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**DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO:
THE WAR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF THE CONGOLESE PEOPLE...**

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Table of Contents

<u>1.</u>	<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>2.</u>	<u>African Solidarity: An Unfortunate Precedent!</u>	2
<u>3.</u>	<u>The International Community: Guilty and Complicit?</u>	3
<u>4.</u>	<u>The Congolese and the War</u>	5
<u>4.1</u>	<u>General Issues</u>	5
<u>4.2</u>	<u>Those Living in Areas under Rebel Control</u>	6
<u>4.3</u>	<u>Those Living in Areas under Government Control</u>	7
<u>5.</u>	<u>The Government’s Handling of the War</u>	8
<u>6.</u>	<u>Embargo on Politics!</u>	9
<u>7.</u>	<u>A Manipulated Rebellion?</u>	9
<u>8.</u>	<u>The Need for Congolese Self-criticism</u>	10
<u>9.</u>	<u>Conclusion</u>	12
<u>10.</u>	<u>Bibliography</u>	14

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The reputation that the Congolese have acquired as dancers and singers and creators of atmosphere must be put aside because it serves to weaken the population. A good Congolese citizen must assess the depth of our degradation and resolutely set to work. We cannot party every day. There is a time for everything, as the Bible says. An eagerness to fight demands an eagerness to work. Those who do not have the courage to fight (either literally or figuratively) are daunted by work. (Henri Mova S)¹

1. Introduction

In an interview published by Agence France Presse on 18 February 2002 President Paul Kagame of Rwanda stated that: “There is an intellectual laziness among the international community and the Congolese. Before demanding we withdraw our troops from Congo, they should take a step back and look at what led us there.” Leaving aside the provocative and dismissive aspects of this statement, it does show that of all the protagonists in the current DRC conflict² Rwanda may be the only one whose military involvement could be said to have a logic defined by necessity and results. A review of the various statements made by the strong man of Kigali on this topic shows the consistency with which he has defended this logic.³ It focuses on two main concerns: guaranteeing Rwanda’s national security (and not only border security!), and pursuing those who threaten that security, wherever they may be.⁴

Paul Kagame is not alone in holding this position. According to Gérard Prunier reportedly all Rwandans have whole-heartedly absorbed this attitude:

I [...] have heard Rwandans, including Hutu, saying: ‘It is good to have conquered Congo. The problem is that Kagame is killing us. But if he were not killing us, it would still be no bad thing to retain Congo. We have no land, we have nothing. It is good to get that from Congo. But Kagame must treat us better.’⁵

The Congolese see the war that has been devastating their country for the past six years quite differently. Not only do they have another perspective on the causes but they also have divergent views about possible remedies designed to bring the war to an end. Is it “intellectual laziness” or a lack of any long-term political vision? Whatever it may be, many people profit from this war and it provides employment for many Congolese (in the industry of warfare?) to such an extent that some observers have come to doubt whether there is any real will or capacity among the Congolese to move beyond the current chaotic situation. Some are also tempted to sketch out catastrophic and pessimistic scenarios as a solution to the Congo crisis, rather than looking to the Congolese themselves.

¹ Mova, H. S., *Congo: Survie et Grandeur. Pari d’une géopolitique nouvelle dans la mondialisation*, Kinshasa : Éditions Safari, 2001.

² By the phrase “current DRC conflict” we are referring not only to the war which broke out in early August 1998, but also that which started in 1996 bringing Laurent-Désiré Kabila to power. We believe that from a Congolese perspective, these two wars are two events or phases in the one crisis around the legitimacy of power in DRC post-Mobutu.

³ Although it did take some time and even required external pressure, Kagame did eventually officially recognize that his troops were operating on Congolese soil.

⁴ Cf. Kin-Kiey, M., Major Kagame speaks to the Congolese (Le Major Kagame s’adresse aux Congolais), *Le Soft*, <http://www.lesoftonline.net> [accessed April 2001]: “In Congo, we are not fighting to secure our frontiers. [...] Our problems concern national security. [...] It is linked to the government in power in Congo which wants to destroy Rwanda by arming former Rwandan soldiers and *Interahamwe* militia who have killed and massacred. We will pursue and fight the *genocidaires* (genocide suspects) wherever they are, wherever they hide and wherever they can cause us problems.”

⁵ Prunier, G., Les Pays ‘agresseurs’ et le départ des troupes ‘non invitées’, (Intervention at the Seminar for reflection and analysis (Séminaire d’analyse et de réflexion) organised by the Congo European Network (Réseau Européen Congo), 14 September 2000), Brussels: REC, September 2000.

One practical way to discover what the Congolese think about the war would be to undertake an opinion poll. We have not done this. To avoid the danger of platitudes – no one can be expected to like war – we thought it more interesting to take the most representative Congolese opinions and compare them.⁶ Before embarking on that, we will look first at how the war is seen beyond the national frontiers and at the general reaction of the Congolese to the stances taken by the foreign nations.

2. African Solidarity: An Unfortunate Precedent!

Some analysts have called the current DRC conflict “the first inter-African war” because there are so many regular armies from Central and Southern African countries on Congolese soil, not to mention a wide range of rebel movements. Other analysts looking beyond the belligerents themselves have wanted to see the conflict as the end of an era and a strategic policy. For these analysts, “direct interventionism by the West is now finished because they have no further geopolitical interest in Africa, and because Africans now intend to sort out their own problems”.⁷ That is doubtful! It is true that the news spotlight is no longer on the African continent unless there is a natural disaster or one caused by man’s barbarism, but even if Africans are not heavyweight actors or partners in the context of globalisation it is false to claim that Western trading nations have turned their back on Africa. Moreover, it is absurd to believe that the destruction of Africa would be done by African actions alone. What is true and new about the war in DRC, as shown by the troubled reaction of the Organization of African Unity (OAU),⁸ is that its expansion is so unprecedented that it has challenged the normal reactions of those who favour the status quo in Africa. In all conflicts between member states which include territorial disputes, the OAU, which was created in 1963, has always championed the principle that the borders inherited after colonisation are inviolable. It was in the name of this sacrosanct principle that in 1984 the OAU officially condemned the Libyan occupation of the Aouzou Strip in Chad, and that same year rejected Moroccan demands in Western Sahara. With regard to DRC, the OAU has so far not condemned the invasion and occupation of a large part of a member country’s territory by other member countries.

Why are Africans silent? Undoubtedly for the same reasons as the rest of the international community. They have been won over by the internal security arguments advanced by the countries whose armies have intervened on Congolese soil. The fact that these countries are divided into “aggressors” and “invitees” can hardly have encouraged the OAU to abandon its cautious approach, a caution that is understandable, given that Luanda’s national security interests in DRC (to isolate the rear bases of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola - UNITA) and those of the the separatists of the Front for the Liberation of the Cabinda Enclave (Frente para a Libertação de Cabinda - FLEC) appear just as valid as those made by Kigali, Kampala or Bujumbura (to destroy the safe havens of the “negative forces” which seek to destabilise their respective governments). On the other hand the official line advanced by Namibia and Zimbabwe

⁶ Even if it does increasingly tend to serve as a vehicle for passionate venting of feelings, the Congolese web still seems to be a good place to look for a study such as ours. For example, it is necessary to look no further than the excellent analysis by Nyunda Ya Rubango who points out the “flagrant contradictions” in the discourse of the Congolese diaspora on the Internet: “which alternates between vulgar, obscene and polemical discourse and deep, judicious analysis”. Nyunda Y.R., *Les pratiques discursives du Congo-Belge au Congo-Kinshasa. Une interprétation socio-linguistique*, Paris : L’Harmattan, 2001, p. 317.

⁷ Havenne, E., “La deuxième guerre d’Afrique centrale” in Marysse, S. et Reyntjens, F. (dir.), *L’Afrique des Grands Lacs. Annuaire 2000-2001*, Paris : L’Harmattan, 2001, pp. 143-74.

⁸ It was renamed the “African Union” at the Organization’s last summit meeting in Lusaka in July 2001 where new *ad hoc* statutes were adopted.

to justify their presence in DRC (the joint security agreement between members of the Southern Africa Development Community - SADC) might indeed appear specious.⁹ This is partly because of the trading activities which take place under cover of the deployment of their troops (as with the other belligerent nations) and which have been clearly exposed in two UN reports on the pillaging of DRC's resources.¹⁰ It is also because, in contrast to the decision taken by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to send a Nigerian expeditionary force (known as ECOMOG) into Sierra Leone, SADC has never given its approval to the sending of Zimbabwean or Namibian troops. The real reason these two countries intervened in DRC becomes clearer on examination of the relationships and interests linking the Congolese leaders and their Zimbabwean and Namibian counterparts.¹¹ For example, there seems to be no reason why Zimbabwean soldiers should remain in Congo while Zimbabwe is experiencing such great political instability itself. The on-going war in Congo seems to indicate that, for the moment, the frequently nurtured dream of the African continent one day being unified around regional and sub-regional groupings must be forgotten. This is particularly regrettable because, according to the Congolese historian, Isidore Ndaywel, Congo has always been seen by Panafricanists as one of the strongest candidates to be able to realise this dream:

Over a long period Congo seems to have had a vocation to unify Central Africa, or even the whole of Black Africa: curiously, it was not possible to colonise Congo without the support of disparate people from: Zanzibar, West Africa, Angola and Congo-Brazzaville, for example. Even today it is still clearly the favourite country for refugees from the region, and its various post-independence constitutions have allowed for some degree of lost sovereignty provided it benefits the cause of African unity.¹²

Even when the Congolese surface from this current ordeal, it is difficult to imagine them again being attracted by these calls for Panafricanism....

3. The International Community: Guilty and Complicit?

The international community is seen as totally incoherent. It wants to hear credible lies and, after that, you have freedom to do whatever you want. (Gérard Prunier¹³)

If you accept for the moment that there is a will within the international community to help Congo escape from war, you will nevertheless be disappointed at the inadequate ways and means employed to achieve that aim. It is high time to take account of issues concerning the interests of the Congolese people and those of the five countries involved in the

⁹ Windhoek has since announced the repatriation of its troops and Harare has just decided to withdraw three of its battalions which were deployed in DRC.

¹⁰ United Nations, Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2002/357), April 2001; and the addendum to that report (S/2001/1072), November 2001.

¹¹ Just as some have tried to explain the recent sending of Chadian troops to DRC as resulting from a generous gift made to Idriss Déby by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, some people now claim that the real motivation for Zimbabwe's intervention is to recuperate the financial and military assistance Mugabe gave Kabila before Mobutu was removed from power. Cf. Zimbabwe's Military Connections in the DRC, *Zim Today*, 2000, <http://www.zimtoday.com/issues/corruption22.html> [accessed April 2002].

¹² Ndaywel, I., *Histoire générale du Congo. De l'héritage ancien à la République Démocratique*, Paris ; Brussels : Duculot, 1997.

¹³ Prunier.

conflict. Otherwise the international community's involvement will cease to have any credibility with the Congolese people. (Pierre Bigras¹⁴)

The international community is hardly consistent. People speak on its behalf or in the name of its leading members. Its discourse is contradictory and it is part of the general confusion in the region. In good faith too many mediators contribute towards this confusion. Moreover, the political changes in Zaïre give rise to shameful contraventions of many of the norms usually upheld by OAU and UN bodies. (Marysse, S. and Reyntjens, F.¹⁵)

Editorials and other articles in the Congolese newspapers published in Kinshasa (including *L'Avenir*, *Le Palmarès*, *Le Potentiel* and *La Référence Plus*) regularly reflect the views of most Congolese who are convinced that their country has fallen prey to a double injustice from the "international community". On one hand they accuse the Western countries, first and foremost the US, of arming "small poor countries" like Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, enabling them to attack, occupy and plunder Congo. On the other, the Congolese do not understand why the sanctions against, and the conditions imposed on, the government in Kinshasa in order to solve this crisis are not similarly made and applied to the other countries involved in the war. Catherine André and Laurent Luzolele criticise these double standards in their observation that "foreign armies are said to be in Congo because they assist the rebel movements to achieve an inter-Congolese dialogue and a share of power. [Yet] the war which is waged has caused insecurity, population movements and two and a half million deaths since 1996".¹⁶

The Congolese see the international community as consisting primarily of the member states of the European Union (EU). The problem is that the EU has never officially condemned the Rwandan and Ugandan armies' attack on and occupation of Congolese territory. Indeed, since the beginning of the second war (2 August 1998), the Europeans have supported the thesis that security is the motivation for the attacking countries. It was not until UN Security Council Resolution 1304 was adopted on 16 June 2000 after murderous encounters between Rwandan and Ugandan troops in Kisangani, that the Europeans raised the stakes and demanded the withdrawal of these troops. But nothing more! Given its development assistance policy, the European Union could have forced the aggressors to actually leave Congolese soil. This leads on to the famous "selective conditionality" of the EU's development assistance policy, which is the second facet of the Congolese complaints. The conditionality functions positively for countries such as Rwanda, Uganda and Angola, which benefit from programmes for structural assistance even though, like DRC, these countries are at war and democratic systems are blocked.

The other controversial issue is the position taken by Congolese of whatever side concerning the provisions of the Lusaka Agreement, which was imposed by the UN and endorsed by the OAU and SADC. The agreement sets disarmament of so-called negative forces and the holding of inter-Congolese talks as preconditions for the return to peace in DRC. The various analyses in the press and on Congolese websites¹⁷ focus on the link between the end of the war (where the stakes for each warring faction are many and varied) and the real challenge of managing to ensure the preconditions

¹⁴ Bigras, P., *Le Désengagement militaire: un marché de dupes*, *L'Observatoire de l'Afrique centrale*, vol. 4, n° 12, 29 March 2001.

¹⁵ Marysse and Reyntjens, p.128.

¹⁶ André, C. and Luzolele, L., "Politique d l'Union européenne et effets pervers pour le conflit dans les Grands Lacs", in Marysse and Reyntjens, pp. 365-96.

¹⁷ The list is ever-increasing. See for example: <http://www.congopresse.com>; <http://www.groupelavenir.com>; <http://www.congonline.com>; <http://www.mediascongolais.com>; <http://www.congo2000.com>; <http://www.congodaily.com>; and <http://www.congovision.com> .

for it are met. The most interesting contribution which is also the most positive on this contentious subject seems to us to be the proposals made quite recently by the political platform, Forces of Renewal for the Republic (Forces du Renouveau pour la République - FRR).¹⁸ The main points of their proposal for an updated Lusaka Agreement are as follows:

- an end to the war followed by a ceasefire;
- the withdrawal of all foreign troops and securing of frontiers with neighbouring countries;
- a real dialogue between the Congolese: such a forum would seem to be necessary in order to air residual issues which block national reconciliation, to settle vital questions such as nationality, and thus to prepare for the institutional reforms for the Third Republic and general elections;
- making good use of the UN which is already represented in DRC by the UN Observer Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mission d'observation des Nations unies en République Démocratique du Congo - MONUC) by giving it a more consistent mission, especially in the field of conflict prevention and peace-keeping, and by giving it a more effective role with regard to Congolese concerns for political, economic and social stabilisation during the transition period.

4. The Congolese and the War

4.1 General Issues

What has happened in DRC is the culmination of a long process of “nation un-building” or the destruction of state structures by those who were supposed to be ensuring their smooth running. In short, an endemic war without name has been waged in this country over a long period; it has caused a gaping dislocation between an oligarchy of completely opportunist and predatory governors on one hand and the governed, who have been impoverished and rejected, on the other. The bodies which claim to govern the country today, whether they depend on power from Kinshasa or from one of the rebel groups, have perpetuated this state of non-nation. For example, the pillaging of national resources which has been much talked about in recent times, is a traditional practice. All those who have held power since colonial times until the present have done no more than exploit and embezzle Congo's vast riches for their own purposes.¹⁹ Not only is pillaging illegal,

it is a means of continuing, even accelerating, the consolidation of some elite groups within a particular kind of embryonic African bourgeoisie. This is not the *comprador* bourgeoisie, nor the classic industrial or financial capitalist bourgeoisie [...] rather a predatory military and political bourgeoisie which conforms to and goes beyond the example set by grasping presidents, starting with Mobutu Sese Seko.²⁰

As well as allowing new predators to arrive with their new outlets and networks to dispose of their stolen goods (including the famous Coltan), the war can only have worsened the country's social and cultural decay and hastened its descent towards hell. This explains why many people, including some Congolese, believe that if the talks which opened on 25 February 2002 in Sun City, South Africa, end

¹⁸ See : Forces du Renouveau pour la République, Vers une coadministration internationale et locale (C.A.I.L.) Pour la période de transition? Sauver l'essentiel de « Lusaka » dans un schéma congolais, *Arguments*, n° 11, http://www.freres.org/dernier_numero.htm [accessed April 2002].

¹⁹ This argument has been developed by Colette Braeckman in her book, *L'Enjeu congolais, l'Afrique Centrale après Mobutu*, Paris: Fayard, 1999.

²⁰ Bigras, P., Pillage des ressources minières en RDC, *L'Observatoire de l'Afrique centrale*, Vol. 4, n° 8, 24 February 2001.

in failure, there is no alternative solution to the Congolese crisis other than to put the country under UN trusteeship once again.²¹ The return of the same causes which justified the establishment of an international administration in 1960 - the failure of the state and the collapse of administrative, political and military structures - support a re-run of the scenario. For those who advocate this solution,

the current crisis is an evil that can no longer be cured with ointment or disguised by make-up. It is more than ever important to eradicate it with major surgery regardless of the pride of one or another group, prevailing selfish wishes, the unfettered race for individual aims and the underhand calculations of many particularist and hidden agendas.²²

If this scenario were to recur, it would above all prove beyond doubt that the Congolese are politically immature and would support the thesis of those who advocate the breaking-up of Congo. And even if the UN were to be called upon to administer the country, on the day scheduled for their withdrawal, “the same questions would arise if there is still no political order which guarantees that Congolese people will periodically be free to choose who will govern them”.²³ That was what happened in June 1964. Following the UN administration, the country experienced widespread upheaval and fell prey to a whole range of uprisings. But, for a country which has already been the scene of several armed conflicts and which is emerging from it more or less unscathed,²⁴ what is it about this current conflict that suggests that it might irrevocably compromise the country’s future?

Before the current DRC conflict was understood and experienced as a “Congolese war”, it was first seen, at least in the early days, as a “war concerning the people in the east”.²⁵ For a long time the Kinshasa population rejected Laurent-Désiré Kabila because he came to power with the support of Rwanda and imposed Swahili, a language spoken in the east of the country, as the language of power in a capital where more people speak Lingala. It was only when Kabila decided to send his former allies back home that he really became popular. A song written by a group of Congolese musicians in September 1998, one month after the beginning of the second war, went so far as to state: “the war has distracted us from reconstruction, we must support Kabila the liberator!”²⁶ Unfortunately this rise in popularity for Kabila coincided with the most critical phase in the country’s political disintegration which had been provoked by Mobutu’s removal from power. This phase was marked by the effective division of the country between rebel groups supported by Uganda and Rwanda on one side, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo – MLC), Congolese Rally for Democracy (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie – RCD), RCD Movement for Liberation (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie - Mouvement de Libération - RCD-ML), and on the other side, the government of Kinshasa supported by Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe (if we keep to the current shape of the alliances).

4.2 Those Living in Areas under Rebel Control

Those Congolese who live in the areas administered by the rebels reject their authority and consider themselves victims of occupation, either Rwandan or Ugandan depending on the context. Drawing on lessons of martyrdom to suggest that the Congolese population is indeed victim of an occupation, the

²¹ The first UN operation in Congo lasted from September 1960 until June 1964, a period of four years.

²² FPP.

²³ Nguya-Ndila, C., *Nécessité de solutions négociées à la crise congolaise*, *Forum des Congolais*, 2002, <http://www.congovision.com/forum2/ngud.html> [accessed February 2002].

²⁴ This is meant from the perspective of territorial integrity.

²⁵ See Djungu-Simba, C., *En attendant Kabila. Kinshasa: fin de règne*, Brussels: EPO, 1997.

²⁶ It is important to note that the production of this song, called *Tokufa po na ekolo* (Let’s die for our country), was financed by the Congolese government.

president of a non-governmental human rights organization based in Kisangani, the Justice and Liberation Group (Groupe Justice et Libération), states the following:

There has never been such an unpopular rebellion as the one currently experienced in Congo, and in particular in Kisangani. While the arrival of the AFDL met with popular acclaim, especially in some ideological fora, the RCD has never had people clamouring at its doors, though a few opportunists have been quite happy to swell the ranks of its supporters. The rebels are aware of their unpopularity and, to fool people, have no choice other than to organise political meetings in busy public places such as at the market or stadium or to force traders and other local chiefs to attend such meetings.²⁷

The counter-resistance that the people are developing to this war of occupation, characterised by expansionist tendencies, systematic repression and the reckless exploitation of the country's resources, could, according to Lubala Mugisho, have strongly divisive effects: "Faced with the necessity of survival, the population is currently split between those who are involved in seeking immediate and material benefits (and so easily yield to economic gain) and those who are still fighting for values with no immediate or material results."²⁸ The continuing Congolese rejection of the rebel authorities in the occupied territories is matched by their allegiance to the legal authority in Kinshasa. This was the conclusion reached by Colette Braeckman, a Belgian journalist who is very well informed on Congolese affairs, when she returned from covering the recent volcanic eruption which sent Goma, the capital of the RCD rebels, into mourning in January 2002:

Even though the (rebel) Movement tried to deal with the catastrophe, the people gave them no credit for their efforts, but simply intensified their criticism and even went so far as to imply they were responsible for the eruption itself. In such a situation, the authorities in Kinshasa are idealised, and without any acknowledgement of the reality of life in the area under government control, the inhabitants of Goma stated that "if the ministers (from Kinshasa) came here, our women would throw their *pagnes* before them as a greeting..."²⁹

4.3 Those Living in Areas under Government Control

In the areas held by the Congolese government, popular enthusiasm, which the authorities in Kinshasa could have exploited in their favour, has quickly faded in the face of the tough realities of a continuing war with no end in sight. There is clear concern over the endless military reversals resulting in the loss of several government-held positions:

Some people ask why there is still a Congolese embassy in Kigali [...] when the two countries are at war. Would one not normally expect diplomatic relations to be broken off? Others ask why Congolese troops rarely attack Rwandan troops to try and re-take the towns of Bukavu or Goma, for example?³⁰

However, as time goes on and the war appears endless, people are no longer content to ask questions, they respond by criticising those in power for their weakness, their incoherent policies and the

²⁷ Zoka, F., Kisangani : Les leçons d'un martyr, in Djungu-Simba, C. and Kalimbiriro, L (eds.), *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs et des Guerres Gigognes. Vers de nouvelles perspectives de paix ?* Kinshasa: Editions du Trottoir, 2002 (at press).

²⁸ Lubala, M., *La Contre-Résistance dans la Zone d'occupation rwandaise au Kivu (1996-2001)*, in Marysse and Reyntjens, pp. 251-72 .

²⁹ Braeckman, C., Congo : le Kivu regarde à nouveau vers Kinshasa, *Le Soir* [Brussels], 25 January 2002.

³⁰ Bonte, L. *et al*, Les dessous de table de guerre, *Karibu* [Brussels], n° 99, September 2000, pp. 4 – 8.

contradictions of their supporters' actions. Many of the reproaches made not so long ago against the dictatorial regime of Mobutu are being reformulated against Kabila's regime, even if everyone currently agrees that the war against the aggressors must take priority. On the streets of Kinshasa, you hear mutterings: "We'll deal with the Katangans after the Rwandans and Ugandans." It is a way of criticising the tribalist origins of the government's power. The only advantage the government still has is its political supremacy because, since Mobutu disappeared, the so-called unarmed political opposition has not presented a credible alternative.

5. The Government's Handling of the War

In Kinshasa the political space is filled by an authority which has shown itself incapable of mobilising the considerable human and material resources available in the vast country of Congo in order to wage and win a war which has already lasted three years. Paradoxically rather than launching a campaign for new recruits as other countries in time of war, the CPP government is demobilising experienced soldiers from the army, while our attackers are still in the country mobilising troops, reinforcing their positions and gaining victories. Why should the Congolese not wonder about complicity between the leaderships in Kinshasa, Kigali and Kampala? Why should they not wonder about the intriguing silences that surround the secret exchanges at summit meetings which are little more than a friendly reunion for presidents? Where else have we seen presidents of countries at war happily meet on several occasions without a press conference or a joint press statement to legitimise a summit meeting? Are they not accountable to the population?³¹

This very severe indictment made by Kadari Mwene-Kabyana, a Congolese political commentator based in Canada, against what he calls the CPP government,³² accurately reflects the general criticisms one hears about how Laurent-Désiré Kabila and his son, Joseph Kabila, have handled the war, which in fact can be seen as a mixed blessing for the government in Kinshasa. Firstly, for Laurent-Désiré Kabila, at the same time as this war brought him closer to the Congolese population, even though it eventually proved fatal, it also allowed them to see his limits. The Congolese academic, Jean Omasombo, has clearly analysed the de-mystification of "king" Kabila:

This event has had the advantage of externalising a crisis which had been smouldering since the new authorities took power in May 1997 and which has influenced the political evolution of Congo. The new rebellion sought to share or seize political power from Kabila, just as the AFDL had done with regard to Mobutu. The main impact of the war has been on the key protagonist, Laurent-Désiré Kabila. Although he has certainly lost overall control of Congo's provinces, he should perhaps not totally regret a war which was not exclusively damaging to him. For example, he saw his popularity grow and that was not due to his masterful running of daily affairs nor to his coherent and committed political action.³³

³¹ Mwene-Kabyana, K., Open letter to the Honorable Étienne Tshisekedi, national President of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social – UDPS) (Lettre ouverte à l'honorable Étienne Tshisekedi, président national de l'UDPS), Montreal, 14 January 2002 (unpublished document).

³² This is a reference to the *Comités des Pouvoirs Populaires*, a structure linking the government with the heart of the population dreamt up by Laurent-Désiré Kabila and which acts as the party-state.

³³ Omasombo, J. L'Évolution politique récente dans les Provinces contrôlées par le Gouvernement central., (Presentation at a seminar for analysis and reflection organised by the European Congo Network (Réseau Européen Congo), 14 September 2000), Brussels: REC, September 2000.

As for Joseph Kabila, his decision to break with his father's policy by accepting an active role in the peace process, in accordance with the framework of the Lusaka Agreement, led many Congolese as well as the international community to have more confidence in him and to show him more sympathy.³⁴ He also gave more indications that he was open to allowing political activity and made some courageous decisions with regard to running the country. The millstone of the war, however, rendered this to no avail. He does not have the means to stop or win it, any more than his father did before him. This is why some analysts do not distinguish between the policies of the son and those of his late father.³⁵

6. Embargo on Politics!

The political parties have seen their role substantially diminish following the successive outbreaks of war, in 1996 under Mobutu and in 1998 under Laurent-Désiré Kabila and his son Joseph. These parties emerged from the new political openness which was reluctantly agreed in the 1990s during the dictatorship and rapidly proliferated. Some (the so-called *partis alimentaires* or “feeding” parties) were wholly created by Mobutu so they could parasitically feed off the democratic process. As dealing with the war became the sole political issue for all Congolese, all other issues, including the question of the national political debate, were put off indefinitely. To make themselves heard, the political leaders had no choice but to take a stand alongside the belligerents at the risk of alienating a good proportion of their traditional support. This is what happened to the main opposition party, Étienne Tshisekedi's Union for Democracy and Social Progress (Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social – UDPS). At the beginning, it attempted to retain its neutrality over what it saw as a power struggle between two factions of the AFDL, the political coalition which brought Laurent-Désiré Kabila to power in May 1997. Later, the party leadership stated that it shared the aim of the rebel movements, namely the installation of democracy in Congo. That is the reason the UDPS were in favour of the invading troops remaining on Congolese territory as this seemed the only means of keeping pressure on the government in Kinshasa. It also explains why the party leadership has said nothing about the abuses and massacres perpetrated by the rebels and occupation troops on the civilian population. This has created a split between UDPS members living in occupied territories and the party hierarchy in Kinshasa. As a result, many UDPS members, including some senior cadres, who either originate in the occupied provinces or simply live there, have resigned.

7. A Manipulated Rebellion?

One could say it is Kabila's fault! Firstly, he opened Pandora's box and confronted the cynicism of all those who seek power through force of arms. Even Jean-Pierre Bemba, the MLC leader who was born and grew up within Mobutu's corrupt entourage, had to wait for him to go before discovering, as if by magic, that the misdeeds of dictatorship (Kabila's!) must be stopped. In fact those responsible for the uprising, which started on 2 August 1998 in Goma, achieved a rapid success in the form of the lightning fall of Kinshasa rather like that achieved by the Kabila expedition of 1996. Since then, the

³⁴ This is confirmed by an opinion poll taken between 27 and 29 April 2001 using a representative sample of 1000 people in Kinshasa by the independent polling institute, the International Office of Planning, Research and Consulting (Le Bureau d'Etudes, de Recherche et de Consulting International - BERCI): 79% of those questioned (10% against) had a good opinion of the President; 67% (15% against) think he is a man of his word; 51% would be prepared to vote for him if he were a presidential election candidate (as opposed to 14% who would vote for Tshisekedi) ; and 65% (18% against) have confidence that the current government will ensure the country's recovery.

³⁵ Kiesel, V., Joseph Kabila, un an après : de réels progrès, mais peut mieux faire, *Le Soir* [Brussels], 17 January 2002. She says : “human rights are barely more respected than before”.

insurgence has diminished in intensity and split into several rival rebel movements, all sponsored or manipulated by Kigali (RCD-Goma, MLC) or Kampala (RCD-ML). It is the former rebel leaders who speak most eloquently about the manipulation of the rebellion.³⁶ Not one of them, Arthur Zaïdi-Ngoma, Etienne Ngangura, Alexis Thambwe-Mwamba or Lambert Mende, discovered the “real aims of the political and military leaders of Rwanda”³⁷ until they were outside the rebel ranks! To hear them speak, the uprising had only one noble aim: to serve as a “starting point in correcting mistakes made by the AFDL regime”. Lambert Mende stretches our credulity further when he reveals that “in their hearts, the Rwandans [consider] RCD-Goma more of a structure to provide an alibi for their pillaging of Congo than an ally in the true sense of the word”.³⁸ Such tardy confessions are all the more poignant as they are not the words of someone struck by a vision, but those of public figures with a string of university degrees and with proven political experience. Do they depend on the naivety of their fellow citizens to disguise and absolve them from mismanagement? The behaviour of Congolese political figures has always been the butt of so many jokes that it has become distracted by its own irrationality. The current DRC conflict provides numerous examples each day.

8. The Need for Congolese Self-criticism

The current socio-political situation in Congo is in several ways similar to that experienced in the early days of independence when the Congolese political class already presented the image of a rather extravagant creature. Benoît Verhaegen, a Belgian academic and eminent specialist in Congolese political history, paints a convincing picture:

The first thing an observer would notice is the formal and artificial nature of the games played in the official political institutions: in the national parliament, in the provincial assemblies. People speak, they vote, they make laws but they are meaningless. There is only one thing which matters for each person: ensuring the instruments of power remain in the hands of their group and sharing out the bonuses which flow from their position of strength to the exclusion of minority factions. There is little legal force to counterbalance this general tendency towards a monopolisation of power, except revolt and chaos. But after the sometimes violent conflicts and brutal confrontations, the enemies easily reconcile their differences, and the population does not bear grudges against yesterday’s sworn enemies. The most spectacular swings in alliances and popularity brought hatred on Tshombe from 1960, brought him back to power, and finally excluded him in 1965.³⁹

One might believe this referred to 2002, but at the same time fear that the current crisis might well not be so easy to unravel! Unlike previous confrontations,⁴⁰ the current conflict has lasted too long. The

³⁶ For the Rwandan and Ugandan sponsors, the Congolese rebels are of course allies, even if reading between the lines of what is said sometimes leaves a different impression, as in this interview with Kagame: “Rwanda did not go to Congo because there was a rebellion there. It did not go to *create a rebellion*. Rwanda went into Congo to deal with the *Interahamwe* militias etc.” *Le Soft, loc.cit.* (our emphasis added).

³⁷ Interview with Lambert Mende Omalanga on Congovision, <http://www.congovision.com/interviews/mende.html> [accessed March 2002].

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Verhaegen, B., *La Politique : La Première République (1960-1965)* in Vanderlinden, J. (éd.): *Du Congo au Zaïre : 1960-1980. Essai de bilan*, Brussels: CRISP, 1980, pp. 11-137.

⁴⁰ The Mulelist rebellion in Kwilu which started in January 1964, the Simba rebellion in the East (South-Kivu, North -Kivu and Eastern Province) which started in April 1964, the rebellion by mercenaries Jean Schramme and Bob Denard from July to November 1967 and the two successive Shaba Wars in March 1997 and May 1978.

involvement of non-Congolese players and the fact that the issues at stake go beyond the national interest have also made the current conflict particularly complex. Basically, the Congolese have been used to brief uprisings which have not fundamentally threatened the powers in Kinshasa. Another expert in Congolese politics, the Belgian scholar J. Vanderlinden, has noted very appropriately:

Since the Second Republic there has been no rebellion or attack which has managed to unleash a movement sufficient to threaten those in power. The only time when they might have felt threatened would perhaps have been at the time of the first Shaba war, but then their opponents were unable to exploit the opportunity which presented itself at the time.⁴¹

Another aspect of irrational behaviour among Congolese political players, which they share with most of their compatriots, is their visceral nationalism, which clearly has no secure basis, since, as we have already seen, the centrifugal tendencies of tribalism, clanism and exclusion stubbornly linger within the young developing nation. Those who have advocated the division of Congo as a solution to the current crisis have been very surprised by the unanimous intransigence of the Congolese who insist on developing their single state, even though it was inherited from the Belgian colonisers! What might justify such an obsessive need to remain united? That the Congolese feel such an “imperative for unity”, to use Isidore Ndaywel’s expression, may have historical, psychological and political foundations:

In its 30 years, the post-colonial era has known many vicissitudes in the form of revolts, acts of secession, foreign interference, wars, plots and brutal repression. However, despite these misfortunes, the view from inside the country of the way forward is consistently characterised by specific concerns. These include the wish to remain united against all odds, the need to develop a true independence and, lastly, the demand to develop ‘in its own way’. The imperative for unity was on the agenda at the dawn of independence. At the height of the crisis around decolonisation, it was reaffirmed by the common wish to end the imbroglio which arose from the September 1960 constitutional crisis, and it became the leitmotiv for the national struggles of the Mobutu period. The unity inherited from the Leopoldian state was such an important consideration in independent Congo, that any interest in regionalisation was seen as suspect.⁴²

Given the need for the Congolese to look critically at themselves, the frequent temptation to “deny responsibility”, that is the tendency to stake all hope on foreign intervention for a solution to their own mistakes, should be eradicated. It is true that those who usually rush to Congo’s help hardly do it for purely philanthropic reasons, and the sheer number⁴³ of interventions ought anyway to have aroused suspicion, even to the extent of generating xenophobia. But no such thing in Congo! The Congolese do have a tendency to expect everything to come from abroad, but their expectations are also clouded by the idea that those who have their eye on exploiting the “fabulous riches” of their “vast” country are constantly plotting against them. However, if there is one virtue the Congolese population is being forced to develop as a result of this current war, it is modesty! Humiliated and beaten militarily by small countries without major resources, the Congolese need to abandon their illusions of grandeur, bury once and for all the demons of division and exclusion and devote themselves to the only war worth fighting, the struggle to develop their country. With all appropriate reservations, especially with

⁴¹ Vanderlinden, J., *La Politique : La Deuxième République* in Vanderlinden (ed.), pp. 139-75.

⁴² Ndaywel, p. 777.

⁴³ It is not possible to list all the foreign interventions in DRC. Here are some examples: the UN mandate between 1960 and 1964; the recruitment of mercenaries; the American and Belgian intervention to end the Stanleyville rebellion; and the Moroccan and French intervention in the two Shaba wars.

regard to the undeniable responsibility that foreign players have for the crises which regularly afflict African countries, including DRC, we agree with the critical observation made by S. Marysse and C. André:

The proposition - which is well developed in the collective Congolese consciousness and that of many other African nations – that the African continent is internationally desired for its riches, must be challenged. In that scenario, any acute political crisis which leads to violent conflict is seen as the work of hidden international actors manipulating national actors with the aim of satisfying their economic interests and establish their domination. This is a determinist vision of dependency where Africans feel the effects of changes caused by globalisation without the possibility of influence over them and thus perceive an inability to create their own history.⁴⁴

9. Conclusion

This is not the first time that a challenge to the legitimacy of power in Kinshasa has led to armed conflict in Congo. Nor is it the first time that such a conflict has lasted long and has removed a large part of the national territory from central government control. But the distinguishing feature of the current DRC conflict is that for the first time central government is faced with external armies which have not been invited and which are not being satisfied with sponsoring rebel movements, but also occupy and administer parts of the national territory for their own advantage. One should note that it was the implosion of the Congolese state coinciding with the strong militarisation of neighbouring countries which made the occupation possible. At the height of Mobutu's power, it was the Congolese regime which sought to interfere and destabilise neighbouring states by regularly playing a subversive role. The Congolese state, already rotten as a result of the kleptocratic rule of Mobutu and put out of its misery by Kabila, has finally during the last decade rid itself of all its defining characteristics. The resultant vacuum at state-level, like an air pocket, has sucked in adventurers looking for space and other opportunities. One of the leaders of Congolese civil society emphasises this as one of the main points of his argument:

The marked deliquescence of the Congolese state has meant that external conflicts impact on the situation inside Congo. The weakness of the state has been exacerbated in the face of internal and external pressures and ambitions, by the lack of a strong national army, the permeability of the borders, the malfunction of the state administration and the chaotic running of public affairs by successive governments and regimes. This weakness benefits internal and external military and political mafias. It also makes the situation easier for those who take power by force. Thus a culture of rebellion has developed in the countries of the sub-region, all the more so when these rebellions, and the regimes that they put in place, are accepted and even welcomed by the international community.⁴⁵

The state of war which persists in Congo permits and provides cover for illegal operations, all of which seem viable given Congo's varied and overflowing resources. However, there is a risk that the prolonged crisis in Congo will irremediably infect the other states in the region. DRC has again become the "hole" which Museveni spoke of when he was allied to Kabila, and is today "a safe haven for

⁴⁴ Marysse, S. et André, C., *Guerre et pillage économique en RD Congo*, in Marysse et Reyntjens, pp. 307-32.

⁴⁵ Civil Society and the Congolese Crisis, report of a meeting of Congolese civil society, held from 13 to 16 January 1999 in Antwerp, Belgium (unpublished document).

illegal armed groups”,⁴⁶ sanctuary for every rebellion imaginable and a self-service store for warlords. However, its particular geo-political status and its diverse demographic composition which makes it the ideal homeland for all those in the region who feel excluded, renders it a serious threat for all the neighbouring countries.

⁴⁶ Expression used by former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in her speech to the United Nations on 24 January 2000.

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