

# THE CONGO'S DARKNESS ENVELOPS ITS CIVILIANS

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has experienced the deadliest conflicts since World War II, it has absorbed many international groups, rebel forces and government troops. REBECCA HINCHEY writes.

Buried deep beneath the feet of soldiers fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (The Congo) today, lie the reasons of much of Congo's horror. Below the surface lies gold, diamonds, cobalt and coltan. The Congo's borders are awash with the minerals adorning the bodies of Western men and women. It's also one of the few countries with abundant reserves of coltan – an essential mineral for mobile telephones, laptop computers and other hi-tech electronic devices. Estimates put the Congo at having close to 80 percent of the world's reserves of this rarest of iron ores. Above ground, timber and water complete the deadly ingredients spurring the fighting.

Resources have long been the nexus of the Congo's woes. It began with the King of Belgium's grab for ivory and rubber. King Leopold II 'owned' the Congo from 1885 to 1908, when it was known as the Congo Free State. His wealth grew exponentially thanks to the rich resources of that country. Like today's conflict, ordinary people saw none of the proceeds. Forced to work as slaves for their Belgian masters, they watched as the King added mansion upon mansion to his already considerable wealth. In the first decade of the new century, the Belgian government took over the King's rule. Conditions remained horrendous. By 1960 they were gone, brushed aside as a post-war world rejected old-style colonialism.

For five years, various political groups jostled for power, hampered by the influence of military and cold-war powers. In 1965, Mobuto,

then leader of the army, seized control of the government and remained at the top until the First Congo War of 1997. While his affluence increased, the same could not be said for the people.

The Congo's troubles escalated in 1994 when Hutus and Tutsis began fleeing the genocide in Rwanda for the relative safety of the Congo, settling in refugee camps in the provinces of North and South Kivu. However, two years later the brutality of Rwanda followed them to the Congo. Hutu militias, responsible for the massacre of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda, had escaped the new Tutsi-led government in Rwanda and joined the civilian refugees in the camps in the Congo.

When these blood-stained Rwandan Hutus formed new fighting groups, which included members of Rwanda's former army, they launched attacks on their Rwandan Tutsi enemy from their Congo base, as well as on Tutsis living in the Congo.

These Rwandan Hutus were not alone in the Congo, and countless rebel groups and foreign troops increasingly complicated this conflict. Among them were Burundian Hutu rebels who were also carrying out attacks on Tutsis, particularly those in south Kivu known as the Banyamulenge.

Then the Rwandan army marched into the Congo, ostensibly to protect the Tutsis

**Lack of progress in the east is caused by greed, fear, ethnic abhorrence and a desire for supremacy**



living there. Fronting their invasion was an armed rebel group led by the Congolese commander, Laurent-Desire Kabila. Uganda also stood behind him. Like Rwanda, Uganda viewed Kabila as a shield against armed groups in the east. And like Rwanda, Uganda also saw potential for a steady-flow of dollars from the resource-rich Congo. Cutting a swathe through the Congo, the Rwandan army perpetrated mass killings, particularly against Hutus living in the refugee camps. Hundreds of thousands died or disappeared in what became known as the first Congo war. A demoralised and destitute Congolese Army quickly capitulated.

Under the pressure, the Congo's President Joseph-Desire Mobutu, entrenched in kleptocratic power since 1965, fled the country. Kabila immediately seized control, beginning a period of corrupt and dictatorial rule full of the same largesse the people so hated in their former leader. The Congolese people's hopes were deflated. Dreams of a new period of fair and just government faded and distrust of their foreign-backed government grew.

The Kabila-Rwanda-Uganda grouping was a shaky alliance at best. Sensing waning support from his backers, Kabila roused militia groups to his side. Just a year after ascending to power he turned on his backers (from eastern Congo), purging government ranks of Tutsi held positions and ordering foreign troops from the country. Their refusal to leave precipitated the beginning of a deadly conflict.

Ugandan, Rwandan and Burundian troops swarmed into the country, entrenching themselves in the north and the east. They named border protection and anti-Tutsi rebel activity as their motivation. But the Congo's African neighbours had their eye on the glittering prize – its gold, diamonds and other mineral wealth.

More than 25 militia groups, both independent and foreign backed, joined them in the tussle for power and resource control. But Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad and Namibia came to the Congo's aid.

## FAILED PEACE AGREEMENTS

The first sign of hope that the conflict might end came in 1999 with the advent of the Lusaka agreement. However the hope would prove false because the agreement

was riddled with cavities. Missing signatories included many of the major militia forces. The promised United Nations Peace Keepers – under the banner of MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) materialised in pitiful numbers. International eyes focused elsewhere, leaving the Congo's neighbouring countries which had invaded the Congo to do as they pleased and the unprotected Congolese to fend for themselves.

In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son Joseph. His ascension brought a conciliatory tone and a brief lull in the fighting. While the United Nations dithered, Rwanda and Uganda increased their forces in the country. A new round of talks – the Sun City Talks – began in 2002. Agreements were reached but again they had holes. Major players were missing, power-sharing deals lacked detail and land and power imbalances in the East weren't addressed.

International pressure forced Rwanda to the table, resulting in a peace agreement in July 2002. Under the terms the Congo would disarm Rwandan Hutu fighters living in the Congo while Rwanda would withdraw troops from the country. A similar deal was struck with Uganda.

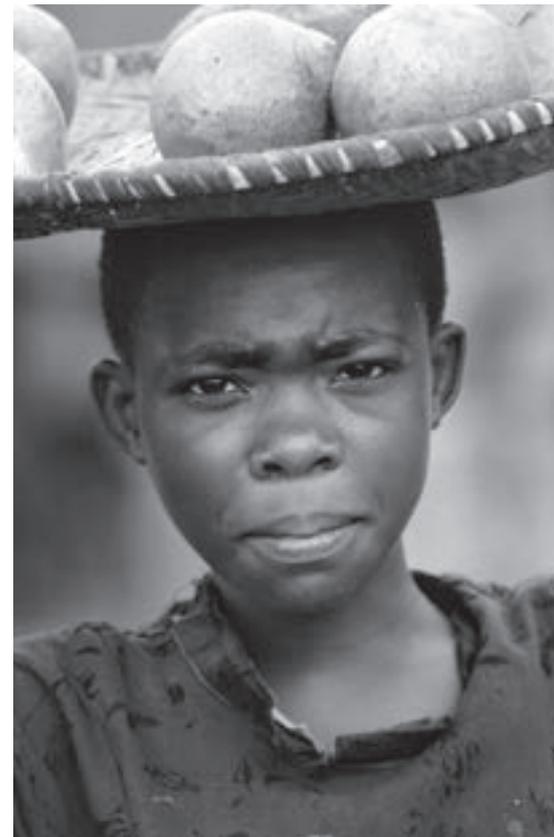
Four million people had died in the official five-year battle, mostly from conflict-related disease and starvation, leaving a nation grieving for their loved ones. The blood bath had crippled the country. Health services disappeared, villages burned and bridges and roads disintegrated. The year 2003 heralded a year of peace. There was, however, no peace for the east, where disparate rebel groups still continued their war, displacing thousands of civilians.

The conflict in the East continued when a separate peace process in Ituri, a north eastern province, faltered. An ethnic-based conflict stirred by international backers resulted in violence as ugly as any seen in the Congo. Looking north raised the bile in the mouths of Rwandans, who wondered why there was no such peace process for the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, at a time when the rest of the Congo enjoyed relative peace. So they began to covertly support private armies in the area. Other opposing rebel groups

representing various different ethnicities joined the battle. The viciousness and brutality that followed was petrifying, even by Congolese standards. People feared another Rwanda.

Throughout the rest of the country, the situation was slowly improving. Most foreign troops had withdrawn and June marked the start of a transitional government which saw the younger Kabila sharing power with four vice-presidents.

MONUC substantially increased their peacekeeping operation to more than 10,000 personnel. Today, it is the largest such mission in the world, employing close to 17,000 staff. The lack of progress in the east is caused by greed, fear, ethnic abhorrence and a desire for supremacy.



## HUMAN-RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE EAST

While fears of genocide have abated, partly due to targeted MONUC intervention, the situation in the east still remains petrifying for the civilian population. Wide-spread sexual violence, disappearances, summary executions and looting go unpunished. In the eastern city of Goma, close to 800,000 civilians rot in the camps





for internally displaced people. Boys and young men are being enlisted to a lifetime of violence -- both a means of economic survival and a way of gaining power, it threatens to become an entrenched way of life.

Currently rebel groups continue to operate with impunity. Among them is the National Congress for the People's Defence (CNDP), lead by the infamous Laurent Nkunda. A self-styled protector of the Tutsi people, he is viewed by many as a major irritant in the war and a key factor in the continuing terror in eastern Congo. He is ably assisted by countless other mercenaries, who fight for control of the people and the land. Chief among them are the Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a mix of exiled Rwandan-

## The UN was covering-up gold smuggling and arms trafficking by their own peacekeepers

Hutu fighters and disgruntled Congolese soldiers. Not helping is the national army, who themselves are guilty of gross human-rights violations.

An agreement this year has led to paper hopes. January's Goma pact looked for an end to hostilities between 22 warring parties, a significant accomplishment for Kabila's presidency. It was not found. Less than six months later Human Rights Watch reported the killing of 200 civilians in the area. In the same period the UN told of 200 ceasefire violations.

While MONUC has led to some improvements, they remain largely ineffectual in many areas and have been accused of exacerbating the situation in others. Earlier this year former UN officials were reporting that the UN was covering-up gold smuggling and arms trafficking by their own peacekeepers while others have accused these of taking sides, thereby adding fuel to the fire. That even UN personnel may be involved in resource exploitation shows the depth of the problem.

### AN ENDLESS WAR

A United Nations investigation has found Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda

guilty of illegally extracting precious resources from the land of the Congolese. Among a litany of evidence they have found that during the war, these countries were exporting diamonds, despite not producing the compressed carbon themselves.

Militia groups are similarly culpable. They are decimating the native forests bordering Uganda and Rwanda. The prize is charcoal, made by baking wood buried underneath soil. It's the major energy source across much of Southern African, used by villagers and city-folk for their everyday needs: Cooking, boiling water and heating.

Corrupt members of the Congolese army have also been implicated in illegal charcoal trafficking, along with drugs and other minerals. Billions are being made, but the people are starving. In 2004, 74 percent of the population were undernourished. "If the government was protecting the resources and using them for the benefit of the local community these issues wouldn't be there," Mfashingabo, a Congolese Australian and member of the minority Banyamulenge tribe, lamented.

Instead multinationals grease the pockets of government officials and local militiamen alike to ensure they can go on stealing from the world's poorest nations. The international companies buy mining rights and security from the government and other armed groups, who in turn use the profits to buy more of the military hardware that continues to kill the people. The soldiers see little of their leaders' wealth. They use their guns to get what they need.

Jacques Mwandulo, a Congolese academic currently working in Australia, tells it like this: "Most mining companies in the area, they don't play nice. Take the RCD. They have dealings with mining companies. They [the RCD]\*\* provide bodyguards for them and in exchange they [the mining company] must supply military equipment.

Several well-known international mining corporations have highly questionable dealings within the Congo. Human Rights Watch names AngloGold Ashanti among them. "AngloGold Ashanti representatives established relations with the FNI\*\*\*, an armed group responsible for serious human rights abuses including war

crimes against humanity, who controlled the Mongbwalu area. In return for FNI assurances of security for its operations and staff, AngloGold Ashanti provided logistical and financial support -- that in turn resulted in political benefits -- to the armed group and its leaders."

Anvil Mining Ltd, an Australian-based minerals giant, has also been implicated in human-rights violations. An ABC Four Corners program screened in 2005 highlighted the company's role in providing transport and other logistical support to the Congolese military. Fifty kilometres from the company's copper and silver mining interests, disparate, disorganised rebels gained control of a police station and were heading for the mines.

According to the report, the rebels were distressed by the lack of profit flowing to the community from Anvil's mine. One hundred villagers were killed in the fighting. According to Albert Kitaniika, who featured in the ABC report: "We started running but the soldiers caught and searched our belongings, they arrested my dad and two other boys. They put the boys into the Anvil mining truck. They came for my dad. I asked them 'where are you taking him?' and they didn't answer. "They took him 50 metres down the road where they shot and stabbed him to death."

An internal company investigation as well as a Congolese military court has cleared the company of any wrong-doing while the human-rights organisation that first raised the alarm is being accused of sabotaging investment in the country.

If the illegal and immoral exploitation of the Congo's resources is not stopped soon violence will continue. But bringing the innumerable militia leaders together to stop the bloodshed is a task of Herculean proportions. Ensuring all the myriad ethnic groups receive representation and a share in the Congo's resources is one of the biggest challenges facing Africa today. Without addressing those root causes the brutality will continue. Will Kabila be the one to do so? Only time will tell.

\*Family names have been omitted to protect their identity  
 \*\* RCD -- Congolese Rally for Democracy. Rwandan backed rebel group.  
 \*\*\*FNI -- Front for Nationalist Integration -- A Ugandan militia group.



## About the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**Capital:** Kinshasa

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**Area:** 2.34 million square kilometres  
(about the size of Western Australia)

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**Population (2007):** 62 million

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**Major religion:** Christianity

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**Ethnicity:** 200 – 250 different groups

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**Major languages:**  
Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili, Tshiluba, Kikongo and French

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**Human Development Index:**  
168 out of 177

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**Under 5 mortality rate (2005):** 20.5 %

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**Life expectancy (2007):** 47

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**Public expenditure on health (2004):** 1.1% of GDP

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# VIOLENCE Against Women

Traumatic fistula is a tear in the wall between the vagina and bladder caused by violent rape. In the eastern Congo the tormenting injury is as common as a broken bone. It is the by-product of the most lethal war in the world today, where rape is used to terrorise, humiliate and to destroy. In this complex and cruel conflict, more than 1,200 people are estimated to be dying every day.

Dr Kasereka Lusi, a surgeon working at one of the few hospitals in the area describes the sexual carnage like this: "There is nothing worse you can do to a human. They talk about four or five men. They rape them, they use material like sticks, like guns to really make a lady suffer. It is the most horrible thing."

As dreadful as the physical consequences of rape are – the leaking urine, the constant smell, the inability to have children, the contraction of HIV – other costs are perhaps more devastating.

"The custom and the culture condemn them," explains Lulu Mitshabu, a Congolese Australian and African Project Worker for Caritas. "Women have lost their dignity. They won't get married. The husband can't stay with the women. If someone has been with his wife it's a disgrace. The best way to show his manhood is to chase the woman away. Even their families don't want them because there is such shame."

The social stigma compounds the psychological trauma. Economically, rape can crush a woman. "The threat of rape terrorises women and stops them from going to the field or the

market, thereby destroying the economy of the region and emptying it of people," says Lyn Lusi, who with Dr Lusi co-founded HEAL Africa, a charity working in the Eastern Congo. The incidence of rape is astounding; crossing boundaries of class, age, education and ethnicity. The United Nations reports that in June 2008 more than 2,000 rapes were reported in one province alone.

The ferocity of sexual violence is as shocking as its incidence. A Human Rights Watch report describes atrocities such as shooting women and girls in the vagina or cutting them with knives and razor blades. "Rape goes from six months to 80, 90 years old," Mrs Mitshabu says, shaking her head at the memories of her recent visit.

Explanation for the sexual violence is almost as varied as explanations for the war itself. Lulu Mitshabu says that women bear the family honour. That by destroying her you are destroying the whole group and gaining power for your side. Mfashingbo believes it is a deliberate genocidal strategy, designed to affect a community's ability to reproduce.

Lyn Lusi blames the twin problems of war and "underlying attitudes to women who are often treated as objects with the permission of traditions of a male-dominated society." Tshimanga Beya, who once investigated the Congolese Army for abuse of power, puts it down to disaffection, poor training, drugs and humiliating the enemy.