

Former rebels put Rwanda under spotlight

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Rwanda has sought to portray itself as little more than a bystander to the scenes of advancing rebels forcing refugees to flee that are unfolding again over the border in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

But in interviews with the Financial Times, former rebels and observers on the ground say the uprising – led by Laurent Nkunda, the renegade former Congolese general – relies heavily on recruitment in Rwanda and former or even active Rwandan soldiers.

Former rebels point to a close but complex relationship in which Rwanda's government is able to exert considerable leverage on Mr Nkunda. Diplomats say Paul Kagame, the Rwandan president, personally intervened to dissuade the rebel commander from over-running Goma when he reached the edge of the city late last month .

Yet, publicly, Mr Kagame has sought to distance Rwanda from the Congo crisis and international diplomatic efforts to resolve it. At a press conference in Kigali last week he said: "What have I to do with what is going on in the Congo?"

The answer lies partly in the hillside villages and refugee camps in Rwanda that are a vital recruiting ground for Mr Nkunda's CNDP movement. Former rebels say that in recent years he has recruited Congolese Tutsi refugees there, as well as Rwandan nationals, many of whom are former soldiers acting as mercenaries. Military experts say Rwandans make up at least a quarter of his 4,000-6,000-strong army.

One Rwandan told the FT he had left his cassava farm in March to join six countrymen in the rebellion. "I was looking for money," said the former Rwandan army soldier. "There was no payment – that's why I left."

The United Nations mission in Congo says 73 Rwandans, mainly combatants, were repatriated after leaving Mr Nkunda's forces last year. A further 76 followed between January and September 10 this year. Human-rights workers say many more are likely to stay in the rebel ranks. Those that have left say would-be deserters are beaten or executed.

Louise Mushikiwabo, the Rwandan information minister, dismissed the testimonies of former CNDP fighters as not "credible" and told the FT: "There is zero involvement of Rwanda in CNDP."

Rwanda says any recruitment on its territory is clandestine and without its support. But human-rights activists say it could try harder to stop recruitment. UN officials suspect that the CNDP has a network of financial backers that stretches from Rwanda to South Africa and the US.

According to another rebel who recently deserted, units of Rwandan soldiers have fought next to Mr Nkunda's forces during the past few years. "There were groups of soldiers from Rwanda who were with us," he said.

He said his uncle, a Rwandan army officer, continued to receive his salary while fighting with Mr Nkunda, and that Rwandan troops who wanted to visit home were given border passes by the Rwandan government

Other former fighters have described using razor blades to remove the Rwandan flag from uniforms sent to the rebel forces.

Evidence of more recent Rwandan support surfaced on October 29, when Uruguayan peacekeepers and international journalists reported seeing Rwandan tanks and artillery firing across the border at Congolese troops defending Goma.

Mr Nkunda's latest offensive secured a chunk of territory that connects the plateau around his headquarters with a strip of land along the border that might ease infiltration of fighters or weapons from Rwanda.

Mr Nkunda and Rwanda's government, military and business elite share a history from before the 1994 genocide of Rwanda's Tutsi minority. Mr Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi, was an intelligence officer in the guerrilla army that Mr Kagame, a Rwandan Tutsi, used to stop the massacre and seize power.

Mr Kagame launched invasions of Congo in 1996 and 1998 and supported uprisings that Rwandan officials maintain were aimed at neutralising the threat posed by ethnic Hutu fighters who fled following the genocide.

The Congolese government of Joseph Kabila, the president, has periodically adopted the exiled Hutu militias to bolster its weak authority in the east - putting it at odds with Kigali.

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