



Strongman of the eastern DRC

A profile of General Bosco Ntaganda



General Bosco Ntaganda, October 2010 © Radio Okapi

Key points

- **Bosco Ntaganda initiated the mutiny in April 2012 that led to the formation of the M23 armed group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).**
- **His family is from the Mugogwe sub-group of the Tutsi community; he grew up in Rwanda and moved to Masisi, North Kivu, in his youth.**
- **Ntaganda joined the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) at the age of 17, and moved through the ranks to become Chief of Operations of the UPC and Chief of Staff of the CNDP.**
- **He has a reputation for brutality and profiteering, and has been accused of involvement in mineral smuggling and massacres in Ituri and North Kivu.**

Background

On 24 February 2013, 11 countries, including the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, signed the UN-mediated Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region (known as the Framework Agreement) in Addis Ababa.¹

This agreement, backed by the UN, the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, is considered the first step in a long process towards a sustainable peace, although it is short on details and it

¹ UN News Service, 'UN urges long-term commitment to today's peace deal on DR Congo', 24 February 2013; <http://tinyurl.com/cpsefbz>.

is unclear how it will complement the Kampala peace negotiations between Kinshasa and the M23. These talks were stalled at the time the Framework Agreement was signed—due to a fresh outbreak of violence, pitting rival M23 factions against one another—but may be concluded in some form before the end of March 2013.

The latest violence has again exposed a long-standing rift within the M23, between General Sultani Makenga and General Bosco Ntaganda.² The origins of this dispute can be traced back to their shared history as members of M23's predecessor, the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP, National Congress for the Defence of the People).³ In late February 2013, tensions escalated into open fighting between the two sides, culminating in the death of senior officers and the replacement of the M23 president, Jean-Marie Runiga, with Bertrand Bisimwa.⁴ Personalities play an important role in understanding this conflict, in particular that of Ntaganda.

Building a reputation

Bosco Ntaganda was born in Kinigi, Rwanda, in 1973. When he was still a teenager, his family, which comes from the Gogwe sub-group of the Tutsi community, moved to join other family members in Ngungu, in the south of North Kivu's Masisi territory. There he attended secondary school, but abandoned his studies at the age of 17 to join the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in its camps in southern Uganda. He then fought in the civil war that overthrew the Rwandan government in July 1994 and effectively ended the Rwandan genocide.

During and after the civil war, Ntaganda was known by his radio call sign 'Tango Romeo' and, due to his brutality, as 'the Terminator'. He gained a reputation as a formidable fighter, a reputation he would solidify over his career in at least six different armed groups.

During the First Congo War (1996-7), he fought for Laurent Kabila's *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour*

² Rift Valley Institute, 'M23's Operational Commander: A Profile of Sultani Emmanuel Makenga', 3 December 2012.

³ Jason Stearns, *From CNDP to M23: The Evolution of an Armed Movement in the Eastern Congo* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012).

⁴ Associated Press, 'Congo rebel group splits over firing of President', 28 February 2013; <http://tinyurl.com/cdh9cl7>.

la libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL, Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre), which marched all the way to Kinshasa to topple the president of what was then still Zaïre, Mobutu Sese Seko, in April 1997.

When Ntaganda joined the next Rwandan-backed rebellion, the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD, Congolese Rally for Democracy), in 1998, he became the bodyguard of its president, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, a former professor at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. When Wamba fell out with the Rwandan government and formed a splinter group backed by Uganda, the *RCD-Mouvement de libération* (RCD-ML, RCD-Liberation Movement), Ntaganda went with him to Kisangani, capital of Orientale province and headquarters of his movement, and then eventually to Ituri in the far north-east of the DRC.

From Ituri to North Kivu

It was in Ituri that Ntaganda earned his reputation as an efficient, if ruthless, commander. As chief of operations for Thomas Lubanga's *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC, Union of Congolese Patriots), he oversaw many of the abuses that resulted in the International Criminal Court (ICC) issuing an arrest warrant for recruitment and use of child soldiers in 2006.⁵ In July 2012, a redacted version of the indictment was made public; it included charges of murder, rape, and sexual slavery.⁶

Ntaganda was also a key go-between for the UPC with his former colleagues in the Rwandan army, who backed the group in a proxy war with Uganda between 2002-4.⁷ As the UPC began to collapse in late 2005, Ntaganda fled Ituri for Rwanda. From there, he returned to the DRC to join Laurent Nkunda, leader of the CNDP, who had recently established his headquarters in Kitchanga, in North Kivu's Rutshuru territory.

According to some ex-CNDP officers, Ntaganda's return to the DRC was directly facilitated by Rwanda—a plausible charge, given that Nkunda did not know him well beforehand. Indeed, Ntaganda was not given an official position in the CNDP for several months, a humiliating experience for the former number two in

the UPC and a source of strain in the relationship between the two.

Ntaganda outplays Nkunda

Ntaganda was eventually named Chief of Staff of the CNDP and set up his base in Kabati, around 20 km south of Nkunda's own base. Friction soon developed between the two men: Ntaganda had a greater military reputation and had earned the respect of the CNDP's rank-and-file soldiers, in particular those from the Gogwe community. Disputes flared, especially over the management of finances under Nkunda's control. Several ex-CNDP sources report that Rwanda had to step in in 2008 to patch up differences between the two and prevent a deeper rift.⁸

Meanwhile, there were further allegations of Ntaganda's involvement in widespread human rights abuses, including the killing of civilians.⁹ On 28 April 2008, the ICC unsealed its 2006 indictment and repeated its call for his immediate arrest.¹⁰ Undeterred, Ntaganda is alleged to have personally commanded operations that resulted in serious abuses, including the massacre of an estimated 150 people in Kiwanja on 4 and 5 November 2008.¹¹

The following month, Ntaganda began talks with Rwandan security officials with the aim of removing Laurent Nkunda and integrating CNDP troops into the Congolese national army, the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC, Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Several weeks later, in January 2009, Kigali arrested Nkunda, and Ntaganda was named the new CNDP commander at a ceremony at the Ihusi Hotel in Goma.

Ntaganda and Makenga

It was this move that accentuated the rift between Ntaganda and Sultani Makenga, a staunch Nkunda loyalist. Some sources within the CNDP even suggest that Makenga considered rebelling against the Rwandan army following Nkunda's arrest.¹²

After CNDP troops were integrated into the FARDC, Ntaganda became the deputy commander of military

⁵ ICC, 'Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the case of the Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda: Warrant of Arrest' (ICC-01/04-02/06), 22 August 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/d8ww02c>.

⁶ ICC, 'Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda: Public redacted version: Decision of the Prosecutor's Application under Article 58', 13 July 2012; <http://tinyurl.com/bnxh4jt>.

⁷ Henning Tamm, *UPC in Ituri: The External Militarization of Local Politics in North-eastern Congo* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2013).

⁸ Usalama Project Interviewees #103, 12 August 2012, and #105, 11 August 2012.

⁹ Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'DR Congo: Suspected War Criminal Wanted', 30 April 2008; <http://tinyurl.com/cnl8c4n>. HRW, 'DR Congo: Arrest Bosco Ntaganda', 2 February 2009; <http://tinyurl.com/6wtmqcj>.

¹⁰ ICC, 'Warrant of arrest against Bosco Ntaganda unsealed' (ICC-CPI-20080429-PR310), 28 April 2008; <http://tinyurl.com/c5kkkjr>.

¹¹ HRW, 'Killings in Kiwanja: The UN's Inability to Protect Civilians', 12 December 2008; <http://tinyurl.com/bhzzqpl5>.

¹² Jason Stearns, *From CNDP to M23*, pp. 34-37.

operations in the Kivus. But he retained strong control over many CNDP units. 'Bosco was never before or since as strong as he was during this period,' said a UN official who followed the CNDP commander's career.¹³ A 2011 report by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC indicated that Ntaganda profited from various illegal activities including cross-border trafficking, levying taxes on mining, and demanding protection money.¹⁴ In late 2011, Ntaganda travelled to Bukavu in an effort to patch up relations with Makenga in his own home.¹⁵

Ntaganda also tried to ingratiate himself with Kabila, but simultaneously prepared for the worst. He shared the spoils of some of his illegal activities with presidential advisors, and helped rig the 2011 elections in Kabila's favour.¹⁶ At the same time, however, he plotted a new mutiny in the Kivus to prevent loyal ex-CNDP officers from being deployed elsewhere in the DRC, a move the army had been trying to execute for months in order to erase the parallel command structures linking ex-CNDP officers.

The post-electoral crisis proved crucial: Kabila was weakened by indications of massive rigging at the polls; and donors, unable to obtain a re-run, decided to push instead for key reforms, including Ntaganda's arrest.¹⁷ On 14 March 2012, the ICC sentenced Thomas Lubanga to 14 years, sparking renewed calls for Ntaganda to be arrested. In the immediate aftermath of the verdict, ex-CNDP officers met in Goma, planning their mutiny.

But Ntaganda overplayed his hand. The initial mutiny failed and he was forced to retreat to his ranch at Bunyole in Masisi. Under pressure from the FARDC, he and his followers then fled to Runyoni, a stretch of hills close to the Rwandan border. By then he had become too divisive a figure within the emerging M23, burdened by his international notoriety, and in May 2012, the command of the newly formed M23 was given to Sultani Makenga, who had been courted by both the Rwandan army and Laurent Nkunda. Ntaganda was effectively sidelined.

The stand-off

With Ntaganda relegated to the background, Makenga became the M23's military commander and public face. But the M23 still revolved around two poles, one loyal to Ntaganda, the other to Makenga. Its political head,

Jean-Marie Runiga, as well as Baudouin Ngaruye, the deputy military commander, were both Ntaganda loyalists. Tensions escalated over the fall of Goma in November 2012, eventually erupting in full-blown violence in late February 2013, causing further civilian displacement and suffering.

Several factors precipitated the clash. There was a row over promotions of officers, allegations of bribery by Kabila and a dispute over what to do with goods looted during the occupation of Goma. Perhaps the most divisive issue, however, were the peace talks. With the international arrest warrant hanging over Ntaganda, he worried that he would be sold out as part of any bargain, and thus was a potential spoiler to the peace process. By the end of February, the two sides had split, with Ntaganda based in Kibumba and Makenga around Bunagana, and engaged in heavy fighting, killing several high-ranking officers on both sides.

The infighting has changed the dynamics at the negotiation table. Keen to exploit the split, Kabila tabled a reintegration deal, to be signed on 15 March, which would give positions and possible amnesties to Makenga's wing.¹⁸ Makenga, weakened but also unburdened by some of the M23's staunchest opponents of compromise, appeared on the verge of accepting the deal at the time this briefing was published, while Ntaganda's camp dug its heels in.¹⁹

It is unclear how such a deal would affect either Ntaganda's personal future or Kinshasa's relations with Rwanda. Makenga has reiterated his commitment to arresting his former comrade-in-arms and sending him to the ICC for trial in The Hague, while a successful integration of Makenga's wing of the M23 into the Congolese national army could spell a thaw in relations between Kigali and Kinshasa.²⁰

Credits

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¹³ Usalama Project Interviewee #142, Goma, 26 June 2012.

¹⁴ UN Security Council, S/2011/738, 'Final Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC', 2 December 2011; <http://tinyurl.com/bmsx83v>.

¹⁵ Usalama Project Interviewee #101, Goma, 2 September 2012.

¹⁶ Usalama Project electronic communication with UN official, 2 January 2012.

¹⁷ Usalama Project interviews with western diplomats, Kinshasa, March 2012.

¹⁸ Radio France Internationale, 'RDC : Kabila serait prêt pour un accord avec le M23 du général Makenga', 6 March 2013; <http://tinyurl.com/bm5mjj5>.

¹⁹ Reuters, 'Congo to sign peace deal with rebels on March 15 – draft', 11 March 2013; <http://tinyurl.com/chnxvc8>.

²⁰ Usalama Project Interviewee #131, Kigali, 3 March 2013.