



Time for a New Deal

Rational Investment and Nation-Building in Congo

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the unrivalled test-case for post-9/11 nation-building. Nowhere else have the problems of state failure been on such a scale. Even with significant progress since 2002, the symptoms are still present to a pathological degree: vestigial state structures and services, chronic conflict, unchecked militias, and predatory exploitation of natural resources. The international effort in response has been significant: the largest UN peacekeeping force in the world, and a substantial aid programme which will soon see the UK alone – until a few years ago an unlikely champion for the Congo – giving £130 million a year. Game on, as they say.

But despite this engagement, this is a test-case in danger of failure. The festering sore of conflict in the east, universally recognised as the essential obstacle that must be overcome if there is to be durable progress in almost any sphere, has again reached crisis proportions – at the time of writing the CNDP are 12km from Goma, with a fragile ceasefire holding. Meanwhile progress on the various chantiers of development, on the essential reforms of institutions and governance, and on encouraging true democratic accountability, has been disappointingly slow. What is missing?

This essay makes the argument that finishing the job in the DRC requires a new deal. First, a re-thought and reinvigorated commitment to the two key pillars of state-building: security and institutional development. For this to succeed both must be rooted in politics and the engagement of Congolese actors. The international community must shift its paradigm on what is

required to bring peace in the east, so there are hard reasons for the parties to engage more seriously. But the bargain in exchange must be advances on the politically difficult reform issues – notably the rebuilding of the security sector – and on the development of governance and democracy in its fullest sense. The future of Congo can go either way, but it hinges on these issues, of which the most urgent and most basic is security.

The world should be hard-headed and realistic: it cannot afford to be half-hearted

The impetus for this re-think should be the risk inherent in the resourcing of international intervention, which reflects the domestic considerations of Security Council members and contributing states, rather than a realistic assessment of demands on the ground. If we do things half-heartedly, we should not be too surprised there is a greater likelihood of failure. The international effort in Congo between 2002-2008 has been substantial, and in many ways laudable, but nonetheless a significant political and military under-investment has greatly contributed to the fact that despite some progress, the fundamental threats and challenges have been unresolved – amid continuous low-level conflict and systematic predation against the civilian population. In the aftermath of the current crisis the risk this poses to everything that has been invested so far





Rebel leader Laurent Nkunda with bodyguards in Masisi District, North Kivu. *Photo courtesy of Susan Schulman.*

should be too much to allow a return to the status quo, without a stronger and more determined effort to neutralise the armed groups and resolve the sources of instability. It should not be thought that this will be easy, but on the evidence the consequences of leaving things as they stand are a rapid return to square one. The world should be hard-headed and realistic: it cannot afford to be half-hearted.

This will also be a good test-case of whether we really believe in state-building. In the Congo the need to develop the state is clear, pressing, and backed by the overwhelming moral imperative of 5.4 million deaths in the past decade as a direct or indirect result of conflict. This is far more than Darfur, in a country that has none of the political impediments to intervention. It is not visibly a matter of the immediate national security to the UK, and arguably to any country outside of Congo's immediate neighbours – though the possibility of nasty surprises from Katangan uranium, and the long-term impact of the country on the stability and prosperity of the Great Lakes region

and to Africa as a whole, should be given due weight. But the argument for nation-building is that in the long run it is a matter of national security for us all. If we really believe in the principle that dangerously weak states are unacceptable in the twenty-first century, the DRC is the place to start.

Security

Security is the first condition of any progress in the Congo: without it everything is built on sand. The approach over the past half-decade to securing it in the eastern provinces most infested by armed groups has been gradualist, if not positively evolutionary: maintaining a basic level of security while pursuing slow negotiations; making efforts to encourage defections through disarmament programmes; and waiting for the Congolese army to improve. This is an understandable approach given the realities of the situation. Any prescription for peace in the Congo should be tempered with a cool-headed appreciation of the practical challenge of acting against myriad armed groups

across a wide expanse of terrain well-suited to guerrilla war. It is important to stress that the problem is not intractable – as past successes in bringing rebel groups in Ituri and Katanga back into the fold demonstrate – but it is not to be taken lightly. Yet, if the slow strategy for security in the east has not been irrational, Nkunda's current offensive against Goma should be powerful evidence it was fatally flawed.

While limited progress was made, the fundamental threat always remained. The peace of the Kivus was always relatively superficial. In much of the region, especially outside of the towns, there was in effect no government and no law even before the current instability. My own experience is instructive: A few months before peace broke down I was efficiently robbed at gunpoint by a pair of armed youths near Rutshuru on a supposedly safe main road: they kindly returned the SIM cards to our phones before running off. For those who actually live in these places, the predation is a much more serious matter. In the midst of 'peace', the level



of violence against women in particular was horrendous, though it is doubtless even worse now. More to the point, the underlying ability of the armed groups to threaten the overall stability of the Kivus was at best diminishing very slowly (for parts of the FDLR) and at worst (for the CNDP) actually increasing.

Now the danger of that underlying threat has been so clearly demonstrated, it cannot be seen to be an acceptable risk. The implication is that there must be a greater urgency in addressing the presence of armed groups. The danger is that after the current crisis subsides, probably into some form of negotiations and rough ceasefire, we will effectively be back to the status quo. That would really be irrational: we need a step change in the effort to address the root causes of insecurity, not just trim leaves off the tree.

What does that mean in practice?

The first point is that the new programme for peace must have a range of different elements, but be rooted in a political context. A purely military solution would be difficult, maximise harm to civilians, and be unlikely to lead to long-term stability. The underlying drivers of conflict must be addressed: in the case of north Kivu, that means among other issues control over land and resources,¹ citizenship and the return of refugees, and how to guarantee security for North Kivu's Tutsis while eliminating the CNDP as a military force.

Addressing questions like these requires a process of negotiation, which the Amani mechanism provided. The problem is that both sides had an ambiguous commitment to the talks. That is not really surprising. For Nkunda especially, it is hard to see what the incentives are for him to disarm. In the bush he has prestige, power, security, and – through control of natural resources – money. There is no credible threat in the short or medium term to these advantages, as the rout of the FARDC shows. Peace offers uncertainty, a loss of power, and – to the extent he genuinely is concerned by such factors – possible threats to his community. It is a calculation that could apply to almost all the armed groups in the region, especially the FDLR, who have no stake

in a peaceful Congo and who have evolved to be closer to bandit businessmen in the most literal sense than politically-motivated rebels.

Altering that balance of self-interest can be done in a number of ways – not all of which involve violence. The lack of commitment to the Amani process was by many accounts not all one-sided; the influence of Rwanda on the CNDP could be more fully exerted to secure a resolution; and the development of the capacity of the Congolese armed forces could change the strategic calculation without a shot being fired. These avenues and more must be pursued with greater vigour than before if progress is to be made. Pressure and help from the international community in these areas may well be the most important contribution they can make. But it seems unavoidable that one part of the mix is also increasing the availability and capacity of international forces – and this is perhaps the most visible way in which outside engagement with Congo needs to change.

Security is the first condition of any progress in the Congo

The obvious precedent is Operation *Artemis*, the French-led EU force that did much to stop a vicious and at times genocidal conflict between rival armed groups in Ituri. David Miliband, the UK Foreign Minister, has himself said that in '2003 the EU deployment in Ituri (...) helped to prevent the bloodbath that many were predicting and allowed the UN time to reinforce and reconfigure its peacekeeping mission'.² In fact if they could be deployed with the same speed there is a strong argument for deploying European troops straight into the MONUC pool, under a strengthened mandate and with plenty of time to do their work. But even with its more restricted mandate and timeframe, an EU force would send a powerful political signal and allow invaluable breathing space to reorganize and reinforce MONUC. There are certainly no political reasons why one could not be put in

place: President Kabila himself has called for an 'Artemis II'.

Consider this for a moment. The Congo still faces a conflict-related humanitarian disaster on an unparalleled scale. We should remember that the IRC's figures of 5.4 million dead since 1998 as a result of the fighting in the Congo are mainly deaths due to malnutrition and disease, but even so the figure is stark by any measure, and growing. In Darfur, by contrast, the comparable figure over five years is 300,000.³ The Sudanese government has a point when they indignantly declare that there is no 'Save Congo' movement on the scale of that to 'Save Darfur'.⁴ We should avoid too much stress on the macabre accountancy of death as a guide to intervention, but on the face of it the case for action in the Congo is stronger. And unlike in Darfur, international intervention in Congo faces none of the political obstacles that have frustrated attempts to help in Sudan. Why are we not taking the chance?

Instead, the call in early October by the Special Representative of the Secretary General Alan Doss for a few thousand more men went unanswered, even as the CNDP began their approach to Goma. MONUC reinforcements have now been approved, but it remains to be seen what quality they will be and when they will arrive – most observers say months and not weeks. An EU force that could provide short-term cover if that timeframe does indeed prove accurate has so far been talked off the table, allegedly to be reintroduced if things deteriorate (at which point of course they risk being irrelevant, as they will still be in Europe). Perhaps more importantly in the wider scheme of things, MONUC has been consistently under-manned throughout its mandate, operating well below its initially recommended level of 23,900 troops even at the best of times. Again, military strength must be subordinate to the first priority of a political process, and must be only one part of the mix – but the point is that it is a part.

An illustration of this is the fact that before the current crisis, MONUC and the FARDC were due to conduct joint operations against the FDLR; something

Crisis in the Congo



FDLR soldiers, some mere children, proudly display their weapons. *Photo courtesy of Susan Schulman.*

many observers saw as long overdue – though an uncomfortable admission of the lack of progress in political efforts to deal with them. As well as being probably the worst of the crowded field in terms of their impact on the civilian population, there is a strong argument for considering the FDLR as the first priority for resolving conflict in eastern Congo. With the FDLR out of the picture, much of the justification for the existence of the CNDP vanishes, and the full weight of attention can be brought to bear on them. The FDLR are not meaningfully engaged in a peace process and the numbers defecting to disarmament programmes has slowed to a trickle. While difficult to destroy by military means alone, there seems to be a strong strategic case to be made for putting them under pressure, and some scope for example to disrupt their access to the more lucrative mining areas (as the MONUC plan envisaged). Even more than with the CNDP, there is little

incentive for the FDLR to disarm without some prospect that the military tide is beginning to run against them. Had the UN been better manned and equipped, that operation could have (and should have) taken place long ago: instead it is on hold while MONUC fights fires around Goma.

The international community is being asked to make another investment, after years of previous investment. That investment was at a level dictated more by political considerations in potential troop-contributing countries than by the reality of the situation on the ground: events show that this was a false economy. What we need now is a more short-term but more serious investment – one that gives us a chance of creating the conditions for departure. That investment will of course not be without risk. The alternatives to it are that we continue on the current path, which might produce a miraculous breakthrough, but which experience

suggests is more likely sooner or later to produce another crisis that will bring us back to the same crossroads – or that we pull out. The consequences of that would be among other things to lose all we have put into the Congo in the past five years. That, it seems, should be considered the bigger risk.

Institutions

But if security is the immediate demand for progress in the Congo, it must be accompanied by more deeply-rooted changes if it is to have any chance of proving durable. 'Institutional reform' is something of a hold-all term, but essential: it means efforts to improve the long-term, structural pillars of stability and development. If progress without security is built on sand, progress without structural reform is built on air.

As in most conflicted-affected weak states, the area most visibly in need of reform in the DRC is the security sector. The rout of the thousands of FARDC



troops around Goma shows how far there is to go. An international force is no alternative to properly trained, paid and equipped Congolese troops: if they had been available, MONUC's military functions would be irrelevant by now.

Reforming the army is not an easy task when it is a political Frankenstein's monster, a convenient stitching-together of the myriad parties to the 1998-2002 wars. Kabila may be correct to be concerned about the loyalty of a more competent army. There must be sensitivity to these political realities. But without reform, there will be no security. The government must find the political will to carry out the reforms: the international community must find the will to support the process, and to present a united and co-ordinated front on what should be an urgent matter of their core interests in the Congo. So far, they have failed to make it a high enough and universal enough priority – as evidenced in the intermittent support given to the EU Security Co-ordination Mission (EUSEC). Security sector reform requires grappling with difficult issues, and David Chuter in another RUSI article⁵ rightly highlights the failure to grasp the nettle that in, practice, reforming the army means international help to pay, equip and train the often abusive forces of a government which, while elected, has often been heavy-handed in its treatment of protesters and political opponents. This is a real dilemma, and one which we should do our best to attenuate through vetting, human rights training and the like. But if we let our distaste stop real engagement, one of the central pillars of the Congolese edifice will be dangerously weak.

Of course security is not the only pillar of that edifice. One could talk at great length about the need for reform of the justice sector, taxation, administration, natural resource governance and so on. The temptation to describe them all as 'central pillars' is too easy, but they are all genuinely important. One in particular stands out. As Miliband puts it: 'Democracy is, in my view, often defined too narrowly. Free and fair elections are the most basic demand. But elections without a

functioning state, without buttressing institutions within civil society, are of limited value. (...) Rather than back individuals, we must support the institutions that provide checks and balances on the concentration of power'.⁶

There is a nice concept within DFID about the 'demand-side' and 'supply-side' of democracy. Supply side means above all supporting parliamentary accountability. Almost for the first time in its history, the Congo has legitimately elected assemblies – something which must change the game to some extent. This applies to the provincial assemblies, and – if the government and donors finally get their act together and make the necessary local elections happen – will apply at the district level as well. At the national level, the potential seems especially clear. Parliamentarians have interrogated the government about Chinese contracts and the harsh repression of protests in Bas Congo, and rejected the executive's candidate for the presidency of the Senate. Small steps to be sure, but it seems likely there will be more – one senator for example is leading an effort to have parliament trace the discrepancies in accounts for tax and income in the mining sector. The point is not that this will transform the political scene in DRC overnight, but that there is a new and apparently positive factor in political life which should be nurtured if its long-term fruits are to be harvested. To do this support for the elected bodies needs to be considered a harder priority than it perhaps currently is, though not to the extent of compromising national sovereignty. That may require taking pains to ensure, for example, large development agreements pass through some scrutiny in the assemblies, but it is a defensible investment. If parliaments have no power, they cannot grow.

The demand side of democracy gets less attention but is perhaps as important. The Congo has – by necessity when the state became virtually absent – a proud history of active civil society groups. If parliament occasionally holds government to account, civil society provides much of the democratic accountability between elections, for

both government and MPs. There is some irony in the fact that they are supported above all at election time. As long as it can be done without creating clientalism between donors and NGOs, they should be considered a regular and important part of efforts to extend democracy.

That then should be the new deal for the Congo. A renewed international involvement – political, material, and military – that corresponds more closely to the real demands of the two key priorities of security and institution-building. And if the international community is to put more of its sons at risk in the Kivus, it is reasonable to expect a follow-through on the commitments already made by the government for institutional reform – of the security and other sectors. It may well seem a risky investment, but if we mean a tenth of what we say about Darfur, we should be seizing the chance in the Congo. That way we might just find our investment has really bought something lasting and worthwhile. ■

NOTES

- 1 For a more in-depth exposition of the importance of local issues of land and power, see for example Séverine Autesserre, 'The Trouble With Congo: How Local Disputes Fuel Regional Conflict', *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2008).
- 2 David Miliband, 'Freedom and Responsibility: New Challenges in Africa', speech delivered at the University of South Africa, 7 July 2008, available at <http://www.davidmiliband.info/speeches/speeches_08_011.htm>, accessed 26 November 2008.
- 3 BBC News, 'Darfur deaths "could be 300,000"', 23 April 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7361979.stm>>, accessed 26 November 2008.
- 4 There is of course a Save the Congo campaign, but not on anything like the same scale. The Save Darfur Coalition in the US, for example, groups more than 180 religious, political, and human rights organisations calling for international intervention in the Darfur conflict in Sudan.
- 5 David Chuter, 'Feeling Good or Getting Better: Options for Security and Development in Africa', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 151, No. 4, 2006).
- 6 Miliband, *ibid*.



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