

Uganda's Museveni takes advantage of tourist murders

by Linda de Hoyos

On March 1, eight tourists — four Britons, two New Zealanders, and two Americans — were murdered in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in the southwestern tip of Uganda, as they were on a holiday to track the rare mountain gorilla that lives there. The Ugandan government immediately attributed the murders to Rwandan Hutu rebels, organized under the Interhamwe, the Hutu militias that carried out mass murder in Rwanda in 1994.

Museveni has used the massacre to further justify the presence of his troops in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which he invaded in August 1998. The Ugandan warlord justified the aggression by stating that Uganda must secure its borders against insurgents, grouped in the Alliance of Democratic Forces, which, he claimed, were using Congo as a base and were backed by Congo President Laurent Kabila. The “right” of Uganda to deploy deep inside Congolese territory had been seconded only a few days before the massacre, on Feb. 27, by British Foreign Secretary Tony Lloyd, then visiting Uganda, who told the press that “Uganda has a genuine security stake in the Congo. . . . Uganda has genuine security concerns in the Congo.”

The international media put out the report, released by the Ugandan government, that the murders were the work of the Rwandan Interhamwe, which group no longer exists in that form, in any case. The line was put out that the attackers, who had gathered two different sets of tourists, had singled out Americans and Britons, and left behind notes on their murdered victims, accusing the United States and Britain of backing a war of extermination against Rwandan Hutus.

The story, however, leaves a lot of holes. First, as Museveni himself pointed out, “There was weakness on the government’s part. . . . Authorities concerned should have had the mind to take precautions in Bwindi.” He blamed national park authorities for failing to ask the army for protection, realizing that the area was prone to attack. The admission raises further questions:

- Since the border is secured by Ugandan and Rwandan troops far into Congolese territory, how is it possible that a group of up to 150 Rwandan Hutu rebels could penetrate this defense to cut across back into Uganda?
- And, if on the other hand, the border is insecure, and given that all the border between Uganda and Congo is a war

zone, why were tourists permitted into this war zone in the first place, and if they were, why was not the area secured?

- As pointed out by the FBI, which has come to Uganda along with Scotland Yard to investigate the murders, how did the perpetrators know the precise location of the tourists and when to attack? How did they obtain such information?

Museveni’s ‘glow is fading’

There is no question that politically, it is Yoweri Museveni who has gained from the atrocity. The Ugandan President has come under increasing pressure on a number of counts, as a feature in the *Washington Post* on Feb. 7 entitled “The Glow Is Fading,” signalled. Museveni has come under scrutiny for his refusal to deal with the insurgencies in northern Uganda; for the corruption within his own government which reaches as high as his own half-brother Gen. Salim Saleh, who was until recently special adviser to the President on defense; and to his deployment of troops into the Congo.

There are suspicions, even in environs as friendly to Museveni as Washington, that corruption and money-making, not national security, is the major reason why he is keeping the war going in northern Uganda, and why he invaded the Congo. It has been reported, by even his Rwandan allies, that the top echelons in the Ugandan military, including Museveni’s nephew, Army Chief of Staff James Kazini, are making a lot of money taking the gold and timber out of Congo, and out of southern Sudan.

The International Monetary Fund is now threatening to stop the release of a flow of money to Museveni, unless the Ugandan defense expenditure is pared down.

With the massacre, Museveni appears to be looking to breathe new life into his militarist aims. As one knowledgeable observer pointed out, Museveni had used the specter of “Islamic fundamentalism” in neighboring Sudan to garner the military and financial support from Washington; with that pretext waning, he wants to use an “Interhamwe” bogeyman for the same purpose. Museveni vowed to hunt and kill all the “Interhamwe” forces in the region, and reported that combined Rwandan and Ugandan forces have already killed 30. However, their guilt in this massacre has not even been established.

Opposition leader Paul Ssemogerere charged on March 5 that Ugandan government “military adventurism” lies behind the massacres. The chairman of the Democratic Party said that the killings “were acts of revenge, which can be avoided by addressing the root causes of our conflicts in order to ensure a peaceful co-existence and good neighborliness. Uganda is seen as having been the one behind the invasion of Rwanda by the RPF [Rwandan Patriotic Front] in 1990, the death of former President Juvenal Habyarimana, the displacement of millions of Hutus and fighting along rebels in the Congo.” It remains to be seen whether the United States will heed that warning, or stick with Museveni’s politics of military revenge, in which case the violence will continue, putting many innocent lives, especially those of Africans, at grave risk.