

## CONTAINING CONFLICT IN THE CONGO

If Africa presents a unique challenge for peacekeeping to the international community, then the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) represents these difficulties in a particularly intractable and potentially destabilising form. It is a politically labyrinthine, topographically obstructive and logistically chaotic scenario. What may be needed is an approach which learns from the experience of a previous generation of peacekeepers, and finds a form of peacekeeping which is targeted at achievable objectives on a realistic and manageable level of operations making progress incrementally and recognising the multiple dimensions to the crisis in the DRC. In the beginning, at least, what may be needed is a strategy of peace-building by containing the extent of the conflict.

The South African government has indicated that among the factors to be considered by its own analysts before involvement in peacekeeping missions is undertaken, are: (1) the nature of the conflict; (2) the prospects for a political resolution; (3) the extent to which political and military involvement in the conflict will encourage or impede violence; and (4) the extent to which the political objectives of the peacekeeping mission are in accordance with those of South Africa's national and strategic interests and capacities.

### Nature of Conflict: 1960 and 1999

Drawing on the 1960-64 UN Congo force deployment titled *Operation des Nations Unies au Congo* (ONUC), it may be possible to extract indications concerning the viability of a similar intervention. It is clear that at the present the key prerequisites for an effective peacekeeping force: ostensible consent of the adversaries, impartiality of the peacekeepers, the availability of resources (both human and financial), the minimum use of force and a commitment or willingness from the international community to intervene, are not at hand, as was the case to a greater extent during the deployment of ONUC. (Noting that even in 1960 consent was as scarce as it will be now.)

At independence, the Congo was faced with an invasion by Belgian troops which were sent to halt the mutiny of Congolese soldiers that began on 5 July 1960. Despite Prime Minister **Patrice Lumumba's** insistence that his government could bring the situation under control, Belgian warships attacked the port city of Matadi, on 11 July 1960, with considerable loss of life. On the same day, with military assistance from the Belgians, **Moise Tshombe**

announced the secession of Katanga. Confronted with a situation beyond its control, the Congo government cabled the UN Secretary-General with a request for 'urgent... military assistance'.

The Congolese government argued that 'the essential purpose of the military aid was to protect the national territory of the Congo against external aggression which is a threat to international peace.' Indeed, under the terms of the UN charter, the Congo crisis

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appeared to be a classic situation that called for UN action to offset a threat to international peace: a member state of the UN had deployed its troops into the territory of an independent state (whose admission to UN membership had been recommended by the Security Council the previous week) without the request or consent of the latter government.

In the present conflict, although **Laurent Kabila's** government and its allies have repeatedly claimed that the rebellion is an external invasion by Rwandan and Ugandan forces, the UN at the France-African Summit in 1998 maintained that the rebels are an internal and legitimate force with whom Kabila needs to negotiate. If Kabila's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the rebels continues, the question of a UN enforcement action might arise; although the political will for such a deployment is unlikely to materialise. Another feature of the 1960 conflict, the aggression by the Belgians and the related secession of Katanga, was within a well-defined territory. In other words the whereabouts of the belligerents was more easily determined in 1960 than in the present conflict.

The DRC, an area of 2,344,885 sq. km., is covered by approximately 1 million sq. km. of tropical forests. This terrain makes monitoring of, for example, the demobilisation of troops, a great difficulty. The DRC's tropical forests also present a considerable obstacle for force mobility, especially during the rainy seasons. Furthermore, the 145,000 km road network — which is in a much worse state of repair than in 1960 — is wholly inadequate for a country of this size and would pose numerous problems for a peacekeeping operation.

The progress that ONUC was able to make after 1960 was in part the result of the solid backing offered by African States. Even before the Secretary-General, **Dag Hammarskjöld**, could go to the Security Council on the evening of the 13 July 1960, Ghana, Guinea, Morocco and Tunisia had promised contingents. The initial UN force on the field numbered 3,500 troops comprising of contingents from Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia. At its height the force numbered **early 20,000 personnel** — a figure which observers consider might have to be tripled to have a chance of dealing with the currently degraded communications network.

Presently, however, many African countries are faced with civil conflicts of their own. Sierra Leone is but one example. Together with their weakening economies, it is unlikely that a UN operation would achieve the personnel and financial assistance from African states that it did in the 1960s. Moreover, assembling an impartial and neutral force would not be any easier, considering the number of countries already involved on either side of the battle. Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Chad, Sudan, Libya and the Central African Republic are in various ways assisting the Kabila **Government**, while Rwanda and Uganda have admitted **supporting the anti-Kabila rebels**. As a result, few states remain from which a neutral peacekeeping force could be chosen.

### **Strategic and National Interests**

South Africa is in some respects very well placed to make a contribution to any planned peacekeeping operation in the DRC. Its lack of military involvement in the conflict so far, the logistical capacity of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), as well as its African credentials qualify South Africa to be considered as a contributor. Whether it is in the interest of South Africans to become involved is a different matter which requires very careful consideration.

The factors which weigh in favour of South African involvement include its stated objective of supporting the African Renaissance, a general moral interest in peace and stability, the more commercial considerations of what is good for regional trade and investment and the important

fact that war in central Africa may have security implications for South Africa's borders in terms of refugees and weapons transfers. Certainly the concept of an African Renaissance looks increasingly flawed without an African willingness and capacity to address its own disputes. Moreover, South Africa's leadership aspirations and possible United Nations Security Council ambitions are directly linked to its approach to responsible and effective participation in regional politics. On these grounds, South Africa cannot remain aloof from the DRC without undermining its foreign policy priorities.

The risks of a SANDF deployment, however, are substantial. They centre around questions of capacity and expertise. In order to have a chance of success, the operation must have benefited from the assimilation of a great range of lessons from the Lesotho intervention at a number of different organisational and bureaucratic levels within the South African policy-making and policy-implementation structures.

### **“South Africa cannot remain aloof from the DRC without undermining its foreign policy priorities”**

To mention a few, improvements will be needed in the advance diplomatic preparation of allies, the grounding of any operation in international law, intelligence gathering of opposition forces' dispositions, capabilities and intentions, intelligence co-ordination and dissemination, assessments of force levels necessary to achieve defined objectives, *co-ordination with friendly forces*, preparation of host nation support, knowledge of the ground to be deployed onto, civil-military relations skills and the management of domestic and international press at home and in theatre. It has to be noted that the chances are not high of the SANDF's higher command having effected such a broad sweep of improvements while simultaneously under severe resource constraint and managing a delicately balanced transformation process.

Without these adjustments, any deficiencies will be exposed in the cruelest manner by the chaotic nature of the DRC conflict and would take the form of SANDF casualties and perhaps even South Africa's international humiliation. If realised, this scenario would run so counter to South Africa's goals, setting back its leadership credibility irreparably, and thus render the desirability of a UN deployment by South Africa a very finely balanced decision. It is therefore critically important that the nature of any UN deployment is subjected to the most rigorous planning and preparation process. In particular, it needs to be accepted that SANDF capacity is already stretched and its resources need to be used very sparingly. The fact that, if it is accepted that SANDF operationally deployable forces have an upper limit of 20,000 personnel, this represents about one-third of the necessary force size to manage a peace within the DRC, but possibly a sufficient force to undertake the more limited mission mentioned below.

Unlike the operation in the 1960s that enjoyed international support, the current war is waged at a time when the UN

has shown that it is no longer willing to deploy peacekeeping troops every time a conflict arises in Africa, especially after US troops failed to restore order in Somalia. Moreover, ONUC took place within a Cold War context that meant the West was not willing to allow the involvement of Soviet troops on the continent. It is not surprising, therefore, that when a cable was sent to the UN by Lumumba on 13 July 1960, warning that if UN aid was not forthcoming the Congo government would be forced to request Soviet intervention, a Security Council resolution adopting ONUC was passed in the early hours of the next day. With the Cold War over, a trend in African security is the non-intervention of the West accompanied by a desire for 'African solutions to African problems'.

ONUC deployment was also achieved in the 1960s, because of the need for strategic resources from the DRC by the West. US support for the 1960 intervention arose partly from the need for an undisturbed supply of strategic minerals such as cobalt. Cobalt is an essential element in the production of aircraft engines and other items contributing to the defence of the US. Roughly 50% of the US's cobalt imports originate from the former Zaire. One explanation for why the US is not treating the present conflict as a threat to its national interest would be that the amount of cobalt the US was able to stockpile during the Mobutu years has been able to offset any short-term supply problems. It is probable that the US would rather have Kabila ousted than support a peacekeeping force which would prolong his reign.

### Imposing Peace in the Congo

Any intervention in the Congo which attempts to impose peace by controlling those armed groups engaged in the conflict appears likely to fail for the following reasons:

1. An imposed peace would not address the complex political nature of the conflict which involves the legitimate security concerns of the combatants and the strategic interests of the 10 states involved. Like Yugoslavia, the Congo is too artificial a creation to exist without the conditions of powerful dictatorship and oppression which the UN would not seek to restore.
2. The political imperatives to provide African solutions to African problems would mean that even if a large intervention force could be assembled, it would experience significant constraints in capacity, logistical support and funding. Past experience of operations in the Congo suggests that the maintenance of control and command will test even the most highly trained, cohesive and experienced troops.
3. More importantly, many of the key potential contributors to peacekeeping are already engaged, directly or indirectly, in the conflict, and prospects for building a consensus for action among such states is remote.
4. Even if the intervention force managed to attract significant logistical support from the United States or Europe, it would

not be able to field the kind of military hardware sufficient to overwhelm the combatants in the Congo conflict in the absence of a pre-established peace as a peace-enforcement rather than peacekeeping mission.

5. The scale of the theatre of operations for an effective intervention force and the lack of infrastructure would be likely to swamp even the most well-equipped and organised force.

### Why a Limited Operation may be Successful

A series of more limited operations may have a greater chance of initiating a process leading to political settlement. Limited operations, such as a deployment along the Congo/Uganda and Congo/Rwanda borders, might be more effective for the following reasons:

1. It would reduce the political complexity of the Congolese conflict to proportions more manageable by international organisations. In the case of the Uganda/Rwanda example, an alliance between those two states already exists and the main reason for the intervention of Rwanda in the Congo would be directly addressed. Rwanda's perceived security dilemma of either being engaged in aggressive self-defence in Eastern Congo or surrendering to ethnic suicide can be eased if Rwandan security is guaranteed by peacekeeping forces.
2. For the peacekeeping forces, this doctrine of peacekeeping containment would have the double advantage of setting specific geographically limited objectives: the consent of the state in which they are based, and the relatively secure rear area from which to operate.
3. By selecting a limited operation in which fewer actors are involved than in the larger Congo scenario, it would theoretically be easier to find African states, sympathetic to the interests of Rwanda and Uganda, to fulfil the limited and defensive role. The limited objectives of such an operation are attractive to decision-makers in contributing states because the scale of the operations, and consequently the costs, are more manageable. In addition, the extraction of military units in an emergency is more easily planned and the criteria for success more clearly defined.

This scenario will not on its own bring peace to the Congo. However, if it succeeded in reducing the level of violence in one region and removing one state from direct involvement, it could be the beginning of a process which would see further limited deployments, increased security and stability on the periphery of the Congo conflict and the containment of the escalation of violence. It may also discourage opportunistic intervention by neighbouring states whose already fragile economies are ill-equipped to support such enterprises without the incentive of easy returns. In short, it would prevent the development of what one commentator has called 'Africa's World War Three'.