



Genocide Watch  
The Alliance Against Genocide

## Genocide Emergency: The Banyamulenge of the Democratic Republic of the Congo September 2021

A history of violence has [collectively victimized](#) many populations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Despite the presence of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), at least [120 armed groups](#) remain active due to the lack of effective governance. Given his expressed [support](#) for the targeted Banyamulenge community, President Félix Tshisekedi's 2019 election sparked hope for [change](#). However, he has yet to end the worsening violence against the group.

The Banyamulenge have been persecuted and treated as an “[unwanted](#)” [people](#) since the colonial era, and their attackers cite false interpretations of [history](#) to justify their genocide. The Banyamulenge are related to the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi and have lived in South Kivu, DRC since [before colonialism began in 1885](#). The Belgians dismantled their [chiefdoms](#) for resisting colonial rule. The Belgians propagated Speke’s “Hamitic hypothesis,” which claimed Tutsi pastoralists were *Nilotic* “invaders” from Ethiopia or the Great Rift Valley, while local *Bantu* farmers were the “indigenous” groups of the Great Lakes region. This [same origin myth](#) became the exclusionary ideology underlying the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi.

Although the Congo gained independence in 1960, the Banyamulenge faced continued persecution. In 1981, the government under Mobutu, who named the country [Zaire](#), revoked their citizenship. In 1996, they faced [expulsion and massacres](#). In what became the Congo Wars (1996-2003), Rwanda invaded Zaire to overthrow Mobutu and to stop attacks by genocidal Rwandan Hutu exiles. Initially, Banyamulenge [allied with Rwanda](#) along with other Rwandophones (groups originally from Rwanda). Since the wars, Banyamulenge have almost [entirely opposed](#) Rwandan-backed rebellions that Tutsis joined. However, all Rwandophones have become [collectively associated](#) with Rwandan invasions. Although a 2004 law granted nationality to groups who lived in the Congo in 1960, political representation in an [ancestral territory](#) remains essential to local acceptance of Banyamulenge citizenship claims. Self-styled “indigenous” [Mai-Mai](#) militias still [target Banyamulenge](#) as “invaders.”

Since 2017, Banyamulenge have faced a [slow genocide](#) unnoticed by the international press. They have been systematically [targeted](#) by a [growing coalition](#) of Banyindus, Bafuliro, and Babembe Mai-Mai, Burundian rebels, and groups named “Biloze Bishambuke,” meaning, “*If we have to destroy, let’s destroy.*” Academics and local sources estimate that Mai-Mai have burnt [hundreds of villages](#), looted thousands of cows, killed [hundreds](#) of people, and [besieged](#) thousands of [displaced](#) Banyamulenge in the Minembwe area. Cattle are central to the Banyamulenge’s [livelihoods](#). The Mai-Mai have attacked Minembwe from [multiple directions](#). They have subjected Banyamulenge to [destructive living conditions](#) and serious mental and physical harm. Soldiers from the [national army](#) have reportedly supported the Mai-Mai. MONUSCO, which faces [fiscal constraints](#) and is closely [aligned](#) with the army, fails to prevent attacks. The violence [worsened](#) in March and [April 2021](#).

The UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) found [31% of hate speech](#) in the DRC from May to December 2020 targeted Banyamulenge. [Mai-Mai](#) and [political](#) figures have incited their “extermination.” In late 2020, the creation of a municipality in Minembwe, which would give Banyamulenge more local [political representation](#), was halted following severe [backlash](#). Political and religious figures had called Minembwe a “cancer” and incited fear of a Rwandan “plot” to “[balkanize](#)” the DRC.

Despite its [complexities](#), framing the situation as “intercommunal conflict” hides the [genocidal processes](#) the Banyamulenge have faced. Banyamulenge self-defense groups, born of [security fears](#), also [attack civilians](#) from other ethnic groups. However, from February 2019 to June 2020, the UNJHRO reported [38% of victims](#) were Banyamulenge. The Banyamulenge face **Stage 9: Extermination** and **Stage 10: Denial** of the [Ten Stages of Genocide](#). **Genocide Watch recommends that:**

- The United States (US) and other global powers recognize the Banyamulenge genocide and help the UN and the DRC government prevent further genocidal massacres. Humanitarian aid should be increased for displaced civilians.
- The UN and the US conduct an independent investigation detailing all the violence in the area since 2017.
- The DRC government tackle ethnic bias and civilian abuse in the national army and hate speech at a national level.