

The Democratic Republic of Congo and the United Nations

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Executive Summary

“The key to restoring peace in Congo, is the political will among the parties in the Congo and in the neighbouring countries – not more UN peacekeepers”

John Negroponte, U.S. Ambassador on opinion from Washington, 2002.

Recent events in the Democratic Republic of Congo threaten the ongoing peace process towards political stability and power sharing. The tense neighbourhood between DRC and Rwanda has yet again blazed up, and a military intervention is once again close to becoming a reality.

The United Nations is having a hard time in fulfilling its role in a way that awakens sympathy and support among the Congolese people in a time where that is extremely important. The work of conflict resolution does not end when the armed conflict ends. The reconstruction phase after the conflict is where the UN and the other involved parts of the international community should show their worth in a nothing less than eminent way.

The UN is (or should be) the living example of nations gathering together to make democratic political structures where such are missing or non-existing. In an ongoing conflict such as Congo’s, the UN should with its presence provide the just framework, in which every factor that fuels the conflict is replaced by a solid foundation for human security, without despair and suffering for the people on the ground.

Introduction

“If the UN deployed the same density of troops-to-land as it has in Kosovo, it would need 10 million UN peacekeepers”

The Great Lakes and Genocide Prevention, to the UK Government, 2001.

A brief comparison of the scope of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) to the conflict in Kosovo at its height draws a serious perspective according to peace monitoring and peace keeping and efforts needed in a large-scale-conflict. If the UN was to install the same amount of troops with the same density, the number would reach 10 million.

The conflict, which is rooted in ‘the Rwandan genocide’ (1994), ‘the civil and regional war’ (1998-2003), and the cultural heritage of the political systems constructed by the Belgian colonial power, has threatened to break out again in a full scale war. The

ethnic and tribal affiliation versus the implanted idea of political nationality moulds the frame in which atrocities are being committed in front of an uncomprehending public in the developed countries.

Recent events in the spring and summer 2004 show how fragile the arrangements towards peace and stability are in a war that best can be explained as a multilayered conflict.

The conflict took a turning point in August 2003, where a transitional government represented by the major factions of the conflict, was installed to secure peace in DRC in a consecutive process that should lead the country to democratic elections June 2005.

The president, Joseph Kabila, has carried with him the hope of a peaceful reunification of the divided country, because of his willingness to oblige the international community in carrying out political negotiations towards a sustainable reconstruction of the country. However the road to political stability has been severely stalled by disputes among both internal and external spoilers. The neighbouring country, Rwanda, has accused Congo of hosting the *Interahamwe*, a group of extremist Hutu militants and genocidaires that played a leading role in the genocide in 1994, and giving them the opportunity to make strikes against civilian Tutsies across the border in Rwanda.

One major mistake from the international community has been to place the refugee camps to close to the border and not the minimum 50 kilometres that is required by international law. That has made it possible for cross-border expeditions and recruitment for militias.

From March to July 2004, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been the stage for three ‘coup d’états’. All three of these were very poorly executed. It is possible that they might have been instigated by the Kinshasa government to strengthen its own power and profiting on the presidency as a part of a delaying tactic for the coming democratic elections. In May 2004 the situation in the capital was so insecure that the MONUC chose to withdraw all their personnel from the Kinshasa area, and the public airport, Ndjili, was temporarily closed for flights.

In the last days of that month a Rwanda backed faction, headed by two renegade commanders, launched attacks against Bukavu at the border to Rwanda and succeeded in attaining control over the city from June 2 to June 9. The MONUC mission’s 600 soldiers failed to fight back against 2000-3000 armed rebels and to keep control over the city. The result was the death of several hundreds and over 30,000 Congolese fleeing into Rwanda and Burundi. Heavy criticism from both the international and the local community poured down on the UN mission, and UN people were attacked, and their offices and vehicles were set on fire in Kinshasa.

The UN mission has been set to phase out in 2006. If it should be done successfully to secure the peace for the many civilians that are being held as hostages in the conflict, it will have to maintain a super efficient observing and reaction system to come down hard on violators of international law. It is also very important that the UN and the international community play an active part in establishing a firm foundation for a politically viable system that puts an end to the suffering of a downtrodden nation.

The transitional government with its four vice presidents is holding the key to the solution of the political conflict, and is facing a task that is only possible to solve with true political will and openness.

History of UN in the Congo

The Congo gained independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960. The following period was politically tumultuous and resulted in a complete break down of law and order in the entire country. Several riots occurred as well as mutiny in the Congolese national army. On June 7 Belgium decided to reinforce its troops that remained at key bases in Congo, not only to restore law and order but also to protect the remaining Europeans. On July 10, the central government in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) asked the UN for military assistance. The Belgian colonial power had left the indigenous Congolese poorly educated with little chance to govern the country successfully. When the Katanga province declared its independence from the central government July 11, the UN had its hands full. The cold war was at its height and Congo had become a strategic playground on the African continent. That was the Congo crisis.

The UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, was the key architect of the Congo mission which at that time was named ONUC. The main tasks were to assist the central government in restoring law and order, and maintain the territorial integrity of the country.

The Lusaka Ceasefire and Monuc

“The United Nations must take an active and forceful role in its Congo mission. Their passive presence has become a mockery of peace”

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, co-chairmann, ‘En Avant Congo’, May 2004.

In 1999 the Zambian capital, Lusaka, hosted the peace negotiations that led to the signing of the peace agreement between the six involved countries and the various rebel groups operating on Congolese territory. MONUC (United Nations Observer mission in the Democratic republic of Congo) was established to monitor and support the ceasefire from August 1999 to November 1999. The mandate and personnel expanded in 2000. The important task is to supervise the withdrawal and disengagement of the rebel forces. By October 1, 2004, MONUC will increase the number of peacekeepers from the existing 10,800 to 23,900 and will make the mission more able to maintain a more credible presence in areas prone to insecurity.

Is a strong central government the solution?

“I don’t see why the Congo today must be a nation that everybody, or anybody, for that matter, should start thinking of dividing it”

President Joseph Kabila, February 2001

The transitional government in Kinshasa consisting of the president and four vice presidents, all representatives from various factions and former rebel movements opposed

to the former Kabila-Government in DRC, is the concept of peacekeeping in a national political context. Though disputes inside the government’s cabinet exist, since its implementation in August 2003, it seems like the best road to peace for the moment. Demilitarizing active actors in the conflict and replacing weapons with negotiations has actually created some stability in the capital region for a time.

After the massacre of 163 Congolese Banyamulenge Tutsies in the Gatumba transit centre in Burundi August 13 by refugee Hutus from eastern Congo, the chairman of the RCD-Goma faction, Azarias Ruberwa, a Banyamulenge Tutsi himself, has withdrawn from his post as vice president of the transitional government.

President Joseph Kabila has in late August announced that it would be “a waste of time” to go to South Africa to negotiate with the former rebel factions of DRC, since the South African president is planning to come to DRC later the same month. Seen in the wake of the Rwandan army spokesman, Patrick Karegeya’s statement, that MONUC’s presence and efforts “are insufficient” and that “they should go home if they were not able to bring the Tutsi hostile elements hiding in Congo home to Rwanda”, the statement of president Kabila shows some legitimacy. If the Rwandan army publicly announces that a coming intervention in DRC is an option, it must be seen as a threat of war. The estimated 15,000 Hutu militia members located in DRC have of course little interest in going back to Rwanda, since many of them would face trials for the genocide in 1994, and are guilty of many other atrocities committed against Tutsies and civilians.

Ethnic and national interests are working together in the transitional government, and as troubling as it seems, it is a major effort and a giant step just to have been able to construct it. Even with the right support from the international community and the good will of the Congolese factions involved the peace is not guaranteed. It remains to be seen if the construction contains the real contemporary solution to unite the country.

Factions in DRC

“In its most recent avatar – the Democratic Republic of Congo – the former Belgian colony is not just a failed state; it is the epitome of the collapsed state, whose descent into hell has set loose a congeries of rival factions fighting proxy wars on behalf of half a dozen African states”

Professor Dr. Rene Lemarchand, September 2001.

In contrast to the ongoing conflict in Darfur, Sudan, the various factions of the Congolese conflict, both armed and unarmed, have been invited to the ‘Inter Congolese Dialogue’ started in 1999 as a part of the ‘Lusaka Peace Process’. On a grass-roots level it is supposed to present the voice of the civil society and is divided into four commissions, each with responsibility for issues like military and security, the constitution, humanitarian and development and an electoral commission.

The peace initiatives never succeeded to have the expected impact in the eastern zone of DRC. Various rebel groups related to or supported by the neighbouring countries have found a good business in operating in an environment that on the surface seems anarchistic. The central government in Kinshasa on the other side of the country has only

modest control of the situation in the east. That makes the rebel groups’ basis for negotiating better than the central government’s, with arguments and unrealistic demands motivated from not wanting peace.

“La guerre dans la guerre”

“At a time when the existing economic, administrative, and social patterns that have defined the local space become increasingly unstable, subject to external penetration, and unable to offer clear contexts within which people on the ground can make daily and life-choices, ethnicity indeed easily becomes an excuse for political action and violence”

Professor Dr. Koen Vlassenroot and Tim Raeymaekers, University of Ghent, September 2003.

The conflict in DRC carries elements of civil war, ethnic disputes, and regular war because of the involvement of neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, but also Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola who are interfering in the conflict as a part of the Kinshasa Governments faction.

The unstable environment which is fuelled by the lack of a strong central government allows for the continuance of organized crime by local actors, but also from business partners and companies outside the country. A list of companies that has profited on the conflict and avoided paying high taxes, has outlined the commercial benefits and possibilities for making a good deal out of the conflict and creates a picture of a multilayered and multi dynamic conflict, which is hosting actors who prefer a “Cash-in a Suitcase- economy”.

An aspect of the conflict is the historical dimension of ethnicities. The Hema/Lendu conflict in Ituri shares some of the same elements as the Tutsi/Hutu conflict that led to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, where around 800,000 Tutsies and moderate Hutus were brutally slaughtered. The Hema community, much like the Tutsie community, was given preferential treatment by the colonial power in access to education, land and jobs, and that has created a cultural gap between the ethnic communities. In a time where the political structures of the colonial powers have collapsed and loyalty to the clan dominates, “ethnic citizenship” is an excuse for warfare.

The rich resources of the country, has made it possible to finance the war continuously, with profitable possibilities and motivations, and the war has become self-supporting in a most deadly sense. There has been an exchange going on between providing military services or assistance for minerals such as diamonds and gold, and also timber. Coltan is another valuable mineral in DRC and is used in cellphones and computers. The market for the many resources that the Congolese soil contains is feeding the conflict endlessly.

The “flash points” where conflicts blaze up, are centred around mineral rich areas, and military action, whether it is small private militias or Rwanda’s and Uganda’s interference in DRC, is closely connected to commercial activities.

Establishing MONUC in Bunia

“The outbreak of violence in Ituri should be understood as the result of the exploitation, by local and regional actors, of a deeply rooted local political conflict for access to land, economic opportunity and political power”

Professor Dr. Koen Vlassenroot and Tim Raeymaekers, University of Ghent, September 2003.

In July 2003 the Security Council agreed to strengthen the mandate of MONUC and increase the number of peace keepers to 10,800 UN soldiers instead of the 5,200 it already had in place in DRC. The mission was to protect civilians and aid workers. The Ituri region, which contains some of the world’s largest gold reserves, had transformed into a bloodbath of extremely large proportions.

The two dominate ethnic groups in the region, Hema and Lendu, were at each other’s throats to gain control over the fertile soil. Years before, the eastern border cities such as Goma and Bukavu had descended into bloodshed and the whole belt along the Great Lakes in eastern DRC had showed itself as being the most troubled area in the world. The central market in the region’s capital, Bunia, was a strategic spot for the various factions and Monuc set up a camp. A French battalion with 1200 troops was sent there in May 2003 under an EU-mandate. This was actually the first EU-led military intervention in Africa.

Ituri and Bunia as an example for peace solutions

“The pacification of the Ituri district should provide a winning formula for the pacification of the Congo’s entire east”

ICG, International Crisis Group, June 2003.

The conflict in DRC parallels the war in the Balkans on specific levels because of its ethnic element. Though comparisons only show vague fragments of resemblance, it might be useful in predictions for the outcome of conflicts and potential aftermaths for the civilian populations in post conflict areas. The outcome of the Balkan-Conflict has been a political and administrative division of the region, motivated by ethnic, religious, and cultural/historic affiliations.

In areas like DRC one must take in consideration both ethnic and tribal affiliations, and national and geographical borders according to reconstruction and redefining the socio-political space. In this web of ethnic groups spread out across national borders, the importance of even stronger political structures and an effective supervision of its observances according to every aspect of the elements of a society are at highest necessity. The local warlords who are profiting on mineral exploitation and demanding high taxes from the locals in the tense regions, Ituri and the Kivus, are a direct threat to the sense of affiliation that is needed for building a system of government that

should transform the regions into peaceful and stable zones of commerce, whose surplus benefits the local people.

A vision for future peace interventions

“Probably our best hope for the future lies in developing the United Nations into a World Federation. The strengthened United Nations should have a legislature with the power to make laws that are binding on individuals, and the ability to arrest and try individual political leaders for violations of these laws. The world federation should also have the military and legal powers necessary to guarantee the human rights of ethnic minorities within nations”

Professor Dr. John Avery, University of Copenhagen, 2004.

With all military interventions, whether they are peace monitoring missions or direct military interference, there is a need for exemplary behaviour. Interventions must establish ethical standards that can be a leading example for future operations in conflict areas. An intervention should always present a just picture by good leadership and for the subsequent political frame and system of government that is to be installed or motivated.

Examples from eastern DRC where UN troops have been taking advantage of their power position to have sex with distressed women for bananas, or simply just committed rape, is not just an act of immorality, but helps to create an aggravated feeling of hate between the local population and the peace keepers. This again can lead to a strengthening of the opposition or rebel groups, opposed to the peace efforts, that will slow or stall the peace keeping efforts, or even clear the road for a possession of political power as the example was in Bukavu, May 2004.

It is important to have the sympathy of the local population on every level of peace keeping operations to prevent unnecessary resistance and violence against all parts in conflicts.

There is also a need for more sophisticated analysis that can combine intellectual knowledge with pragmatic solutions in the continuous process of the international community’s interventions.

Troops, observers and staff operating on conflict sites must be “culturally well equipped” and educated in the cultural and historical background of the regions of their operations, and should not only present an authoritative role, but also be a guide of justice. In modern times where troop based warfare is being gradually replaced by highly skilled and specialized soldiers and sophisticated technology, this surely seems a surmountable mission.

List of Acronyms and Names

Banyamulenge	Ethnic group of Tutsies living in exile in eastern Congo.
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
Hutu	Ethnic group spread over many African countries and largely presented in

Interahamwe	the Great Lakes Region.
eastern Congo.	Militant Hutu extremists and genocidaires living in exile in
MONUC	United Nations Mission in DRC.
ONUC	United Nations mission in Congo during the Congo crisis.
RCD-GOMA	Congolese Rally for Democracy (major faction in DRC with
headquarter in	Goma and presented in the transitional government.
Tutsi	Ethnic group spread over many African countries and largely
presented in	the Great Lakes Region.
UN	United Nations

This paper is dedicated to my dear friend, Professor Dr. John Avery