

US threatens Rwandan President Kagame over support for Congolese rebels

By Eddie Haywood
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Last week the US Office of Global Justice warned the administration of Rwandan President Paul Kagame that it could face prosecution on war crimes charges if it continues to support M23, a rebel militia operating near Goma in Eastern Congo's Kivu province.

Stephen Rapp, the chief of the US Office of Global Justice, the entity responsible for the prosecution of war crimes, told the Guardian last week that “the Rwandan leadership may be subjected to charges of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity” for arming the M23 militia.

Following Rapp's statements, the Obama administration declared that it would end part of its military aid program to Rwanda, after a UN report was published outlining Rwanda's current leadership's active involvement in supporting the M23 rebels. The Obama administration had been accused of refusing to release the report to conceal Rwanda's involvement. The report has been leaked to the media, however.

In an emailed statement, US State Department spokeswoman Helen Fuller Renner said: “The United States government is deeply concerned about the evidence that Rwanda is implicated in the provision of support to Congolese rebel groups, including M23. We will not obligate \$200,000 in Fiscal Year 2012 Foreign Military Financing funds that were intended to support a Rwandan academy for non-commissioned officers. These funds will be reallocated for programming in another country.”

The M23 force is led by Rwandan-born General Bosco Ntaganda, a former member of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA)—the military arm of Kagame's movement, which took power during the 1994 civil war and genocide in Rwanda. He then allegedly joined the military wing of the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), a Rwandan- and Ugandan-backed militia active

during the Congo wars of the early 2000s.

Nicknamed the “Terminator”, Ntaganda has been sought by the International Criminal Court since 2006 for crimes against humanity, including the procurement of child soldiers.

In April, Ntaganda led soldiers in a “mutiny” against US-backed forces in the Congolese army. Made up of a former rebel militia in the Congo, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), the rebels now call themselves M23, or March 23 Movement, taken after their March 23, 2009 peace agreement with the Congolese government. The mutiny reportedly occurred due to dissatisfaction among the troops with the Congolese army and with low pay.

The rebels have conquered several towns in Eastern Congo near the Ugandan border. It is expected that the militia will take the provincial capital of Goma.

Washington's hypocrisy is on full display, given that the US has supported the Kagame regime for nearly two decades since it came to power—despite widely publicized allegations that it committed war crimes during its invasion of Rwanda in 1994 and incursions into the Congo. The sudden claim of US outrage at Rwanda's support for rebels accused of committing atrocities in Southern Congo is entirely cynical.

Rwanda has a history of carrying out Washington's bidding in the region, including by deploying its military forces in Darfur, Sudan, supposedly to support US “peacekeeping” efforts. Rwanda has received explicit US support and praise under several US presidents, including Obama. The US has extensively funded its Rwandan proxy, including providing military aid for armaments and training.

The sudden about-face of the US stance towards its Rwandan proxy must be viewed in the context of the broader intervention by Washington and its allies in

Africa—including the ouster last year of Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo and particularly the NATO war in Libya.

Rwanda's support of Ntaganda and M23 has become no longer “convenient” for Washington. What this development shows is how quickly the US can turn on a former ally. As with the US-backed military aggression which resulted in aggression against Libya and the murder of Gaddafi, Kagame faces the threat of regime change.

Washington's criticisms of Kagame come amid an escalating assertion of US imperialist interests in Central Africa. As the World Socialist Web Site reported last October, Washington deployed “special operations” troops to the region, under the false pretext of “neutralizing Joseph Kony” the leader of the Ugandan rebel group Lord's Resistance Army, a militia accused of war crimes.

A major goal of US operations in Africa is to block the spreading influence of China, which has made significant economic inroads on the continent. Washington's criticisms of Rwanda have come amid escalating concerns over Rwandan economic ties with China. (See: “Tensions emerge between Rwanda and Western backers”)

US State Department cables released by Wikileaks show that Washington has been keeping a close watch on Rwanda-China economic ties.

Referring to meetings by Rwandan officials with a Chinese delegation, the cables took note of Rwanda's economic agreements with China and loans from Beijing for the construction of buildings to house the Office of Foreign Affairs and to finance a railway project. China also agreed to consider funding the construction of a new stadium, a women's center, and a Confucius Institute. Rwanda requested the delegation for duty-free access to Chinese markets, and Rwandan rice cultivation and road projects were discussed.

As Rwanda is a transportation gateway for the Congo's vast resources to the global market, it goes without saying that China's “control by investment” of a railway project traversing Rwanda through to a port in on the East coast of Tanzania would raise concerns in Washington.

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