

# Uganda–Rwanda Relations: Crossing the Border into Politics

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## Abstract

In the unfolding drama between Uganda and Rwanda, this article looks at the role played by two factors: refugee movements and the border. The role played by each of them is relevant because the presence of Rwandans in Uganda (as refugees and migrants) has influenced the trajectory of both states, and still remains an unresolved issue. Refugee movements take centre-stage whenever a humanitarian crisis is unfolding, and are regarded with pity or with distrust, depending on the moment and the actors involved. More germane to this article, however, is the fact that they also expose political issues. The issue debated here is the political outcomes that long-standing refugee communities contribute to, and their impact on the border. This article therefore argues that the relationship between communities and the central state shapes the border as much as diplomatic agreements, as the relations between borderlands and both capitals across the border are as important as those between capitals (states) themselves.

**Keywords:** refugees, Uganda, Rwanda, border, politics.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The XX century was the century of the refugee, a time when millions of people were forced to leave their homes to take refuge in foreign countries, and when the issue was regulated by international treaties (Mogire 2011). These movements have been the cause of severe crises that stirred humanitarian interventions, which were generally juxtaposed to political solutions (Branch 2009; Malkki 1996; Wagner 2017; Adan *et al.* 2018; Fresia 2014). Mostly the result of state violence, refugees' movements are overcome through international humanitarian interventions that are intentionally depoliticizing, and often seen as disempowering. The depoliticization of refugees occurs when they cross the border, breaking with their state of origin and entering a

host country in which they are not supposed to be politically active. However, long-term settlements of refugees push them to engage with the host state. Against this background, this article shows that despite the apolitical humanitarianism narrative,<sup>2</sup> refugees are far from being apolitical; on the contrary, the issue in the case before us is highly politicized, as it lies at the heart of the diplomatic relations between Uganda and Rwanda. This paper claims that the long permanence of refugees in Uganda pushes refugees into the political realm and to exercise political agency not merely as pawns, but with an unbalancing role in Uganda-Rwanda power relations, exposing the paradox of refugees: they are allegedly an apolitical category, but they play a central role in the political sphere of multiple countries.

We will see how relations between Uganda and Rwanda have run hot and cold over the years. In particular, the past two decades have witnessed an especially volatile shift from military clashes (such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo - DRC) to the signing of cooperation treaties (such as Rwandan admission to the East African Community - EAC). On many occasions, the drama of conflict and reconciliation has been played out at the border (Nugent, Soi 2020), which is both the bridge and the barrier between them, but it is also a backdrop to a humanitarian crisis. Tensions have emerged and alliances have been forged there over the decades, with both countries resisting the temptation to turn their backs on a difficult companion, and accepting the need to co-operate. For these reasons, the border is key, even though here the focus is on refugee movements as one of the most evident elements that made the border 'effective' and 'affective' at the same time, despite the regional integration rhetoric.<sup>3</sup>

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There is extensive literature on the reasons why thousands of Rwandan refugees spread across the region, or on the link between refugees and rebel groups (Mamdani 2001; Prunier 1998; Long 2012; Van der Meeren 1996). As Gil Loescher has demonstrated, refugee problems are political (Loescher 1992), particularly if they are long-lasting, and influence diplomatic relations between states (Loescher 2007). This is especially evident in Uganda (Ahimbisibwe 2017: 16), where the usual narrative towards refugees is that of a benevolent state hosting a huge number of them<sup>4</sup> and offering a particularly successful and inclusive model of refugee management (Ahimbisibwe 2020). But recent events have shown a darker side of the story, with Uganda forcing Rwandans out (with the Rwandan government's support) using the justification of the 2013 Cessation Clause (Kingston 2017), their unclear identity and status and a lack of danger in Rwanda (Ahimbisibwe 2017). This has added another piece to the puzzle of love-and-hate and alliance-and-enmity between the two countries. At the same time, encouraging refugee repatriation is a way of reiterating the existence of the border: refugees are foreigners, even those born in Uganda, and the border is real, albeit porous (but only for Uganda's goodwill towards neighbours). Nevertheless, the refusal of Rwandan refugees to return to Rwanda creates tensions and distrust from the host community – intensifying past feelings, when Rwandans were victimized by

Obote (Van der Meeren 1996) or bore the stigma of being supporters of Amin (Prunier 1998). Moreover, the current quarrels have a great deal to do with Kagame's belief that Museveni is harbouring Rwandans plotting to overthrow him, and Museveni's counter-accusations that Kagame is interfering in Ugandan affairs. Besides, there is the border (and its management): a means to blackmail the neighbour with closures, and a constant variable in their relations, which dates back to long before the two independent states existed (Soi *forthcoming* – Carswell 2003).

In the case of Uganda-Rwanda, the border was decided during the colonial era, without breaking community links on the two sides, considering that it was already a frontier, a buffer zone between different polities and kingdoms. Today it is visible (at least at the border posts),<sup>5</sup> but *panya* routes (informal paths) still exist, reproducing the image of a porous border (Nugent, Soi 2020) and feeding the illegality narrative. In pre-colonial times, keeping the area as a frontier was a guarantee of trade and an almost undisturbed flow of people – essential conditions for regional prosperity (Newbury 1980). So, in some ways, the region's status as a borderland was confirmed by the creation of the border. The passage from frontier to borderland is a pattern that is seen in other regions as well, despite the 'poor reputation' of African borders in terms of artificiality (Foucher 1988, 2020; Lefebvre 2011; Thom 1975; Asiwaju, Nugent 1996; Nugent 2002).

This article therefore seeks to contribute to the study of both refugees and borders, arguing that the relationship between communities (Rwandan refugees) and the central state shapes the border as much as the agreements that officially create and manage it. Relations between people and state, and between borderlands and both capitals across the border, are as important as the relations between capitals (states) themselves. This article will also contribute to refugee studies, highlighting the importance of the border, which is too often only considered to be a line that people cross and that changes their status from displaced people to refugees, from citizens to strangers.

The historical perspective of the article is a key to overcoming the temptation to consider current tensions only as the result of a clash of personalities and ambitions between Museveni and Kagame. Even if we only consider a few illustrative events because of lack of space, looking at the longer historical trajectory is the only way to show the extent of the impact of the border and refugee movements on Uganda-Rwanda relations. Only by expanding the timeframe can we understand the ways in which the past and the present are closely intertwined (Mathys 2017). When we look at the contemporary governments – the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda – we see that their alliance has turned on past refugee relationships, and therefore to some degree on Kagame's and Museveni's shared history. In the early 2000s, dealing with alleged Hutu refugee activity was one area where the Rwanda and Ugandan regimes joined forces – despite the fact that their military forces clashed in Congo in the 1990s. In the past few years, renewed tensions have underlined the recurrence of the problems encountered (or created) by Rwandan

refugees in Uganda and their periodic forced repatriation, and recent hostilities have proved that this is an issue that is in some way embedded in regional politics, and not just the outcome of a specific crisis.

Before starting our journey, it is essential to clarify that, considering the aim of the article and the need to be concise, less emphasis will be placed on the differences among the various groups of Rwandans who have arrived in Uganda over the course of the years – officially as refugees or migrants (Newbury 2005). The author is aware of the importance of these differences when explaining their behaviour and the Ugandan reactions, but the main purpose is to argue the centrality of the two variables (refugees and border) in relations between states – leaving a more exhaustive analysis of such differences to future works.

### **The historical background to a difficult history: the Great Lakes Region in the early 1960s**

Since the late XIX century, Uganda has been host to many Rwandans who have crossed the border as labour immigrants, with encouragement from the colonial powers: Great Britain in Uganda, and Germany – and later Belgium – in Rwanda. Both African territories were protectorates at that time: in 1894, Germany and Great Britain had declared a protectorate over Ruanda-Urundi and Uganda respectively (Calas 1994: 62). In 1890, the two colonial powers signed an agreement to establish their respective spheres of influence: the Tanganyika-Kivu region (which changed its name to Ruanda-Urundi in 1899) for the Germans and Uganda for the British. A few years later, they officially marked the present Rwanda-Uganda border by signing an agreement on 14 May 1910 (U.S. Department of State 1965). This agreement was then modified by the Anglo-German-Belgian Boundary Commission of 1911, which settled the claim of the three parties that wished to gain control of Kigezi (Good 1972: 568).

It was during the colonial period that the first 'refugees' arrived. The first foreigners to take refuge in Uganda as 'special' refugees arrived during the Second World War, and were mainly Europeans fleeing from the war or prisoners-of-war who had been captured by the British in Eastern or Southern Africa (Soi 2008). In 1942, Great Britain created the East African Refugee Administration, which was based in Nairobi, and was responsible for the British colonies in Central and Eastern Africa and Belgian Ruanda-Urundi.<sup>6</sup> Most of the refugees were settled in camps in Western and Central Uganda, and after the war ended, they were resettled in Europe or other Commonwealth States. The first refugees from Rwanda arrived in Uganda during the following decade. The first great wave was caused by the fighting and violence that followed the Social Revolution in 1959.<sup>7</sup> The Rwandan social and ethnic balance had been broken, and after a long period of Tutsi rule, the Hutu majority was ready to take power. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in the course of the five-year period between 1959 and 1964, some 200,000-300,000 Rwandans left the country, 78,000

of whom entered Uganda.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in late 1959 and 1963, refugees tried to re-enter Rwanda, provoking a reaction from the Rwandan government and the subsequent flight of more civilians. By 1963, both Rwanda and Uganda had gained independence from Belgium and Great Britain respectively, with the refugee problem as a foreign policy issue between the two newly-independent States.

In the early 1960s, the Ugandan attitude toward the Rwandan refugees appeared to be positive, with Milton Obote, who had been the Prime Minister during the independence transition period,<sup>9</sup> claiming that refugees were welcome in Uganda. His position changed in the first two years of independence, however, principally as a result of four events: the attempted Inyenzi invasion of Rwanda in 1963; the friendship between the Buganda King *kabaka* Mutesa and the Rwandan *mwami* Kigeri V, who had taken refuge in Uganda in 1962; the refugees' support for the Catholic Democratic Party (DP), which opposed Milton Obote's party, the Protestant Uganda People's Congress (UPC); and the good relations between the Batutsi and the Bahima in Ankole, whereas the UPC was close to the Bairu, who were the ethnic 'opponents' of the Bahima.

The change in attitude became evident in 1964, when Uganda threatened to close the border with Rwanda to stop the influx of refugees in a radical effort to obtain more funds from the UNHCR and the international community. In reaction to his appeal for aid, in January 1964 Obote obtained the support of the British Disasters Emergency Committee,<sup>10</sup> but the commitment was not considered to be sufficient when compared with the emergency and the financial situation: "unless Uganda received help quickly, she might have to stop refugees from crossing the border into Uganda". Uganda announced that the "closure of the borders restricts the entry of the refugees [...]. Anyone wanting to enter Uganda will have to present travel documents",<sup>11</sup> and threatened to cease "all Uganda government expenditure to refugees".<sup>12</sup> Financial and political difficulties influenced relations between the two countries, and despite the fact that diplomatic relations were never broken off, Uganda kept a close eye on Rwandan policies, worried that every decision might produce new refugees.

Continuing rumours around the possible actual closure of the border with Rwanda and the Simba rebellion in Congo worsened the situation. According to Commonwealth Office sources, Uganda backed the rebel movement in 1965, while Rwanda supported Moise Tshombe's government and "incurred the wrath of the government of Uganda. The latter by way of showing their disapproval, in February, arbitrarily closed all but one road between Rwanda and Uganda. This ban remained in force until the end of October [...]".<sup>13</sup> The consequences for the Rwandan economy were severe, as in 1965 the country was almost totally dependent on its neighbours for international and regional trade. Obote also asked Kenya to forbid "imports of all goods into Kenya destined to Rwanda",<sup>14</sup> thereby worsening Rwanda's position and giving Belgium concerns about a possible imitation of these actions by other governments in East Africa, in an attempt to put pressure on Rwanda and Congo.<sup>15</sup> As a result of this Ugandan policy and its

consequences on the Rwandan economy, President Kayibanda decided to reassess his policy towards Congo and Uganda, reassuring Uganda on Rwanda's disengagement in Congo,<sup>16</sup> and seeking to establish closer relations with Uganda and other Eastern Africa states such as Kenya and Tanzania, in an attempt to prepare the ground for the future membership application at the EAC.<sup>17</sup>

Relations between Obote and the Rwandan refugees deteriorated in the late 1960s. The 1966 constitutional crisis and deteriorating relationships with Baganda brought about an authoritarian turn in Obote's regime. In an attempt to regain total control of the country and solve the crisis, Obote announced the Move to the Left in 1969. This policy brought no great positive results, but it had deep implications for the daily lives of refugees because it promoted the Ugandanization of the country in general, and of its economy in particular. By enforcing the exclusion of foreigners from the public sector, state institutions and the economy, Obote caused ethnic divisions to worsen as the Banyarwanda<sup>18</sup> were excluded from the private and public sector and higher education. He also decided to take a census of foreign nationals, with the likely intention of ordering future expulsions.

While relations with the Rwandan refugees grew worse, diplomatic ties with Rwanda saw an improvement. In the late 1960s, negotiations began on Rwanda's access to the EAC, which was only granted in 2007 (at the same time as Burundi). In an attempt to improve regional communications, Rwanda also requested loans from the World Bank and West Germany "for the improvement of her northern and south-western road communications into Uganda and Tanzania".<sup>19</sup> In 1970, Obote visited Rwanda for the first time to discuss the refugee problem, especially after the launch of Obote's Ugandanization policy. Despite its symbolic significance for relations between the two states, the visit lasted just four hours and did not solve any problems.<sup>20</sup>

### Amin's regime

Obote's rule was interrupted in January 1971 by the military coup led by Idi Amin Dada. Everyone seemed happy with the change at first – including Rwandan refugees, given their poor relations with the former President. Some began to work for the government, joining the State Research Bureau<sup>21</sup> or the army (Mamdani 2001: 167), even though their support for Amin was no greater than that of other ethnic or social groups (Prunier 1998: 67). One of Amin's first actions was to permit the body of *kabaka* Mutesa, who had died in Great Britain in 1969, to be returned to Uganda. Amin then invited the Rwandan *mwami* Kigeri to return to Uganda after his expulsion in 1963, arriving in May 1971.<sup>22</sup> Some thought that hosting the former King of Rwanda might be a sign of indirect support for the re-establishment of the monarchy in Rwanda and opposition to the Republic of Rwanda. Others, like representatives of some Western countries, described the decision as "idiotic", and they believed it was in retaliation for the news that Rwanda was allowing Obote's supporters to cross Rwandan territory

from Tanzania to reach Uganda in preparation for an attack against Amin.<sup>23</sup>

Another result of this political environment was the closure of the border between Rwanda and Uganda in July 1971,<sup>24</sup> which was reopened the following month<sup>25</sup> after President Amin set three conditions: the Rwanda government must immediately stop all activities relating to the anti-Uganda guerrillas in its country; Rwanda must not allow or assist any military activity on the part of Tanzania across or in Rwandan territory against Uganda; and finally, Rwanda must always "tell Uganda the truth and keep its territory free of any subversive activities against Uganda".<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Amin also assured the Rwandan Ambassador that he was not going "to allow any Rwandans in Uganda to involve themselves in activities that are against Rwanda".<sup>27</sup> However, he also told the envoy that "he liked President Kayibanda but he warned President Kayibanda against conspiring with Tanzania and Zambia, who are against Uganda", and that "if Rwanda starts hostilities against Uganda, Kigali is not too far for the Uganda army to reach".<sup>28</sup> Alleged political and subversive activities by refugees had always been the cause of tensions between Uganda and Rwanda, despite recurrent reassurances, and were often followed by contrasting threat of retaliations.

In 1972, the border crisis between Rwanda and Uganda entered a new phase. In August, Amin "told the Rwandan ambassador [...] that he would order Kigali to be destroyed if Rwandan association with the Israelis cause any harm to Ugandans living along the border. [...] Kigali was now the Israeli's base for subversive activities against Uganda [...]", threatening its integrity and security. There were several thousand Rwandan refugees in Uganda who might decide – he prophesized unsurprisingly – to return to Rwanda by fighting their way back.<sup>29</sup> The Rwandan response was to express surprise about the changing relations with Uganda, firmly denying any involvement in subversive activities against its neighbour, with which it intended to strengthen its relationship. Nevertheless, Kayibanda was suspicious of Idi Amin's objectives and asked for Belgian support, persuaded that there was a Ugandan-Burundian plan to destabilize his country.<sup>30</sup> Although Amin's real intention was not to invade his neighbour, Rwanda continued to be concerned, and the Rwandan embassy in Nairobi published a long statement in a Kenyan newspaper to clarify its position.<sup>31</sup>

Following violence in the months between 1972 and 1973 caused by Kayibanda's regime crisis, a new refugee wave of Tutsi entered Uganda. They joined the 'old refugees' in the camps or simply settled in various parts of Uganda. This new group found a different – and better – situation than those who had arrived in early 1960s. Amin was more benevolent with the Rwandan refugees than Obote, although this perception was exaggerated by the comparison with Obote's attitude. Not all refugees supported Amin's regime, and he was actually suspicious of the refugees' political activities, particularly in relation to the former King of Rwanda, Kigeri. According to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Amin claimed to have "intercepted letters addressed to the ex-King which aimed at 'confusing people in Uganda and causing conflicts between

Uganda and her neighbours", inducing Amin to remind Kigeri that "he and his supporters were only tolerated in Uganda as long as they did not plan subversive activities against Rwanda".<sup>32</sup> For the Rwandan refugees, however, Amin's years were better than those of Obote's presidency.

In some ways, Amin encouraged the refugees to integrate into Ugandan society; they were allowed to work for the government and many left the camps to settle outside. But Amin was overthrown in 1979, and after a few months of uncertainty and instability, presidential elections were held in December 1980, resulting in a contested victory for Milton Obote, who was thus able to return to his former role. After the overthrow of Amin, the persecution of Rwandan refugees began, because they were accused of supporting him, leading to the creation in 1979 of the Rwandese Refugee Welfare Foundation (RRWF; Prunier 1993) to help the so-called "political diaspora", the refugee and exiled community. With the return of Obote, relations with Rwanda also changed, because Amin's encouragement of Rwandans' integration into Ugandan society reassured Habyarimana about the refugee issue: integration meant that Rwandans would likely prefer to stay in their new place of residence rather than being repatriated. In addition, there was the ghost of the 1971 census of foreigners, including refugees, that Obote ordered to be carried out without having the time to achieve his goal of expelling them (Watson 1991: 10). When he returned to power, he completed the task by expelling the Rwandan refugees in 1982, in part due to their support for the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/NRA).

### **From the bush to the State House: Museveni, the NRM and Rwandan refugees in the 1980s**

Milton Obote's return to power in the early 1980s led to a new wave of discrimination and violence against Banyarwanda refugees (Pirouet 1995: 150). They were viewed as a threat to the security of their host state, both because of their potential engagement in military and rebel activities (as was the case of the Rwanda Defence Force recruiting in Ugandan refugee camps) and because of the involvement of refugees in criminal activities (during these years, the news reported several incidents involving Rwandan refugees in crimes committed in Uganda; Ahimbisibwe 2017: 17).

In the early 1980s, there were 120,000 refugees in Uganda, several tens of thousands of whom were Rwandans, mostly Tutsi (Pirouet 1988: 242), who had tense relations with Obote for several reasons. Apart from their collaboration with Amin's government, there was still the political factor related to the equilibrium among the different Ugandan parties (Newbury 2005: 273): most Rwandans were Catholics (Medard 2003), while the UPC had a prevalently anti-Catholic identity that was set against Catholic support for the DP (Medard 2003: 157). The majority of them, moreover, were Tutsis, who are ethnically close to Museveni's group, which was one of the regime's main sources of opposition. The last issue was thus one of the major causes of Obote's fury



with Rwandan refugees and their manifest political and military agency in favour of government opposition. Yoweri Museveni founded the NRM/A, immediately after the 1980 elections, thanks to the support of a number of Rwandans (Reed 1996), among them Fred Rwigyema (Umwantisi 1997: 54) and Paul Kagame. The collaboration between Ugandan and Rwandan rebels was exploited by Obote, who defined the rebel movement as a foreign force (Watson 1991: 11) seeking to overthrow a legitimate, democratically elected regime – hereby feeding the narrative of foreigners as scapegoats to justify insecurity.

The hostility between refugees and the government degenerated into violence at the end of 1982. In October, despite appeals from the international community, UPC youth militias and a special forces unit attacked Banyarwanda residing in Ankole (in South-West Uganda), killing around 100 people (Prunier 1998: 69), destroying their homes, stealing from their properties and driving them out of the region (Watson 1991: 10). These people included both refugees and migrants who had been living between Uganda and Rwanda for decades,<sup>33</sup> and Ugandan Bahima and Bakiga, pastoralists and agricultural people ethnically close to Banyarwanda (Mamdani 2001: 168). Some 16,000 homes were destroyed and 45,000 heads of cattle were killed, affecting around 80,000 people (Braeckman 1995: 44). According to Catharine Watson (Watson 1991: 10) of these people, around 40,000 returned to Rwanda, some 35,000 took refuge in border camps and the rest remained blocked in Uganda.<sup>34</sup> In November, Rwanda closed the border, leaving the refugees who had been chased by Ugandan troops trapped and unable to return to their homes. Of the 40,000 returnees to Rwanda, however, only 4,000 were recognized as having the right to stay (because they were Rwandan nationals) and were relocated throughout the country; of the others, 1,000 were allowed to return to Uganda, while the vast majority (35,000) remained along both sides of the border, facing an uncertain future and status (Mamdani 2001: 169). Many Rwandan refugees in Uganda were therefore forced to return to the camps they had left in the 1970s (Pirouet 1988: 240). In the end, many of them joined Museveni's rebels: Obote's refugee policies therefore strengthened the rebel movement opposing him.

The international community began to press the two governments to solve the "double refugee" issue, and in March 1983, Rwanda and Uganda reached an agreement: Habyarimana agreed to resettle at least 30,000 of them, while Obote built a new camp, Kyaka II, in an attempt to improve the living conditions in the old camps (Mamdani 2001: 169). Other refugees were also taken to new camps in Toro, in a remote and sparsely populated region, by the UNHCR (Pirouet 1995: 150-151). Uganda promised that the nationality of the refugees would be checked to establish who were real refugees and who were Ugandan citizens (Prunier 1998: 70), and promised compensation to those who had suffered losses. However, no one was punished for the 1982 attacks, and no one was compensated. Obote presented these attacks as a spontaneous popular uprising against the Rwandans and sought to gain support for his operation by redistributing

land and confiscated properties to Ugandans (Mamdani 2001: 168). In December 1983, Obote's troops attacked the Banyarwanda in the Rakai and Masaka districts, removing 19,000 more refugees. As the border with Rwanda was still closed, half of these people fled to Tanzania, while the other half remained in Uganda in refugee camps or joined the guerrilla movement. At the same time, the Banyarwanda residing in Teso (Eastern Uganda) and Lango (Northern Uganda) were also attacked (Mamdani 1996: 25). In July 1984, Uganda signed an agreement with Tanzania to guarantee the return of 10,000 Rwandan refugees. The violent attacks continued, however, even against the Kyaka II camp, forcing international personnel to flee in January 1985 (Mamdani 2001: 169). Events in the late 1970s and early 1980s prove how the presence of refugees has been a recurrent variable in the relations between Rwanda and Uganda, which worked well for both governments when Rwanda wanted to keep the number of Tutsis within its borders low (and Uganda was receiving external support) but triggered great tension when refugees threatened to intervene in Rwanda or became embroiled in Ugandan politics.

The tense situation of Rwandans in Uganda caused their reaction. Refugees alleged that their non-involvement in politics had become impossible to bear, and they began to explicitly exercise their agency. In 1980, the Rwandan Alliance for National Unity (RANU) was created out of the RRWF (Reed 1996: 484). According to Prunier, RANU was "more politically militant" (Prunier 1998: 67), with a leftist ideological approach opposed to the monarchy and favourable to the development of a socialist state in Rwanda. Its members were mainly intellectuals who had met at debates and who eventually came to represent the refugee community (Mamdani 2001: 166). More importantly, for the first time, an organization of this type considered the possibility of fighting in order to return to Rwanda, involving other cultural associations to create nationalist sentiments among the diaspora and attract as many sympathizers as possible to the cause (Reed 1996: 484). Owing to the escalation of violence in Uganda, the organization was forced to leave, and moved its headquarters to Nairobi (Prunier 1998: 67). These were the years (1981-1986; Prunier 1998: 72) when the NRA was fighting Obote's regime and recruiting anyone who could fight regardless of his/her nationality (Reed 1996: 485). Rwandans, particularly those who lived in the area between Kampala and Fort Portal (Mamdani 1996: 26), one of the most affected by the clashes, also joined, including Kagame and Rwigyema (Mamdani 2002). When Kampala was conquered, the NRA consisted of 14,000 guerrilla fighters, including 3,000 Banyarwanda (Prunier 1998: 70). The regime change allowed the RANU to return from exile, and in 1987 the RPF was founded in Kampala with the aim of returning home by any possible means (Mamdani 2001: 175). According to Reed (1996: 485), the Ugandan example somehow inspired the Rwandans' actions: the NRA had managed to defeat a far more powerful army, and the Front might do the same. Despite past failures (Mushemeza 1998: 96), there was initial optimism for a possible negotiated solution when the NRM/A took power

in Uganda, but it soon became clear that Museveni and Habyarimana did not see eye to eye on the refugee issue. Furthermore, the attempted invasion of Rwanda from Ugandan territory in 1990<sup>35</sup> and the identification of the RPF as a "Ugandan" rebel movement finally caused the wreckage of the negotiations for the resolution of the refugee problem, worsening the relations between the two governments. The situation changed when the RPF took power in Rwanda, considering the shared history of the two Presidents, Museveni and Kagame, and the alliance between the NRM and RPF based on their past refugee relationship.

In sum, it clearly appears that in the 1980s, refugees became political actors in their own right, and exercised their agency – such as backing the NRM and the RPF at different points. But it also exposes the limits of what this agency can achieve, as it works best when at least one of the main parties is in a relatively weak position and in need of refugees as allies. Paradoxically, it is the very instability of the equation and power relations in the region that enabled them to gain influence. If the two governments had been in perfect harmony and secure within their own politics, the refugees would have been fully marginalized – enjoying influence in neither country.

#### **The end of harmony: a sour turn in Uganda–Rwanda relations**

In 1994, the RPF took power in Rwanda, changing the regional balance of power. Despite the accession of Rwanda to EAC and their interdependence on trade (most goods heading to Rwanda from Mombasa pass through Uganda, and many goods from Congo pass through Rwanda on their way to Uganda), their relations still blow hot and cold. This situation is shaped by the presence of Rwandan refugees' in Uganda and Congo since the late 1990s and general distrust between the two Presidents. With the NRM in power in Kampala and the RPF in power in Kigali, an odd balance emerged whereby both were convinced that each was crucial to the other's successful assumption of power. An early alliance led them to intervene jointly in Zaire in 1996–1997 (now DRC), bringing Laurent-Désiré Kabila to power. Despite their joint 1997 invasion of part of Eastern Congo (in an attempt to limit attacks to Rwanda and in support of Kabila), their relationship was marred by disagreements created by status competition and economic disputes over DRC natural resources, to the point where their armies clashed twice in Kisangani (1999 and 2000; Murison 2003), and each accused the other of arming rebel groups. In fact, after the 1994 genocide, more than a million Rwandans sought refuge in Congo. These refugee movements destabilized the region, creating new tensions between neighbouring states, and posed a threat to the new Rwandan government when Hutu militias took refuge in the camps and engaged in activities against Rwanda. One main issue was the failure to recognize the potential presence among the fugitives of individuals who had been involved in the genocide. Elements of the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) also left Rwanda and reorganized in the refugee camps. The confusion between refugees and *génocidaires* (and the army)

had serious and violent consequences in the years following the genocide, creating insecurity and suspicion everywhere against refugees (IRRI 2010: 10). There were also the ambitions of the two Presidents: controlling part of Congo could lead to a great improvement in their economic performance and also enhance their image as regional leaders. However, it also created rivalries over resources and strategic influence.<sup>36</sup>

The refugees in Congo were not the Rwandan government's only concern. Despite some previous attempts at repatriating them in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were still thousands of Rwandan refugees in Uganda in the 2010s, and Rwanda was still worried about possible anti-Rwanda rebel activities being carried out in Uganda with the support of the government.<sup>37</sup> Rwanda accused Uganda of hosting Interahamwe,<sup>38</sup> and of assisting groups such as the Rwanda National Congress (RNC) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (DFLR).<sup>39</sup> Worried by the possible threat posed by rebels living abroad, Rwanda insisted on the return of refugees to make the state secure and to identify possible accomplices in the 1994 genocide (Ahimbisibwe 2017: 15).<sup>40</sup> Possible political activities by refugees still posed a risk for the region, challenging the idea that they should be an apolitical entity, without disputing power in any way. As refugees they are supposed to stay outside politics, or return to their country of origin – by staying abroad they were not only posing a risk but they were not even participating to the reconstruction of their country. Likewise, Rwanda believed that the presence of refugees in neighbouring countries gave a negative image of the country at an international level.

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In an attempt to solve the refugee issue, a tripartite agreement for the repatriation of refugees was signed by Uganda, Rwanda and the UNHCR in 2003, thanks to mediation and support from the Tripartite Commission (Ahimbisibwe 2017). The refugees did not trust the Commission on the situation in Rwanda, however, and human rights groups (Human Rights Watch 2014) publicly denounced abductions<sup>41</sup> and forced repatriations by the Ugandan authorities, who were working together with the Rwandans (Ahimbisibwe 2017: 10), of certain high-profile figures such as Joel Mutabazi, a former bodyguard of Kagame who had fled Rwanda in 2011.<sup>42</sup> Despite the Tripartite Agreement and pressure from Rwanda, therefore, most Rwandan refugees refused to return. Regardless of the deteriorating conditions in Uganda due to reductions in support (including reduced supplies of food, difficulties with accessing secondary education and the reallocation of their farmland to Congolese), the concerns and uncertainties awaiting them on the other side of the border were still greater than the problems in the camps. Interviews conducted with Rwandan refugees in 2009 on the reasons that prevent them from returning have revealed that the key issues were mainly the fear of the Gacaca courts,<sup>43</sup> the lack of access to land, actions by the Ibuka organization,<sup>44</sup> and the idea that they will be discriminated against because of their ethnic affiliation (mainly Hutu), despite the government's rhetoric on national unity (IRRI 2010: 23).

The situation has become more tense in the past few years, with increased accusations

of espionage, political killings and support of rebel groups on both sides. Rwanda also blames Uganda for detaining hundreds of Rwandan citizens under controversial circumstances, accused of committing various crimes (which are often not disclosed by the Ugandan authorities).<sup>45</sup> As a consequence, a display of force, both military and diplomatic, started at the border, which once more became the theatre in which the Uganda-Rwanda drama is played out. As a reaction to illegal border crossings, and in retaliation for alleged Ugandan involvement in, or support for, activities to destabilize Rwanda,<sup>46</sup> Rwanda closed the border in February 2019 – intermittently, and at times not officially – particularly at the busiest border post, Katuna-Gatuna. The border closure caused obvious discontent among traders and borderlanders, inducing three organizations to file suit in the East African Court of Justice on behalf of about 600 border traders.<sup>47</sup> There had also been various violent incidents with border guards shooting at border crossers, causing even more tensions at state level.<sup>48</sup> The situation at the border and the perceived attack on trade thus led to tensions between borderlanders and central governments, with trade associations (particularly women traders) suing the government for the damage caused by the closure.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Uganda accused Rwanda of letting its security forces cross the border illegally (and armed), deeming these activities to be a threatening behaviour.

Recent events throughout 2019 and 2020,<sup>50</sup> which caused the closure of the border and increased mistrust between Museveni and Kagame due to the former's alleged support for Kagame's enemies in Uganda, demonstrated how volatile the relations are between the two, with both the border and the refugees playing a pivotal role in their trajectory. The choice of the border for one of their last meetings in February 2020 was clearly not casual. The meeting was convened to find ways to implement the clearly unsuccessful *Memorandum of Understanding* signed in Angola in August 2019,<sup>51</sup> which committed "both parties to release imprisoned citizens, refrain from supporting destabilizing groups and create a commission to monitor the implementation of the agreement".<sup>52</sup> Despite the visible, but merely ostensible, efforts to solve the tensions between them, the situation is still unresolved at the time of writing, with the border partially and intermittently closed and refugees unsecure of what the near future might possibly bring them. One consequence of the dispute has been to confirm the importance of an open and functioning border. As a trader from Katuna put it, "I didn't know what closing the border meant" until traders were prevented from crossing, damaging not only the economy of both countries but also Museveni's image during an electoral campaign, and showing how fragile EAC can be.

### Final remarks

As we have seen, the presence of refugees in Uganda had a powerful influence on its relations with Rwanda. Security concerns regarding refugees have dominated diplomatic relations, despite the rhetoric about regional integration and acceptance

of the EAC's rules of freedom of movement for people and goods. Rwanda's continuing concerns about possible rebel activities from Uganda have motivated its persistent requests for the repatriation of refugees, and over the years, Ugandan worries about the security threats provoked by possible criminal activities have persuaded Uganda to encourage the repatriation of Rwandans. Rwanda has also wanted to construct an image of reconciliation and inclusion after the genocide and the post-1994 violence, but the persisting presence of Rwandan refugees in neighbouring countries, and their fears of being discriminated against or targeted by state violence, have projected an image of a merely partial reconciliation.

The article argues that despite the fact that refugee status creates a state of exception that according to international bureaucratic instruments converts them into apolitical figures, in an attempt to obscure the political reality behind their decisions to move and the political consequences of their presence, they actually form part of the political sphere. By analyzing the historical trajectory of Uganda-Rwanda relations, and those between refugees and Uganda, we can easily make the claim that a long-lasting presence of refugees in a country makes it impossible for them to maintain an apolitical life. Moreover, by studying the entire existence of the two countries, we can identify some general patterns that confirm not only that refugees and the border are at the centre of the relationship between the two countries, but also that people-state relations are as important as relations between states. Both countries have framed their identities in relation to those groups that are considered to be 'external' – refugees in Uganda and repatriates in Rwanda – as the very concept of refugees has evolved. Refugee communities also had to pay a price in order to fit in, as they were considered at various points to be guests or dangerous infiltrators who had the potential to destabilize the state. We therefore see how the complete equation changes depending on the relations between people (refugees) and states (both Uganda and Rwanda), encouraging refugees to exercise their agency actively or passively. We also see how, when the two governments were in harmony and secure within their own politics, the refugees had no space for manoeuvre, resulting in their marginalization. In conclusion, refugee movements have been a constant reminder over the decades of how the Uganda-Rwanda border can be breached despite efforts on both sides to confirm its effectiveness, and they still contribute towards challenging state power on the ground.

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## NOTES:

- 1 – Part of the research for this article was conducted under a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant for the project "African Governance and Space: Transport Corridors, Border Towns and Port Cities in Transition (AFRIGOS)" [ADG-2014-670851].
- 2 – On how humanitarian crisis and interventions have been depoliticized and turned into a technical issue see Ferguson (1994).
- 3 – On the concept of 'effective' and 'affective' borders see Datta (2012).
- 4 – J. Mutabazi, *On refugees, Museveni is the Arsonist that Sets Fire on a House*, «The New Times Rwanda», 25 June 2019: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/museveni-sets-fire-house> (last access 16 October 2019).
- 5 – In 2010 Uganda and Rwanda agreed on the re-demarcation of the border, an exercise that started in 2014. *Gov't to Spend Rwf 700m on Border Demarcation*, «The New Times», 20 April 2010: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/18926>; A. Tashobya, *Minister Nduhungirehe Explains Rwanda-Uganda Border Demarcation*, «The New Times», 12 September 2018: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/minister-nduhungirehe-explains-rwanda-uganda-border-demarcation>.
- 6 – The League of Nations granted the Ruanda-Urundi mandate to Belgium after the Belgian occupation of Ruanda-Urundi in 1916 and the defeat of Germany in the First World War.
- 7 – During the Belgian administration of Ruanda-Urundi, the balance between the different social groups changed considerably, which led to a deterioration in the relations between the Bahutu and Batutsi. The first open clash between those two groups took place in 1959, when a Hutu politician was allegedly assaulted by Union Nationale Rwandaise (UNAR) supporters, causing widespread violence against the Batutsi. This reinforced the social and political polarization of Rwanda, leading to the end of the rule of the Batutsi, which was confirmed at the 1960 and 1961 elections.
- 8 – UNHCR *Banyarwanda Refugee Census of 1964* in Prunier (1998: 61).
- 9 – Obote only officially became President of the Republic of Uganda in 1966, when the new Constitution was approved (Mutibwa 1992: 58).
- 10 – The National Archives (TNA), DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *Disasters Emergency Committee – Notes of the Second Meeting held on 2 February 1964, at Grosvenor Crescent, London, SW1, at 2:30 p.m.*, London.
- 11 – TNA, DO 213/6 – Uganda/Sudan, *Text of report of Nekyon's statement* – London, 6 May 1964.
- 12 – TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *Letter of Mr E. G. Le Tocq (to W. G. Lamarque, Esq., M.B.E., Commonwealth Relations Office) – British High Commission, Kampala*, London, 13 May 1964.
- 13 – TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *Rwanda Annual Review 1965*, London, 5 January 1966.
- 14 – TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *From Bujumbura to Foreign Office*, London, 22 February 1965.
- 15 – TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *From Commonwealth Relations Office to Kampala*, London, 2 March 1965.
- 16 – TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *From Bujumbura to Foreign Office*, London, 23 February 1965.
- 17 – "[...] President Kayibanda is determined to establish closer relations with Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. He is encouraging his Ministers and senior civil servants to learn English. He is pressing forward with the plan to build a road to link Rwanda and Tanzania. Close relations with East Africa are a cardinal point in his foreign policy programme": TNA, DO 213/7 – Uganda-Rwanda/Urundi, *Rwanda Annual Review 1965*, London, 5 January 1966.
- 18 – Immigrants from Rwanda that speak kinyarwanda (Pirouet 1995: 68).
- 19 – TNA, FCO 31/291 – Rwanda: annual review for 1968, *Rwanda: Annual Review for 1968 – Mr Scott to Mr Stewart*, London, 5 February 1969.
- 20 – TNA, FCO 31/769 – Rwanda: Annual Review for 1970, *Rwanda: Annual Review for 1970*, London, 18 January 1971.
- 21 – The State Research Bureau was created by Amin to collect information and use it to control the Ugandan people, including through the use of violent methods (Pirouet 1995: 334-5).
- 22 – TNA, FCO 31/1035 – External plots against Government of Uganda, *News Kampala – Visit by Ex-King of Rwanda*, London, 7 May 1971.
- 23 – TNA, FCO 31/1035 – External plots against Government of Uganda, *From Mr C. M. Le Quesne to Mr Le Tocq – Uganda*, London, 10 May 1971.

- 24 - TNA, FCO 31/773 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *Aide-Memoire of Ambassade de Belgique, London* – London, 19 July 1971.
- 25 - TNA, FCO 31/773 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *From Kampala (Mr Slater) to FCO – Tel No 811*, London, 5 August 1971.
- 26 - TNA, FCO 31/773 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *B52. Rwanda Border 2 – Three Conditions* – London, 5 August 1971.
- 27 - TNA, FCO 31/773 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *B52. Rwanda Border 3 – Kigali within Uganda Army's Reach*, London, 5 August 1971.
- 28 - TNA, FCO 31/773 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *B52. Rwanda Border 3 – Kigali within Uganda Army's Reach*, London, 5 August 1971.
- 29 - TNA, FCO 31/1109 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *Uganda/Rwanda relations*, London, 18 August 1972.
- 30 - TNA, FCO 31/1109 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *Confidential*, London, 23 August 1972.
- 31 - TNA, FCO 31/1109 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *Daily Nation "Rwanda states its stand"*, London, 28 August 1972.
- 32 - TNA, FCO 31/1109 – Political relations between Uganda and Rwanda, *Restricted*, London, 5 December 1972.
- 33 - In 1982, 40,000 Banyarwanda claimed Ugandan citizenship, 31,000 of whom were refugees registered with the UNHCR (Pirouet 1988: 243).
- 34 - According to Prunier (1998:70), up to 10,000 Rwandans remained blocked between Rwanda and Uganda.
- 35 - According to William Pike, Museveni and Kagame were taken by surprise by the border crossing of 1990 that led to the invasion (Pike 2019).
- 36 - N. Norbrook, P. Kantai, P. Smith, *How Kagame and Museveni Became the Best of Frenemies*, «The Africa Report», 4 October 2019: <https://www.theafricareport.com/18087/kagame-and-museveni-the-best-of-frenemies/>.
- 37 - C. Uwiringiyimana, *Rwanda Accuses Uganda of Supporting Rebels*, «Reuters», 5 March 2019: <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1QM1TJ-OZATP>.
- 38 - The Interahamwe was a youth movement within the Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour la Démocratie et le Développement (MRND), the political party of Rwanda's President Juvénal Habyarimana, created to threaten non-MRND people. The word *interahamwe* means "those who sing/work/attack together", and since 1992 it became associated with the terror they spread in the country (Twagilimana 2007: 87).
- 39 - *Rwanda: as Tensions Mount with Uganda, here's how to Defuse the Crisis*, «The Conversation», 18 March 2019: <https://theconversation.com/rwanda-as-tensions-mount-with-uganda-heres-how-to-defuse-the-crisis-113532>.
- 40 - *Rwanda, Uganda Trade Claims over Treatment of Refugees*, «Associated Press», 02 February 2018: <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/rwanda-uganda-trade-claims-over-treatment-of-refugees-20180202>.
- 41 - *Rwandans at the Heart of Uganda-Rwanda Row*, «The Monitor», 30 March 2019: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Rwandans-heart-Uganda-Rwanda-row/688334-5049270-1ve09u/index.html>.
- 42 - *Ugandan Officers Charged with Abducting Rwanda Refugees*, «Agence France-Presse», 9 January 2019: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/ea/Ugandan-officers-charged-with-abducting-Rwanda-refugees/4552908-4927982-jxmljvz/index.html>.
- 43 - The Gacaca courts (grass courts) were established in 2001 as an instrument of transitional justice to deal with the genocide-related crimes committed in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994 (Clark 2010). According to refugees interviewed by IRR1, Gacaca were "vulnerable to manipulation by those seeking to settle personal grudges or as an instrument of government repression. Most refugees who had previously tried to return home to Rwanda – including under the 2009 repatriation exercise by UNHCR – recounted having had a negative experience of the *gacaca* process or government bodies linked to it" (IRRI 2010: 4).
- 44 - The Ibuka, meaning "we should always remember", is an umbrella organization created in Rwanda in 1995 for genocide survivors to represent them and address issues related to memory and justice.
- 45 - *Rwanda, Uganda Moves 35 Illegally Detained Rwandans from Ungazetted Facilities*, «The New Times», 25 October 2019: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/uganda-moves-35-illegally-detained-rwandans-ungazetted-facilities>.
- 46 - A. Rudatsimburwa, *Gatuna Border Closure: Museveni Cites his Meddling as Origin of the Problem*, «The



- New Times», Rwanda, 26 February 2020: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/opinions/gatuna-border-closure-museveni-cites-his-meddling-origin-problem>.
- 47 - S. Neiman, *The Dangers of Deteriorating Relations Between Rwanda and Uganda*, «World Politics Review», 17 October 2019: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28272/the-dangers-of-deteriorating-relations-between-rwanda-and-uganda>.
- 48 - *One Step Forward, 2 back in Uganda, Rwanda Talks*, «The Daily Monitor», 14 June 2020: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/one-step-forward-2-back-in-uganda-rwanda-talks-1894802>.
- 49 - A. McCool, *Thwarted by Rwanda-Uganda Border Closures, Women Await Resolution*, «Aljazeera», 4 October 2019: <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/thwarted-rwanda-uganda-border-closures-women-await-resolution-190924160937257.html>.
- 50 - *Rwandan Refugees in Uganda May Be Thrown Out – Minister Onek*, «The Monitor», 15 November 2018: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Rwandan-refugees-Uganda-may-be-thrown-out-Minister-Onek/688334-4853062-ra0ok9/index.html>; *Rwanda Accuses Uganda of Supporting Rebels*, «Voice of America» (VOA), 5 March 2019: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/rwanda-accuses-uganda-supporting-rebels>; J. Beloff, *Rwanda: As Tensions Mount with Uganda, here's how to Defuse the Crisis*, «The Conversation», 18 March 2019: <https://theconversation.com/rwanda-as-tensions-mount-with-uganda-heres-how-to-defuse-the-crisis-113532>.
- 51 - P. Fabricius, *Museveni Agrees to Smoke Out Rwandan 'Terrorists' on Ugandan Soil. But if Uganda's President Can't Find any to Expel, Will that Keep the Uganda-Rwanda Border Closed?*, "Institute for Security Studies", 27 February 2020: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/museveni-agrees-to-smoke-out-rwandan-terrorists-on-ugandan-soil>.
- 52 - *Rwanda-Uganda Conflict: Is the End in Sight?*, «African Business», 23 March 2020: <https://african.business/2020/03/economy/rwanda-uganda-conflict-is-the-end-in-sight/>.

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