

The Washington Post

Monkey Cage

Here's what Congo can teach the world about peace

By Séverine Autesserre October 19 at 4:00 AM

Congo is usually associated with war, violence and chaos. News reports focus on strife and bloodshed. The coverage of electoral protests last month is no exception.

But that's not true everywhere in the country. I have researched solutions to war and violence in Congo for the past 15 years. With that pursuit in mind, I went to Idjwi.

This island contains many ingredients that, elsewhere, have resulted in violence. Idjwi is situated on the border between Congo and Rwanda, which have been at war for the past 18 years. The island boasts valuable mineral resources (such as coltan, much sought for its use in cellphones), which many analysts blame for fueling the Congolese war. Land is scarce. Eighty-three percent of the population survives on less than \$1 per day. Few young people find jobs. Inhabitants view the state bureaucracy, police and justice system as highly corrupt and inefficient. Enormous tensions roil the two main ethnic groups, the Havu majority and the pygmy minority. In the words of Livingston Charles Shaniavu, the representative of Idjwi's pygmies, "pygmies are considered less than animals. They have nothing, absolutely nothing."

Such a combination of poverty, state weakness, ethnic discrimination and geostrategic location has led to violence throughout Congo and in many other parts of the world.

But not in Idjwi. And order in Idjwi comes not through police cameras, guns and ammunition, but through human participation.

Life on the Congolese island of Idjwi would startle many Westerners who know little about that country outside the horror stories in the news. In that normal, peaceful place, it can be easy to forget that you are surrounded by the deadliest conflict since World War II. Idjwi's inhabitants go about their daily lives without the fear that I saw and felt just a few miles away in neighboring provinces. When we talked, people did not focus on the latest massacre or bout of fighting, as they so often do in eastern Congo. Last year, when a resident tried to set up a militia, locals refused to follow him. Hunted by the Congolese army for crimes he and his few supporters had committed, he fled to the neighboring town of Goma and was subsequently arrested.

And here's what the rest of the world can learn from Idjwi: The island is peaceful because of its many, very effective grass-roots organizations. When there is a conflict, instead of calling the police or the army or resorting to violence, people try to contact one of these local groups: religious networks, traditional institutions, youth groups, women's groups and so on.

Surrounded by such a strong network, each citizen also helps maintain the stability of his or her village by keeping tabs on potential troublemakers and working with local leaders to prevent minor issues from escalating into violence.

Strong beliefs also help support peace. For centuries, blood pacts have linked the main families of the island. Elders teach children the meaning of these pacts: Death will take those who harm members of the many other families with whom they are linked. In addition, people from surrounding provinces think that Idjwi is home to powerful sorcerers who can cast protection upon you, or cause you harm if you try to invade or disturb their island. These

beliefs help deter violence by both insiders and outsiders, just as different spiritual and religious systems help prevent violence in other countries (as, for instance, in East Timor, where I am currently conducting research).

Is it a coincidence that there has been no mass fighting in Idjwi in 20 years?

Idjwi is not the only Congolese success story. Throughout eastern Congo, various people decided that they had had enough violence. They set up peace committees, sometimes spontaneously and informally, other times with external support.

Several such committees — in the territory of Uvira and the village of Kalehe, for instance — have developed effective mechanisms to address conflict. Teams used their personal connections to persuade the leaders of surrounding armed groups to negotiate. They mobilized their communities so that all would actively support an end to the violence. They worked with the parties in conflict for months, sometimes years, until they found solutions that satisfied everyone involved. And they kept monitoring the implementation of any agreement reached, tapping into their personal and community networks whenever they needed to address emerging issues.

Their efforts paid off: They succeeded in containing fighting around their villages and promoting common interests across ethnic lines, at least for a time.

It was not the army, state or police who managed to control ethnic tensions and dampen violence. It was members of the communities themselves.

Local peace does not necessarily scale up to national peace. We still have no clear understanding of how to link bottom-up and top-down efforts effectively, so that individual and grass-roots initiatives contribute to macro-level stability and so that top-down processes do not undermine local achievements. What we do know is that only a combination of local, provincial, national, regional and international efforts can lead to

sustainable peace.

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Sadly, many people in eastern Congo still face poverty and violence. In the village of Kavumu (a couple of hours away from Idjwi, on the mainland), a group of inhabitants I met at the local market complained that at night, they fear being killed in their sleep by bandits who want to steal the few dollars they earned the previous day. The parents of baby girls keep worrying that their infants will be kidnapped, raped and subjected to genital mutilation, as has already happened to more than 40 babies in the past couple of years.

I have heard similar stories of fear, torture and despair throughout my 15 years of research. In eastern Congo, places like Idjwi — where grass-roots organizations, social networks, strong beliefs and individual agency conspire to curtail violence — are still very much exceptions to the norm.

But not all is lost in Congo. Many people strive for peace and manage to make a difference.

Activists, diplomats and development workers try to address tensions in places such as Congo through projects, aid and other resources that come from the outside. Very few focus on tapping into and unleashing the talent and potential that the Congolese and others throughout Africa possess. They may wish to reconsider this strategy.

Séverine Autesserre is an associate professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and a 2016 Andrew Carnegie fellow. She is the author of “Peaceland” and “The Trouble with the Congo.”