

## Burundi-Rwanda Rivalry: RED-Tabara Rebel Attacks Add to Regional Tensions

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The RED-Tabara armed group, based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has renewed attacks in Burundi since late 2023. The group – which is an abbreviation of the French Résistance pour un État de Droit au Burundi (Resistance for Rule of Law in Burundi) – is one of a handful of rebel groups seeking to unseat the Burundi government.

RED-Tabara attacks, however, are targeting civilians rather than government installations, military bases or strategic infrastructure. This has thrown the group's motivations into question.

RED-Tabara was created in 2015 in the aftermath of a political crisis and failed coup by some military officers against Burundi's then president, Pierre Nkurunziza, who died in 2020. The group claims to fight for a return to the rule of law, which it claims the current government has abandoned. However, its indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations are increasingly falling into the pattern of terror acts.

In February 2024, RED-Tabara fighters attacked Buringa village, which is in Burundi on the border with the DRC, killing nine people. Two months earlier, the fighters attacked Vugizo, also in Burundi near the DRC border, killing 20 people.

RED-Tabara operates out of the DRC's volatile eastern region, in South Kivu province. The province shares a porous 243km border with Burundi.

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Political and economic interests, mainly focused on the control of mining areas and the trade of minerals, are playing a key role in the region's dynamics.

The attacks have heightened tensions between Burundi and its neighbour Rwanda. Burundi's president Évariste Ndayishimiye has accused Rwandan authorities of supporting RED-Tabara rebels, a move which has the potential to undermine his country's peace mission in the DRC and its influence in the region.

To protest against this support, Burundi closed its border with Rwanda in January 2024, deported several Rwandan citizens and suspended diplomatic ties. Kigali has repeatedly denied accusations that it supports the rebel group.

The tensions between Rwanda and Burundi are likely to affect economic activities, in particular cross-border trade between the two countries. They could also hinder the implementation of the eight-member East African Community's objectives. These include a common market and, in the future, a political federation.

### **RED-Tabara origins**

RED-Tabara positioned itself as an alternative to the various militia groups that were engaged in internal resistance against Nkurunziza's regime in 2015.

The armed group claims to fight for the rule of law. According to the movement, democracy is in regression in Burundi and the government system is characterised by corruption. The group wants to reinstate the governance system in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement.

This was signed in August 2000 to address Burundi's civil war, which erupted in 1993. One of its key provisions gave 60% of government positions to Hutus, who make up about 85% of Burundi's population.

The negotiation process brought together 17 political parties and led to a power-sharing mechanism that provided ethnic quotas in government and the armed forces. These institutions were previously dominated by the Tutsi minority.

The civil war, which ended in 2005, pitted Burundi's armed forces against Hutu rebel movements. Burundi's current ruling party, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy, was one of these Hutu rebel movements.

RED-Tabara is an offspring of the banned political party Movement for Solidarity and Democracy. The party was banned in 2017 after its members were accused of inciting violence.

It's led by former journalist Alexis Sinduhije, who previously used the media to promote peace during the civil war. Since joining politics, however, Sinduhije has been sanctioned by, among others, the US for his turn to violence. RED-Tabara is, therefore, viewed as the military wing of Sinduhije's political party.

### **The Rwanda factor**

The Burundi government has linked RED-Tabara's recent operations and attacks to Rwandan support. Burundi accuses Kigali of using the group to support the country's destabilisation in two major ways.

First, after the failed military coup against Nkurunziza in 2015, coup leaders who were not arrested fled and found exile in Rwanda. They have since made statements from Kigali aimed at delegitimatising the Burundian government.

Second, there have been reports that Kigali was recruiting and training Burundian rebels from the Mahama Refugee Camp in eastern Rwanda. The site hosts more than 60,000 refugees, a majority of whom are from Burundi.

In 2016, UN experts interviewed captured Burundian fighters in the DRC. These fighters claimed they were recruited from the Mahama camp and, after being trained, were escorted by Rwandan military personnel into the DRC with fake IDs as Congolese citizens. They then moved to South Kivu, ready to launch attacks against the Burundi government as members of RED-Tabara.

The presence of former coup leaders in Rwanda and their involvement in destabilising actions against the Burundi government, as well as the seemingly renewed support for RED-Tabara fighters from the Rwandan government, are driving the renewed political tensions between Kigali and Gitega.

### Conflict dynamics

RED-Tabara's attacks fit into the complex conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes region. The DRC has become the site of proxy wars, as competing political and economic interests from its neighbours conflate.

About 1,000 Burundian troops are supporting the Congolese army's fight against a fast-advancing M23 rebel group in the country's eastern region. Rwanda has been accused by the UN of financing the M23 – allegations that Kigali has denied.

Against this backdrop, Rwandan support of RED-Tabara fighters can be seen as an effort to undermine Burundi's military support in the DRC. This view is supported by Kigali's continued refusal to hand over Burundians who plotted the 2015 coup, and continue to live in Rwanda while coordinating attacks in Burundi.

This has widened the fault lines between Burundi and Rwanda, and could rope in other countries in the region.

Amid these realignments, RED-Tabara is emerging as an armed group that has chosen terror as its main tactic. This, in turn, has resulted in the movement being perceived as losing its initial vision.

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