

CONFLICT IN THE EAST OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: ANOTHER CHALLENGE TO REGIONAL AND INTER-NATIONAL CRISIS DIPLOMACY

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When rebels led by General Nkunda marched on Goma late in October 2008 and tens of thousands of civilians fled, the world was horrified. People were asking themselves whether the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP) would actually occupy the town, and what this would lead to. The peace process initiated by the armistice agreement of January was on the rocks, and calls for strengthening the UN protection force, MONUC, were growing louder. In terms of security policy, the Congolese government as well as the international community are confronted by utter ruin. What is more, the warlord economy that is operating in the east of the DR Congo is impossible to dislodge; after all, militias as well as rebel forces, governmental as well as non-governmental players equally benefit from it.

By now, there are three hotspots in the eastern Congo: Based in Uganda, the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) is raiding Congolese villages. In Ituri, the conflict between Hema and Lendu militias is coming to a head. And in northern Kivu, General Nkunda is about to launch a major offensive against the regular forces.

The conflict between the Hema and the Lendu goes back a long way, although Operation Artemis superficially pacified the district and paved the way for settling disputes about access to land and natural resources as well as other matters. Some of the marauding militias were demobilized, while others were not. The latter include 'Cobra' Matata's FRPI as well as the FNI – forces of local warlords who are ruled exclusively by opportunism and, more importantly, the desire for power, now that their ideological differences have faded.

As early as September, LRA troops attacked the north of Orientale province, spreading destruction and rape and kidnapping children. More than 5,000 Congolese fled to the southern Sudan. Although tied down by the conflict in northern Kivu, the general staff at Kinshasa and the MONUC sent troops to this second hotspot, depleting the forces that were fighting Nkunda. According to Ugandan sources, peace negotiations with the LRA hardly stand any chance now that the International Criminal Court of The Hague has issued an order for the arrest of its leader, Joseph Kony.

Mr Nkunda, the Rebel General, finds himself in a similar position, with the Sword of Damocles hanging over his head in the shape of Mr Moreno-Okampo, the chief prosecutor at The Hague. The CNDP, whose leader fancies

himself as a defender of the disenfranchised and the interests of the Congo, has no serious intention to negotiate. The general became prominent in 2004 when he occupied Bukavu, allegedly to protect the local Tutsi from being murdered wholesale. When it became clear in 2006 that Kabila would defeat his challenger Bemba in the elections, Nkunda attacked the town of Sake. To the surprise of many, the government agreed on a compromise which provided for integrating the CNDP's soldiers into the Congolese forces, so that entire rebel units became *de iure* part of the country's official army. However, this step did not resolve the security problem presented by the CNDP.

The Rwandan government which, it is often said, maintains links with the CNDP plays a pivotal role in the crisis. When they signed the Nairobi convention late in November, the foreign secretaries of Rwanda and the DR Congo undertook, among other things, to demobilize the former FAR and Interahamwe units. That the convention addressed the subject of Rwanda's past support for Nkunda is certainly positive. However, because the international community chose to ignore Rwanda's support for a long time, the Congolese party had doubts about its willingness to solve the conflict without prejudice.

Under the aegis of international organizations, the leaderships of the DR Congo and the rebel groups operating in northern and southern Kivu met at Goma early in 2008 to negotiate about re-establishing peace in the two regions. Yet the fact that all key players were only represented by delegates overshadowed the meeting from the start. In point of fact, the FDLR, for one, was not interested in demobilization because its control over the gold and cassiterite mines in various territories provides a sound economic foundation. In 2002, Joseph Kabila attempted for the first time to outlaw the FDLR which, consisting today of former FAR soldiers and Interahamwe Hutu militias as well as newly-recruited Congolese and Tanzanian refugees, seems to be working hand in glove with the FARDC brigades.

The true value of the Goma meeting emerged when it became known that new and/or forced recruitments were being stepped up instead of abandoned. The various militias involved are as unwilling as they ever were to abandon their control over the natural resources in the regions they rule. In addition, they still adhere to their spurious claim of having to protect – mostly ethnic – communities in specific regions.

Relations between Rwanda and the DR Congo are problematic. The spirit of Nairobi, where the foreign secretaries of the two countries agreed on demobilization, has evaporated as completely by now as the spirit of Goma. In September this year, after Nkunda had expanded his operations, the president of Rwanda, Mr Kagame, charged the DR Congo with failing to tackle the core of the problem which, according to his view, included not only Nkunda and his troops but also the conflict between the Tutsi, the Hutu, and other

groups. In response, Kabila called upon his countrymen to show patriotism and resist the attacks of the enemy. Talks between Kigali and Kinshasa were resumed only when Nkunda appeared before Goma: Kagame visited Nairobi, and Congo's foreign secretary came to Kigali in November. Kinshasa affirmed its readiness to solve the problem of the former FAR and Interahamwe members together with its neighbour. If the demobilization of the FDLR units were to succeed, Nkunda would be weakened and Rwanda would be deprived of any pretext for supporting him from outside.

This is not the first time that the MONUC's capacities and its mandate are called into question. Early in October, the UN special envoy, Mr Doss, had warned against a war, demanding an increase in both troops and material. The MONUC's task is both complex and unrewarding. It is strange that the Congolese should direct their fury about the erosion of governmental structures against foreign helpers instead of their own leaders.

These leaders have been refusing to talk to General Nkunda since the beginning of the crisis. Violence appears more attractive. France was the first country to be asked for military aid, followed by Angola, an ally. However, both declined with thanks.

The state does not hold a monopoly on the use of force. Cobbled together from former rebels and units of the Zairian army, the soldiers of the regular armed forces are generally badly paid, which is why they are forced to keep looking for ways and means to secure a living. They habitually murder, rob, and rape their own people. Corruption and fraud are commonplace in FARDC circles. Some time ago, the government promised to reform the security sector. It would be much more important to establish effective control over the management of resources, to separate the administration of the army from its command structure, and to suppress impunity.

For a long time, Europe quarrelled over how to respond to the demand for more troops for the DR Congo. The most recent decision of November 20 provides for a humanitarian aid package valued at 45.6 Million Euros. But is this the new face of the oft-invoked partnership with Africa? Moreover, it is certain that the UN decision to add 3,100 soldiers to the strength of the MONUC troops cannot satisfy the humanitarian needs of the civilian population.

While both the SADC and the AU have declared their solidarity with the Congolese government, they are hardly in a position to send troops. South Africa is having difficulties meeting its own international peacekeeping obligations. Angola, in turn, is prepared to send troops only under a multilateral regime.

There certainly are some positive aspects, such as the bilateral exchange between Kigali and Kinshasa, the Nairobi summit initiated by the UN, and the

dialogue with the rebel leader, Mr Nkunda, which resulted from it. So far, the government has refused to accede to Nkunda's demands, which include direct talks with the leadership in Kinshasa, the protection of all minorities in the DR, the integration of CNDP soldiers into the FARDC, and the assurance of good governance. It is questionable whether any concessions will be made in the future. At the moment, there are many signs pointing at a military solution.

At the end of the day, the conflict can be settled only through negotiations. At present, however, the CNDP's unilateral ceasefire declaration is constantly being undermined by diverse parties, both rebels and regular forces. If the FDLR troops should be demobilized, Nkunda would be deprived of his main motivation. Should this happen, the economic factor as well as the complexity and heterogeneity of the players would have to be purged of the destructive potential which is the origin of the warlord structures that exist today.

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