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## Massacre Unfurls in Congo, Despite Nearby Support

By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

KIWANJA, [Congo](#) — At last the bullets had stopped, and François Kambere Siviri made a dash for the door. After hiding all night from firefights between rebels and a government-allied militia over this small but strategic town, he was desperate to get to the latrine a few feet away.

“Pow, pow, pow,” said his widowed mother, Ludia Kavira Nzuva, recounting how the rebels killed her 25-year-old son just outside her front door. As they abandoned his bloodied corpse, she said, one turned to her and declared, “Voilà, here is your gift.”

In little more than 24 hours, at least 150 people would be dead, most of them young men, summarily executed by the rebels last month as they tightened their grip over parts of eastern Congo, according to witnesses and human-rights investigators.

And yet, as the killings took place, a contingent of about 100 [United Nations](#) peacekeepers was less than a mile away, struggling to understand what was happening outside the gates of its base. The peacekeepers were short of equipment and men, United Nations officials said, and they were focusing on evacuating frightened aid workers and searching for a foreign journalist who had been kidnapped. Already overwhelmed, officials said, they had no intelligence capabilities or even an interpreter who could speak the necessary languages.

The peacekeepers said they had no idea that the killings were taking place until it was all over.

The executions in Kiwanja are a study in the unfettered cruelty meted out by the armed groups fighting for power and resources in eastern Congo. But the events are also a textbook example of the continuing failure of the world’s largest international peacekeeping force, which has [a mandate to protect the Congolese people](#) from brutality.

In this instance, the failure came from a mix of poor communication and staffing, inadequate equipment, intelligence breakdowns and spectacularly bad luck, said Lt. Col. H. S. Brar, the commander of the Indian peacekeepers based in Kiwanja.

But the killings and the stumbling response to the rebel advance were symptomatic of problems that have plagued the United Nations peacekeeping force in Congo for years, said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a senior researcher for [Human Rights Watch](#), who investigated the slayings this month. The rebel onslaught was even led by a commander who is wanted on war crimes charges by the [International Criminal Court](#).

“Kiwanja was a disaster for everyone,” Ms. Van Woudenberg said. “The people were betrayed not just by rebels who committed terrible war crimes against them but by the international community that failed to protect them.”

In the past year alone, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes as the rebels, led by a renegade army general, have waged a fierce insurgency against the government and its allied militias.

In an interview, the rebel general, [Laurent Nkunda](#), denied that his troops had executed civilians here, accusing militias allied with the government of trying to make his rebel movement look bad.

“We cannot kill the population,” he said. “It is not in our behavior to kill and to rape.”

But extensive interviews with victims, aid workers and human-rights investigators showed that Mr. Nkunda’s men carried out a door-to-door military operation over two days in which young men and others were executed.

The trouble began on Oct. 28, when Congolese Army troops fled the town, fearful of the advance of Mr. Nkunda’s troops.

The soldiers, who had already been routed by Mr. Nkunda’s men farther south, looted and raped as they ran, taking everything of value and even forcing some residents to help them carry the spoils, according to witnesses and investigators. Fearful residents had to choose between two bad options: follow the rampaging army or wait to see what the rebels might bring.

With the soldiers long gone, Mr. Nkunda’s troops took the towns of Kiwanja and Rutshuru without firing a shot. Immediately, they ordered the residents who remained to torch sprawling camps that held about 30,000 people displaced by earlier fighting, proclaiming that it was now safe for the camp dwellers to return to their villages, witnesses said.

“They said there was security, so everyone should go home,” said François Hazumutima, a retired teacher who had been living in a nearby camp. “But none of us felt safe.”

A week later, on Nov. 4, a group of militia fighters known as the Mai Mai carried out a surprise attack on Kiwanja. But the rebels soon routed the Mai Mai — and ordered all residents to leave.

The soldiers then went house to house, saying they were searching for militia fighters who stayed behind to fight. But many residents who stayed were scared their houses would be looted or were too old or infirm to flee, according to witnesses. Others had simply not gotten the message to leave.

The rebels came to the door of a 25-year-old trader, banging and threatening to shoot their way in.

“There were gunshots everywhere,” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. “They asked for money. I gave them \$200.”

He then watched in impotent horror as the rebels went to his 22-year-old brother’s house next door. The man, a student, had no money to offer them. The soldiers ordered him to lie on the ground. They stabbed him in the neck with their bayonets and shot him in the head, he said.

“They said, ‘If you don’t have money, you are Mai Mai,’ ” he said. “Everyone who was young was destined to die.”

Muwavita Mukangusi said she was out in the fields farming with her husband when the shooting started. Their three young daughters were at home, so Ms. Mukangusi ran back. Her husband hid in the fields, returning only at nightfall. The next morning the rebels came.

“They took my husband,” she said, her eyes rimmed in red. “Because I had \$50 in the house, I took \$25 to them. But it was not enough. I added \$25. It was still not enough. They accused him of being Mai Mai.”

The rebels beat him, she said, then forced him to the ground and shot him in the back of the head.

According to witnesses and clips of video shot at the time, Jean Bosco Ntaganda, Mr. Nkunda’s chief of staff, commanded the troops that carried out the killings. Mr. Ntaganda, whose nom de guerre is the Terminator, [is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes](#) committed while he was commanding a different armed group earlier in the war.

Meanwhile, confusion reigned at the nearby peacekeepers’ base. The company of soldiers sits in a spot that is decidedly not strategic, nestled in a valley that is highly vulnerable to incoming fire and has a poor vantage point from which to keep tabs on the surrounding area.

The company’s only translator left the base on Oct. 26 and was not replaced until more than two weeks later. But even in normal times, communications are limited. To make logistical arrangements, the peacekeepers depend largely on civilian staff members who work normal business hours and have weekends off. Unable to speak to most of the population and with almost no intelligence capabilities, Colonel Brar groped his way through a fog of rumor, speculation and misinformation.

“During this whole time, there was an informational vacuum,” Colonel Brar said.

With just one company of soldiers and three armored vehicles, the colonel’s peacekeepers were overmatched, he said. Patrols had to be aborted because rebels and militia fighters opened fire with heavy weapons that could pierce the vehicles’ cladding. The peacekeepers said they could not tell the difference between the different armed groups and were fearful of firing on civilians.

The colonel said he was juggling orders from headquarters in Goma to rescue stranded aid workers and search for a kidnapped foreign journalist. Sending out too many patrols would leave no one to protect the thousands of civilians gathered around the base, trapped in the vulnerable valley.

Making matters worse, the peacekeepers’ armored vehicles are largely unable to handle the muddy terrain of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the violence. It was not until the fighting was over that the full horror of the killings was discovered in houses stuffed with dead bodies.

“We launched patrols in areas we thought there would be clashes,” he explained. “But we could not be everywhere at once.”

As the shooting died down, residents said they found streets littered with bodies. Most, but not all, were young men and boys. One health care worker, who spoke anonymously for fear of reprisals, helped the Red Cross recover the bodies.

“Some were killed with bullets, others bayoneted,” the worker said. Among the injured sent to the regional hospital, the worker said, were “two women, one small girl of 9 years and one boy of 11 years.”

Witnesses said the rebels ordered that the bodies be buried quickly and far from the cemetery, to avoid leaving evidence for war crimes investigators.

“They did not want any mass graves,” said another man, who participated in the burials.

The worker said that by the end of Nov. 6, they had collected 150 bodies, the same toll reached by Human Rights Watch. The count could be higher still, he said, since the rebels have hampered efforts at a fuller accounting of the dead and missing.

Mr. Nkunda’s men continue to hold the town, as well as neighboring Rutshuru. Outwardly, calm has returned to the streets. But mothers have sent their sons packing because the rebels have been forcing men and boys to join them.

Mujawimana Nyiragasigwa said her 15-year-old son Jimia was snatched by soldiers in broad daylight last month. He had been out looking for work when the soldiers rounded him up, she said, and he has been missing for two and a half weeks.

“If I ever see him again, it will be by the grace of God,” she said.

Colonel Brar was clearly troubled by what happened here but said he and his troops did their best in an awful situation.

“We did what we could,” he said. “Imagine if we had not been here. Many more could have died.”

Ms. Kavira Nzuva, whose son François was killed, said his death had hollowed out her life. Gaunt and hobbled at 67, she was forced to return to the fields to farm.

François had supported her with his photography business. He had wired her mud-walled house for electricity and paid the monthly bill. He had built her a new kitchen. She kept a thick album of pictures of him, a tall man always eager to strike a pose for the camera.

“He was my youngest child,” she said. “I don’t know how I will live without him.”

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