

Rwanda Conscripts Burundian Refugees into New “Rebel Force”

By [Ann Garrison](#)

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Western press and officials now warn that the Rwandan massacres of 1994 are close to a replay in Rwanda's neighbor Burundi, which shares its Hutu-Tutsi-Twa demographic. Prominent Western voices blame Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza for seeking and winning a third term in office, but critics of US and EU foreign policy say that their real issues are Western firms' loss to Russian and Chinese firms in the scramble for Burundi's natural resources, most notably its nickel reserves, and Burundi's geostrategic border with the the resource rich Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In “[Burundi's dangerous neighbor](#),” a letter to the Washington Post, former UN official Jeff Drumtra argues that the Rwandan government's conscription of Burundian refugees to fight in a new, so-called “rebel force” is a grave danger that the international community should recognize before it's too late.

Drumtra returned several weeks ago, from five months work in [Rwanda's Mahama Refugee Camp](#) for Burundian refugees near the Rwandan Burundian border. I spoke to him on 11.14.2015. He stressed that his employment contract with the UN had been completed several weeks before and that he was not speaking in any official capacity.

Ann Garrison: Jeff Drumtra, in your Washington Post letter, “Burundi's dangerous neighbor,” you said that you worked for five months as a UN official in [Rwanda's Mahama Refugee Camp](#) for Burundian refugees. Could you tell us what your responsibilities there were?

Jeff Drumtra: Well, Mahama Camp in Rwanda had about 45,000 Burundian refugees. It was created in April. I was part of the UN emergency team that went in there to respond to the massive Burundian refugee influx that was coming into Rwanda. And on an emergency team, you do whatever needs to be done in the first weeks and months of an emergency.

So, my primary responsibilities were to deal with journalists coming to the camp, and it was a very high profile camp. Also, facilitating visits by diplomats, representatives of other governments who would come to the camp. Their money is going into paying for the international assistance that the UN was providing.

I was also filing daily reports for the UN team. These were internal reports, within the UN system, things that were going on in the camp every day. Progress being made to deal with health issues, nutrition, food distribution, shelter, water, sanitation. All of this has to be set up in the first weeks and months of creating a refugee camp.

But another part of my responsibilities was to do what we call “protection,” which means to try to monitor the physical safety of refugees in the camp and also make sure that their legal rights are not being violated, and doing that kind of protection work really gets you

into some of the more subtle issues that go on in a refugee camp.

AG: And how did you experience what you called, in your Washington Post letter, “the intimidating power of the military recruitment effort by the Rwandan government” there?

JD: Well, the military recruitment, much of it would happen at night, when international staff like myself were not in the camp. Under UN security restrictions, we’re required to leave the camp before nightfall every evening. And so a lot of this would happen at night but we would gradually piece together what was happening, as refugees who were very afraid of being forced into a rebel army, forced to go into combat, would come to talk to us with their fears, their concerns. And we gradually pieced together the story of what was happening, and various eyewitness accounts from the refugees themselves, of who was involved in this massive recruitment effort and it gradually became clearer and clearer to us that this was not just a few refugees who were trying to recruit a rebel force, but that there was the hand of the Rwandan government involved. Police officers, intelligence officers.

And certainly I felt the effects of that. I had refugees coming to me who were extremely afraid, very much afraid of what might happen to them.

AG: Do you mean what might happen to them if they refused the recruitment?

JD: What might happen to them if they refused to be recruited. They did receive death threats, telling them that “you really have no choice, you *must* agree to join the force that’s being created. So they had death threats. Some of them were afraid to sleep in their tents at night and would spend the night in the latrines, trying to escape because a lot of this would happen at night, and so they would sometimes be afraid to go into their tents at night. And so the ones who were most afraid took the risk of talking to a UN team, which itself was a risk because the UN team, including myself, was under constant surveillance in the camp by Rwandan government officials. And so we certainly felt the effects of that surveillance and it made our work more difficult, but gradually we did piece together what was happening in terms of recruitment, usually refugee young males, middle aged males being moved out of the camp, presumably for military training and then onward for whatever the eventual mission was meant to be.

AG: And these were Burundian refugees being drafted by the Rwandan army for some kind of mission in Burundi. Right?

JD: They were Burundian refugees being conscripted by Rwandan officials to form their own rebel force. We saw no evidence that these individuals, these refugees, were integrated into the Rwandan military. That’s not what we think was happening or is happening. Instead it was the creation of a new rebel force that was being put together under the guiding hand of Rwandan officials.

AG: You also wrote that “UN officials and the US government are aware of the Rwandan government’s recruitment campaign.” Could you explain how UN officials and the US government know, and how you know that they know?

JD: Well, UN officials know because they were receiving the regular reporting that was coming from my team, and we were reporting on a daily and then a weekly and a monthly basis. And we would analyze this and we would report this up the chain, and so we know that UN officials at higher levels knew about this because they had access to the internal

reporting that we were generating.

US officials and officials of other governments who visited the camp knew about this eventually because they said they did. They would ask about it. They had heard about it.

There was some [coverage of this issue](#) as early as late July by some members of the international media. Not the US media, but the international media. And so close observers of the situation in Rwanda and Burundi began to understand what was happening as early as late July. Now those of us working in the camp every day began to understand in early June.

But foreign diplomats would come to the camp because, again, their governments were providing financial support to the humanitarian assistance effort, so they would come to the camp and want to look around and see how their money was being used. And inevitably, during their visit, this issue would come up. They would ask about it. So they knew.

They oftentimes did not know how the recruitment was happening or how pervasive it was, but, by midsummer, some of the more astute governments paying close attention had figured out that some kind of military recruitment was happening in Mahama Refugee Camp.

AG: And why is it significant that the UN and the US government are aware of this?

JD: Well, it's significant that governments are aware of this because, if they are aware of it, then they can exert pressure. They can exert diplomatic pressure either behind the scenes, quietly, on the Rwandan government to cease this activity, or if that doesn't work, they can go more public.

My impression is that, up to this point in time, the pressure that they have exerted has been more behind the scenes. Constructive diplomacy, if you will. And it has not stopped the recruitment. At times perhaps it slowed down the recruitment but it most certainly has not brought the military recruitment to a stop. And, ultimately, some of the governments, including the US government could always take a stronger position, going beyond just quiet diplomacy or even public diplomacy but getting to the point of considering sanctions against the Rwandan government.

So those are all tools that the US government has and whether they are ready to use those tools or not, I don't know. I don't have access to their internal discussions. But it's significant that they know it, because they can't come back – governments can't come back – months from now when it's too late and say they didn't know about this. They do know about it. We know they know about it. They've asked about it. And I think some governments have other methods to monitor the situation and collect information on this kind of activity. So, it's not a secret, and it needs to be talked about more openly to try to impose some accountability.

AG: Did you see any sign that the US is actually encouraging the recruitment?

JD: That the US is encouraging the recruitment?

AG: Yes, the US has a historically very close relationship with the Rwandan military, and there are many people who believe this. But, that doesn't mean it's true.

JD: No, I saw no signs of that, and this is the first time that notion has ever even been

presented to me. Every indication that I ever had, both when I was in Rwanda, as well as since returning from Rwanda, a couple weeks ago, is that the US government is extremely concerned about military recruitment in Rwanda and in Mahama Camp. I've never had any sense that the US government would support that. But I'm not inside the US government, so I can't speak authoritatively on that.

AG: Is it possible that easing the tension is best left to Rwandans and Burundians?

JD: I think this is an issue that needs international diplomatic attention, including by the US government, and it is possible that diplomatic pressure by the UN and others has already had some beneficial effect. There is not as yet a full blown rebel invasion into Burundi.

There is violence, perhaps there are things going on, but there were periods of time when the recruitment in the camp did slow down. We can only guess about the reasons, but perhaps diplomatic pressure played a role. But there was always the sense that the recruitment network remained in place and that the recruitment network would continue to function, and I think that's proven to be the case right up to the current time.

AG: Today, Agence France Presse reported that Burundian insurgents, quote unquote "Burundian insurgents," boasted of firing mortars at the presidential palace in Bujumbura. That is, at President Nkurunziza's residence. Do you have anything to say about what this could mean?

JD: Well, it's hard for me to analyze that because that happened inside Burundi. I was on the other side of the border in Rwanda, but I can say, having worked on issues of Rwanda and Burundi on and off for more than 20 years, that we know, historically, that the violence gets worse and the risk of mass atrocities becomes much more serious when both sides feel that they have been victimized. And so, a mortar attack on the presidential palace. . . if it were to hit its mark and actually create a large number of deaths, or even the death of a president . . . would certainly create a situation where the ruling party and everyone who voted for the ruling party in Burundi would feel victimized at a whole new level. And if something like that were to happen, that's when, historically, violence in Burundi becomes much worse, and that's what everybody fears here.

Up to this point, the violence in Burundi has largely been political in nature. There's always an ethnic tinge to it, but it's largely political. But everyone's fear is that the violence in Burundi could flip into wholesale ethnic violence. And, if that were to happen, then all bets are off, because we've seen back in the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, Burundi can produce tens of thousands of refugees in a single weekend. It can produce hundreds of thousands of new refugees in a matter of weeks. It can produce tens of thousands of deaths of innocent people in a short period of time, if the violence escalates to a whole new level. The violence in Burundi now is bad but it is not as bad as it could get, and if both sides see themselves as victims, then they lash out very strongly at each other.

KPFA: By both sides, you mean Hutu and Tutsi?

JD: If it gets to that, yes.

KPFA: If it gets to that.

JD: If it becomes totally ethnic in character. Right now, as I said, there's an ethnic undercurrent but it seems largely politically oriented. There are plenty of Hutu in Burundi

who oppose the ruling party and the third term of the president. But if you were to have a wholesale invasion of Burundi by an army organized by the government of Rwanda and sent into Burundi – Burundian refugees – that would tilt the dynamics of the violence in Burundi instantaneously. And that’s what everybody fears.

AG: OK, is there anything else you’d like to say?

JD: Yes. This is an issue that has not gotten attention in the media. The attention it has gotten has largely been from European media. It does need more attention here in the United States and I’m encouraged that you’re looking at this and I hope that it will stimulate more coverage from other American media because there is potential for this to get out of hand very quickly.

It oftentimes felt very lonely, and very isolated there at Mahama Camp. It’s a remote area anyway, and you always wonder who’s really paying attention. You file your reports but sometimes you wonder who’s reading them. But, little by little, I think that, hopefully, pressure’s being put on the government.

AG: Well, it’s courageous of you to speak. It’s courageous of you to have even filed the reports there, because the Rwandan government is known to disappear people. I think you’re pretty safe here in Maryland, but in Mahama Refugee Camp, they could just say, “He’s gone and we don’t know where. We can’t be responsible for everybody.”

JD: It’s something that we thought about and we talked about at critical moments. We were aware. Like I say, you’re weighing risks every single day, on things large and small. Risk to yourself, risk to the refugees, risk to your co-workers. Every step you take, in a way, has to be thought through in advance. So, it continues here in the States. I feel like I’ve brought Rwanda back with me for better or worse.

Update: On Monday, 11.23.2015, President Obama issued an [Executive Order](#) imposing sanctions on two Burundian military officers and two former Burundian military officers who have joined the current insurgency. The order did not sanction any Rwandan officers and made no mention of Rwanda’s role in the conflict.

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