

Courtesy of Author



Rwandan Patriotic Army soldiers during 1998 Congo war and insurgency

Courtesy of Author



Rwandan Patriotic Army soldiers guard refugees streaming toward collection point near Rwerere during Rwanda insurgency, 1998

The Kitona Operation

RWANDA'S GAMBLE TO CAPTURE KINSHASA AND THE MISREADING OF AN "ALLY"

By JAMES STEJSKAL

*One who is not acquainted with the designs of his neighbors
should not enter into alliances with them.*

—SUN TZU

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In early August 1998, a white Boeing 727 commercial airliner touched down unannounced and without warning at the Kitona military airbase in the southwestern Bas Congo region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As the civilian-marked airplane rolled to a stop, the doors opened, and a force of heavily armed Rwandan soldiers poured out. Within 30 minutes, the main facilities were secured, and the airfield was in the hands of the invaders. Once the airfield was secured, additional aircraft began to land and offload troops and equipment to reinforce the initial landing force. So began one of the most brazen operations in African military history—all the more remarkable because the small African country that launched the raid did so without outside assistance or support. It was the Rwandan army, a small but extremely competent force with a reputation for brilliant leadership, discipline, and tactical excellence.¹

In a classic maneuver made up of equal parts speed, surprise, and audacity, a small force of Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) and Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) troops under the command of RPA Colonel James Kabarebe commandeered a civilian airliner and flew over 1,000 miles from Goma in the far east of DRC across the Congo River basin to seize Kitona Airfield near the Atlantic coast and then threaten the capital of Kinshasa.

The "Kitona Operation" was an extremely risky but potentially strategically decisive special operation that had as its objective nothing less than the capture of the DRC's capital, Kinshasa, and the overthrow of President Laurent Desiré Kabila. Within days, however, the raid began to unravel as opposition came from an unexpected opponent: Angola. The assault at Kitona is an example of a brilliant military operation that ultimately failed because of erroneous political assumptions, in this case, a singular misunderstanding of the strategic political interests of Angola, the one regional power that Rwanda and Uganda needed on their side more than any other country. It was a fault that could have been avoided through a better understanding of both the decisionmaking process in Angola and regional power politics.

Misconceptions about how decisions are made in many African countries, and the importance of the regional political context,

remain hurdles that must be confronted by U.S. planners and decisionmakers when considering military operations in today's Africa. Rwanda's foray into DRC in 1998 also illustrates the consequences of a failure to understand that the generals' view was not always the same as the civilian leaders' view. This strategic failure has relevance for the U.S. military as it deals with allies as well as opponents. Anyone—including the United States—could easily repeat Rwanda's mistake.

Prologue

Laurent Desiré Kabila, a former youth-wing member of the Balubakat, a party aligned with Patrice Lumumba, and the "Simba" rebels who opposed Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seku in the 1960s, was used by Rwanda and Uganda as a surrogate to lend credibility to the rebellion and ousting of Mobutu during the first Congo war in 1996.² In planning a second coup, the Rwandans and Ugandans counted on the tacit acceptance of their plans and intentions by Angola, their former ally, which had supported the overthrow of Mobutu in 1996.

Rwanda's president in 1998 was Pasteur Bizimungu, although most political and all military decisions were made by then-Vice President Major General Paul Kagame. Uganda's president was (and still is) Yoweri

Uganda, DRC in 1998 remained a safe haven for rebels who represented a threat to their respective nations. Angola had shared this concern in 1996, and its dominant security imperative remained an ongoing civil war with the rebel National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola or, UNITA) force. In supporting the 1996 invasion, dos Santos and his party, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola—Labor Party (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola—Partido do Trabalho or, MPLA), saw supporting Kabila as a chance to overthrow their nemesis, Mobutu, for his Cold War support (at the behest of the United States) of Holden Roberto's National Liberation Front of Angola (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola) and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA. Pro-Mobutu UNITA forces operating in Zaire (DRC) resisted the Rwanda/Ugandan invasion. By supporting the invasion and Kabila, Angola was able to disrupt UNITA's bases and logistical lifeline and was thus better able control its northern and eastern regions. Angola was also convinced that Kabila would never support UNITA precisely because they had supported Mobutu. Thus by 1998, dos Santos no longer saw DRC as a safe haven for his enemies. His interests lay with Kabila, not with Rwanda or Uganda.

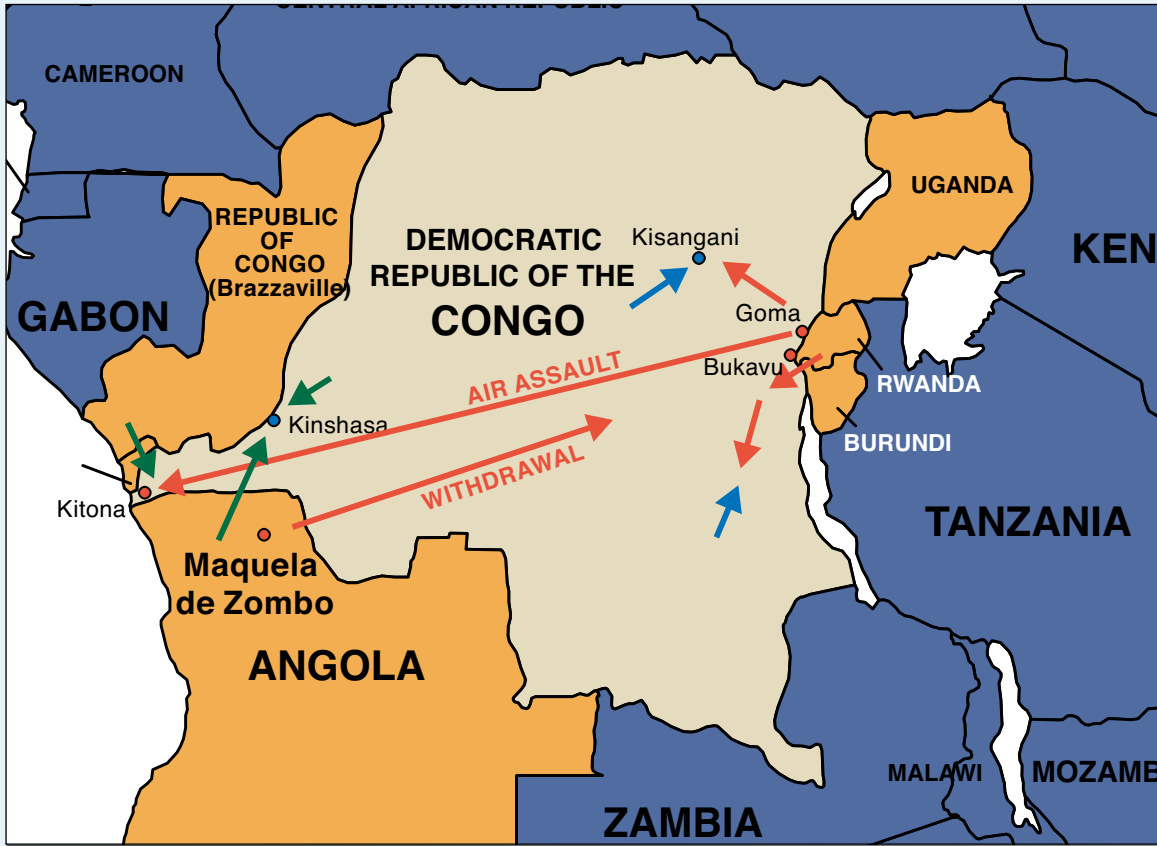
misconceptions about how decisions are made in many African countries remain hurdles that must be confronted by U.S. decisionmakers

Museveni. In 1996, both viewed themselves as representing a "new generation" of African leaders who were prepared to chart their own destinies with or without the approval of others—whether traditional Western powers or other African leaders. By contrast, Angola's José Eduardo dos Santos, in power since 1979, could be considered the quintessential "old style" African strongman. It is not known to what extent the generational difference was a factor in the misunderstanding among Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola, but it may have strongly influenced the respective leaders' assumptions about decisionmaking.

The strategic factors that drove Rwanda and Uganda to turn against Kabila, their former protégé, and their decision to remove him from power lay in the civil war that began in Rwanda in 1990 and ultimately led to the 1994 genocide. For Rwanda and

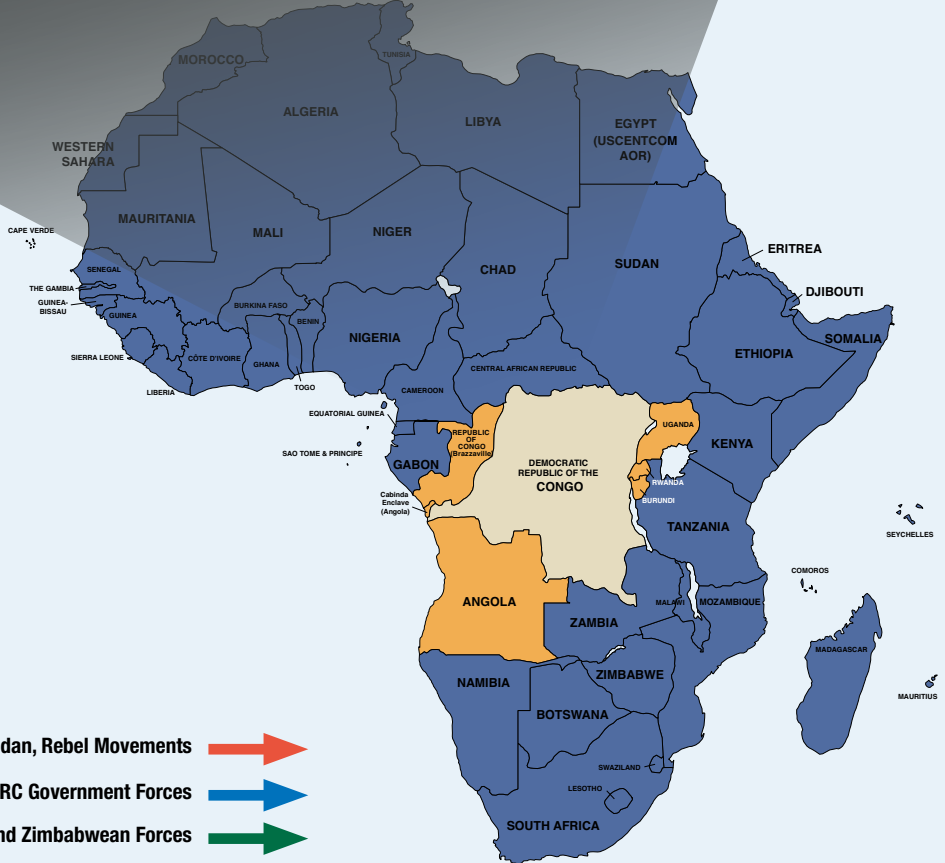
Rwanda's leaders faced a problem they thought they understood and based their calculations on a situation in which their primary Angolan interlocutors, senior military and security officials, misrepresented their country's position as well as their decisionmaking mandates. The summer of 1998 was another turning point for the small country, one of many in its 8-year civil war that had led to a genocide in which nearly 800,000 people were murdered, the Hutu-led government in Kigali was toppled, and the stability of the new government remained in question.

Earlier, in 1994, following the victory of the Tutsi-exile dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF's) military wing over the Rwandan Armed Forces (Forces Armées Rwandaise, or FAR) and its Interahamwe³ militia force, several million Hutus fled west



Operation Kitona

- Rwandan, Ugandan, Rebel Movements ➔
- DRC Government Forces ➔
- Angolan and Zimbabwean Forces ➔



into neighboring Zaire. Among the refugees was a large, organized, and armed remnant of the FAR and Interahamwe who, once settled among the other refugees in United Nations refugee camps, began preparations for a guerrilla campaign into Rwanda's north-western territory as a prelude to an offensive to reconquer Rwanda. The new RPF government in Kigali had intelligence sources in the camps and discovered the plans. Of additional concern to Kigali was the information that Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko was condoning, if not directly supporting, the activities of the ex-FAR/Interahamwe.⁴ Despite warnings provided to the United Nations by the new Rwandan government, nothing was done to stop these preparations and the RPF decided it had to act alone.

The 1996 offensive that followed was launched by Rwanda into Zaire initially only to eliminate the threat from the camps in the extreme eastern border area of Zaire and, it was hoped, to enable the refugees to return home to Rwanda. The RPF believed the ex-FAR/Interahamwe militias were effectively holding many of them hostage. (The RPF leadership's supposition was in fact correct as many Hutus returned to Rwanda after the camps were liberated.⁵) Quickly overrunning the camps, the RPA began to pursue the armed militias westward into the Congo River basin. As this happened, Mobutu ordered Zairian military forces to oppose the intruders and the dynamics of the mission changed; the Rwandans found themselves actively opposing another country's armed forces.⁶ Rather than backing away, the Rwandans took their coalition of forces, which by now included Ugandans, Zairian Banyamulenge (an ethnic group closely related to Rwandan Tutsis), Burundians, and rebel Congolese army and militiamen—including one Laurent Desiré Kabila—and moved farther west toward Kinshasa. At that time, Kabila was pushed forward to nominally head the coalition known as the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire or, AFDL) by former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere. The leaders of the so-called Front-line States, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, Angola's dos Santos, South Africa's Thabo Mbeki, and Namibia's Sam Nujoma, along with Nyerere, saw the "rebellion" as akin to their own liberation struggles, for they had always viewed Mobutu as a puppet of the imperialist West. His departure would rid

southern Africa of "foreign" interference once and for all.⁷

The AFDL, with Rwandan officers and noncommissioned officers leading the way, quickly overwhelmed Mobutu's forces and forced him to flee into exile. Kabila declared himself president and thereafter began pursuing his own erratic agenda, which included promoting his Lubakat tribe to the exclusion of other tribal groups.⁸ This eventually led to a falling out between the Rwandans and their protege.

By early summer 1998, Kabila was facing Congolese popular discontent over Rwanda's heavy-handed tactics in the eastern DRC and a perception that he was a puppet of two foreign powers. This led him to send home the Rwandan forces that installed him and had been protecting him in Kinshasa, including Colonel Kabarebe, whom Kabila had named his defense minister after assuming power. Additionally, he began to consolidate his control of the country by allying with some

wanted Kabila's continued presence as a docile and compliant neighbor to the north to ensure the eventual victory over UNITA.⁹

Prior to the invasion, the director of Rwanda's external intelligence service, Colonel Patrick Karegeya, conducted a number of meetings with senior officials in Angola. Karegeya received assurances from two powerful Angolan rivals, General Manuel Helder Vieira Dias, also known as "Kopelipa," minister of state and head of military house in the Office of the President, and General Fernando Garcia Miala, director of Angola's External Security Services and Military Intelligence, that their country would remain on the sidelines. Thereafter, Karegeya briefed Kagame that the invasion plan could proceed without fear of outside intervention. But, unknown to the Rwandans and Ugandans, the discussions were not briefed to dos Santos, who repudiated the agreement once the invasion commenced as he perceived a danger to

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of the groups "his" AFDL had just defeated, including the remaining Rwandan ex-FAR and Interahamwe, as well as the local Congolese Mai-Mai militias. While Kabila probably felt the militias would act as a buffer against a Rwandan invasion, the Rwandan leadership perceived Kabila's support for the militias as a threat to Rwanda itself.

The Rwandans and Ugandans interpreted this as an irrevocable break that, combined with Kabila's apparent support for (or tacit acceptance of) the Hutu militias in eastern Congo, convinced Kagame and Museveni that Kabila had to go. Kabila's fears became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Rwandan and Ugandan decision to invade in 1998 was linked to their sense of imminent danger from the militias that were engaged in a cross-border insurgency in north-western Rwanda at the time. In their minds, it was a continuation of the 1996 operation to eliminate the ex-RPF and Interahamwe. However, it is now clear that Kagame and Museveni had not fully considered their allies' motivations for their earlier support or the potential regional political ramifications that would result from a renewal of the conflict. In dos Santos's view, the removal of Mobutu had achieved MPLA's aim and nothing was to be gained in another regime change. Dos Santos

his own interests.¹⁰ Dos Santos had befriended Kabila and gained an influence over him that the Angolan leader was not eager to lose, especially when no one knew who the next Congolese leader would be. This factor would prove decisive in the end game.

The Military Operation: The Successful Aspect of the Plan

Colonel James Kabarebe knew the terrain and the enemy best, having marched the ground with his troops and led both the Zairian/Congolese rebels, as well as the RPA in 1996 and through 1997. He would lead the most dangerous and audacious part of the invasion, the air assault deep into enemy territory to seize the key province of Bas Congo and then to capture the capital of Kinshasa. On August 2, 1998, breakaway elements of Kabila's newly created Congolese Army Forces (Forces Armées Congolaises, or FAC) in Goma led by Major Sylvain Mbuki declared their opposition to Kabila and launched a ground assault westward, supported by Rwandan and Ugandan army forces. Simultaneously, Kabarebe seized a civilian Boeing 727 airliner that was on the tarmac of Goma Airfield and loaded it with his assault force. The plan was simple and elegant, but it was built on a faulty premise:



Then-Rwandan Vice President Paul Kagame

that Rwanda's and Uganda's allies from the first Congo War that deposed Mobutu, namely Angola and Zimbabwe, would remain neutral. Despite indications that these countries would stay on the sidelines, that would not be the case.

On August 4, Kabarebe's force landed in Kitona and quickly dispersed across the installation and secured key points. Kabarebe then met with the former Zairian Army Forces (Forces Armées Zaïroises or, FAZ) army officers who were being "re-educated" at Kitona. Kabarebe was in a good position to understand both their plight and their motivations. He had been the FAC chief of staff when Kabila ordered approximately 2,000 ex-FAZ soldiers and officers to be interned there because he did not trust them. After about 30 minutes of negotiations, an agreement was reached and Kabarebe had his "army."¹¹

With the airfield secured, several additional aircraft brought more troops from Goma until the Kitona raiders totaled two battalions (800 men), including a 31-man, self-contained UPDF light artillery unit. The raiders set up blocking positions to the east of the airfield and then headed west with a small element to seize the port cities of Banana and Moanda about 6 kilometers away, which they did on August 5.

When Kabarebe's force took control of Kitona Airbase and the coastal ports, his small force effectively closed DRC's connection to the outside world. Under Mobutu, the capital city of Kinshasa had been effectively reduced to one means of resupply: the Atlantic Ocean port of Banana, which lies at the mouth of the Congo River. The Rwandans

knew that if they could control the port and the mercantile traffic that supplied Kinshasa, they could strangle the government. Moreover, if the huge hydroelectric plant at the Inga Dam complex on the Congo River could be captured, the invaders would control *all* the electrical power for the western part of the country. A third component of Kabarebe's plan was even more ingenious: the several thousand soldiers suspected of being loyal to Mobutu who were interned at the Kitona Airbase rallied to Kabarebe and augmented his own small force to complete the mission.

The incursion forced Kabila to face not one but two fronts, as a joint force made up of Rwandan and Ugandan army forces along with the rebellious FAC launched an attack from the east that quickly captured the eastern third of DRC.

After capturing the seaports, Kabarebe's force then turned east, reinforced by the ex-FAZ soldiers. By August 10, his force had moved 40 kilometers up river and seized the river port city of Boma, followed by the railhead/pipeline terminal at Matadi. They took Inga Dam on August 13 and turned off the power on August 14, plunging most of the DRC into darkness. The force had quickly moved 110 kilometers in 6 days meeting little resistance. Kabila's FAC had no will to fight Kabarebe and ran back to Kinshasa or melted into the jungle, although they outnumbered the invaders three to one.¹² Leadership, discipline, and a fearsome reputation made the difference for the Rwandans.

By August 17, 1998, Kabarebe and his forces were located 30 kilometers west of Kinshasa and President Kabila was under pressure. Alarmed by the success of Rwanda's

incursion, on August 22, after intense lobbying and deal making, the presidents of three countries—Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, and dos Santos of Angola—agreed to help Kabila to repulse the invaders. But these leaders were also seeking influence and a share of DRC's immense mineral reserves, especially in the case of Zimbabwe.¹³ A Zimbabwean businessman, Billy Rautenbach, was given the position of director of Gécamines, DRC's parastatal cobalt and copper mining company, which permitted Zimbabwe to siphon off large sums of money as well as raw resources from the mine's lucrative operations.¹⁴

The Reversal

Dos Santos's Angola had the most powerful forces of all the allies available and began immediately to undo what Kabarebe had wrought with an assault south across the Congo River from its Cabinda enclave that quickly recaptured Moanda. With a large, armor-heavy column, the Angolans cut off Kabarebe's comparatively lightly armed rear guard from the main force, placing the entire plan in jeopardy. Left with few options, Kabarebe attacked Kinshasa, forcing his way into the city to the perimeter of the Ndjili International Airport. At the same time, Rwandan Tutsis and ethnically related Congolese Banyamulenge civilians were being hunted down and killed in Kinshasa as Congolese government-controlled radio began to broadcast messages warning of Tutsi spies and saboteurs in the capital city that were reminiscent of hate messages broadcast by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. That, and the arrival of Zimbabwean helicopter gunships and an Angolan Armed Forces (Forças Armadas Angolanas or, FAA) armored column that threatened his rear, forced Kabarebe to break off the engagement at the end of August. He knew that his continued advance could well mean large-scale ethnic killings.¹⁵

Although outgunned and outnumbered and with little maneuver room, Kabarebe chose to conduct a tactical withdrawal rather than surrender. To preserve his force and link up with the main invasion force in the east, he and his officers decided to move 360 kilometers south into Angola to get to a suitable airfield for exfiltration. Moving swiftly, Kabarebe's force brushed off their pursuers and punched through another Angolan force of around 400 defenders to seize the airfield at Manuela do Zombo in mid-September 1998.

For several weeks, the beleaguered force held off the FAA and worked to extend the airfield to 1,400 meters to enable large transport aircraft to use it. At one point an RPA unit at a defensive post positioned 100 kilometers from the airfield stopped an FAA armored convoy that was en route to recapture the field.¹⁶ Finally, once the runway was prepared, aircraft began to land and extract the Rwandan,

that ended only after long negotiations. The singular fault in the planning was political. Rwanda and Uganda miscalculated Angolan President dos Santos's readiness to accept the overthrow of Kabila. Their understanding of Angola's position was based on representations of senior Angolan officers that did not reflect political reality. The only way this mistake could have been avoided would have

Rwanda and Uganda miscalculated Angolan President dos Santos's readiness to accept the overthrow of Kabila

Ugandan, and eastern Congolese forces. Most of the ex-FAZ had already made the choice to return to their homes or to remain in Angola with antigovernment UNITA rebel forces. Some 30 flights were made over the next several days, and as the defensive perimeter was collapsed inward, successive numbers of Kabarebe's forces were flown out. The last flight was literally loaded with troops running from their positions to the airplane, with the commanders being the last to leave. It is not clear how many casualties the Rwandans took in the operation—the secretive RPA will not discuss the operation openly—but it is believed that the majority of the force was repatriated. The Ugandans stated that their small part of the force returned home without any losses.¹⁷

The Final Analysis

When the decision is made to go to war, a successful plan for victory rarely involves timidity or restraint. Risks must be taken, especially when one chooses to engage a country far greater in size, with forbidding distances to conquer, and to fight an army that has more soldiers and equipment at its disposal. The tactical aspect of the Kitona Operation is a testament to the great skill of its planner and commander, as well as the fighting capabilities of a small African nation's army.

The Kitona Operation was an audacious strategic gamble by the Rwandans to avoid a protracted struggle in their bid to oust Laurent Kabila. As long as neighboring countries stayed out of the conflict, the chances of its success were very high. However, once Angola, and to a lesser degree Zimbabwe, entered the fray, the odds changed dramatically. The Kitona military plan was not faulty; rather, it was well planned for strategic effect and could have achieved its desired aim. As it was, the so-called Second Congo War turned into a protracted affair

been through direct negotiations between Kagame and dos Santos. Amazing as it may seem today, the two leaders never discussed Rwanda's plans because the Rwandans did not fully appreciate the power structure or political interests of the Angolan government.

Kitona could have had a place in the annals of great victories. Instead it is a little-known example of brilliance unhinged by fate.

Epilogue

Following the Second Congo War, Kabarebe served as chief of Rwanda's Defense Forces before he became minister of defense in 2010, a capacity in which he still serves. Paul Kagame became President of Rwanda in 2000, a position he still holds. Angolan General Miala was imprisoned for coup plotting in 2007, while "Kopelipa" remains a principal advisor to dos Santos. Also in 2007, Colonel Karegeya was cashiered from the RPA for insubordination and conduct unbecoming. He is currently in exile in South Africa and is a vociferous critic of the Kagame government. Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguards in 2001. **JFQ**

⁶ John Pomfret, "Rwandans Led Revolt in Congo," *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1997, A1.

⁷ Gérard Prunier, *Africa's World War—Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 116.

⁸ Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2011), 203.

⁹ Robert E. Gribbon, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: The U.S. Role in Rwanda* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 276.

¹⁰ Author's discussion with a senior Rwandan military officer, Kigali, September 1998.

¹¹ Prunier, 182.

¹² Charles Onyango-Obbo, "Daring RPA Raid in Congo, Angola; and a Heroic UPDF Unit," *The Sunday Monitor* (Kampala), April 16, 2000.

¹³ Kevin C. Dunn, "A Survival Guide to Kinshasa: Lessons of the Father, Passed Down to the Son," in *The African Stakes of the Congo War*, ed. John F. Clark, 65 (London: Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁴ Author's conversation with a Congolese official in Goma, September 1998. Rautenbach's Ridgepointe Overseas Developments, Ltd., took control of Gécamines shortly after Zimbabwe's entry into the war.

¹⁵ Ouzani.

¹⁶ Onyango-Obbo.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

NOTES

¹ Greg Mills, "The Boot Is Now on the Other Foot in Rwanda: Lessons from Both Sides of Insurgency," *RUSI Journal* 153, no. 3 (June 2008), 72–78.

² Che Guevara wrote of Kabila: "Nothing leads me to believe he is the man of the hour." See *Bolivian Diary* [of] Ernesto "Che" Guevara, trans. Carlos P. Hansen and Andrew Sinclair (London: Cape-Lorrimer, 1968).

³ A Kinyarwanda word meaning "those who fight together."

⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Africa's Seven Nation War," ICG Democratic Republic of Congo Report No. 4, May 21, 1999, 2.

⁵ Author's conversation with a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees officer, Kigali, Rwanda, 1997.