

Further war threatens in Congo as rivalry for resources intensifies

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A major escalation of the conflict in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) erupted as President Joseph Kabila carried out an assault on rebel forces led by General Laurent Nkunda at the end of 2007.

Four years since the end of the war from 1998 to 2003, dubbed Africa's world war, which resulted in the deaths of 4 million people through conflict and its related causes, war is once again on the agenda. Congo now stands on the brink of another major conflict as foreign powers and their local auxiliaries compete with one another for control of the country's rich natural resources.

In December of last year, Kabila amassed an army of 20,000 men with logistical support given by the UN force in Congo (MONUC). He unleashed a major military operation in an attempt to oust Nkunda from North Kivu and take control of South Kivu. But the government army was routed.

The government campaign followed intensive discussions with the US administration. Kabila met Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in September 2007.

Rice secured the agreement of Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni and the DRC government that they would both cooperate to eliminate Nkunda. This would open up an area that is rich in natural resources to US companies.

The agreement was reiterated when Rice met Museveni, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi and Dennis Kalume, the Congolese interior state minister, who represented President Joseph Kabila, in Addis Ababa on December 5.

"The three-point plan which she summarised is a good restatement of what we have talked about before, but this time with more vigour," said Uganda's Museveni at a news conference with Rice.

Kabila himself travelled to Washington to meet President Bush in November. But the attempt to eliminate Nkunda proved disastrous. The government troops were defeated despite support from what is the largest-ever UN force. They fled leaving their equipment strewn along the line of the retreat.

Their defeat forced the government to call a peace conference at Goma, the capital of North Kivu. The Conference on Peace, Stability and Development in the Kivus opened on January 9 at the University of the Great Lakes in Goma with more than 1,000 delegates and observers present.

The US administration welcomed the conference as a contribution to peace in the region. But the absence of Rwandan delegates was a strong indication that the same strategy was being continued by other means. Both Uganda and Burundi have a presence at the conference.

Nkunda himself did not attend. There is still a warrant out for his arrest, but his representatives were present.

The civilian population have so little confidence in its outcome that they have used the temporary and sporadic lull in fighting to flee. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports thousands on the move and out of the reach of relief agencies.

"Such an overwhelming level of new displacement is very worrying," said John Holmes, the United Nations undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator.

It is estimated that 6 million people have already been displaced in the country as a whole. One third of them are from the Kivu provinces. A major humanitarian crisis is unfolding in this region that has already experienced so much suffering.

Mass rape, murder and mutilations have been used by all sides in the conflict as a weapon to terrorise the civilian population. Child soldiers have been recruited by government and rebel forces alike.

The humanitarian crisis was ostensibly at the top of the conference agenda. But as long as powerful interests are competing for control of the region's resources there cannot be a resolution to the conflict or an end to the humanitarian crisis.

The local forces involved in the conflict include Nkunda's National Congress for the People's Defence (CNDP), the Mai Mai militias, and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

The FDLR was formed from the remnants of the Hutu Interahamwe militia that carried out the anti-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. Many of them fled into Congo when the present Rwanda government came to power.

The CNDP was formed by Congolese Tutsis and claims to be defending the interests of Tutsis against attacks by the FDLR and the Mai Mai militias. The Mai Mai is made up of a collection of Congolese armed groups who have allied themselves with the government and the FDLR against Nkunda's forces.

There is a long history to the conflict in the area that goes back to the struggle by rebel forces against US-backed dictator Joseph Mobutu. It has impacted on all the nine countries that border on Congo. At various times they have been drawn into the civil war. Any renewal of that war threatens to provoke a continent-wide conflict.

Nkunda's personal history demonstrates one aspect of the international dimension of the Congo civil war. He was born in North Kivu and fought with the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which came to power in Rwanda in 1994 ending the genocide. He then returned to Congo where he became the commander of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), which won control over most of Eastern Congo.

In 1997 Rwanda invaded Congo, a move that encouraged all rebel groups that opposed Mobutu, who had been in power with Western backing since 1965. Mobutu was overthrown, and Laurent Kabila, Joseph's father, became president. The rebel groups who had helped bring him to power, including the RCD, joined the new national army. But Nkunda refused to join the army and continued to hold out in North Kivu.

The Rwandan-led alliance rapidly disintegrated, and Congo was plunged into another civil war that lasted from 1998 to 2003. It drew in all nine of Congo's neighbouring states in support of either the rebels or Kabila's government. In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and his son Joseph succeeded him. The war was finally brought to an end by the Sun City Agreement of 2002. All foreign troops, except Rwanda's, pulled out in

the next year.

In 2004, army units loyal to the RCD mutinied and the government issued a warrant for the arrest of Nkunda on war crimes charges, but he was able to hold out in the Kivus. The 2006 election was characterised by an escalation of anti-Tutsi rhetoric, and the national government removed any prospect of the RCD achieving local power in the predominantly Tutsi areas through the ballot box.

Backed by Tutsi businessmen, Nkunda emerged as the leader of a reorganised Tutsi movement after the election. He claims to be independent of the Rwandan government. But he is thought to rely on their support to recruit soldiers in the refugee camps where many Congolese Tutsis live, over the Rwandan border.

Last November, Washington sent US State Department conflict advisor Tim Shortly to Congo to meet Nkunda. The aim of the mission was to persuade him to accept a pay-off and exile in South Africa or the US. Another opposition figure, Jean-Pierre Bemba, who was Kabila's main rival in the recent presidential election, accepted a similar deal and has gone into exile. Nkunda appears to have refused the proffered deal, and the military assault was launched on his stronghold, which resulted in humiliation for the government and MONUC.

Having tried persuasion, Washington turned to force and it has now returned to persuasion, but the objective remains the same—to gain control of the Kivus' natural resources. The US has been unable to impose its will in Congo, either by force or persuasion, because it is no longer the only game in town. China and India have both emerged as serious rivals in the contest to reap the rewards of high commodity prices. Russia, which has just signed a deal with Nigeria giving it control over natural gas exports, will not be far behind.

The impact of this competition on domestic politics has been considerable. Kabila has attempted to assert his control over key resource-rich areas of the country. But those who have lost out have been left in rebellious mood. Nkunda has succeeded in recruiting Eugène Serufuli, a Hutu with his own militia, whose allegiance would not have lain with Nkunda's largely Tutsi forces in the past. Formerly the governor of North Kivu, Serufuli was disappointed when his loyalty to Kabila was not rewarded with a reappointment to the governorship.

Much has been made of the democratic character of Kabila's government. The UN provided US\$500 million for the presidential elections, most of which came from the US and the European Union. The EU also provided troops to police the streets of the capital while the poll was in progress. The US and Europe have longstanding interests in Congo and viewed a successful election as the best way of ensuring an air of legitimacy for their continued domination of the country.

But there was, in reality, very little that was democratic about the elections. George Forrest, one of the main funders of Kabila's party, the People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy, is under sanction from the UN because of his role in the illegal exploitation of resources in Congo.

Kabila secured national power by allying himself with key power brokers in each province. In Katanga, he has relied on Gabriel Kyungu, who was responsible for a campaign of ethnic cleansing under Mobutu. According to MONUC's own human rights coordinator, thousands of ethnic Kisaiaans were killed in 1992-1993 and an estimated half a million detained in inhuman conditions. Kyungu whipped up the same ethnic hatred in the presidential elections of 2006, and government soldiers carried out systematic human rights abuses in Katanga.

With the election of Kabila and the exile of Bemba, it appeared that the West had secured its hold over Congo. But the emergence of China onto the world stage has radically changed the picture.

The position of the Western mining companies has come under challenge from a government review of mining contracts. Western governments, the UN and the World Bank have long overlooked fraud,

corruption and other irregularities in Congo mining contracts because they allowed the systematic looting of the country's resources by Western companies. The Tenke Mining Company of Canada is said to have secured the Fungurume concession for US\$15 million when the real value of the mine is estimated at US\$60 billion.

Now, some 60 contracts are under review by the *Commission de Révisation des Contrats Miniers* (Mining Contracts Review Commission). They involve some of the largest transnational mining companies. Mining shares wobbled on the news that 23 contracts might be revoked altogether.

For the government, what is being called *le scandale géologique* offers an opportunity to renegotiate on more favourable terms deals it has already concluded or to cut entirely new deals with rival companies. The US and Belgium, whose companies are those most seriously affected, have sought assurances from the Congo government that their companies will not be squeezed out in favour of Chinese companies. But experts suggest that virtually all mining contracts in Congo would be open to dispute if scrutinised closely.

China has established itself in Congo by providing US\$8 billion for infrastructure projects and mining operations. This deal will give Chinese companies control of several important copper and cobalt mines. Since the Chinese investment was announced, President Kabila has been courted by every government that fears its interests in the Congo may suffer.

Washington immediately invited him to visit the White House last autumn. This was followed by an invitation from the Belgian government. Kabila is due to visit Moscow and India on his return from a trip to China. The Indian government is said to be putting together a Chinese-style deal, which will involve infrastructure projects in return for mineral concessions.

Billions of dollars are at stake. Mining companies Freeport McMoRan, BHP Billiton and Anvil Mining have all recently launched multimillion-dollar projects in Congo. Israeli mining magnate Dan Gertler, who laid on a private jet to take the presidential party to Washington, stands to make immense profits out of the merger of Katanga Mining and Nikanor. The deal will create the world's largest cobalt and copper producer. The two companies have raised US\$2 billion for a single project in Katanga that is expected to produce the highest-grade copper ore in the world. The sum is the same as the entire Congo government budget for last year.

One of the key areas is the border between Congo and Uganda, in the eastern part of the country. Extensive oil reserves have been discovered in Lake Albert. Heritage Oil, one of the companies carrying out the prospecting in Lake Albert, is headed by Tony Buckingham, who has links to British military companies such as Executive Outcomes and Sandline. Two Chinese companies and a Spanish oil company are also said to be interested in the Lake Albert oilfield.

It is possible that the armed groups involved in the Kivu conference may sign a cease-fire in the next few days. The European Union has offered US\$150 million in aid to reconstruct the region, so there are considerable incentives to do so. But there is little likelihood that such a deal would provide the basis for lasting peace in Congo. The stakes are too high, and the rival local factions are vying for the support of powerful international contenders for Congo's natural resources. The purpose of the EU aid would be to benefit European mining and oil companies, not the local population.

Even if Nkunda were to withdraw from the scene, there are numerous other conflicts that would take centre stage. Many of these conflicts have even wider implications than that between Nkunda and Kabila. The oil reserves of Lake Albert have exacerbated tensions between Uganda and Congo. Shots have already been fired in what may prove to be a war as serious as the recently ended civil war. In the south, Katanga is torn by the ethnic tensions that Kabila has used to secure his election. Should any of the mining companies that currently have interests in the region find

themselves excluded by the review of contracts and Chinese competition, they might even sponsor a breakaway by Katanga if that seemed to be the only way they could maintain their ability to loot the country's resources.

The losers in all of this will inevitably be the population of Congo. As the humanitarian crisis grows, cholera has been reported in the city of Lubumbashi, capital of Katanga. While the disease is common in the wet season, it has begun unusually in the dry season. This is a tangible result of the effect that protracted war and the rivalry for mineral resources has had on the living conditions of the people of Congo.



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