

## FIRST PERSON

## Resilience in East Congo

By BRUCE KNAUFT

Emory College's Institute of Critical International Studies (ICIS), which I directed, has closed amid the heavy ax of budget cuts. I write today not about this foreclosure, but about how lucky I have been, how lucky most of us are, to be able to continue working in the midst of a global financial crisis — especially by way of comparison with those in many other world areas.

This spring, I had the privilege to visit once again the eastern Congo, a region that has suffered the greatest loss of life in the world from human-caused disaster — about 5.5 million persons — since World War II. Though ICIS is closed, a major project within it, funded externally by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and co-contracted with Emory, continues. This project considers “States at Regional Risk” (SARR) in various hot spots around the world, including the Great Lakes Region of East Africa.

In the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, large-scale loss of life in the Great Lakes region has now become concentrated primarily in one country — the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). But the conflict that informs this catastrophe is regional and even global. It has even been described as “the first African world war,” as so many countries have been involved.

An important and troubling aspect of this conflict is not only that it has dragged on for years but that it combines dramatic, violent atrocities with a numbing drumbeat of lives lost due to famine, destruction of crops, livestock, homes, and lack of health and humanitarian services. Armed groups and militias render populous parts of rural East Congo insecure and effectively unreachable for services or aid by humanitarian organizations and the United Nations, much less the Congolese government.

Part of the problem is caused by the enormous mineral resources that the region is effectively cursed with. Gold,

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diamonds, and less well-known but lucrative minerals are often easy to procure and hugely profitable to smuggle and sell on the international market. Largely unregulated by the Congolese state in this vast region, the trade in minerals attracts militias, traders, the interests of numerous nations, the Congolese army, and commerce on the side by some U.N. workers. Even American consumers are not uninvolved; for a time, the demand for cheap new cell phones and SONY PlayStations put a premium price on smuggled coltan ore from East Congo for their manufacture.

Though the conflict in East Congo is dramatized occasionally by high-profile atrocities and especially by sexual terrorism against local women by soldiers and militias, the vast majority of lives lost in this conflict continues to fly under the radar of the media and international attention.

Intractable as this conflict is, what can we as outsiders do about it? Even the best of intentions has unintended consequences, and intervention can easily make matters worse rather than better. As we put aside our own sense of superiority, we realize that this complicated conflict imbricates many national and international interests and policies, not excluding those of our own government and the international community. It is not a conflict that “we” can solve for “them” — any more than we can easily change the composition of our cell phones.

Our SARR project emphasizes that core issues that cause and abet conflict need to be discussed frankly by those who live and work in the region itself. Strategies hatched in boardrooms, meeting halls, or academic gatherings at international venues are often at pains to effect meaningful and lasting change on the ground. With its limited resources, the SARR project cultivates dialogue across different and competing



The author visits displaced Congolese in their camp.

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perspectives within regions of state risk themselves.

On June 4–5, we convened a conference on the conflict of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa in Bujumbura, Burundi. Co-sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace, the conference included more than 100 East African scholars, civil society leaders, and government members. The conference looked beyond immediate conditions to candidly consider root causes of the ongoing violence. Keynote addresses were given by the head of the world's largest peace-keeping mission (MONUC), as well as the Burundian Minister of Education, and others.

This was the first conference of its kind, and it was deeply gratifying to be project director. But our initiative would have been impossible without the work of our Congolese SARR postdoctoral fellow and visiting lecturer here at Emory, Patience Kabamba. During several trips to the region preceding the conference, Dr. Kabamba built relationships, trust and collaborations that enabled the June meetings to take place.

Though I was gratified by the success of the conference —

and by the appreciative desire of those from all countries to further the dialogue at a follow-up conference — I was most impressed on a personal level by once again visiting war-torn areas of East Congo. This time, I traveled in a small group under U.N. escort and protection. With Dr. Kabamba and me were Emory graduate student Jill Rosenthal, whose trip was supported by SARR, and our security and logistical advisor, Cornelius Mbuluku.

Among other things, we traveled to a recent encampment of some 17,000 persons who, displaced by warfare, spontaneously set up their own U.N.-style refugee camp to protect themselves from armed conflict and sexual assault and also to attract the services of the U.N. and other relief organizations. We also traveled to a mass grave memorial of the Rwandan genocide that included the mummified remains of thousands of people who had been slaughtered.

What struck me most was the resilience of the living — the resilience of East Africans who, having faced challenges and atrocities that seem almost

unfathomable to us in the U.S., continue with grace and commitment to forge lives of meaning and dignity, often achieving personal and professional success in the process. The major cities and towns of the eastern DRC, Burundi and Rwanda are thriving and energetic. Their universities boast many scholars and professionals who are qualified, dedicated and smart.

Most government officials are deeply concerned and work hard to find ways to address the region's problems. Rural people who are fortunate enough not to be displaced by the conflict continue to be amazingly industrious and successful as farmers in a land that is as fertile as it has been torn by bloodshed.

Those in this difficult corner of the globe, with its worst loss of life in the world for more than half a century, refuse to give up. As I think of the challenges that Emory now faces in this time of diminished resources, I need only to remember those who I have met and respect so much in this ravaged region. I realize how lucky I continue to be, and how much from them I have yet to learn.