Waiting to erupt

Congo’s war was bloody. It may be about to start again

President Joseph Kabila is in the seventh year of a five-year term. He is struggling to hold the country together

WHEN change comes to Congo, it can come fast. The previous president, Laurent Kabila, lost power when a bodyguard shot him in 2001. The president before that, Mobutu Sese Seko, was overthrown by Rwandan-backed rebels who marched 1,600km through the rainforest in a mere six months, wearing gumboots. Mobutu did not pay his troops. “You have guns,” he told them. “You don’t need a salary.” Faced with a serious enemy, they ran away. A tyrant who had ruled for 32 years was suddenly unemployed.

Could it be about to happen again? Congo’s ruler today, Joseph Kabila, who inherited the job from his late father, is beleaguered. Like Kabila père, he has many enemies. Like Mobutu, he has presided over a violent kleptocracy, which few
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President Kabila is in the seventh year of a five-year term and is constitutionally barred from standing again. He was supposed to call an election in 2016 but found excuses to delay it over and over. He has no legitimacy. His authority is disintegrating. And with it, central Africa faces once again the possibility of a slide into war.

After Mr Kabila broke a vow to hold elections by the end of last year, there were protests at Catholic services in Kinshasa, the capital, and 12 other cities. Mr Kabila cracked down hard. Police surrounded 134 churches in Kinshasa alone, beat and tear-gassed churchgoers, and shot live rounds into fleeing congregations. At least eight people died and probably many more. Human Rights Watch reports that bodies were dumped into the Congo river.

In rural areas the violence is worse. More than 70 rebel groups trade bullets with the army or, more commonly, prey on civilians. The security forces are equally vicious. Some 2m people fled their homes in 2017, bringing the total internally displaced to 4.3m. The UN predicts that an army offensive launched last month against Islamist guerrillas near the border with Uganda will drive another 370,000 from their homes. At least ten of Congo's 26 provinces are in the grip of armed conflict. Refugees are flocking into Uganda, Tanzania, Angola and Zambia. Recent history suggests that things could get much bloodier.

The great Congo war of 1998-2003 was the most lethal on any continent in most people’s lifetimes. It sucked in soldiers from eight other countries. Mass rape...
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The external shock was the Rwandan genocide of 1994. In its aftermath 2m refugees fled into eastern Congo. They were not the victims, but the perpetrators, along with their families and weapons. The forces of Paul Kagame, Rwanda’s Tutsi strongman, had chased them into the rainforests of what was then called Zaire. When they used the forest as a base to attack Rwanda, he invaded his giant neighbour, twice, to slaughter them. The first time he overthrew Mobutu and put Laurent Kabila in the palace. The second he tried to overthrow Kabila, who had double-crossed him and started to aid the genocidal Hutus. Only swift military intervention by Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia saved Kabila’s life.

Scramble in Africa

The war then degenerated into what Joseph Conrad once called a vile scramble for loot. Armies and militias seized mines and helped themselves. Gunmen plundered villages and raped every woman they could catch. The carnage ended, more or less, in 2003, when all sides were exhausted and donors were leaning on them to make peace. Today the world’s largest UN peacekeeping force, numbering 18,000 blue helmets, tries to enforce a measure of calm in the east of the country.

Paul Collier of Oxford University estimates that when a civil war ends, it has a 40% chance of reigniting within a decade. Congo has so far avoided a full relapse. But it still has three of the four factors that fed a conflict last time—a rotten state, mineral wealth and warlords stirring up animosities. It also has an illegitimate president. Small wonder Congolese are nervous.

Congo is four times the size of France but has less paved road than Luxembourg. Its population is estimated at 80m but no one is sure (the latest census was in 1986). Whatever the true figure, it is soaring. The average Congolese woman has six children, the third-highest rate in the world; nearly half of Congolese are under 14. And they are grindingly poor. Only one in seven earns more than $1.25 a day. Life expectancy is just 58. Britain, which provides aid to Congo, estimates that by 2030 it could be home to more absolutely poor people than any other country. It lags far behind even neighbouring Zambia on many indicators of development (see chart).
Yet there is more to Congo than misery. Its capital is a megacity of 12m. It is the birthplace of rumba lingala, dance music that has spread beyond Africa. Its artists exhibit across the world. Its people speak hundreds of languages. Despite this diversity, the Congolese are a single people. Crossing from Rwanda into the Kivus, you go from order to chaos, from stultifying conformity to exuberant individualism.

**Africa’s beating heart**

Congo’s potential is colossal. It is at the heart of Africa, and could connect north, south, east and west, if only it had roads. Underneath its soil lies enough copper, cobalt, zinc, tin, diamonds and gold to transform its fortunes, if only the wealth could be used wisely. Its rainforests teem with wild animals and unfamiliar plants. Binding it together is the great river, which flows so hard into the Atlantic that Portuguese sailors in the 16th century could drink fresh water 160km out to sea. The Congo could, if harnessed, power much of Africa. Yet chronic misrule and insecurity prevent any of this potential from becoming reality.

Somehow, with a bit of ingenuity and a lot of hustle, its people get by. On Lake Kivu a curious industry has grown up. On a beach, crude rails—seemingly pilfered from a railway—descend into the water. Mounted on top is a half-built ferry. Young men crowd around it, wearing cheap sunglasses in place of safety goggles, as they weld parts onto the hull. According to Baby Masuo Hamadi, the 39-year-old chief engineer, the boat will have cost just $800,000.

For $50, a speedboat will take you across the lake in two hours. The slower boats, which take 12 hours, have pulsing on-board nightclubs. Your correspondent travelled on a ship with four classes of travel, from a crowded and sweaty third-class compartment in the hold to a VIP cabin on the roof, occupied by a splendidly regal government minister.

The boats thrive because no one wants to travel by road. The journey from Bukavu to Goma, on the other end of the lake, is infested with rebels. Though the boats occasionally sink (and contain precisely zero safety equipment), they are still far safer. “Cars don’t move how they used to, because of the insecurity,” says Bebe Kasi, a soldier’s wife travelling from Kalemie, on Lake Tanganyika. She left her husband...
there after fighting broke out nearby, to take her children out of danger.

It is in the green hills of North and South Kivu that Congo’s wars have been most bloody. Bukavu and Goma, the two main cities, have changed hands several times. The hills are densely populated and fertile. Conflict over land, grazing and water is common. Analysts talk in an alphabet soup of acronyms of different armed groups. The last major offensive took place in 2012, when a new Tutsi group, M23, reportedly sponsored by Rwanda, marched into Goma unopposed. It was eventually thrown out by the Congolese army, supported by the UN. But war has continued.

Local rebel groups are nearly all ethnically based. The government will not protect you, they tell villagers, so you must rely on your tribe. They make money from logging, extortion and smuggling. They terrorise civilians but have not yet seriously challenged Mr Kabila’s rule.

Some rebel groups seem to be coming together and may once again threaten the state. In September a group called Mai Mai Yakutumba, led by William Amuri Yakutumba, an ageing Babembe rebel who likes to wear a Nazi SS symbol on his uniform, attacked Uvira, a lakeside city in South Kivu. The Congolese army fled. With machineguns mounted on speed boats, the rebels would have taken the city had they not been repelled by Pakistani peacekeepers. Mr Yakutumba says his aim is to overthrow the government in Kinshasa.

In the past year several cities have seen prison breaks. One in Kinshasa, led by a Christian cult, freed perhaps 4,000 people. In Beni, a city in North Kivu, massacres of civilians and attacks on UN bases have killed hundreds. In Kasai, in the southwest, a major insurgency that began late last year has displaced hundreds of thousands and led to the deaths of thousands, including two UN experts, one of whom was apparently decapitated by rebels.

**State of collapse**

Making sense of it all is hard. Mr Kabila’s foes say he has deliberately stoked violence so that holding elections is impossible and he can stay in power. Others mutter conspiratorially that the West keeps Congo in chaos so as to extract its minerals.
What seems more likely is that Mr Kabila’s authority is draining away and with it the Congolese state’s ability to maintain even a basic monopoly of violence. Soldiers and police are barely paid. In Beni, the front line in the battle against the rebels allegedly responsible for the massacres, soldiers live in miserable dugouts protected from the elements by tree branches and tarpaulins, and complain that there is no food. They rarely fight.

In the east Mr Kabila has never really been in control. Instead he has forged alliances with warlords and regional power-brokers, with the tacit support of Mr Kagame over the border in Rwanda. Army commanders, of which Congo has far too many, are bought off with lucrative postings where they can smuggle or extort.

The UN provides a hefty monitoring operation and has so far prevented any rebel movement from growing large enough to threaten Mr Kabila. That now risks breaking down. Nikki Haley, Donald Trump’s ambassador to the UN, accuses it of propping up a corrupt government. Even as conflicts spread, the peacekeeping mission is being cut back, to save money. Meanwhile, Rwanda and Burundi are quietly fighting a proxy war on Congolese territory. Neighbours abhor a power vacuum.

**Dig for victory**

Mineral wealth finances the instability. Take, for instance, a gold mine in a hill at a place called Nzibira, 80km from Bukavu. All of the vegetation has been stripped away. Tunnels have been cut deep into the rock and propped up with logs. A generator hums, pumping air down the shafts. Men with cheap head-torches scurry around the surface. Underground, at the end of a steep tunnel too small even to crouch in, miners bash chisels into the rock to free the precious ore.

This kind of mining is “artisanal”, meaning primitive and dangerous, not expensive and handmade. Industrial mining all but stopped in the 1980s in this part of Congo. Instead, 400 workers dig, carry, wash, break and filter the ore by hand. They break lumps of mud and rock not with hammers but with bigger rocks. Congo has perhaps 2m such miners.

Their unmeasured output may exceed that of Congo’s industrial mines, which are run mostly by Western and Chinese firms and provide 95% of formal exports.
Without mining, villagers around Bukavu and Goma would struggle to afford tin roofs or mobile phones. But the men with guns would have less to fight over. Many mines are run or taxed by warlords.

Augustin Baderhekuguma has been mining for 31 years. In a good week his team of around 50 workers can bring out around 50 grammes of gold, earning $2,300 from the local négociants (middlemen). Recent years have been hard. Since 2010 the Dodd-Frank law has required American firms to prove their products do not contain “conflict minerals”. So that an embargo did not affect all Congolese minerals, Mr Kabila ordered the shutdown of mining in eastern Congo, the most conflict-ridden region. Soldiers swarmed over the sites, forcing miners off the hills. Mr Baderhekuguma went to Kolwezi, in the former province of Katanga, to find work. Others went back to subsistence farming. A few joined rebel groups.

Fidel Bafilemba, who runs an NGO in Goma, says the law has made it harder for armed groups to fund themselves. But not impossible. Several complex systems of verification, using bags and tags to track minerals, have grown up. That gives sellers the paperwork to “prove” that minerals can be certified as coming from conflict-free artisanal mines.

Yet many are sceptical that the system stops fraud. “Here, there is so much gold, it is sold in all of the neighbourhoods,” says Apollinaire Bulundi, a former South Kivu minister of mines. Almost all of it is mined by hand and smuggled out, mostly into Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, often wrapped in women’s clothes. Pascal Buyoya, a smuggler in a flamboyant red suit, says he takes the gold to Rwanda. From there, it is flown to Dubai, and becomes indistinguishable from any other gold. The Congolese state receives no taxes from this trade but bigwigs on both sides of the border have grown fat on it.

War threatens Congo’s natural splendours. Fly over Virunga national park in a helicopter, and you can see great black patches where the trees have been burned. Smoke rises ominously. The forest is burnt down for charcoal, with which most Congolese cook. Much of the trade is controlled by the FDLR, a Hutu militia which grew out of the génocidaires.

Congo’s forests contain gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees, as well as the elusive okapi, which looks as if it is half-giraffe, half-zebra. Forest elephants and lions also hide in its depths. It is vast and poorly understood. Last year, scientists discovered
an area of peatland around the size of England, containing as much trapped carbon dioxide as America emits in 20 years.

Daring tourists visit Virunga to climb Nyiragongo, an active volcano, and to track gorillas. They need an armed escort. The park's Belgian boss, Emmanuel de Merode, reckons that the illegal economy there—charcoal, logging, fishing—is worth $100m a year. His rangers try to prevent some of it. Over 100 have been killed. Mr de Merode has been shot while doing his job, too.

He recognises that the park cannot deprive desperately poor locals of 2m acres of land without offering them something. So the park is building hydroelectric power plants—some of which are paid for by money from the Howard Buffett foundation, an American charity. Running any kind of enterprise in Congo is costly, however. Half of the park's revenues go to Kinshasa, supposedly to fund the national park service. What happens to the money, Mr de Merode is unsure.

Go with the flow
Nothing illustrates Congo's missed opportunities better than the river itself. Under brutal Belgian colonialism, it was the country's main artery. Stanleyville, later renamed Kisangani, 1,500km inland, became the country's second-biggest city. A series of cataracts upriver means that the capital, Kinshasa, is where the river starts to become navigable.

"You could go all over this country by river," says the director of the national transport office, Daniel Mukoko Samba, pointing to an old map. Tributaries of the Congo and the Kasai rivers used to carry palm oil, beer, coffee and other goods from factories to the coast. Now the factories are derelict, and the grand shipping company the Belgians built has no functioning boats. The latest statistics Mr Mukoko Samba can produce for traffic date from 1979.

Trade on the river now moves on small barges. In Kisangani ladies in multicoloured wraps cook on open fires, waiting for a boat. There are no cabins. Instead, passengers sit in a floating shanty town on top of the cargo, with tarpaulins to shield them from the rain. There are no fixed timetables. Whenever the rumour spreads that a barge is leaving, people rush to it. Therèse Basea Abedi, a 43-year-old trader, is waiting to travel to Kinshasa, where her mother has just died. It could take ten days, or a month. Coming back against the flow could take six weeks. Ms Abedi has made the journey 30 times or so. Each time it has got worse, she says. The rich fly.

The river’s hydroelectric potential is barely tapped. Kinshasa is powered by two large dams, built in the Mobutu era. There are plans for a third, which could generate 39,000MW, or twice as much as China’s Three Gorges dam. That is enough to power not just Congo but much of southern Africa. Yet, despite a South African promise to buy the power, the project has gone nowhere. In 2016 the World Bank withdrew its support, having been put off—those with knowledge of the project say—by Mr Kabila’s insistence that he take personal charge of it.

**Kin La Poubelle**

Kinshasa is the centre of Congolese cultural life and politics. Its glitzy hotels and restaurants are where the money looted from the rest of the country is spent. It boasts grandiose architecture (including an enormous Chinese-built parliament) and some of the best-dressed people in the world (known as *sapeurs*, or members of the Society for the Advancement of Elegant People). It is also filthy and lawless. The buses are known as “spirits of death”. The potholes are the size of buses. Traffic is regulated by gun-toting cops who will happily pull a motorist out of his car and beat him up in broad daylight.

The city is one of the least connected in the world. The airport on the English channel island of Guernsey, with a population of 63,000, handles more passengers than Kinshasa’s. Perhaps one in 20 Kinois has a formal job. Nonetheless they pay dearly to live in the metropolis. A room in a slum, without dependable electricity or clean water, can go for $100 a month.

In December 2016, on the streets of Kinshasa, Mr Kabila met his biggest test as his term as president drew to a close. He faced Étienne Tshisekedi, a veteran of the anti-Mobutu struggle in the early 1990s, who is revered in much of the city. On the final day of the year, with riots brewing, Mr Kabila agreed that elections would be held by the end of 2017 and that, in the meantime, a national unity government would bring in parts of the opposition.

In February 2017, however, Tshisekedi died and the deal began to implode. Without its charismatic leader, the opposition alliance, *le rassemblement*, is weak. Martin Fayulu, the co-ordinator of the group, says Mr Kabila “wants to stay in power eternally”. An election is scheduled for December 23rd. Voter registration has progressed but few expect it to happen on time. On January 31st Mr Kabila’s spokesman said his boss would not run for another term and would name a preferred successor by July. The opposition do not believe him.
According to polling by the Congo Research Group, of New York University, Mr Kabila is unpopular. If he changed or ignored the constitution and ran again, just 10% of the population would vote for him. However, his rivals are weak, too. Moïse Katumbi, a wealthy former governor of Katanga, came first in that poll, with 38%. But he is in Brussels, having been exiled and then convicted of (almost certainly) trumped-up charges of illegally selling property. Tshisekedi's son Félix lacks his father's charisma. No Congolese politician has a truly national following.

Mr Kabila has amassed great wealth in office but shows little interest in governing. According to a friend, he is indecisive and introspective. He likes to collect motorbikes and old cars. He spends a lot of time on a farm he owns in Katanga, where he also has plenty of businesses. Some say he plays a lot of video games. He rarely appears in public or gives speeches.

Having been raised in Tanzania, he speaks little Lingala, the language of Kinshasa's streets. Having taken power at 29—he is now just 46 years old—he cannot reasonably hope to die peacefully in office. Yet there is almost nobody he could turn into a dauphin, trusted to protect his affairs. Jaynet, his sister, and Zoe, his brother, both members of the national assembly, are his closest allies. He thinks tactically, not strategically. Each promise seems designed to buy him another few months in power. He cannot keep it up for ever.

Congo is a bit like Mount Nyiragongo. In 2002 it erupted and a river of molten rock, 200 metres wide, poured down towards Goma. Some 400,000 people were evacuated—at the last minute, because the rebels controlling the city thought that the warning of the impending eruption was a trick to make them flee.

Even as Nyiragongo's crater still bubbles, 50 metres under the surface of nearby Lake Kivu lies 60bn cubic metres of methane. If lava sinks to the bottom, the explosion will release enough gas to suffocate everyone for miles around—millions of people. The city avoided this catastrophe in 2002, says Abel Minani of the local volcanology centre. Next time, it might not.

**Bubbling under**

As with the volcano, so with politics. A new war could spread far beyond Congo's borders, sucking in neighbours as happened 20 years ago. By contrast, if Congo were peaceful and growing, it would give a huge boost to the continent of Africa.
There are reasons to hope. Among them is Lucha, a movement of young middle-class activists that started in Goma and has now spread across the country. Ghislain Muhiwa, one of the founders, explains the group’s tactics. Instead of engaging in ethnic politics, they protest against the government’s failure to provide services. “People here think it is normal to have no water, no electricity, to be killed by militias. Our job is to convince them it is not normal.”

No more than a few hundred people in size, Lucha has nonetheless scared the government. That is because it cannot be bought off. Dozens of its activists have spent time in prison; others have disappeared. Mr Muhiwa spent six months in prison—he devoted it to teaching the other inmates how to read and write. Lucha is a long way from bringing about a revolution. But it is a hint of what the people of Congo could produce, given a chance.

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