

Overkill in Africa

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Edward Mortimer

Zaire is dead. Long live Congo. The corrupt regime of Mr Mobutu Sese Seko is at last consigned to the dustbin of history. Mr Laurent Kabila, the new president, is the latest recruit to the club of new-style African leaders — tough but enlightened and English-speaking — whose rise has ended the long civil wars in countries stretching from Eritrea to Rwanda.

What is wrong with that widely accepted account of recent central African history? There is the implicit equation of enlightenment with the English language. French policy in Africa has been unenlightened, giving uncritical support to dictators so long as they speak French and are amenable to French influence. English-speaking policymakers and commentators should beware of doing the same.

Unpleasant facts keep coming to light about what Mr Kabila's Tutsi supporters have been doing to Hutus (both Rwandan refugees and native Congolese) during their sweep from the Rwandan border to Kinshasa, Congo's capital, which they reached last month. Perhaps the most detailed and chilling report appeared in the Washington Post.

Mr John Pomfret, the reporter, described how, in mid-April, the inhabitants of a village called Kasese, urged on by military officers loyal to Mr Kabila, "tore through a camp of refugees, most of them Rwandan Hutus, hacking and snatching men, women and

That means the victims were chosen not for their political views, nor even because they were foreigners, but because of their ethnic identity. Nationality is irrelevant in this war, but ethnicity is everything. Mr Kabila's rebellion started last autumn as a revolt of Zairean Tutsis and has been consistently supported by the Tutsi-dominated government of neighbouring Rwanda. Rwandan soldiers have frequently been identified among his forces.

Many Zaireans of all ethnic groups rallied to his cause to get rid of the Mobutu regime but the war was also, and perhaps mainly, a continuation of the struggle between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi.

Those of the victims who are refugees are supposed to be under the protection of Mrs Sadako Ogata, the UN High Commissioner. Her office (UNHCR) is mandated to look after refugees and to ensure they are not sent back against their will to the country from which they fled.

But that has now become almost the least of its concerns. UNHCR, together with various voluntary agencies, has been struggling to repatriate as many Rwandan refugees as it can, in the hope of saving them from an even worse fate if they stayed in Congo.

Oxfam, one of the voluntary agencies most active in the area, estimates the death rate among the refugees who have returned to Rwanda at 60 per 10,000 per day.

and spearing men, women and children". Armed Hutus fought them off. But a day later, Mr Kabila's rebel forces stepped in and, according to survivors and local residents, ravaged the 55,000 refugees for seven hours, firing wildly into the encampment".

Hundreds died and were buried in a mass grave. And this was "just one of numerous tales of mass killings carried out by soldiers loyal to Mr Kabila". "The stories," wrote Mr Pomfret, "along with mass-graves and accounts of witnesses and victims in eastern, central and western Congo, paint a horrific picture of atrocities. Taken together, they suggest the massacres were not isolated instances of unruly troops, but rather part of Mr Kabila's war of liberation.

One word is conspicuously missing from Mr Pomfret's report: a word that reporters are rightly reluctant to overuse — and governments are reluctant to use at all, since almost all states are signatories to an international convention obliging them to intervene and halt "genocide: wherever it occurs.

Yet what other word will do when, in the words of Amnesty International, "Thousands of unarmed civilians, mostly Rwandese Hutu refugees and (ex)Zairean Hutus, are reported to have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed" while Congolese [ex-Zaireans] from other ethnic groups suspected or known to be sympathetic to the Hutus and others thought to be hostile to the Tutsis have also been targeted".

But among those who remained in Congo the estimated death rate from preventable causes (not including homicide) was five times higher than that — until about three weeks ago. By then there were "no major concentrations left" though some 200,000 refugees remain unaccounted for.

"We believe this death rate to be a world record," says Mr Nicholas Stockton, Oxfam emergencies director. Yet, in the UK at any rate, there has been minimal newspaper coverage and no major appeal for funds as in previous humanitarian crises. "Human life, concludes Mr Stockton bitterly, "is deemed not worth saving any longer."

The reason is, of course, that the world's conscience is already numbed by other atrocities and especially by the genocide against the Tutsis which the Hutu regime in Rwanda organised before it fled in 1994. The armed men who unsuccessfully defended the refugees in Congo this spring were, in all probability, among those who butchered defenceless Tutsis in Rwanda three years earlier.

The world failed to stop that genocide and failed afterwards to weed out its perpetrators from among the refugees kept alive by western aid on the Rwanda-Zaire frontier.

Instead it allowed armed men to control those camps, to use them as bases for raids back into Rwanda, and then to attack Zairean Tutsis as well. So now, when the survivors of one genocide resort to another, the world prefers not to know.