

Africa's Longest War: A Call for Immediate International Action

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Once more Congo is burning and the world is watching. After five years of civil war (1998-2003) in which over 5 million people were killed and over a million dislocated, the war-weary people of Congo are facing the prospect of another preventable war. The Congo conflict is the longest and most devastating conflict in Africa. It is also central to resolving the horrors going on in Darfur because these conflicts have led to the weaponization of this African sub-region and the surrounding countries extending to Sudan and Chad. The vast and ungoverned territories of Congo, Angola, Sudan, and Uganda provide the route for the transportation of all kinds of weapons to the African hot spots in Uganda, Somalia, Congo, and Sudan. They are also providing fertile grounds for very angry and disinherited Africans who are veritable tools for burgeoning terrorist cells and rogue groups and militias.

General Nkunda's rise as a main player in the conflict is not without reason. He is only a front for a constellation of ethnic, national and economic interests within and outside Africa, which is playing out in the murky waters of the bloody politics of this troubled African region. This self-proclaimed general of the Tutsi ethnic nationality claims to have a Messianic mission to purge Congo of the remnants of the Hutu ethnic group that perpetrated the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. He is also claiming that he is a freedom fighter who will rid the region of dictatorial regimes who have mortgaged the future of the people of the Greater Congo basin to Western and Chinese economic interest. Since January 2008, Nkunda has made it clear that the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was wrong to have negotiated away a third of Congo's resources to China. In that deal worth over 5 billion dollars, China will control and exploit Congo's resources over a given period, while in return China will build 2,050 kilometres of road in Congo as well as provide other infrastructures like schools and hospitals.

Analysts argue that the outbreak of violence in the Eastern province of Congo was Nkunda's way of pressing home his point that he should be part of any political and economic negotiation about the future of the DRC. Nkunda's rebel group is only one of the many military groups that are roaming freely in Congo. There are four different military groups with different loyalties in the Congo: the remnants of the Hutu army who perpetrated the genocide in 1994 (FDLR), the DRC army (FARDC) who are mainly soldiers

from the ethnic group of the Congolese President, and the *Mai Mai* military, who are a para-military force loyal to the president, and a few other remnants of the forces (MLC) loyal to the exiled leader of the opposition in Congo, Jean-Pierre Bemba.

DRC is the largest African country. It is a country more than the size of California and larger than Western Europe. It is potentially the richest country in Africa with rich deposits of gold, coltan and niobium – important minerals for making mobile phones and satellite. It also has unexplored deposit of diamond and oil and one of the richest arable lands in sub Saharan Africa. The fight for the control of these resources is one of the main reasons for the endless wars in this beautiful land. Congo is the clearest evidence of state collapse and the apparent failure of Africans to build regional integration and peace. At a time when the rest of the world is building regional co-operation and stronger economic and political ties, African countries and regions are growing far apart from each other, propping up insurgencies in each other's backyard.

The fault lines in this African region continue to widen and the cracks are only beginning to show with ferocious consequences for the ordinary people in the region. The fault lines are along four major arcs: The first is that the whole area today that make up a greater part of the Great Lake region was once governed as one Kongo Kingdom before the advent of colonialism. The people of this region have had political and economic ties and stability for more than five hundred years before they were over run by Belgian, French, English, and Portuguese colonial lords who broke them down into small countries, the largest of which is the DRC. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was not the cause of this present conflict but rather was a consequence of the fault line in the region whose epicentre then was in Rwanda. Now the epicentre has shifted to Congo with dire consequences for the war weary people of Congo and the surrounding countries of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Angola.

In addition, there are unresolved questions arising from the Rwandan genocide which relate to the involvement of the Congolese government and other countries in the region who all took side among the two ethnic groups who were fighting in Rwanda. There is mutual suspicion between Rwanda and Congo, and many people fear that Nkunda is being sponsored by Rwanda. In addition, the long wars in Uganda, Angola, and Congo, and the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, as well as the liberation wars in Zimbabwe and

Namibia had created the greatest dislocation and migration in modern African history. We find in the DRC people of different ethnic groups who fled their respective countries and settled in the uncharted territories of Congo but with strong attachment to their ethnic groups in their respective countries. There is also the question of failed governments in all these countries. Apart from Namibia, most of the countries in this region are facing serious political crisis because the people in power came to office through violent or foul means and have remained in power through strong arm tactics. This is particularly evident in Uganda, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe. There is also the sad involvement of external influences mainly Western and now Chinese business interests who all are exploiting the crisis in the Congo for economic interest and have funded the importation and smuggling of arms in the region for over three decades.

The conflict in the Congo is, therefore, convoluted. It goes beyond the rebel leader General Nkunda or the much weakened President Kabila of DRC. It is a conflict which the African countries in this region cannot resolve themselves because there is a long-standing mutual suspicion and hostility among them. It is also a conflict that goes beyond Western interference and exploitation which will still be decisive in resolving the conflicts. This is a conflict that requires a multi-pronged approach. There is the need to immediately address the refugee problem in Kivu region, the epicentre of this conflict. This region is still recovering from the 2002 volcanic eruption that destroyed the provincial capital of Goma and the Ebola disease that wiped away a significant portion of the population. It is also a region that is susceptible to the outbreak of cholera and yellow fever. Thus, humanitarian assistance is urgently needed. There is the need to convene an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council which should institute a high level UN commission to address the unresolved fault lines in the region which we have identified as relating to ethnicity, nationality, control of the rich resources of the DRC, and the trans-national enterprises and African businesses and governments who unfortunately are feeding fat from this regrettable conflict.

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