



UNTANGLING AFRICA'S WORLD WAR: MEDIATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO'S REGIONALIZED CONFLICT, 1998 – 2006

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Introduction

The regionalization of intrastate conflicts through the military involvement of proximate states renders conflict dynamics more complex and poses formidable challenges for international mediation. Peacemakers must develop strategies and design processes that address intersecting conflict lines and a myriad interests of state and non-state actors at both intra- and inter-state levels.

The First Congo War, which began in 1996, culminated in the rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila overthrowing the regime of Zaïre's President Mobutu and declaring himself president of the newly named Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This paper focuses on the Second Congo War, which broke out in 1998 and has been described as "Africa's World War." The belligerents included the armies of seven African nations: Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia sided with the Kabila regime; Rwanda and Uganda supported Congolese rebels as their proxies; and Burundi was drawn into the war on the rebel side. In addition, Chad and Libya gave covert military assistance to Kabila's regime, while Sudan sponsored Ugandan rebels.¹ Six rebel groups from neighboring countries took sanctuary in the DRC and waged their respective civil wars against the governments of Angola, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi from inside the Congo.² In this mesh of conflict lines and shifting alliances, the proximate states' security concerns, economic interests and political imperatives became inseparably intertwined with those of the Congolese belligerents and local intercommunal conflicts.³



By Don-kun

In 1999, seven belligerent nations and Congolese rebel groups signed the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement.⁴ Although the agreement failed to end the war and the proximate states' involvement, it established the framework for the subsequent Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD). In 2002, the ICD produced a partial power-sharing pact for governance in the DRC (Sun City I agreement).⁵ Nevertheless, a comprehensive internal settlement with the major Congolese rebel groups proved impossible without addressing the security concerns of Rwanda and Uganda, which sponsored the rebels.⁶ South African and Angolan mediators therefore facilitated bilateral agreements between the DRC and Rwanda and between the DRC and Uganda, which were intended to ensure the withdrawal of foreign troops in exchange for security guarantees.⁷ The two bilateral treaties cleared the way for a comprehensive internal settlement among the Congolese parties, which was enshrined in the Pretoria Agreement on the Transition (2002) and the Final Act of the ICD, also known as the Sun City II Agreement (2003).⁸

The agreements and post-conflict transition stabilized the country and enabled the official withdrawal of all the proximate states' armies.⁹ Since the agreements were not fully implemented, however, the security concerns of Rwanda and Uganda, namely the on-

going presence of Rwandese and Ugandan rebels in the DRC, were not resolved. Furthermore, the accords did not address Rwandan and Ugandan state actors' economic motivations to prolong the DRC conflict.¹⁰ Consequently, the peace process that terminated the Second War and the involvement of most of the proximate states failed to end foreign-sponsored insurgencies and the meddling of Rwanda and Uganda in the eastern DRC.¹¹

Despite these limitations, the case suggests that a multi-pronged approach, which covers the proximate states at the regional level as well as the domestic belligerents at the national level, may be a viable strategy to achieve a settlement in regionalized intrastate conflicts.

This case study explores how the regionalization of the DRC conflict affected, and was addressed by, international mediation. More specifically, it examines the mediation efforts that were undertaken by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) AU / African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the United Nations (UN) between the outbreak of the Second War in 1998 and the 2006 elections that concluded the transition to democracy.¹² Before delving into the mediation, this paper describes the basic causes and dynamics of the conflict.

Conflict causes and dynamics

First Congo War

The structural causes of the Congo Wars lay in the weak nature of the post-colonial state, the authoritarian and corrupt regime of President Mobutu and a fragmented society and economy.¹³ The trigger for the first war was the 1994 Rwandan genocide.¹⁴ When the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) stopped the genocide, a million Hutu refugees and extremists of the genocidal *Forces Armées Rwandais* (FAR) fled to eastern DRC. The extremists formed the Interahamwe militia that undertook cross-border attacks into Rwanda and massacred Banyamulenge and other Tutsi groups in the DRC.¹⁵

In October 1996, the First Congo War broke out when Banyamulenge and Rwandan Tutsis attacked the Interahamwe.

Rwanda established the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), which claimed to unite Congolese forces opposed to Mobutu. In reality, the AFDL largely consisted of Rwandan fighters. Angola supported the AFDL as Mobutu had given sanctuary to *União Nacional pela Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), which was fighting the Angolan government. Uganda also backed the AFDL since the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and other rebel formations were fighting the Ugandan government from within the DRC.¹⁶ Within eight months the AFDL seized Kinshasa, and its leader, Kabila, declared himself president of the DRC.¹⁷

Second Congo War

Kabila's regime rapidly alienated the population, opposition parties, donors and sponsors. In July 1998, Kabila dismissed his Rwandan advisors and commanders, whose presence was unpopular, and ordered Rwanda's army to withdraw from DRC.¹⁸ The relationship with Kigali broke down when Rwandan intelligence learned that Kabila's regime had armed the Interahamwe.¹⁹

In August, the Second War commenced with a mutiny in the Congolese army in South Kivu province and a Rwandan invasion into DRC, which Kigali denied. The mutineers formed the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD), which served as the proxy of Rwanda and Uganda. The RCD later fragmented into splinters, including the Rwandan-backed RCD-Goma (RCD-G) and Ugandan-sponsored RCD-*Mouvement de libération* (RCD-ML). Uganda also sponsored Jean-Pierre Bemba's *Mouvement de Libération Congolais* (MLC).²⁰ Burundi's Tutsi-dominated army entered the DRC because Kabila had drawn the *Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (FDD), a Hutu militia fighting the Burundi government, into his alliance.²¹

A military intervention by three SADC states – Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia – prevented the rebels' victory against Kabila.²² The Chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, Zimbabwe's President Mugabe, justified the intervention as



Soldiers loyal to Laurent Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo brandish their weapons. **Photo:** Jon Jones/Sygma/Getty Images

intended to defend the DRC, which was a SADC state, against foreign aggressors.²³ Chad sent troops who were airlifted by Libya to support Kabila. Uganda's rival, Sudan, reportedly provided funding to Kabila's military alliance.²⁴ Within the DRC, Kabila forged alliances with the Interahamwe and Mai-Mai militias.²⁵ For Kigali, Kabila's pact with the *génocidaires* was an unforgivable *casus belli*.²⁶ As the fighting escalated, the DRC became partitioned into three zones, which the different belligerents controlled and pillaged. Between 1998 and 2003, the conflict, which led to an epic humanitarian catastrophe, caused the death of about 3.8 million people, 200,000 of whom died through direct violence.²⁷

Basic mediation dynamics

This section describes the different mediation stages, mandating authorities, peacemakers and accords:

Lusaka Ceasefire

SADC was divided over the military intervention by the "SADC allied forces" of Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, with South Africa, Tanzania and Mozambique preferring a diplomatic solution.²⁸ The SADC Summit sought a compromise that commended the intervention and also called for the negotiation of a peaceful transition among all stakeholders.²⁹ The SADC Chair, Zambian President Chiluba, was mandated to mediate, and consultations between the belligerent nations took place.³⁰ Their eventual willingness to sign a ceasefire was due to battlefield losses by Kabila's alliance. The Rwandan-sponsored rebels stopped their advance as the United States (US) pressed Kigali to end hostilities.³¹ In July 1999, the DRC, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Rwanda and Angola signed the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement. The RCD and MLC signed in August after intense South African mediation.³² However, all sides immediately breached the agreement.³³

The agreement recognized that the conflict had "internal and external dimensions." It entailed the withdrawal of foreign troops, addressing the security concerns of the DRC and neighboring states, disarming and repatriating foreign rebels, including the Interahamwe, deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, and establishment of the OAU-led ICD.³⁴

Inter-Congolese Dialogue Phase I

In December 1999, the OAU appointed Botswana's former president, Ketumile Masire, as the mediator. In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated and succeeded by his son, Joseph, who accepted Masire.³⁵ After a failed launch in Addis Ababa, the ICD began in earnest in Sun City, South Africa, in February 2002. President Mbeki assumed a hands-on mediation role without overshadowing Masire.³⁶ The participants included Kabila's regime, the MLC, the RCD-Goma, the RCD-ML, the RCD-National, the Mai-Mai, and unarmed opposition and civil society.³⁷ The talks stalled over delegations, power-sharing and the rebels' integration into the DRC army. Masire was criticized for ineffective mediation. Mbeki's proposal for a government of national unity (GNU) prevented a collapse of the talks. Since the RCD-G rejected Kabila as interim president, Kabila struck a power-sharing pact with Bemba's MLC. The MLC's sponsor, Uganda, was the winner of the pact, which did not resolve the conflict with Rwanda or the local conflicts in Kivu, Ituri and Katanga provinces.³⁸



Sir Ketumile Masire, facilitator of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, speaking at the peace talks at Sun City, February 26, 2002 Photo: Anna Zieminski/AFP via Getty Images

DRC-Rwanda Agreement

In mid-2001, Mbeki commenced a parallel mediation between the DRC and Rwanda to build confidence, address the security guarantees Rwanda demanded, and disarm the Interahamwe. The ICD had revealed that withdrawing troops and disarming extremists were major obstacles to a settlement with the RCD-G. South Africa and the UN thus adopted a new strategy that prioritized Rwanda's security concerns regarding the Interahamwe so as to enable viable negotiations for the DRC transition.³⁹ Under US pressure, negotiations produced a bilateral agreement.⁴⁰ Rwanda committed to withdraw troops and the DRC agreed to disarm the Interahamwe.⁴¹ Rwanda withdrew 33,400 troops ahead of schedule, but many joined the RCD-G and stayed behind to control

mines. Kigali likely changed its goal from seizing Kinshasa to maintaining influence and revenues in Kivu province. Kabila's regime formally ended its alliance with the Interahamwe, but arms deliveries reportedly resumed.⁴² Zimbabwe followed Rwanda in withdrawing its troops. Angola and Burundi, which had signed ceasefires with UNITA and FDD respectively, followed suit.⁴³

DRC-Uganda Agreement

In September 2002, Angola's President Dos Santos brokered the Luanda agreement between the DRC and Uganda, with Pretoria's support.⁴⁴ Ugandan troops withdrew and both states pledged to not harbour subversive groups.⁴⁵ After Uganda's withdrawal, the Hema-Lendu conflict, which Kampala had fueled, escalated in the Ituri region, resulting in a French-led military intervention.⁴⁶



Militia members in Bunia, the capital of the eastern Ituri Province, protest against Kabila's government. Photo: Renaud Khanh/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

Inter-Congolese Dialogue Phase II

Since the Kabila-Bemba power-sharing pact failed to end hostilities, the belligerents were under international pressure to seek an 'all-inclusive' settlement. Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia's withdrawal from the DRC heightened pressure on the remaining belligerents and their sponsors. Rwanda demanded the ICD's relaunch to include the RCD-G. The negotiations resumed in Pretoria in October 2002 under the UN's authority and were mediated by the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for the DRC, Moustapha Niasse. South African minister Sidney Mufamadi assisted the mediation on behalf of the host and AU Chair, South Africa.⁴⁷ On December 16, the ICD parties signed the Global and Inclusive Agreement on the Transition, which entailed a cessation of hostilities, disarming foreign rebels, troop withdrawal, equitable power-sharing, an integrated and restructured DRC army, and international guarantees.⁴⁸

Thereafter, the AU facilitator, Masire, oversaw the Sun City II conference, where the ICD parties approved a transitional constitution.⁴⁹ On April 2, 2003, they signed the Final Act, which endorsed the transition plan and 36 resolutions that included forcibly disarming and expelling foreign rebels, citizenship for Kinyarwanda-speaking communities present in the DRC at independence, a regional peace conference, a ban on supporting foreign subversive organizations, and regional economic integration.⁵⁰

Mediation during the transition

The DRC's GNU took office in June 2003 and was dominated by Kabila, who won the 2006 elections. The major Congolese armed groups were integrated into the DRC army. Kabila stopped supporting the Interahamwe, which were not disarmed and repatriated. Albeit decimated and posing no existential threat to Kigali, the Interahamwe gave Rwanda reason for cross-border incursions. In 2004, Rwanda encouraged a mutiny of dissidents in the DRC army in Bukavu, who launched the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple*.⁵¹ In 2012, the latter spawned the March 23 movement (M23), whose armed rebellion continues two decades later.⁵²

An International Committee to Support the Transition (CIAT) coordinated third-party support.⁵³ At an AU- and UN-sponsored Conference on Peace and Security in the Great Lakes in 2004, 11 states signed a declaration on security and economic cooperation.⁵⁴ South Africa and the AU mediated in Ituri's crisis and 2006 elections.⁵⁵ In 2004, the US sponsored a DRC-Rwanda-Uganda agreement on security cooperation.⁵⁶ The détente between Kigali and Kinshasa succeeded. Relations with Bujumbura improved after the FDD's Nkurunziza won the 2005 elections.⁵⁷

Effects of regional dynamics on mediation

Complexities and conditionalities

The regional dynamics greatly increased the mediation's complexity. A comprehensive settlement among the Congolese belligerents was impossible without satisfying the security concerns, political imperatives and economic interests of the proximate states that

sponsored the rebel belligerents in the DRC. By way of illustration, this included the motivations of the following proximate state belligerents:

- **Rwanda's** justified security concern resulted from the Interahamwe's presence in the DRC. Bringing the *génocidaires* to justice was a non-negotiable political imperative. The fact that the Interahamwe would not disarm voluntarily and were not party to the peace process complicated matters.⁵⁸ Rwandan military and political elites also had an economic interest in perpetuating hostilities through the RCD-G in order to exploit the DRC's natural resources.⁵⁹
- **Uganda's** security concerns related to the presence of Ugandan rebels in the DRC, who were not a party to the mediation processes. Terminating Uganda's involvement also proved difficult as it was motivated by the economic interests of military elites, who extracted resources in MLC- and RCD-ML-held zones.⁶⁰
- **Burundi** was drawn into the war by Kabila's co-option of FDD rebels and had an interest in a speedy settlement of DRC's conflict, which imperilled the Arusha peace process to end Burundi's civil war.⁶¹
- **Angola** would not disengage from the DRC unless its security concerns relating to UNITA's Congolese rear-base, oil-rich Cabinda, and Central Africa's coast were satisfied.⁶² UNITA's defeat by the Angolan army in 2002 decisively changed dynamics, enabling Angola's transformation from belligerent to peacemaker.⁶³

Ripeness

The evolving regional dynamics' impact on the Congolese conflict actors' willingness to engage in mediation was mostly adverse but not unidirectional, as they created brief moments where the conflict was ripe for resolution through negotiations. After war broke out, Kabila's allies' intervention changed the military balance, preventing the rebels' victory and creating an equilibrium.⁶⁴ During the Lusaka peace process, the Rwandan-backed rebels' advance on Kinshasa gave Kabila's camp reason to sign the ceasefire agreement. Rwanda signed under US pressure and likely instructed the RCD-G to follow suit.⁶⁵ If there was a moment of ripeness, however, it did not last as all the belligerents breached the ceasefire.⁶⁶

The adverse regional dynamics changed in the second ICD phase. Rwanda and Uganda signed bilateral treaties with the DRC and withdrew troops. Angola defeated UNITA and withdrew. So did Namibia and Zimbabwe, leaving Kabila without foreign armies. The troop withdrawal combined with donor pressure on Kinshasa, Kigali and Kampala compelled the belligerents to negotiate a settlement in Pretoria and Sun City II.⁶⁷ This moment of 'relative ripeness' permitted a de-escalation but never sufficed to resolve the DRC's conflict(s) sustainably. I argue this was because Rwanda, Uganda and their proxies could achieve their downscaled objectives of influencing and economically exploiting particular territories by perpetuating hostilities.

Impediments to conflict resolution

The regional dynamics that delayed a settlement and prevented a lasting solution included the following: (a) the fallout of Rwanda's genocidal civil war, with the Interahamwe's presence in the DRC impeding all the phases of the peace process; (b) Ugandan rebels' presence; (c) Angola's civil war, since UNITA used the DRC as a rear-base and prevented Luanda's disengagement; (d) Burundi's Hutu-Tutsi conflict, as the FDD reinforced Kabila's alliance, and the RCD-G suspended power-sharing when Tutsi were massacred in Burundi in 2004; and (e) Rwandan, Ugandan, Zimbabwean and Namibian state actors' economic interests in prolonging the war.⁶⁸

Cohesion and competing mediations

The regional dynamics impaired the cohesion of the mediation actors. The member states of both SADC and the OAU were divided, with some states being belligerents in the DRC. The military intervention of Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, which claimed a SADC mandate, divided the organization because South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique preferred peacemaking.⁶⁹ Since the war involved seven African nations, it evidently also affected the OAU's conflict management efforts. The divisions resulted in a competing mediation by Libya, which brokered the Sirte agreement in 1999 between Kabila, Uganda and Chad, to Pretoria's dismay as this occurred in the midst of the Lusaka process.⁷⁰

Strategies to address regional dynamics

Proximate states in mediating body

The peace process was not managed continuously by a single mediating body as the lead organizations (SADC, OAU/AU, UN) changed between the different stages. The proximate states that undertook peacemaking efforts included South Africa, Zambia, Angola (which was also a belligerent), and Libya (which provided military assistance to Kabila). However, the SADC and OAU mediation teams did not themselves include representatives of the belligerent states.⁷¹ Since SADC was divided and the conflict went beyond the SADC region, after the Lusaka process the mediation was handed to the OAU.⁷²

Parallel and sequential processes for Congolese and proximate state belligerents

The mediation treated the proximate states as conflict parties when facilitating the Lusaka ceasefire amongst them and the Congolese belligerents. The original process design was sequential in that the Lusaka agreement first aimed to end the proximate state's involvement and disarm the foreign rebels, after which the Congolese ICD parties would negotiate a transition to peace and democracy.⁷³ When this did not succeed, the mediation tried another sequential approach. South Africa and Angola addressed the security concerns and troop presence of Rwanda and Uganda by brokering two bilateral treaties with the DRC. This cleared the way for an 'all-inclusive' settlement among the Congolese parties.⁷⁴ Consequently, the DRC case suggests that an incremental approach, which includes bilateral agreements with proximate states in addition to the national peace process, may be a viable strategy to achieve an all-encompassing settlement in regionalised intrastate conflicts.

Table 1. Regional issues addressed in the peace agreements

	Lusaka ⁷⁹	Sun City I ⁸⁰	DRC-Rwanda ⁸¹	DRC-Uganda ⁸²	Pretoria ⁸³	Sun City II ⁸⁴
Mediating actor	SADC	SADC	SA	Angola	UN	AU
Lead mediator	Chiluba	Masire	Mbeki	Dos Santos	Niasse	Masire
Signatories	DRC Angola Zimbabwe Namibia Rwanda Uganda Burundi RCD MLC	DRC MLC RCD-ML Mai-Mai Unarmed opposition Civil society	DRC Rwanda	DRC Uganda	DRC MLC RCD-G RDC-ML RCD-N Mai-Mai Unarmed opposition Civil society	DRC MLC RCD-G RDC-ML RCD-N Mai-Mai Unarmed opposition Civil society
Regional issues						
Interahamwe	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
External troop withdrawal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Ugandan rebels				Yes	Yes	Yes
Kinyarwanda-speakers' citizenship	Yes					Yes
Regional co-operation				Yes		Yes

Table 1 presents the mediating actor, lead mediator and signatories of each of the agreements reached, and summarizes the regional dynamics addressed in the agreements. Notably, the mediations collectively sought to tackle both the internal and regional conflict dynamics and, to this end, entailed both multilateral and bilateral agreements.

Conclusion

The regional conflict dynamics greatly increased the complexity of the mediation. A sustainable settlement among the Congolese belligerents was impossible unless the outcome of the peace process satisfied the security concerns, political imperatives and economic interests of the proximate states. Overall, the regional dynamics impeded the resolution of the conflict, delaying the conclusion of a comprehensive internal settlement and, ultimately, preventing an end to the hostilities in the eastern DRC.⁷⁵ The regional dynamics also affected the cohesion of the mediation actors negatively as the members of the OAU and SADC included the belligerents.

The mediations addressed several of the regional issues that were the subject of the disputes between the Congolese actors and the proximate states: the disarmament of the Interahamwe, withdrawal of foreign troops, Ugandan rebels in the DRC, the citizenship of Kinyarwanda-speakers, and regional security and economic cooperation. However, the mediation left out significant regional issues, most importantly, the predatory economic war motivations of proximate states. It also excluded regional conflict actors, most importantly, the Interahamwe, which remained a central conflict driver from the first war until after the transition.⁷⁶ Negotiations with the genocide-accused Hutu extremists were, presumably, unacceptable to Rwanda.⁷⁷

From the outset and throughout the peace process, the mediation treated the proximate states as conflict parties. The logic of the Lusaka Agreement was that the withdrawal of foreign troops would create the political space for a dialogue over an internal settlement among the Congolese conflict parties. When this approach failed, the mediation efforts pursued a different sequenced approach. By brokering two bilateral treaties between the DRC and Rwanda and between the DRC and Uganda, which addressed the proximate states' security concerns, the mediation cleared the way to achieve an inclusive comprehensive settlement among the Congolese parties.⁷⁸ Therefore, the DRC case study suggests that a sequential approach, which includes the facilitation of bilateral agreements with individual proximate states to address their interests and involvement in parallel to the national peace process, may be a viable strategy to achieve a comprehensive settlement in regionalized intrastate conflicts.

Endnotes

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- ⁸¹ 'Peace Agreement between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Rwanda'.
- ⁸² 'Agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Uganda'.
- ⁸³ 'Global and Inclusive Agreement'.
- ⁸⁴ 'Final Act'.