

Kabarebe on why RPA prevailed despite early setbacks

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Minister Kabarebe speaks to The New Times on June 23. He says the swiftness and the charisma of the soldiers account for the success of the RPA during those risky operations. / John Mbanda On October 1, 1990, a few young men and women launched the liberation struggle through Kagitumba near the Ugandan border, a war that would ultimately change Rwanda forever. The Rwanda Patriotic Army opted for the armed struggle as a last resort after the Juvenal Habyarimana government rejected repeated attempts by the former's political wing, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPA), to have Rwandan exiles who had fled the country during earlier ethnic killing episodes return home peacefully and to eliminate institutionalised injustice and discrimination back home. But shortly after the launch of the struggle, the RPA suffered devastating setbacks, including the shocking death of their leader, Maj. Gen. Fred Rwigema, the charismatic and battle-hardened youthful commander who died on the second day of the attack. Rwi-

gema's childhood friend Paul Kagame, then a Major, would later abandon his military studies at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, US, and went to the bush to lead the struggle.

On June 23, 2014, The New Times' James Munyaneza and FELLY Kimenyi sat down with the Minister for Defence, James Kabarebe, who talked about the RPA's early losses, the reorganisation of the force after Kagame's arrival, the campaign to stop the Genocide, the challenges that came with the reconstruction process, the Congo wars, and the RDF's commitment to the country's security and social well-being of Rwandans.

Excerpts :

TNT : What would you say shaped the liberation struggle between 1990 and 1994 ?

JK : One can say that in spite of the challenges at varying times, our trajectory in terms of our vision and direction of where we are going is straight, we have not been derailed by the various seemingly insurmountable challenges we have encountered.

We have been able to overcome these challenges because of; one, the strong leadership we've had from inception up till today, which has been

consistent, charismatic, courageous, focused to maintain the course of the struggle irrespective of whatever challenges.

The second is the spirit of the fighters, which never withered, never got lost under difficult circumstances, and of the Rwandans in general because the spirit started with a small number of fighters who launched the liberation struggle in 1990, but it has grown to incorporate very many Rwandans at different stages, and that's what has made the struggle carry on and achieve its objectives and that's what makes us confident that our struggle will live on to make Rwanda become what Rwandans want it to be in the future.

TNT : On October 1, 1990 the RPA launched the liberation struggle in the form of a conventional war through Kagitumba. Don't you think that was a mistake considering that this was a conventional war in a region that's geographically flat and exposed?

JK : Of course, at the beginning of the war we made many mistakes that were very costly in terms of losing people. There are questions about the manner in which we moved from Uganda to Kagitumba, the choice of Kagitumba itself, the lack of cohesion among the troops, the leadership problems that cost the death of most of the leaders themselves etc. We had so many fundamental weaknesses of excitement and lack of the understanding of the enemy we were to confront, under-looking and underestimating the enemy, but also not doing the little details that are necessary for adequate preparation if one has to confront a difficult situation like we were going to. That cost us a lot in the beginning to the extent that we had completely lost the war in the first two or three

weeks, and recovery was very difficult. We had been defeated totally, completely and wiped out of the area we held in Umutara, so to be able to organise the little that was remaining by President Paul Kagame, and re-launch the struggle and pick momentum to make gains and achievements on the ground was a turning point because otherwise we would have registered a total defeat.

The rest was the normal challenges one would encounter when confronting an enemy that is strong, virulent and supported. But the biggest shortcoming was at the beginning of the struggle, we could have avoided that.

TNT : Where were you personally at that time?

JK : In the first week and the first day itself, I and many others would see some form of disorganisation that would inevitably put us at risk, we could see it but we didn't have the guts and the power to influence things. Even after we struck Kagitumba, the very first day and the next day, you could see total disorganisation, lack of control of the situation, lack of proper planning, to the extent that if the enemy was smart, even on the first day or second of October he would have wiped us out in that state in which we were. There were a lot of visible problems, lack of self-discipline by senior commanders, a lot of excitement and indeed it was all to be seen in the preceding days when we lost very senior commanders; when we talk of senior commanders sometimes people think of the top and maybe the next three or four but we had very many charismatic, combat-hardened commanders who sacrificed and died in those first days and very many other charismatic soldiers who were battle-hardened. Because of the poor command, control

and management of the whole force, we lost so many people.

Of course even after we reorganised and re-launched the struggle we lost people but in a manner that can be accounted for because when you are fighting you lose people.

TNT : So what major tactical and strategic decisions were made that breathed new life in the liberation cause ?

JK : Even with the initial defeat – and that’s why you blame that defeat to the leadership at the time – what was not lost is the spirit of the fighters, even at the time when they were being massacred, being dispersed, those who survived retained the spirit to fight to the last person because they had a legitimate cause.

And so the coming in of Paul Kagame after two weeks, which most of the commanders and fighters were waiting for – after losing many commanders, – gave them hope, it kept them going. So, when he came in, he came with a new strategy altogether, he changed the tactics, he changed the operational concept and did not approve of sending soldiers to an open grassland to be bombed by anti-aircraft, aircraft and tanks. This reorganisation gave hope to the fighters who were scattered and those who had run away. As a result, he organised successful operations. For example on October 28, 1990, the Habyarimana regime recaptured Kagitumba successfully and reached the borderline, but a week earlier Paul Kagame had organised a fresh force and sent it to Gatuna to open a new front. As Habyarimana was celebrating the recapture of Kagitumba on October 28, the RPF, on October 30, struck and captured Gatuna. That reengineered the morale of the

fighters and sent a message to Habyarimana and to the international community that the struggle was still alive.

After capturing Gatuna, very many other operations were launched. To put it simple, when President Kagame came, he did two things simultaneously : reorganising and restricting the force, redefining the vision, mission and strategy, but at the same time carried out operations against the enemy. He did not halt one to begin the other, the two went together simultaneously. Besides Gatuna, Rwempasha, Kaniga, Rushaki, Cyungo, and Kanyantanga were all attacked in November. Nkana was attacked around December 24, 25 and by January 23, a force was attacking Ruhengeri and liberating political prisoners. We did not give the enemy breathing space.

TNT : Going by what you are saying, it sounds like he came in as your natural leader yet one would assume that he would have instead faced some internal opposition since he found commanders on the ground...

JK : I don’t think he could have faced opposition internally because even when we were in Uganda, he was already one of the top most leaders and that was a known fact. He is one of those who started the struggle, the RPF in 1987. Even before he went to the US for military studies, he had been organising, so all the commanders knew that he was their leader and immediately after the death of late Fred Rwigema on October 2, 1990, everybody, including the commanders who had not died by then were waiting for him as their leader, so it was a natural process.

TNT : From what you’ve told us, it’s clear that the RPA was a disorganised force in the early days of the

struggle. That may seem to reinforce the narrative that actually some of the RPA commanders, including the top leaders like Gen. Rwigema, were victims of infighting.

JK : We don't know where the narrative about the infighting in the RPA came from, we don't know who really manufactured it but the way each commander died is well known. First of all, there was nothing like infighting. Never. It was not there. All the commanders who died, their death can easily be explained. They died during the day and, all of them, in combat. How late Fred died is very well known because he was not alone, he was with a very big team of escorts. He was shot directly on the forehead by an enemy that was retreating; the enemy used a machine gun mounted on a jeep, and late Fred was on a hilltop, exposed. You know the hills in Umutara are all exposed, he was an easy target. Maybe it must have been accidental, it must have been a coincidence because I imagine the guy who operated the machine gun and shot randomly at a crowd of people did not identify late Fred, he must have shot just randomly and unfortunately the bullet hit late Fred directly on the forehead and he fell down. The soldiers who were fighting in an extended line saw the machine gun fire; everybody saw how he was shot.

TNT : When he died, who took charge immediately before Kagame's arrival?

JK : It's very difficult to say who took charge because when he died, there was total confusion. Maybe individual commanders took various initiatives but not coordinated. It was difficult to know who took charge, because operationally late (Maj. Chris) Bunye-

nyezi seemed to be in charge; politically and administratively, you could see late (Maj. Peter) Bayingana trying to be in charge. What was apparent was that there was a total vacuum, total disorganisation. I myself, at one point, heard late Bunyenyezi also expressing desperation over the situation. I heard him saying 'we could only be lucky if Paul Kagame came as soon as possible to help us'. These words proved that there was a vacuum.

TNT : And you blame the same chaotic situation for the death of both Bayingana and Bunyenyezi as well?

JK : They both died in similar circumstances, that's the most unfortunate part. There were problems of misjudgements and under-looking the enemy. Let's start with late Fred, the circumstances in which he died. The enemy (government army) was advancing and had started shooting. Although we had our own forces, we were redundant at Kagitumba where we had spent the night to the extent of even not putting in place a force to protect the area we had captured. Even the captive we had captured at Kagitumba escaped at night and he's the one who guided that enemy in the morning, the enemy that killed late Fred.

On the next morning, on October 2, late Fred, instead of organising the forces to go and encounter the enemy that was advancing, he personally took the lead and went ahead of everybody. Of course most of us knew it was wrong but nobody would go and stop him. Other fighters of course followed him but in a manner that was not very well organised. But because our soldiers had combat experience, they organised very quickly along the road and repulsed the enemy. But he had gone to the right, climbed a very expo-

sed hill, and was facing the enemy. He even saw the enemy retreating but the enemy also saw him on top of the hill and then fired in disarray and that's how he was shot.

On October 23, Bunyenyezi was warned against the enemy that feigned to be wanting to report to us; in fact Paul Kagame warned him against that, saying 'how would you think that that enemy around Lyabega wants to report to you yet you have not fought and they have not suffered any casualties? How would you be sure that they are going to report?' But Bunyenyezi and others kept thinking that the whole battalion of the enemy would report to us, but the enemy was planning to attack us around Lyabega, so when Bunyenyezi attempted to attack them, their plans had already been laid and he fell in their ambush and was killed.

For Bayingana, it is even very funny, how he died. When he heard gunshots and bombs, he thought that Bunyenyezi was succeeding, so he drove a pickup to join him. He was eager to join Bunyenyezi and even left his escorts behind. He fell in the ambush of the enemy that had killed Bunyenyezi and died just hours, may be minutes after, also around Lyabega.

Bayingana and Bunyenyezi died on the same day – October 23.

So in all this you see lack of proper planning, lack of seriousness and lack of consciousness of the enemy. So how would you blame this on infighting?

I think the fact that we lost so many commanders consecutively, one after the other, lacks a compelling explanation and therefore people tend to think that it was infighting and planned, but the best explanation for that is that there were fundamental mistakes that were committed by leader-

ship, including those who died, because each one who died made a mistake or was part of the mistakes that were made.

TNT : It looks as though Maj. Bunyenyezi and Maj. Bayingana acted contrary to the views of Kagame, who was the new overall commander!

JK : No, they weren't. You know Paul Kagame had just arrived. He arrived around October 14. He had met all those people, he gave them his views, he questioned them why they had to stay in Umutara in an open terrain being killed by the enemy at his will, why they had not followed the earlier operational plan (I think they had planned before the launch) of the unconventional way of fighting and also of properly utilising the terrain in the northern part of Rwanda. I think that's why later on he chose to send forces to Gatuna and to attack Nkana, Kaniga which are all hilly areas.

So these things happened when he had just arrived and people on the ground were still telling him how things were and he was still assessing the situation.

In the case of Bunyenyezi, who was more of the operational commander, what I know is that he tried to convince Paul Kagame that he would hit that enemy successfully. Of course Paul Kagame gave his views, but even in command sometimes you give some leverage to commanders to take initiatives. Unfortunately Bunyenyezi went ahead to attack Lyabega and it was disastrous.

TNT : Fast forward to 1994. When the genocide broke out, was it a surprise to the RPA?

JK : The occurrence of genocide was another episode that really caught us by surprise. We had not prepared

to fight a war stopping genocide, we did not know that genocide would take place let alone happen at the scale it did. We did not anticipate that. What we anticipated after the signing of the 1993 Arusha Peace Accord, was that the RPA and FAR (then government forces) would integrate at 40 :60 ratio, and in our mind, we thought that after integration, these people would turn against us and kill us within, that's what we anticipated and that's what we were worried about.

But at the same time we were going in it and we had faith that we would defend ourselves, that's what we were working towards; that's why during the Arusha peace negotiations and the ceasefire, we concentrated so much on training, so when genocide broke out it was a surprise. I don't think if we knew what was lying ahead we would have sent the 600 (3 battalion) and our politicians to CND (in Kigali), because there was no plan to rescue them. It's like we had some faith in the negotiations in Arusha. The main effort was to see how we integrated and survived within the system, that's why we spent much of the time making those preparations.

When genocide broke out, what helped us to react very quickly and adequately in those 100 days is our force which was well trained and psychologically prepared – It was very easy to adjust to stop genocide. Our mobility levels, our physical fitness, our charisma...

TNT : Did the RPF/A have a level of trust in Habyarimana during the negotiations?

JK : We did not trust Habyarimana. But you have to know that the Arusha deal was reached at with many stakeholders involved; the region, the

international community and the UN force (Unamir was here). We had not had any experience with UN forces before but there were so many guarantors. The framework under which the Arusha Peace Accords had been negotiated was beyond Habyarimana himself, therefore we thought things would work out, of course with scepticism. You have to know that even the war was the last option. We were open to a peaceful solution. We had been defeating the government forces, and that's what gave us the courage to move in to stop the genocide. Fighting had been stopped because the RPA was continuously gaining strength and defeating Habyarimana forces on the battlefield, that's what had forced Habyarimana to agree to the peace talks and ceasefire, because he could not hold us back.

TNT : Would one say that the genocide was a result of a partner betraying a partner in a peace process?

JK : Genocide was a manifestation of what we would expect anyway, in the long-run : that those people were extremists who would never agree to put up with the Tutsi. If it didn't happen at that time it would manifest itself in some other form, maybe it would have taken place even after we had integrated.

TNT : The Genocide against the Tutsi was a game changer. What we know is that once it started, the RPA started moving forces from its stronghold in the north to all corners of the country to rescue people besides fighting the enemy forces. That was a very unusual situation, how challenging was it on the battlefield?

JK : During the three months of the campaign against the Genocide, the situation was very challenging. First of all, the RPA was by far outnumbered

red by the FAR. The FAR was augmented and supported by the Interahamwe who were all over, in every sector, every village, every hill, everywhere. The FAR and Gendarmerie (equivalent to present-day police) maybe could have been about 70,000. Now for the Interahamwe, it is not even easy to estimate their numbers, but they were in thousands and all of them trained and armed.

The RPA at that time, the effective force was 19,000. Numerically it was not something easy for us, but the RPA gave their best, including a lot of sacrifices in the process of saving people. The will, the spirit and the superiority in operational planning accounts for our success in stopping of the Genocide within the 100 days.

The dispositions at the time were that we held the northern part of the country, stretching east to west, but for every position of the RPA, within 200m or 400m, there was an enemy position. To have broken through those enemy lines and moved on to stop the Genocide was not something simple. There are just a few forces which moved from our stronghold in the north to Kigali without fighting, basically each unit had to fight its way to Kigali. The forces that moved through the east to Kibungo, to Bugesera, to Gitarama and Butare, fought at every point, overrunning the enemy and continuing; the hastiness with which they attacked the enemy and moved along can be explained by the level of commitment, the level of discipline, the superiority in training, and also the will, the heart to fight, knowing what we were fighting for. There were a lot of obstacles, a lot of constraints; of course including logistics. You can imagine sending forces to Kigali and other

various parts of the country without logistical support yet they survived and they had to fight.

Take the example of the troops that were at CND (present-day Parliamentary Buildings in Kimihurura), that moved and captured Mount Rebero and then to Nyamirambo to rescue people there. Between CND and Rebero, there were so many obstacles, there were so many enemy defences and obstacles but they had to move through the obstacles day and night, either transporting back the people who were rescued and their own casualties or transporting logistics. It was a very difficult, challenging situation, and that's why it took long anyway. One would say that 100 days was a long period but that was down to the difficulties involved, the enemy was virulent and fighting – real fighting.

TNT : For four years you had been confined to a small part of the country, yet once Genocide started you proceeded to capture the whole country in three months. Tactically, how did you move the forces ?

JK : When the Genocide broke out on April 7, the Chairman of the High Command, Paul Kagame, called the sector commanders and assigned each one tasks. The Alpha Mobile Force, which was under Sam Kaka, was to move to Kigali to reinforce the 3 battalion, which was at CND (under Charles Kayonga), the 59 battalion which was under late Ngonga also moved to Kigali, the 21 battalion which was under (now) Gen. Martin Nzaramba also moved to Kigali, 101 battalion under (Charles) Muhire moved through Muhura and eventually to Kigali, 157 battalion under (Lt. Gen.) Fred Ibingira had to move through Umutara, Kayonza, Kibungo, Bugesera, Gita-

rama and then Butare. Bravo, under Dodo (Twahirwa), also moved towards Kigali, specifically to Jali and Gatsata areas; Charlie, under late Kareba, was to take charge of the Ruhengeri-Kigali areas; the 7 mobile force moved along with the 157 battalion but they separated at Kayonza, with the 7 battalion, under late Bagire, taking the Rwamagana-Kigali direction. The military police and other the general headquarters kept the rear. The High Command was mobile, President Kagame and his protection unit were mobile across almost all sectors, we had abandoned the base because the mission now was to stop the Genocide, sometimes they would be around Kigali, sometimes towards Bugesera, and so on.

The swiftness and the charisma of the soldiers really account for the success of those operations because we were highly mobile; whenever we would learn that people are dying in here, forces would move there, et cetera.

TNT : Finally, the RPA takes Kigali on July 4, but there was hardly a semblance of life everywhere. That opened a new challenge in terms of reconstruction, how did you confront that new challenge?

JK : I think the fall of Kigali and the manner in which the RPF reconstituted itself and organised that desperate and pathetic situation also shows how strong the leadership of the RPF and the RPF itself was and is, otherwise that's not a situation that one would take over and move an inch in making it better. What did we have on the ground? The Interahamwe were still all over the country, even in liberated areas, and some of them even killing people. We had dead bodies lit-

tered all over the country, we had Internally Displaced People, we had earlier caseload of refugees who had fled to Uganda, Burundi, and other countries in the 1950s flocking in, we had others coming in from the Congo because the Interahamwe had crossed over to DRC (then Zaire) and started killing the Tutsi in Masisi and other areas. The situation was very chaotic, it was a big problem.

But for the RPA, the challenge was that the enemy, though defeated, had just crossed into the DRC and was positioned along the border, not far from the border, and the French who had come in through the Zone Turquoise (operation, that allowed the Genocide machinery to relocate to the Congo along with millions of civilians) to support them were still with them, and Mobutu soldiers who had come in 1990 to fight us in Umutara were now hosting them.

So to us the priority was to secure the country as the RPF internally was trying to organise what was there. It was a very big challenge. One would say that at that point there was no country, no institution, nothing apart from a handful of liberators who had all this mess to clean up and put right. To have moved to where we are today within 20 years, and reflecting on what the situation looked like at that particular time, on July 4, 1994, it looks like a miracle for Rwanda to have recovered from that situation.

TNT : Looking at all that you had to contend with on your own, with the French siding with a genocidal regime, the UN pulling out peacekeepers when Rwanda needed them the most, and the rest of the international community watching from a distance even in the wake of a genocide, would it be un-

fair to say that RPF, with all its effectiveness and prowess on the military front, it was possibly weak diplomatically?

JK : I don't think diplomatically the RPF had issues itself. When you look at the diplomatic issues then and the diplomatic issues today they are not so much different. Diplomatically, there are always issues because the change that we ushered in in this country stepped on a lot of people's interests, and those people have had a stake in the history of this country, in shaping whatever we dealt with, the ideology of genocide, and very many other vested interests. This is what we confronted during the time of the struggle and this is what we still confront today – people who will not readily accept that we had the right to change the course of things in this country and determine our own direction as a nation without being patronised by those who have done it before. On the diplomatic front, what we confronted in 1990 still manifests even after 24 years later and we don't see that changing anyway...

TNT : Do you think we will still have the same professional, highly disciplined military force 20 years from now?

JK : I think it's all about the character, the discipline, the doctrine inculcated into the force; how you grow the force, how you prepare your force, how you train, how you administer, how you command, the character you inculcate into the individual within the force. The fact that after 20 or 24 years, our force has not changed in anyway but continued to improve, shows that we have laid a strong foundation for the character of the force we need for Rwanda; a force that

has fought war under difficult circumstances from its inception in 1990, a force that stopped the Genocide, the force that defeated the insurgency between 1997 through 2002, a force that defeated enemies who were backed by many strong nations that wanted to recapture the country and reverse the gains, a force that has no history of losing war, and a force that in war time does its job perfectly; in peace time it does its job perfectly well contributing to socio-economic development; in international peacekeeping missions it does its job perfectly well, in different circumstances, different environments, and different situations.

It's a force that is able to operate in different environments under difficult circumstances and a force that sustains itself with meager logistical support. The fact that this force has not changed character for the last 24 years and it's a force that has been tested by difficulties at different points in time and overcame the challenges assures us that this force has built its character on a very strong foundation that will live on. The way we recruit, the way we train, the way we prepare our forces psychologically, mentally, the way we administer our force, the way we command our force, the doctrine we have in place on how to do things... it ensures that our force will be sustainable.

TNT : And that I suppose explains the strong linkage that exists between the RDF and the rest of the community, especially through community service?

JK : I said our military operates so well both during war time and peace time. During peace time they assume their responsibility of reaching out to the population and contributing to the social well being of the population be-

cause they know their responsibility is to serve their people. And we look at security in the broader sense of security – social, economic, cultural, political and diplomatic attributes. So by reaching out to the public and working with them to better their lives that has a security connotation, it is a responsibility.

The character of our army is totally different from the colonial setup of our armies, that were just trained and (put) in military barracks just to intimidate the people and to carry out coup d'états. There are some armies today which still behave like that, but our army is totally different in terms of the way we perceive security of the nation. And that's rooted in our experience in the liberation struggle, has been carried on afterwards, and it will be carried on because there is no point at which we shall declare that the liberation struggle is over.

TNT : Are you saying that the RDF has risen above political divides, that it's a force that can outlive any political party, any president ?

JK : It's a force that's committed to its people ; so long as the people define what they want, the RDF is there to protect the people.

TNT : You are probably the only person in the world who has served as military chief in two different countries – in Rwanda and DRC. How do you feel about that ?

JK : That was a task like any other task people were given within the RPA.

TNT : Did the Congolese ask for it ?

JK : Yes, the Congolese themselves asked about it. My task was to organise the Congolese army because those people we helped to get to power had no army for themselves, so we had to

stay, it was a continuous exercise of liberating the Congo. But also, it gave us the opportunity to fight and neutralise ex-FAR within eastern DRC, we also saw an advantage in it and we used it.

TNT : So many things happened in the Congo between 1996 and 2002 when Rwanda withdrew its troops after the second Congo war. Looking back, do you probably see any missed opportunities for Rwanda, any regrets especially considering that we even still have FDLR in eastern DRC ?

JK : I don't have any regrets whatsoever ; I look at the bigger picture. First of all, what was the objective of going into DRC at that time ? The objective was not to allow the ex-FAR and Interahamwe, backed by their foreign allies, to reorganise and to recapture the country and complete the Genocide. Before we crossed into the Congo in 1996/97, the ex-FAR was well organised, re-equipped, re-armed and even trained from within the refugee camps across our border. If you consider the number of trained Interahamwe militia by the time they crossed into the Congo in 1994, then the ex-FAR themselves and the Gendarmerie, plus the trainings that were ongoing within the refugee camps including Katara, Kahindo, Kashusha, Rumangabo, Kibumba, Mugunga I, Mugunga II, Katana, Kamanyora, maybe you could say their total strength could have been up to 300,000. But we neutralised them and today, the FDLR are estimated to be 4,000 fighters. All this is work that has been done from 1996 to date, including those wars that were fought there. So there can never be any regrets so long as Rwanda is safe and secured to date. If we didn't take the decisions at various points to do what

we did, I think the situation could have been different.

Maybe the fellows would have organised, supported by Mobutu, the French government, and others and rolled things backwards and it would have been catastrophic.

TNT : Do you have a feeling that the international community has probably not always appreciated Rwanda's security concerns as far as Congo is concerned ?

JK : I don't think it's the whole international community but some members of the international community, states or individual members or organisations don't. There are some people who will perpetually remain our opponents just because we ushered in this change in this country. Chances are that they will remain our enemies, and we shouldn't bother about them. And there is no alternative that they gave us.

TNT : Do you see any possibility of Rwanda and DRC working together again in joint operations against FDLR, the same way you did under Umoja Wetu ?

JK : Even the earlier joint operations were not as perfect as you think. They were just symbolic and with difficulties. For instance, during Umuja Wetu, yes we worked with FARDC (Congolese army) but FARDC was at the same time working with FDLR, so by the time we launched operations against a particular position of FDLR, the FARDC had already warned the FDLR and they had moved away. We were just playing that cat-and-mouse game. Symbolically we worked together yet practically there was nothing. The same was the case with the Special Forces that were operating in the Rutshuru area. Our troops did some work

out of difficulty, killing the enemy, neutralising FDLR, but on their own initiatives with less cooperation from FARDC except hosting them, instead FARDC was cooperating with FDLR.

Are we open to working with them on this again ? Yes, as long as the DRC will realise that it's not profitable to keep investing in FDLR because, ultimately, FDLR has done more havoc inside the DRC to the Congolese themselves. Until such a point when DRC will realise that they have wasted time and make a choice to relate with a legitimate government as opposed to dealing with a genocidal group; if they come to that realisation I think that's when things will work better. But so long as they are still bent to FDLR, then I don't see the situation getting better.

TNT : Do you think Kinshasa still actively supports the FDLR ?

JK : Sure. Honestly, even when you look at this so-called voluntary disarmament arrangement of the FDLR, it is just meant to hoodwink the international community but also to sanitise and protect the FDLR, because the FDLR (fighters) have been returning home since 1996 – that's why there is Mutobo (Demobilisation and Reintegration Centre), that's why there is the reintegration process either in the army or civilian life. For a long time there has been this open channel (to facilitate voluntary repatriation) through Monusco (UN Stabilisation Force in the Congo) and the reception centre at Mutobo; so there is nothing new in what they are publicising today. It has been ongoing for a long time, in fact they are just disrupting the ongoing repatriation process and trying to organise and sanitise the FDLR to make it a credible force,

maybe because they saw that at the rate at which the FDLR (individual fighters) repatriates on its own, ultimately they would remain with no FDLR. It's a way of holding them back, and organising and rebuilding them.

TNT : But what is Congo benefiting from FDLR's presence on its territory ?

JK : That's what we don't understand, maybe Congo is not operating on its own, Congo may not be operating on its own.

TNT : Do you have an idea of what exactly is going on on the ground besides the official statements from there ?

JK : You know after the defeat of M23, the arrangement was that the Intervention Brigade (under Monusco) were going to shift focus to FDLR and ADF-Nalu (a Ugandan rebel force that's also based in eastern DRC). We were told that ADF-Nalu have been neutralised, naturally they should have proceeded to take on the FDLR but this is not what happened. Monusco says its ready to take on the FDLR but it says it can't do so without the cooperation of the DRC government. Now the DRC government comes up with another mechanism that has not been discussed and agreed on within the ICGLR (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region) of; re-organising the FDLR, relocating them, disarming them, this and that. To us, this is totally different from the arrangement that was agreed on within the ICGLR framework. It is a way of trying to avoid fighting the FDLR just like the other negative groups have been fought; it's a way of trying to protect

them. That's why only a few very old people and a few old guns were collected, just symbolically, to hoodwink the world that the FDLR are no longer a threat.

TNT : Throw in the recent attacks on the Rwandan territory by the Congolese soldiers, do you see a possible link between the two ?

JK : It's all related, it says a lot about their attitude. How could they cross over the Rwandan territory to attack us leaving behind the FDLR which they are supposed to be fighting ?

TNT : Maybe to provoke you into moving back with them into the Congo ?

JK : That's also possible. It's a provocation. But I think part of the international community and the DRC government see insecurity in eastern DRC as a profitable adventure for some reason, otherwise how else would you explain the lack of will to end the insecurity there for all these years ?

TNT : Twenty years later, what's your message to Rwandans as far as their security is concerned ?

JK : Rwandans are secure and their security is guaranteed. We have dealt with tougher situations before, we are now well positioned to deal with whatever challenge.

The strength of the RDF has increased tremendously over the years and it continues to multiply, envisaging whatever threat we may face in the future. My message is that Rwanda is safe and secure.

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