Future Without Hope
Alroy Fonseca
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In the news again is the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo—a new wave of violence has resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties and massive displaced persons flows in eastern parts of the country. What follows are some reflections on Congo's conflict, the global context and the hopelessness of the situation.

Eastern Congo has been burning for the last 15 years. They say that the Second Congolese War— which began in August 1998—came to an end in 2003-04 when a transitional power-sharing government took hold in the capital of Kinshasa. Yet, in the ensuing period, the fighting hasn't really stopped, particularly in the Kivu and Ituri regions stretching along Congo's eastern border with Rwanda and Uganda. Indeed, the current crisis stems primarily from battles between government forces and Laurent Nkunda's rebel fighters in North Kivu, which have displaced an estimated 150,000 people. Meanwhile, a secondary set of battles are taking place in Ituri-Dungu, where rebel groups—the Lord's Resistance Army and the Popular Front for Justice in Congo—have been fighting each other, resulting in an estimated 50,000 displaced people.

This past January, the New York-based International Rescue Committee (IRC), which has surveyed mortality rates in Congo over the years, reported that the conflict continued to claim the lives of some 45,000 people every month—a rate unchanged since the last survey at the war's "termination" in 2004. The organization's head, George Rupp, observed that: "The conflict and its aftermath, in terms of fatalities, surpass any other since World War II. Congo's loss is equivalent to the entire population of Denmark or the state of Colorado perishing within a decade." In numbers—depressing numbers—the death toll may have been as high as 5.4 million.

The attack of September 11 was a tragedy, but a rather minor one by any serious assessment—a point, though clearly evident, nonetheless worth making given the scale of attention the destruction of the twin-towers generated. To contrast, at the end of 2001, when US Special Forces were hunting down elusive cave-dwellers in southeastern Afghanistan's Tora Bora region, estimated fatalities in Congo already totalled well over 2.5 million. But, alas, the real concern for the West was in Central Asia, where, it was claimed, the terrorists were planning their next spectacular attack. Was it going to be chemical, biological, nuclear? The world was in grave danger—a new threat had reared its ugly head, we were told. Therefore, the "war on terror" had to be launched to stop the "evil-doers"—wanted dead or alive—and make the world safe again.

The 'world', however, did not include the millions living in Congo along the western shores of the African Great Lakes, whose lives had already been at grave risk since at least the October 1993-April 1994 period, when refugees fleeing intense turmoil in neighbouring Burundi and Rwanda ignited the region's delicate ethno-political tinderbox.

Nevertheless, popular calls for so-called humanitarian military interventions to stop conflicts in places like Congo cannot be assessed without a wider analysis that accounts for the current global political context. Consider, for example, the situation in the northeastern Ituri region of Congo during the first six months of 2003.

Early that year, it became increasingly evident that interethnic warfare – loosely pitting Hema-led

militias against their Lendu counterparts – had reached a critical point, with the very real possibility of degeneration into genocide. In early April, a small and inadequate United Nations mission deployed in the area reported the discovery of some 20 mass graves containing nearly 1,000 bodies. At around the same time, the IRC issued a report estimating that between 3 and 4.7 million people had died in Congo as a result of the four and a half years of warfare. The following month, moreover, while Oxfam warned of the increased risk to civilians in Congo's northeast, senior UN relief coordinator Carolyn McAskie attested that she saw "shades of Rwanda in 1994" in the region's fighting.

Despite these ominous warnings indicating that the already horrendous situation had actually become worse, there was no commensurate action from North American and European powers. Instead, on March 20, 2003—the same day that Amnesty International declared that the Ituri region was "suffering one of the world's gravest humanitarian and human rights crises"—a courageous "coalition of the willing" led by the great transatlantic powers began the invasion of Iraq on the basis of flagrant lies and in violation of international law, quickly unleashing levels of carnage that by most measures surpassed those reached in Ituri.

Attempts to initiate any kind of meaningful UN intervention in Ituri moved at a glacial pace. Little to no leadership was shown by the permanent Security Council members. Eventually, in June, after much dithering, France committed around 1,400 soldiers to a three month deployment in the region, which, along with subsequent contributions from a few other countries, reduced some of the fighting, though not very effectively. Richard Boucher, the US State Department's spokesperson, graciously observed at the time that "the [UN] force is critical to stabilizing the region," but American soldiers would not be placed under UN command.

The Americans, of course, bear special responsibility for putting Congo on the fast lane to hell. Back in 1960, when Congo freed itself from Belgium's colonial tentacles, the Central Intelligence Agency undermined and conspired to murder the country's first legally elected leader, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, though local clients were allowed the honour of actually performing the dirty deed. Moreover, the US extended strong diplomatic, economic and military support for the madman, Mobubu Sese Seko, who eventually replaced Lumumba as Congo's leader, treating the country's treasury like his personal piggy-bank and ensuring that indigenous attempts to restore something resembling a democracy would fail for more than three decades.

In his book, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, Ludo de Witte notes that the populist Congolese politician was "the leader of an incipient nationalist movement which, had the West not won, could have influenced the course of history in Africa for the better" —conceivably, a profound understatement in light of the mortality figures referenced above. But yes, if *only* the West had not won...the same West that liberal internationalists today imagine can save the wretched across the world.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported in June that global military spending totalled a stunning US$1.339 trillion in 2007, a 45% increase in real-terms since 1998, the year when the Second Congo War began. All expenses incurred, of course, to make the world safer. Eastern Congo will likely continue to burn as it has for the last decade and a half. The West is too deluded to do anything serious about it.