

The dynamics of instability in eastern DRC

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The conflict in eastern Congo has been the most deadly one since the second World War, and its social consequences have been disastrous. Solutions to the conflict – which has its roots in politics, in demographics and in economics – must look to the long term.

The first significant displacements of the rwandophone¹ population began back in 1937 when DRC (then called Zaire) encouraged immigration of 'non-native' Banyarwanda (people from Rwanda) to provide labour on its large colonial plantations

disrupted the complex and already fragile demographic balance. Among the refugees were members of the Interahamwe militia (a Hutu paramilitary organisation), the group which formed the spearhead of the genocide, and soldiers of the

Forces armées rwandaïses (Armed Forces of Rwanda, FAR). Hatred between Hutu and Tutsi living in Congolese territory reached a new peak.

Pressure on land in Kivu also increased with a number of disastrous consequences. Competition for access to land and the essentials for life such as water and firewood triggered conflict between

groups forced to live together. These conflicts were poorly arbitrated by traditional elders, who themselves were weakened by upheaval and displacement, and who retained only a vestige of their previous powers.

From the end of the 1990s, another ingredient was added to make the whole region a potential powder keg: the discovery of much sought-after minerals, used in the electronics industry, as well as a range of other valuable natural resources. These include coltan and cassiterite (a tin oxide mineral) in North Kivu, and gold from Ituri and South Kivu, in addition to tropical woods, charcoal, meat, tea, quinine and

papain. The militias and armies were keen to exercise their power over the main mining sites, from which they drew and continue to draw significant sums of money.

Criminal economy

The system which was established was a criminal one, privatised, militarised and highly profitable – and its unique feature is its violence. Each FARDC, FDLR or Mayi Mayi militia warlord controls his territory, his mine and his marketing territory; if one impinges on the playing field of another, it leads to clan warfare. Those who control the mine and the marketing territory make every effort to retain their position; those who seek to seize it use military force to achieve their ends. The absence of public order, accompanied by a culture of impunity inherited from the last years of the Mobutu regime, has enabled this economy to flourish – an economy which feeds on predation and which will, in the long term, self-destruct as a result of the overexploitation of the land, the minerals beneath it and its people.

As ever, arms are in high demand. The profits from mineral exploitation and trafficking have enabled armed groups to obtain heavy weaponry, cannons, long-range mortars, AK-47s, ammunition, radio equipment and uniforms from overseas. Despite the embargo on the supply of arms, the enormous market in light weapons has never faltered. At the end of 2009, there were some 40,000 Kalashnikovs in North Kivu alone.

There remains one last ingredient to exacerbate the conflict: malicious rumour, spread by word of mouth, anonymous tracts, posters, radio messages, text messages. It relies on credulity and awakens accumulated grievances, which further aggravate inter-communal hatred and feed the desire for revenge. Conspiracy theories abound. In Kivu and Ituri, the rumour mill ceaselessly circulates the idea that the 'Rwandans' monopolise the land and the mines,



Two boys on watch for rebels at the Mugunga refugee camp north of Goma

alongside existing communities identified as 'native'. By 1960 there were some 200,000 rwandaphones living in DRC. More Rwandan Tutsi and Burundian Hutu emigrated to the Kivus following their countries' independence in 1962; more fled Burundi following the genocide against them instituted by the Bujumbura Tutsi regime in 1972 and later again to flee civil war. In DRC they found a land much like their own, with green mountains, healthy air and familiar agricultural practices.

The flight of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees to Zaire after the Rwandan genocide in 1994 totally

dispossessing the traditional chiefs, continuing to speak Kinyarwanda. We hear of the sale of the 'national birthright' (Kivu) by the élites and military who seek enrichment by making secret pacts with the enemy. These accusations of betrayal deepen the gulf between 'native' and 'non-native'. Rural radio plays a very effective role in neutralising or propagating rumours; and mobile phones now enable faster, wider relaying of hate messages.

Disastrous social consequences

The most obvious consequence of this climate of conflict is the insecurity in Kivu. In October 2010, there were still 1.5 million displaced persons, and new groups of people were fleeing their homes following a number of attacks, accompanied by rape, especially in Walikale territory. The human development indicators are extreme in Kivu. Poverty rates (84.7% in South Kivu and 73% in North Kivu) are higher than the national average (71.3%). School attendance rates are very low in primary schools (about 53%), and maternal and infant mortality rates are high. Very few households are connected to drinking water supplies and even fewer to electricity. Health services are inadequate, with one doctor per 27,700 inhabitants in South Kivu, one per 24,000 inhabitants in North Kivu.

Certain phenomena have profound consequences. There has been a significant exodus towards the mining sites, causing a probably irreversible uprooting of young people. There is a similar exodus to join a rebel group or militia. The Mayi Mayi groups, which are omnipresent in the Kivu area, present a different community from the traditional social structure – with closely structured internal organisation and egalitarian relationships. They offer an escape from the land and a new and more acceptable form of organisation than that of the village. The young recruits leave their homeland for the long term and thus leave, often forever, the authority of their ancestors. Parents lose their influence over their children who are more and more attracted by urban cultures than by traditional values. Elsewhere in Africa, the process has developed over the long term but in eastern Congo it has been rapid and violent.

Everywhere you look, agriculture has lost its workers to the mines.

This erosion of the resource base of many households is worsened by military pillaging, massacres of animals, and theft of harvests and livestock. The traditional forms of social and economic solidarity are now being replaced by the individual fight to survive.

Protection: the highest priority

Successive peace accords (Kisangani, Nairobi, Goma) and UN resolutions, specifically those of December 2009 (resolution 1906) and June 2010 (resolution 1925), seek to provide improved security and humanitarian assistance, in particular:

- significant reduction in cases of abuse and violence
- reduction in the numbers of displaced persons
- increase in access to humanitarian aid and human rights services for vulnerable populations
- reinforcement of targeted protection, especially for women, children, refugees and IDPs
- ensuring that displaced persons are able to return to their original areas
- reducing impunity and bringing to justice those responsible for violence and human rights violations.

After protection of populations, the second priority – essential for the establishment of lasting peace – is the cessation of hostilities through the disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and reinstallation (DD3R) of armed groups. In December 2003 the government launched a national programme to substantially reduce the availability of illegal weapons and to rehabilitate demobilised fighters through community work, integration into the regular army or repatriation to Rwanda. This has been a partial success at least numerically. 21,500 fighters and their dependants returned to Rwanda between 2003 and 2009. At the start of 2010, there were only 3,000 fighters from armed groups awaiting rehabilitation.

The preferred method for settling conflicts, quashing insurrections and re-establishing peace in DRC has always been the integration of rebel groups into the army. The result is that the Congolese army is now a melting pot which includes 56 rebel groups, successively 'integrated' since the 1980s. The new 'integrated soldiers' join disparate elements from groups of fighters integrated previously. The year 2009 saw the 'accelerated integration' of almost 20,000 additional rebels into the national armed forces. In truth, this does not create the best conditions for building a national army – and can, to the contrary, have a destructive effect on the army. Elements of the CNDP, the former Tutsi rebel group, and other former rebels were integrated hastily in 2009, with no verification of the origin of the conscripts. The CNDP, which was well organised, was able to profit from its integration into the national army to create a parallel command structure and pursue its former objectives from within the army, specifically to track down the Hutu rebels of the FDLR and take control of mining sites. The rot had truly set in.

The resolution of conflict in eastern Congo will take time. After so many years of conflict and insecurity, the deaths of so many and the destruction of so much land, it is hard to change entrenched attitudes of defiance and reprisal. However, it is not beyond hope that one day in the future a federal structure will be able to initiate cooperation based on the concerted rehabilitation of the country, primarily for the benefit of local communities. It is also not beyond hope that the resources diverted by the fraudulent economy, especially those from the mining sector and biodiversity, will be channelled towards productive jobs. The only impossibility is a belief in simple and rapid post-conflict solutions; the time-scale for reconstruction will run into decades.

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1. People speaking Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda.