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By Robert Draper

The mwami remembers when he was a king of sorts. His judgment was sovereign, his power unassailable. Since 1954 he, like his father and grandfather before him, has been the head of the Bashali chiefdom in the Masisi District, an undulating pastoral region in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Though his name is Sylvestre Bashali Mokoto, the other chiefs address him as simply *doyen*—seniormost. For much of his adult life, the mwami received newcomers to his district. They brought him livestock or other gifts. He in turn parceled out land as he saw fit.

Today the chief sits on a dirty couch in a squalid hovel in Goma, a Congolese city several hours south of Masisi. His domain is now the epicenter of a humanitarian crisis that has lasted for more than a decade yet has largely eluded the world's attention. Eastern Congo has been overtaken by thousands of Tutsi and Hutu and Hunde fighting over what they claim is their lawful property, by militias aiming to acquire land by force, by cattlemen searching for less cluttered pastures, by hordes of refugees from all over this fertile and dangerously overpopulated region of East Africa seeking somewhere, anywhere, to eke out a living. Some years ago a member of a rebel army seized the mwami's 200-acre estate, forcing him, humiliated and fearing for his safety, to retreat to this shack in Goma.

The city is a hornet's nest. As recently as two decades ago Goma's population was perhaps 50,000. Now it is at least 20 times that number. Armed males in uniform stalk its raggedy, unlit streets with no one to answer to. Streaming out of the outlying forests and into the city market is a 24/7 procession of people ferrying immense sacks of charcoal on bicycles or wooden, scooter-like *chukudus*. North of the city limits seethes Nyiragongo volcano, which last erupted in 2002, when its lava roared through town and wiped out Goma's commercial district. At the city's southern edge lies the silver cauldron of Lake Kivu—so choked with carbon dioxide and methane that some scientists predict a gas eruption in the lake could one day kill everyone in and around Goma.

The mwami, like so many far less privileged people, has run out of options. His stare is one of regal aloofness. Yet despite his cuff links and trimmed gray beard, he is not a chief here in Goma. He is only Sylvestre Mokoto, a man swept into the hornet's nest, with no land left for him to parcel out. As his guest, a journalist from the West, I have brought no gifts, only demeaning questions. "Yes, of course my power has been affected greatly," the mwami snaps at me. "When others back up their claims with guns, there is nothing I can do."

The reign of the mwamis is finished in this corner of East Africa. The region has become a staging ground for violence of mind-reeling proportions over the past few decades: the murder and abduction of tens of thousands in northern Uganda, the massacre of more than a million in the genocides of Rwanda and Burundi, followed by two wars in eastern Congo, the last of which, known as the Great African war because so many neighboring countries were involved, is estimated to have killed more than five million people, largely through disease and starvation—the deadliest war since World War II. Armed conflicts that started in one country have seeped across borders and turned into proxy wars, with the region's governments each backing various rebel groups, a numbing jumble of acronymed militias—the LRA, FDLR, CNDP, RCD, AFDL, MLC, the list goes on—vying for power and resources in one of the richest landscapes in all of Africa.

The horrific violence that has occurred in this place—and continues in lawless eastern Congo despite a 2009 peace accord—is impossible to understand in simple terms. But there is no doubt that geography has played a role.

Erase the borders of Uganda, the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania and you see what unites these disparate political entities: a landscape shaped by the violent forces of shifting plate tectonics. The East African Rift System bisects the horn of Africa—the Nubian plate to the west moving away from the Somalian plate to the east—before forking down either side of Uganda.

The western rift includes the Virunga and Rwenzori mountain ranges and several of Africa's Great Lakes, where the deep rift has filled with water. Called the Albertine Rift (after Lake Albert), this 920-mile-long geologic crease of highland forests, snowcapped mountains, savannas, chain of lakes, and wetlands is the most fecund and biodiverse region on the African continent, the home of gorillas, okapis, lions, hippos, and elephants, dozens of rare bird and fish species, not to mention a bounty of minerals ranging from gold and tin to the key microchip component known as coltan. In the 19th century European explorers like David Livingstone and John Hanning Speke came here searching for the source of the Nile. They gazed in awe at the profusion of lush vegetation and vast bodies of water, according to the scholar Jean-Pierre Chrétien: "In the heart of black Africa, the Great Lakes literally dazzled the whites."

The paradox of the Albertine Rift is that its very richness has led to scarcity. People crowded into this area because of its fertile volcanic soil, its plentiful rainfall, its biodiversity, and its high altitude, which made it inhospitable to mosquitoes and tsetse flies and the diseases they carry. As the population soared, more and more forest was cut down to increase farm and grazing land. Even in the 19th century the paradise that visitors beheld was already racked with a central preoccupation: Is there enough for everyone?

Today that question hangs over every square inch of the Albertine Rift, where the fertility rate is among the highest in the world, and where violence has erupted between humans and against animals—in a horror show of landgrabs, spastic waves of refugees, mass rapes, and plundered national parks, the last places on Earth where wildlife struggles to survive undisturbed by humans. For the impoverished residents of the region, overcrowding has spawned an anxiety so primal and omnipresent that one hears the same plea over and over again:

We want land!

The suspected lion killer sits near the shore of Lake George and plays a vigorous board game known as *omweso* with one of his fellow cattlemen. He looks up, introduces himself as Eirfazi Wanama, and says he cannot tell me his age or the number of his children. "We Africans don't count our offspring," he declares, "because you *muzungu* don't want us to produce so many children." Muzungu is slang for whites in this part of the world. Wanama offers a wry smile and says, "You don't have to beat about the bush. Some lions were killed here, and the rangers came in the middle of the night and arrested me."

In late May 2010 two rangers in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park saw vultures hovering over a field in the park about a mile from Wanama's village of Hamukungu and discovered the dead bodies of five poisoned lions. Nearby were two cow carcasses that had been laced with a bluish pesticide called carbofuran. Early intelligence pointed to Wanama; another suspect fled the area. "They held me for a day," Wanama says. "They have released me from their investigation. I am not running away."

Hamukungu is located within the boundaries of the park, whose predominant tourist attraction is its population of lions, which has dwindled by about 40 percent in less than a decade. "The number of villagers has increased," says Wilson Kagoro, the park's community conservation warden, "as has the number of cattle. And this has created a big conflict between them and us. They sneak into the park late at night to let their cattle graze. When this happens, the lions feast on the cows." Given that parkland grazing is illegal, the aggrieved pastoralists are left

with no legal recourse. But that does not mean that they are without countermeasures. "We are surviving on God's mercy," Wanama says when I ask how so many people manage to survive on so little land. "The creation of this national park has made us so poor! People have to live on the land!" It's a common complaint in the overcrowded villages that ring the region's networks of parks and reserves.

Queen Elizabeth Park was established in 1952 with the growing recognition that this region had the highest biomass of large mammals of anyplace on Earth, according to Andrew Plumptre, director of the Albertine Rift Programme of the Wildlife Conservation Society. But social and political upheaval made it difficult to protect the wildlife. Over the decades poachers and desperate villagers raided the parks and decimated the populations of elephants, hippos, and lions. By 1980 the number of elephants had dropped from 3,000 to 150 in Queen Elizabeth.

Virunga National Park in eastern Congo—Africa's oldest, founded in 1925—is among the most imperiled, with many people already settled inside its boundaries. The countryside, once teeming with charismatic megafauna, is eerily vacant. The park's tourist lodges are gutted. Since the Rwandan genocide of 1994, much of the park has been closed to tourists.

The park is a war zone. Rodrigue Mugaruka is the warden of Virunga's central sector, Rwindi. He is a former child soldier who participated in the 1997 overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko, the longtime dictator of the DRC (then called Zaire). In eastern Congo the vacuum created by Mobutu's exit led to fierce competition among proxy armies and various militias for its gold, charcoal, tin, and coltan. Now Mugaruka is doing battle with militias—called Mai-Mai fighters—who control illegal fishing and charcoal production in many of the villages that have cropped up inside the park on the western shore of Lake Edward. He recently regained control of his sector from thousands of Congolese soldiers stationed there to fight off the militias. Since the government rarely paid the soldiers, they resorted to killing the wildlife for food.

Mugaruka's efforts to enforce park regulations do not sit well with the tens of thousands of Congolese who have fled areas of conflict and taken up residence in the villages. In the fishing hamlet of Vitshumbi the warden orders park rangers to chop up, douse in kerosene, and set fire to several unlicensed fishing boats, illegal nets, and bags of charcoal, while the villagers look on bitterly. In a fishing boat dented from gunfire he ferries us to Lulimbi village, from which we drive to the Ishasha River bordering Uganda, where 96 percent of the park's hippo population has been slaughtered since 1976 and sold for bush meat by militias. Later we head to the park's Mount Tshiaberimu subsector, where an armed patrol provides round-the-clock protection to 15 eastern lowland gorillas from militias and from villagers who have been encouraged by politicians to claim parkland.

Rodrigue Mugaruka knows that he's a marked man. The Mai-Mai—and the Congolese businessmen who fund them—have made him a target. "Their objective is to chase us out of the park for good," says the warden. "When we seize a boat and a net, the businessmen tell the Mai-Mai, 'Before we put another net in the water, you must go kill a ranger.' Three of mine have been killed in the lake. If you consider the whole area, more than 20 rangers have been killed."

Last January, Mugaruka's men were ambushed with a rocket-propelled grenade by militia fighters along a road that goes through the center of the park. Three rangers and five Congolese soldiers were killed. Government officials soon received a petition signed by 100,000 villagers demanding that Virunga National Park be reduced in size by nearly 90 percent. The petitioners gave the government three months to release the land, which they claimed belonged to them. After that, warned the petition, the villagers would all grow crops in the park—and defend their activities with arms.

"We want land!"

The speaker gives his name as Charles, a 24-year-old sitting on a freshly cut log in a forest, a machete in his hand. He does not belong here, in Uganda's Kagombe Forest Reserve. Then again, maybe he does. No less than a presidential order has stopped the evictions of those who've encroached on forest reserves and wetlands. Charles says a government minister recently visited the Kagombe inhabitants. "He told us we can stay," he says, grinning. The minister's cronies have an election coming up, and the best way to placate voters is to promise them land.

Charles and a few other pioneering young villagers moved into the forest in 2006. "We'd been living on our grandparents' property, but there were too many people on the land already," he says. "We heard people talk about how there was free land this way." A migrant group, the Bakiga, had already begun to settle in Kagombe, and when the National Forestry Authority tried to evict them, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni—himself facing reelection—issued the executive order forbidding evictions. Thereupon a few local politicians urged the native Banyoro people, who include Charles and his friends, to grab some forestland as well, lest all of Kagombe wind up inhabited by nonlocals.

Charles and his friends each claimed about seven acres of timberland and began slashing away. They built grass-thatched huts, feed-storage sheds, a road, and a church. They planted corn, bananas, cassava, and Irish potatoes. Then they sent for their wives and began to have more children. Today Charles is one of about 3,000 inhabitants of the forest reserve and has no desire to leave. "We're very well off here," he says.

The forest, meanwhile, sometimes looks like a smoky wasteland, as people use fire to clear the forest for crops. The damage goes beyond the aesthetic: Kagombe serves as one of a series of connective forests that make up a wildlife corridor for chimps and other animals. As Sarah Prinsloo of the Wildlife Conservation Society observes, "The health of the wildlife population in these parks is dependent on corridors like Kagombe." The habitat destruction has contributed to a plunging animal population throughout the region. In Kagombe itself most wildlife has been hunted out.

The forestry authority's sector manager, Patrick Kakeeto, contemplates the devastation with a despairing smile. "They're cutting all of this down," he says. "And we can't touch them. For us, it's a kind of psychoprofessional torture."

How did this land of plenty descend into a perilous free-for-all? Dig deep into its history and it turns out the Albertine Rift has been shaped by mistaken ideas about its ethnic identities. The archaeological and linguistic evidence indicates that by as early as A.D. 500 various peoples had migrated into the region and forged a heterogeneous society that spoke similar Bantu languages and supported itself with both farming and herding. In the 15th century centralized kingdoms such as Bunyoro and Rwanda arose, along with exclusive classes of pastoralists, who distinguished themselves from farmers by their dress and a diet of milk, meat, and blood. Over time these pastoralists became distinct from the rest of the population, and their influence grew.

By the time European explorer John Hanning Speke arrived in the late 19th century, he was astonished by the highly organized kingdoms he encountered, complete with courts and diplomats. He assumed the elite pastoralists, known as Hima or Tutsi, were a superior race of Nilotic people (from what is now Ethiopia) who had invaded the Great Lakes and subjugated what he regarded as the lowly indigenous Bantu farmers, such as Iru or Hutu. "The states of the Great Lakes challenged derogatory racial beliefs about African intellect and ability," says archaeologist Andrew Reid. The idea of a Nilotic invasion was a way to explain away the existence of sophisticated kingdoms in the heart of Africa. The only problem: It wasn't true.

That didn't stop the Tutsi and other elites from embracing the story of their exotic origins to better differentiate themselves from the majority Hutu. And after East Africa was divided between European powers in the late 19th century, the Germans and then the Belgians were only too happy to co-opt what appeared to be the natural social hierarchy and give preference to what they believed to be the superior minority of Tutsi.

Despite the oft-cited physical differences between the two groups—the Tutsi are supposed to be taller, lighter skinned, and thinner lipped than the Hutu—it was so difficult to tell the two apart that by 1933 the Belgians had resorted to issuing identity cards: The 15 percent who owned cattle or had certain physical features were defined as Tutsi, and the rest were Hutu. (Members of one family sometimes ended up in different groups.) These identity cards, officially codifying a caste system that separated one people into two, would be used during the Rwanda genocide to single out who would live and who would be murdered. By the time the colonizers granted the countries independence in the early 1960s, ethnic hostilities between Tutsi and Hutu had already led to waves of killings and retaliatory murders. Today tensions between these two groups continue to play out in the Congo.

But clearly the Rwanda genocide was the result of more than Hutu-Tutsi ethnic hatred. The latter years of the 20th century had brought a sobering recognition that there was in fact not enough for everyone in the Albertine Rift—and with that, catastrophe. An alarming rise in population coincided with a slump in coffee and tea prices in the 1980s, leading to great deprivation; poverty led to an even greater strain on the land. Although it's true that a country like the Netherlands had a population density as high as Rwanda did at this time, it also benefited from mechanized, high-yield agriculture. Rwanda's dependence on traditional subsistence farming meant that the only way to grow more food was to move onto ever more marginal land.

By the mid-1980s every acre of arable land outside the parks was being farmed. Sons were inheriting increasingly smaller plots of land, if any at all. Soils were depleted. Tensions were high. Belgian economists Catherine André and Jean-Philippe Platteau conducted a study of land disputes in one region in Rwanda before the genocide and found that more and more households were struggling to feed themselves on little land. Interviewing residents after the genocide, the researchers found it was not uncommon to hear Rwandans argue that "war is necessary to wipe out an excess of population and to bring numbers into line with the available land resources." Thomas Malthus, the famed English economist who posited that population growth would outstrip the planet's ability to sustain it unless kept in check by starvation, disease, or war, couldn't have put it more succinctly.

André and Platteau do not suggest that the genocide was an inevitable outcome of population pressures, since the killings were clearly instigated by the decisions of power-hungry politicians. But several scholars, including French historian Gérard Prunier, are convinced that a scarcity of land set the stage for the mass killing. In short, the genocide gave landless Hutu the cover they needed to initiate class warfare. "At least part of the reason why it was carried out so thoroughly by the ordinary rank-and-file peasants ... was the feeling that there were too many people on too little land," Prunier observed in *The Rwanda Crisis*, "and that with a reduction in their numbers, there would be more for the survivors."

The eastern Congo village of Shasha has become a grim crossroads between major destinations in North Kivu for armed groups seeking land, minerals, and revenge. Mines holding eastern Congo's abundant tin, coltan, and gold are almost exclusively under the control of these roving bands—Hutu and Tutsi paramilitaries, Mai-Mai militias, army soldiers—each descending on Shasha in a macabre rotation, one after another, month after month, in a wave of mayhem.

A woman named Faida weeps quietly as she recalls what happened to her a year ago. She is petite, with fatigued

eyes and a voice just above a whisper. In her hands is a letter from her husband, demanding that she leave their house because he feared she might have contracted HIV from the men who raped her.

On that fateful day Faida was on the same road she always took after working in the peanut fields. She would walk an hour and a half to the market at Minova with the peanuts on her back, then return home with firewood. Faida was 32 and of the Hunde ethnic group, married with six children, and for 16 years this had been her routine. She believed no one would attack a woman in broad daylight.

The three men were rebel Hutu. She tried to run, but the load on her back was heavy. The men told her to choose between life and death. Then they dragged her into a cattle field. She lost consciousness.

Today she and her children live with neighbors, and she cannot work. Her husband took another wife. The physical damage done is extensive. "I'm really suffering," she says. "Please help me with medicine, I beg you."

Shasha's population is about 10,000, twice what it was in 1994, and its story is, writ small, that of eastern Congo. A Hunde stronghold since antiquity, Shasha saw an influx of Hutu in the 1930s, when the Belgian occupiers brought them in to work their plantations. Later, in the wake of the 1994 genocide, thousands more Hutu came as refugees. Land disputes became overheated and were frequently resolved at the point of a gun. The area's vast mineral wealth only made things worse. Scarcity and abundance exist here side by side, fueling grievances as well as greed, both spiraling into inexplicable violence against innocents.

Goma women's advocate Marie Gorette estimates that more than 800 females in the village have been raped. They ranged in age, she says, from nine months to 80. One afternoon we sit in a hut while women enter one by one to tell their stories. Odette is strong shouldered and wears a blue print dress. It happened to her just ten days ago. Her 12-year-old son found her unconscious in the cassava fields where she had been working. Justine looks much younger than 28 and has lively eyes. The Congolese Tutsi warlord Laurent Nkunda (under house arrest in Rwanda since 2009) sent CNDP troops into Shasha in 2008. Justine was far from the only one—many of her relatives and neighbors were raped as well. Another woman, 42, tells how Congolese Tutsi rebels barged into her house four years ago, took all the family's money, and raped her. "It's a secret," she says, and I sadly realize she's told me her story only because she thinks I can help her.

Some 200,000 females in the Congo were raped between 1996 and 2008, and more than 8,000 in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu in 2009 alone. And despite international attention following a 2009 visit to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the rapes continue. Just as the "Hutu power" Rwandans sought to eradicate the Tutsi in 1994 by massacring women and children, Shasha's invaders are human heat-seeking missiles aimed at the village's women. "Because it's the corridor, Shasha is the worst place in the region when it comes to mass rapes," says Gorette. "They use rape as a weapon to destroy a generation."

I am somewhere in Rwanda when my car breaks down. A man pulls over to where I'm hovering over the smoking engine and offers to drive me the remaining 70 or so miles to Kigali. "If this were the Congo, you would be in big trouble," he says laughing.

The 41-year-old man's name is Samuel, and though he is from the farming community of Rwamagana, his vocation is carpentry. By the region's standards, Samuel's family is small. "Only four children," he says. "I think that's the ideal size." Schools cost Samuel about \$650 per child each term. "But I think education is the solution. Otherwise people have no work. They just resort to having lots of children and stealing to survive." The broad-faced man smiles and says, "I'm very optimistic about our country. The future is indeed bright."

It is no small miracle that the country where the Albertine Rift's anxieties and resentments metastasized into genocide would, less than two decades later, emerge as the region's beacon of hope. Rwanda's President Paul Kagame drove out the Hutu leaders of the massacre and helped set up a Tutsi regime that has been in power ever since. While many credit Kagame with bringing stability and economic growth to this troubled region, several historians have come to view his regime as a repressive autocracy that favors the Tutsi minority. He's come under harsh criticism for human rights abuses against dissidents and for using paramilitary groups to divert mineral riches from eastern Congo to Rwanda. Though Rwanda has largely stopped the direct plunder of resources that occurred during and after Congo's last war, Kagame's plans to build up his country undoubtedly depend on covertly exploiting Congo's mineral wealth.

Still, there's no denying the long list of successes Kagame has piled up in an incredibly impoverished place. Rwanda is now one of the safest and most stable countries in this part of Africa. The roads are paved, the landscape is tidy, and the government has launched an ambitious campaign to preserve what little forest is left in Rwanda. Government programs train poachers for alternative livelihoods. An event known as Kwita Izina has raised awareness of wildlife conservation with an annual ceremony to name every newborn mountain gorilla in Rwanda. A law passed this past June provides compensation for any livestock—or humans—hurt or killed by wildlife. And hundreds of thousands of acres owned by wealthy landowners in the country's Eastern Province were shrewdly redistributed to citizens in 2008, before Kagame's reelection—though the president and other influential cronies continue to own sprawling estates.

Unlike Uganda, where President Museveni has declared its high fertility rate a tool in building a productive workforce, Rwanda is tackling its high fertility rate with aggressive family planning. "When I look at the problem of Rwanda's population, it starts with the high fertility rate among our poor women. And this impacts everything—the environment, the relationship between our people, and the country's development in general," says Jean-Damascène Ntawukuliryayo, the deputy speaker of parliament. "For all the visible progress Rwanda is making, if we don't address this matter, then it will create a bottleneck, and our development will be unsustainable."

Yet even if Rwanda's fertility rate falls below replacement level, as it's projected to do by 2050, its population will still triple beyond what it was before the 1994 genocide. Forty-three percent of Rwandans are under the age of 15; 30 percent are illiterate; 81 percent live in rural areas. To feed its burgeoning population and protect the wildlife still left in its parks, Rwanda will need to figure out how to produce much more food on much less land—a tall order in this part of the world. Even Kagame's strongman government can do only so much so fast.

"The average family of six has little more than half an acre here," says Pierre Rwanyindo Ruzirabwoba, director of Rwanda's Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace. "And of course those children will have children. Where will they grow crops? That small piece of land has been overworked and is no longer fertile. I'm afraid another war could be around the corner."

Another full-scale war in the heart of the Albertine Rift? It's an awful thing to contemplate. Ruzirabwoba fretfully ponders the way out. High-yield farming techniques, of course. Better job opportunities in the city. And "a good relationship with our neighboring countries."

Then he shrugs and says, "Perhaps some of our people can migrate to the Congo."