

## Coherent Humanitarian and Political Action in Congo

Max P. Glaser, MA Political Science\*

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Max Glaser has been working with Medecins Sans Frontieres since 1992. Currently he is a consultant in Political Context and Security Assessment and involved in research on the politicization of humanitarian aid. He is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: [m.glaser@pax-consultancy.com](mailto:m.glaser@pax-consultancy.com)

**Humanitarian assistance and international action in conflict**

The humanitarian crises of the last decade ignited vigorous debates on the dimensions of humanitarian assistance, the role of NGOs / PVOs, UN and inter-governmental organizations in the context of violent conflict. To a large degree this has been caused by the failure to prevent major calamities such as in Rwanda, Somalia and the Balkans, but also the continuation of protracted wars and conflicts in Angola, Zaire/Congo, Sierra Leone and Sudan. The inabilities of UN and inter-governmental agencies - in particular after the UN initiative "Agenda for Peace" in 1992, and realizing the limits of the capacities of humanitarian assistance to redirect cycles of violence and abuse, has produced a broad scope of analysis and studies which can be summarized in two extremes. On the one end is the view that humanitarian aid has utterly failed, at best a measure to combat symptoms and at worst fueling conflict dynamics. On the other end are approaches promoting integration of development and aid concepts into a wider framework of political, military and diplomatic means and methods.

Co-ordination, coherence and comprehensive action are key-terms recurrently featuring in the last's realm, expressing the analysis of interconnectedness and interdependence between the various domains at the heart of contemporary conflicts, often referred to as "root-causes". The debate on humanitarian crises has produced a wave of analysis identifying new concepts such as "complex emergencies", "failed states" or "predatory regimes". "Development" as a concept has also been drawn into the arguments between schools of thought, questioning how aspects of development can be sustained in areas of continuous conflict, or conversely, how emergency relief aid should or could incorporate the lessons and practices of development approaches.

The present conference mainly looks at the Democratic Republic of Congo as the suffering of Congolese population and war continues. But perhaps it also an adequate case-study on possible responses in comparable cases of perpetual conflict and crisis, such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Colombia or Sudan. The workshop on the diplomatic dimension looks at three major challenges: the coherence between donor instruments; coordination between donors and third, a (coherent) regional approach, ultimately raising the question how to create coherence between donors' political orientations.

This paper argues that the interests of international and regional-national political actors have largely determined the dynamics and structure of conflict in Central Africa. Aid and humanitarian assistance in the context of extreme violence has been confronted with ultimate challenges. While taking notice of the complicated setting of aid efforts at the various levels, I still argue for the distinction between the humanitarian, development and diplomatic domain. Some conclusive views on the possible way forward, seen both from the experience and observation of a humanitarian practitioner and from the political-historical analysis, will conclude this paper.

## **An historic perspective**

To describe the current state of Congo as an emergency or protracted emergency would be understating and denying the long history of abuse. Much has been published on this and it is not in the scope of this paper to present an overview of the exploitation of the resources and people of Congo and Central Africa. Since the initiation of colonialism, the slave trade and the declaration of Congo as the private possession of King Leopold, there has been no recognition of the people actually inhabiting the area. The sale of the Congo possession by King Leopold to the Belgian state for the symbolic amount of one Belgian Franc is the most cynical expression of the denial of rights and people in Congo, effectively ignoring their existence. Exclusion and domination was of course not an exception in the colonisation era, culminating in the formal division of Africa at the Berlin conference of 1885. Far from branding Belgian rule as the sole cause for the suffering of Congo, this would not be justified in view of the other dimensions of Congolese foreign relations, most notably the US "tolerance" Mobutu's regime in the course of cold war or French about-turns in their policy vis-a-vis Mobutu.

The above underlines that the people and population of Congo never knew self-determination, independence or freedom from oppression. In fact, the constitution of Congo as a territorial entity ignored the cultural and ethnic diversity of the population inhabiting the vast area. To a large extent this has contributed to the fertility of conflict in Congo as divisions and separations could easily be enforced in order to control the vast area and its minerals. Mobutu in fact exploited the latter mechanisms to the extent possible, contributing ultimately to his own personal downfall and the total collapse of Congo as state<sup>1</sup>.

Regionally looking, it suffices to say that with the doubtful exception of Uganda, all the regimes in the region, including Angola, Congo Brazzaville, Burundi and Rwanda have non-elected, self-declared leaders, a non functioning or non-existent political system of elections or proportional representation. The case of Uganda is a complicated one since the introduction of the concept of non-party-ism (to circumvent the stigma of one-party state). Although elections have been held since 1996, the opposition in Uganda is still a matter dissent and confrontation. In fact all mentioned countries are still marked with intense civil-strife, conflict and opposition.

## **Power and leadership in Central Africa.**

Congo is an exemplary illustration of two dimensions that are characteristic for the region, namely the concentration of abundance of mineral and natural resources and highly diverging population densities. These two dimensions have interplayed with each other, accumulating wealth in the hands of few, centred around (kleptocratic) leadership, where corruption and graft are major tools to maintain power through allegiances. Control over resources while keeping people divided and competing has been the dominant concept of control, very much emulating colonial rule.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Wiliam Reno, 1998, Warlord Politics an African States, pp. 147-181

In Rwanda and Burundi coffee industries have been the providers of wealth and power in the hands of a confined-exclusive elites, Tutsi and Hutu. Inter-group power struggle and (post-) colonial interventions eventually tilted the power balance to minority rule. The introduction of ethnicity as a mobilising concept in war found its most horrific expression in Rwanda, but has "successfully" been used elsewhere, as can be seen from the Ituri conflict, where Hema-Lendu hatred is being exploited to control the area, its people and its resources.

Not much different then in other political systems, power in Central-South Africa gravitate around the control over mineral resources. Two main differences mark the Central African case. First is the abundance of resources in a largely undeveloped local economy, i.e. one that does not possess over productive industries converting primary resources in consumer, intermediate products or capital goods, which can be exported or sold locally - it is an extractive rather than productive economy. The other sector of economic activity is agriculture, which produces cash-crops (such as palm oil and coffee) next to low-subsistence farming: the realm of the excluded population.

The second major difference is the absence of a tradition of political and social formation, development of accountable state and government bureaucracies, based on a concepts of (free) civil society, be it based on clan, tribe or western-styled representative democracy. Hence, leadership is not based on delegated power, entrusted to accountable leaders, but on obedience to the most powerful and wealthy group, or its leader.

It is not difficult to see how mineral richness and control over population has interacted in the struggle over Congo over the last years. The UN report on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources is amazingly clear and specific about the patterns, the perpetrators (as in state and in person) as the motives. The accumulation of wealth has become a necessity for regimes to maintain security forces, the same forces guarding the very resources providing the wealth, hence becoming a self-predating mechanism. Control over resources, cannot be accomplished without control over population. In the situation of constant conflict and absence of a central, civil state, control is enforced through mechanisms of fear, denial or intimidation of population <sup>2</sup>.

### **War by proxies and "enemies of my enemies"**

Alliances through proxy forces are created in order to survive or dominate. This in fact was the core of the strategy of Mobutu, sometimes referred to as the "trough-politics" allowing each potential competitor to feed from the wealth, in exchange for allegiance. Contenders for power would thus be set-up against each other, eventually making place for the next. The RPF invasion of 1993 from Uganda in Rwanda, was as much a result of internal pressures in Uganda to get rid of the so called 59-ers (named after the year they went into exile to Uganda) - where they became competitors for the military class- as much as a war by against a potentially dangerous competitor - a Hutu dominated hostile

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<sup>2</sup> See: Mary Kaldor New & Old Wars, 2001

country. The Ugandan support has also been interpreted as repaying the support of the 59-ers to Museveni's National Resistance Movement in overthrowing the Obote regime in the 80's.

There were proxies were absent they were created or "brought to maturity", as was the case of the Banyamulenge forces. Often seen as the starting point of the started the rebellion in Eastern Congo, prompted by Mobutu's denial of their citizenship, but as much as result of the active support and training by Rwanda and Ugandan military advisers as early as 1995. It may even have been the last what prompted Mobutu's decision to "expel" the Banyamulenge from Eastern Congo.

The Masisi wars between 1994 and 1996 were the result of the two circles of crisis spreading through Eastern Congo. They clashed there were populations of various ethnic orientation and natural resources coincided, in this case the Masisi plains. During those wars, as well as in the ADFL uprising, Mai-Mai played a confusing role. Even today, Mai- Mai groups can be seen shifting sides easily. The reason and motive for this is as simple; Mai Mai groups are locally oriented militias, seeking protection and defence of their own communities and lands. The enemy of the enemy is in that case always a welcome partner. The numerous faction-alliances created out of the Interahamwe, ex-Far, ex-FAC, FDD (e.g. AliR), cooperate and compete, depending on local power dynamics and the interests of their benefactor who maintains their survival.

### **Rebel and guerrilla forces and state military budgets**

As demonstrated above, control and access to (mineral) resources as well as quelling of potentially contending groups, demand the maintenance of costly armies. As argued, the extraction wars in Congo provide state income, but are expensive to maintain. The existence of guerrilla opposition groups such as mentioned above, as the ADF (Allied Democratic Front), the LRA (Lord Resistance Army) and others, are seen by some as welcome elements, in the sense that they justify interventions, offer an excuse for the 'inability' of regimes to develop regions (which are not core to economic interest or belong to political suspect groups) and above all, justify to maintain a high military spending.

In case of Uganda, this is a staggering approximate of 30% of the budget, while the same budget is actually supported to some 60 % with bilateral and multilateral assistance. In theory hence, some 50% of the defence budget is subsidised through international donor credit system. Surprisingly this is accepted each year at the Paris Donor conference, as Uganda's defence is a guarantee for national stability and integrity, and (in donors view) regional stability and security. Ironically, the capacities of the Uganda defence, compared to the tattered shape the Congolese forces anno 1998 were in, created Uganda's potential to invade Congo and consequently secure the flow of resources to maintain high budgets.

Similarly, Rwanda is being exempted of various otherwise stringent regulations, in particular when referring to the continuous reports of misbehaviour and atrocities

performed by Rwandan soldiers in Congo, the continuous flow of minerals and the systematic removal of industrial and financial capital from Congo. In view of the UN report in the Illegal extraction of resources from Congo, it is therefore surprising to see that on recent trip through the region of the development co-operation ministers of the UK, The Netherlands and Norway the UK renewed the existing bilateral MOU (1999) as reward for the commitment to "good governance". Museveni's Uganda has repetitively been hailed for his efforts for peace and stability in the region, and although sometimes slightly pressurised on the issue, managed to maintain presence in Congo through the Bemba's MLC, The RCD-K-ML group (although the latter is rather weak and scattered) and the continuous intervention in Ituri district.

### **Congo: A staggering giant**

In contrast to the above while visiting President Kabila jr. the renewal of development budgets were referred to as "old questions" to be referred to in writing, and no new commitments were made. Although Belgium and the European Union renewed development budgets to Congo recently, this has been done with much reservation and perambulatory statements, demanding commitment to the further democratisation, elections and adherence to the Lusaka Agreements.

Though noticeably soft spoken, intelligent and apparently full of good intentions, Joseph Kabila remains to be an imposed leader, perhaps warped by coincidence and fate into the leadership of a country which effectively is torn in de-facto three spheres of influence- the Ugandan, the Rwanda and the Kinshasa partition, of which the last, much has been "sold off" to Zimbabwe as result of the costly military support from that country.

It remains to be seen what the current leader of the remnants of the old Congo can deliver. Much depends on the intentions, policies and practice of the invading powers. This is the realm where international politics can play a decisive role, but it will not suffice.

The major issue left unattended in the present situation in Congo, is the same which was overlooked once it was created – the population constituting the vast country in all its diversity, cultural and tribal. There can be no real way forward less a true civil structure is created n Congo, acknowledging the will and desire of its population and create the abilities to constitute power with the people, rather then against them.

## **Humanitarian action, development and political action**

As illustrated above, the context of Congo is complicated and constructed of many multi-layered, overlapping factors. Yet to speak of a complex emergency in humanitarian terms seems inadequate and inappropriate once out in a historic perspective. The term complex emergency is defined in rather general characteristics, such as 'highly politicised', 'non-conventional war-fare', 'cross border and regional'<sup>3</sup>. There are many complex situations without war, and equally, non-conventional wars in non-complex situations.

The real question is what the word complex really adds. As Slim points out: "Today's emergencies are just as complex as they ever were before for the people who are affected by them (... ) the addition of the word complex is gratuitous and verges on tautology. It is the UN and the leaders of the its members states for whom today's emergencies are really much more complicated, largely because they can now choose to get more directly involved on the ground, militarily". He points this out not just as options of more direct involvement, but rather: "once intervened. (...) action becomes part of the problem".<sup>4</sup>

The latter is of key-importance. Intervening always means interacting and paradoxically contributing to the complexity. This is the real source of the despair of failed UN missions, aid efforts gone sour or public expectations of justice to be done –shunned. The challenge of coherence is really, how to become part of solutions while intervening in a problem. This is where the importance of distinction between humanitarian aid, development and diplomacy (or international community) action comes into view.

Humanitarian action has never been designed, intended or defined as a corrective measure to repair systems or re-address the sources of conflict. Rather, by definition, it is meant to aid victims of conflict and wars. It is obvious that the context of extreme or protracted suffering and atrocities pose a serious challenge on humanitarian action. The practice of aid needs to adapt to these, sometime very severe circumstances.

Humanitarian action should not be confused with human rights activism. Humanitarian action promotes human dignity and respect for life, including human rights, but does so by virtue of the humanitarian action, presence itself and the proximity to victims. Given the premise that humanitarian action must be impartial, independent and a-political (neutral), provides it with a larger potential to be accepted and create presence in crises zones. Humanitarian aid is the expression of applying universal principles to victims.

Development per definition is a political term and political activity, disregarding if one means economic, socio-political or community development. The term itself contains aspects of intended progress, an ascending linear line or even a hierarchical state (underdeveloped - developed). This last is not to postulate development aid as a political incorrect action nor as suggesting of disregarding it altogether. But development process must always depart from specific setting, capacities, culture and even social orientation.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Duffield, in War and Hunger, Macrea, Zwi, 1994) The Political economy of internal wars.

<sup>4</sup> UN reform in a changing world Responding to complex emergencies, Hugo Slim and Agneta Pemrose, in War and Hunger, Macrea, Zwi, 1994

The construct of a relief-development continuum in the context of protracted violent conflicts such as Congo, have time and again demonstrated the impracticality of such notions, simply because the actual situation - a recurrent relapse of hostilities - do not accommodate the assumed linear logic of relief - rehabilitation to development stages.

### **Coherence: Views in the field**

After the eruption of the Nyiragongo, an angry man was interviewed for the television: “There are two types of disasters” he exclaimed, “one natural and the other political. The one volcano is the Nyiragongo, the other is Rwanda!” Talking to the people in Kivu today I find that the majority claim themselves to be Congolese, first and foremost, next to their tribal belonging. They do not sense Kinshasa as a political vicinity, but have also not forgotten the horrors brought on them by Interahamwe and ex-Far, supported by Kinshasa. Yet they do not feel trusted nor protected by Rwanda forces, and why should they? It is well known that the soldiers recruited into the occupying forces are equally Ex-Far and even Interahamwe fighters. Looting, pillage and rape have occurred so frequently that some people have literally nothing left but the clothing on their body.

Along the ridges of Virunga park, north of Sake, one stumbles over a long settlement of Tutsi displaced - returnees. Even the Congolese staff I travel with do not know how to refer to them - returnees, refugees, or displaced. We compromise on returned- displaced refugees. Their fate is illustrative of so many others. Having fled the last eruption of violence in Masisi, end 1995, where I met them first, at the border of Uganda, on their way to Rwanda. Now, six years later, they are back, reportedly rejected from Rwanda as not adapting to the Rwanda Tutsi orientation, but unable to return to their original homes in Masisi, which undoubtedly have been taken by Hunde or Hutu. Their location along the ridge however, is suspicious. Positioned in a North-South line between Virunga and Masisi seems to indicate they block the East-West movements of Interahamwe. Whether this is the case I don't know, but if it is, it definitely was not their own choice.

These two small anecdotes from the field demonstrate the confusing state the population of Eastern Congo has landed in. They hate the occupiers but have little to expect from the centre representing their national belonging. What these people concretely do in their struggle for survival and livelihood is not based on choices or options but merely a fatalistic accommodation in their fate, as they often exclaim in Congo: “On souffre de la souffrance”. Indeed, this is perhaps the best way to summarise the situation: torn between suffering and hope, what else is there? There is no real centre to turn to for help, protection or assistance. There is no gravity in the political civil administration responding in an accountable way, let alone coherent, to the population it is responsible for. Perhaps, more than a collision between two tectonic plates, the eruption of the Nyiragongo demonstrated the rift between political plates. The eruption was foreseen, yet no warning was given- or quite: the authorities advised for people to stay indoors.

## **Regional complexity in solutions**

Parallel to the argument outlined above, complexity in the diplomatic sense, or viewed from the perspective of the international community – is primarily expressing the complexity of possible responses, given the options, interests, willingness and commitment of international actors. If the situation in Congo is complex, it is the outcome of so many converging, conflicting and competing interests of regional and international actors, which have produced the current complexity.

There are various reasons for this the most often quoted are the needs and interests of a global world economy to a flow of primary raw material, oil and minerals. The second is the Cold War and its aftermath, where conflict was combated in ideological grounds. Globalisation, has been a dominant factor in both of the mentioned trends above.

Much less referred are other possible causes for this complexity, which should actually be seen as a complex in a psychological sense- the residue of tolerating unjust systems to extract resources, the remnants of colonial slavery and domination. The politics of central powers, i.e. the former colonial powers and later the western anti-communist powers, sustained “ peripheral regimes “ which were oppressive and exploitative by nature.

Conversely this has created remorse bitterness and agitation amongst present day African regimes, once pushed to introduce democracy or slammed on human rights, In fact, international criticism on the events of 1996 in Kivu, was renounced by African leaders as “ western hypocrisy”. Similarly Rwanda has time and again respect and understanding for the Rwanda concerns on security and self-defence, including the occupation of Congo, in view of the failure of the West to prevent the genocide of 1994.

There is another obstacle in the political realm, which complicates regional solutions. The problem lays in the heart of the concept of Status Quo of borders as accepted by the OAU, based on the demarcation of the African borders as agreed n the Berlin conference between colonial powers. This concept has always been painstakingly protected, in particular during the Cold War period, but also by African regimes themselves. There is a huge problem however when the accepted principles of national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states collides with the other concept of international law, which is the right of “self determination” of people. In many other international negotiations this has been a source of quarrel and tension, where the question goes deeper then “ what comes first”.

Although some adaptations took place, such as the secession of Eritrea form Ethiopia (although mutually agreed after referendum) other border issues remain cumbersome (e.g Spanish Sahara – Mauritania). In the Congo case, Rwanda has made its territorial claims on parts of Kivu very clear, immediately after the invasion of 1996, supported by old (Belgian) maps.

## **Realism or functionalism: A diplomatic approach?**

Given the tremendous pressures and competing interests, the question is if the integrity of Congo as we knew it, can be restored. Rather than talking of partition, it would be a good start to accept the de-facto prevailing spheres of influence as a political reality- to be taken into account once negotiating how to redress the pre-conflict situation. If this can be (temporarily) accepted, the challenge and first priority for the diplomatic is to provide security to the population of Congo. The acceptance of border restoration as pre-condition should not be put as a precondition on the last, which can be settled later.

The above can clearly not be provided by humanitarian action, nor will development aid be able to deliver this required security. The parameters in which venue should be sought after are to be based on some fundamental principles:

- full accountability to be demanded from all involved governments
- no impunity to be tolerated as for human rights or international crimes
- the inclusion of all civil groups in the process of political restoration
- full recognition and acceptance of ethnic diversity

Practically, disarmament of the variety of forces is a priority and must be completed as soon as possible. Disarmament of so-called “negative forces” alone is insufficient if the presence of occupying armies (i.e. Rwanda and (Uganda) remain un-debated, and the military expenditures of these net- foreign aid recipients, remain un-criticised. As an additional measure, an active, internationally enforced disengagement of troops n the front line should establish the status quo necessary for stabilisation. Clearly, MONUC’s capacities and mandate are insufficient to do this.

International foreign bilateral and multilateral aid should be brought in line, reflecting proportionality in needs addressed in non-political terms (i.e. non political bias). The problems are immense, but the real issue at stake is whether the international community is committed and willing to put in the resources commensurate to those put in supplying former regimes, or matching the vast amounts of capital extracted from the region. These resources should be directed at restoring the capacities of the population in Congo, to form the essential social, economic and political processes through which they can elect their own future and leadership.

The above is formulated with a Realist view utilising the ‘Balance of Power’ concepts. Much can be derived from ‘Neo-functionalists’ approaches in international relations, in particular the “Logic of Ramification” laying at the basis of the formation of the ECSC (European Coal & Steel Community), the EEC predecessor. In particular since mineral extraction and resources are so much at the heart of the conflict, but also the concepts of control and power in Central Africa. The formation of an international regional board to supervise the administration of mineral extraction and the distribution of revenues, could provide a beginning to defuse the scramble over resources, demobilise mutual suspicion and promote mutual co-operation and trust, in the hope of “spill-over” to other sectors.