HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN THE DRC

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Introduction

The Congo Basin entered the world's history almost "by infraction", with a litany of forms of extortion and of mineral extraction that stretches from Razzia, with its slave trade and rubber, to Miba, with diamonds, niobium and coltan. The relationship of local communities with the outside world has constantly been marked by strategies of external coercion, facilitated from the inside by local chiefs twisting traditional patterns of submission to authority, for personal or family-centered advantages. Such patterns, although not unique to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), have had unparalleled negative consequences in a country characterised by incommensurable natural resources and an inversely proportional capacity of state structures to exert their authority. The latest stage of such an explosive mixture of rich resources and lack of control or regulation, may be the threat of an endless inflow of small arms into the DRC – driven by a combination of power games at local or regional levels, and a continued preference for informal forms of trade.

The current humanitarian situation and the self-deficiency syndrome that have characterised the country's defense and security capacities since the early 1990s must be gauged against this unique historical and institutional background. The widespread lootings in September 1991 and January 1993 as well as the waves of ethnic violence in Shaba (Katanga) and in Masisi (North Kivu) were an early manifestation of a decaying state, observable way before the Burundian and Rwandan crises started to spill over in Zaire.

The years 1998-2003: the figures of fear

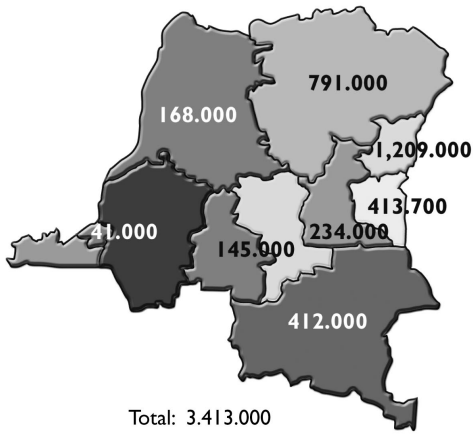
400,000 persons were displaced during the first phase of the conflict between August and December 1998, especially in northern Katanga, southern Kivu and in Bas-Congo (following the Rwandan army's failed raid against Kinshasa). Later on, between January and July 1999, a further 700,000 persons were thought to have been driven away from their homes as the conflict spread towards Equateur and Kasai, while subsiding in Bas-Congo. Following

the signing of the Lusaka Agreement, the year 2000 can be considered retrospectively as the most despairing one in terms of humanitarian space and of the level of humanitarian response to rising demands. Over 1,8 million displaced could be "guessed" in nine out of the country's eleven provinces. Practically all the rural communities of northern and southern Kivu were affected one way or another by the war, including numerous cases of repeated displacements.

The most extreme forms of manipulation of ethnic differences were unleashed in Ituri, but also in some parts of South Kivu, which had long been abandoned by the state. 2002 was marked by a massive displacement in North Kivu, following the volcanic eruption of Nyiragongo near Goma, and by a particularly violent wave of armed violence after the withdrawal of foreign forces in October. Approximately 2,5 million persons were displaced by the end of the year 2002.

In August 2003, after months of terrible clashes in the Ituri district, and in Kivu and Maniema provinces, over 3,4 million persons were estimated to be displaced. North Kivu and Ituri alone represented 2 million displaced, thus reflecting the level of fear and mobility (which characterise every family) as a result of a series of military conquests and withdrawals. Meanwhile, over 350,000 Congolese were still resorting to refugee status in Congo-Brazzaville, Zambia or Tanzania, and approximately 250,000 foreigners from six neighbouring countries had sought asylum in war-torn DRC.

Map 1: Displaced Congolese in August 2003 – a rough estimate



+ Around 350.000 Congolese refugees outside, over 250.000 foreign refugees inside DRC

Human displacements: The war in Congo revolves around terror on civilians

Beyond the figures, what matters most is the characteristics of this massive displacement of people. Many of the 3,4 million displaced have not been direct witnesses of violence in their areas of normal residence. More frequently than not, displacements are massive and of a preventative nature, based on a collective knowledge of the lethal risks faced by those ready to defend their belongings, their physical integrity and their villages against armed elements. As for the latter, years of unpaid salaries and total lack of discipline, as well as a sense of self-hatred directly linked to their submission to practices of violence against their own compatriots, have made them the most absolute threat to human security in the DRC (together with a few Interahamwe and ex-FAR militiamen in some specific areas).

There is a direct link between the scale and nature of displacements on the one hand, and the country's appalling record in terms human security on the other hand. Between 2000 and 2003, the International Rescue Committee, a non-governmental organisation, has carried out statistical surveys on mortality and morbidity figures which have formed the basis for the description of the DRC conflict as the deadliest place since the Second World War. Yet the main sources of human deaths have little to do with battlefields. Indeed, the war in DRC is probably a case of extreme contradiction between the relative absence of "conventional clashes" and the number of collateral casualties.

Some examples can best describe the environment in which rural populations in eastern DRC have found themselves since 1994 (the date marking the arrival of Rwandan militias together with refugees):

- The *Mangene phenomenon* describes the way entire villages in Maniema and Kivu provinces, as well as in Ituri, pre-empt the usually brutal arrival of armed elements by making their way through dense forests with a view to reaching inhospitable areas where they will spend months away from armed extortions. They also hide the village's sacred instruments and icons further away into the forest. Prior to the years of armed conflict, similar options were taken to avoid the Mobutu regime's civil and military predators. Staying away from health facilities and choosing the least attractive areas of residence, these families usually face sickness and death in massive proportions;
- In Mwenga (South Kivu), the communities have long been used to preparing themselves for "organised extortions", three times a month, to the respective benefit of Interahamwe/ex-FAR militiamen, RCD soldiers and Mayi Mayi fighters. Such practices have been found less costly in material and human terms than having to face surprise raids by any of the three groups;

- Women in the vicinity of Shabunda, in South Kivu, have resorted throughout the war to the practice of leaving fifty per cent of the wood or basic food they had collected during the day to the "sniper" (RCD or Mayi Mayi armed element) blocking their way on one of the few roads leading back to town. Frequent cases of rapes, kidnapping and forced transportation could further describe these "transactions".

More generally, the war has shaped cycles of victimisation and submission, whereby the victims of the day could become, forcibly, perpetrators the day after. Such extreme practices as those cases of forced cannibalism ascertained by a UN inquiry in Mambasa (Ituri, Oriental Province) in December 2002, or allegedly during the same period in government-held territories of Ankoro in Katanga, must be understood along the same lines. Likewise, they explain how villagers looted and taken as porters by armed militias can follow their abductors towards the next village and participate in the new wave of looting and violence against their neighbors and occasional victims.

In Ituri, more than anywhere else, displacements are led by terror, and characterise the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Since June 1999, the Lendu and Hema communities have *volens nolens* internalised a perception of themselves, which defines their mutual behaviors, and their territorial boundaries. The Lendu have internalised the image of themselves projected by Hema political and business leaders, who consider that they should be kept away from towns and villages, from schools and health facilities, owing to their indiscipline and wild nature (in a monstrous and magnified reminiscence of the ethnical descriptions made by Belgian settlers half a century ago). In reaction to that perception, Lendu political and military leaders have developed a sense of a "legitimate right to revenge" which has, over the years, manifested itself in genocidal patterns against Hema civilians. For their part, Hema political leaders have extensively used these patterns of blind revenge by Lendu militiamen as a justification of their natural vocation to protect themselves by ruling Ituri and by exerting self-defense through the use of heavy weaponry against Lendu villages and through exclusive control of Bunia. The most immediate consequences of these infernal logics have been endless waves of displacements and indescribable patterns of fear.

In Western DRC (Equateur) and eastern Katanga, where armed clashes subsided by and large two years ago, only banditry and a total lack of confidence *vis-à-vis* any "armed authority" explain the persistence of displacement patterns, together with widespread misery and the lack of clothes that keep, for instance, mothers away from health and nutrition centers.

Given the country's geography, nowhere else in the world are displaced communities scattered through as wide a territory as in the DRC. To identify, enumerate and assist the internally displaced in a country described as

"Europe without roads" amounts to an impossible task. As a result, operational costs are among the highest in the world, especially for emergency food distribution. In the absence of camps (with a few exceptions in Bunia, Mbandaka, Kalémie and in some areas of the Kivu provinces) and without registration procedures, statistics on displacements, as collected and treated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, are of empirical nature and depend on a matrix of humanitarian actors at local level. Current efforts are centered on the issue of protecting collectively, rather than counting, the displaced.

Humanitarian crisis: Facts and figures

The DRC is typically affected by a complex humanitarian crisis, the multiple facets of which revolve around patterns of dilution of any sense of responsibility on the part of the many would-be authorities. The following factors describe how the war in DRC has "quietly" cost so many lives. They reflect the obvious, namely, the fact that the DRC has been primarily affected by the effects of a predatory form of political, administrative and economic rule, at every level:

- IRC figures (as mentioned earlier) make reference to 3,3 million excess-deaths (caused by disease, hunger). It is clear that the death toll since 1998 derives primarily from three forms of destitution, apart from direct vio lence which, can explain up to 300,000 of these deaths:
  - o lack of financial means that keeps would-be patients and their parents away from markets, as well as health or nutrition facilities;
  - o lack of inputs and human resources in health and nutrition facilities, whichforces households and individuals to resort to exhausted self-medication or self-survival mechanisms; and
  - o lack of access to such facilities due to the predatory behavior of "armed authorities".
- 213 children out of 1,000 children of the same class of age, die before reaching 1 year in eastern DRC (UNICEF, 2002);
- 1,289 women out of 100,000 die of delivery-related problems – this figure is among the highest in the world. This is not only true in eastern DRC. In Kinshasa, the national capital in which more than half of the country's health personnel are concentrated, twenty pregnant women or new mothers die on average every day for reasons related to an unhealthy environment.
- According to FAO[2] and to a countrywide network of thematic working groups on food security, over 20 million people are probably food insecure

since the early stages of the war, because of interrupted commercial outlets, frontlines, displacements and the resulting decrease in food production (aggravated by large scale damages caused in western DRC by the "cassava disease" otherwise named mosaic);[3]

- UNICEF[4] estimated the school drop-out rate at 67% in 2002. Education has hardly ever been considered a priority area for humanitarian funds (with the notable exception of Norway), despite the fact that the protracted absence of any school alternative for a whole generation of children since 1996 is, in itself, a cause of perpetuation of the armed conflict. The slogan "wipe out the blackboard" used by MLC and RCD-National militiamen during their deadly raid on Mambasa (southern Ituri) in December 2002, and the particular efforts displayed by them in destroying schools can be understood among other reasons as a way for young armed elements of taking revenge on "normal" children;
- By the same token, the presence of over 20,000 child soldiers (working figures can rise up to 50,000) within the ranks of all the armed factions, is the most eloquent manifestation of the self-destructive process that has taken place since 1996. Together with a diversification in the flow of small and cheap arms, linked to income generated by informal mining activities (using children in small and hazardous corridors), the recruiting of children and their use as tools to explore the boundaries of cruelty and predation against other civilians, has become the easiest task of any would-be or established warlord. Humanitarian actors, as well as child protection advisers, are often confronted with proud political leaders claiming that they, at least, have provided their younger fellows with a horizon and (violent) means to get a daily meal; and,
- HIV/AIDS has spread throughout the DRC during these years of military conquests, defeats and manifestations of self-hatred by armed elements. So far, however, the relative absence of accurate figures, especially in eastern DRC, makes it difficult to get a global view of the real extent of the damage.

Uneasy terrain for humanitarian actors and beneficiaries

In April 2001, six Red Cross officers were assassinated between two military roadblocks somewhere between Fataki and Bunia in Ituri. They were among the only humanitarian organisations active in the area. However, personal danger, staggering violations of human rights and appalling infrastructure are not the only adverse factors hampering humanitarian response. As shown in reference to the "FAO figure" (20 million food insecure), excessive expecta-

tions are placed *vis-à-vis* relief workers. The latter, in turn, being the only valid actors on the ground (together with MONUC personnel and in particular sections in charge of civil affairs, church structures and a handful of economic actors) are faced with overwhelming demands. These range from job opportunities, protection against armed violence, advocacy, tutorship of local organisations, to restoration of school and communication infrastructure. Being obviously unable to address the legacy of decades of corruption and irresponsibility, they have become easy targets in environments where armed actors seek to impose an order of terror submission and exclusion.

In particular, the principle of non assistance to armed elements, and its uneasy application on the ground, often leads to violent manifestations of frustration. In Isiro, the leader of RCD-National has threatened the only NGO active in the area that he would himself force the gate of the NGO's warehouse should his soldiers need drugs and motorbikes. He forgot to thank the same NGO for having saved hundreds of thousands of lives since the onset of the war, in spite of such a hostile environment and other blatant examples of disregard for the plight of Congolese civilians.

Another adverse effect of a decade of crises and wars, is the appalling contrast that has grown between humanitarian actors on the one hand, and the general working conditions of state and local non-governmental structures and actors on the other hand. In the 1980s, the former Kivu province had experienced the impressive nascence of civil society, entirely geared towards emancipation *vis-à-vis* Mobutu's regime. Such a movement had managed, for instance, to overcome the risk of local implosion following the wave of civil unrest in Masisi in 1993. It also had initiated development schemes at micro levels, aimed at strengthening communities' capacity for self-sustainability. The sudden influx of Burundian and Rwandan refugees in 1993-1994 was bound to relegate these local initiatives to the bottom of a new priority list set altogether by the facts (over a million of people to feed, cure and host as a matter of urgency) and by the donor community. Since then, funds for community-based initiatives have only been secured by a handful of actors, including UNDP/UNOPS[5] through small-scale projects.

As a result, an atmosphere of resentment, frustration and mistrust has often characterised the working relationship (if any) between local and international non-governmental or UN organisations. This also applies to local state structures, tempted or forced to see in humanitarian structures their only possible source of income to compensate for the decade-long absence of any decent and regular salary. Frequent and uneasy exchanges punctuate the daily work of relief organisations, forced to explain to frustrated civil servants and local actors that they and their families do not constitute the primary target groups to benefit from emergency relief, and that using objective criteria of vulnerability clearly show that civilians deprived of any authority, status or