

## Are Rwandan Army Troops in Congo? Q-and-A

### *Human Rights Watch Explains*

(New York, December 4, 2004) — Rwandan troops have invaded the Democratic Republic of Congo twice in the last decade. Press reports indicate that Rwanda troops have again crossed into Congo. Violence and instability in Congo have claimed the lives of three million people in the last five years and the dispatch of United Nations peacekeepers to eastern Congo has not brought stability to the region.

Veteran Rwanda expert Alison Des Forges, a senior advisor to Human Rights Watch's Africa division and recipient of a 1999 MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, discusses current events in Rwanda and the Congo in a Q-and-A attached below.

Are Rwandan troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

The evidence says yes. The United Nations peacekeeping force in Congo, MONUC, has aerial photographs of well-armed soldiers, who are not from the Congolese army, in northeastern Congo. Congolese living in the region identify the soldiers as part of the Rwandan Defense Force (RDF). Combat has been reported in this region during the last week. Since December 1, some wounded RDF soldiers have been treated at a hospital in Gisenyi, the Rwandan town nearest this part of northeastern Congo.

What do Rwandan authorities say?

Rwandan authorities deny the presence of their troops in Congo, but in a late November letter to the African Union, Rwandan President Paul Kagame said that if Rwanda sent troops into the Congo, they would be home within two weeks. He left it unclear whether troops had already crossed into the Congo. In a speech before the Rwandan senate on November 30, President Kagame said it was possible that such military operations had already begun. The same day a Rwandan letter to the UN Security Council sought to justify military operations in the Congo, but again left unclear whether they had begun. Privately Rwandan officials talk of "surgical strikes" taking place into Congo.

Why are Rwandan army troops in the Congo?

This is the third time Rwanda has sent its soldiers into the Congo (1996, 1998, 2004), each time saying it is protecting its own security. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi-led party, took control of Rwanda in 1994 after defeating a Hutu-led government that carried out genocide against Tutsi. Rwanda says it is threatened by remnants of the defeated government army (Forces Armées Rwandaises, FAR), now called ex-FAR, and members of the genocidal Interahamwe militia who fled to Congo after their defeat in 1994. The Congolese government says Rwanda seeks control of Congolese mineral wealth.

What are Rwandan rebel groups doing in the Congo?

The original group of soldiers and militia chased from Rwanda in 1994 has been much reduced by death and desertions over the last decade. But it has been joined by new Rwandan recruits not involved in the 1994 genocide but opposed to the current Rwandan government. Many of them are part of a movement known as the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) that says it seeks a return to Rwanda by negotiation or by force.

Others of the original group operate as armed bands, exercising control over local Congolese communities and sometimes committing abuses against Congolese civilians, including

killings, rape, and looting. Still others have integrated into local communities and live by farming or trade.

Why is the Rwandan army conducting military operations in the Congo now?

The Rwandan government says the FDLR fired shells from Congo into Rwanda on November 15. It has been confirmed that shells were fired, but it is not clear by whom or for what reason. It also alleges other unspecified violations of its territory. Rwanda already showed signs of intervening again in the Congo in June and in August, but was dissuaded by international pressure from doing so. Rwandan influence, important for political, economic, and military reasons, has been exercised in part through its local ally, the Rally for Congolese Democracy-Goma (RCD-Goma). In recent months, RCD-Goma has been weakened by internal splits and by the loss of administrative and military control over South Kivu. Rwandan military presence, even if only temporary, serves as a reminder of continuing Rwandan interest in the area.

Didn't Rwanda and Congo just sign a peace accord?

Rwanda and Congo have signed several peace agreements, most recently at a major regional conference on November 20, and have set up mechanisms to resolve problems like that of the shells fired on November 15. In terms of the larger issue of armed Rwandan groups in eastern Congo, the UN peacekeeping force, together with the Congolese army, began a new disarmament operation in South Kivu meant to persuade these combatants to return to civilian life just weeks before the recent Rwandan operations. The disarmament effort, which faces serious problems, has not yet had a chance to prove its usefulness and may find its hope for success significantly diminished by the Rwandan operations.

What do military operations mean for ordinary people in the combat zone?

More death, injury, and misery. An estimated three million civilians have died as a result of the last five years of war in the Congo. Rwandan officials say their "surgical strikes" will target only FDLR, but distinguishing combatants from civilian populations is often difficult. In addition, civilians are frequently caught between demands for assistance from competing forces and end up being punished for having given—or for being suspected of having given—aid to the other side. In the last week, there have been reports of villages burned and of civilians killed. Thousands of civilians have fled the combat zone, reporting that heavy weapons are being used in the clashes. Some will seek safety in the forest, others in the towns. Some may cross into neighboring countries, Rwanda, Uganda, or Burundi. All will live in misery until they can go home where they may find the little property they had amassed since the last round of war gone or destroyed.

What could be the impact on ethnic tensions in the region?

Fear and hatred between ethnic groups has risen sharply in eastern Congo in the last six months. News of a Rwandan military presence will further spark anger towards Congolese of Rwandan origin, particularly those who are Tutsi. Congolese of other groups believe that Congolese Tutsi—and a related people known as the Banyamulenge—will support a Rwandan invasion of their country. In the past two wars, many Congolese of Rwandan origin, especially the Tutsi among them, did in fact cooperate with Rwandan soldiers and their local ally, the RCD-Goma. In addition, Tutsi and Hutu in neighboring Burundi appear to be moving gingerly towards constitutional arrangements and elections to end ten years of strife. Rwandan military operations in the Congo, especially if they spark widespread ethnic violence, could upset the peace process in Burundi.

What can be done?

The U.N. peacekeeping force MONUC recently received a clear mandate from the Security Council to use force if necessary to protect civilians and to disarm armed combatants. The additional troops and equipment needed to make this possible are just arriving in the Congo and must be hurried to the east. The United Nations Security Council, international leaders, including President Olesegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and President Thado Mbeki of South Africa as well as U.S. and European leaders, must redouble their efforts to calm the situation by urging Rwanda to keep its troops at home and by urging the Congolese government to ensure that its military or civilian officials offer no support to the armed groups. Important donor nations have agreements with Rwanda and Congo which include conditions meant to encourage peace and stability in the region; in the past they have interrupted their aid when these conditions were not met and they should be prepared to do so again.