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"A WAR IN CONGO? WHERE'S THE NEWS?"

The dramatic humanitarian situation in the Eastern and North-eastern provinces

Andrea Pontiroli Head of media relations at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Italy

A forgotten crisis

Over the years, among the most dramatic and most neglected humanitarian crises around the globe, there is always the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the humanitarian consequences for the civilian population of the conflict and the violence that have ravaged the country appallingly.

The situation is far from ameliorating, on the contrary, over the last two years, the population in the East and the Northeast of the country has suffered continuous violence from different armed groups. In 2008 a full scale war, which included many armed groups but mainly between the Congolese Army (FARDC), the rebel group of the National Congress for the People's Defense (CNDP) and the rebel group of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), ravaged North Kivu (and partly South Kivu), displacing hundreds of thousands of people. In 2009, the full scale war in North Kivu was replaced by guerrilla warfare, this time opposing the Congolese Army, supported by the UN Mission in DRC (MONUC) and the Rwandan Army, against the FDLR in North and South Kivu. At the end of 2008, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group, began a series of attacks in Haut-Uélé, and

since then the civilian population has had to endure extreme levels of violence, caused by attacks perpetrated by the LRA that were further exacerbated by the military operations against the LRA by the Congolese, the Ugandan and the South Sudan Army; all this led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

It is important to stress the dramatic humanitarian situation faced by the almost totality of the population in DRC. After a few years of relative calm, in 2009 also the region of Ituri, in Eastern DRC, was again hit by violence and

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tensions between the Front for Patriotic Resistance of Ituri (FRPI) and the Congolese Army (FARDC), causing the displacement of 50,000 people. Also, towards the end of October 2009, extreme violence between two ethnic groups hit the Equateur Province, in the West of DRC, and some 100,000 people had to flee and take refuge in the neighbouring Republic of Congo. More generally, people in all regions of DRC, even those at peace, have to endure extreme poverty, a perpetual lack of access to health care and recurring epidemics.

The war is over, the war continues: a short history of the conflict

Following its independence from Belgium in 1960, what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo went through a period of political and military struggles that ended in 1965, when Colonel Joseph Desire Mobutu took power and began a thirty-two year rule, using its country's mineral wealth to maintain power and forge internal and international alliances. In 1997, Mobutu was ousted by Laurent Kabila, supported by Rwanda and Uganda. The following year, Rwandan troops, backing Congolese Tutsi rebels, invaded DRC, and Kabila asked Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia to intervene in its defence: it was the beginning of a war – also known as Africa's World War - which claimed an estimated 3 millions lives between 1997 and 2002, from violence and the consequences of the war, particularly lack of access to medical care. In 1999, a ceasefire was signed and in 2000 the UN Security Council approved the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, which has then become one of the largest peacekeeping

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forces in the world (over 20,000 troops). In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and was replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila. In 2002, the official and gradual withdrawal of foreign troops began. However, while the war was officially over, insecurity and violence against the civilian population went on, and the conflict *de facto* continued in the Eastern provinces of the country, i.e. Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu and Katanga, where various armed groups, including Rwandan-backed Tutsi and the Hutu Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, Mai-Mai and the Lord's Resistance Army continued to fight amongst themselves and against the Congolese Army, with the civilian population trapped in what often appeared as an everlasting cycle of violence. In the meantime, political negotiations led to the first presidential elections in 2006, won by Joseph Kabila. However, little has changed for the people in the East. Security for the civilian population remained precarious, and eventually deteriorated in 2008 and 2009 both in the East and North East of the country.

North (and South) Kivu: people on the run and the double failure of the international community

Following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, North and South Kivu have become the battleground, at times official, at times unofficial, between various armed groups, including Rwandan troops, Rwanda-supported Tutsi militias, Rwandan and Congolese Hutu militias, and the Congolese Army. From 1998 until 2003, North and South Kivu were, *de facto* if not *ex lege*, politically and military autonomous from the DRC, also with a dif-

ferent name, RCD – *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*. In 2003, a peace pact was signed at the closing ceremony of the Inter Congolese Dialogue in Sun City, in South Africa, which established a national two-year transitional government to guide the DRC to its first democratic elections, which took place in 2006. However, violence, especially in the East of the country, never ceased.

On 21 January 2008, the different armed groups fighting in North (and South) Kivu, including the Congolese Army, the Rwanda-backed CNDP (Tutsi) led by General Laurent Nkunda and Rwandan Hutu militias, signed a ceasefire agreement that should have ended fighting in the East of the country. However, the ceasefire did little to ease the violence. Armed groups broke the agreement within hours. According to humanitarian workers on the ground, the humanitarian situation in North Kivu at the beginning of 2008 was disastrous, with malnutrition and diseases the main killers. In one district only of North Kivu, Masisi, Médecins Sans Frontières had, in late January, 900 children

under treatment for acute malnutrition. People continued to die from preventable problems, which were becoming lethal because they could not get access to basic health care due to the ongoing conflict. And another extremely disturbing aspect of the conflict in DRC continued to damn the lives of many, i.e. sexual violence. In North Kivu, in January, the

very month the ceasefire had been agreed, 550 rape cases were admitted to MSF facilities.

Then, in April 2008 clashes between the Congolese Army and Rwandan Hutu militias (former allies in Eastern Congo) left thousands of people displaced. And at the end of August, heavy clashes between the Congolese Army and CNDP troops marked the beginning of a new phase of full scale war. The fighting in North Kivu was so intense that MSF, often the only international humanitarian medical organisation with a permanent presence in the zones hit by the conflict, had to evacuate its teams from certain areas and redeploy its staff.

At the beginning of 2008, one million people, i.e. a fourth of the total population of North and South Kivu, were estimated to be internally displaced. Since the beginning of the new full-scale war at the end of August, hundreds of thousands more people had to flee their homes, living in constant fear, without the means to meet their most basic needs. People had to flee their villages, or the camps where they had sought refuge from previous violence; once again they had to leave all their few belongings behind. Once again, they had to run for their lives, without a safe place to go to. Many of them had to spend days, or even weeks, hiding in the forests, often with no choice but feeding themselves with leaves and roots, without shelter, with no access to medical care (a pattern already witnessed a few years before in Katanga, where the civilian population had to flee the fighting between the Mai Mai and the Congolese Army). This had dramatic effects on the health situation of these people, many of them already weakened by years of misery and

violence. And it had a particularly dramatic effect on children – while an adult can survive with little or no food for a time, a child, especially under 5, is likely to develop malnutrition. And in fact, as it had happened in Katanga, and as it more and more often happens when conflict-related displacements occur, many children who reached safe areas presented symptoms of malnutrition. Moreover, given the nature of the conflict – a conflict whose parties often changed alliances, and a front line continuously moving – many people had to flee over and over again: once they had found a place they considered safe, the front line moved once again, and once again they had to flee, afraid of violence, retaliations, or forcible recruitment.

To have an idea of the extreme violence that the civilian population had to endure, it suffices to give a few numbers: in 2008, more than 6,700 victims of sexual violence received specialised medical care and counselling in various MSF programmes across North and South Kivu. In Nyanzale (North Kivu) alone, more than 3,500 victims were treated; 1,450 in the areas of Kitchanga and Mweso (North Kivu).

In the meantime, the international community did very little. Yes, the MONUC was in North and South Kivu, in theory to protect the civilian population. Yes, in Goma, the capital of North Kivu, a plethora of UN agencies and NGOs existed, in theory to assist the civilian population. The reality in the field was, however, very different. In September 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) denounced that many violations of international humanitarian law, including looting and rape, had been committed by weapon bearers against civilians, and the following month MSF denounced that the civilian population was neither protected, nor assisted. Outside of Goma, a few hours drive from the city, the civilian population was grouped in camps where humanitarian assistance was either absent or insufficient and intermittent. In many of these camps, MSF was the only humanitarian organisation with a permanent presence – but only provided medical assistance. As for the lack of protection by the MONUC, it was often felt that MONUC was supporting the Congolese Army against the CNDP, instead of being a force of interposition to protect the civilian population.

Moreover, it was obvious that the few humanitarian organisations present in the areas of conflict could only reach a small part of those in needs. In the words of the MSF Head of Mission in North Kivu at the time, Anne Taylor, “reaching these people is extremely difficult because of the volatile security context and because they are constantly on the move. But it is not impossible. We just keep trying and trying until we can find them and provide some vital assistance. But we are aware that we are only dealing with a small part of this humanitarian catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands are out of reach.”

In the meantime, the rest of the world took little notice. Even international media did not bother to cover what was happening in the area, in spite of several press releases issued by the main humanitarian organizations working in the field. A number of

international correspondents contacted by the author, asking them to cover the new tragedy unfolding in the Kivu, replied very candidly: “A war in Congo? Where’s the news?”

Only when the fighting reached the outskirts of Goma at the end of October, the capital of North Kivu, did the international media, and the international community, take notice. With mixed consequences: on the one hand, the conflict in the Kivu and the suffering of its people were, finally, on the first page of all the main newspapers around the world. On the other hand, many considered the conflict only insofar, and as long as, this concerned the immediate surroundings of Goma. Moreover, an immediate reaction was the use of relief convoys under armed escort by MONUC to Goma and Rutshuru – an action that may have aimed at improving access for humanitarian aid groups, but that could in fact reduce access to the populations in danger, by creating the risk of aid being manipulated and of humanitarian actors losing their in-

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dependence and being seen as parties to the conflict since the MONUC was already perceived as supporting the Congolese Army.

In January 2009, a significant change in the pattern of the conflict occurred, with the beginning of a joint military operation by DRC and Rwanda against the CNDP (led by General Laurent Nkunda and formerly supported by Rwanda). Finally, Nkunda was arrested in Rwanda, and the Congolese Army, supported by MONUC, began fighting together with the Rwandan Army against the Hutu rebels belonging to the FDLR. Military operations began in January in North Kivu and were extended to South Kivu in August.

In the meantime, by the end of 2008 the international community had somehow decided that the emergency phase was over – even more so, with the arrest of Nkunda in Rwanda. It was as if enough international attention had already been devoted to the people of North and South Kivu. In fact, the situation for the inhabitants of North and South Kivu never really changed much throughout 2009. As mentioned above, the fighting between the Congolese Army, the CNDP and the FDLR that characterized 2008 was simply replaced by the fighting between the Congolese Army and the FDLR. Again, villages were attacked, houses were burnt, people were killed, raped, wounded, tens of thousands had to run for their lives. Villages suspected of being allied with one side were sometimes attacked and systematically destroyed. In the first six months of 2009 alone, Medical teams from MSF treated 2,800 victims of sexual violence in North Kivu. And in November, seven MSF vaccination sites, where thousands of civilians had gathered, came under fire during attacks by

the Congolese army against the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). This abuse of humanitarian aid for military purposes marked another step towards an increasingly worrying situation.

In July 2009, Max Hadorn, head of the ICRC delegation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, said in an interview that, according to an independent survey carried out for the ICRC, armed conflict in North and South Kivu had affected 76% of the population. 58% of the population had been displaced, 47% had lost a close relative and 28% knew someone who has fallen victim to sexual violence.

In November 2009 a report by the United Nations Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo stated that "military operations against the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* have failed to dismantle the organization's political and military structures on the ground in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo" and that "FARDC and non-governmental armed groups continue to perpetrate human rights abuses, in the context of Kimia II operations in contravention of international humanitarian law. Both FARDC and FDLR have been involved in significant killings of civilians and other abuses from March to October 2009

According to Human Rights Watch, all sides to the conflict have attacked civilians: the FDLR, the Congolese Army, even the Rwandan Army. They also state that MONUC failed in protecting the civilian population

causing additional waves of displacement of several hundred thousand civilians". It is interesting to note that, only 3 months before, Alan Doss, head of MONUC, had declared that the joint operations by the MONUC and the Congolese Army against the FDLR had been "largely positive".

As denounced by Human Rights Watch in a report in December 2009, significantly entitled "You Will Be Punished – Attacks on Civilians in Eastern Congo", all throughout 2009 attacks against the civilian population have continued, the civilian population often being accused of being collaborator of one side or the other and being expressly targeted. Between January and September 2009, Human Rights Watch has documented the deliberate killing of 1,400 civilians, the rape of 7,500 women and girls. According to Human Rights Watch, all sides to the conflict have attacked civilians: the FDLR, the Congolese Army, even the Rwandan Army. They also state that MONUC failed in protecting the civilian population.

North-eastern DR Congo: a "new" crisis in the making, another forgotten crisis?

On Christmas Day, 2008, the city of Faradje, in Haut-Uélé, was attacked by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group. The attack, that occurred after fighting between the Uganda, South Sudan and DRC armies against the

LRA, provoked several dead (600 men, women and children, according to Human Rights Watch) and wounded, and the displacement of about 15,000 people (the population of Faradje was, before the attack, 25,000). This attack marked a new scale of a new tragedy for the people of DRC, this time in the Northeast of the country. During the following weeks, several other towns in Haut-Uélé were attacked. Information were extremely scattered, very few humanitarian organisations were and are present in the area. The attacks were particularly worrisome because, as witnessed by the first MSF medical teams who reached the sites of the attacks to provide emergency care, the combatants had left very few wounded. "They obviously come to kill", was the statement by a doctor, who added that "the couple of wounded we nursed were clearly left for dead. That is what saved them". Also, following an infamous pattern known all too well in Northern Uganda, the LRA kidnapped children, to use them as child soldiers.

Between 25 December 2008 and the end of January 2009, more than 50 villages and towns in Haut-Uélé were attacked. People had no choice but to flee their villages, taking refuge in the bush to save their lives, waiting for a humanitarian assistance that often failed to arrive because of the extreme levels of insecurity. Medical teams collected dramatic eyewitnesses' accounts, describing horrific scenes. One survivor of one of these attacks on Christmas Day described the killing of his loved ones. "They quickly took them out to the grasslands and systematically executed them.

No one was spared – children, infants, pregnant women, the elderly, all killed. More than 60 people". MSF medical teams, at the end of January, confirmed that the death toll of these attacks had reached 900, while only 17 were the survivors MSF was able to treat – all of them presenting wounds caused by clubbing or stabbing. This terrible humanitarian situation led MSF to publicly denounce, in February 2009, the inaction of the international community to protect and assist the population.

In June, and then again in October 2009, MSF reiterated its extreme concern for the situation in Northeast Congo. Attacks by the LRA and clashes between the LRA and the Congolese and Ugandan Army have been expanding throughout the year to new areas, reaching villages also in Bas-Uélé, and in neighbouring regions in Southern Sudan and Central Africa Republic. Hundreds of thousands of people are estimated to have been displaced, some of them having to flee over and over again from violence. "New people are being displaced every day in the region", said in October Pierre Kernen, MSF coordinator in Niangara, in Haut-Uélé. "They have been forced to flee one time, two times, three times. They have sought shelter with local families or in empty buildings but they still don't feel safe here. We are providing medical and psychological care, but we have our limits. These people also urgently need food, clean water, shelter and proper living conditions".

Heart of Darkness?

On 8 December 2009 UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has recommended that the mandate of MONUC in Congo be extended by just six months instead of the usual year, in spite of a dramatic rise of violence and human rights abuses in the East and Northeast of the country. Is the DRC thus doomed to remain a “heart of darkness” even as we enter the second decade of this millennium? Events occurring in the East and Northeast of the country, which have been ravaged by new wars (Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé) and old wars revisited (North and South Kivu) are hardly making any news. In spite of the real difficulties that exist in reaching the deep causes of these wars and violence and solving them, a greater effort on the part of the international community is both necessary and possible to bring protection and humanitarian assistance to the people of these regions, who have endured unimaginable levels of violence for too long, while the rest of the world took very little notice, and very little action, indeed.

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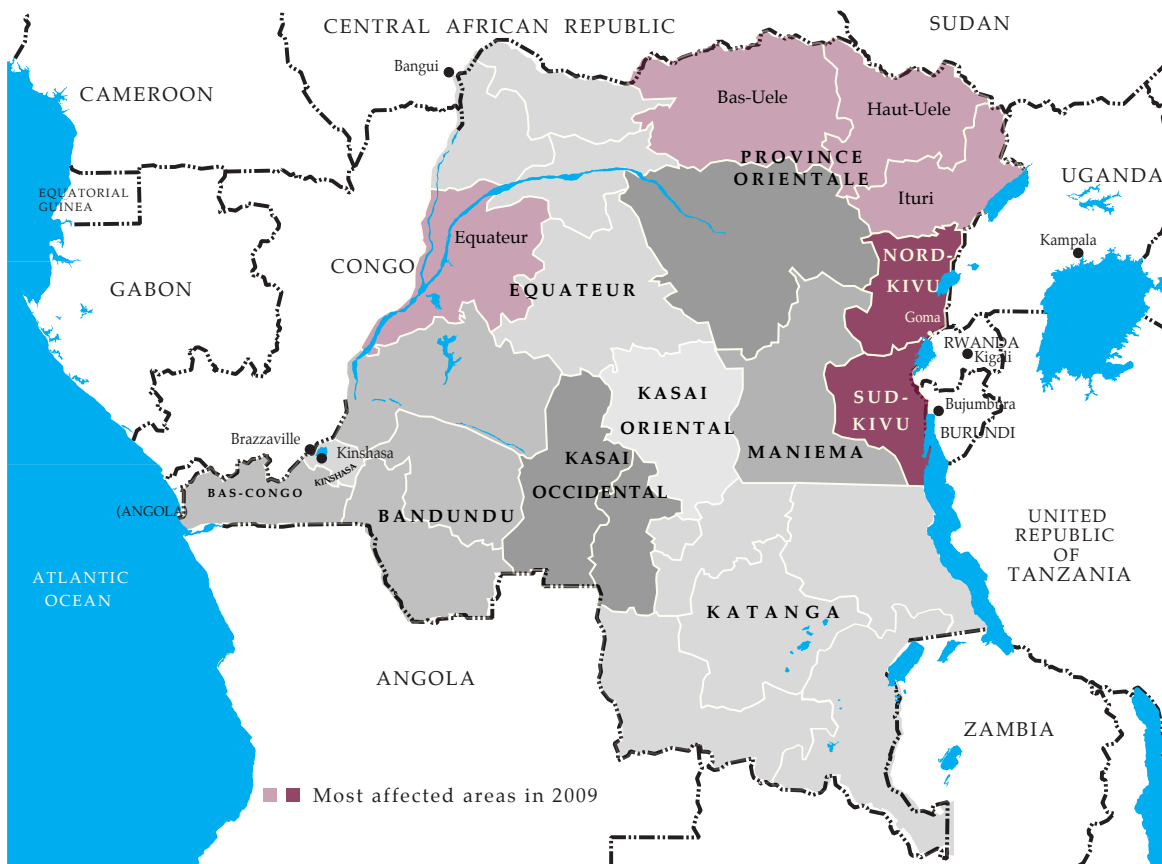
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Pontiroli is head of media relations at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Italy. He worked as MSF emergency communications officer in North Kivu in October 2008, and he previously worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Rwanda and Burundi. He holds a MSc International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences.



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