

# **Greasing the wheels of reconciliation in the Great Lakes region**

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## **Introduction**

Several interconnected elements have shaped the conflict in the Great Lakes region, including the interests of neighbouring countries, competition over natural and economic resources concerns over instability and lack of security, and ethnic chauvinism, to name but a few. This generally applies to all countries in the region, namely Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda. In addition, these countries are afflicted by poor governance and political opportunism, which leads to military action being used to resolve essentially social, political and economic problems (Cartier-Bresson 2003).

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If realistic possibilities for conflict resolution and transformation are to be developed, concerns about resources and security will have to be addressed. This article will focus only on the issues of resources and security, and will offer a perspective on how to transform conflicts by using resources and security as tools of reconciliation and reconstruction in the Great Lakes region.

## **Security and resources as sources of conflict in the Great Lakes region**

### **Security concerns**

Security remains a major issue throughout the region. There is a long history to the sources of conflict in the region. However, the recent cycle of violence in the region began with the 1993 civil war in Burundi, which was followed by the 1994 Rwandan genocide that targeted ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Both conflicts resulted in large numbers of refugees fleeing to neighbouring Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Before the Rwandan conflict spread to Zaire, both Tutsis and Hutus had been residing there in significant numbers. Rwanda, citing the need not only to protect its own citizens from attacks by Hutus, but also to protect Tutsi Congolese, launched incursions into the eastern DRC in 1996.

At the beginning of the war in the DRC (1996), Rwanda and Uganda formed an alliance with the Congolese armed resistance movement led by Laurent Kabila. However, this 'triple K' (Kampala-Kinshasa-Kigali) alliance fell apart in 1998 because of security concerns cited by Uganda and Rwanda. Uganda maintained that it needed to stop insurgents, particularly the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Allied Democratic Forces, from attacking Uganda through southern Sudan and eastern DRC. The Rwandan government invoked the right to 'self-defence' against cross-border incursions into its territory by DRC-based Hutu militias. In reaction to the growing hostilities, Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe justified their military intervention in the DRC stating that they were seeking to preserve the unity of a Southern African Development Community (SADC) member state. Chad also provided a small number of troops at the request of the DRC government.

Political and security justifications for Rwandan and Ugandan intervention notwithstanding, the opportunity to exploit the DRC's lucrative natural resources also provided several states in the region – Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe – with an incentive for military intervention. However, while the clamour for economic resources may well have proved to be an obstacle to peace in the DRC, the conflict was triggered by the security concerns of neighbouring states, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, who

argued that it was essential to stop the incursions by various armed groups based in Congo.

### **Concerns about resources**

One of the most perplexing issues in the DRC conflict has been, and still is, that of the exploitation of the DRC's natural resources. Illegal exploitation of the DRC's mineral resources has been a constant feature in discussions about the war in general and especially in the eastern part of the country. There is a debate about whether the exploitation of mineral resources is a main aim for foreign intervention or whether mining initiatives is a way of financing the war effort. It has long been established that the exploitation of these resources, including 'coltan' (columbite-tantalite), gold, and diamonds in the eastern Congo, and diamonds, copper, cobalt, and timber in central DRC, contributed to and exacerbated the conflict in the country. Concerned with reports of pillaging of resources by the foreign forces, the UN Security Council mandated an independent panel to investigate these allegations. In fact, in its presidential statement dated 2 June 2000 (S/PRST/2000/20), the Security Council requested that the Secretary-General establish a Panel of Experts on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth of the DRC. The objective was to research and analyse the links between the exploitation of the natural resources and other forms of wealth in the DRC and the continuation of the conflict. In its four reports, the UN Panel of Experts has named senior Ugandan and Rwandese armed forces officers and senior government officials and their families who are allegedly responsible for illegal exploitation of the DRC's natural resources and other abuses. It has also proposed that measures be taken against the states, individuals and companies most implicated in the exploitation, including travel bans, financial penalties and reductions in aid disbursements. In January 2003, in response to complaints raised by companies and some governments, the panel's mandate was extended to 31 October 2003. In its final report from October 2003 the panel largely documented the nexus of economic exploitation, arms trafficking, and armed conflict, stating that illegal exploitation remains one of the main sources of funding groups involved in perpetuating conflict. The Panel of Experts also listed companies based in Belgium, China, France, Germany, Israel, Spain, the UK and the United States that were allegedly involved in the illegal arms trade in the DRC. (See UN Security Council 2001a, 2001b and 2002b.)

Regional actors have been accused of aggression and 'foreign adventurism' with regard to Congolese territory and natural resources. In other words, while parties to the conflict in the DRC may have been motivated originally by security concerns, their continued presence in the DRC can be attributed to economic gains derived from the DRC. The report further stated that criminal groups linked to the armies of Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe and the government of the DRC have benefited from such conflicts. This is critical to the peace process, because according to reports, these 'groups will not disband

voluntarily ... they have built up a self-financing war economy centred on mineral exploitation' (UN Security Council 2002b).

The rationale for intervention by neighbouring states became self-enforcing and the localised conflicts became regional. As such, the conflicts within and among the countries of the Great Lakes region require regionally based and targeted solutions, along with the cooperation of other, relevant neighbouring states.

## **Transforming security and resources from sources of conflict to options for reconciliation and reconstruction in the Great Lakes region**

Reconciliation and reconstruction are essential elements of peacebuilding. The key to transforming conflicts is to build strong, equitable relations where distrust and fear were once the norm (Kriesberg 1998:322–335).

In the Great Lakes region, as in many other African countries, violent conflict has become the 'normal' state of affairs. Control of economic resources has become an important factor in motivating and sustaining armed conflicts. Complex political economies, which often hide behind the outward symbols of statehood and national sovereignty, have been rooted in the pursuance of conflict. The challenge therefore is to transform regional and national political 'parasite' economies that rely on violent conflict into healthy systems based on political participation, social and economic inclusion, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Accordingly, any attempt at transforming conflicts to ensure reconciliation and reconstruction in the region requires stimulating positive developments in the region. Such developments will reassure the affected countries that their security and economic interests are better served through fostering stability and improving relations with their neighbours than through allowing their neighbours' turmoil to deflect them from their objective of peace, reconciliation, democracy, and economic development.

Moreover, in terms of ensuring security, ignoring the tensions and misunderstanding among Burundi, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda will have far-reaching implications for the stability and socioeconomic development of the region because resources will be diverted from human and economic development to warfare. For this reason it is important for these countries to cooperate towards the restoration of peaceful dialogue and cordial interstate relations. In this regard, allegations of support to belligerent proxy armed movements by the neighbouring states must be investigated and stopped. Armed incursions by rebel groups of one state into another can lead to rising tensions and full-blown interstate armed conflict which, if not promptly addressed, will affect the long-

term well-being and socioeconomic development of both populations. If rebel groups in Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda are not disarmed and rebel incursions prevented, and interstate aggression is not arrested and territorial integrity secured, the result may be a renewal of interstate conflicts and destabilisation or even disintegration of the countries concerned.

The Great Lakes region is rich in the natural resources that are at stake for many actors in the conflict. However, natural resources also harbour potential for post-conflict rehabilitation and development. Countries should therefore examine ways of limiting the exploitation of such resources for the purpose of funding conflict. They should furthermore seek to identify and promote the means by which such resources can be safeguarded and managed in a way that will reduce conflict and ensure benefit to the population. Equally, there is a need to develop institutions and frameworks for the integration and transformation of the informal economy to a formal economy, governed by a reasonable rule of law, transparency and efficiency, without marginalising local and regional actors.

## **Concluding remarks**

While the conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes region are complex and involve a multiplicity of interlocking regional and international actors, we should recognise that the region has made some progress in overcoming instability, even though several threats remain.

Each country in the region has pursued its own process of internal normalisation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the reconciliation process in one country is strongly linked to that in the others. Any durable solution to the issue of insecurity in the region must have a regional character. It is therefore important that the region's constituent states understand that their security and economic interests are better served by fostering stability and improving relations with their neighbours than by allowing turmoil to prevail.

At the level of regional integration it is important to use a forum, such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes, to speed up the normalisation process among all these states and to define strategies for political and economic integration in the region. Reviving the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries would also be a vital step towards ensuring stability. Other social, cultural and scientific institutions can also contribute to deepening the progress.

Moreover, countries in the Great Lakes region should work towards establishing rule of law. This implies promoting democratic governance and respect for human rights, and

terminating impunity at every level through the creation of effective and independent courts and tribunals. Efforts can be made to set up functional Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. There should be support for indigenous institutions for resolving disputes, for example the *Gacaca* courts in Rwanda set up to address accountability for atrocities and reconciliation even if the system has recently come under criticism.

Furthermore, in order to build sustainable peace, countries in the region should work on political cohabitation and border security. The security of borders must be guaranteed and the efficacy of checkpoints ensured. To reach these objectives, it is necessary to strengthen the human resource capacity of the security sector in every country in the region, as well as the regime to monitor and prevent illicit small arms trafficking, particularly in the border areas. Ultimately, it is also important for these countries to promote peaceful coexistence among themselves by respecting the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of their neighbours.

In summary, close to one-third of all civil wars that have ended in Africa have re-ignited. Therefore postconflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC need to be consolidated. Ultimately, peace and stability have to become a reality for the millions of citizens in this region to ensure that we effectively move from crises and conflicts to security and stability.

## References

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