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Out of sight, **out of mind**

War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The world's media has been saturated with coverage of warfare in recent years, yet the deadliest conflict since the Second World War has gone virtually unreported by the press. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has endured a loss of life on the scale of September 11 every two days since 1998.¹ This war, and the silence that surrounds it, has been sustained by the vested interests of nations and corporations hungry to make a profit.

The 'Invisible' War

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been a hotbed of civil war and corruption since it gained independence from Belgium in 1960. Ethnic tensions in the country ignited when more than one million Hutu refugees spilled across the border in the aftermath of Rwanda's 1994 genocide. Rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda pitted themselves against DRC government forces supported by Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe.² This triggered a five-year war which drew in the armies of nine African nations³, and the world's largest and most expensive United Nations peacekeeping mission.⁴

The International Rescue Committee reports warfare in the DRC has cost the lives of 5,400,000 people since 1998.⁵ The bloodshed has been fuelled by parties with an interest in maintaining anarchy for their own economic gain.

Resource Exploitation

The Democratic Republic of the Congo should be one of the wealthiest nations on earth: the country has Africa's richest

deposits of copper and cobalt, and is abundant with other natural resources including diamonds, gold, silver, petroleum, uranium, coltan, coffee and timber.⁶ Evidence uncovered by the United Nations proves that nations and multinational corporations perpetuated the conflict to exploit these resources.

Eighty percent of the Congolese population lives on 30 cents a day or less, yet billions of dollars have gone out the back door to feed the economies of wealthier nations.⁷ In October 2003, a United Nations panel of experts documented the systematic exploitation of Congolese resources by Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe. These countries had supplied local militias with money, food and military hardware in exchange for the smuggling of resources.⁸

Multinational corporations have also been indicted by the United Nations for the role they played in maintaining the conflict. An independent panel of experts reported to the United Nations that 85 multinational companies based in Europe, the United States and South Africa had violated the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ethical guidelines by collaborating with criminal networks to pillage natural resources from the DRC.⁹ Throughout the years of war, multi-national companies have attempted to take control of the Congo's resource-rich rainforests, and approximately 43.5 million hectares of



forest have come under the control of logging companies.¹⁰ This has had a devastating impact on the Congolese population because rainforests are crucial to their survival: of the more than sixty million people living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, about forty million depend upon the forests for essentials such as food and medicine, as well as energy and building materials.

In 2002 the World Bank implemented a Forestry Code to combat corporate exploitation of precious Congolese resources, and to assist communities whose infrastructure has been decimated by warfare. The Code declared that companies had to negotiate directly with communities about the services they would provide in exchange for logging in the area.

However, a Greenpeace report titled *Carving up the Congo* found that communities rarely receive the monetary compensation they are entitled to – in some cases companies extract timber worth many hundreds of thousand of dollars, and provide the community with gifts totaling as little as \$100. Further, logging can impede communities' access to vital resources. For example, caterpillar trees are often felled despite caterpillars providing the major source of protein for forest-dependent communities.¹¹

Illegal Arms Exports

In recent years the DRC has had deals with arms suppliers in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine and the Peoples Republic of China. A decade of international arms trading has left the country awash with small arms and light weapons. Supplies of weaponry, ammunition and military training flowed from powerful forces in the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda to their competing militias.¹² This, combined with the ease of availability of weaponry, led to armed banditry, looting, and the kidnapping of civilians for cash in the DRC's fragile eastern provinces. Peace agreements reached in late 2002 between the major Congolese parties, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda were supposed to bring the violence to an end. However, Amnesty International reports that even since the peace agreements and the United Nations Security Council-imposed mandatory arms embargo on nearly all of the DRC in 2005, further arms and ammunition have been imported into the region.¹³

Civilians Paying the Price for War

The legacy of a decade of warfare in the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to claim the lives of 45, 000 people each month.¹⁴ Although the war officially ended in 2002, infectious diseases, malnutrition and pregnancy-

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related conditions are a major cause of mortality. These easily preventable and treatable conditions are the result of the social and economic disturbances caused by conflict, including disruption of health services, poor food security, deterioration of infrastructure and displacement.¹⁵

War resulted in millions of people fleeing their homes, and the collapse of what infrastructure still remained after decades of neglect. Those who returned home found water sources, health clinics and farms destroyed. Armed men were responsible for mass rape and sexual violence, particularly in the east of the country, which has made it incredibly difficult for women to venture into the fields to grow food or collect firewood.¹⁶ In addition, large amounts of unexploded landmines, shells and grenades litter the Congolese soil and continue to maim and kill civilians.¹⁷ According to the United Nations there are 3.4 million internally displaced people and hundreds of thousands of refugees in all nine nations bordering the DRC.

Looking Forward

Although civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo formally ended in 2003,¹⁸ conflict has continued in the eastern provinces of the country. A peace deal in these regions is crucial for curbing the mounting death toll and for the stability of the country as a whole. There are, however, encouraging signs that peace is slowly returning. The United Nations reports that of the seven rebel groups

operating in the Ituri province in 2003, only two remain active in 2008. In addition, the 800,000 displaced persons in the province in 2003 have been reduced to 115,000 in 2008.¹⁹

The cessation of civil war in most regions of the DRC has allowed the country to focus on the process of recovery and redevelopment. Recent substantial progress towards a fairer and more functional government has been made: a two-chamber parliament more representative of the society at large has been established, and five citizen commissions including an independent Electoral Commission have been created. An important historic development has also taken place: the country's first democratic elections since independence in 1960 were held in 2006. These elections, which returned Joseph Kabila to power, were generally declared to be free, fair and successful, despite the lack of an electoral culture, significant illiteracy and the isolation of certain areas of the country.²⁰

Further progress is seen in the recovery of the DRC's economy. The Congo River - the DRC's economic lifeline due to its lack of serviceable roads - has reopened, and inflation rates are down from 630 per cent in 2000 to less than 16 per cent at end-January 2008. Eighty per cent of the DRC's US \$14 billion external debt has been forgiven, and donors have pledged the country US \$4 billion.²¹ Such developments suggest that there is, finally, hope ahead for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Lessons learned?

The more than five million people who have lost their life to war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are a devastating reminder of what happens when the media and the international community turn a blind eye to conflict, and the vested interests of the nations and corporations that sustain it.

Full references on the ERC website.



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