

Africa's great war

Congo's civil war may have claimed as many as 3m lives. The country is so inaccessible that its horrors are rarely reported
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IN THE chocolate waters of the Congo river, a mutilated corpse rolls by. The rebels' "minister for children" shivers. How is he going to explain this to the horrified UN peace envoys from the capital, Kinshasa, who are at that moment stepping on to the quay to meet him? Not by telling the truth, obviously, which was that his rebel group had slaughtered 150 people in the town of Kisangani on May 14th-15th, then pitched their disembowelled bodies into the river with stones crammed into their bellies. Instead, he smiles, accepts the envoys' offerings of food aid, and talks chummily of other things.

Over the past four years, Congo's war has claimed more lives than any other. The International Rescue Committee, an American aid agency, says that by the middle of last year, 2.5m people had died because of the war in eastern Congo alone. Some were shot or hacked to death; many more succumbed to starvation or disease as nine national armies and a shifting throng of rebel groups pillaged their country. By now, the death toll is probably over 3m, although this is the roughest of estimates. As one UN worker puts it: "Congo is so green, you don't even see the graves."

Western powers seem barely to have noticed the catastrophe. This is partly because, unlike the Middle East, Congo has no strategic importance. But it is also because it is two-thirds the size of Western Europe, thickly-forested, incredibly dangerous and has hardly any paved roads or working telephones. Simply finding out what is happening in Congo is a challenge, as your correspondent discovered while accompanying militiamen on patrol by the shore of Lake Kivu last week, when he was forced to hide in a bush to avoid 200 hostile Rwandan soldiers passing by.

And yet there is hope. In April, the Congolese government signed a peace deal with most rebel groups. By offering rebel leaders a share of power, the government won nominal control of 70% of the country (see map below). This part of Congo is now relatively peaceful, and slowly recovering economically. But one important rebel group refused to sign. The Rwandan-controlled Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), whose minister for children brazened out the watery corpse, still holds most of eastern Congo.

Here, the war blazes on. Or rather, dozens of overlapping micro-wars flicker, in which almost all the victims are civilians. A typical village can expect to be looted by several different bands of armed men. Under what amounts to Rwandan occupation, eastern Congo is arguably the most miserable place on earth.

A rough neighbourhood

The story of Congo's war began in 1994, with the genocide in Rwanda, Congo's tiny neighbour. A government dominated by Rwanda's Hutu tribe tried to exterminate the Tutsis, a prosperous minority. In 100 days, 800,000 Tutsis, and Hutus who refused to co-operate, were murdered. The slaughter stopped when an army of exiled Tutsis invaded from Uganda, and drove the killers into Congo (which was then called Zaire). The new, Tutsi-dominated government in Rwanda was afraid that the *genocidaires* would regroup and return to finish the job. So when Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire's dictator, gave them succour, Rwanda engineered a rebellion that toppled him.

In his place, the Rwandans installed a guerrilla leader and drunk, Laurent Kabila. They hoped he would do their bidding. Instead, he rearmed the *genocidaires*. So Rwanda tried to topple him, too. With help from Uganda and Burundi, it nearly succeeded. Kabila was saved by five friendly nations, of which the most effective were Angola and Zimbabwe. Most of the countries that intervened had legitimate interests in Congo. Rebels from most neighbouring states were using Congo's lawless forests as a base from which to launch cross-border raids. The failure of the Kabila government to curb these rebels prompted Rwanda, Uganda and Angola to enter the war. Zimbabwe, which shares no border with Congo, sent troops for different reasons: to satisfy the power-broking pretensions of its president, Robert Mugabe, and his army's appetite for loot.

Before long, the war reached a stalemate and the miscellany of armies settled down to the serious business of plunder. Zimbabwe bagged diamond seams in the south. Angola joined the Congolese government in an oil venture. Rwanda and Uganda began digging for diamonds and coltan (a mineral used in mobile telephones), harvested timber and ivory, and even emptied schools of desks and chairs. Though supposedly allies, Rwandan and Ugandan troops have occasionally clashed over the spoils. But in general, the more all the armies plundered, the less willing they became to fight each other (as opposed to unarmed peasants).



A younger, thinner, nicer Kabila

Then, in January last year, one of Kabila's bodyguards shot him once in the gut and twice in the guts. No one knows who gave the order, because the assassin was himself killed almost immediately. One rumour is that his allies were so sick of his double-crossing that they had him killed.

Kabila's legacy is not a happy one. At his mausoleum in Kinshasa, a bronze statue shows the dead president clutching a book, which is an odd memorial for a man who halted book-keeping at the Congolese finance ministry. In the parts of Congo he controlled, Kabila ruled as despotically as his predecessor, but less competently. He scared off investors by jailing foreign businessmen and demanding million-dollar ransoms. He banished aid by insulting foreign diplomats. By printing money while enforcing price controls, he caused Soviet-style shortages. By the end, petrol was so scarce that the state oil firm resorted to flushing its main pipeline with river water to force out the dregs.

Kabila was succeeded by his son, Joseph. Now 31, Mr Kabila junior is doing a better job. He endorsed a peace plan that his father rejected. A ceasefire followed, policed, where possible, by the UN. Angola withdrew to its border, and Uganda pulled out some troops, leaving others to mind its businesses in northern Congo.

Zimbabwe stayed, at the government's request. The young Mr Kabila wants to be protected from the Rwandans, who refuse to leave. The Rwandan government says it will not withdraw its army, which occupies a slice of Congo 27 times bigger than its own country, until the last Hutu fighter has been captured or killed.



Rwanda reckons that 55,000 Hutus, still intent on genocide, continue to lurk in Congo's jungles or have joined the Congolese army under false names. The estimate of the International Crisis Group, a think-tank, is half that number. All the same, to prevent the Hutus from regrouping and invading Rwanda, the UN has proposed setting up a Congo-based border force. Mr Kabila's government accepts this. To show goodwill, it has already released 2,000 Rwandan Hutus from its army and invited the international genocide tribunal to investigate. But Rwanda says no.

No one is suggesting that Rwanda's fears are unfounded. Yet many observers say that Rwanda and its pet rebels are no longer pursuing the *genocidaires* with much passion. Refugees from Mwenga, a bush-town in South Kivu, a mineral-rich province, complain that their homes were attacked by Hutu militiamen a dozen times in the past two months, but that the town's Rwandan garrison did nothing. The townspeople say they asked the Rwandan commander why. He is said to have replied: "These are our brothers, do you think we can kill them?"

Another example: the Hutus' camps on South Kivu's Ruzizi plain are well known to the Rwandan troops nearby, say UN officials, but they are seldom, if ever, attacked. A local Hutu commander claims that the Rwandans regularly supply him with arms. Elsewhere, according to a senior Rwandan officer who recently sought asylum in Belgium, the army hires Hutu militiamen to work its **coltan mines**. He told the Belgian senate that they could otherwise be eradicated "in less than a month".

Besides securing its own borders, Rwanda claims to be protecting Congo's ethnic Tutsis, the foot-soldiers of its two rebellions, from being murdered by Hutu militias or other Congolese. But even this group is now rising against Rwanda's occupation. Early this year, a brigade of Congolese Tutsis mutinied and returned to their tribal homeland, in the hills above Lake Tanganyika. Around 1,000 rebel fighters have deserted to join them. Rwanda swiftly sent 8,000 troops to crush the revolt, and is now reportedly herding Tutsi villagers into a barren camp, to stop them feeding the deserters. Tutsi against Tutsi, this is now the fiercest battle of the war.

With mid-ranking rebels meanwhile crossing to the government side, and senior rebels expected to follow, the RCD could be on the verge of disintegration. Rwanda has tried to deter desertions by force, of which the massacre in Kinsangani was an example. But if the RCD crumbles, Rwanda will doubtless find an alternative cover for its occupation of eastern Congo. Indeed, it has already started looking: in June, Rwanda deposed the RCD "government" of South Kivu, and replaced it with the leaders of a more pliable militia.

The players change; but the game remains the same. This is bad news for the hapless people of eastern Congo. Everywhere they look, they see men with guns. Besides the Hutu militias, the Rwandans and their rebel allies, there are the Mai-Mai, a warrior cult, and myriad gangs of bandits. All prey on the poor.

Across Kivu, a land of postcard-perfect green hills, villages are half-deserted, fields neglected and livestock a fond memory. In the forests around Mantu, near Bukavu, villagers have dug waist-deep trenches and covered them with branches. When Hutu marauders come, as they do most weeks, they hide in these holes.

The peasants of Ramba Chitanga, a village too tiny to appear on any map, tell a grisly tale. When the RCD left, Hutus moved in, and accused the villagers of feeding their enemies. Then the Mai-Mai attacked. During the ensuing battle, the Hutus hacked off 29-year-old Janet Vumilia's hands. Now, with her skittle-like stumps, she ticks off the relatives they killed: her parents-in-law, her brother-in-law, her pregnant sister, her niece.

Villagers say they can distinguish different factions by their actions. The Hutus, they say, are more vicious than the Mai-Mai, while the rebels are more likely than the Rwandans to abduct children. But sometimes the distinctions become blurred. Francine, a 14-year-old new mother, says she thinks her baby's father was an RCD rebel. But he could have been a Mai-Mai; men from both groups raped her. When her father objected, the Mai-Mai slit his throat.

In Kivu, cattle are now scarce, yet livestock prices have plummeted. Locals calculate that if they buy a cow, armed men will take it, so they don't buy cows. The rebels levy a "security tax" of \$1 per hut, but payment does not seem to reduce the likelihood that, sooner or later, killers will come in the night.

In Walungu hospital, near Bukavu, 1,200 patients compete for 300 beds, and the attention of three doctors. About half the inmates are relatively healthy, but too terrified to go home. Murals in the hospital depict black doctors in white coats peering into microscopes, recalling the lost hopes of the 1960s. Now, the wards are full of black children with blonde hair, a sign of malnutrition. The hospital's 32-year-old head of nursing says she has received only three months' salary in her whole career. Why does she carry on? "It's our country," she shrugs. "It's painful, but there it is."

If Rwanda had been a benevolent occupier, it might have turned a profit without stealing. As Congo's infrastructure crumbled over the past 40 years, people in the east of the country strengthened their commercial links with Rwanda. This trend accelerated when war closed the Congo river, the country's main highway, severing eastern Congo from Kinshasa. Had the Rwandans built a decent road or two linking eastern Congo with Kigali, their own capital, they could have exploited this.

Instead, they chose to murder and plunder. "We couldn't believe the things these people did during the genocide, until they came and started doing them to us," said a market-woman in Bukavu, jumbling together Hutu killers and Tutsi invaders.

Heroic optimism

In Kinshasa, meanwhile, stinking bank notes suggest that things are looking up. The new government printed no money in the second half of last year, and lifted price controls. Inflation is currently below 5%, down from 511% in 2000. On June 13th, the World Bank approved a \$450m loan, part of a multilateral aid package that could total \$1.7 billion. The Bank's new man in Kinshasa, the first posted there in a decade, says that Congo could be about to see surprisingly rapid development.

This is heroic optimism. Congo's institutions are as dirty as its bank notes. Corrupt parastatals disgorge no revenue to the central bank. Their past thieving has saddled Congo with \$13 billion in debt. Civil servants make ends meet by demanding bribes or doing other jobs on the side. In the offices of the immigration ministry, for example, not only visas but also sexual favours are for sale. Respect for human rights has improved under the new regime, but only a bit. Political troublemakers, and journalists, are regularly arrested. Policemen and soldiers, often drunk, in mirrored sunglasses, freelance as muggers. During a random "visa inspection", *The Economist's* correspondent was bundled into a black Mercedes and relieved of \$450 by four men claiming to be security officers. It could have been worse: an American aid worker was recently beaten senseless after overtaking a general on the boulevard.

Whether Joseph Kabila could control these abuses is unclear. He is popular throughout Congo, because people regard him as the best hope for peace. But he has some ugly people around him, including some of the worst crooks and thugs of his father's administration, and of Mobutu's too. The people of Congo tell anyone who asks that they want their country to be united, invader-free and democratic. The prospects for this are woeful, in the short term at least.

Mr Kabila has promised to hold free and fair elections as soon as the country is reunited. But no Congolese leader has ever kept such a promise before, and some of Mr Kabila's allies have cause to try to prevent the young president from keeping his. For example, Mwenze Kongolo, who is Mr Kabila's uncle and Mr Mugabe's good friend, is associated with the worst abuses of the old Kabila regime, and so cannot expect anyone to vote for him. He is however popular with certain army brigades.

If Congo's different factions agree about anything, it is that white foreigners are responsible for their troubles. Given a history of western meddling—King Leopold of the Belgians plundered Congo in the 19th century, and America first propped up Mobutu and then helped

overthrow him—such a view is understandable. But it is hopelessly out of date. Since the cold war ended, western governments have seen no reason to care much about Congo.

Mostly, they ignore it, considering its problems too tangled to solve. The UN's ceasefire-monitoring mission consists of only 442 military observers. Efforts to disarm the militias in eastern Congo have been crippled by the RCD's refusal to grant the UN free passage. Since 1994, western donors have put a bigger effort into Rwanda than Congo. In part, this stems from guilt at having failed to stop the genocide. It is also because bite-sized Rwanda's problems seem more manageable, and its efficient government is refreshing to deal with. Throughout Congo's war, aid has poured into Kigali.

All the same, Rwanda's behaviour in Congo may soon cost it some friends. In August, a UN Security Council panel will deliver its third report on the looting of Congo's resources, focusing on the humanitarian impact of Rwanda's plunder in the east of the country. Sanctions, or at least a reduction of aid, are possible. Britain, Rwanda's biggest bilateral donor and keenest apologist, is expected to oppose such moves. But France will probably be in favour. And the Americans may be willing to go along with some sort of censure of Rwanda, even if it is only a reprimand.

It will take more than a reprimand to eject Rwanda from Congo. Its leaders—the Tutsi fighters who stopped the genocide—have turned their country into one of the most militarised in Africa. By plundering Congo, some have found a way of enriching themselves without upsetting their own people. Meanwhile, war gives Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, an excuse to squelch dissent and muffle the press. It also keeps at least 20,000 unruly, mostly-Hutu soldiers from coming home and stirring fresh trouble in Rwanda, where it all began.

V·T·E		Armed groups in the First and Second Congo Wars	[hide]
National armies	Pro-government	Zaire (FAZ, under Mobutu Sese Seko / FARDC, after Mobutu) · Angola (FAA, in Second War) · Chad (FANT) · Libya · Namibia (NDF) · Sudan · Zimbabwe (ZNA)	
	Anti-government	Angola (FAA, in First War) · Burundi (FAB) · Rwanda (RPF/RDF) · Uganda (UPDF)	
Militias and rebel groups	Rwanda-aligned	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL, Rwanda-Uganda backed alliance) · Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) · RCD–Goma · Banyamulenge (ethnic Tutsis in South Kivu) · RCD-Congo (faction of RCD-Goma created in 2002)	
	Uganda-aligned	Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC, created in 1998) · RCD-Kisangani/Mouvement de Libération (RCD-K/ML or "RCD-Wamba", created 1999) · RCD-National (RCD-N, split from RCD-K/ML) · Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) · Front de Libération du Congo (FLC, formed from the MLC, RCD-N and RCD-ML from 2000 to 2001)	
	Anti-government, other	Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) · National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA, in Second War)	
	Anti-Rwanda	Interahamwe · Rassemblement Démocratique pour le Rwanda (RDR, successor organization to the Interahamwe) · Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR, successor to RDR in 1997) · Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR, created in 2000)	
	Anti-Uganda	Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) · Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) · Nationalist and Integrationist Front (FNI)	
	Anti-Burundi	National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) · National Liberation Front (FLN/FROLINA)	
	Government-aligned, other	Mai-Mai · National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA, in First War) · White Legion (First Congo War)	
United Nations	MONUSCO		
Alliances sometimes changed dramatically over the course of the wars. Some groups may be associated with multiple, ostensibly opposed factions.			