

# 1. Post-independence conflict and peace-building in the DRC

## 1.1 The Congo wars

The DRC has a prolonged history of repression and armed conflict dating back to the era of European occupation. The Belgian monarchy and colonial elite used violence against the population of the DRC to maximise the extraction of natural resources in from the late 1800s. The DRC gained independence in 1960, and five years later General Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (later referred to as Mobutu Sese Seko) seized power through a military *coup d'état* with foreign backing (particularly the United States). The country was subsequently renamed Zaire in 1971. Mobutu ruled the Zairian state with an iron fist for more than three decades. Despite the 'strongman' approach to governance there was a severe lack of state investment in improving infrastructure and human development, exacerbated by endemic corruption. Government authority was not exercised over vast tracts of territory, particularly in the eastern Zaire. These dynamics contributed to the emergence of various opposition movements and armed groups.

Government armed forces, the *Forces Armées Zairoises* (FAZ) were routinely unpaid, and therefore soldiers often resorted to raiding and looting rural communities to sustain themselves, which was often condoned by the Mobutu regime.<sup>1</sup> Affected communities responded to the FAZ predatory behaviour and the other insecurities brought about by what Thomas Hobbes termed 'a state of nature'<sup>2</sup> by creating their own militarised structures and processes, typically in the form of militias. These armed groups, which were diverse in structure and membership, proliferated in the mid-1990s in response to heightened insecurity (mentioned below), and became commonly referred to as *Mai Mai*.

In 1994, in excess of one million refugees from Rwanda fled into eastern Zaire. Some (ethnic Tutsis) had crossed the border to escape the genocide in Rwanda that was being pursued against ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutus. Later that year, with the imminent victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels (ethnic Tutsi) over the Hutu-dominated government in Kigali, more Rwandese (mainly ethnic Hutu) also crossed the border fearing reprisals from the RPF. Refugee camps were subsequently established in Eastern Zaire. Amongst the refugee population were former soldiers from the Rwandan military, as well as the *Interahamwe*, which were those individuals that had directly perpetrated the mass violence in Rwanda. These individuals would later form the basis of the rebel group, *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR). The *Interahamwe*, allegedly with material support from Mobutu, launched military assaults into Rwanda, as well as against Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge (ethnic Tutsi) communities resident in eastern Zaire.<sup>3</sup>

This series of events, combined with decades of simmering tensions between the Banyarwanda/Banyamulenge and other communities, and the disenfranchisement of the Banyarwanda/Banyamulenge, ignited a rebellion in 1996. The RPF provided strategic, mili-

1 Michela Wrong, *In the footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: living on the brink of disaster in Mobutu's Congo*, New York, HarperCollins, 2001.

2 This was a phrase used by Hobbes in his philosophical masterpiece, 'Leviathan', first published in 1651. Hobbes, building on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, described a state nature as being characterized by the absence of the state or government, where every person seeks to preserve their life through whatever means is at their disposal. According to Hobbes, human life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".

3 Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

tary and material backing to the rebellion, with added support from Uganda and Angola. The uprising harnessed the widespread discontent with the Mobutu regime, drawing in various militia and armed groups. As a result, within a matter of months, the rebels seized control of Kinshasa and forced Mobutu into exile. The country's name was changed to the DRC, and Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who had led the rebellion, became the head of state.<sup>4</sup>

Due to domestic pressures, Kabila sought to dilute the influence of the Rwandan and Ugandan military within the DRC government, and eventually expelled them. This development, in conjunction with continued attacks by the Interahamwe, motivated Rwanda and Uganda to instigate a second rebellion in the eastern DRC in 1998 through a military rebellion within the ranks of newly established DRC armed forces. A fledgling rebel movement, the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) was then used as the vehicle (along with Rwandan soldiers) in an attempt to depose Kabila. The RCD marched on Kinshasa, but were prevented from overthrowing the Kabila government by rapid military support provided by Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and a handful of other governments. The Kabila regime also enlisted some Hutu militia groups in the east to this war effort. Uganda supported the anti-Kabila alliance through another rebel group, the *Mouvement de Libération du Congo* (MLC).<sup>5</sup>

Leadership tensions and strategic disagreements within the RCD led to the rebel movement fracturing into three groups: the RCD-Kisangani-Mouvement de Libération (RCD-K-ML); RCD-National (RCD-N) and RCD-Goma. In June 1999 the Ugandan armed forces carved out a new mineral-rich “province” from part of the area it was controlling in eastern DRC, and referred to it as Ituri. The effective annexation of this region by the Ugandan military escalated ethnic tensions in the area that had been festering for decades into violent conflict, which was then perpetuated by various armed groups. The most prominent of such groups were the Nationalist and Integrationist Front (FNI) and the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC). The complexity of the military campaign combined with conflict over access to mineral wealth took its toll on the collaborative relationship between Rwanda and Uganda, with a number of armed confrontations and battles taking place between both militaries. In

addition, an array of other armed groups continued to contribute to the destabilisation of the region.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Peace accords

A ceasefire was secured through the Lusaka Accords (1999) and a UN peacekeeping mission was deployed (MONUC) the following year, but despite these developments, the violence continued. In 2001, Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated. Shortly thereafter his son Joseph was appointed head of state. In 2002 the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and a series of peace agreements between the principal warring parties resulted in an uneasy cessation of hostilities, and paved the way for the incorporation of many of the larger armed groups and militia into the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC). However, the FDLR and an unknown number of armed groups continued to operate in the eastern DRC. Democratic elections were held in 2006, with Joseph Kabila being elected president.

In late-2006 and early 2007, the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP), led by Laurent Nkunda escalated tensions in the Kivu provinces by launching a military campaign against the FDLR. The CNDP was comprised of elements from one of the RCD splinter groups, as well as combatants formerly associated with militia and other armed groups, and had been operating as brigades within the DRC government armed forces, the FARDC. The CNDP withdrew from the FARDC and initiated a military campaign against the government forces. The violence was eventually restrained through a peace accord in 2009, with agreement that the bulk of the CNDP forces, as well as some militia groups, would be incorporated into the FARDC. However, sizeable areas of the eastern DRC continued to be unstable, with an assortment of armed/militia groups remaining active, particularly in mining areas.

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4 Gérard Prunier, *Africa's world war: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

5 Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the glory of monsters: the collapse of the Congo and the great war of Africa*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2011.

6 Gérard Prunier, *Africa's world war: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009; Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.