

All Against All: The Conflict in the Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the geographically largest and, with over 60 million citizens, most populous countries in Africa. It also is one of the world's most troubled states, consumed by a long-running, multi-faceted civil war, crippling socioeconomic problems, and poor governance. These difficulties have kept the resource-rich country unstable and abysmally poor for decades, and, although recent developments have brought some hope of peace, there also is good reason to be sceptical that the DRC soon will become stable, much less well-governed. Examining the ongoing strife in the DRC offers insight into the problems facing many Third World states in the twenty-first century.

In his 1994 essay *The Coming Anarchy*, American journalist Robert Kaplan warned that political unrest, environmental degradation, corrupt government, and other problems threatened to drag a growing number of countries into anarchic violence from which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recover.¹ Arguably, events in Africa and elsewhere in the years since *The Coming Anarchy* was first published have added credibility to Kaplan's thesis. Moreover, problems in the Third World are relevant to the overall world security environment and the interests of the great powers. Although the great powers have done relatively little to address the Congo crisis, they have become involved in countries facing similar problems—the most famous example of this being the American involvement in Somalia in 1992/3 that ultimately resulted in the “Black Hawk Down” incident, a battle in the streets of Mogadishu (Somalia's capital) in which nineteen US troops were killed.²

Prelude to the Congo Wars

Congo became independent in 1960; for most of the preceding one hundred years it had been a colony, first as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium, and later (after 1908) as a colonial possession of the Belgian state. Congo was harshly exploited for its mineral wealth during the period in which Leopold controlled it; indeed, the brutality of the colonial regime during this time became a major scandal throughout Europe. After

¹ See Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 3-58.

² See Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Signet, 2001).

1908, treatment of the Congolese population improved markedly, with efforts by the Belgian government to provide education, health care, and other basic services, but this did not prevent the rise of Congolese nationalism and demands for independence in the mid-twentieth century. This was not anomalous—in colonies throughout the world, independence movements had begun to gain energy after the First World War, becoming extraordinarily powerful by the end of the Second World War. Over the ensuing two decades, the Western European colonial empires collapsed.

The movement for Congolese nationalism was, however, a complicated one, largely because of the wide variety of ethnic groups in the vast territory; some Congolese favoured a unified state, while others wanted the colony to be broken in smaller units. Further complicating matters, European settlers in Katanga allied with local Congolese who favoured independence for that province. As Congo moved toward independence, tensions continued to increase between various factions, resulting in civil strife, declarations of independence by Katanga and another region, South Kasai, and the creation of two rival national governments in different cities. The most famous event of this disorderly period was the execution of Marxist former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who had served in office for less than three months before being dismissed by his rival, President Joseph Kasavubu. Lumumba was arrested and transferred to Katanga, where he was killed by a firing squad. The murky events surrounding his death, and particularly the degree to which Belgium and the United States were involved, are still controversial. (In regard to the United States, it is clear that the CIA at one point intended to poison Lumumba,³ but the evidence appears to indicate that there was no significant American involvement in the events that actually did lead to his death.) Also of note, in 1960 the United Nations dispatched thousands of peacekeeping—or, more accurately, peacemaking—personnel to Congo, one of the largest and most important UN operations of this kind (at one point nearly 20,000 UN troops were operating in the country).

Over the next half decade, Congo continued to experience rebellion and disorder, but avoided falling apart completely even after the withdrawal of UN troops in mid-1964. In 1965, General Mobutu overthrew his long-time ally Kasavubu and declared himself to be

³ Madeline G. Kalb, "The CIA and Lumumba," *New York Times* online ed., 2 August 1981.

the country's new president. Mobutu proceeded to create a relatively stable, although spectacularly corrupt, dictatorship; he changed Congo's name to Zaire in 1971.

The First Congo War

The very complex background of the First Congo War is tied intimately to ethnic tension and violence in other African countries, particularly Rwanda. In the Rwandan genocide of 1994, a very great number—perhaps even more than a million—members of the Tutsi ethnic group were massacred by Hutus, the majority ethnic group in Rwanda. However, the genocide set off a chain of events that eventually led to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-dominated group, controlling Rwanda. As a result, approximately two million Hutus, fearing reprisals (which in fact did occur in many places), fled Rwanda. Many of them took refuge in eastern Zaire. However, the refugees included a substantial number of individuals who had participated in, or even organized, the genocide. Over time, the refugee camps effectively came under the control of officials of the former Hutu-dominated government and army of Rwanda, and Hutu fighters used the camps as bases from which to launch raids into Rwanda. The ultimate intent of the Rwandan Hutu leaders was to regain control of Rwanda itself from the RPF. (Further complicating matters, the refugee camps of eastern Zaire also were home to many Hutus from Burundi, a country, like Rwanda, which had experienced enormous violence between the Tutsi and Hutu in 1994.)

By 1996, Hutus frequently were attacking members of the Banyamulenge ethnic group, who resided in eastern Zaire but were related to the Tutsi (they are the descendants of Tutsis who migrated to Zaire). Rwanda's government became very actively involved in the conflict between the Hutus and Banyamulenges, both for reasons of ethnic solidarity and because it wished to eliminate the Hutu threat to the RPF. (In addition, both Uganda and Burundi opposed Mobutu and became involved in the events of the First Congo War.) However, the Mobutu government long had quietly supported the use of Zairian territory for operations against Rwanda, backing the Hutus against the Tutsis and Banyamulenge. Although it may appear confusing that the government of Zaire effectively would support Hutu foreigners who were fighting individuals residing on Zairian territory, this illustrates the complex character of ethnic rivalries in the conflict—in this case, ethnic affiliations and alliances were far more important to all the parties involved than was “citizenship” in the usual sense. Indeed, the Banyamulenges were not even

Zairian citizens; as a group, their citizenship had been revoked in 1981.⁴ In October 1996, a Zairian official in the province of South Kivu declared the all Banyamulenges would be required to leave. This and other events were the catalyst for a full-scale Banyamulenge rebellion. In late October and November, as the situation degenerated, terrified Hutus began to flee Zaire in great numbers, returning to Rwanda or Burundi despite their fear of mistreatment in those countries.⁵

The Banyamulenge fighters, now well-armed by Rwanda (which also raided Hutu refugee camps in Zaire and clashed with Zairian armed forces), joined with other anti-government forces in a coalition, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Zaire (ADFZ), led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila. For decades, Kabila had led an unsuccessful rebellion against Mobutu. Indeed, for a time in 1965 Che Guevara had served with Kabila, but the latter, unsuccessful in his guerrilla operations and deeply unimpressed with Kabila's character and leadership, soon became disillusioned with the rebellion and left Zaire. However, Kabila now commanded an imposing force and—perhaps more importantly—Mobutu's control of Zaire had corroded in recent years. Soon, Kabila's army, which included personnel from the Rwandan Army, was marching across the broad expanse of the country to the capital, Kinshasa.

It is clear that the civilian population of Zaire suffered enormously during the war. As the Zairian regime crumbled, already-weak government services collapsed and the country descended into chaos and violence. The Zairian Army proved completely ineffective against the rebels but committed enormous violence against the civilian population. The rebels were as bad, if not worse, on their march westward. Rape, torture, murder, looting, and other crimes clearly occurred on a massive scale, but the great majority of these acts were never documented. Partly, this was because of the minimal on-the-ground coverage by Western media—the situation in Zaire was so dangerous as to make frontline reporting extraordinarily hazardous even by the standards of war correspondents.

⁴ Anonymous, "Zaire Fights Displaced Tutsi Suspected of Attacks," *New York Times* online ed., 11 October 1996.

⁵ See James C. McKinley, Jr., "Refugees are Caught in Central African Crossfire," *New York Times* online ed., 31 October 1996.

International efforts to broker a ceasefire were ineffectual, and neither the great powers nor the United Nations backed peace initiatives with credible threats to use force. Mobutu, gravely ill with cancer, spent much of the war in France, a fact which surely helped to undermine public confidence in his regime's prospects. Even when he returned to Zaire, however, he proved unable to rally his forces, and in May 1997 Mobutu fled the country and Kabila took control of the capital. Kabila quickly renamed the country the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Second Congo War

Although some international figures expressed hope that the Kabila government would bring peace and better government to the DRC, many longtime observers of the country were more cynical. The latter promptly were shown to be correct, as Kabila's regime proved to be as corrupt and thuggish as its predecessor. Indeed, the war in eastern Congo did not even end—the Rwandan Army and the Banyamulenges continued to fight against Hutu militiamen. Foreign forces opposing the Hutu casually ignored Congolese territorial sovereignty, operating at will on DRC territory. Kabila's government had become irreconcilably alienated from its former supporters in Rwanda and Uganda, and these two states began to back a new movement that emerged in August 1998, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD, after its French name, *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*), which was dedicated to the overthrow of Kabila. A multi-sided civil and international war followed, with soldiers from Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda fighting alongside various Congolese factions to dethrone Kabila. A motley collection of allies—including many Hutus, a strange turn of events given the massacre of Hutus by Kabila's Tutsi forces in the First Congo War—supported the Congolese dictator.

During the first weeks of the war, it appeared probable that Kabila would be overthrown promptly, as violence exploded throughout the country and rebel troops moved toward Kinshasa. However, a number of African leaders who felt, for varying reasons, that their interests were threatened rushed to assist Kabila; the latter received help from numerous states, including Angola, Chad, Libya, Namibia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean and Angolan contribution of troops was particularly significant—approximately 6,000 and 5,000 respectively, according to an estimate made during the

war, in December 1998.⁶ These numbers are impressive when one considers that—despite the DRC’s substantial population and huge size—perhaps less than 70,000 combatants were fighting at that time.⁷

As the war continued, the RCD began to experience considerable internal strife, with Uganda and Rwanda backing different factions within the organization. Relatedly, Uganda—which controlled much of the northern portion of the DRC—created a new province named Ituri, whose governor was to be a member of the Hema ethnic group. These actions concerned the Lendu, another ethnic group resident in Ituri; the Hema and Lendu had many longstanding grievances. This tension resulted in the outbreak of a conflict in Ituri connected to the larger Congo War, but also somewhat distinct.

In July 1999, six countries—Angola, the DRC, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe signed the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, but the RCD did not accede to the Agreement. In any case, the Agreement did little to halt the ongoing warfare.⁸ Moreover, the tensions between Rwanda and Uganda caused fighting to break out, on DRC soil, between the armies of the two countries. In November, the United Nations authorized the deployment of slightly over 5,500 peacekeeping troops, organized as the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC, an acronym derived from its name in French). Nevertheless, military operations by various forces continued.

Kabila was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in January 2001, apparently as part of an unsuccessful coup attempt; he was succeeded by his son Joseph. In the first months in which the younger Kabila was in power, many hoped that a final settlement would be reached that would end the war, but this did not occur quickly. However, the RCD did seem to lose momentum, and some of its members even defected to the government. Several major accords were signed in 2002, including the Sun City Agreement in April, which set the structure for a new, democratic government for the DRC, and peace agreements between the DRC and Rwanda (in July) and the DRC and Uganda (in September). In December, the government and the various factions within Congo

⁶ Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “The World: A War Turned Free-for-All Tears at Africa’s Center,” *New York Times* online ed., 6 December 1998. An estimate later in the war, however, stated that Angola only had about 2,000 troops in the DRC but that Zimbabwe had 10,000 soldiers stationed there. Ian Fisher and Norimitsu Onishi, “Chaos in the Congo: A Primer,” *New York Times* online ed., 6 February 2000.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Ian Fisher, “Shaky Congo Peace Grows More So,” *New York Times* online ed., 12 November 1999.

signed the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement, which was intended to end the civil war. In July 2003, a transitional government, headed by Kabila, took power.

Although the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement formally ended the Second Congo War, violence continued in parts of the country, particularly in the east, where ethnic violence continues to occur. The Ituri conflict continues, and the simmering tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi—the catalyst for the First Congo War—certainly have not been resolved.

The Congo Wars in Perspective

As is noted above, the Congo Wars demonstrate many of the characteristics which mark warfare in some of the world's economically least developed and politically most troubled regions. In the least developed countries, government institutions tend to be very weak, and the state is unable successfully to maintain a monopoly on violence. This creates opportunities for "strategic entrepreneurs," such as rebels and local warlords, as they easily can establish zones in which they, rather than the state, exercise effective control. On maps, the DRC is a clearly defined territorial entity, but throughout the time that it has been independent the central government has been unable to control the entire country. Relatedly, the DRC's borders are porous and its population diverse; many ethnic conflicts are international in character because major groups such as the Tutsi and Hutu live in several countries. The genocide in Rwanda was an indirect catalyst for the Congo Wars, as its events ultimately resulted in the creation of massive Hutu refugee camps that were central to subsequent events in the DRC.

The Wars' heavy toll in human lives also is characteristic of warfare in the world's most troubled states. The number of deaths in the First Congo War was very substantial, but the Second Congo War's toll was far more appalling: it is likely that somewhere in the range of four million people were killed, but the figure could be as large as ten million. Even the lower estimate marks the conflict as one of the costliest twentieth century wars, particularly for the period after 1945. Moreover, the Congo Wars were fought with crude weapons: tanks, aircraft, artillery, and other heavy equipment played only a small role; most of the killing was done with rifles, machetes, and similar personal weapons, or by illness or starvation. Indeed, the bulk of fatal casualties—most of whom were civilian—died from the hunger and disease that accompanied the conflict.

Sadly, civilian suffering is common in conflicts such as the Congo Wars. War crimes occur in all conflicts, even when the forces involved are highly disciplined armies which undertake good faith efforts to prevent atrocities and punish them when they occur. In the Congo Wars, leaders in the various armies treated war crimes casually (and no doubt sometimes actively encouraged them). The result was both predictable and tragic—crimes against civilians, particularly rape and looting, occurred on a truly massive scale. Most of these atrocities were not, and never will be, punished. Moreover, various parties in the Congo Wars looted the country's very great resource wealth, with both government and rebel leaders taking advantage of the opportunity to pocket profits from diamond mining and other resource extraction activities.

The Second Congo War also was notable for the way in which it has been treated by the world's most powerful states. Although various states, including the United States, attempted to use their diplomatic resources to broker an end to the conflict, powerful countries never treated it as a key international crisis. Most major states did not commit their own troops to MONUC, nor did they seriously consider unilateral military action. This guarded attitude reflected a key reality: from the perspective of countries such as the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, the DRC and its region is strategically marginal. The war did not threaten the critical national interests of any of these states, so they had no major incentive to spend "diplomatic capital," much less risk the lives of their own soldiers, to bring about its resolution.

Moreover, because international media coverage of the war was minimal, the major democratic countries did not experience what often is called the "CNN effect," wherein media attention to a foreign crisis, and its attendant suffering, creates public pressure for leaders to resolve the situation. (Certainly, the CNN effect encouraged the American intervention in Somalia.) The small quantity of international coverage of the Congo Wars ensured that most citizens of the major democracies remained largely unaware of the conflict.

Conclusion: Unending Crisis

Although the Second Congo War has formally ended, and the size of the MONUC mission in the DRC now stands at more than 15,000, there perhaps is little reason to be

optimistic that genuine peace will come to the DRC at any time in the foreseeable future. The DRC held an internationally supervised national election in July 2006, but it soon was followed by a renewed outbreak of violence.⁹ The long-term prospects for democracy in the country are dim, as it is among the most corrupt and economically troubled states in the world. As in similarly troubled states, it is difficult to imagine how their massive systemic problems realistically might be resolved. Thus, the stage is set for further internal instability and warfare.

⁹ See Jeffrey Gettleman and Anjan Sudaram, "UN Brokers Ceasefire as Congo Vote Turns Violent," *New York Times* online ed., 23 August 2006.

Questions

- 1) Should the Democratic Republic of Congo be characterized as a “failed state”? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2) Should the UN intervene militarily to end civil wars in deeply troubled countries such as the DRC?
- 3) How does the Second Congo War illustrate the problem of ethnic conflicts “spilling over” borders?
- 4) Is the history of UN involvement in the DRC one of failure? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 5) Is it possible for international aid donors to encourage effective long-term reform of the government of the DRC? If so, how? If not, why not?

Websites

www.fpif.org/briefs/vol5/v5n10congo.html

allafrica.com/

www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/monuc/index.html

www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/Africa/DRC.asp

www.udps.org/

www.congozaire.org/

news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/148462.stm