

Mystery surrounds Ntaganda surrender
By Katrina Manson, The Financial Times
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For more than four years, General Bosco Ntaganda has been on the run from the International Criminal Court. But for most of that time the warlord wanted for war crimes in eastern Congo has not exactly lived the life of a fugitive.

The senior officer in the Congolese army and rebel known as the “Terminator” often dined alongside diplomats and played tennis with them in Goma, eastern Congo’s provincial capital. Fearing the consequences of his arrest on a fragile peace, the Congolese leadership let him be until he mutinied last year fearing arrest.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that on Monday he arrived at the US embassy in Rwanda, and asked to be transferred to The Hague.

As diplomats speculate why he might have surrendered his freedom for a jail cell in the Netherlands, his captivity could yet boost Rwanda’s relations with western donors, who suspended aid after Kigali was accused of backing Gen Ntaganda’s rebels, and an increasingly battered international justice system.

Gen Ntaganda is accused of recruiting and deploying child soldiers in 2002-03 during a conflict in Ituri in northeastern Congo. His charge sheet also includes murder, rape and sexual slavery. He denies the charges.

Gen Ntaganda could be transferred to the ICC “in the next week”, said one US official. “We have a plan to deliver him to The Hague and we are working tirelessly to figure out what to do,” said the official.

“We’re also worried about his safety,” said the official, echoing comments from a senior Rwandan military official that Gen Ntaganda was more afraid of Rwanda than the US.

The relationship between Gen Ntaganda and Kigali is fraught and highly contested. He participated in Rwandan-backed rebellions in Congo since the late 1990s. Donor pressure on Rwanda to help deliver the general up to international justice triggered his mutiny in the Congolese army last year, analysts said. The general then helped form the M23 rebels, a group that Rwanda has denied supporting.

Analysts point to a split among those mutineers and deteriorating relations with Rwanda as possible reasons for his surrender.

“Bosco is not useful for the Rwandan government any more and he’s afraid for his life . . . He has too many secrets about the Rwandan government,” said a senior Congolese official, who argued the ICC had become his only option.

If Gen Ntaganda takes the stand at The Hague, his testimony could cast light on Rwanda’s role in conflict in mineral rich eastern Congo.

But, analysts say Gen Ntaganda could yet keep quiet about the part played by Kigali. His one-time commander, Thomas Lubanga, was last year sentenced to 14 years in jail by the ICC and said little about Kigali’s links in eastern Congo.

In fact, his surrender might suit Rwanda, analysts said, opening the door for better relationships with donors whose cash until this year made up more than 35 per cent of its budget.

The country's biggest donors suspended aid last year after UN experts alleged that Rwanda was backing the M23, who took over territory in the country's east and at one point over-ran Goma.

"Rwanda is really suffering because of the cut-off of the budget support. They are under pressure and trying to change the mind of international community," said the Congolese official.

Regional peace in Congo may be the only way Rwanda can regain its missing aid, something that may be easier to achieve in the absence of Gen Ntaganda. His move to The Hague may also make it easier for Kinshasa to integrate remaining rebels into the army, Congolese officials say.

Last week, the World Bank, which had suspended a \$125m payment, approved a \$50m grant. The World Bank is due to release another \$50m payment in the next few months.

"Shipping Bosco off to The Hague creates space for donors to come back and support Rwanda," said a specialist in the region.

For the ICC, his prospective appearance at The Hague – which Rwanda has said publicly it will not block – is also a relief.

In 10 years of operation, the court has only secured a single conviction.

Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's president accused of genocide in Darfur, still travels with impunity. Its most prominent case continues to unravel. Of six men accused of masterminding Kenya's deathly post-election violence five years ago, only three still have cases pending.

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