capital of eastern Zaire. Despite the generally accurate picture of a war without much actual combat, the fighting around Walikali, Lubutu, the Oso River Bridge, and Bafwasende on the routes to Kisangani had

been at times "serious and intense." Why should the Alliance expect it to go differently at Kisangani? The ADFL and their backers were pursuing the largest remaining group of Rwandan refugees, and presumably the main body of the Hutu militants, up through the Tingi Tingi refugee camp to Lubutu. Others advanced from the direction of Bafwasende.

On 13 March the battle for Kisangani began at the village of Babagulu about 30 miles to the east on the Bafwasende axis, when a FAZ/ex-FAR defensive position was attacked. The local people led the rebel troops around the defenders allowing the attackers to fire on them from three sides. The defense quickly melted away and the ADFL brought Kisangani under control two days later without any significant fighting in the city itself. Some sources give the Katangans of the Angolan Army special credit for capturing the city. What seems certain is that heavy weapons in the form of armor and artillery were deployed by Alliance forces, perhaps for the first time, at Kisangani. This was a clear signature of foreign forces from regular armies trained in the use of such weapons. The Angolan opposition movement, UNITA, claims that the Angolan government provided logistic support to Alliance forces from its Cabo Ledo Base, south of Luanda, to Goma in eastern Zaire, under the direction of an FAA (Angolan) general. On the 15th, it is widely accepted that a rebel column advanced into the city led by light armored vehicles.<sup>43</sup> Zairian mercenary pilots flew the FAZ combat aircraft out of Kisangani just ahead of the ADFL arrival on the 15th, to a safer location at Mobutu's estate at Gbdolite in the far northwest. The aircraft were never again to be flown against the rebels, however.

After Kisangani, Mobutu's credibility declined. The Alliance grew in confidence tremendously, and FAZ morale plummeted to an all time low. At once the war to oust Mobutu seemed no longer a pipe dream. The capture of Kisangani was a seminal event in reshaping local perceptions of the ADFL as well. Previously, the war had been seen by many as simply a Rwandan gambit to create a more secure border zone with Zaire. Kisangani, however, convinced many Zairians that the conflict had become a genuine uprising against Mobutu's regime. Those who initially dismissed Kabila as a mere front-man for foreign interests were now willing to give him the benefit of the doubt; popular support for the Alliance soared as did recruitment for the Alliance forces.<sup>44</sup>

Immediately rebel forces were pushed forward into Shaba (Katanga) Province and beyond. Slow and careful planning gave way to an accelerated rate of advance. A vanguard, usually composed of a few hundred Tutsi troops (whether RPA or Banyamulenge), raced quickly to seize town after town, leaving mop-up operations in the rear to other ADFL units, a technique reminiscent of Simba rebellions a generation earlier. These tactics were risky, but paid off handsomely as government resistance collapsed.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the transition had been made and the race to Kinshasa was on.

### **On to Kinshasa -- The Ground Swell Against Mobutuism: Phase Three**

The final act of the war that put an end to Mobutu's Zaire was swift. The only drama was whether Mobutu loyalists would make a last stand in Kinshasa and plunge the capital into anarchy. Negotiations between Mobutu and Kabila, backed by the good offices of Nelson Mandela and others in the international community, noble as they were, were pointless as

long as the ADFL continued marching on Kinshasa virtually unopposed. After the fall of Kisangani, the rebel advance speeded up tremendously. This was the result of two factors: the almost total collapse of government resistance virtually everywhere, and the growing direct foreign support for the Alliance. The ADFL swept into Shaba (Katanga) Province, Zaire's mineral resources center, in late March and its capital Lubumbashi, the country's second largest city, fell on 9 April. There was resistance at Lubumbashi, but it was short-lived and pitiful. FAZ troops got off a few mortar rounds before retreating to the airport. The attack force reportedly was as few as 300 lightly armed rebels who advanced from three sides with the cooperation of Zambia.<sup>46</sup> Large enthusiastic crowds greeted the rebels.

The rebel Alliance continued to move westward as well. Mbuji-Mayi, the capital of Kasai Oriental Province, fell without a fight on 4 April, and Kanaga, the capital of Kasai Occidental succumbed shortly thereafter. There were no detailed plans to attack these towns, as had been characteristic of the previous fighting up until Kisangani. Rather, a flying squad of 100 to 300 Tutsi shock troops walked into these towns announcing the ADFL's arrival well in advance.<sup>47</sup>

The Alliance forces were covering up to 20 miles a day against almost no resistance, with the cooperation of the local populous, and generous foreign support by six of Zaire's nine neighbors. Yet, Mobutu's entourage and the ailing leader himself remained hopelessly out of touch. The country was being occupied by Kabila's Alliance and foreign troops at an alarming rate, but the obvious fate of Mobutu's Zaire was not apparent to the suffering leader himself.<sup>48</sup> Mobutu's mental state, due to his prostate cancer and his treatments, was a factor throughout the campaign. Whether a healthy, mentally agile Mobutu would have been able to save his regime is a matter of conjecture. As late as 7 May, two weeks before the fall of Kinshasa, government spokesmen were still claiming phantom victories. Such claims appeared ludicrous to the international community. "It would be the first time in more than half a year that Zairian troops would win a victory," according to one sober official.<sup>49</sup>

The other decisive factor for the ADFL in the April-May period was escalating foreign involvement. While Tutsi troops remained in the vanguard, Angolan forces assumed a larger role as the rebel tide swept on toward Kinshasa. Claims of a rapidly expanding Angolan role grew wildly. Katangan fighters from the FAA were conservatively estimated at 2,000 troops. Another source claims five battalions of FAA regulars with "tanks and artillery." Among the more reliable reports was this description:

Angolan troops with armor and artillery have joined the rebel alliance pushing toward Kinshasa. Several thousand Katangan troops from the Angolan Army are with them. These troops wear Angolan Army uniforms and have armored personnel carriers and field artillery. Other Angolan troops are also reported massing in Cabinda.<sup>50</sup> Besides armor and artillery, these FAA troops also had bridge laying equipment, according to one observer.<sup>51</sup> This is a clear signature of a regular army. The FAA is one of the few forces in the region to possess bridging equipment, with which it gained experience during its war against UNITA. The Angolan opposition gave further details of



Luanda's involvement in Zaire. It claimed that FAA General Paulo Lara was a "top commander" of the forces advancing on Kinshasa, and that Lara was just one of many FAA officers serving with the rebels. UNITA estimated that 8,000-10,000 FAA soldiers were sent to help Kabila oust Mobutu.<sup>52</sup> While these figures appear exaggerated, they add to the convincing evidence that the Angolan Army did indeed play a significant, if not overwhelming, role in the latter stages of Zaire's eight month civil war.

UNITA, of course, had enjoyed an excellent relationship with Mobutu's Zaire. In a sense, the FAA's and UNITA's involvement in the civil war were an extension of the Angolan conflict into Zaire. UNITA stood to lose from the collapse of the Mobutu regime at the hands of Kabila's Alliance, because Zaire had become a very useful base of operations and logistic support for the Angolan insurgents. Denying UNITA access to Zaire became a priority for the Angolan government. During the latter stages of the war in Zaire, Angolan forces entered the country in the Tshikapa area, and threatened to enter in Bas Zaire Province from northwestern Angola and from the Cabinda enclave, although such attacks never materialized.

The march on Kinshasa continued with the capture of Kikwit, about 250 miles to the east, on 30 April. Alliance forces reached Kenge, about 120 miles from the capital on 5 May. Here they were surprised by unexpected resistance from the FAZ and UNITA troops, and the rebel's overextended forward elements finally were forced to fall back and regroup. When Alliance troops moved beyond Kenge to the Kwango River Bridge on 5 May, they were fired upon by a blocking force composed of one composite battalion of FAZ troops and about a company-sized unit of UNITA soldiers. The latter forces had recently been flown into Kinshasa to shore up the capital's defenses. When the FAZ force advanced to attack Kenge, however, they were once again ambushed, and fell back to the Kwango River Bridge. There they were quickly outflanked and forced to retreat. The result of the 5/6 May fight around Kenge was another rebel victory, but one won at a higher cost.<sup>53</sup> Some accounts claim the fighting here was some of the fiercest of the war with over 100 government troops, 200 civilians and 20 plus rebels killed.<sup>54</sup>

The clash at Kenge began a final series of skirmishes on the last 100 miles of the road to Kinshasa. The FAZ blew up the Black (or Bombo) River Bridge -- the only major bridge destroyed by the retreating FAZ on a strategic line of advance during the entire war -- about 48 miles from the capital. The DSP battalion assigned to defend the river crossing from prepared positions was pushed back in 14/15 May fighting, however. Once outflanked by 500 rebel troops who had crossed the river upstream, the DSP abandoned its heavy equipment and pulled out. On 15/16 May DSP and UNITA troops were defeated at the Nsele River Bridge some 25 miles from Kinshasa; a DSP base in the area was cleaned out by Alliance troops. Kabila's forces entered Kinshasa's suburbs the night of 16-17 May, and consolidated their control over the city three days later. At 9:00 AM on 18 May a white flag of surrender was raised at Camp Tshatshi, the DSP base downtown near Mobutu's residence. The president himself had flown out of the country two days before.<sup>55</sup>

In the final days of the Mobutu regime the concern of the international community was to avoid at all costs a bloody fight for Kinshasa or a FAZ rampage. The FAZ's history of violence against the population made the latter a serious threat. In the months before, thousands of defeated FAZ troops had been falling back to the capital. As many as 40,000 of them were believed to be in the capital by mid-May. While most had discarded their weapons and uniforms, some remained armed. Furthermore, some of their senior commanders had fled (e.g., two of the highest ranking of Mobutu's generals -- Baramoto and Nzimbe -- fled about 7 May). The Western powers had deployed military forces -- some 3,500 troops -- to the region in the event that they would have to go into Kinshasa to rescue their citizens in peril. Ambassador Bill Richardson, the US Ambassador to the UN, said in early May, while on a mission to Zaire, that "the object of my urgent mission is to prepare a soft landing for Mr. Kabila's rebels when they reach Kinshasa, a landing that avoids bloodshed and chaos."[56](#)

Kabila was widely reported to have some 10,000 troops outside Kinshasa, and claimed to have an army of 70,000 altogether. The FAZ had only a few thousand troops still under any kind of command remaining in the capital at the end, and some reports credit UNITA with having 1,000 or so. General Mahele played a major role in preventing a bloodbath. He tried to keep the FAZ soldiers calm and instructed them to cooperate with the rebels once the situation was truly hopeless. Mahele told Mobutu the end was imminent when the president made a brief return to Kinshasa on 15 May. Mobutu had been in Gabon and on a South African ship off Pointe Noire hoping against hope that a peace accord with Kabila would somehow be possible. Mahele told the president, residing at Camp Tshatshi, that about 2,000 rebel soldiers were at the Nsele River 25 miles away, and there was nothing between them and the city. After Mobutu's departure the next day, Mahele was shot and killed by a Mobutu loyalist while addressing DSP troops at Camp Tshatshi. The Kabila regime later gave him a hero's funeral, the first public act by the new government.[57](#) By mid-day on 18 May Alliance soldiers were pouring into Kinshasa. For the most part, they did not speak French or Lingala -- the most common languages of Zaire. Rather, they spoke mostly Swahili, the trade language of east and central Africa. This was a sign that an exotic leadership, on the wings of an exotic army, had indeed come to the capital.

### **Tactics and Strategy**

The tactics employed by the Alliance were simple, yet effective. They advanced on foot at first, moving through the bush parallel to the roads. From the early days of the conflict, they tried to leave the FAZ a route by which to escape. Rebel attacks by fire were effective, and as FAZ resistance weakened, preparation for those attacks diminished. As the ADFL grew in confidence a "domino effect" developed: the rebels would approach, the FAZ soldiers would panic, loot, then flee toward the next town where the process would be repeated. The "domino effect" was characteristic of almost the entire war. Some pockets of well-led FAZ troops did hold out after being bypassed by the rebels, but these were exceptions.[58](#) These tactics were not dissimilar to those employed by the rebels in the 1964 Simba rebellion.

According to Kagame, most of the guerrilla fighters in the Alliance were Congolese, but some key units were RPA. Kagame admitted after the war that while it might have been better for Congolese soldiers to do more of the fighting, it would have been riskier. The ADFL was not prepared to carry the war to conclusion on their own. Further, when there was "a need for precision . . . for things to happen in a precise way . . ." the RPA was used.<sup>59</sup> Bringing in the better trained force, be it from a foreign army or an elite guerrilla unit, to accomplish the toughest tasks where there is no margin for error, is a well established technique.

There are two fatal strategic reasons for Mobutu's defeat in eight months: the incompetence of his own forces, and the weight of foreign support arrayed against him. That the FAZ was a hollow shell is well known. As one citizen of Kinshasa put it: "in three decades Mobutu formed an entire generation of thieves and called them his army."<sup>60</sup> Against the armies of Rwanda, Uganda and Angola, and with the assistance of Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia and others, the lackluster FAZ was clearly overmatched.

The FAZ's heavy weapons never seriously came into play. The army lost all its operational field artillery early in the war, and the gun crews too. Long range multiple rocket launchers remained locked up at their bases because of a lack of trained operators. Only a few crew-served weapons were deployed, e.g., at one point the FAZ central front had only one operational mortar crew. A few 120-mm heavy mortars deployed at Isiro and at Lubumbashi were ineffective. As the war approached the capital, the FAZ managed to move seven Chinese Type-62 light tanks by rail from Mbanza-Ngungu to Kinshasa. They were deployed to the Nsele River where they were abandoned.<sup>61</sup>

The most identifiable leader of the Alliance army was James Kabari (aka Kabarebe), the ADFL's senior commander during the war, and Kabila's chief of staff after the war. Kabari was an RPA officer and a combat veteran of the 1990-94 war in Rwanda, where he served as Kagame's aide de camp. In February 1997, he became the G-3, or chief of operations for the RPA.<sup>62</sup> Again, according to Kagame, Rwanda not only planned and directed the rebellion, but Rwandan officers and men led the rebel forces throughout the war. RPA troops were directly involved in the capture of all the major cities that fell to the rebels: Kisangani, Lubumbashi, Kenge and Kinshasa.<sup>63</sup> Kagame states that he was unaware of any US role in supporting the rebellion, but commended Washington for "taking the right decisions to let it proceed."<sup>64</sup>

According to LTC Bud Rasmussen, the US Defense Attaché in Congo-Zaire throughout the war, the Rwandan role was a bit more modest. During phase one, the RPA made up two-thirds of the rebel army and played a very prominent role. These were mostly Banyamulenge troops. In phase two on the Walikali-Lubutu axis, only one-third of the force was RPA. In phase three, only 10 percent of the force was Rwandan, but they provided the shock troops, and vital command and control apparatus. While the number of RPA participating declined, their leadership and "point of the spear" roles did not.<sup>65</sup> LTC Richard Orth, the US Defense Attaché in Kigali during the conflict, believes the RPA's greatest contribution to the ADFL was providing seasoned combat-tested officers to serve as cadre for rebel units. In addition, the RPA also completely manned two or



three mobile light battalion-sized formations that formed the backbone of the rebel army.[66](#)

### **Strategic Conflict Analysis**

From the course of events described above, it seems likely that the military-political strategy employed by the ADFL and its backers evolved along with their unexpectedly easy success. It is less likely that the anti-Mobutu march on Kinshasa unfolded according to some master plan concocted in Kigali or Kampala. Rather, initial success bred confidence, and with that confidence came broader horizons. The visionary thinking of regional leaders such as Kagame, Museveni and perhaps Angola's Dos Santos, undoubtedly came into play as the war unfolded. They surely saw the possibility of ousting Mobutu, especially after the UN-backed MNF became a non-factor.

As for the late President Mobutu, his regime was slow to see the growing danger, and his strategy for combating the rebels was wanting in its execution and was largely based on misperceptions. The plan, as such, boiled down to buying some quick fix, off the shelf hardware and hiring mercenaries. However, a handful of combat aircraft and a few hundred European mercenaries did not stem the rebel tide, and in effect contributed to the expansion of the war. The defeat of the largely inexperienced mercenaries, who were unprepared for field operations in remote central Africa, greatly encouraged the ADFL and its supporters to reach even farther into Zaire and ultimately reach for the gold ring of Kinshasa. At the same time, remaining Zairian forces under Mahele's command were alienated, because the mercenaries received better pay (or at least got paid most of the time), and were discouraged further by the mercenary's ineffectiveness. Hopes that European troops would once again turn the tide in favor of Mobutu were dashed. Kinshasa did attempt to hire security vendors with a better record, such as Executive Outcomes, but was unable to close a deal, according to media reports.

There also was the lingering hope that France would save Mobutu's regime, an illusion that persisted until the eleventh hour. The French, however, have been very reluctant to embroil themselves in African conflicts since their controversial deployment into southwest Rwanda in 1994 (Operation Turquoise). There are unsubstantiated reports that Paris paid for the European mercenaries hired by Mobutu. And, there is widespread speculation that the fall of Zaire to a largely non-French speaking army is a political reverse for France. Although overblown, the perception remains that the Zairian conflict was a disaster for Paris and its francophone allies in Africa. Linking Zaire to the larger regional picture, some argue that like Kinshasa, Paris fatally underestimated the potential of the 1994 civil war and genocide in Rwanda to fundamentally change the political and military realities of central Africa.[67](#)

To what degree Mobutu's serious illness and its treatment may have contributed to the sense of denial and incompetence that characterized his regime's response to the rebel challenge may never be known. It seems, though, that in the unfolding stream of history, Mobutu's time had come. The era of the traditional African "big man" is coming to an end, and even a healthy Mobutu probably could not have survived this test.

One thing is clear: foreign support for the Alliance was decisive in achieving Kabila's victory. Military training, logistic support, leadership of the field forces, and above all the direct assistance of foreign combat forces, allowed the ADFL to overcome its own weaknesses and prevail. Without this ample support from neighboring states, the Alliance victory probably would not have been possible, and certainly would not have occurred in only eight month's time. In the words of former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, Kabila came to power with "borrowed guns." It is no secret, according to Crocker, that support from Uganda and Rwanda, and Angolan troops propelled Kabila into power.<sup>68</sup>

The war in Zaire was symptomatic of the greater ethnic conflict in central Africa. And, as such, the fate of refugees, especially Rwandan Hutus, was a causative factor and also played into the strategy employed by both sides in this multifaceted conflict. The masses of Rwandan refugees in eastern Zaire concealed a displaced army and thousands of Hutu militants who had participated in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Breaking the militant's control over the refugees and providing more secure borders for Rwanda were central motivating factors. When the remaining refugees, and the ex-FAR and Interahamwe fled deeper into Zaire, Rwandan and rebel troops followed them. Why chase the militants out of the border area if a weak government in Kinshasa could not prevent them from going back into the area? To fix the border, they must fix the problem in Kinshasa. With a friendly regime ensconced in the capital, Kigali could be assured of carte blanche access to the eastern border zones to prevent or combat a return of the militants.

### **A War Characteristic of the 1990s**

The 1997 civil war in Zaire is more in line with other contemporary conflicts in Africa than those of the earlier periods for the following reasons. At its inception, the conflict began as a proxy border war. It has been described as a proxy war fought by neighboring countries with their own agendas, and as a "substitute battlefield."<sup>69</sup> Both sides used existing infrastructure -- in this case mainly the refugee camps and facilities of the relief agencies -- to support their military activities. For the Hutu militants, the refugee relief operations were an important source of support, and for that reason they were a target of the RPA and the Alliance. For the rebels, local populations were mostly supportive, despite traditional resentment of Tutsis in the east. As the Alliance gathered momentum and penetrated deeper into the country, local support for the "liberators" allowed them to utilize what there was of the Zairian government infrastructure. Local civilian support, as people rallied to the cause of unseating Mobutu's dictatorship, simplified the logistic problems faced by the Alliance. The renewed use of mercenary forces, primarily by Kinshasa, though mostly ineffective, was also in tune with similar developments elsewhere (e.g., pro-Lissouba forces in Congo-Brazzaville). In addition, both sides employed contract air transport to provide logistic support, another contemporary phenomenon. The use of civilian-piloted unmarked airliners made fighting a war on the scale of the Zairian conflict possible. The intervention of neighboring states indirectly in the conflict is not really new, or tied to the 1990s, but the direct involvement of combat forces in a civil war on such a scale is new. Almost to prove that Zaire was not an isolated occurrence, we have recently seen this happen again in Congo-Brazzaville's

June-October 1997 civil war. Finally, the unconventional tactics and the use of basic infantry weapons primarily, are representative of the type of fighting we have seen in Africa throughout the post-independence era.

On the other side of the ledger, the war in Zaire was not an economic insurgency. Motivation for the aggressors was clearly political and driven by the legitimate security concerns of Rwanda. For the ADFL rebels, the motive was to oust a corrupt and grossly unpopular dictatorial regime -- a long cherished goal and one that harks back to the liberation dynamism of the 1960s. I conclude then, that the war in Zaire was much more characteristic of the 1990s than of earlier periods of liberation warfare or of interstate wars.

### **What Can Zaire Tell Us About the Future of Conflict in Africa South of the Sahara?**

According to an African statesman, "The tragedy in Zaire is an illustration of a new form of conflict which, following the cold war, threatens our whole continent."<sup>70</sup> While the truth is probably not so dramatic, authentic African powers are emerging in the aftermath of the Cold War, and they are willing to pursue their security agendas regardless of outside opinions. We saw the restrictions of Cold War politics removed early in this decade and a rush toward democratization. As the decade of the 1990s draws to a close, we are seeing countries and leaders who are willing to take security problems into their own hands and disregard international organizations and the traditional Western powers. As a diplomatic colleague exclaimed "these countries are acting more like us (the Western nations) and we are surprised."<sup>71</sup>

As *Africa Confidential* points out, Rwandan, Ugandan and Angolan soldiers in Kabila's army scarcely bothered to hide their military predominance. This source went on to categorize the combined forces under President Museveni, Vice President Kagame, and Angolan Chief of Staff General Joao DeMatos as a "formidable military machine (in the sub-Saharan context) that might try its strength elsewhere."<sup>72</sup> African states acting in concert and projecting military force, brings a new dimension to international politics in Africa, and raises the question of whether the external bogeymen of the Cold War has been replaced by home-grown varieties? Some of these emerging regional powers have improved their military capacities by turning to private sources of military assistance. Shunning traditional state to state assistance, they are turning to private companies to act as cost effective force multipliers. Contracting logistic services is a key area. While the deployment of Executive Outcomes personnel into combat may get the publicity, it is the quiet, behind the scenes help with maintenance, transportation and training that is the real benefit in increasing combat power and thus overall military capabilities.

To conclude then, this conflict, more than anything else, serves to usher in a new era of power politics in sub-Saharan Africa, in which the corrupt edifices of the Cold War are crumbling and giving way to the emergence of regional powers from within that are ready and willing to use military force to achieve their own goals. The traditional Western powers, although they won the Cold War, are also losing real influence among

Africa's new power brokers in such places as Luanda, Addis Ababa, Kampala and Asmara. These new powers stand for a new order, one emerging from within Africa and not beholden to distant capitals around the globe. This does not necessarily mean we will see more conflicts in Africa, but it indicates that the rules of engagement and the regional hierarchy are undergoing drastic change.

### **Endnotes**

1. Interview with LTC Richard K. Orth, former US Defense Attaché in Kigali, February, 1999.
2. Ibid, plus various media accounts.
3. John Pomfret, "A Trail of Blood Across Africa," Washington Post, 27 June 1997, p. 1.
4. LTC Orth states that documents recovered from Hutu militants at the Mugunga Camp in eastern Zaire indicate that they were highly organized into two divisions and several brigade headquarters.
5. Africa Confidential, 38, no. 10 (9 May 1997), p. 2.
6. Interview with LTC Orth.
7. John Pomfret, "In Congo Revenge Became Rebellion," Washington Post, 6 July 1997, p. 1.
8. One need only cite the case of President Mobutu's Zaire in the 1970s and 1980s as an example of Western nations backing a thoroughly corrupt and repressive regime as a bulwark against communism.
9. Interview with LTC Bud Rasmussen, US Defense Attaché in Kinshasa, 18 September 1997.
10. John Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt in Congo," Washington Post, 9 July 1997, p. 1.
11. According to LTC Orth, General Kagame confirmed this account to him in late August 1996.
12. Ibid. See also, "Leaked UN Report Outlines Arms Trafficking," Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 20 December 1996.
13. LTC Orth saw these documents, which leave little doubt of ex-FAR intentions and Zairian complicity.
14. John Pomfret, "Mobutu's Last Stand," Washington Post, 6 July 1997.

15. "Kabila Yaka" Africa Confidential, 38, no. 8 (11 April 1997). See also Phillip Gourevitch, "Continental Shift," The New Yorker, 4 August 1997, p. 45.
16. Ibid.
17. LTC Rasmussen concedes that the war in the east began as a proxy border war although it developed into much more than that.
18. Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt," 9 July 1997.
19. "Leaked UN Report,"
20. See Africa Confidential, 9 May 1997 p. 2, and "Report Discusses Role in Mobutu's Downfall" FBIS, 17 July 1997, for information supporting this contention.
21. Eleanor Bedford, "Site Visit to Eastern Congo/Zaire April-May 1997," US Committee on Refugees (USCR) Site Visit Notes, 10 June 1997.
22. Interview with LTC Orth.
23. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
24. Pomfret, "Mobutu's Last Stand," and "Rwandans Led Revolt."
25. Ibid.
26. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
27. Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt."
28. "Second Exodus Could Halt Intervention," Financial Times (London), 19 November 1996.
29. Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt."
30. Ambassador Richard Bogosian, statement to the House sub-Committee on International Operations and Human Rights, Washington DC, 4 December 1996, as reported in "US Coordinator Analyzes Great Lakes Crisis," Africa News Service Inc., 4 December 1996.
31. John Pomfret's 9 July 1997 article cites General Kagame's claim, but LTC Rasmussen believes otherwise.
32. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
33. Captain Kopla Masitolo, a FAZ officer present at Bunia; quoted by John Pomfret.

34. Emergency Update No. 66 on the Great Lakes Crisis, Africa News Service Inc, 28 December 1996.
35. Eleanor Bedford, USCR report made to a selected audience in Washington DC, 29 July 1997.
36. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
37. Ambassador Bogosian quoted in "US Coordinator."
38. Gourevitch, "Continental Shift," p. 51.
39. Pomfret, "Mobutu's Last Stand."
40. "Advisors Say FAZ in a Tangle," FBIS, 23 February 1997, from Radio Brussels.
41. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
42. Ibid.
43. "UNITA Radio Discusses Angolan Role in Zaire Conflict," FBIS, 5 May 1997; also see Angola Now, 1, no. 2 (27 June 1997) quoting the Belgian Newspaper Le Soir.
44. Bedford, "Site Visit to Eastern Congo/Zaire."
45. Pomfret, "Mobutu's Last Stand."
46. Ibid.
47. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
48. Howard French, "Insurgents Shatter Defense in Capital's Front," New York Times, 14 May 1997.
49. "Media in Kinshasa to Rely on Rumor Mill," FBIS, 7 May 1997.
50. Thomas Lippman, "Angolan Army Joins Drive," Washington Post, 2 May 1997.
51. Ibid.
52. Angola Now, 1, no. 2 (27 June 1997), p. 6.
53. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
54. French, "Insurgents Shatter Defense."

55. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
56. Bill Richardson, US Ambassador to the United Nations, quoted by Stephen Buckley in "Zairian Rebel Vows Victory in Days," Washington Post, 6 May 1997, p. 1.
57. Lynn Duke, "Fear, Panic Grow as Rebels Close In," Washington Post, 16 May 1997, p. 1.
58. French, Insurgents Shatter Defense."
59. Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt."
60. Howard French, New York Times, 19 May 1997.
61. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
62. Interview with LTC Orth.
63. According to LTC Orth, over time, many RPA officers candidly admitted their roles in the campaign to oust Mobutu.
64. Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt."
65. Interview with LTC Rasmussen.
66. Interview with LTC Orth.
67. Africa Confidential, 9 May 1997. Articles such as "Washington's African Move," Newsweek, 12 May 1997 fuel the notion that the US is out to replace France as the dominant external power in Africa. Some have been quick to link alleged US backing to the rebel success in Zaire. Such are the consequences of being the only remaining superpower!
68. Dr. Chester A. Crocker, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, quoted in Angola Now, 1, no. 2 (12 June 1997), p. 6.
69. Alex Russell, London Daily Telegraph, 14 May 1997, p. 13.
70. Togolese Foreign Minister Pierre Koffi Panou quoted by Gwynne Dyer, "Africa's Second Generation Takes Charge," Montreal Gazette, 5 April 1997.
71. Remark attributed to US Foreign Service Officer David Kuaeper.
72. Africa Confidential, 38, no. 10.