

Congo in Context

Written by Adam Elliott-Cooper

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Congo in Context

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/12/14/congo-in-context/>

ADAM ELLIOTT-COOPER, DEC 14 2012

“Our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory. We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which do not permit us to eat enough to drive away our hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us... For though this independence of the Congo is today being proclaimed in a spirit of accord with Belgium, a friendly country with which we are dealing as one equal to another, no Congolese worthy of the name can ever forget that we fought to win it [applause]... We are proud of this struggle amid tears, fire, and blood, down to our very heart of hearts, for it was a noble and just struggle, and indispensable struggle, if we were to put an end to the humiliating slavery that had been forced on us”

At the Independence Day celebration commemorating the official handover of power from Belgium to what was called the Congo Free-State in 1960, Patrice Lumumba issued this defiant response, in the presence of numerous Belgian statesmen, to King Baudouin’s speech, who hailed the “genius of King Leopold II”. Lumumba was the only anti-colonial leader with widespread support among the poor in Congo at the time. A year later, Lumumba was assassinated in a plot hatched by the CIA and carried out by the Belgians. This year is the 50th anniversary of Lumumba’s untimely death – a half century which has delivered neo-colonial riches to the west, while funding Africa’s first World War.

Five years after Lumumba’s assassination, Sésé Seko Mobutu became president of Zaire (now Congo), reigning as the authoritarian head of state for other 30 years. Mobutu was on the payroll of the CIA for many years before Washington supported his rise to leadership. In return for CIA support, Mobutu promoted US interests in central Africa during the Cold War. Mobutu’s loyalty to the US went as far as supporting the South African army, which was defending its system of apartheid. Mobutu sent commandos and armoured cars and committed another four battalions of paratroopers to support South African troops fighting in Angola’s civil war. The troops that Mobutu sent were fighting the Marxist-inspired People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). However, after Cuban troops (mainly Afro-Cubans) joined the MPLA, South Africa and its allies were defeated.

Another reason for US support for Mobutu was the vast mineral resources in the Congo. Under the regime, US multinationals accessed the resources they needed and, in return, Mobutu instigated a regime of violent repression and corruption. By the early 1980s, Zaire’s debt stood at 30% of GDP, partly due to unfair trade agreements with the west, and partly due to Mobutu draining public funds into his personal bank accounts. In 1982, Mobutu followed US advice in accepting an IMF deal which liberalised Zaire’s economy and brought about a reversal of the previous fifteen years of Mobutu’s state-led economic planning. These reforms included the liberalisation of agricultural products and the sale of diamonds, making it even easier for multinationals to profit from these resources. The resources were no longer in the hands of corrupt Congolese government workers, but directly in the hands of private corporations based in the west. With the end of the Cold War, access to the region’s resources had been secured and Mobutu was no longer needed by the US. As Mobutu and his corrupt regime were deposed and Laurent-Désiré Kabila came into power in 1997, violent conflict across state boundaries began to have an effect on the Congolese (now known as Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC) economy.

In 1998, civil war in neighbouring states began to spill over into the DRC, particularly from Rwanda’s infamous genocide. The US’s continual involvement in this resource-rich region saw hundreds of Rwandan soldiers and

Congo in Context

Written by Adam Elliott-Cooper

officers enrolled in American training programmes. The other country to become involved in the conflict in DRC was Uganda, which received \$81 million in 'development assistance and food aid' from the USA. It was also around this time that global demand rose for coltan. This metal is a vital component in the micro-chips used in mobile phones, laptops and other electronic items that provide huge profits for multinationals, who are able to sell them to westerners for inflated prices, reduced by the slave-like conditions under which they are mined in this war-torn region of Africa.

In 1996 American Mineral Fields (AMF) signed three multi-billion dollar deals for metal and mineral extraction. However, Kabila's terms of trade were not as preferable as those offered by rebel groups from Uganda and Rwanda. According to the United Nations, western multinationals were illegally buying minerals from different rebel groups, benefiting from the DRC's fractious governance structure and funding the overspill of conflict. In fact, AMF gave an 'advance' to rebel fighters of \$50 million to finance the war still being fought and to secure a date for transactions in the future, in the hope that they would deal with the transaction of resources. In response, Kabila decided to expel the violent Rwandan rebels, leading to intense conflict between Congolese peasants and the Rwandan and Ugandan rebel groups, effectively dividing the country into three. While this conflict ensued, trade increased, as the value of diamonds exported from Uganda rose from \$0.2m in 1997 to \$3.8m in 2000. For the Rwandan fighters, revenue from the re-export of coltan covered the entire cost of fighting the war and arming the rebels.

Although Mobutu used barriers to free and increase trade to fund the invasion of Angola, the opening up of the Congolese economy gave the opportunity for many violent dissident groups to be funded by the multinationals that could profit from their highly destructive methods of mineral and metal extraction. Coltan particularly, was found in the DRC, resulting in rebel groups and unscrupulous business people forcing farmers and their families off their land, or chasing people off land with coltan deposits and forcing them to work in artisanal mines. The conflict has taken the lives of over 5 million people since 1997, and has prominently included the use of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war. The United States and Britain are now providing direct military training and resources to Rwandan and Ugandan armies, which include parts of the United States Africom programme and the British Army training at the Singo Training School 75 miles north of Kampala. The US has been silent in Rwanda's funding of the M23 rebels, who have attacked UN troops, and used its international influence to make Rwanda a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Both the US and Britain have been complicit in the furthering of the conflict in Congo through their Rwandan and Ugandan proxies, according to the leaked UN report, benefiting from looting which can take place amidst the disorder. Similarly, the US funds NGOs which provide a decontextualised analysis of the conflict, and even campaign for direct US military intervention, as demonstrated by the Kony 2012 campaign.

Although pockets of protest amidst the suffering in Congo are receiving some coverage, it is the responsibility of those supporting and funding the war to act. The destruction of the Congo is only made possible due to there being no ethical investment policies in the region, despite the aforementioned condemnation from the United Nations. Holding our own governments to account, not only for colonial legacies, but for the continued indirect imperialism currently being imposed on the innocent people of Congo, is the only way the spirit of Lumumba can be continued, and genuine justice and autonomy for the region and its people can be achieved.

—

Adam Elliott-Cooper is Associate Editor of *Ceasefire Magazine*, and a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford.

About the author:

Adam Elliott-Cooper is Associate Editor of *Ceasefire Magazine*, and a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford.