

Community-Driven Civilian Protection in the DRC: Preventing Violence and Mitigating Harm

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Summary

The series of conflicts and wars that followed the breakdown of the Zairian state, and which continue to plague the Democratic Republic of Congo, have been among the deadliest since World War II. Civilians have suffered from both the direct consequences of violence as well as the war's destruction of lifesaving infrastructure. While the political causes of conflict stem from national and international forces, the patterns of violence and level of civilian suffering have been profoundly shaped by local factors.

This paper analyzes local efforts to protect civilians in two Congolese trading cities: Butembo, North Kivu and Dongo, Equateur which represent polar opposites in civilian response to conflict. Elite-driven, civilian-led collective action by close-knit leadership in Butembo played a key role in minimizing the suffering of civilians in the city throughout the 1996-2003 war. The strong influence of the Catholic Church and other civil society groups led to effective advocacy on several occasions to reduce or prevent violence and accommodation of rebel financial demands by business leaders ensured a degree of internal security and influence of the local community over rebel actions. Reinvestment in social services, local security and support networks reduced mortality. Accommodation of armed groups and the patron-driven elite networks may have aggravated the conflict in other ways, but benefited the communities they served.

In Dongo, ethnic divisions and bureaucratic leadership left the city paralyzed and prevented collective action prior to the city's sacking by rebels in late 2009. Individuals and households adopted prevention measures to minimize harm. However, they lacked necessary information which aggravated the long-term humanitarian consequences of the conflict.

The paper notes that most communities' experiences in war preparedness generally lie between the two extremes represented by these case studies. The study considers the long-term effects of increased preparedness and information and concludes with a discussion of opportunities for outside actors to strengthen and engage with community protection responses.

Introduction

Between 1996 and 2002, the Democratic Republic of Congo experienced one of the deadliest conflicts in recent history, and for the last eight years many regions of the vast Central African nation have remained at war, despite a ceasefire and democratic elections which integrated former rebel groups. Tens of thousands of civilians died in the violence, most during massacres and retribution for attacks by government, militia, and rebel forces. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights inventoried more than 700 “serious” incidents that could be considered war crimes, nearly all of which were directed against civilians. Rape and sexual violence were widespread and remain a source of insecurity for Congolese women. However, the vast majority of the estimated 5 million deaths¹ that resulted from the conflict were caused by disease, hunger and otherwise treatable medical conditions. Some of these deaths were direct effects of the war. During the fighting, armed groups destroyed roads, bridges, wells, and health infrastructure.² Forced displacement and flight increased mortality among civilians fleeing violence. The war led to collapse of state institutions, and in both government and rebel-held areas, life-saving infrastructure fell into disrepair, even in areas where fighting had subsided.

Civilian protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo can be analyzed along two lines: protection from the violence carried out by armed actors, including both government and rebels, and community mitigation efforts to protect vulnerable people from war’s deleterious effects. Examples of the first include advocacy efforts, flight and displacement, and accommodation with the demands of the armed groups. Examples of the latter include ‘host family’ arrangements, locally-established relief groups, and substituting local providers for services for those provided by the state.

This paper looks at the wartime experience of two cities, and the civilian protection strategies employed in each. The first is Butembo, a city in North Kivu province, along the DRC’s eastern border with Uganda. Though profoundly affected by the conflict between 1996 and 2003, Butembo represented an outlier in terms of civilian response. In a city of approximately 400,000, located in one of the worst-affected areas during the war,³ leaders maintained local order through church, business, and ethnic community networks. As a result, wartime mortality was significantly lower than nearly anywhere else in the DRC, and a combination of accommodation and advocacy prevented much large-scale violence.

¹ This figure is the most-widely cited, drawn from the IRC’s DRC Mortality Survey.

² While it is reasonable to assume that some infrastructure was destroyed inadvertently, or as a result of being converted to military purposes (for example, clinics and schools were appealing military bases), much infrastructure was destroyed specifically to harm civilians. The UN Mapping report on Grave Human Rights Abuses in the DRC documents more than a dozen cases in which health centers and schools were systematically and deliberately destroyed in order to ‘punish’ civilian populations for supporting opposing factions.

³ In part due to the events described in this paper, the city has continued to grow, with a population now of more than 550,000 according to 2009 estimates from the Provincial Ministry of the interior.

The second city is Dongo, in the far western corner of the country. Another trading town, Dongo is situated on the border of the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville (Republic of Congo) alongside the Ubangi River, a trade route which connects Kinshasa and Brazzaville with Bangui in the Central African Republic. Between 2009 and early 2010, the area surrounding Dongo saw local clashes over fishing rights escalate into a full-scale rebellion. Unlike the proactive community response from the leaders in Butembo, individuals and families were left to develop their own protection strategies in Dongo.

Three particular characteristics are important to note in connection with the Congolese conflict:

- First, the DRC is a *poor country, but not without resources*. The nation still has the lowest per capita income in the world, estimated at only US\$ 330 when adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity.⁴ However, the DRC is rich in natural resources, including gold, copper, tantalum, as well as timber, and suitable agricultural land, much of which rest in the hands of an elite class. As a result, small group of wealthy individuals has resources that can – if they are applied – support community protection and response mechanisms.
- Second, the slow collapse of the Zairian state was marked by breakdowns in public order and interruptions in public services in the decade before the war's outbreak. The collapse of an already-weak state led to the move of public good provisions outside of the public sphere to local communities and institutions.
- Third, in many parts of the DRC, wartime allegiances – and violence – were identity-driven. *Mayi Mayi*,⁵ and other militia groups which mobilized to protect local interests, played an active part in the violence. Patterns of violence were often determined by local interests and grievances along ethnic and regional lines.

A Brief History of the Congo Wars

The political crisis that led to the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Congo began in the early 1990s in then-Zaire. The disastrous economic policies and personal largesse pursued by the Mobutist regime had bankrupted the state, while external and internal pressure for political reforms yielded the first strong civilian opposition movement. Weakened internally by economic and political crises, and having lost the support of its Cold War-era allies, Mobutu's government turned increasingly to a divide-and-rule strategy. The Mobutist regime aimed at splitting the civilian opposition along ethnic and political lines, while at the same time allowing rebel movements from neighboring countries to operate from Zairian territory. Rebel groups included remnants of the Rwandan Army and Interhamwe after the Rwandan Patriotic Army ejected them from power and ended the

⁴ Both the IMF and World Bank rank the Democratic Republic of Congo last on this indicator, of all of the countries surveyed, ranked 182nd and 162nd respectively.

⁵ "Mayi Mayi" is the collective name given to a movement of local militias across the eastern DRC. "Mayi" means "water" in many Congolese languages, and refers to the traditional practices incorporated by the militia which includes the belief that magical water can protect fighters from their enemy's bullets.

genocide in that country, Uganda's Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF), and Angola's UNITA. The frustration of these neighboring countries, coupled with the political vacuum of the Zairian political system ultimately ended the regime.

In 1996 and 1997, the Zairian government crumbled as the demoralized Forces Armées Zairoises (FAZ) deserted and fled before advancing rebel forces. Backed by Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola, and led by longtime rebel Laurent Kabila, the advancing rebels were greeted by a population frustrated and disenchanted by the country's economic stagnation, stalled democratic transition, and increasingly corrupt and erratic rule by the longtime dictator. Known as the Alliances des Forces Democratiques pour la Libération (AFDL), and later the Forces Armées Congolaises (FAC), the rebels swept to power amid a wave of popular support and with substantial backing from neighboring countries.

After Kabila's ascension to power, relations with his Ugandan and Rwandan patrons soured. Kabila made little progress in eliminating the Kivu-based rebel groups that threatened his neighbors, and appeared erratic and unreliable to international partners. In August of 1998, barely a year after the AFDL victory, a second attempt by the Rwandan and Ugandan alliance to topple the Kinshasa government was launched, under the banner of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD). However, unlike the AFDL rebellion, the RCD encountered far stiffer resistance from the Kinshasa-government, which this time received support from other neighbors, including Angola and Zimbabwe. In May 1999, the RCD movement splintered, as Uganda- and Rwanda-backed troops clashed over control of the strategic town of Kisangani.

A deadly three-way stalemate ensued. The country was divided into zones of Ugandan influence in the North via its proxies: the Mouvement du Libération du Congo (MLC) and the RCD-Kisangani or RCD-Mouvement de Libération (referred to henceforth as RCD-K/ML). Rwanda, and to a lesser extent, Burundi, controlled the East via the RCD-Goma proxy force. The Government forces, supported by Angolan and other friendly nations' troops retained the south and western regions of the country. Despite the relative stagnation along the frontlines of the conflict as early as 1999, the emergence of rival factions within each zone of control, and nationalist Mayi Mayi insurgencies in zones of Rwandan influence led to violence and a humanitarian crisis of terrible proportions throughout the rebel-controlled regions.

A series of peace conferences in 2002 and 2003 ushered in a period of transition, which was followed by democratic elections in 2006. However in many regions, instability remained. In northern Ituri province, the rapid Ugandan withdrawal of their troops in 2002 left a power vacuum that was quickly filled by a number of varied rebel factions fighting for control. North and South Kivu provinces continue to experience violence. Former fighters of the RCD-Goma (regrouped as the CNDP), of the Ex-FAR/Interhamwe (reorganized as the FDLR), and of Mayi Mayi local militias, continue to clash with each other and with the national army, the Forces Armées de la RDC (FARDC) in a changing web of splintering alliances. In many other regions, the legacy of war and state collapse continue to exact a

toll. The proliferation of small arms, intercommunity tensions, and the incapacity of local governance structures create a context prone to armed conflict.

Collective Community Protection in Butembo

It was incredible, to arrive there, in a city where we were told there were sixty or seventy thousand displaced people, and to find that there was not a single refugee camp. Not one.

–Aid worker upon arriving in Butembo in 2003.

Patterns of Violence in Butembo

As one of the most important transportation hubs in eastern DRC, Butembo represented a strategic target during the 1998-2003 war. Located in North Kivu province near the Ugandan border, Butembo straddles a major trading route for commercial and manufactured goods entering the DRC from East Africa, and for gold, coltan, timber and other goods from the interior reaching East African ports and destinations further afield.

Like much of the eastern DRC, violence in Butembo began in the early 1990s, when unpaid Zairian soldiers ransacked the town, part of a wave of looting that wracked urban centers and represented the final sign of the collapse of the Zairian state in the region. During the same period, Ugandan ADF rebels used rear bases near Butembo to launch attacks into Uganda. When the war against Mobutu began, the Ugandan Army, known as the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) and Laurent Kabila's anti-Mobutu alliance, the AFDL, took over the city in November 1996 unopposed -- after it had been looted and abandoned by retreating FAZ troops.

Throughout the brief interwar period, control of the town by the AFDL, (which, after Kabila's victory became the Forces Armées Congolaises, or FAC) was tenuous and troops clashed regularly with Mayi Mayi militia in and around the city. While Mayi Mayi militias were initially mobilized by the AFDL to supplement their regular troops in the region and defend local interests, the militia quickly escaped the control of their AFDL colleagues. In March 1998, prior to the Second War, Mayi Mayi attacked the "foreign" AFDL fighters from the southern Katanga province as well as ethnic Tutsi troops perceived as Rwandans. From 1998 onward, Mayi Mayi militias formed an unpredictable and increasingly powerful force in the region, existing in uneasy and ever-changing alliances with more regularized armed groups, while ideologically committed to expelling foreigners from the region.

At the outset of the 1998 war, the city of Butembo was again abandoned to the advancing UPDF, this time fighting in partnership with RCD. After the RCD split into Rwanda- and Uganda-backed factions, the town remained with the Ugandan-backed RCD-K/ML, despite several attempts from rival rebel groups to seize the city. The RCD-K/ML enjoyed support from some elements of the city elite, who feared the actions of undisciplined Mayi Mayi and renegade UPDF soldiers, and allied with the rebel movement as protection.

At the same time, the RCD-K/ML engaged in many of the practices for which the Congo wars have become notorious, including the widespread recruitment of child soldiers

(comprising nearly 25% of their forces, according to one estimate), rape, and human rights violations. The gravest violations occurred in rural areas, and further north, as they sought to retain control of the Ituri region through alliances with ethnic militias. Despite control by a single rebel group, the zone was far from peaceful. Both MLC and RCD-Goma rebel factions attempted to seize the city, and Mayi Mayi attacks intensified within and outside Butembo. Mayi Mayi groups were mobilized by ideological dissatisfaction with the RCD-K/ML's close alignment with the UPDF, outrage at extortion by RCD-K/ML soldiers, conflict between local commanders over "taxation" of the gold trade. In some cases they were joined by RCD-K/ML defectors and Ugandan ADF rebels.

Chronology of waves of violence in Butembo

Nov. 1996	FAZ troops loot and abandon Butembo to the AFDL. The number of deaths are unknown. Many women are raped.
Jan. 1997	Mayi Mayi clash with AFDL troops of Tutsi origin 26, mostly civilian and Mayi Mayi.
Feb. 1998	FAC Troops launch first 'Combing Operation' for rebel and Mayi Mayi sympathizers which results in an unknown number of rapes and killings.
Mar-Apr. 98'	Mayi Mayi and ADF clash with Katangan FAC Troops, who report killing 220-300 Mayi Mayi though note that many are unarmed.
Aug 1998	UPDF and RCD seize Butembo, unopposed.
Nov. 1999	Mayi Mayi attack UPDF at airstrip. More than 200, mostly Mayi Mayi and civilians, are killed.
Sep. – Dec 01'	Mayi Mayi and RCD-K/ML clash with UPDF across the city; the death toll is unknown. This is one of the rare periods in which child soldiers were forcibly conscripted.
Apr. 2001	Mayi Mayi clash with RCD-K/ML, killing at least five.
Jun.- Jul. 01'	Mayi Mayi attack airstrip, leaving 20 dead, mostly Mayi Mayi.
Nov. 2001	Mayi Mayi clash with RCD-K/ML, killing 50 people, including key RCD-K/ML Leaders.
Jan. 2002	Mayi Mayi attack RCD-K/ML and UPDF at airstrip, leaving 'Many' dead.
Jul. 2003	Mayi Mayi clash with RCD-K/ML, killing 35, including 11 civilians.
Nov. 2005	Mayi Mayi clash with RCD-K/ML, leaving 10 Mayi Mayi dead.

Protection from violence in Butembo

Despite rebel occupation, and clashes between UPDF, RCD-K/ML and Mayi Mayi forces, civilians experienced an unexpected level of physical security. The *Economist* wrote in 2003 that Butembo was "hardly a paradise, but it is peaceful and orderly." A freelance journalist marveled to find a "city of 400,000 without a police force." In March 2002, just several months after the worst period of violence, Butembo was selected to host a major conference of 1,000 civil society leaders on peace in the DRC, including 350 travelers from

Europe. Among the reasons that the organizers cited for moving the conference to Butembo was the relative security and lack of interference from the authorities.

As described above, the RCD-K/ML occupying the city were as prone to extreme violence and human rights abuses as other factions in the Congolese war, and while the city remained under rebel control throughout the war, other rebel factions and local Mayi Mayi militia frequently challenged RCD-K/ML control. Despite the hostile environment, the relative protection of civilians from physical violence was ensured through a series of local advocacy, accommodation, and self-protection mechanisms organized by the city's religious, business and administrative elite.

Advocacy: The Bishop's Bully Pulpit

Historically, the Catholic Church has held a privileged position in the DRC, including in Butembo, as one of the few organizations with an independent revenue based on landholdings, broad public support, and the ability to provide social services in the absence of the state. After unpaid soldiers looted the town in the early 1990s, and insecurity in the southern part of the province began to cut Butembo off from centralized authority, the Catholic Church emerged to play a larger role in ensuring peace. In 1994, as fighting erupted on the Ugandan border involving local armed groups, a delegation of leaders from Butembo, led by Bishop Kateliko and the town Commissioner traveled to the border regions to mediate a truce. This exercise was repeated in 1997, when ADF rebels kidnapped several Ugandan seminarians, and the Butembo church was called to mediate for their release. The church also began to collaborate with the business community, described below, to build schools and health clinics only nominally within the formal government system.

When war broke out, civil society groups, led by wartime Bishops Kateliko and then Paluku, played an active role in reining in insecurity caused by armed groups. In 1999, the mayor of Butembo, with religious and civic leaders, wrote a remarkable letter to the RCD-K/ML leadership demanding that the UPDF be withdrawn from the city, that the RCD-K/ML stop harassing suspected sympathizers of other rebel groups, and that the town's rebel administration be turned over to local civilian authorities. Former Bishop Kateliko and Bishop Paluku repeated the message that troops must be restrained and must respect human rights in a meeting with RCD-K/ML leader Wamba dia Wamba the following year.

In February and March 2001, Bishop Paluku made a series of public speeches that were sharply critical of the Uganda-backed alliance between the MLC, led by businessman Jean-Pierre Bemba and the RCD-K/ML. Paluku cited the heavy-handedness of the MLC forces in Butembo and, in a play on the rebel movement's name, called provocatively for the city to be "liberated from 'liberation'." He criticized the MLC for building garrisons in agricultural regions around the city, which increased the likelihood these regions, would be targeted by Mayi Mayi attacks, and thus jeopardize Butembo's food security. Bemba responded quickly

to the Bishop's criticism, publicly apologized for the actions of his troops, and withdrew from the offending agricultural areas.

“Bemba Eats Pygmies”

When Jean Pierre Bemba's Mouvement du Libération Congolais (MLC) later fell out with the RCD-K/ML and threatened to seize Butembo in order to secure much-needed supplies, they seemed likely to overwhelm the RCD-K/ML. Recognizing the humanitarian disaster of a fight for control of the city – and the consequences should the city fall to the cash-strapped MLC – the Catholic Bishop used the “bully pulpit” afforded by his role as a high-ranking church official to launch a campaign of denunciation of the MLC's abuses aimed at generating pressure to prevent an MLC takeover. While most of these denunciations garnered little attention outside of the DRC, the Bishop's most dramatic – and false – allegation that Bemba himself had personally eaten a family of pygmies set off a firestorm in the national and international press, conjuring up “Heart of Darkness” images and drawing attention to the atrocities committed by MLC troops. The accusation of cannibalism was shown to be false, but nonetheless, it mobilized national and international pressure against the MLC to halt their encroachment in the area, and continue to haunt Bemba's reputation.

In response to pressure from a coalition of civil society groups, the Bishop and traditional leaders, rebel factions and the key Mayi Mayi groups around Butembo accepted a ceasefire to end fighting around the city in 2002.⁶ Although the agreement did not hold after Ugandan forces began a hasty withdrawal the following month, it was among the first agreements to bridge the RCD-Mayi Mayi gap that was at the root of the most deadly of armed conflicts around the country.

In 2003, as RCD-G troops aimed to take advantage of fighting in Ituri and divisions within the RCD-K/ML, the Bishop played a key role in guaranteeing outside attention, warning of millions of refugees fleeing Beni and Butembo, and an ensuing humanitarian crisis. Under international pressure, leaders of both RCD factions ultimately came to terms that allowed the RCD-K/ML to retain the city and halted the RCD-G advance.

Accommodation: Buying Off the Rebels

The key interest of armed groups in controlling Butembo was the city's location across lucrative trade routes. Business leaders and armed groups alike quickly realized that they had an interest in accommodating each other's needs in order to keep trade routes open. Wealth (and tax revenue) depended upon two sensitive elements: the maintenance of favorable conditions in the city to allow small traders to come to buy products and sell raw

⁶ As a testament to the influence of this local-led peace initiative, the Butembo-based armed groups who accepted the ceasefire were uniformly criticized by their sister groups involved in RCD – Mayi Mayi clashes elsewhere. Both Mayi Mayi leaders and other RCD factions denounced the agreement as “betrayal” their various causes.

material, and road security both to move minerals from Butembo across the Ugandan border and to allow East African and Asian manufactured goods to be shipped in the other direction.

Business leaders, organized under the local chapter of the FEC (Fédération des Entreprises Congolaises) thus had an interest in accommodating armed groups' demands for taxes in order to ensure safe passage for their shipments. Traders also had an interest, as major investors in the town, to ensure that civilians were protected so that the market remained vibrant. The business community is also extremely close-knit, and so emotional and family ties also drove their interest. Thus, traders played a key go-between role between the armed groups and the population. For example, when women complained of being harassed by troops in the market place, they used the strategy of getting the FEC to raise the issue directly with the RCD-K/ML and to follow-up to ensure that the harassment ended. Traders also invested directly in social service projects, including schools, universities, roads, and health facilities, as described below. Reinvestment in public goods helped contribute to Butembo's growth throughout the wartime period, to maintain public favor toward the business elite, and to ensure a favorable business climate.

The business community thus exerted a great deal of influence upon armed groups – whether RCD-K/ML or Mayi Mayi. As rebels became reliant on the business community for their tax revenue (as alluded to in the quote above, the rebel movement lived mainly hand-to-mouth), the influence of business over the rebels increased. In 2003 one observer told the French daily *Le Monde* that it was no longer clear who was controlling who: “These traders make the law, they decide who leads the rebellion, who leads the police. Those who go against their wishes will find troubling obstacles.”

We were essentially a weak state. We didn't have any budget, so the money earned from tax duties was immediately used...As an official, you only observed the entry and exit of goods [into] the region. You were a minister only in title, but not in real terms (“vous étiez un ministre de titre, mais pas de faite”). We were obliged to create a favorable climate for the merchants, because they were the only ones which we had.

-Former RCD-ML official, interviewed by Timothy Raeymakers

The backbone of the business community's influence over the rebels was the “prépayage” system. To streamline the numerous payments that transporters were forced to make to local commanders at road blocks, the traders and RCD-K/ML leaders agreed to a 20% up front tax on the goods being transported, in exchange for free passage. By centralizing payments, “prépayage” reduced the overall amounts paid by merchants, and centralized them within the RCD/K-ML leadership. But, rather than centralizing control within the rebel movement, centralized payments to a handful of officials had the opposite effect: cutting out local commanders and creating rivalries within the leadership as to who

received the payments. In this confusion, business leaders were able to steer their “prépayage” and influence the leadership of the rebel movement.⁷

Civilian Security Measures: The Crisis Committee

When there was no police force charged with maintaining public order following the FAZ withdrawal in 1996, the town established a Crisis Committee, to oversee the humanitarian and security questions linked to the succession of wars. The Crisis Committee, a council of notables assembled by the local administration to organize collective security eventually gave way to a “Comité des Sages,” which featured prominent church and business leaders, as well as citizen groups, to make local decisions on longer-term development and security issues. The Crisis Committee model had a profound influence in the surrounding area. During recent fighting in July 2010 between FARDC and ADF-NALU forces in neighboring Oicha, the Crisis Committee was reinstated there by local administrators, in order to handle mass displacement.

One of the key actions of the crisis committee was to organize self-defense patrols, usually armed with sticks or other crude weapons, to protect neighborhoods at night. These patrols were organized off and on throughout the crisis, and proved extremely popular. In nearby Beni, citizens protested when joint military-police patrols were reinstated to replace the neighborhood patrols, arguing that the police were less effective and more likely to be abusive than the community’s own patrols.

Mitigating War’s Effects in Butembo

Maintaining Lifesaving Services

Perhaps even more remarkable in terms of local life-saving than the protection from violence, was the preservation of basic services in Butembo which mitigated the harm of the broader conflict. In the late 1970s, Zaire was considered to have a model healthcare system for developing nations, attaining a 95% vaccination rate against childhood diseases, eradicating smallpox, and employing nearly 500,000 healthcare workers. Healthcare coverage collapsed with the rest of the state, leading to crude mortality rates in excess of 2.1 per 1,000 per month -- nearly twice the average of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Butembo represented an exception to the generalized collapse of healthcare in the war-affected area. The aforementioned Lancet/IRC study mortality study, which covered Butembo in 2002 found that the crude mortality rate in Butembo was the lowest of all of the Eastern DRC sites surveyed, at just 0.4 per 1000 per month which was less than one-third of the average for poor regions of sub-Saharan Africa, and less than one-fifth of the

⁷ It is worth noting that while the prépayage system increased the influence of the business community and furthered the co-optation of the rebel movement by the Butembo elite, it had the opposite role in rural areas. Outside of the city, competition between local rebel factions over control of the prépayage system often spilled over into violence.

national rate.⁸ While this may be an outlier,⁹ health services in Butembo – due in large part to the investments by the business community described above – were among the best in the war-affected area.

This surprising outlying statistic can be explained in large part through community investment in infrastructure. Medical facilities functioned in Butembo throughout the war, uninterrupted. A hospital was built in 1994 after the first round of looting, drawing on community financing and volunteer labor. The hospital maintained an intensive care unit that treated victims of violence. Additionally, both FEC and the Catholic Church constructed smaller health centers throughout the war. PROLEKI, a cooperative of businessmen constructed a locally-financed hydro-electric power station in 1999, to provide power to, among other things, health facilities. Besides supplying electricity to the hospital, the dam supplied welding shops, grinding mills, street lighting, and offered electricity to city residents at a discounted rate of \$5 per month.¹⁰ Additionally, the business community invested in road infrastructure, bridges and security, which had the added benefit of facilitating access to medical care; in fact the dilapidation of the road network has been among the key impediments to medical care in the DRC during the war.

Host families and Refugee Flows

As alluded to in the quote from the aid worker at the beginning of this section, Butembo's population swelled from 150,000 inhabitants in 1996 to an estimated 400,000 in 2003. This population growth was due largely to the protection afforded there to civilians. Many of those moving in had fled fighting in the front-line areas north and south of the city; others sought the relative freedom from the threat of rape, illegal taxation, and human rights abuses committed by armed groups in rural areas.

With virtually no international humanitarian presence at the time, the costs of feeding and supporting these displaced populations fell to the Butembo community. The majority of those fleeing the surrounding rural areas stayed with host families, living with urban kin, friends, or strangers. When the fighting escalated, particularly during the several attempts by MLC and RCD-G factions to take the city from the RCD-K/ML, tens of thousands of IDPs poured into the city. The Crisis Committee and local administration responded to the pressures of these population movements by setting up temporary camps in schools and churches and purchasing and distributing food contributed by the business community. In 2002, a local parents group frustrated with the use of child soldiers established the Let's

⁸ Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report. "Elevated mortality associated with armed conflict -- Democratic Republic of Congo, 2002." 5/23/03

⁹ While household surveys tend to underestimate mortality rates in conditions of war-induced displacement (since households that suffer most typically abandon their homes), similarly war-affected regions were included in the study, and all had rates that were significantly higher, such as Isiro (2.2/1000) and nearby Kayondo (0.9). Coghlan, B., Brennan, R.J. et al. (2006): Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a nationwide survey. *The Lancet*. 367(9504), January : 44-51.

¹⁰ It is worth noting however, that despite the striking example of local initiative and resource mobilization, the power station project was not a success. The South African firm contracted to supply the station turned out to have supplied fraudulent parts.

Protect Children Center, which aimed at serving child soldiers and children affected by war, less than one year after the fiercest fighting between Mayi Mayi and RCD rebels and a year before the arrival of any international organizations.

Risks in Butembo

Cohesion and exclusion

The civilian protection mechanisms deployed in Butembo during the war were largely driven by the city's close-knit elites, through the church hierarchy, the FEC, and the Crisis Committee. These ties were facilitated by longstanding patronage structures among the Nande, the principal ethnic group in the area, and the political, religious and business elite were bound by family ties and past dealings. According to one Nande leader from a different region, the city is essentially a "hostage of 10 families; everyone else is a peasant." A former U.N. relief official described the Butembo "as the kind of place where people say 'we' instead of 'I.'" This high degree of social cohesion facilitated a united front in requesting the withdrawal of the UPDF or denouncing human rights violations, but it also gave rise to a "non-Liberal and socially exclusive political economy." Nande from other regions, as well as other ethnic groups repeatedly reported not feeling welcome in the town. Indeed, because civilian protection activities were organized through elite networks, the system was naturally undemocratic, and served to the direct disadvantage of those without family or political ties to the influential patronage networks.

Fueling the Fighting

One important aspect of local protection of civilians in Butembo, was that the accommodation strategies adopted by the business community, which also generated the local resources to be reinvested in infrastructure and local humanitarian projects, did not necessarily have a net positive effect on the overall conditions of civilians in the eastern DRC. The wealth generated by the trade in conflict minerals was the most substantial source of revenue for the RCD-K/ML, as for many armed groups across the DRC; control of the minerals and their trade routes, as described above, were a source of internal fighting within the RCD-K/ML and drove many of the violent clashes between the RCD-K/ML, the UPDF and the Mayi Mayi in the region.

Individual Protection Mechanisms in Dongo

Standing in stark contrast to the collective action undertaken by elites in Butembo to prevent and rein in the harmful effects of the war, the experience of Dongo in Equateur Province illustrates the consequences of elite failure. The lack of cohesive action by leaders and incomplete information blocked local protection mechanisms, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Pattern of Violence in Dongo

On the far western border between the DRC and the neighboring Republic of Congo, more than 1000 KM west of Butembo, sits the town of Dongo. Smaller and poorer than Butembo, the town is nonetheless a border trading hub and port for exporting palm oil and agricultural goods from the interior for shipment on the Ubangi and Congo rivers to Kinshasa, Bangui, and Brazzaville, and for receiving commercial goods moving inland from West Africa. While the area surrounding Dongo was a minor point of escape for former Rwandan and Mobutist elites fleeing to Congo-Brazzaville or the Central African Republic, the area escaped major carnage during the first Congo war and Kabila's rush to Kinshasa. During the Second War, the town and surrounding area was the scene of sporadic clashes between the FAC and the rebel MLC, before ultimately falling to Bemba's rebel group. In that war, most of the population fled hostilities to neighboring Congo-Brazzaville, thus saving their lives by doing so.

Unlike Butembo where the Nande ethnic group composes the near-totality of the population, Dongo is ethnically divided. Although the area surrounding Dongo along the Ubangi River is largely comprised of the Lobala ethnic group, the first missionary stations and schools were established further in the interior, in an area belonging to the neighboring Boba. The Boba, due to their superior education and expanding network, gradually acquired posts in business and government throughout the region, and constituted a powerful, and often-resented, minority within Dongo. Frictions existed between these ethnic groups prior to the war. As a result, the community did not offer a unified response to the rebels, and at least in the mind of many Boba, their Lobala neighbors encouraged the violence.

The most recent conflict emerged in October 2009, in a clash between two Lobala clans over rights to fish in the lucrative forest ponds.¹¹ Enlisting the support of a well-known witch doctor, Enyelle youth attacked their Monzaya rivals. The success of the attack and the witch doctor's involvement attracted the interest of other disaffected youth in the region, ex-combatants, as well as local and national political interests. What began as a local clash became a full-fledged rebellion. The rebels sacked Dongo, carrying out targeted killings against the ethnic Boba, and began advancing towards other population centers before eventually being contained by MONUC and the FARDC in a major counterinsurgency.

Protection from Violence in Dongo

Before and after the initial fishing conflict, local leaders did very little to defuse the situation, resolve the conflict or prevent the emerging explosion. Rather than seize the initiative, local government looked to higher echelons to orient them toward the looming crisis. In the view of one security official in Dongo at the time: "I reported and reported to our hierarchy, but what can I do? They were paralyzed and confused. And so they said to sit tight and do nothing."

¹¹ In the region, each year the rainforest floods with the rainy season. As the dry season evaporates the water, the fish become trapped and concentrated into more than a dozen large ponds, eliciting rivalries from neighboring villages scrambling over the rights.

In fact, despite the official's proclamation, local leaders could have undertaken a number of concrete actions to spare the town – given that many of the rebels had family living in the town, there might have been an opportunity for local leaders from the Lobala community to reach out to the rebels, or to share more broadly the analysis that the town would be attacked in order to allow the population to prepare itself. But none of this information was widely shared; no “crisis committee” was called, and elites remained inactive.

Failure of Preparation and Urgent Flight

Because the war began as a clash between clans near fishing ponds 80 km to the south, very few of the town's residents recognized the threat posed by the conflict, or the degree to which it had escalated. When Odjani, the witch-doctor-turned-rebel leader passed through town without stopping several days before the attack, the population considered that they had been spared the worst of the violence, as the rebels had set up their temporary base north of the city. When the rebels did attack, pillaging and carrying out ethnic cleansing of the Boba minority, the population was largely caught unaware.

The first time that the war came here [during the 1998 war], people were vigilant. By the time the brigands came people had packed and left. But the second time, people were unaware. They had heard that there was fighting to the south, but still when the brigands came, the rebels caught them in the middle of drinking beer and relaxing with friends. As a result, when the war came, everyone ran to the water and started trying to swim or taking canoes. People stripped off all their clothes and jumped in, to swim faster. Because they left everything behind, now they have nothing – not even clothes.

My family had heard beforehand that the rebels wanted to kill my father, who worked for the local government. As a result, my family fled. We figured if the rebels were trying to kill my father, they would soon come to town. To avoid anger from our neighbors, we warned some of them, but they didn't believe us. Now, I think that peoples here have learned and will leave as soon as they hear any information.

-Dan, Songo DRC

Because of the ethnic divisions and lack of cohesion within the town, and the lack of information about the rebels' approach, there was no concerted civilian self-protection mechanism, either to attempt to accommodate the rebels, or to prevent their advance. Even had the information been apparent – and it was to at least some residents – the city's leadership was weak and divided, thwarting the collective action.¹² As a result, individual households were left to decide their individual strategies on their own based on the bits of information available.

¹² In the words of one highly ranked government security official in Dongo at the time “we reported and reported to our hierarchy, but what could I do? They were paralyzed and confused. And so they said to sit tight and do nothing.” In fact, despite the official's proclamation, local leaders could have undertaken a number of concrete actions to spare the town – given that many of the rebels had family living in the town, there might have been an opportunity for local leaders from the Lobala community to reach out to the rebels, or to share more broadly the analysis that the town would be attacked, to allow the population to prepare itself.

Caught suddenly, civilians adapted the most basic protection mechanisms possible – fleeing in canoes, and even swimming – to islands in the Ubangi River, reasoning that the rebels coming over land would have difficulty reaching them. Because flight under such conditions prevents civilians from bringing their belongings, including household goods, identity documents, clothing and the like, it constitutes the most basic and disadvantageous self-protection mechanism, and leaves the population particularly vulnerable in the long-term. Nonetheless, fleeing to safety and taking refuge on the islands in the river (and eventually the other shore) did effectively save the lives of thousands of residents; having taken the town, the rebels looted and burned much of it to the ground, raping, killing and mutilating the residents that they found, and particularly members of the Boba minority.

Women's Plight

Following the re-taking of the town by the FARDC and MONUSCO, the largely-abandoned town remained heavily militarized, even as the population gradually began to return. In the DRC, the presence of military forces poses particular risks for women. Dozens, if not hundreds, of reports have documented the horrors inflicted on the country's women by the army and other armed groups. Transferred from as far as Goma in the east of the country, and participating in a general climate of impunity and objectification of women, FARDC units deployed to Dongo also engaged in rape and other sexual violence.

You see these young women here during the day, but they will not be here at night. The only women who sleep here are the soldiers' wives. The rest come to do their business and then go back to the camps.

-An elderly returnee in Dongo

With the launch of humanitarian actions and the pacification of the zone, activity is currently returning to Dongo. However those returning to live are disproportionately males and older women. Young women in town return each night to sleep in camps on the Brazzaville side of the river; as a result, in some households, typical “female” tasks such as fetching water or cleaning dishes are done by boys or young men.

Other women, in exchange for food, lodging, and protection, become the “wives” of FARDC soldiers occupying the town. Such arrangements are deeply destructive to the women who adopt this strategy, virtually guaranteeing they will not be able to marry locally, particularly those who are seen in public with their “husbands.” Nonetheless, for women who found themselves in particularly desperate straits, for example having already been raped or having been widowed, opting to become a soldier's wife offered a guarantee of survival and income during the emergency, in some cases securing food for children as well as themselves.

Risks in Dongo

Pre-Emptive Flight

Approximately 100 KM north of Dongo, on the border of the Central African Republic sits the trading town of Libenge, a slightly larger city. After taking Dongo, the rebel advance

turned north-easterly, heading for the district capital of Gemena and away from Libenge. Nonetheless, rumors circulated, aided by outlandish proclamations of strength by the rebel movement, that Libenge would be the next town to be attacked. With no telephone network in Dongo or the surrounding zone, and few local media outlets, these false rumors created a panic. Learning from the lack of preparation in Dongo and from the survival strategies developed in the 1998 war, when the town saw major fighting on a number of occasions, the population of Libenge fled preemptively, becoming refugees in neighboring Central African Republic.

This pre-emptive flight from a town that had not been targeted was a sensible protection measure – given the lack of information on the rebel advance and their intent – but had the adverse effect of creating a humanitarian emergency where there need not have been one, diverting resources and exposing the population to the hazards of displacement. IRIN News reported that more than 60% of the population arriving in Central African Republic from Libenge were children, and that the refugees experienced food shortages and inadequate shelter. Due to the complexities of repatriation operations in the zone, and lingering security fears, many refugees will spend a year or more in camps.

When does the Crisis End?

A farmer here can make a lot of money each growing season, enough money to send his children to school, or buy himself new sandals. But he will not send them to school and he will walk barefoot. This is because he is afraid that if people see him spend money, they will think he is rich and one day they will come to target him. And so he buries his money in his field, to keep it in case he needs to flee, and everyone does the same.

-A teacher in Moba, Katanga, speaking of an area where IDPs had returned

The quote from the school teacher in Moba, Katanga cited above – while exaggerating the degree of the behavior – nonetheless highlights one complicated facet of civilian protection in the DRC. Because of the weakness the state, it is difficult for many civilians to know when the threat has passed, and thus the optimal level of resources that should be kept as savings and how much should be invested. In the teacher's example above, the returnee farmer's decision to store money instead of investing it in his children's education may prove lifesaving if war returns, but will undermine the family's future if it proves unnecessary. The lack of confidence in state authorities, even in areas where war is unlikely to recur, risks further impoverishing formerly displaced populations who prefer to err on the side of caution and be prepared for a political crisis, even if it does not come. This dilemma is likely to present itself in Dongo too. While the rebels have largely been suppressed, rumors of a potential resurrection of the rebel movement remains, and given the trauma experienced by the population, it will likely take years before civilians again feel secure.

Conclusions and Lessons

The relatively successful civilian protection strategies undertaken by elites within Butembo were the product of a cohesive local community and drew on institutional capacities that had been developed over time. In Dongo, the community was divided, caught unaware, and

left to ensure their survival in the crudest possible manner. Across the DRC, communities have typically responded to the waves of violent conflict somewhere between these two extremes, which allow us to draw some conclusions on the opportunities for outside intervention. The level of Nande internal cohesion and the cooperation between church and business leaders to protect civilians from harm was the unique result of the confluence of interests, strong individual leaders, and a deep institutional history. At the same time the lack of organization among the elite and absence of information among the population of Dongo led to extremely high levels of suffering and to dependence on outside assistance. Most war-affected populations in the DRC share some combination of the experiences of these two cases. They usually have civil society groups, social and family networks, and religious institutions that can provide some protection in humanitarian crises until international help arrives, as well as some experience with lack of local preparedness and inadequate information sharing.

If you want to know when there will be a problem, you have to watch the population – their moods, the feeling of the town. Anywhere in the country, it is the same thing; they have more information than we will ever have.

-World Food Program Staffmember in Dongo

Based on these two experiences, several lessons are clear:

Information is Critical

One common realization, as described in the WFP quote above, is that communities are often better-informed than humanitarians on changes in the political situation. However, the example cited above in Libenge, where false rumors created a humanitarian crisis shows that community information is not always perfect. Furthermore even where information is available, as in the case of Dongo, it is not always shared clearly with all members of the local community. New technology, including local radio and the extension of telephone network coverage will provide more information. But it is important to note that more information, does not necessarily translate to better information, as new technology is as susceptible to rumor-spreading as word-of-mouth.

Communities are not always financially poor

In Butembo and in other mining and urban areas in the DRC, wealthy local individuals financed schools, infrastructure and health projects, with only negligible international support. The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to dozens of millionaires who can bring significant financial support to projects. In Butembo, while international donors financed much of the long-term recovery, many of the emergency humanitarian investments were financed directly by the town's elite. To the extent that assistance can help complement and encourage efforts by the financial elite to look after the country's poorest, local response will be more sustainable.

Collective action depends on local cohesion

In Butembo, where the community was largely homogenous and organized, institutions undertook successful activities to contain violence within the community and mitigate the harm faced by civilians. In many divided communities, such as Dongo prior to the war, these divisions stifled collective action. Given the identity-based nature of conflict and politics in the DRC, the lack of social cohesion poses an impediment to community protection mechanisms at the local level.

Community Protection mechanisms are not always politically neutral

In Butembo, the accommodation of rebel demands by the business elite may have led to increased overall levels of violence. Like all actions undertaken during armed conflict, civilian protection actions can have both positive and negative consequences, and tend to be driven by local interests. As a result, protection activities undertaken for the benefit of one community can have a counterproductive overall effect.

Individual Preparedness can play a Key Role

The experience in Dongo illustrates that a small degree of preparedness, for example by having a flight strategy or always keeping identity documents at hand, could have had a dramatic effect on facilitating recovery. The conditions of the flight via small canoes or swimming are likely to have a long-term effect on the ability of those fleeing to “return to normal.”