

The Great Lakes Crises

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INTRODUCTION

In the third week of October this year, the "Cobra" militia, commanded by the former president of Congo-Brazzaville, Dennis Sessou-Ngueso, took control of the national airport and the presidential palace in Brazzaville thus bringing to an end the two-way civil war that pitted him against the forces of the democratically-elected president of the country, Pascal Lissouba. The war, which reduced Brazzaville to rubble and exiled most of the city's estimated 700,000 population to the countryside or neighboring Kinshasa, had been fought intermittently since last June. Regional and international mediation had failed to stop it. In the wake of his defeat, Lissouba fled to Burkina Faso while the leader of the neutral third force, Brazzaville's former mayor, Bernard Kolelas, escaped to Kinshasa. So ended the fragile "consolidation" of democracy in this ethnically-divided country whose fate, according to John F. Clark, lay in the evolving compromise and statesmanship of its three main leaders¹. And with that, this frequently unstable republic has unwittingly been restored to the pre-1992 situation when Sessou-Ngueso ruled the country as the unchallenged military dictator in the thinly-veiled disguise of a Marxist ideologist heading a party and bureaucratic framework to match. As international TV crews filmed the pillage of the city by unruly gunmen and interviewed victorious "Cobra" amidst the ruins of the Brazzaville airport, the backdrop was composed of a population fleeing to Kinshasa across the Congo River. It made for an irony that was impossible to forget: as Mobutu fled Kinshasa last May in advance of the rebel coalition led by Laurent Desire Kabila, Mobutu loyalists and nervous foreigners had crossed the river for safety to Brazzaville, where US marines waited (in vain it turned out) to evacuate them.

That dramatic switch in roles is symbolic of how unpredictable the politics of this region have become. The events in Congo-Brazzaville constitute the latest in a series of interlocking tragedies in Central Africa that began with the genocide of the Rwandan Tutsi in 1994. Political violence was of course never far from the surface. Burundi's ethnic carnage had resumed after the October 1993 coup d'etat that destroyed the elected Melchior Ndadaye government. Insurgency against the central government in Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda had lasted for decades. But after 1994, violent conflicts in the Great Lakes region and the neighboring countries have at once assumed an unprecedented ferocity and a regional if not international character.

This special issue of *African Studies Quarterly* examines the underlying causes of political instability in the region and how lessons drawn from it might aid the search for a lasting solution. At a time when Africa's fragile economic recovery calls for greater regional security, the problems of central Africa are sending political seismic waves to other parts of the

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continent: to Eastern Africa via Uganda and the lingering refugee problem in Tanzania, to Southern Africa as Angola's problematic search for peace becomes intertwined with the fate of governments' in Kinshasa and Brazzaville, to Sudan in the north as Uganda becomes a key player among the new "front-line states" (with Ethiopia and Eritrea) opposed to the National Islamic Front government in Khartoum.

The Great Lakes region--comprised roughly of Uganda, Western Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and the northeastern part of Democratic Republic of the Congo--lies in the eye of the storm. In the brief span of time between 1994 and 1997, it has rapidly replaced Southern Africa and the Horn of Africa as the most violence-prone of the continent's major regions. The unprecedented 1994 horror in Rwanda may have led to the annihilation of up to 850,000 Tutsi, according to Gerard Prunier's authoritative account of the events leading to the genocide². But the horror, as René Lemarchand has argued in his presentation here and writings elsewhere, lay deep in the widely-shared Hutu-Tutsi "exclusionary" political calculus in which accession to power by one group is automatically considered by the losers as the precursor to their own destruction. In these circumstances, Lemarchand says, there is no room for compromise: "the preservation of ethnic hegemony is perceived as a condition for physical survival" by the incumbents, with "the elimination of rival claimants as the only means by which survival can be assured"³. In the effort to show how conflict in Rwanda since 1959 has been filtered through those lenses in Burundi (and vice versa) Lemarchand traces the hardening of the attitudes of the Rwandan genocidaires to the overthrow of the Ndadaye government in Burundi (by the country's Tutsi army) that culminated in his assassination. The mass exile of over one million Hutu (many of them accomplices in the genocide) to the then eastern Zaire, and north-western Tanzania only set the stage for the next round of the conflict.

To strengthen its declining political fortunes, the Mobutu regime (evidently with the support of France) took up the cause of the Hutu exiles. This served as a counterbalance to the perceived emergence of Tutsi (or Hima) regional hegemony that was symbolized by the victorious alliance of Paul Kagame in Rwanda (Tutsi) and Yoweri K. Museveni of Uganda (Ankole Hima). Both groups are somewhat related, if one goes by the profuse myths of the "imagined communities" of this region. Among the many conspiracy theories in the region, this one extends the reach of Tutsi hegemony to Burundi, where the predominantly Tutsi government of Pierre Buyoya took over power in mid-1996. Others see the diplomatic and military tentacles of the Tutsi-Hima alliance and counter-alliance as expanding further outward with the United States (and the "Anglo-Saxon" world as Prunier calls it, following the codewords of Paris) taking sides with Kagame and Museveni, while France supported the disgraced pre-1994 Hutu regime in Rwanda and the tottering Mobutu regime in then Zaire. In an opinion piece that appears in our "At Issue" section, Tony Waters deals with the construction of improbable "conventional wisdoms" about the genocide and its fall-out in the realms of humanitarian relief, ethnic rivalries and regional power politics. It is a salutary reminder for caution to those instant-experts of Africa who lurch to "ancient tribal animosities" as the cure-all explanation for Africa's political problems⁴.

As we know now, the Mobutu regime overplayed its hand in its attempt to use the Hutu refugees as a pawn in its struggle for self-preservation, using them alternately to play to the galleries of the international humanitarian lobby (and its largesse), French diplomatic

ambitions, and its embattled regional allies, like Daniel arap Moi of Kenya and Omar el Bashir of Sudan. But Mobutu's calculations proved most self-destructive in his government's efforts to disenfranchise the Zairian Tutsi (the Banyamulenge) in Kivu, adjoining Rwanda and Burundi. For at this stage the memories of 1994 in Rwandese government circles and zero-sum political calculations (which Lemarchand writes about) kicked in, bringing Uganda and Rwanda on the side of the coalition of the Banyamulenge and forces loyal to Kabila. The immediate goal was to break the Hutu refugees in Kivu loose from the control of the Interhamwe militiamen who had constituted the vanguard in the Rwandan genocide, giving them a chance to go home to Rwanda. That task, which had eluded the UNHCR and the humanitarian activists, was accomplished by the end of November. For their part, the Interhamwe and some of the refugees (nobody knows how many) fled to the Congo interior. With the Banyamulenge and their allies in hot pursuit, some made for the Gabon border and yet others to Congo-Brazzaville, only to be caught in the civil war there. Such were the rapid regional permutations of the troubles. But the most significant long-term consequence of the fighting in 1996 was the demise of the Mobutu regime. In a lightening series of military maneuvers, most of which were preceded by outpourings of massive local support in favor of the "liberators", this armed coalition took over most of Congo between October 1996 and May 1997. By the time this motley army marched to Kinshasa, Kabila had the regional support not just of Rwanda and Uganda, but also--most importantly--of South Africa, Angola, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and the international business lobby keen to invest in the country's ample natural resources.

Yet, as the papers by Thomas Turner and William Reno in this issue remind us, the triumph of Laurent Kabila brings formidable problems to the political and economic fronts. In reports that are likely to delay development assistance to the Kabila government from Western governments, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in October accused the victorious Congolese soldiers of a series of massacres of fleeing Hutu refugees. The Kabila government, with the support of Rwanda and Uganda, has resisted UN-sponsored investigation of these alleged massacres. Furthermore, as Turner remarks, although a nationalist, Kabila is an outsider to the complex politics of Kinshasa and his unwillingness to engage established political leaders there like Etienne Tshisekedi will cost him local support. His legitimacy has in any case been substantially eroded by the popular perception of him as a captive of a "foreign" Tutsi army and of his forces as external occupiers who do not understand the capital city's lingua franca, Lingala. And, as William Reno demonstrates, any efforts to reconstitute the country's economic base as a unitary system is bound to run into complicated local and international networks, based on local political patronage, mineral and other resource extraction. The private companies, local bosses with an ethnic following, and an assortment of freebooters who established themselves in the shadow of the decaying Mobutu state, are likely to resist any rationalization of the economic system, even if it is based on free enterprise as the World Bank and donors insist it should be.

Taken together, the contributors to this issue have made a commendable effort to elucidate the most salient factors in the evolving crises in the Great Lakes area and Central Africa generally, an area of great potential to the future of the continent. Apart from its vast size (2.4 million square kilometers) and comparatively huge population (48 million), the Democratic Republic of the Congo borders nine African states: Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Central African

Republic, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Zambia. It is also, as so many have remarked, "a geological scandal" in view of its vast and varied mineral potential. Historically, Congo has had cultural, political, and economic ties to all these countries that look set to expand especially southwards to South Africa and the Southern African Development Community, which Kinshasa is now slated to join. Political speeches have been made about a prosperous future scenario already in the making. There have been press reports about a vigorous alliance of new, younger, well-educated African leaders--like Yoweri Museveni, Paul Kagame, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and Isayas Aferworki of Eritrea--that will carry the torch forward to that future⁵. Most of the contributors to this issue are more cautious. But the debate has been joined. As all Africanists continue to observe the events in this region, we hope this issue can provide some guidance to their thinking, research, and personal judgment on that and related issues.

Notes

1. Clark, John F. "Congo: Transition and the Struggle to Consolidate" in John F. Clark and David E. Gardinier, eds., *Political Reform in Francophone Africa*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, pp.62-85.
2. Prunier, Gerard. *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p.265.
3. Lemarchand, René. "Patterns of State Collapse and Reconstruction in Central Africa", in this issue, and Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp.17-33.
4. The most publicized recent product of this genre is Keith Richburg, *Out of America*. New York: New Republic Books, 1997.
5. Gourevitch, Philip. "Continental Shift", *New Yorker*, August 4, 1997.