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The Continuing Trouble with the Congo – By Severine Autesserre

Posted on August 1, 2012 (<http://africanarguments.org/2012/08/01/the-continuing-trouble-with-the-congo-by-severine-autesserre/>) by [AfricanArgumentsEditor](http://africanarguments.org/author/africanargumentseditor/) (<http://africanarguments.org/author/africanargumentseditor/>)



(http://africanarguments.org/2012/08/01/the-continuing-trouble-with-the-congo-by-severine-autesserre/monusco_drongo/)

MONUSCO peacekeepers in Congo. In June 2012, the UN Security Council opted to renew its mandate.

operation remains the only military force capable of protecting the population from the abuses of the Congolese army and various other armed groups. Humanitarian agencies are the only ones able to respond to epidemics and, in many places, to provide access to drinkable water and basic health care. However, violence still persists in most of the eastern provinces.

The wrong approach to Congo's local troubles

There is a simple reason for the failure of these massive international efforts to help the Congo achieve lasting peace and security. Foreign interveners follow a top-down logic. They try to resolve the conflict at the national and international levels, hoping that peace will then trickle down to the local level. This approach works well to resolve the many causes of violence linked to antagonisms among national and regional elites. However, it ignores some of the other key drivers of conflict: those linked to distinctively local tensions.

In the Congo, a lot of the continuing violence is motivated by longstanding bottom-up agendas, whose main instigators are villagers, traditional chiefs, community chiefs, or ethnic leaders. Many conflicts revolve around political, social, and economic stakes that are local. There is constant competition at the village or district level over who will be chief of each territory under traditional law, who can control the distribution of land and the exploitation of local mining sites, and who can be appointed to local administrative positions. This competition often results in localized fighting, which quite frequently escalates into generalized violence.

Even issues considered purely international or national problems – such as the presence of foreign armed groups in Congolese territory or the tensions between indigenous people and Congolese with Rwandan ancestry – have important local dimensions. There are constant interactions among local, national, and international causes of violence. National and international elites enroll grassroots actors in their fights, while local soldiers and leaders ally with provincial, national, and international power brokers to advance their grassroots agendas. As a result, local tensions have fuelled micro- and macro-level violence throughout modern Congolese history. They continue to do so today and regularly jeopardize the national and international settlements.

The case of the Kivus

Consider the tensions between the Congolese of Rwandan descent and the “indigenous” communities of the Kivus. This conflict, motivated in part the two Rwandan invasions of the late 1990s, is at the heart of the current fighting. It began in the 1930s, during Belgian colonization, as a competition over land and local traditional and administrative power.

The antagonisms between the two groups escalated into a national issue after the Congo's independence in 1960, as each camp recruited allies outside of the province and sent representatives to the national parliament. The conflict caused massive violence in the Kivus long before the generalized wars of the 1990s started, notably large-scale massacres in 1963 and again in 1993.

With the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Kivu crisis then took on a regional dimension. Each side allied with various Congolese and Rwandan armed groups to promote its own local agenda. All of the grassroots fighters originally intended merely to protect their kinsfolk, but they quickly started using their military might to seize land and mining sites and to capture political power. Throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s, local tensions in the Kivus repeatedly prompted outbreaks of violence and fed the national and international conflicts.

Today, hardliners on both sides still refuse any kind of settlement – in part because they fear revenge killings on their families and kin and because they worry they might lose their land and their local power.

An ill-adapted peacebuilding culture

International interveners, however, often neglect to support local conflict-resolution programs because of the peacebuilding culture that prevails among them.

The situation in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo has deteriorated significantly since the end of the transition to peace and democracy in late 2006. The Congo has officially become the least developed country on earth, having dropped twenty places (from 167 to 187) on the [Human Development Index](http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/) (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>) since last year. Armed groups, including the Congolese army, relentlessly commit horrific violations of human rights. Their actions cause massive population displacement: more than 470,000 people have fled their homes since last April.

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An ongoing and intractable conflict

It is crucial to understand the reasons for the continuation of violence in the Congo. The Congolese conflict is one of the deadliest since World War II. It has resulted in more than five million casualties so far. It has destabilized most of Central Africa for the past sixteen years, and it remains one of the largest ongoing humanitarian crises in the world.

International engagement in the peace process is also noteworthy. The Congo hosts the second-largest and second-most expensive United Nations peacekeeping mission in the world. It also hosted the first European-led peacekeeping mission in 2006. The International Criminal Court indicted Congolese warlords in its first ever cases.

There is no doubt that these international efforts have achieved many positive results. In concert, they have made the reunification of the country possible. They have helped reestablish peace over a large part of the Congolese territory. As of today, the United Nations peacekeeping

Western and African diplomats, United Nations peacekeepers, and the staff of many non-governmental organizations involved in conflict-resolution share a set of ideologies, rules, rituals, assumptions, definitions, and standard operating procedures. This common culture influences the interveners' understanding of the causes of violence, the paths toward peace, and the roles of foreign actors.

Most international interveners interpret continued fighting and massacres as the consequence of national and international tensions alone. They blame violence on the struggle for power among Congolese elites, the political and economic disputes among the Congo and its neighbors, and the manipulation of local actors by national and international ones.

Diplomats, donors, and United Nations staff also view intervention at the macro levels as their only legitimate responsibility. Aside from rare exceptions, they focus their efforts on national and international issues. In fact, the dominant culture of intervention constructs local peacebuilding as such an unimportant, unfamiliar, and unmanageable task that neither shocking events nor resistance from certain individuals and organizations have yet convinced international actors to reevaluate their understandings of violence and intervention.

This common peacebuilding culture shapes the intervention strategy in a way that precludes action on local conflicts, ultimately dooming international efforts. It enables foreign interveners to ignore the micro-level tensions that jeopardize the macro-level settlements. In the Congo, the presence of this peacebuilding culture explains why the massive international efforts have only rarely targeted local conflicts, and therefore why international interventions have failed to help the Congolese state build a sustainable peace.

Severine Autesserre is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University. She is the author of [The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding](http://www.cambridge.org/us/knowledge/isbn/item2704889/?site_locale=en_US) (http://www.cambridge.org/us/knowledge/isbn/item2704889/?site_locale=en_US), which won the [2012 Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order](http://grawemeyer.org/news-updates/analysis-of-what-went-wrong-in-congo-wins-grawemeyer-award) (http://grawemeyer.org/news-updates/analysis-of-what-went-wrong-in-congo-wins-grawemeyer-award).

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2 thoughts on “The Continuing Trouble with the Congo – By Severine Autesserre”

1. *William Zartman* says:

August 15, 2012 at 3:47 pm (<http://africanarguments.org/2012/08/01/the-continuing-trouble-with-the-congo-by-severine-autesserre/#comment-15845>)

A great analysis, but where is page 2? What can and should be done. A fruit basket is held from on top by a handle, because it is much more difficult to cart each plum by itself. If the problem is rotten plums, are we to fix each one separately (the metaphor runs out here). What is the policy alternative to hold from the top and trickle down?

2. *Bert* (<http://africanations.wordpress.com>) says:

November 29, 2012 at 8:41 am (<http://africanarguments.org/2012/08/01/the-continuing-trouble-with-the-congo-by-severine-autesserre/#comment-16784>)

Severine,

Where is page two? What a lame comment! Of course any analysis should start with a correct page one and you are showing that this is not where most current analyses start.

But – why not be a little bit more bold and call a spade a spade? You state that the origins of the conflict lie, to a great extent, in the fact that ‘All of the grassroots fighters originally intended merely to protect their kinsfolk’. Are you not saying, in fact, that this conflict should be explained from the context of the ongoing conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples in the area? Why not say so openly?

Because if this is your analysis – and I believe it is, but please correct me if I am wrong, then any solution must address the legitimate needs for peace and security of both populations.

I believe that such a solution cannot be found within the framework of the failed nation state that Congo is at the moment. It is a taboo subject – but at the same time an inescapable conclusion – boundaries will have to be redrawn in the region. Building on the solutions that have been found for ethnic conflict in other parts of the world (Europe, especially), I believe that there is a need for two new countries in the region now covered by Rwanda, Burundi and Kivu: one in which the Tutsi are the dominant group, the other dominated by Hutu.

That’s your page two, William – over to you.

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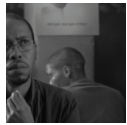
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