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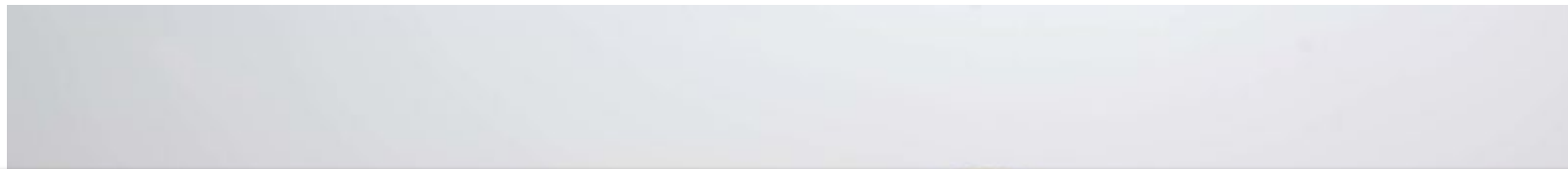


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[Guest blog] General Mudacumura: the death of a most-wanted

KST on September 18, 2019



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Christoph Vogel is a researcher and investigator specialising on DRC's armed groups. A former member of the UN security council group of experts, he currently works with the Conflict research programme based at London school of economics and Ghent University (Belgium).

This morning, around 5am, the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda's (FDLR) long-standing overall military commander Lt.-Gen. Sylvestre Mudacumura (also known by his *noms de guerre* Bernard Mupenzi and Pharaon) has been killed in a raid near Bwito-Monument, a small locality in southern Bwito

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Mudacumura has been one of the most-wanted armed group leaders and war criminals in the past 25 years. Indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes committed by the FDLR and its predecessors (ALiR I/II, RDR. ex-FAR/*interahamwe*) in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mudacumura was also one of

the few known Rwandan *génocidaires* still at large. Born in today's Rubavu area of Rwanda in 1954, the young Mudacumura made a fulminant military career in the Rwanda of the 1980s. Interrupted by military training in Germany specialising on transmissions (journalist Simone Schlindwein, in her book, recounts how much later he would still greet his troops in German), Mudacumura made it into former Rwandan president Habyarimana's presidential guard, temporarily serving as a personal bodyguard. During the 1994 genocide, Mudacumura is suspected to have played a commanding role in several killing operations.

As the RPF was progressing and pushing back the then-Rwandan army and the *interahamwe*, he managed to flee and cross the border into then-Zaire. Ever since, he has risen the ranks of the Rwandan rebel groups formed out of the *génocidaires*, effectively becoming the military commander of the FDLR in the mid-2000s, as his predecessor Paul Rwarakabije demobilized and returned to Rwanda. A few years later, in 2009, joint Rwando-Congolese military operations dubbed Umoja Wetu inflicted serious losses to the group which hitherto controlled vast parts of eastern Congo's Kivu provinces. In 2012, the ICC issued an international arrest warrant against Mudacumura. He also figures – alongside 8 other key genocide suspects – on a US-issued most-wanted list. On the ground, this coincided roughly with a further blow to the FDLR, as the nascent Raia Mutomboki militia in Walikale, Shabunda and Kalehe areas were able to further weaken the Rwandan group. Ever since, the FDLR has been mainly based out of northern Masisi and western Rutshuru areas, including with key strongholds in the Virunga National Park.

While the FDLR has been feared for large-scale massacres throughout most of the 2000s, the group changed strategy in the face of growing military pressure. In the current decade, it has mainly tried to stand away from military confrontation and limit attacks and human rights abuses so as to diminish international

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mobilisation. Ever since, it has focused revenue generation on a fine-grained system they internally refer to as 'logistique non-conventionnelle' (LNC). It includes legal business such as agriculture, herding and local retail trade as well as systems of forced taxation, trade in cannabis, charcoal and woods – often in

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...can trade as well as systems of forced taxation, trade in minerals, charcoal and wood ... collaboration with Congolese armed groups, army units and local traders. LNC has permitted the FDLR to maintain purchases of ammunition in an era of shrinking revenue and as outside support (such as through diaspora organisations) has become more difficult due to scrutiny over financial transactions. However, increasing economic pressure also led the FDLR to carry out kidnappings, mostly notably in mid-2018, when their abduction of two British tourists led to the temporary closure of Virunga National Park. By the mid 2010's, the FDLR possibly had around 2000-3000 combatants, more weapons than soldiers in many of its units but severely lacked supply in ammunition which they would mostly gather in small quantities from individual Congolese army officers.

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In the past couple of years, the FDLR's position kept weakening for a couple of converging reasons. After the demise of the M23 rebellion, Kinshasa, regional governments and the UN agreed on putting the FDLR top of the list of armed groups that needed to be forcefully disarmed for the sake of local and regional stabilisation. Yet, UN-backed operations of the Congolese army (FARDC) began against the Ugandan-originating ADF in Beni area and subsequently planned FDLR operations fell apart in a row between UN peacekeeping forces and the FARDC. Nonetheless, the Congolese army began unilateral operations in late 2014, known as Sukola II. In parallel, newly emerging Congolese armed groups – in particular a splinter faction of Sheka Ntabo Ntaberi led by Guidon Shimiray as well as the various Mazembe militia in Lubero area – began tracking down FDLR units on their side. Having lost key headquarters in Mumo and Ihula by 2016, the FDLR kept control over parts of northern Masisi and western Rutshuru. At this point, deeply entrenched internal divisions – reflecting both the regionalist split between northern and southern Rwandans in the leadership as well as diverging attitudes to repatriation of civilian Rwandan refugees which the FDLR claims to represent – led to a major split (previous defections had happened in the 2000s, prompting the FDLR-Soki and the RUD-

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Ever since, the FDLR and its armed wing FOCA (*Forces Combattantes Abacunguzi*) became limited to a triangle between Nyanzale, Kitchanga and Rutshuru town. Mostly situated inside Virunga National Park, this

triangle between Nyanzale, Kitchanga and Kitchanga town. Mostly situated inside Virunga National Park, this area had been a home turf to the group for many years – helping the FDLR’s hide-and-run strategy when facing military pressure. Several operations to catch Mudacumura or other senior leaders between 2014 and 2018 failed due to the FDLR’s superior knowledge of the terrain but also in sequence to leaks out of the Congolese army and the UN. Bolstering their stamina in western and southern Rutshuru, the FDLR also tied an efficient web of Congolese Hutu militia – often collectively referred to as Nyatura (‘hit hard’/‘hard sticks’) – especially the CMC coalition including Dominique Ndaruhutse and the late John Love. Using its infrastructure (especially what remains from the FDLR’s training wing called ‘Groupement des Ecoles’), the FDLR formed hundreds of Nyatura recruits who in turn would form a *cordon sanitaire* around the FDLR’s positions and taking the bulk of fighting against FARDC, NDC–R, Mazembe and other enemy forces. Yet, pressure on the FDLR/CMC alliance mounted in 2017 and 2018 as Guidon Shimiray’s NDC–R flamboyantly progressed to take control over most of southern Lubero and eastern Walikale. In early 2019, the NDC–R further expanded into northern Masisi, dislodging first the FDLR’s former CNRD brothers-in-arms as well as the Nyatura groups of Kavumbi, Jean-Marie and Nzayi (part of which were incorporated into Guidon’s troops). Throughout the Sukola II era, the FARDC focused increasingly on capturing individual FDLR top brass (including Vainqueur, Mudacumura’s former personal guard chief, intelligence chief Sophonie Mucebo, General Leopold Mujiyambere or most recently the FDLR’s spokesperson Laforge Fils Bazeye). With the FDLR cut in half and under strong pressure since 2016, these losses have further weakened the organisational and military capacity of the group, whose only serious combat force to date is the Maccabe unit composed of its special forces. Occasional joint operations between Congolese and Rwandan army units have happened as well, but were mostly not officially declared – such as most recently throughout the first half of 2019 in Rutshuru area.

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Throughout the past months, clashes circled in around Kitchanga and Mweso, two major towns located just

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were reported into Bukombo area from units wearing FARDC uniforms. Today at 5am, Mudacumura was killed in Bwito-Monument. The event took place in presence of several other high-ranking FDLR

commanders, two of which have been killed according to FARDC sources, while others may be on the run as combats have continued throughout the zone during the day. Media and observers have been in disagreement over whom has taken out Mudacumura. While some point at Guidon's NDC-R, others have mentioned FARDC commando troops in a joint operation with Rwandan special forces. Given that the area is highly inaccessible, early affirmations are to be taken with a pinch of salt. Looking at historical operational dynamics in the area, however, it would not be surprising if all of this is true to a certain extent and various belligerents be involved either directly or indirectly in Mudacumura's killing. It is not known, however, whether Mudacumura has been killed because he resisted arrest or whether this was the actual objective of the raid.

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A couple of points are particularly striking: in dozens of attempts, this is the first successful not only in getting to Mudacumura but actually eliminating him. Secondly, if it weren't for official confirmation and a few well-placed local sources, it may be impossible to authenticate Mudacumura's killing – pictures used for his arrest warrant are all 20+ years old and he has been particularly successful not only in escaping arrest but also in camouflaging himself and his whereabouts. Third, he was wearing a Rwandan army uniform while killed, indicating that in its last unsuccessful raids into Rwanda, FDLR special forces may at least have pillaged a small army warehouse. Fourth, UN troops seem not to be involved in the operation.

In sum, whoever of all potentially participating forces carried out the actual killing, this represents another major blow to the FDLR. While subsequent military operations and pressure from Congolese armed groups have diminished the FDLR in size, territory and capabilities, the loss of key leaders – including convicted Ignace Murwanashyaka who died in a German prison earlier in 2019 – is not to be underestimated considering the group's emphasis on bureaucratic and hierarchical structures (even after 20+ years based in Congolese forest, the FDLR keeps meticulous records on stockpiles, units, activities and internal commands).

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in operational military affairs. Moreover, he has been a key ideological pillar inside the group, especially after the CNRD split that left the FDLR increasingly dominated by Mudacumura and interim president Victor

Byiringiro.

Whether or not this is the end of the FDLR is difficult to tell. Relying on internal cohesion and ideology, the group has often managed to rebound and survive after previous blows. However, the loss of its evergreen leader certainly is a big piece to chew for the remaining leadership. Moreover, it is unlikely that self-declared FDLR enemies such as the NDC–R will suddenly stop their military campaign. On the other hand, the FDLR's and CMC's entrenched versatility in southern Bwito could also lead to a lengthy and protracted stand-off in the coming months.

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The Kivu Security Tracker (KST) is a joint project of the Congo Research Group, based at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, and Human Rights Watch.

The goal of the Kivu Security Tracker is to map violence by state security forces and armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to better understand trends, causes of insecurity and serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

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