

TRANSCRIPT OF DEVELOPMENT DRUMS [EPISODE 5 – KIVU – A CONGO BACKGROUNDER]

Host: Owen Barder. Guests: Patrick Smith

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Owen Barder

Thank you for listening to the fifth edition of Development Drums recorded on 31st October 2008. This is a special extra edition looking at recent developments in the Eastern Congo. I am joined by Patrick Smith, the editor of Africa Confidential who will be explaining the background to the current crisis and looking at what can be done.

If you are looking for our normal roundup of current news and development, please listen to the fourth edition of Development Drums in which I'm joined by Shanta Devarajan and Sheila Page.

About 1.2 million people are currently affected by violence in the Eastern Congo. I asked Patrick Smith, the editor of the fortnightly newsletter on African politics to explain what is happening.

Thank you for joining us. Can you tell us a little bit about what's happening at the moment in the Eastern Congo?

Patrick Smith

Well, as of Friday, the 31st of October, there is a ceasefire which Laurent Nkunda, the military leader of their National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) militia in North Kivu and he has declared that ceasefire as of the middle of this week and so far it's more or less held and effectively that puts his forces some distance away from the capital of North Kivu, Goma. They took a military camp called Rumangabo earlier in the week and that was seen as a key point in the conflict and really the next step after taking that military camp was to advance on Goma. So they are holding – they have been holding off but unfortunately what's been happening within Goma is that the government troops, the FARDC troops as they are known, have been running rampage. They are really deserting their posts but before they desert their posts, they are effectively looting the town of Goma, stealing everything they can get away with and also beating up people and it is said violating women and children. So, it's a pretty gruesome situation.

Owen Barder

So, Nkunda has advanced in northern Kivu but not on to Goma itself. So he has expanded the territory he holds.

Patrick Smith

Yes, he hasn't – he holds a large chunk of North Kivu. In the way that the – these militias operate – he – it's probably truer to say that he denies access to that territory by people who are not his supporters rather than controls it because he doesn't actually do anything with it. I mean one can then speculate on what his project is. Most people think that he is intending to take Goma and then establish some sort of interim regime there.

Owen Barder

Why then has he declared a ceasefire?

Patrick Smith

He was under absolutely huge pressure to do so and it may be that he thinks that if he holds out in this threatening position, a lot of the hostile population will leave and also of course the government forces will leave and they are exactly following that precedent. That sort of makes people remember what happened in the 1996, 1997 war when Rwanda scooted across the country and effectively took half the country without fighting because their troops would surround a city, a town and then they – the military jargon was they'd leave the backdoor open. So the troops, government troops defending that town and the people in that town





could go out through the backdoor and leave a deserted town, and the Rwanda troops would just move in and take it. So it may be that he's employing those sort of tactics. So, to let Goma almost empty out before he takes it, and therefore there'll be a minimum of fighting and bloodshed.

Owen Barder

So we've got a huge number of displaced civilian population at this point?

Patrick Smith

There is – by the counts of the International Red Cross, at the moment there is at least a million people displaced. So far they are talking about concerns for another 200,000. All of these people are being caught between this sort of vice of Nkunda's troops on one hand and the government troops on the other, and most importantly for them, apart from the threats of violence there is also the fact they can't get access to food and water, so – or of course medical treatments. So they are in very – a very, very bad way. So the lives of about 1.2 million people are currently threatened by this fighting.

Owen Barder

And that's clearly a huge number of people. And the news recently has been that the international NGOs are, if anything, withdrawing their staff from the region. Is that – is that what you are hearing?

Patrick Smith

Yes. What's happening is that they're – as unfortunately usually happens in these circumstances, all the international staff leave and the nationals carry on and try to do the best they can with the local people. And that's been the case with several of the Western NGOs I've heard that they are evacuating their international staff out and leaving some structures in place in their capacity to do what they can in terms of basic relief facilities. But, you know, conditions are worsening and worsening because it doesn't really – well, it matters that there is a ceasefire of course because that does reduce violence, but at the end of the day, there is a stranglehold around Goma, it's like a noose. And whether or not the fighting restarts, the supplies are being disrupted, so people are running out of food and medicines.

Owen Barder

And there is talk today that the European Union is going to provide large quantities of new aid. In what form will that arrive? How will they deliver that, through the Red Cross?

Patrick Smith

I would imagine, yes. I mean there's two possible ways of doing that: either through the ICRC, which does have access, and there are other groups, I mean MSF is still operating a service there at the moment, Médecins Sans Frontières. And the other project suggested – proposed by Monsieur Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister and seconded by the Belgian Foreign Minister is for an EU intervention force to go in with a humanitarian objective. Now, that's – a lot of people would support that because they take the view that the United Nations military force is not fulfilling its mandate, is not protecting the civilians it's meant to be protecting.

And the alternative is either to boost that UN force immediately, and that doesn't look very likely, or to send in a force that has a military capacity to make the difference. And the only force that would be available within a short period of time would be a European Union battlegroup to go in there 2,000, 3,000 strong and keep the peace and distribute humanitarian requirements and so that is what Kouchner is pushing along with his Belgian counterpart, however the Germans and the British are very skeptical about that for three basic reasons, the first one is logistical, it's a difficult operation to do it militarily at this stage, they wouldn't be able to use Goma Airport, they'd have to either use Entebbe, a Ugandan airport or Kigali the Rwandan airport, and Rwanda's really unlikely to give them permission to do it.

Number two, there is a shortage of European soldiers at the moment because of the deployments they have in Iraq and Afghanistan; and third I sense there is also a difference of political view on what's going on in the Congo between the British and the Germans on one side and the French and the Belgians on the other.

Owen Barder



And is this difference to do with the extent to which Rwanda is backing General Nkunda?

Patrick Smith

It's very much about the role of Rwanda; the British have been historically, since the 1994 genocide extremely sympathetic to President Paul Kagame's government in Kigali, and they have tended to take his side either openly or not so openly in internal discussions in the Security Council and so forth.

The French have been fairly openly hostile to Kagame, General Kagame, since '94, and that hostility sort of reached its apogee in November 2006 when France and Rwanda severed diplomatic relations and just to drive the point in a little bit further, Rwanda issued a report in August naming a range of senior officials some of whom are still in public service in France, naming them as responsible and implicated in the 1994 genocide, when President François Mitterrand was around and who was running the government in France, who seemed to be extremely sympathetic and a strong supporter of the regime under whose watch the genocide happened.

Owen Barder

So, from your view, where do you – do you think that Rwanda is supporting the CNDP or do you think that - where else would Nkunda be getting his support from?

Patrick Smith

Well, he is certainly getting his arms from his military operations, there is no doubt about that. He has committed a number of audacious raids on the government forces and their armory, and has got away with tanks, rocket propelled grenade launchers. I mean there was a raid in December last year, in a camp, a government camp, army camp at Mushukke [ph], he got away with 6 tons of ammunition, 45 armored vehicles, 20 RPGs, 15,000 boxes of grenades. So he is – I don't know, he is quite a resourceful guy.

Now, there are a number of UN investigations, there have been a number of UN investigations, there is one going on at that moment, and I'm told they are looking very closely at the links between the Rwandan government and Nkunda, and may have found something.

I think the test really of Rwanda's sincerity in all this is not, in the short term, what can be done to prove that there are links, but what is Rwanda going to do to stop the conflict and it's done precisely nothing. It claims and I don't think anyone believes this that it has no influence over Laurent Nkunda and I think for General Kagame to say that if I told Nkunda to stop he wouldn't stop, if I told him that I would call his soldiers to order they wouldn't obey me, a lot of people just wouldn't believe that. So I think...

Owen Barder

One reason why Rwanda might have an interest in this is because of the fear of Hutu militias in the area. Is that still a serious threat, does Rwanda have a legitimate interest in protecting itself from looting militias?

Patrick Smith

I mean this of course is all the unfinished business since the '94 genocide and there is no doubt that many of the genocidaires, well virtually all of the genocidaires who didn't get out further afield to Europe or to the rest of Africa ended up in eastern Congo and regrouped and formed themselves into these militias that proceeded mainly to prey upon local people, local Congolese. From all the evidence in the last decade or so these groups such as the FDLR which is sort of an organized Hutu force with a political agenda in Rwanda. They have been attacking local people and they have been imperiling the lives of Congolese rather than Rwandans.

They certainly haven't made any successful forays into Rwanda and a lot of people would say that right now 14 years after the genocide, they don't represent a serious threat. Of course it depends what their strategy is, if they had a really clever strategy of going back and infiltrating themselves in Rwanda and setting up covert militias and so on, they could, they could be the basis for the undermining of Rwandan security, but anyone who knows Rwanda would know that it's run extremely tightly and military intelligence is pervasive.



So it would be very difficult for a group like that to come back and to do harm, but there has been the pretext of Rwanda's interest and involvement in the Congo for the past 10 years. So it's difficult to make the case that this group is currently an active threat to Rwanda, but it has to be said that their ultimate aim is to go back into Rwanda and destabilize it and take power. There is no question of that, but the reality at the moment is they show no signs of doing that and in fact the people who are suffering from their operations are the Congolese people themselves.

And that really gets to the point of the failure of the Congolese army itself to deal with this issue. I mean it's whether the FDLR are a threat to Rwanda or are they a threat to the Congolese or both, they are a nuisance. They are a militia that roam around the countryside grabbing resources and beating people up and are responsible for an obscenely high level of violence in that area, and for the depredations against ordinary people, and something's got to be done about them.

Owen Barder

If I can put you on the spot, if you – we've got some tension now within the European Union between the U.K. and Germany on one hand and France and Belgium on the other. We have got a massive humanitarian disaster unfolding and little prospect of being able to really help the civilian population who are affected by it. What would you do if you were, if you had the power to send in troops or send in money - what would be the key steps that you would take now?

Patrick Smith

Well I think you've got to start with the first principle. The first principle to my mind is you've got 1.2 at least million people under threat. Those people have got to be protected. The countries in the world who subscribe to the UN have sent in 17,000 troops to do that job in Congo and those troops for a variety of reasons have failed. Some would say failed absolutely. So somehow that force has to be strengthened and I think in reality we would – I think a lot of people would like to see a really effective African force going in properly armed and properly airlifted with proper intelligence capacity to deal with it immediately. That force isn't available. We have to be realistic.

The only force that's conceivably available is the one that Kouchner is talking about, which would be a European Union battlegroup of the kind that went into Ituri in north-eastern Congo back in 2003, and went in on a short mandate, a three month mandate when there were similar attacks, random attacks and very targeted attacks in some cases by militia that were displacing hundreds of thousands of people and causing death and starvation. And that European force, I was reporting from Ituri at that time, they very quickly established themselves effectively, partly because of the professionalism of the soldiers, and partly because they had the equipment and the logistics to do that.

And I think that's the sort of force that needs to be sent in if we are serious about saving lives and I think we should be serious about saving lives. After all 5.5 million people have died in Congo over the past decade, for the failures of all of us to support a more robust force there. I am not saying that the military option it will stand alone. There has to clearly be serious diplomacy, committed diplomacy at the highest level to bring the parties, and that's Kabila, that's Nkunda, and I believe Kagame, into some sort of dialogue to deal with this. And then I think you've got a whole set of other policies to go through which are much longer-term policies but the obvious one is the restructuring and the reform of the Congolese Army which has been piecemeal and unaccountable and actually disastrous because the army doesn't work and isn't accountable to anyone. But that's part and parcel with the solution of getting rid of the militias – of trying to deal with those militias.

Owen Barder

Patrick Smith, it's an absolutely vital challenge that we get this right. Thank you for joining us on Development Drums to explain what's happening.

That's all for this special edition of Development Drums. Thank you to Patrick Smith of Africa Confidential for explaining the situation in the Eastern Congo so clearly. You can find Africa Confidential at www.africa-confidential.com. From me, Owen Barder in Addis Ababa, thanks for listening and I hope you will join us again next time


