

Ituri Case Revives Village Horrors

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Bogoro villagers relive alleged massacre at the centre of ICC case against militia leaders. Smearing with a finger dipped in the blood of an apparent massacre victim, words scrawled on a classroom wall warn chillingly that an alleged attack on the village of Bogoro that left 275 people dead five years ago won't be the last.

Bogoro is in the hill country of Ituri, just 25 kilometres from Bunia, and sits at a vital crossroads in the region, connecting the interior with Lake Albert to the east, and southern Ituri to the mining and farming communities of the north.

It is also at the centre of a case by the International Criminal Court, ICC, against Germain Katanga, a militia leader from Ituri known as Simba, or lion in Swahili, who with fellow militia leader Mathieu Ngudjolo, face a confirmation of charges hearing at the Hague court, scheduled for later this week.

Katanga and Ngudjolo are charged with multiple counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, as well as using child soldiers, sexual enslavement, pillaging and inhumane treatment.

The case against Katanga and Ngudjolo concerns an attack the court claims he ordered against the village on February 24, 2003. Katanga allegedly told his largely ethnic Lendu fighters to "wipe out Bogoro", which had been held by Hema militia leader Thomas Lubanga. Lubanga faces other ICC charges.

Although the alleged massacre at Bogoro took place five years ago, the memories are still fresh.

"They came in the day," said Bogoro village chief Samuel Bahemuka Mugeni. "They didn't want to loot, only to kill. Those who were lucky escaped and went to Kisenyi (a village on Lake Edward about 20 km away)."

The alleged attack came despite the presence of the Ugandan army nearby, said Mugeni, which had occupied the area since 1998.

Mugeni told IWPR that the reported killings were in retaliation for earlier attacks on Lendu villages in the area by Hema militias and villagers. "It was a matter of revenge," he said. "They knew [Bogoro] was a Hema village."

Villagers are said to have fled in panic, some heading for the bush while others took refuge in the brick school at Bogoro. Although the Ugandan army returned fire, some villagers were believed to have been trapped in the school and killed.

The alleged attack came when the Ugandan army was preparing to withdraw from the region and the Hema militia of Thomas Lubanga had pulled back from the Bunia, leaving the region vulnerable to Lendu militias such as that of Katanga's.

An estimated 275 people were killed in Bogoro that day, and 98 people were buried in a mass grave, said Mugeni.

Katanga's force occupied the village until it was chased out by United Nations forces in December 2004 - and, during that occupation, the villagers lost their animals and most of their homes were razed, he claimed.

"They destroyed our village," said Mugeni. "They killed people. We ask that justice do its work."

The villagers reoccupied Bogoro in August 2005, but are struggling in the wake of the alleged massacre. "We are waiting for reparations for what they have done here," said Mugeni. "We have never understood why they were fighting."

Nestor Kabagambe, a Bogoro resident, said nine family members were burned to death in their hut in a nearby village that was also attacked. He also lost nearly 50 cows and two houses.

"I'm very angry. I lost my homes, my cattle and my relatives. I've never understood what the fighting was about," he said.

Bezaler Nzwenge said he fled when the reported attack began, and, in the chaos, lost many of his family. Only later did he find the remains of his father, he said, which he recognised by the shirt that his father had been wearing that day, along with some bones.

"It's hard to forget," said Nzwenge. "It's true we were rich and had beautiful houses. What happened here left us poor."

David Binyomwa, a Lendu, said he was an example of the indiscriminate nature of the alleged killing. He said he lost 11 of his family in the fighting, "I feel sad. I'm suffering. Even my wife was killed."

Onisumu Anyaga, who is from the village of Nombe, 11 km south of Bogoro, said five of his children were shot dead by soldiers as they ran away, "They saw people running and they would stand shoot you.

"This war was very bad. People had to leave the village, but no matter where you went, they were chasing you. No one here knows exactly why they were fighting."

Regardless, he said, "all sides were victims" in the region's war.

Kezia Bonebana, a woman from Bogoro who said she lost six daughters along with nieces and nephews, recalled the day of alleged attack with difficulty. "It was very sad," she said. "We had children with us. We have nothing to think about now. We lost everything.

“We wish that justice can be rendered, so that peace can be restored. That’s what’s important to me.”

As the villagers of Bogoro look warily to the future and wait for the ICC to prosecute Katanga and Ngudjolo, they are haunted by the past.

In the fields surrounding the village, the bones of villagers who were reportedly shot fleeing occasionally emerge during the planting season, said local Simon Kabeba.

“We see bones of people and we realise they were killed,” he said. “We’re afraid to touch the bones. You may touch the bones and there will be spirits there.”

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