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Rwandans Led Revolt In Congo



Troops of Laurent Kabila's rebel force stand guard outside the remains of the Kasese refugee camp in April. (Reuters)

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Rwanda's powerful defense minister, Paul Kagame, has acknowledged for the first time his country's key role in the overthrow of president Mobutu Sese Seko in neighboring Congo, saying that the Rwandan government planned and directed the rebellion that toppled the longtime dictator and that Rwandan troops and officers led the rebel forces.

Rwandan forces participated in the capture of at least four cities -- the Congolese capital, Kinshasa; the southern copper-mining town of Lubumbashi; the key western crossroads of Kenge; and the diamond center of Kisangani, which fell on March 15 in what was considered the key battle of the war, Kagame said in an interview here Monday. He added that Rwandan "mid-level commanders" led Congolese rebel forces throughout the

successful rebellion and that Rwanda provided training and arms for those forces even before the campaign to overthrow Mobutu began last October.

Kagame, the 40-year-old major general who commanded the 1994 takeover of Rwanda by a rebel army, offered what he said were "secrets of the war" in Congo, including the first public account by a senior Rwandan official of that country's involvement. Several other African countries, including Uganda, Angola, Burundi and Zambia, also are known to have supported the rebel cause. But Kagame's account suggests that the war, which began in the eastern Congo near the borders of Rwanda and Uganda, was planned primarily by Rwanda and that the plan to remove Mobutu originated in Kigali as well.

"There are not many people who thought that Mobutu was very weak. They thought of Mobutu as a big monster who wouldn't be defeated, with his big hat and his big stick. They thought little Rwanda and big Zaire," Kagame said with a smile. "Only when we started did they look at the map and see the possibilities."

The Rwandans' role in the rebellion has been controversial in Congo. Rebel leader Laurent Kabila, who proclaimed himself president of Congo in May, has maintained that his victorious forces were assembled from among Congo's many ethnic groups. But the large number of ethnic Tutsis -- who account for a tiny percentage of Congo's population but dominate the government and armies of Rwanda and Burundi -- in the rebels' ranks have led Kabila's critics to claim Congo is being ruled by a Rwandan occupation force.

Kagame, a Tutsi, also responded to allegations that Tutsi officers of the Rwandan army ordered massacres of Rwandan Hutu refugees inside Congo. The Hutu refugees fled to Congo, then

known as Zaire, in 1994 after Kagame's Tutsi-led army seized power in Rwanda and ended a campaign of massacres of Tutsis by Hutu troops and militiamen that killed at least 500,000 people. Rwandan officers interviewed in Congo said the Tutsis were given a free hand by the Congolese rebels to attack the Rwandan Hutus -- many of whom were former Rwandan soldiers and militiamen who participated in the 1994 genocide -- in exchange for backing the war against Mobutu.

While not denying the possibility of individual atrocities, Kagame accused U.N. officials who have leveled massacre charges against Rwandan army and Congolese rebel forces of fallaciously trying to equate their behavior with the genocide that Hutu extremists carried out in Rwanda.

"It is my strong belief that the United Nations people are trying to deflect the blame for failures of their own making onto us," he said. "Their failure to act in eastern Zaire directly caused these problems, and when things blew up in their faces they blamed us. These are people who want to be judges and nobody can judge them."

Kagame, who holds the titles of vice president and defense minister and is Rwanda's most powerful leader, said that months before war erupted, he warned the United States that Rwanda would take military action against Mobutu's regime and the refugee camps in eastern Congo that were being used as a base by the Hutu troops Kagame had defeated. As many as 1.1 million Hutus were housed by late 1996 in camps in eastern Congo.

While Kagame said he was unaware of any American military support for the rebellion, he commended the United States for "taking the right decisions to let it proceed."

Kagame, who studied at the U.S. Army Command and General

Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., in 1990, has directed military campaigns before. In the 1994 war in Rwanda, he led a rebel force of 8,000 -- predominantly Rwandan Tutsi exiles who had been given sanctuary and training in Uganda -- against a 30,000-strong, Hutu-dominated government army that was trained and equipped by France and backed by tens of thousands of armed Hutu militiamen. U.S. Army Gen. George Joulwan, the supreme commander of NATO forces, has described Kagame as "a visionary," a perception shared by other American and Western military officers.

The decision to prepare for a second war, Kagame said, was made in 1996, although rebels in Congo have said they were training for a year before the uprising began in October. The impetus for the war, Kagame said, was the Hutu refugee camps. Hutu militiamen used the camps as bases from which they launched raids into Rwanda, and Kagame said the Hutus had been buying weapons and preparing a full-scale invasion of Rwanda.

Kagame said that he and other Rwandan officials attempted to persuade the United Nations and Western countries to demilitarize the refugee camps and separate the Hutu troops from the real refugees. But, he said, "they were insensitive." He added: "We told them clearly: 'Either you do something about the camps, or you face the consequences.' "

In early August 1996, Kagame traveled to New York and Washington, where he said he met with State Department officials and "other people" in the Clinton administration. "I was looking for a solution from them," he said. "They didn't come up with any answers, not even suggestions." Kagame said he returned home sensing that war was inevitable.

[A State Department official said Tuesday that Kagame told officials during his visit that the camps had to be dismantled and that if the United Nations would not remove them somebody else would have to do it, staff writer Thomas W. Lippman reported from Washington.]

The Rwandan army had already begun training Tutsis from Congo who had been the target of attacks by Congolese Hutus for more than three years. Meanwhile, Rwandan agents started making contact with other Congolese rebel forces opposed to Mobutu. Slowly, the organization that would be known as the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo began to take shape.

Kagame said most of the guerrillas in the alliance were Congolese but that key units belonged to the Rwandan army. "The main bulk of the force was [Congolese] forces except when there was a need for precision, for things to happen in a precise way," he said.

The alliance's opportunity came in early October when the Rwandans received information of a plan by the Hutus in Congo to attack the Banyamulenge, a group of Congolese Tutsis who live near Uvira and Bukavu, south of Goma. Agents also learned of a plan, Kagame said, to invade Rwanda with 100,000 Hutus, including 40,000 who had been members of the Rwandan army that Kagame vanquished in 1994.

Kagame dispatched Rwandan Tutsis who were related to the Congolese Tutsis near Uvira with messages instructing them to prepare for war. He also sent weapons and reinforcements. When the rebellion erupted in early October in the village of Lemera just north of Uvira, Kagame said, his enemies "were stunned by the effectiveness of the Rwandan and the Rwandan-

trained troops."

Kagame said the battle plan as formulated by him and his advisers was simple. The first goal was to "dismantle the camps." The second was to "destroy the structure" of the Hutu army and militia units based in and around the camps either by bringing the Hutu combatants back to Rwanda and "dealing with them here or scattering them."

The third goal was broader -- toppling Mobutu. Kagame said, "it would have been more suitable" if Congolese rebels had done most of the fighting against Mobutu's troops, but it also would have been riskier.

"I don't think they were fully prepared to carry it out alone," he said. "We did continue to take some role because we thought doing it halfway would be very dangerous. We found the best way was to take it to the end." The Rwandans were backed in this final aim by Angola, which also contributed troops and arms to the rebels and pushed the rebels to take Kinshasa.

The towns of eastern Congo fell quickly to the rebels. But then came the threat Kagame said he feared most -- talk of a U.S.-backed international intervention force for eastern Congo.

While Canadian, American and British diplomats and officers trooped through Kagame's office in Kigali, talking about the multinational force, he prepared a scheme to bury the plan. It unfolded on Nov. 15, when rebel forces attacked the huge Mugunga refugee camp near Goma from the west, giving most of the more than 500,000 refugees there only one way to flee -- home to Rwanda.

Kagame declined to go into detail about how Kabila, a Congolese native and longtime Mobutu foe, came to be leader of the alliance. But he strongly implied that such a figure was needed if

the war was to be won. "The people of Zaire were simply tired of the regime," he said. "As long as the people at the forefront were Zairian, the rebellion was going to be easy."

Kagame said the question of who ran the offensive was a complex one. He acknowledged that James Kabari, whom Western and Congolese military officers point to as the senior commander, is a Rwandan army officer. "He's been assigned to help the army of Congo," Kagame said. "He's been requested to organize the army, training. He's one of many able commanders we've had around."

A senior Congolese officer whom Congolese government officials have identified as the top commander of the alliance, Gen. Nindaga Masasu, Kagame said, served in the Rwandan army.

Kagame said the fighting in Congo was bloodier than had been reported. Battles in the east around the towns of Walikale and Lubutu were "serious and intense," he said. In Bafwasende, a town at an important crossroads 140 miles east of Kisangani, thousands of troops were fighting for five days, he added. Lumbumbashi, in the south, fell after three to four days of battle, he said.

And in Kenge, 100 miles east of Kinshasa, 1,500 Angolan mercenaries from the Mobutu-backed UNITA rebel movement battled 600 Rwandan army troops for 10 hours in mid-May before the Angolans fled, he said. Kagame said Rwandan troops were used in the final march into Kinshasa because "we didn't want to take any chances." The Rwandan troops sped into the city "to fulfill the requirements of the Americans for a soft landing -- no killing of civilians," Kagame said.

"These are some of the things we had to do," Kagame said, summing up the war he planned. "They may not be popular, but

we are more interested in the results than with the stories about the results."

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