

Rwandan War Threatens to Add to Chaos in Zaire

Mark Fritz

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KINSHASA, Zaire (AP) – Steve Shyaka and partners sell beans in the big city and beer in the boondocks, shuttling the goods aboard their own Boeing 727. They use profits earned in the chaos of Zaire to finance the war in Rwanda.

“We do our part. We are Tutsis. We are an RPF airline,” said the smiling, bespectacled businessman, a Tutsi tribesman who was born in Zaire but considers himself a member of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Shyaka, 27, is part of Zaire’s large Rwandan community, made up of both Hutus and Tutsis with blood ties to the inflamed little nation dying horribly on this country’s eastern border.

Now, the conflict in Rwanda threatens to spill into Zaire. It is a vast, virtually ungoverned land one-third the size of the United States with a bubbling stew of its own ethnic conflicts, marauding soldiers and

breakaway provinces.

“Since Zaire shares a frontier with Rwanda, when there are problems there, there is insecurity here,” said Leon Kengo wa Dondo, one of two men who claim to be prime minister of Zaire.

France’s decision to send its troops through Zaire into Rwanda is just another complication in the slow but steady implosion of social and economic order in this nation of 40 million people.

The main opposition group in Zaire blames France for supporting the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, just as the Tutsi-dominated rebels in Rwanda blame Paris for arming the majority Hutu government.

“France is instigating the situations in both countries,” declared Frederic Kibassa Maliba, chairman of the main opposition coalition, Sacred Union. France insists its intentions in Rwanda are purely humanitarian.

Right now, though, Rwanda is just a blip on Zaire's radar screen.

Zaire has seen influxes of refugees from wars in neighboring Sudan, Uganda and Angola in addition to Rwanda and Burundi. But its most intractable problems remain within its own borders, where the political impasse between Mobutu and his opponents has left Zaire lawless and abandoned by its Western benefactors.

"We are in a complex emergency situation," said Isaac Gomez, director of the U.N. Children's Fund here. "Zaire is a failed state. Everybody does what he wants. Children are dying from numerous epidemics. You have looting all over the country. In the regions, all these ethnic conflicts. There is complete confusion."

Zaire seemed poised for progress in 1991, when a national conference elected opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi as prime minister. Mobutu tried to fire him, and has named four men as prime minister in the last four years.

The most recent edition was Kengo, who served as prime minister for most of the 1980s under Mobutu and was elected to the post by Parliament last week.

Kengo said he is willing to compromise with Tshisekedi, who has enough public support to be an obstructionist but probably not enough to seize the country by sheer numbers.

"I have given my hand to Tshisekedi," Kengo said. "I am open to him. I am waiting for him to give me some members for my government."

Tshisekedi, whose rigid resistance to compromise has increasingly eroded his opposition coalition and alienated his Western supporters, will have none of it.

"He asked to see me, but I said 'No,'" said Tshisekedi. "If the people don't accept that government, it can't exist."

There is growing evidence that the people no longer care. In Kinshasa, the capital, the informal economy of bartering, bribing and begging flourishes even as social order, health and nutrition plunge.

Parents have pooled their money to persuade professors to return to the main university. Mothers are turning plots of urban earth into gardens. Neighborhoods are organizing road crews to patch potholes.

"The crisis has given way to a lot of creativity," Gomez said. "People are finding ways and means to survive."

Abruptly and somewhat inexplicably focusing on France rather than rallying the masses against Mobutu, Kibassa's pro-Tshisekedi group last month called for a boycott of French products. He said in an interview that the opposition will begin trying to "peacefully" persuade French people to leave the country.

Rwanda, meanwhile, looms on the eastern horizon. At the border, relief agencies are bracing for an influx of refugees.

The fleeing Hutu-led government reportedly has already moved to Gisenyi, just a few miles from the Zairean town of Goma.

Rwandans fleeing into Zaire probably could expect a brutal welcome.

Last year, ethnic Zairians launched a campaign of terror against ethnic Rwandans already living there who had clamored for land rights in the eastern Zairean region north of Lake Kivu.

Relief groups say an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 people died in the massacres and revenge killings that erupted in the hills of eastern Zaire from May to August 1993. An estimated 350,000 people were displaced.

UNICEF project officer Juan Carlos Espinola said aid groups had just succeeded in placating the situation and returning displaced people when neighboring Burundi exploded in violence last November, sending about 90,000 ethnic Hutus from that country into eastern Zaire south of Lake Kivu.

The ethnic killings in Burundi were followed by the carnage that erupted in Rwanda after the death of

Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6.

Only about 4,000 Tutsis have fled into the eastern Zaire town of Goma since then, but relief groups say they are starting to see more Hutus filtering in.

Rwandan President Theodore Sindikubwabo and his ministers visited Kinshasa last week and met with government officials. But Rwandan Ambassador Etienne Sengegera denied the Hutus were benefiting from Zairean aid, a claim made both by Zairean Tutsis and the anti-Mobutu opposition.

However, relief groups allege that arms are moving through Goma into Hutu territory near the border. The fact that French troops planned to enter Rwanda from Goma has raised suspicions that they are aiding the Hutu side of the war.

Shyaka and his two Tutsi business partners don't deny they are using part of the profits from their airline, Gomair, to help the rebels. The three men come from Goma, where their parents fled after the Hutu rebellion against Tutsi rule in Rwanda in 1959.

"We are businessmen, but we are also Tutsis," said Shyaka.

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