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Congo DR and the Intrigues of Resource-Based Conflict

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Abstract

Congo DR is one of Africa's most fabulously resource-endowed countries. It has the world largest reserve of cobalt; 80% of global reserve of tantalum; 60% of global reserve of niobium. It is also rich in coltan zinc, gold, diamond, uranium, tin, copper, rubber, ivory and tusk, among others. It is against this backdrop that this study interrogates the politics of resource-based, bitter and enduring conflict in the country. It traces the history of the conflict, discusses its content, examines the motives of stakeholders and appraises the dynamics of third-party intervention in the country's recurring conflict.

Key words: resources, plunder, mining, looting, rebel.

Introduction

Two things immediately come to mind the moment there is a mention of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): the first is the association of the country with

a bitter civil war that now has the unpleasant distinction of being tagged “Africa’s first World War” (Moloo, 2007; Kennes, 2002 and Collins, 2002) while the other is its enormous natural resources deposit. This thus makes “war” and “natural resources” to be the two central issues in the politics of the central African country. While the two issues are now coming to mind far more distinctly in recent times, war and natural resource politics have been at the centre of affairs in the DRC since independence. The classification of the DR Congo’s war as the “African first World War” is understandable in so far as it occurred in Africa and with up to seven or nine African countries taking frontline/inglorious part in it. But it is inappropriate to the extent that there are numerous non-African actors (state and non-state) in the war. Many Western countries and about eighty-five multinational companies participated either in the gross human right violation, despoliation of land, water and forest, plunder of mineral resources and violation of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines when the DRC war was ranging.

Established as a Belgian colony in 1908, the DRC became independent on June 30, 1960. However, the early years of independence of the country were markedly turbulent. Today, political and social instability is still prevalent in a country of 66, 514, 504 million population (CIA World Factbook, 2009). One of the reasons for the instability is the cut-throat competition between and among the country’s elites over its resources. The internecine and seemingly unending war has led to the death of more than 3.5 million people (CIA World Factbook, 2009). In north Kivu that is rich in gold, tin-ore and coltan (which is a major component of mobile phones), fighting for control of the mines there is often common and brutal (CIA World Factbook, 2009). This paper takes a look at the politics of natural resource conflict in the DRC – tracing its history, discussing its content, investigating the motives of the actors and interrogating the ways through which the international community has tried to address the complexities of the recurring conflict in the country.

Background to the study

The Literature on the causes of many African conflicts or state collapse is replete with causal factors ranging from race to ethnicity, poverty, irredentism and religion. There are also the reasons of boundary and colonialism leading to many internecine wars in the continent. Many of these conflicts that have bedevilled the continent in the past three decades are not only ill-defined and cavalier; they are also a result of greed and pure criminality. Incidentally, there is an uncontrollable and massive death of innocent citizens as opposed to only professional armies or combatant rebel elements (Laasko and Olukoshi, 1996). The facilities that sustain these wars are ready availability of mineral resources and markets for these resources to the warring parties. The resources are available at a cheaper rate which would not

have obtained in peacetime – this could be described as rabid international consumption culture occasioned by warfare.

The bottom line is that the crisis in the DRC cannot be divorced from the very ‘false start’ that many African countries had. In this event, many of these countries did not demonstrate original strategy of endogenous development which differs in any form (or widely) from that of their colonial masters. Many of the ruling elites that took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists were merely keen on pursuing personal agenda; decimating the potentials of the citizenry and mortgaging the future of the generations yet to be born – which eventually led to the nature of crisis that obtained in the DRC (Zack-Williams, 2002 and Clapham, 1996).

The DR Congo conflict has been described as Africa’s World War I involving seven countries. It is the deadliest conflict since World War II – with children accounting for 47 per cent of the deaths (Shah, 2008). Apart from the war in Iraq, the war in the DR Congo is one of those that have caused the most sufferings in the world in recent years. As many as 5.4 million people have been killed and at least another 2 million displaced (Renner, 2004). Save the initial security concerns, the countries bordering the DR Congo continued in the war because it provided them with enormous opportunity to plunder and sell the country’s resources. The foreign invaders and their rebel cohorts within the DR Congo began with theft of the extant stockpiled raw materials. Once the stockpiles were exhausted, they resorted to various means of predatory methods of extraction of the mineral resources (Renner, 2004).

This ‘unrefined’ method of extraction has to be put in context at this juncture. Even in peacetime, mining and logging are unfriendly to the environment much less under conflict situation. In the belligerency of the DR Congo then, the primary interest of the combatants was to raise fund to buy weapons and stuff the pockets of the warlords and foot-soldiers alike with the loots of war. Hence, the widespread and unregulated logging, mining and poaching there resulted into gross violation of both the civilians and the environment. The environmental violation becomes more grievous when we reckon with the fact that the DR Congo ‘houses’ more than half of Africa’s forests – habitat to a large number of rare floras and faunas (Renner, 2004).

At the root of the crisis was a Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who seized power through a military coup in November, 1965. He changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko and that of the country to Zaire. His thirty-two-year hold on government was filled with primitive accumulation of the state resources and relied mainly on the goodwill of the West – bent on maintaining its Cold War preferences (CIA World Factbook, 2009). The only laudable legacy he left is his ability to weld together a fragmented country of about two hundred heterogeneous ethnic groups – thereby preventing potential ethnic crises from degenerating into bloody and protracted civil war (Adesola, 2001). Interestingly, in the post-Mobutu years, the DRC is fragmented

as a result of civil war. Mobutu government was toppled in May 1997 by Laurent Desire Kabila – who was supported by neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Uganda. Kabila immediately renamed Zaire, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The reign of Laurent Kabila was short-lived due to internal wrangling and geopolitics of the DRC's neighbours – Rwanda, Uganda, Chad, Angola Sudan, Namibia and Zimbabwe. By January 2001, Laurent Kabila's junta fell and Joseph Kabila, his son, became the head of state.

Understanding illegal mining and criminal extraction of natural resources in the DRC

The DR Congo is fabulously endowed with mineral ores. It has \$24 trillion worth of untapped deposit of raw mineral ores, the world largest reserve of cobalt and large quantities of the world's diamond, gold and copper (Morgan, 2009). The DR Congo contains 60 per cent of the world niobium deposit and 80 per cent of tantalum. An estimated \$6 million worth of raw cobalt alone is exported daily and 6,000 tons of heterogenine (another cobalt ore) leave the DRC per month (Moloo, 2007).

The date of primitive accumulation of mineral resources in the DR Congo started way back in 1885, during the reign of King Leopold II of Belgium. At that time up till 1960 when the country became independent, King Leopold II profited from the seizure of ivory (from ivory raids) buying of tusks from the interior or through direct confiscation. The Congolese were often compelled at gunpoint to accept extremely low prices in exchange for the ivory in their possession. In the 1890s came the primitive acquisition of rubber by the totalitarian King Leopold II. This was another assault on humanity of the Congolese who had suffered long years of ivory raids under the same dispensation (Moloo, 2007).

In fact, before World War I, rubber and ivory extraction constituted 96 per cent of exports from the Belgian Congo; by 1926, mineral exports constituted 61 per cent of total exports. Copper production began in 1911, diamond mining in 1913, tin in 1918 and uranium and radium mining in 1922. By 1932, the country had attracted more than 100 million pounds of foreign capital – mainly controlled by Belgian firms (Moloo, 2007).

It is instructive at this point to dwell on Erik Kennes' highlight of the interface between the ordinary workings of formal mining, the state structure and criminal and/or illegal mining in the DRC. Exploitation of metals and other mineral resources were in the hands of the big businesses during colonialism. The commodities at that time had fixed prices, limited number of sellers and buyers. Supply and demand were predictable as well. At independence in 1960, the state became intrusive in the mining economy as it depended heavily on the revenue from the sector for its survival. By 1970, big development banks that could generate

funding for mining projects took over the major activities within the sector. Unfortunately, there was a decline in the price of base metals in the 80s and 90s which made the sector unattractive to investors. Thus, new but smaller companies that were run by highly competent hands (who had been laid off by the larger companies) began to take the risk of exploration. Speculative explorers also delved into mining in the DRC. It is pertinent to state that the dominant political elite class collaborated with the mining speculators and it was ready to sign any agreement – in a desperate bid to survive. This led to the emergence of patron-client network in the mining sector – which ran through the Mobutu and Kabila eras (Kennes, 2002).

The chequered mining history of the DRC was further shattered by the devastating war that broke out in 1998. It was at that point that the vice-like and criminalized grip of the military (both of the Congolese descent and that of the invading forces) on the mining sector became monumental. Hence, the military network (made up of the military, business and political elites), instead of the state, began to act as a locus of power both at the local and international levels. To facilitate the looting of the mining sector, the military usually remove a patron of a network to be replaced by their own representative, often selected from the lower level of the pyramid and expected to be loyal to them. They also control essential access points like the airports and trading posts – in order to levy taxes (Kennes, 2002). It is germane to note that the international network through which the plundered resources are let out of the country is the same channel through which in-road is made for weapons to prosecute the war.

Thus, while the mining sector in the Congo DR might not be profitable or attractive to the profit-oriented businesses, it is certainly a source of wealth for military and criminal activities (Kennes, 2002). The resources are extracted in small scales i.e. artisanal mining operations which have no regard for environmental impacts, family dislocation, mining-related diseases, child labour and women abuse. Going by this gainful but dangerous engagement, it was easy for the Rwandan, Burundian and Ugandan governments to finance their war machines in the DRC with ill-gotten proceeds from massive and illegal exploitation of mineral resources, commercial deals, profit sharing companies and taxation in the DRC (UN Report, 2001).

In this section, we shall demonstrate that wars, no doubt, need money. In the DRC's case, natural and agricultural resources such as diamond, uranium, cobalt, elephant tusk, timber, coffee, palm oil make such money available. The money is used to fund armies, dissident and militia groups who murder, rape and commit sundry human rights abuses against civilians. Besides, rather than fingering culture and ethnicity as the explanation for the initiation and sustenance of numerous conflicts in Africa, as obtained during the Cold War, economic agenda is the driving

force in many of today's African conflicts. Indeed, there is a denial once a group is accused of having economic agenda for initiating or continuing a war (Samset, 2002). The reasons for such denial are multifarious but the details of which we do not want to delay us here.

The DRC is a nation endowed with vast potential wealth coming mainly from the extraction of diamond, gold, copper, cobalt and coltan zinc as well as consumer products like textile, footwear, cigarette, processed foods and beverages cum cement and commercial ship repairs (CIA World Factbook, 2009). Hence, the economic benefit of fighting a war is one of the central motives of the warring parties there. For instance, natural resource trade had intensified over ten years of violence and civil war between General Laurent Nkunda-led rebel group named *Congres National Pour la Defense du Peuple* (CNDP) and the national Congolese army, *the Forces Armees de la Republique Democratique du Congo* (FARDC). Unarmed civilian population has not only been internally displaced, but they have also suffered gross human rights violations especially in the Eastern city of Goma and north/south Kivu province – noted to be rich in minerals such as cassiterite (iron ore), gold and coltan. The rebel group and the Congolese army have been involved in illegal trade in these minerals. Many unarmed civilians have been maltreated, taxed, maimed and plundered of these minerals or cash along the roads or at border crossings (Global Witness Press Release, 2008).

Again, availability of ready markets for these plundered resources is an incentive to the combatants that are involved in the illicit trade. The said availability of ready markets also adds to the egregious violation of the fundamental rights of the civilian population there. It is instructive to know that the buyers of these mineral goods are individuals who buy from the mines as well as manufacturers and multinational retail companies. Be that as it may, the international community is found wanting in addressing the linkage between armed conflict in the DRC and the global trade in natural resources originating from the country. This explains why commodities like diamond, timber, cocoa, etc. have played pivotal roles in sustaining conflicts across Africa. This is said with the benefit of hindsight that most of the world's most brutal wars have had to end abruptly once there is a disconnection between resource and conflict. Not only that, the United Nations (UN) itself is yet to evolve a more robust collective mechanism to the resource-conflict network; either because of lack of adequate means or lack of political will to do so (Global Witness Press Release, 2008).

Research has shown that 'lootable' commodities like gemstones, diamonds and drugs in themselves do not account for the commencement of wars, but they doubtlessly have the tendency of lengthen the existing conflicts (Ross, 2004b). The protraction and seemingly intractable nature of the DRC conflict become more telling

of this standpoint. To be sure, resources are termed 'lootable' to the extent that they can be easily appropriated, extracted and sold by individuals or small groups of unskilled workers. Such resources benefit local economy, but harden armed factions or rebel elements in a conflict to abandon their weapons and resort to the 'conference table'.

Furthermore, availability of mineral wealth also increases the chance of third party intervention from far and near; either because of the accompanying benefits of intervention or because of the reduction of the cost of intervention – as evident in the Rwandan government's intervention in the DRC in 1998 (Ross, 2004b). Access to lootable commodities by rebel or separatist groups (usually being the weaker party in conflicts) enhances their chance to raise money and thereby continue fighting or harm successful peace-building rather than being interested in what the 'negotiating table' has in stock for them.

The only instance where despite the profit derived from 'conflict-commodities' the conflict duration has shortened is when the principal characters in the conflict have been assured of retaining the control of the area where resources were plundered while the war was ranging or given a promise of a new investment but equally profitable one. In this case, the peacemakers or negotiators would draft agreements that would favour the rebel leaders – either to get rich or richer in peacetime. This was what obtained in the 1999 Lome Accord on the war devastated Sierra Leone and the 1994 Lusaka Protocols in Angola; Foday Sankoh and Jonas Savimbi respectively were left in charge of the country's national resources (i.e. the areas that they held before the accords) under a unity government (Ross, 2004a). The same way the Cambodian civil war was shortened after 1996 when a faction of Khmer Rouge defected to the government and was given resource-based incentives (Ross, 2004a). Worthy of note at this juncture is the fact that in 1996, Ieng Sary, one of the Khmer Rouge's top-notch Commanders surrendered to the government along with 4,000 soldiers under his command.

However, against the above standpoint of MacAlister Brown, Joseph Zasloff, Philippe Le Billon and Jake Sherman (Brown and Zasloff, 1998; Le Billon, 2000; Le Billon, 2001 and Sherman, 2000), a conflict lasting close to a decade or more as it obtained in Sierra Leone, Angola and Cambodia could not be characterized as 'short-lived'. What would have been more appropriate is that the conflict would have lingered were the resource-based proviso to assuage the rebels was not included in the terms of agreements mentioned above.

It need be mentioned here that alluvial diamonds are found near the surface of the earth in myriad of rivers criss-crossing the vast land and can be extracted by artisanal miners. In this case, extraction requires little prior knowledge or technical equipment – hence, it is more easily accessible to the rebels or separatist elements.

The lightness of the stones facilitates transportation and commercialization (Samset, 2002). However, kimberlite diamonds are deep-seated in the volcanic rock and can only be extracted by large-scale industrial mining – thus, foreign concerns get attracted and involved in the illicit mining and sale of this commodity (Ross, 2004b).

Again, on the incentive that natural resources could give to sustaining civil wars, Kabila's government offered timber concessions to neighbouring Zimbabwe in return for the latter's military assistance (Ross, 2004b); just the same way that Charles Taylor raised money from timber's sale and used the forest resource more to consolidate his hold on power once he seized it.

Wars funded by plundered resources not only account for mindless killings of innocent and defenceless citizens in their millions, but such plundering has also generated enormous revenue that enables both state and non-state actors as well as their logistical backers to maintain their war machines. Not only that, lack of domestic and international action to prosecute such war criminals has heightened their sense of impunity, self-perpetuating cycle of violence and has undermined economic growth and social rejuvenation. This position is predicated on the fact that the mass of displaced labour pool flee the fighting and there is a disruption of effective government. Furthermore, such plunder of forest resources, among others, have untoward environmental impact (Lundberg, 2008).

As it is apparent in the DRC, property-based war makes it imperative for the armed parties in the conflict to joust for control over territory. This will enable them benefit from the exploitation of the natural resources that are available in such territory. As would be expected, the backers of the warring parties facilitate and concentrate more on massive importation of weapons into those 'strategic' conflict zones where their beneficiaries are in control of (Lundberg, 2008).

Countries often become involved in their war-ravaged neighbours mainly for economic gains unrelated to legitimate national security concerns. In fact, in December 2005, the Ugandan government was held liable, by an International Court of Justice (ICJ) verdict, for plundering DRC's natural resources by members of the Ugandan military (Lundberg, 2008). Interestingly too, while Uganda and Rwanda are not endowed, at all, with diamond on their soils, they began to export diamond since 1998 when the DRC civil war commenced. The two countries were able to export diamond due to their involvement and predatory exploitation of the mineral resource in the DRC. They even exported more diamond than the authorities in DRC have (Samset, 2004). There is also a grave regional instability in the Great Lakes region. For mainly economic reason and other sundry reasons there is a keen involvement of Ugandan, Rwandan, Zimbabwean, Angolan and Chadian troops and government-supported militias in the DRC's civil war (Lundberg, 2008).

Arising from the foregoing, it could be argued that the DRC is archetypal of the plight of many African countries. In spite of rich natural resources and mineral endowment, its population is one of the poorest and most conflict-ridden in the world. To be sure, part of the main predicament of the DRC could be explained using its relationship with the West (Martin, 2005). The summary of which is that the West is inclined on a consistent balkanization of the DRC people. This is said with the hindsight that any Congolese leader who comes between the West and its access to Congo's strategic mineral resources is easily 'stamped-out'. The tragic fate of Patrice Lumumba and Laurent Kabila and the protracted romance of Mobutu Sese Seko with the West – become more telling of the above mentioned assertion (Martin, 2005).

The foregoing depicts how economic considerations often shape the choice, preferences and behaviour of warring parties. This type of attitude is a peculiar dynamic of conflict. Here, 'defeating the enemy' is downplayed; instead attempts are often focused on economic gains that are derivable from continuation of war and institutionalization of violence (Berdal and Malone, 2000). In this event, while warfare is seen as an instrument, violence is seen as a mode of accumulation in the warfare. The continuation of war is not seen as a collapse of one system but the emergence of a new one – in which government officials, traders, combatants and international actors who collaborate with the local actors benefit maximally, to the detriment of the mass of people in the war zones (Berdal and Malone, 2000). In short, the benefits of war are closely linked to the availability of and access to natural/mineral resources in the area of conflict (Berdal and Malone, 2000).

Conclusion

Evidence abound that countries with heavy reliance on export of primary commodities face a higher risk of civil war than resource-poor ones and the presence of mineral resources in a conflict zone tends to increase the a conflict's geographical scope (Ross, 2004a). However, the untoward consequence of a resource-driven conflict is that the state would have been incapacitated or be unable to reconstitute itself as a state qua state (Lundberg, 2008). The following suggestions could be helpful:

One, even as the war is over, the DR Congo's government should move to control the mining zones of Kivu, Kisangani, Kasai, Shaba (formerly Katanga), Kahuzi-Benga National Park, Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Virunga Park. This control could take the form of registering artisanal miners, levy tax on exploitation and monitor export of the commodities. The borders and airfields should also be closely monitored in order to prevent resource smuggling and arms trafficking. Two, the government should regenerate the agricultural sector which in turn will enhance food security and make those involved in artisanal mining take up a more gainful employment. Three, and above all, there is the need for good governance which will

meet the yearnings and aspirations of all and sundry and prevent the predatory plundering of the country's natural resources, mindless killings and bitterness that greeted the war there.

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