

Rwanda: Ground Zero of the New U.S. Imperialism in Africa

by Masako Usui and Gena Berglund

The U.S. seems to be aiming to use Rwanda to keep neighboring Congo's commercially desirable mineral resources from China—most notably coltan which is used in the manufacture of electronic products such as cell phones, computers, DVD players and cameras.

A long-term U.S. policy in Africa is just beginning to be implemented.



64% of the world's columbite tantalite (coltran) is found in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The new U.S. Dodd-Frank Wall Street and Consumer Protection Act contains a clause obliging companies in 2012 to reveal the supply chain of "conflict materials" originating in the Congo, but there are questions about enforcement.

A widely accepted genocide narrative has been increasingly used by Rwanda's President Paul Kagame to divide the people and create fear among those who might challenge his power. In the past two Rwandan presidential elections Kagame won more than 90 percent of the vote; the most recent, which took place on August 10, 2010, is being criticized by growing numbers of governments and institutions. In the past six months Human Rights Watch documented a pattern of intimidation, harassment, and other abuses ranging from killings and arrests to restrictive administrative measures against opposition parties, journalists, members of civil society, and other critics. The British government is under increasing pressure to use the UK's substantial aid budget in Rwanda as a lever to end the civil rights abuses. The New York Times extensively described the repressive atmosphere in an August 8, 2010 story.

"In the past six months, a leading opposition figure and her American lawyer were arrested. Other popular opposition candidates were denied a chance to run for the

presidency. A dissident general was nearly assassinated in South Africa. An investigative journalist who wrote about the assassination attempt was shot in the head just hours after his story was posted on the Internet. And an opposition leader was killed and found dead along a river, his head nearly severed.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/09/world/africa/09rwanda.html> – Jeffrey Gettleman and Josh Kron

The leading opposition figure described in the article cited above is Victoire Ingabire who was trying to challenge President Kagame in last month’s presidential election. She was arrested in the preceding spring on charges of “genocidal ideology” for asking why there were no monuments to Hutu victims anywhere in Rwanda. Under the Kagame regime, only Tutsi are recognized as victims among the estimated 800,000 people who were murdered in the 1994 bloodbath involving Hutu and Tutsi. (It should be mentioned here that the division between Hutu and Tutsi is more nuanced than is often portrayed – there has been intermingling, intermarriage.) According to Human Rights Watch, it is apparent that Kagame regularly uses accusations of “genocidal ideology” to criminalize speech, stifle legitimate dissent, and prosecute or threaten people.

Underscoring this, in an ironic twist of circumstance, Victoire Ingabire’s attorney, U.S. lawyer and law professor Peter Erlinder, was also arrested when he entered Rwanda on May 28, 2010 to represent her in the charges made against her. Erlinder was held by the Rwandan government for three weeks in squalid conditions as prosecutors decided whether to charge him with “genocidal ideology,” crimes similar to those of his client’s. Indignation over the injustice of Erlinder’s arrest set off actions around the world, which put pressure on the U.S. State Department and the Rwandan government to secure his release on humanitarian grounds. Erlinder, a past president of the National Lawyers’ Guild, is the lead defense counsel of the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (UN-ICTR).

The basis for Erlinder’s arrest lay in another case he had handled – in the writings and speeches he had made in defense of Aloys Ntabakuze at the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTR) on Rwanda Ntabakuze, a former Rwandan military official, faced serious charges of genocide. Erlinder crafted his vigorous defense of Ntabakuze after discovering mountains of documents in the files of the United Nations and the U.S. government, which expose a version of events leading up to the 1994 Rwanda genocide that is dramatically different from the accepted narrative – one that the Kagame regime clearly doesn’t want recognized. (rwandadocumentsproject.net).

The documents reveal that in 1990 an invading army called the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), composed mostly of elements of the Ugandan army that were aristocratic Tutsis, marched into Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, to take over the Rwandan government in a coup d’état. The RPF continues ruling Rwanda today, with Paul Kagame, who received military training at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, as president for the past 16 years.

Interestingly, only high-ranking officials from the losing side are pursued for prosecution under the UN-created ICTR. Many of these former officials have already been apprehended, held, and charged with crimes related to the alleged genocide. According to her memoirs published in 2009, Carla Del Ponte, the chief ICTR prosecutor, was forced from her post for publicly suggesting that both parties to the Rwanda war should be held accountable for crimes. She also said that Kagame ordered the April 1994 shooting down of the plane in which President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi died – the crash is often cited as the trigger of the Rwandan genocide. Even though Kagame has been indicted in France and Spain for assassinating the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, the ICTR persists in prosecuting only the losing side of the civil war. This raises concerns over U.S.-driven bias and control of the ICTR in the U.N. Security Council.

Erlinder came on in 2003 as defense attorney for Ntabakuze shortly after Del Ponte was forced out. But Erlinder and Del Ponte are not alone in their view that official documents demonstrate that there was a multiyear Rwandan civil war, culminating in massive numbers of atrocities inflicted by both sides in the conflict. Minnesota native Robert Flaten, the former U.S. ambassador to Rwanda from 1990 to 1993, testified under oath at the ICTR that he personally warned both Kagame and Hutu President Habyarimana in November 1993 that “massacres would be the result if either side resumed the war” and also that he had “no credible information that there was a plan to carry out genocide.” And the UN Rwandan Tribunal ruled on December 18, 2008 that there was no conspiracy to commit genocide by Erlinder's client or other military leaders affiliated with the former Habyarimana government. Rather, the actions – far from a calculated genocide – were found by ICTR judges to be “war-time conditions.”

Professor Erlinder points to the documents to show how this atmosphere of repression came about. He found in those documents that the U.S. government and the United Nations were at the table when the widely accepted genocide narrative was developed, thereby assisting the RPF to maintain power in Rwanda, and giving the U.S. and Britain a strong military ally in the region. Notably, the U.S. and Britain have sent millions of dollars of government aid into Rwanda to transform and strengthen the military and civilian infrastructure. But under the cover of that physical transformation lies another Rwanda. “Kagame was engaging in massive killing of civilians, we never stopped supporting him and we are still supporting him today, although he is in my opinion the greatest killer on the face of the earth,” said Ed Herman, University of Pennsylvania professor, in a KPFA news report.

Because he thoroughly studied the documents he unearthed, Erlinder is confident he has the factual basis to criticize U.S. policy in central Africa as “a 21st century version of an old-style imperialism.” Erlinder opines that the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape, and the U.S. seems to be aiming for a mutually beneficial relationship with Rwanda to keep neighboring

Congo's commercially desirable mineral resources from China. Gold and copper are among those minerals, and so is the highly desirable columbite tantalite (coltan) which is used in the manufacture of, among other items, electronics products such as computers, cell phones, DVD players and cameras products widely consumed by Western customers). Erlinder says that in order "to secure its access to resources, the U.S. is just beginning to implement a long-term policy in Africa, similar to that implemented in South America over the past two centuries." The current U.S. policy in Africa may have already led to the deaths of 5.4 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) alone, which is more than 8 percent of the country's population of 66 million (Craig Timberg, Washington Post/Foreign Service, January 23, 2008). For more information about the connection between U.S. policy and deaths in the Congo see: U.S./U.K. Allies Grab Congo Riches and Millions Die: 2001-03 UN Expert Reports by Prof. Peter Erlinder
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=10815>

On June 16 a Rwandan court released Erlinder on humanitarian grounds. He is undeterred from offering speech critical of the U.S. role in Rwanda and the Congo. Charges against him have not yet been filed. Victoire Ingabire continues to be under virtual house arrest in Kigali, Rwanda, but no one will rent space to her, and neither is she allowed to leave Rwanda. After a seven-year trial in which he was acquitted of conspiracy and planning to commit any crimes, Aloys Ntabakuze has filed an appeal at the ICTR against his life sentence and conviction on three incidents that were not included in the indictment. Erlinder's continuing role as an ICTR defense attorney is complicated by Rwanda's aggressive prosecution of its genocide denial laws.

Online Resources - [click here](#).

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