



# Burundi steps up its private war in Congo

9 September 2022

*This opinion piece, written by Carina Tertsakian, the co-founder of the Burundi Human Rights Initiative, was published by SOS Médias Burundi on 9 September 2022.*

Burundi is in the depths of a devastating economic crisis, but this hasn't stopped its government from sending large numbers of troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), apparently prioritising an expensive military mission over the needs of millions of its citizens. In recent weeks, Burundian soldiers, accompanied by *Imbonerakure* (members of the ruling party youth league), have been deployed in the DRC, officially as part of a regional initiative to restore security in the east of the country.

The Burundian and Congolese authorities have presented this as a new deployment, but in reality, several waves of Burundian soldiers and *Imbonerakure* have crossed into the DRC since December 2021, to fight the armed opposition group RED-Tabara. Until recently, this was a covert mission. The Burundian government repeatedly denied sending troops across the border, despite abundant evidence that soldiers and *Imbonerakure* were being selected and deployed there. In a [report](#) published in July 2022, the Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) described this clandestine and ill-prepared operation that resulted in many casualties among Burundian troops and *Imbonerakure*, as well as abuses against Congolese civilians.

The participation of *Imbonerakure* was particularly concerning. *Imbonerakure* are civilians, so should not take part in security or military activities. Although some *Imbonerakure* had prior military experience as former armed group combatants, others had never fought on the frontline, so were not prepared to deal with ambushes and clashes with armed groups.

Families of Burundian soldiers or *Imbonerakure* killed in the DRC received little or no state assistance or compensation, while *Imbonerakure* injured in the fighting were left to fend for themselves and pay for their own medical treatment. Some *Imbonerakure* never received the remuneration they were promised for this dangerous mission, leading to growing resentment as they felt abandoned by their party and their government.

By hiding the truth from the public and avoiding democratic scrutiny, the Burundian government was also violating the country's constitution. Not only did it ignore the legal obligation for its armed forces to be accountable and transparent, but it failed to inform parliament about its operation in the DRC – a constitutional requirement.

Then suddenly, on 24 August, President Évariste Ndayishimiye wrote a “message of information to Parliament”, addressed to the president of the Senate, in which he informed Parliament of the decision to deploy Burundian troops to the Congolese province of South Kivu and stated that one infantry battalion had already been deployed. This was followed, two days later, by a statement by the spokesperson of the National Defence Force of Burundi, announcing that Burundi had sent troops to contribute to restoring peace and security in South Kivu, as part of a bilateral agreement pending the deployment of a regional force.

So what had changed?

Leaders of the East African Community (EAC), of which Burundi is a member, decided to assemble a regional force to deal with security threats posed by numerous armed groups in eastern DRC. Burundi was the first (and so far the only) country to deploy forces to the DRC, jumping at the opportunity to try to legitimise the operation that it had been conducting unilaterally for several months.

So now, the operation has become official. Or has it? Informing national institutions after the fact doesn’t legitimise the covert activities of the previous eight months. And while the latest deployments may have the formal blessing of the Burundian and Congolese governments, there are still many unanswered questions. The collaboration between the two governments seems to go far beyond what is laid out in the formal agreements, with the Congolese government allowing the Burundian army to operate freely on its territory to hunt down its enemies.

The continued recruitment and deployment of *Imbonerakure* to fight in the DRC is not officially recognised either. Yet *Imbonerakure* are operating alongside Burundian soldiers in the context of the recent, official deployment, with some wearing military uniforms to blend in with the troops. According to information received by BHRI, some of the *Imbonerakure* and soldiers deployed before August are likely to have remained in the DRC, so the official operation has overlapped with the unofficial one.

The confusion surrounding these deployments is not accidental. The more obfuscation, the easier it is for the Burundian army to do what it pleases. The Congolese authorities are unlikely to monitor the behaviour of Burundian troops and may even look the other way when they commit human rights violations; their priorities lie elsewhere and they have shown little concern for the actions of their neighbour. The Burundian army has taken advantage of this complicity for many months, avoiding all scrutiny.

A further cause for concern is the appointment of certain Burundian commanders who have overseen human rights violations in Burundi in the past. For example, Dominique Nyamugaruka, reportedly appointed deputy commander of the joint Burundian-Congolese force, was, until July 2021, head of the Special Brigade for the Protection of Institutions (*Brigade spéciale pour la protection des institutions*, BSPI), whose soldiers committed serious human rights violations during the 2015 crisis in Burundi.

The stamp of legitimacy offered to Burundi by the EAC force should not be allowed to obscure these concerns, or the fact that Burundi is not a neutral actor in eastern DRC. On the contrary: Burundi is a direct party to the conflict. Its participation in bilateral or regional operations should provoke a strong response by international actors, who should speak out against this blatant conflict of interest. A wait-and-see approach will only give Burundian soldiers and *Imbonerakure* ample time to commit further human rights violations against Congolese civilians. Recent history has shown the lengths that the ruling party in Burundi will go to in pursuing its agenda, including by sacrificing the lives of its own youth.

For further information, read "[An operation of deceit: Burundi's secret mission in Congo](#)"

[burundihri.org](http://burundihri.org)  
[twitter.com/@BHRI\\_IDHB](https://twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB)  
[contact@burundihri.org](mailto:contact@burundihri.org)  
+1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp)