Alex Veit

Intervention as Indirect Rule

Civil War and Statebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo

campus

Content

Conflict and Intervention in a Local Space: The Case of Ituri

Civil war and civil peace do not take place in conference rooms or presidential offices alone, but in concrete social encounters. While high politics impact on local interactions and relationships, the study of these phenomena is most fruitful in a context in which international, national, and local arenas intertwine. Ituri constitutes such a political space and thus provides manifold hints and insights into the politics of civil war, intervention, and statebuilding. Ituri's conflict presents many particular and specific conundrums. Its distinct value as a case study derives both from the many characteristics it shares with other regions and armed conflicts in the Global South, thus the similarities it posits, and from its exceptional significance as a laboratory of intervention in an African civil war. This single-case study can not cover the entire spectrum of humanitarian military interventions. But the findings on both these specific aspects and similarities with other cases allow some further reaching conclusions on the relationships between armed groups and international interventions, as well as on externally steered statebuilding projects after civil war.

The war in Ituri was a prototypical armed conflict in a so-called failed state. It connected local political conflict to wider processes of political reconfiguration in the Congo and geo-strategic warfare between states in the Great Lakes region. Besides these political aspects, the warring parties were regularly suspected of pursuing purely economic agendas. The Ituri conflict developed in the shadow of the Congo Wars, during the occupation of the district by the Ugandan army from 1998 to 2003.[6] Together with their then Rwandan allies, the neighboring country supported the formation of Congolese armed groups employed in conflicts against the Congolese government and to administer the occupied territories. Out of these major rebellions, most of Ituri's smaller militias defected. About a dozen local armed groups have since fought in Ituri, some of whom were defined along ethnic lines. Given the extreme forms of violence used, especially against civilians, external observers expressed fears, at times, regarding genocidal discourses and practices. Most of these armed formations, however, did not exist in a congruent form for more than a few years, had mostly weak internal hierarchies, and failed to control the dis-

6 The expression "Congo Wars" refers to the various armed conflicts involving multiple states, Congolese governments, and foreign and local armed groups in the DRC since 1996 (cf. Turner 2007).

trict in a sustained manner for longer periods. The reasons for their formation, besides Ugandan instigation, were several local and national disputes reaching back over decades, but radicalized during the Congo Wars, and the proliferation of political violence. Conflicts over land use and ownership, social and political exclusion, and struggles over business stakes, among other issues, played a role.

Despite the massive violence, for a considerable time Ituri remained on the margins of international attention. It was only after a peace accord formally ended the Congo Wars in 2003 that the district experienced intense interference by the International Community.[7] Monuc, the United Nations Mission in the Congo, had existed since 1999, but made its first serious appearance in Ituri only four years thereafter. Too weak to halt escalating fighting between militias at that time, the European Union sent troops to violently pacify the district's capital Bunia from June to September 2003. Following this episode, a reinforced Monuc force took over again. Thereafter, the UN's Ituri Brigade numbered several thousand troops and was mandated to enforce peace under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Since then, Monuc struggled to impose itself on the armed groups in Ituri, frequently resorting to violent means. Many other international agencies and NGOs followed Monuc's lead and turned Ituri into a region of intense intervention.

Confronted with massive intervention and a new transitional government in Congo's capital Kinshasa, the politics of Ituri's armed groups changed. New alliances were created, and older enmities were put to rest. Iturians themselves divided the conflicts in their region, accordingly, into two phases – the "ethnic war" that began in 1999 and the "political war" from after the arrival of Monuc's military forces. Monuc and its national and international partners offered Ituri's militias the option to become part of the new national army, to form political parties, or to integrate into civilian society. Some components of the armed groups accepted, while others founded new fighting formations. The Congolese central state, which for years had played a minor role in local affairs, reappeared most visibly through the deployment of several thousand combat troops. Monuc undertook extensive joint military operations with this reconstructed national army, whose arbitrary use of violence, however, strongly impeded the mission's aim of installing a peaceful order. A cycle of violence and

7 Major Congolese armed groups and other political organizations signed the "Global and All Inclusive Agreement", which marked the beginning of a transitional period, in April 2003.

negotiation set in between rebel groups on one side and the state and international agencies on the other.

Humanitarian military intervention in Ituri was, in comparison, particularly massive in the African and Congolese context. Agencies of the International Community employed violence to an extent bordering on outright warfare, invested early on and massively in the demobilization of armed groups' combatants, fostered the deployment of the Congolese army much more decisively than elsewhere, and strongly supported political and judiciary institutions in the district. The International Criminal Court chose some of Ituri's militia leaders as its first defendants, while other warlords achieved inclusion into the Congolese state apparatus.

Despite these efforts and democratic elections, the reconstructed state demonstrated many characteristics of its colonial and post-colonial predecessors. The use of arbitrary violence by its law enforcement agencies, its weak hierarchies, and its neo-patrimonial and extraverted uses of state offices were aspects of rule that strongly hindered the emergence of a liberal democratic state in Ituri. Meanwhile, customary chiefs, churches, local civil society groups, and international organizations and NGOs administer many sectors of society more or less independently of state directives. Statebuilding has not yet produced conclusive results. Most conflicts that initially instigated political violence – land disputes most prominently – have remained largely unresolved and even deepened by enforced migration of parts of the population.

The aspects of arbitrary state rule and ongoing armed conflict were equally observable in other parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where international efforts of intervention and statebuilding were much less pronounced. This allows certain insights on the limits of interventionists' influence on political developments in the country, the resilience of historically grown patterns of domination, and the generalizations that can be drawn from this case study. Unfortunately, although the Democratic Republic of Congo, given its size and wealth of resources, is generally considered key to many problems of peace and development in Africa, the country and international intervention into its conflicts, nevertheless remains under-researched.

The UN mission Monuc has thus far been scrutinized by only one detailed study. Séverine Autesserre argues that Monuc neglected local violence in Ituri's adjoining provinces of North and South Kivu and instead concentrated on the national arena. The International Community's obses-