

Congolese Blood Bath

Nancy Palus, *Slate Magazine*, 05/16/03

Ethnic clashes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have observers warning of a possible genocide in a nation that has already seen the worst of Africa's bloody wars. According to DRC's *L'Avenir*, a U.N. official in the region declared that without decisive action, the area could be headed toward a blood bath. At least 100 people have died over the past two weeks "U.N. officials say the current chaos makes an accurate count impossible "and tens of thousands are fleeing Bunia, the capital of Ituri province in the former Zaire.

Fighting broke out following the May 7 exit of Ugandan troops "part of a global peace accord signed in December 2002 among leaders of the DRC and the surrounding countries intervening in the war. Papers said the violence in Bunia appears to prove many observers' greatest fear "that the withdrawal of foreign troops would create a vacuum, sending the region into a spiral of ethnic violence. The two tribal groups fighting in Bunia "the Lendu and the Hema "have long battled over land and resources. Congo's civil war, which raged throughout the 1990s, fueled the groups' bitter rivalry. Lendu militiamen reportedly flooded into Bunia once the Ugandan troops left; days later, Hema drove the Lendus out.

Britain's *Guardian* reported that 625 U.N. peacekeepers and about 8,000 civilians have sought refuge in two U.N. compounds in Bunia. The paper said some missionaries evacuated to Uganda spoke of dozens of bodies lying in the streets, and at least 20 were piled in the aisle of a small church where people sought shelter.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has asked the Security Council to form a coalition of the willing to halt the violence in eastern Congo. France has already said it will send troops but wants to see other countries do the same. France's *Le Figaro* reported that Britain has indicated a willingness to help and that the French and British foreign ministers are set to meet soon in the region. The paper added, "After the serious divisions created by the Iraqi crisis, [this] could allow London and Paris the beginnings of reconciliation." Congo's *L'Avenir* newspaper reported that Canada and South Africa have also said they will help with the formation of an international intervention force. Congolese President Joseph Kabila and leaders of the warring factions began talks May 15 in the Tanzanian capital Dar es Salaam, at the urging of the United Nations.

Papers pointed to the existing U.N. force's impotence in the face of the violence that has swallowed up Ituri province. As peacekeepers, the troops have neither the equipment nor the mandate to handle the ethnic fighting. *Le Monde* said MONUC "the French acronym for the U.N. mission "far from maintaining order, has been reduced to powerlessness, its members trapped in their buildings. About 700 MONUC peacekeepers are based in Bunia.

Talk of another genocide in the region raises the chilling specter of the 1994 massacre in Rwanda, in which more than 500,000 minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed.

The Guardian said, Africa analysts have been castigating the UN for failing to foresee the bloodbath predicted since Uganda agreed last year to withdraw its troops from Bunia. A human rights worker told the paper, "This is an appalling response by the international community. The UN knew this was going to happen, yet they've been completely overwhelmed."

An op-ed in Congo's L'Avenir said the violence in Ituri destroys any hope created by the 2002 peace accord. The paper blamed Rwandan President Paul Kagame for supporting one of the militia groups. Despite their formal exit, Rwanda and Uganda are blamed for continuing to arm and otherwise support armed militias in the region.

With violence across the DRC intensifying in recent months, many observers have called it the world's forgotten war, saying the international community is too fixed on Iraq to pay attention to even the bloodiest of conflicts in Africa. L'Avenir said in an editorial, "What's happening in Congo, no one would tolerate in the US, in France, in Germany, in Brussels, or anywhere else." The paper said, "One cannot be an architect of peace and fight against terrorism in the world and stay silent in the face of the Congolese crisis."

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