

Presentation of occasional paper
2nd International Student/Young Pugwash Conference
Seoul, South Korea, October 2004

The Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Mads Fleckner

New analysis shows the complexity and scope of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the surface, one might reach the conclusion that chaos and anarchy are the dominating factors in the stateless societies that have arisen after the outbreak of war in 1998 and 1996, and the coup d'état in 1997 which made the creator of the Zairian kleptocracy, Mobutu, flee the country to his Moroccan exile. But a deeper look at the conflict shows that the breakdown of the traditional and formal political structures has resulted in the emergence of new political and arms based power structures.

The ongoing conflict in the Eastern part of DR Congo has often been explained as being a conflict created by greed and exploitation of mineral resources by internal and external actors motivated by pure profit, because of the extreme concentration of mineral resources on Congolese soil. One often overlooked factor is the micro level dynamics that creates informal politics and power structures parallel to the central transitional government in the capital Kinshasa.

The provinces of Ituri and the North and South Kivus are highly explosive areas with ongoing disputes among ethnicities about land ownership, access to mineral resources and political participation in decision making. According to some observers the peace process never had the expected impact on the eastern parts of the country. Ethnic clashes continuously break out. So was the case of the strike on the Gatumba transit centre in the bordering Burundi August 13 on 163 ethnic Banyamulenge Tutsis by Hutu militants living in exile in DR Congo.

Ethnic affiliation has become an even more dominating and noticeable factor in the conflict with armed groups using it in their recruitment strategies for new members.

The access to land, mineral resources and political decision making, are three major issues in the conflict in the eastern part of DR Congo. In the lack of stable and continuous governance, ethnicity indeed has become an excuse to use violence to gain control of assets in the politically fragile environment. Seen in the light of the colonial legacy and its favouring of some ethnic groups and the exclusion of others, these issues

have become an ever self-birth giving Sisyphus-like obstacle on the road to peace, and with a constant overshadowing threat of a disastrous full scale war. So is the case of the Hema and Lendu disputes, and the Tutsi and Hutu disputes, that have created death tolls comparable with the Second World War.

The international community represented in governances and middle state organisations has played a significant role in the peace process. The installation of the transitional government in the capital Kinshasa in August 2003 which officially ended the occupation and division of the country and lead the way to coming democratic elections, is the product of a political tendency that has its roots in the past colonial period. 'Nation Building' has become a norm in peace interventions and is based on a strong presence of operating staff and opportunities for political interference in the decision making processes. This is a break with the principle of the sovereignty of nations.

The planned election in June 2005 is an optimistic and risky goal, if the result should lead to democracy and stability. The physical conditions of the country are in such bad shape that travelling by airplane many places is the only option. One might view that basic building of a countrywide infrastructure should be done before elections to create the right foundation for fair elections and proper access possibilities for international observers to motivate fairness among political actors in DR Congo.

With the government of President Joseph Kabila in office and the ongoing peace dialogue, the international community has better chances than before to secure human rights and pressure the government to obligate itself to the peace process and the disarmament of small armies and violent factions in the country. In the terms of 'nation building' as an aspect that goes hand in hand with 'peace building', one might take in consideration by the present situation what the scenario would be in and after an election process. The political games in DR Congo, carry with them a violent element that might take over and blaze up in a full scale war in a hypothetical election situation where the game is open for political actors to gain profit and power.

Studies and statistics of conflicts show that 40 per cent of ended conflicts world wide occur again. That is the case of DR Congo. The multilayered conflict presents a hazardous subtlety in which the civilian population is held as victim. While the international community represented by governments and middle state organizations supports the initiatives towards a sustainable economic and political construction, the micro-level dynamics has to be taken in heavy consideration. The parallel economy and the informal political structures in the stateless societies in DR Congo contain the dynamics towards peace. It would be hazardous to criminalize all nongovernmental policy in the fragile regions in the process of 'nation building' and 'peace building'. The existing structures are a product of the collapse after the war and neglect by a corrupt regime, and the lack of formal employment. The social marginalization of youth is an underlying factor behind the proliferation of armed militias. In conflict ravaged areas, joining a local militia and receiving a Kalashnikov is the only single opportunity for a marginalized youth for social identity, profit and survival.

How do you hide a dinosaur? Some conflicts gain more publicity than others. A brief look at the western news-medias makes one realize that even the size of a conflict according to death tolls and regional scope doesn't secure it a place in the headlines. Does this reveal a view of human nature? Or is it the revealing fact that the interest of the international community in a potential conflict is deeply related to economic and commercial interests?

I urge the Pugwash community to also put some focus on the "hidden conflicts" around the planet and take in consideration that the global peace has not been attained before it is world wide.

Published by the Danish Peace Academy March 2007