



Building Peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Beyond the United Nations Toolkit

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) hosts the largest United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in the world—the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO.) The mission currently has 18,399 personnel,¹ and costs the international community USD\$1,086,018,600 per year. UN peacekeeping troops have been in the eastern DRC since 1999. Paradoxically, since their arrival, conflicts in the eastern DRC, currently involving more than 100 armed groups,² have intensified and become more complicated.

MONUSCO's mission has changed over the years. Initially seen as an interim measure to help the DRC build a new army, the UN later increased MONUSCO's size, then broadened its powers, and finally extended its mandate to protecting civilians. Despite these adjustments, peace has been elusive in the DRC. 2019 and the beginning of 2020 witnessed a reigniting of conflict in the eastern DRC, with a significant number of victims.³ This situation has led stakeholders to ask: "Why the many years of failure? Is there a 'missing link?'" This paper aims to respond to these two questions.

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A Brief History of Armed Conflict and Attempted Peacebuilding in the Eastern DRC

It is widely understood that the DRC experienced a two-phased rebellion between 1996 and 2003. The first phase, which began in September 1996 and ended in May 1997, was described as a “war of liberation” by its initiators. This war ended the Mobutu dictatorship, which had lasted 32 years, and saw Laurent Désiré Kabila take over as president. The second phase started in August 1998 and ended in April 2003 with the signing of the Comprehensive and Inclusive Agreement on Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the establishment of institutions to lead the country’s political transition. Both phases of the rebellion have been well researched and assessed by multiple studies.⁴

The period after the 2003 agreement has been characterized by persistent violence across the eastern DRC, especially in the fragile Kivu region. The most culpable armed groups in the violence include the National Congress for Development (CNDP, 2003-2009); the March 23 Movement (M23, 2012-2013); the Forces of Defense and Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR, 1996-present); and, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF, 1996-present). Hundreds⁵ of local militias known as “Mayi-Mayi” were also dragged into the conflict.

These post-2003 conflicts deeply undermined the exercise of central power from the capital, Kinshasa. The DRC’s national army (FARDC) has continually had to confront various forces, including the regular armies of Rwanda and Uganda alongside proxy rebel groups⁶ they sponsor, external armed groups,⁷ and the numerous Mayi-Mayi militias.

To put an end to these conflicts, the Congolese government and the United Nations, with massive support from the international community, undertook several peace initiatives, some of which are ongoing.⁸ The first was the International Conference for Peace and Security in the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Its major early achievement was the Dar-es-Salam Declaration that was signed and adopted in June 2004 by the region’s heads of state during a troubled period marked by the beginning of the CNDP rebellion. Signatories to the declaration pledged to:

“ Fully support the national peace processes in the region and refrain from any acts (...) to negatively impact them (...) Strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation, through the adoption and effective implementation of Non-Aggression and Common Defense Pacts; Establish an effective regional security framework for the prevention, management and peaceful settlement of conflicts (...) Fight genocide in the Great Lakes region and hereby undertake to neutralize, disarm, arrest and transfer to relevant international tribunals the perpetrators of genocide, including the forces that committed genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and any such other forces that may occur in future (...) Strengthen cooperation in the area of defense and security and promote confidence building by establishing policies, measures and mechanisms aimed at enhancing good neighborliness and multi-sectoral cooperation (...)”⁹

When the ICGLR process began to falter because of a new wave of CNDP operations, the DRC government convened a second peace initiative, the Goma Conference in 2008. This was an important and innovative initiative that included broad representation of local communities.¹⁰ The Goma Conference launched two years of negotiations (2008-10) between the government and the CNDP. However, like the earlier ICGLR process, the Goma process was also unable to definitively end the conflict.

A third peace initiative centered on the *San Egidio* meeting in Rome (2005) and the “*Tripartite-Plus-One*” mechanism convened by the U.S. government in Nairobi (2007). These efforts attempted to find a solution to the presence in the eastern DRC of an ex-Rwandan army group, the FAR,¹¹ who had fled into Congo after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.¹² A fourth peace initiative emerged in 2012 after the CNDP revived itself under the name of the March 23 Movement (M23). Both the Kampala Negotiations (2012-2013) and the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement (February 2013) focused on addressing the M23 rebellion. However, the Kampala Negotiations were terminated after the FARDC and MONUSCO military victory over the M23 rebels, although neither the victory nor the talks brought an end to violent conflict in the eastern DRC.

The failure of these multiple peace processes, the high number of war victims, and the eastern DRC’s chronic humanitarian crisis raise the question of why the efforts of the DRC government, the UN, and other actors over the last 20 years have failed to yield peace in this volatile region.

An Assessment of Peacebuilding Failures in the Eastern DRC

There are several plausible explanations as to why the UN has struggled to bring about peace in the DRC despite its huge effort and apparent goodwill. One is that the peace efforts it led or backed all appeared to be built on a poor understanding of the dynamics of the militias and armed groups that have tormented the eastern DRC for over two decades. A closely related explanation is the failure of the various peace efforts to effectively consult, much less involve, local communities and leaders. In addition, many of the peace agreements failed to impose enforceable obligations on the signatories. Another consequential flaw in the UN approach was that even interventions that worked initially experienced difficulties in adapting when conditions shifted—as they so often did. Perhaps the most crucial flaw in the various UN-sponsored peace efforts in the eastern DRC was the fact that the peace processes were consistently based on faulty and biased diagnoses of the root causes of the region’s conflict.

Beginning with the 1999 Lusaka Agreement that called for a UN peacekeeping mission and continuing through to the 2013 Addis Ababa Framework Agreement, the list of failed peace agreements in the eastern DRC is long.¹³ The repeated failures demand an examination of the analyses that undergirded the peace efforts.

In the eyes of many UN officials and Western experts, the roots of the conflict are primarily internal to the DRC: a weak state, deficient democracy, underdeveloped security apparatus, tense ethnic relations, rampant smuggling of natural resources, and destabilizing domestic political machinations. However, this analysis, although accurate in some aspects, is flawed. Namely, it overlooks and avoids naming the “pyromaniacs”—the key actors responsible for starting and perpetuating conflict in the eastern DRC. In other words, this flawed analysis fails to hold accountable the initiators of the region’s conflict. Along with this, it turns a blind eye toward clear criminal behavior¹⁴ and other findings documented in reports by the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.¹⁵

One former Group of Experts member testified to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2012 that:

“Rwandan involvement (...) becomes more comprehensible when understood as a determined and calculated drive to spawn the creation of an autonomous federal state for the eastern Congo (...) One of the most senior intelligence officers within the Rwandan government (...) reflecting the thinking of many of his colleagues, asserted (...) Goma should relate to Kinshasa in the same way

that Juba was linked to Khartoum prior to the independence of South Sudan.”¹⁶

This testimony alludes to the existence in the mind of some leaders, who have long engaged in the conflict, of a possible plan to dismember the DRC. This would motivate the continued destabilization of the eastern region. It highlights a new dimension of this decades-long crisis.

Another shortcoming of the UN’s engagement in eastern DRC peace efforts is its overly bureaucratic approach to peacebuilding that tends to apply a generic model of actions to be taken to build peace. Unfortunately, this one-size-fits-all approach does not work in all cases and has repeatedly failed in the eastern DRC. The UN must be honest in recognizing this.

A 2017 debate on what needs to be done to build peace in the DRC highlighted the flaws in the UN toolkit. The researcher Séverine Autesserre wrote in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁷ in March 2017 that peace efforts in the DRC focused too much on the organization of elections and ignored the local dimensions of the conflict. According to her, focusing on elections distracted from the basic peacebuilding issues of poverty, unemployment, corruption, crime, and poor access to land, justice, and education. She argued that these problems were at the root of the persistent violence and conflict in the DRC. Therefore, even if the levers of political power changed hands in Kinshasa, peace and prosperity would not automatically follow. To support her argument, she pointed out that the DRC’s elections in 2006 and 2011 did not end the violence in the country’s volatile east. On the contrary, the country’s newly elected leaders consolidated power and took actions to shrink the democratic space. She concluded by arguing for a change in perspective in order to rebuild peace:

“Bringing peace and prosperity to Congo will require a change in attitude, away from the crisis in Kinshasa and toward the local actors who have the power to address the deeper sources of the country’s troubles.”¹⁸

Autesserre’s article was written at the time when a majority of actors—including MONUSCO, foreign diplomats, international NGOs, humanitarians, journalists, and peace activists—were concentrating their efforts on demanding elections that the Kinshasa regime was deliberately delaying. Consequently her article, by questioning the consensus approach to peace in the DRC, raised eyebrows and caused controversy within the peacebuilding community. Two weeks after its publication, a group of other notable researchers¹⁹ offered a rebuttal to Autesserre’s article.²⁰ They rejected her argument that local conflict was the root cause of war in the DRC. According to them, the local conflicts cited by Autesserre were not organic, but rather were provoked, exploited, or supported by national or regional political actors. Consequently, they argued, bringing peace to the DRC would hinge not on directly addressing local conflict, but rather on dealing with those who “pull the strings” of conflict—i.e., national elites and the leaders of neighboring countries. These authors further argued that the road to stability in the DRC must also involve national-level reform:

“The road toward stability in Congo must pass through the reform of state institutions. The only way that can happen is by increasing official accountability, which will require national elections, the opening of democratic space, and a shift from predatory to responsible everyday governance.”²¹

Autesserre responded to her critics by referring to her findings during her field studies:

“Local, provincial, national, regional, and international issues combine to produce conflicts over power, land, economic resources, and social standing, fueling violence in the eastern provinces

(...) Elections cannot guarantee institution building. What's more, ending the power struggle in the capital is unlikely to automatically address the 'poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education' that I argue are at the root of Congo's problems."²²

She further argued there was no guarantee that elections would help in building peace. However, she concluded her response with a more nuanced stance proposing a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down approach to peacebuilding in the DRC:

“The massive national and international peace efforts of the past two decades have clearly failed to end the violence. What Congo needs is bottom-up peacebuilding in addition to the current top-down approach: foreign interveners should not end their current focus on Kinshasa but supplement it with local peacebuilding efforts.”²³

Autesserre's recommendation—to undertake vigorous bottom-up (local) peacebuilding efforts to supplement the top-down-only strategy that had failed for over two decades—has helped open the door to a more comprehensive approach to bringing lasting peace to the long-fragile eastern DRC. In this regard, the blame for peacebuilding failures cannot be attributed solely to the UN and international community; rather the DRC government bears responsibility as well.

Toward a Sustainable Peace in the DRC

After more than two decades of widespread violence and halting peace efforts, peace continues to prove elusive in the eastern DRC. Looking forward, there are a number of challenges the DRC government and the United Nations—both of which bear responsibility for over two decades of peacebuilding failure—need to actively address. First, key priorities are for Kinshasa to consolidate the country's democratic process and finalize security sector reform (SSR), and for the UN mission and its international partners to follow up on past peace agreements to consolidate the partial gains these achieved. Second, the DRC government and UN must join hands to implement the agreements reached in the 2008-2010 Goma Conference talks,²⁴ which made many sound recommendations, including calling for Rwanda to reverse course and stop playing a harmful role in the DRC's volatile Kivu region. This point is crucial, given that other peacebuilding approaches in the DRC avoided the question of Rwanda's 1996 invasion of the eastern Congo, and also overlooked the destabilizing actions taken by other neighbors of the DRC, namely Burundi and Uganda. Third, peace efforts must also address the destabilizing presence of the two million Rwandese Hutu refugees in the eastern DRC. This deluge arrived in 1994 after a series of local conflicts had already stretched the eastern DRC's social fabric to the breaking point. Aiming to ease the refugee pressure, the Goma Conference proposed establishing a special reconstruction fund to restart an integrated regional development plan. Unfortunately, little follow-up was done during the subsequent decade.

In conclusion, building lasting peace in the eastern DRC will require a different approach from the failed one pursued over the last 20 years. The region's populace is fatigued by the long absence of peace and the many failed attempts to restore it. Exasperated by conflict, some communities in the DRC are accusing the national Army (FARDC) of complicity in perpetuating the conflict and are also demanding that UN troops leave the country. In light of the long-standing impasse, it is time for the DRC government, the UN, and international stakeholders to explore new approaches for peace in the DRC.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 20 by Rigobert Minani Bihuzo.

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 2. "Armed Groups," accessed April 27, 2020, <https://kivusecurity.org/about/armedGroups>.
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Philip Winter, *Une cause sacrée: Le dialogue intercongolais, 2000-2003*, (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2015).
 5. The names and number of "Mayi-Mayi" groups can be found here: www.kivusecurity.org.
 6. Proxy rebel groups include the National Congress for Development (CNDP) and M23 Movement.
 7. External armed groups include the Forces of Defense and Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).
 8. Rigobert Minani Bihuzo, "Unfinished Business: A Framework for Peace in the Great Lakes," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, no. 21 (July 2012, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ASB21EN-Unfinished-Business-A-Framework-for-Peace-in-the-Great-Lakes.pdf>).
 9. International Conference on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region, First Summit of Heads of State and Government Dar-Es-Salaam, November 19-20, 2004, Dar-Es-Salaam Declaration on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/041120_DarEsSalaamDeclaration.pdf.
 10. The Goma Conference gathered 1500 participants including members of parliament, senators from across the country, ministers and other government officials, traditional chiefs, and representatives of all ethnic communities. The Conference also welcomed members of civil society, women's associations, the Congo business federation, several international NGOs, as well as a strong presence from the international community. The army was another component of the Conference, and the communities had various armed groups from their territory at their side.
 11. Forces armées du Rwanda (FAR).
 12. Read more in: Rigobert Minani Bihuzo, *Du pacte de stabilité de Nairobi aux actes d'engagement de Goma*, (Kinshasa: Cepas/Rodheic, 2008).
 13. Jean Migabo Kalere, *Textes fondamentaux sur le processus de paix en RDC*, (Leuven: CPRS, 2008).
 14. In 2000, Rwandan and Ugandan armies battled for six days in Kisangani, the Congo's third-largest city, for the control of diamond business, frustrating United Nations and leaving at least 150 civilians dead and another 700 wounded.

"The Forces Of Rwanda And Uganda Fight in Congo," New York Times, June 11, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/11/world/the-forces-of-rwanda-and-uganda-fight-in-congo.html>.
 15. UN Security Council, Addendum to the interim report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2012/348) concerning violations of the arms embargo and sanctions regime by the Government of Rwanda, S/2012/348, (June 27, 2012).

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17. Autesserre Séverine, "What the Uproar Over Congo's Elections Misses," *Foreign Affairs*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/democratic-republic-congo/2017-03-01/what-uproar-over-congos-elections-misses>.
18. Ibid.
19. Jason Stearns is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Congo Research Group at New York University's Center on International Cooperation. Koen Vlassenroot is a Professor and Director of the Conflict Research Group at Ghent University. Kasper Hoffmann is a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen. Tatiana Carayannis is the Deputy Director of the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum at the Social Science Research Council.
20. Jason Stearns, Koen Vlassenroot, Kasper Hoffmann, and Tatiana Carayannis, "Congo's Inescapable State. The Trouble with the Local," *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/democratic-republic-congo/2017-03-16/congos-inescapable-state>.
21. Ibid.
22. Autesserre Séverine, "The Right Way to Build Peace in Congo. Elections Are Not the Only Way Forward," *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/democratic-republic-congo/2017-04-06/right-way-build-peace-congo>.
23. Ibid.
24. We will limit ourselves to only a few recommendations of the Goma conference drawn from the fifteen actions proposed.

Cover Image: MONUSCO soldiers pictured in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo courtesy of the United Nations via Sylvain Liechti. <https://www.un.org/en/ccoi/monusco-dr-congo>.

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