



Congo's Conflict: Heart of Darkness

With 30,000 deaths a month from violence and disease, Congo is the world's deadliest place. Does anyone care?

By Sarah J. Coleman

How do you measure the horror in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Add up all of the American deaths in every single war we've fought in since 1776, including World War II and the Civil War (1,540,665). Now add to that the estimated deaths from the recent tsunami (169,752 confirmed dead, 127,294 missing). Next, add to that the estimated death toll in the conflict in Darfur (400,000). Then, add to that the victims of genocide in Rwanda, one of the most horrific slaughters of the 20th century (937,000).

Add all of the deaths together—and you still have a smaller number than the 3.5 million people who have died in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1998.

According to the [United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#), 30,000 Congolese are dying every month from the after-effects of war (mostly from diseases that have flourished in the conflict's wake), an estimated 1,000 people a day. Thirty-eight percent of the population suffers from malnutrition. Children as young as 7 have been recruited into rebel militia. An estimated 3.4 million of the country's 60 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

By the time you finish reading this article, another 10 people will have died in the DRC's chaos. And yet most people in the West are unaware of the magnitude of this crisis, how it happened, or what could be done about it.

The DRC--a central African country almost the size of Western Europe--is strategically critical to the continent. And it is a treasure trove of natural resources the world wants. The country contains 50 percent of Africa's forests, and a mighty river system that, if harnessed, could provide hydro-electric power across Africa. The DRC's mineral riches include copper, gold, diamonds, and coltan (an essential component of capacitors that control current flow in cell phone circuit boards).

The country's natural wealth is also the cause of its blood-soaked history. In the late 19th century, King Leopold of Belgium seized the territory for its vast supplies of rubber, ivory, and gold. Leopold's "Congo Free State," created in 1885, was one of the most repressive regimes in history. It is estimated that up to 10 million Congolese lost their lives during his rule. The era left an indelible imprint of violence on the country.

In 1960, the country gained its independence from Belgium under populist leader Patrice Lumumba, who became its first and only elected head of state. But hope for democracy ended when Lumumba was assassinated in 1961.

The United States was instrumental in putting Joseph Mobutu in power in 1965. The dictator renamed himself Mobutu Sese Seko, and the country as Zaire. Its people invented another word—kleptocracy—to describe their ruler's ruthless, thieving ways.

After years of guerrilla warfare against Mobutu's regime, Rwanda-backed rebels captured the capital, Kinshasa, and installed their leader, Laurent Desire Kabila, as president of the again-renamed Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997. Kabila promptly split with his former Rwandan supporters, sparking a fresh round of war in which the new DRC government was backed by Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe against Rwanda and Uganda. In 2001, Kabila was assassinated and his 29-year-old son Joseph was put in charge. Throughout the past eight years, neighbors Uganda, Rwanda, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe have all sent armies into the DRC in a grab for power and natural resources.

Uganda's presence has been especially destructive in the northeastern province of Ituri, where it has armed rival ethnic Hema and Lendu groups, enabling them to slaughter each other with a brutality reminiscent of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. "The war is, by and large, a story of groups from the outside coming in and creating chaos," says Peter Rosenblum, who documented human-rights abuses in the country in the 1980s and now teaches law at Columbia University. But in Ituri, he adds, "the outside forces have succeeded in making the conflict local."

Of the outside forces, Rwanda has been the most aggressive in recent years. After the genocide in Rwanda, thousands of Hutus who had murdered their countrymen fled across the border to the DRC. In 1996 and 1997, Rwanda invaded the DRC, claiming that the Hutus inside the DRC threatened Rwanda's security. But the United Nations has cast doubt on Rwandan president Paul Kagame's motives, and others are skeptical too. "It seems Kagame needs [the Hutus] there to keep his country under control," says Bushoki Batabiha, a Congolese civil-society activist who is currently a fellow at the International Peace Academy in New York. "They're a good scapegoat that allow him not to deal with poverty, land claims, and other issues in Rwanda."

In 2003, Joseph Kabila struck a peace agreement with former rebels, bringing them in to a transitional, power-sharing government. But in June 2004, conflict flared up again when the border town of Bukavu was captured by a former Rwandan rebel leader, Gen. Laurent Nkudu. And ethnic tensions continue to boil in Ituri province, where the U. N. mission in the DRC (known by its French acronym, MONUC) is struggling to pressure armed groups to demobilize. For ordinary Congolese caught in the crossfire of warring militias and marauding thugs, without the kind of safety net that would come from a stable state, daily life has continued to be a chaotic struggle against violence and disease.

What could the world community have done to prevent this human catastrophe? The prevailing wisdom in the international community, as reflected in the United Nations, is that humanitarian intervention and peace-brokering are better approaches to conflict than military intervention. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations have taken that stance toward the DRC's conflict.

Still, the United Nations has not been blind to the DRC's suffering. U.N. troops have been on the scene since 1999, when MONUC was set up as a monitoring body to oversee a cease-fire in the ongoing civil war. MONUC initially had no mandate to protect civilians victimized by the conflict. But since 2003, the U.N. has strengthened MONUC's role in quelling violence and disarming combatants, according to U.N.'s newly adopted doctrine of "robust peacekeeping." Even as some critics continue to fault the U.N. force for its relative lack of strength and size, others now have condemned aggressive behavior by U.N. troops, including allegations of sexual abuse of Congolese girls.

African nations have sent mixed signals about Western powers intervening in the DRC or any of the continent's other conflicts. On one hand, African leaders denounced the United States failure to act against the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. On the other hand, most of the DRC's neighbors have insisted that African nations should take the lead in solving regional problems.

National interests and the desire to reap the bounty of the DRC's natural resources play a significant role in the hands-off message to the West.

Could the United States now effectively intervene? Some observers argue that Washington could use its economic and political clout, threatening to withhold foreign aid to the DRC's neighbors unless they stop stirring up the violence. In an atmosphere of relative stability, the international community then could begin to help reconstructure the country's devastated social, political, and economic institutions.

Speaking to the French foreign press association in May 2003, the DRC's human-rights minister, Ntumba Luaba, said that the United States has a moral obligation to become directly involved. He described Washington's influence in the region, especially on Uganda and Rwanda, as so great that "the United States could resolve the situation in Congo in a matter of days.... If the United States feels motivated to intervene in other parts of the world to save human lives, one can well ask why it has remained indifferent to the fate of 4 million people in Congo. The United States has all the information and justification it needs to exert pressure on Rwanda and Uganda to stop their intervention."

Luaba went on to criticize the U.S. and France for letting the DRC suffer while Washington and Paris continued to argue over the Iraq invasion, calling his people "victims of the tensions that exist between super and medium powers on the international stage."

Although the Bush administration has taken no direct action on the DRC crisis, in March State Department officials condemned U.N. peacekeepers' alleged involvement in abuses, sexual exploitation and human trafficking in the country. The administration's policy toward the DRC as outlined by the [State Department](#) stresses a multilateral, diplomatic approach:

"The United States supports the transitional government and encourages peace, prosperity, democracy, and respect for human rights in the D.R.C. The United States remains a partner with the D.R.C. and other central African nations in their quest for stability and growth on the continent, and facilitated the signing of a tripartite agreement on regional security in the Great Lakes region between the D.R.C., Rwanda and Uganda in October 2004. The United States also strongly supported U.N. efforts to create a Joint Verification Mechanism to monitor the border between the D.R.C. and Rwanda.

From the start of the Congo crisis, the United States has pursued an active diplomatic strategy in support of these objectives. In the long term, the United States seeks to strengthen the process of internal reconciliation and democratization within all the states of the region to promote stable, developing, and democratic nations with which it can work to address security interests on the continent and with which it can develop mutually beneficial economic relations."

Human rights groups charge that the Western powers' attitude toward the DRC conflict falls into the category of what Salih Booker, executive director of [Africa Action](#), calls "malign neglect." Dr. Rick Brennan, health director for the [International Rescue Committee](#), says "The international response to the humanitarian crisis in Congo has been grossly inadequate in proportion to the need," Dr. Brennan said. "Our findings show that improving and maintaining security and increasing simple, proven, and cost-effective interventions such as clean water, immunizations, and basic medical care would save hundreds of thousands of lives in Congo. There's no shortage of evidence. It's sustained compassion and political will that is lacking."

A scarred country trying to get back on its feet, the DRC has almost countless needs. After years of war, it's now at a critical juncture in its history. The first democratic elections in 44 years are on the horizon (originally planned for June 2005, they've been postponed because the electoral system is not yet in place). With a stable elected government in place, the DRC could attract foreign aid from countries that are too squeamish to put their faith in the current transitional government. But this is a chicken-and-egg problem: without the faith and support of the international community now, the DRC might not become stable enough to hold valid elections or attract any aid in the future.

During Mobutu's regime, the Catholic Church played an important role in supporting a growing civil-society movement. "It required an act of faith to believe that democratic change could come, and church groups tried to create a space where people could be honest about what was happening in the country," says Rosenblum. One of the groups that received support from the Catholic Church during that time, La Voix des Sans Voix (Voice of the Voiceless), has become an influential human-rights organization; other groups are still active too. "There were Catholic nuns who became galvanized activists for democracy," says Rosenblum.

Toward the end of the Mobutu era, there was considerable pressure from the international community, including from the Catholic Church, for Mobutu to open up the country to democracy. Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, then leader of the Zaire Conference of Bishops, headed a national conference on the nation's future in 1991-92. But Rosenblum is quick to point out that "the Catholic church is certainly not angelic in the Congo"—for example, in Ituri, Catholic bishops have stoked conflict by supporting the Hema against the Lendu.

Local Catholic church leaders are likely to play a role in monitoring the election, when it happens. The head of the electoral commission is a Catholic priest, Abbe Malu Malu, and Catholic lay people are being trained as election monitors.

Elections will probably take place in the first half of 2006. In current polls, President Joseph Kabila is running neck and neck with Etienne Tshisekedi, whose reputation rests on the spirited opposition movement he created in the Mobutu era. Tshisekedi has broad popular support, but most DRC analysts think that he lacks the stature of a transformative leader. "Had he been Nelson Mandela, all of this could have been solved a long time ago," says Rosenblum. Batabiha agrees, saying that while Tshisekedi should be given a chance, "I don't see a big change coming from him."

Batabiha and Rosenblum agree that elections alone won't solve the country's problems. "Whenever Congolese talk about the future, they talk about justice," says Rosenblum. "There's a deep sense within the country that those who have perpetrated the violence have impunity, which needs to be addressed." How that will happen is a subject of contention. The process for some kind of truth commission has been started but, says Rosenblum, is deeply flawed. "A problem like Ituri needs to be approached on multiple levels. You need soldiers on the streets, a ceasefire by force, and a way of dealing with justice issues, with mechanisms to put [justice] into place."

If there's any hope for a large-scale transformation, it probably comes from two non-government sources: civil society groups and the media. A free press, started in the waning years of the Mobutu regime, has gathered steam and is now an unstoppable force in the country. Batabiha points out that in 2004, eight cabinet ministers were dismissed when the press wrote passionately about their corruption. "The power of the press is at work in the Congo," he says.

But if the DRC is to succeed, it might need help from a higher power. "Western countries' development is based on a respect for human rights and a belief in the value of human beings—the Bible is the source for a lot of that," says Batabiha. "In the DRC, we need a leadership that believes in God."

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