Report

The Search for Elusive Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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29 December 2015

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) formerly known as Zaire, is a vast country with an enormous amount of untapped natural resources. Since independence over 50 years ago, the country has experienced sustained conflicts, with devastating effects on the people and economy. [Getty Images]

Abstract

The DRC remains unstable 50 years after independence. Just like at independence, the country is fractured along ethnic lines and has witnessed sustained conflicts. The conflicts are largely a result of poor leadership, struggle for citizenship, resource competition and exclusion of others from accessing state resources. The consequences of the conflicts have been devastating; several generations are traumatized and suspicions run high among citizens. The effects of the conflict prompted African, international and regional bodies as well as governments, to push for sustained peace in the country. Thus a peace operation was established with United Nations and African Union providing leadership. The peace process produced several lessons for peace practitioners – including the need for collaborative actions anchored on partnership building, resource mobilization as well cultivating strong political support at the community, national and international levels. This paper has revealed that peace processes are complex and full of uncertainties, and that success requires honesty and commitment by stakeholders.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) formerly known as Zaire, is a vast country with an enormous amount of untapped natural resources. Since independence over 50 years ago, the country has experienced sustained conflicts, with devastating effects on the people and economy.

In the mid-1990s, after several years of lull under Mobutu, a new rebellion started in the eastern part of the country – in the city of Goma. This was followed by a second rebellion in the late 1990s that again began in eastern Congo. This conflict has continued

in spite of several peace agreements were entered into by the warring parties. The sustained conflict is blamed on the presence of over a dozen militia and extremist groups, both foreign and Congolese, in eastern Congo, and the failure of the parties to fully implement the signed peace agreements(1).

In late 2008, in an attempt to reduce conflicts and stabilize the region, the governments of Rwanda and the DRC agreed to launch a joint military offensive against the National Congress for the Defense of the Congolese People (CNDP) and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). They also agreed to restore full diplomatic relations and to activate economic cooperation. In January 2009, Rwanda and DRC launched the joint military operation in eastern Congo(2). In late February of that year, as part of the agreement reached with the DRC, Rwandese forces pulled out of the region. The joint military operations achieved some level of success, by reduced the capacity of rebel groups in the eastern Congo significantly, giving hope of peace finally returning to the region.

Regional and international action has repeatedly been launched to restore sustainable peace in DRC. For a while, progress remained elusive as peace agreements were broken over and over again, and recurring conflicts was discouraging. Even today, the DRC is considered to be at war despite all the peace efforts. The forthcoming elections are a particular source of new tensions, and intermittent conflicts are being experienced in some parts of the country.

The Complexity of the DRC Conflicts

One of the factors that have significantly complicated the conflict is the involvement of foreign and internal militias in the conflict. In the mix are the former Rwandese forces on one side and the Interahamwe militia on the other. This is further compounded by the presence of the Ugandan rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The historical development of the conflicts is also complex. DRC's history has been influenced by conflicts ignited largely by events in the eastern part of the country and in the neighbouring countries of Uganda and Rwanda(3). After the Rwandan genocide in 1994, one million people fled to eastern DRC. In the process, the conflict moved from Rwanda to the DRC and had a spillover effect on the local population. These dynamics contributed to the 1996 uprising among the Tutsis in the region that led to a Rwanda - Uganda backed rebellion in the DRC. The final result of that conflict was the overthrowing of the then Congolese government.

The strong and diverse interests in the country present a serious complexity to the sustained conflicts in the country. The interests have partly driven the DRC to the centre of what some observers call "Africa's world war"(4) in the 21st century, in which

government forces supported by Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, fought against rebels backed by Uganda and Rwanda. In its wake, an estimated 6 million lives were lost, either as a direct or indirect result of fighting. This war produced the worst emergency in Africa in recent decades(5) and resulted in the serious humanitarian crisis on the country.

The country is characterized by extremes: endowed with enormous natural resources wealth, the DRC is paradoxically unable to provide basic infrastructure to the majority of its population. Instead of serving the development of the country, its riches have only served to attract rapacious adventurers, unscrupulous multinational corporations, vicious warlords and corrupt governments, and divided the population between competing ethnic groups(6).

Like in many other African countries, poor leadership has had a role in the conflicts. Although the root of the problem could be traced to the colonial period, independent governments have not done any better. The first post-colonial leader, Mobutu Sese Seko exhibited extremely poor leadership. He took over power as the country was tottering towards disintegration. He started off by attempting to stabilize the volatile situation in the country. Once he had achieved some level of stability, he turned his attention to plundering the country's wealth, which he in turn used to consolidate his hold on power. In the process, he lost control of the country and his downfall was hastened by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which also plunged the country into the deadliest conflicts in the African history(7).

Many observers have concluded that the conflicts in the DRC are entirely resource based. Although resources remain critical in the DRC conflicts, quick and generalized conclusions of this kind arguably undermine in-depth examination of important underlying issues such as questions of identity, particularly with regard to the Tutsis, infrastructure development, and a general lack of government authority in parts of the country. In reality, the identity crisis has led rebel armed forces to exploit the enormous natural resources and fuel the continuous conflict in the country. Thus the search for sustainable peace in the DRC must prioritize such underlying factors.

Peace and Interest Groups

Despite the failure of several peace agreements, the signing of a cease-fire agreement in Lusaka on 10th July, 1999 provided a glimmer of hope for peace in the DRC. The agreement entailed the creation of a joint military commission composed of the belligerents as well as creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU)/UN Observer Group. The Joint Military Commission (JMC) comprised two representatives from each party to the conflict under a neutral chairman appointed by the OAU. Signatories to the agreement had already nominated representatives to the Commission. The duties of the

JMC and the OAU/UN Observer Group were to investigate cease-fire violations, work out mechanisms to disarm militias and monitor the withdrawal of foreign troops. Both the JMC and the Observer Group started executing peacekeeping operations until the deployment of the UN peacekeeping force in 1999. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized the deployment of 90 military observers on 6 August 1999(8).

The groups involved in the conflict in the DRC included the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), LRA, the Mai Mai militia, and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

- Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR): The FDLR, composed of Rwandan Hutu extremists who entered the DRC following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, repeatedly attacked civilians, such as in January 2012, when it killed twenty-six people in South Kivu. It had also been involved in the recruitment of child soldiers. Both Human Rights Watch and Oxfam agree that despite being weakened, the group still remains an important element in the peace process in DRC.

- Maï-Maï Sheka: The Maï-Maï Sheka that was formed in 2009 by mineral resources business contributed to the violence in the DRC by attacking both civilians and UN peacekeepers. It was involved in the increased violence experienced in the eastern DRC around October 2013. The group gained notoriety for exceptional sexual violence in 2010.

- Allied Democratic Forces (ADF): The Ugandan-led ADF existed since the mid-1990s. While relatively small, the ADF abducted Congolese nationals and is known to have links to the terrorist networks of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. While the ADF's ultimate goal is to establish Shari'a law in Uganda, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) began Operation Ruwenzori in 2010 in an effort to drive the ADF out of the DRC.

- Lord's Resistance Army (LRA): The Ugandan-based LRA is known for notorious recruitment of child soldiers. In December 2009, LRA soldiers killed over 300 people and abducted 250 more over the course of four days in Makombo, located in northeastern DRC.

A good understanding of the conflict in DRC requires an appreciation of the undercurrents in the country and region. Most important is an appreciation of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and existence of the various groups in eastern DRC prior to the genocide. After the overthrow of the Hutu regime in 1994 in Rwanda, more than two million Hutus are thought to have fled into DRC for fear of reprisals against them by the

new, Tutsi-dominated government. Among those who fled Rwanda into the DRC were the militiamen responsible for the genocide(9). They quickly allied themselves with Mobutu's government and began to attack DRC's ethnic Tutsis, who had lived in the country for generations. This led to serious unrest in the eastern Congo and forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. As a consequence, Rwanda's Tutsi government started to back rival militias, fighting both the Hutu militias and Congolese government troops.

Eventually, Tutsi militias, allied to other local groups backed by Uganda, marched on Kinshasa and overthrew Mobutu's government. They installed Laurent Kabila as president and he renamed the country - from Zaire to Democratic Republic of Congo. But Mr. Kabila failed to expel the Hutu militia and tiny Rwanda, which had put him in power, soon sent a new force to oust him. President Kabila then called in help from Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola, and for the next five years all six countries, and others, fought a proxy war on Congolese land. All sides were accused of using the cover of the war to loot the country's riches. More than five million people are said to have died in the war and its aftermath - mostly from starvation and/or disease. Although the war was declared over in 2003, the east of the country continues to be unstable(10).

Peace Initiatives and contributions of the interest groups

Prompted by the humanitarian crisis that was playing out in the DRC, several regional and international actors felt that there was an urgent need to end the violence. These included: Southern African Development Community (SADC), International conference on Great Lakes Region, United Nations and global north. These organizations were central in organizing forums for negotiations for the return to peace in the country. In addition, they piled pressure on regional governments and on the international community to prioritize peace initiatives in the DRC.

As a result, on 9th November 2008, the Heads of State of members of SADC agreed to immediately deploy a team of military experts to assess the escalating violence in the country, as well as an additional team to evaluate the situation on the ground. Importantly, the creation of the UN Intervention Brigade was initiated by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and supported by SADC. Consequently, on 8th December 2012 SADC decided to deploy its standby force under the auspices of the Neutral International Force (NIF). The African Union held consultations on the operationalization of the NIF at the end of December, in particular to decide whether it would be separate from or integrated into the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)(11). At the beginning of January 2013, the Military Adviser to the UN travelled to the region to try to harmonize UN and regional efforts to create a security arrangement in the eastern parts of the DRC. At a ministerial-level meeting on 8 January

2013, which the Military Adviser attended, the matter of an Intervention Brigade made up of troops from SADC but within the framework of MONUSCO was discussed.

The realization that there was an urgent need to address the mounting violence in and around the eastern DRC was further hastened by the March 23 Movement (M23 rebellion). The group largely comprised of Hutus and a few local groups in Eastern DRC. As such, President Kabila of the DRC used the ICLGR as a platform for discussion by convening a series of meetings that resulted in the Kampala peace talks.

On 24 February 2013, a UNSC-brokered peace agreement between the ICGLR Heads of State was signed by Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Formally called the "Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework for DRC and the Region," the Agreement emphasized issues of sexual violence and displacement, among other human rights abuses, and noted that progress begins with the cessation of violence.

Importantly, the Agreement recognized the distinct yet interdependent roles of actors from the DRC, within the region, and within the international community. At the country level, the DRC agreed to work towards decentralization and further structural reform. Regional players promised to respect one another's sovereignty, but to also increase cooperation between states(12).

The road towards peace

The DRC conflict had three dimensions: local, national and regional(13). For peace to return to the DRC, there was need to deal with the peace process at all these three levels. For the international community, this was a unique opportunity to re-engage with the region, to demonstrate commitment to African peace processes, and to rebuild credibility with national partners in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa.

The international community played a critical role in supporting regional efforts to restore the territorial integrity of the DRC and to resolve its security issues(14).They exerted pressure on all rebel factions to sign the Lusaka cease-fire agreement and on all parties to respect it. On the other hand, the United States, UNSC and regional diplomatic pressure was directed towards Uganda and Rwanda to respect the Kisangani cease-fire; commitment to the Lusaka cease-fire; and to take a common stand on the issue of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), so that the Congolese may start their National Debate process.

In addition, there was strong support for the JMC and a deliberate strengthening of the mandate of the OAU-appointed chairman of the JMC. This was with the understanding that the JMC was composed of representatives of the belligerent parties and had no

accountability or supervision mechanism by any neutral body, the OAU (currently known as AU) played a more active role as an arbitrator of the agreement.

What can the world learn from the conflict in DRC?

The conflicts in the DRC led to deaths of millions of people as well as displacement of large numbers, who in the end, were exposed to more violence, disease, and malnutrition. It also left a huge traumatized generation of children and young adults, broken bonds of trust and authority structures among and across local communities. It visited chaos on a people including rape of women and children. It completely shattered education and health care systems, disrupted transportation routes and infrastructure, and did untold damage to the continent's ecology from its land and waterways to its flora and fauna(15).

At whatever level one looks, the lessons from the conflicts and peace processes are as varied as the effects of the DRC conflicts on various groups. However, it is clear that for sustainable peace to be achieved in these situations, the peace process must be integrated in the political system. In addition, it needs to be recognized that ending conflicts is an expensive undertaking requiring mobilization of huge amounts of resources for negotiation processes. This essentially takes away resources from development.

The need for a balance between peace operations, maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the relevant audiences— including the conflict parties, local civilians, international NGOs, and foreign governments—is a crucial part of achieving success. Importantly, peacekeepers are never in total control of their legitimacy because it depends on the perceptions of other actors. The situation is made more complex because the relevant audiences may well come to different conclusions about the legitimacy of the same actor or action. Operations perceived as legitimate will be more likely to achieve their objectives, not least because they will find it easier to attract personnel, funds, and political support, and locals will provide them with good intelligence and other forms of assistance.

Operations perceived as illegitimate will struggle on both counts, as the AU mission in Somalia has found to its considerable cost. Irrespective of the specific details of the mandate, a peace operation's legitimacy can be eroded by various forms of behavior, most notably when peacekeepers are accused of committing war crimes—In the case of DRC, MONUC(16) was meant to protect civilians from violence, but it was infested with cases of corruption and sexual exploitation and abuse. The potential for illegitimate behavior can be reduced by ensuring that peacekeepers are well trained to cope with the challenges they are likely to face in the field; follow similar codes of professional ethics;

are adequately paid during their tours of duty; and are punished if found guilty of illegal acts.

The stalled peace processes in DRC emphasize the importance of prioritizing peace operations to support effective peace processes. It is clear from that policymakers should put more resources into designing effective peace processes that address the causes as well as the symptoms of armed conflicts. Indeed, the merits of deploying a particular peace operation should be assessed with direct reference to the prospects for constructing a successful peace process.

Constructing effective peace processes is never solely about providing more money, although funds spent wisely will usually help. Rather, it requires the provision of better and sustained mediation from senior political figures as well as greater organizational support for them. Moreover, mediators and their teams who are permanently based in the region concerned will be more likely to have a positive impact than special envoys who make only fleeting visits to the conflict zone in question.

The DRC peace process clearly pointed to the need to design better entry and exit strategies. It is generally argued that knowing when and where to deploy peace operations and when they should leave is a fundamental but under-debated question from which we can learn, especially as it relates to the DRC conflict. With regard to entry strategies, more thought needs to be given to the issue of consent: whose consent is essential, whose consent is desirable but not essential, and what should be done if these actors withdraw their consent or place additional conditions upon it after peacekeepers deploy? Such benchmarks would help clarify how to proceed when debates emerge over how and when to end operations.

There is always need to invest more and better resources in peace processes; this is first premised on the argument that failed peace operations seriously damage the credibility of the organization(s) involved, do a great disservice to local civilians, and sometimes even endanger the notion of peacekeeping itself(17). As a consequence, once the decision has been taken to deploy an operation, maximum international effort should be expended to ensure that it succeeds. In time, a critical mass of successful missions will invigorate the peacekeeping brand and strengthen the credibility of the UNSC and other peacekeeping actors such as the AU and the European Union (EU). Peacekeepers therefore deserve to be given more and better resources to fulfill the numerous tasks they are set.

A critical lesson from the DRC peace process is the need for partnership peacekeeping. This was arguably the case in the DRC. It thus accorded the international community, a unique opportunity to re-engage with the region by demonstrating commitment to

African peace processes, and to rebuild credibility with national partners in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. In particular, the international community supported regional efforts to restore the territorial integrity of the DRC and to resolve its security issues.

Conclusion

Although there are lots of criticisms of peace operations around the globe, they are still the international society's principal tool of conflict management, and empirical evidence suggests they have contributed to the decline of conflicts in numerous war-torn territories.

However, peace operations have not been without disappointments. This explains why there is need for reform so that peace operations can satisfy society's wants. Thus policymakers and analysts alike should work to ensure peace operations are given sensible operational directives, clear mandates, and sufficient resources to fulfill the proposed objectives. The resulting success stories would contribute to the downward trend in the number and magnitude of conflicts, reduce the human and economic cost of violence, and thereby open the door to more dynamic and sustained development as the case of DRC promises.

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