

Republic of the Congo

Population: 2.8 million

Life expectancy: 47 years

National capital: Brazzaville

Independence from France: 15 August 1960



Abstract

From June to October 1997 and again from December 1998 to December 1999, The Republic of the Congo has experienced political violence pitting government forces against rival militia supporting opposition leaders. The war has resulted in over 800,000 displaced persons. These clashes are an extension of the 1993-95 conflict between the government and the opposition leaders, which erupted following the democratic opening in 1992. The conflict reflects the structural opposition between the north and the south. These clashes represent the continuity in the fight inside the political class to obtain exclusive control over both the state and the wealth produced by the country's major resource, oil. The conflict has involved the use of heavy weaponry and the targeting of the civilian population, leading to a major humanitarian crisis. Despite a few mediation efforts, the international community has been relatively inactive in resolving the conflict, unlike in the highly mediatized war in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo. Finally, the conflicting parties signed a peace accord, mediated by the Cabonese president Omar Bongo, in Brazzaville on 29 December 1999. The accord provides for a general amnesty for all militiamen who lay down their arms and for a dialogue between the government and different opposition groups, paving the way to national reconciliation. The European Union and the OAU have commended the conflicting parties' willingness to engage in dialogue. The EU has urged the parties to engage in an electoral process. International long-term efforts, going beyond supporting a national dialogue between elites and emergency assistance, are needed to assist in building up sustainable institutions, health care, education and other infrastructure to address the multiple grievances of the population, in order to achieve a sustainable peace in the region.

The “Forgotten War” in the Congo (Brazzaville)

Terhi Lehtinen

The armed conflict in the Republic of the Congo (1997-1999) can be situated in the continuity of Congolese conflictual political space in which the use of violence has become a means of resolving power struggles inside the political class. It also reflects the re-organization of regional alliances and the pursuit of foreign economic and political interests in Central Africa. The process leading to the peace accord in December 1999 showed the importance of engaging all interested parties in the dialogue in order to achieve a sustainable peace agreement.

The Republic of the Congo was previously known as the Middle Congo and was part of French Equatorial Africa. It became the Republic of the Congo within the French Community in 1958, and an independent state in 1960. The country was governed by a socialist single-party rule from 1964 until 1990, when the military leader Denis Sassou-Nguesso consented to the organization of multi-party elections in 1992, leading to the victory of Pascal Lissouba. The latest political conflict of 1997 erupted when President Lissouba ordered government forces to arrest Sassou-Nguesso, who had returned to the Congo, in view of the presidential elections in August 1997. Congo’s capital Brazzaville became a scene of violence, leading to political and economic chaos and to the intervention of regional forces. (See Chronology.)

Agents

Parties in the conflict¹ in Congo (Brazzaville) can be illustrated in Table 1:

Acronym	Name	Established	Represents	Affiliation	Support	Conflict with
PCT	<i>Parti Congolese du Travail/ Copra militia</i> (Denis Sassou-Nguesso)	1959/1992	North/ Mboshi, “socialism”		Angola, Chad, ex-Forces Armees Rwandaises (FAR), (allegedly Cuban mercenaries), Elf Aquitaine/ France	Pascal Lissouba, Bernard Kolelas
MCDDI	<i>Mouvement congolese pour la democratie et le developpement integral/ Ninja militia</i> (Bernard Kolelas)	1990	The Pool and Nibolek region, Kongo/Teke/ south, “liberalism”	Occasionally with Pascal Lissouba		Denis Sassou-Nguesso/ cobra militia
	Cocoyes militia (Pascal Lissouba)		South /The prefectures of Niari, Bouenza and Lekoumou (Nibolek region), Nzabi/Teke “socialism”	Occasionally with Bernard Kolelas/ (U.S. oil companies)	Angolan UNITA,	Denis Sassou-Nguesso/ Cobra militia

The structure of antagonism between political actors in the Congo is historically constructed since the formation of the Congolese State in 1959. The eruption of violence in Brazzaville few weeks before the presidential elections in 1997 appeared to be instantaneous, but in reality, it reflected a long-term rivalry and antagonism inside the political class, failing to resolve political problems without violence. The struggle for political power has been motivated by the importance of oil revenues. Since its first democratic elections in 1992, the Republic of the Congo has periodically endured conflict, predominantly between ethnic-based militias of three rival presidential

¹ Other fighting militias are Zoulous, Aubevillois, and Mambas who have fought in different clashes between 1993-98. Mambas fought against Sassou-Nguesso’s cobra militia in 1997 (Yengo 1998).

candidates². The configuration of current clashes reflects the re-activation of unresolved antagonisms of the past (Yengo 1998). The repetitive use of violence³ characterizes the re-negotiation of power balance between political elites.

The polarization between the two camps appeared immediately as Brazzaville became divided into northern and southern parts, reflecting the ethnic character of the Congolese political conflict (Yengo 1998). The predominance of regional rivalries between north and south in the political culture dates back to the constitutive conflict of the state in 1959. The North-South antagonism corresponds to the ethnic division between the Kongo, living in the southwestern part of the country and constituting nearly 50 per cent of the population, and the northern groups, such as the Mboshi⁴ (Levinson 1998). Distrust and hostility between the northern groups and the Kongo have always been the major source of political unrest in the Congo. The distrust has a long history dating back to the competition for access to trade routes through the region. The development of cities and subsequent migration from rural areas led to substantial contacts between the Mboshi and Kongo peoples. Following independence, the Republic of the Congo was ruled as a one-party state and ethnic rivalries remained muted. However, in 1992, democratic elections were held and ethnic conflict broke out. The opening of political space resulted in violent expressions of social discontent as economic decline has struck different urban and rural groups. Violent clashes destabilized the government as the military and the state administration are staffed and backed by rival ethnic groups. Politicians who seek to establish political parties by appealing to ethnic and regional loyalties have also fuelled ethnic conflict (Levinson 1998).

The regional dimension of the conflict is particularly important. The Rwandan genocide and the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo⁵ (DRC), have both had a major impact on the political situation in Central Africa (M'Bokolo 1998; Yengo 1998). The

² Political conflict articulates the rivalries between Pascal Lissouba, Denis Sassou-Nguesso and Bernard Kolelas.

³ In 1959, 1993-94, 1997, 1998-99.

⁴ Mboshi men have traditionally migrated to Brazzaville where they comprise a sizeable percentage of the government workforce (Levinson 1998).

⁵ Also, the end of Mobutu's rule led to the "recycling" of some elements of the ex-Zaire's army and the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) in Sassou-Nguesso's cobra militia (Yengo 1998).

force of personal affinities has been particularly significant in the configuration of regional alliances. The alliance between President Dos Santos of Angola and Denis Sassou-Nguesso led to the deployment of Angolan troops in the Congo. Similarly, the Congolese conflict has affected the situation in the DRC, due to the flow of refugees and the sporadic violence in Kinshasa. Equally, the fighting in northwestern DRC has led to considerable flows of refugees in the northern Congo (Yengo 1998; IRIN 24 December, 1999).

Several oil companies, especially the French Elf Aquitaine⁶, have played a crucial role in the escalation of the conflict, stemming from the political elites' struggle for political, and consequently, economic power. The French government, by supporting Elf's positions and being militarily active in the region, has aimed at ensuring the continuity of its interests, especially facing an increased US involvement in Central Africa. The Angolan intervention in support of Sassou-Nguesso was reportedly in response to Lissouba's fraternization with UNITA rebels opposed to the Angolan government. Chad has also sent troops to the Congo in support of Sassou-Nguesso, mainly to ensure francophone interests in Central Africa. (IPS, 1 October 1998). Gabon⁷ has played a leading role as a mediator in the peace process, while consolidating its position as a regional power. France and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) have supported Gabonese efforts to mediate the conflict and urged the conflicting parties to negotiate. Finally, the mediations of President Bongo led to the signature of the Brazzaville accord on 29 December 1999 between the government and the umbrella group of rebel militia "National Resistance Council" (CRN).

⁶ Elf Aquitaine produces 80 per cent of the Congo's oil, a total of 13.8 million tons in 1998 (AFP, 19 February, 1999)

⁷ International observers have reported a perceived bias in the active involvement of President Omar Bongo of Gabon, who is a son-in-law of Sassou-Nguesso (Armed Conflicts 1998).

Motivation

Since the 1980s, the Republic of the Congo has suffered from economic recession, a public expenditure crisis, the decline of the monetary situation and the balance of payments. The adoption of structural adjustment programs (SAP) has failed because of a void between the implementation of the SAP and popular participation, leading to discontent and marginalization of both urban and rural populations, to whom the opening of the democratic process provided new channels of expression⁸. The democratic opening stemmed mainly from the donors' conditionalities in the context of plunging oil revenues and enormous foreign debt (Yengo 1998). Social unrest reflected demographic pressures of the marginalized youth, mainly concentrated in urban areas⁹, demanding better education and health facilities. Rising unemployment and poor living standards of the population's great majority highlights general poverty and provides a contextual background for the permanent social conflict (Tati 1995). Currently, AIDS is the main cause of death in the army. The common practice of raping the children have resulted in major epidemia throughout the country, and the suffering is greatly due to food shortages, insecurity and the lack of medical care (IPS, 10 January, 2000). This will constitute a crucial challenge to the efforts of stability in the Congo.

The inequitable distribution of income and misapplication of financial resources are inherent in the Congolese neo-patrimonial state structure. In particular, the unequal distribution of oil wealth despite populist promises contributed to the violent expression of discontent. The control of oil resources became the major source of dispute among the political elites. Furthermore, rivalry between different oil companies, such as the French Elf Aquitaine and the American Oxy, resulted in their direct involvement¹⁰ in Congolese internal politics (Tati 1995; Yengo 1998).

⁸ The expression of social discontent had been for a long time stifled by the political and military machinery of intimidation set up by the single party in power (Tati 1995).

⁹ The Congo is one of the African countries experiencing a very high rate of urbanization since independence in 1960 (52 per cent in 1984). The annual rate of urban growth is between 6 per cent and 7 per cent (Tati 1995).

¹⁰ Elf has allegedly supported Sassou-Nguesso's struggle for power in 1997, in exchange for favorable contracts, whereas Pascal Lissouba has allegedly favored an American oil company Oxy. Subsequently, Lissouba opened legal proceedings against Elf for its involvement in the Congolese political competition in

Moreover, factional divisions have always been an important source of conflict. Opposition politicians had accused President Lissouba of political and ethnic partiality, when, on several occasions, he was perceived to grant preferential treatment to army members from his native southern Congo, while dismissing several high-ranking northern officials installed under Sassou-Nguesso¹¹ administration (Englebert 1999). The reorganization of the army, according to ethnic divisions, provoked dissatisfaction among many dismissed officers, subsequently recruited by rival militias. The mobilization of fighters, organized in rival militias, stems from ethnic identification as well as political affiliations with the personalized leader (Yengo 1998). The recruitment of militiamen, from different ethnic groups, into the army and the police, provided by current peace accords, will constitute a major challenge to create a multi-ethnic public service.

The Congolese dispute contains several dimensions, ranging from the eruption of political violence during the electoral period to a struggle for the control of economic and political resources, exclusively concentrated in the hands of the ruling party. Violence has become the means of “political qualification” (Yengo 1998). The crisis of the post-single party state, failing to integrate rival factions into political consensus and to ensure the distribution of benefits, together with ideological disillusion, contributed to the fragmentation of political space (Yengo 1998). Subsequently, the re-emergence of ethnic, regional and ideological alliances has had a major impact on violent expressions of social discontent. The conflict also reflects the failure of the democratization process and the inadequacy of international response, as President Lissouba, a democratically elected leader, was ousted from power with the help of foreign intervention, including France, Chad and Angola. Curiously, there have not been any major international reactions to the rule of President Sassou-Nguesso, except public statements urging the conflicting parties to engage in dialogue.

1997. Elf has denied accusations of financing Sassou-Nguesso’s return to power saying the company does not interfere in the internal politics of the Congo (AFP, 19 February, 1999).

¹¹ The Cobras of President Sassou-Nguesso draw their main support in the northern Congo.

The European Union and the OAU both issued a statement congratulating the Congolese people on their willingness to engage in dialogue, but further concrete support for reconstruction and institution building will be required in order to achieve a sustainable peace in the region. The EU also called for a full respect for human rights, the rule of law and the restoration of democracy through the holding of free and fair elections. If progress takes shape towards establishing pluralistic elections, the EU may consider assistance, beyond emergency humanitarian aid, to contribute to the restoration of democracy through the holding of free and fair elections.

Instruments

The brutality of military commitment, the determination of conflicting parties and the active intervention of foreign powers characterize the Congolese political conflict. According to the Amnesty International report for 1998, government forces and armed opposition groups have perpetrated grave human rights abuses, with hundreds of unarmed civilians killed from late 1998 to early 1999 alone. Most of the civilian victims of the abuses were targeted on the basis of their political or ethnic affiliation (IRIN, 25 March 1999). The UN has estimated the total number of displaced and recently returned persons at over 800,000 (IRIN, 15 October 1999). The use of heavy weaponry, targeting civilian populations, is another particularity of the conflict. Rival militias, who proceed by looting, have easy access to arms through black markets fed by regional conflicts (Armed Conflicts 1998). Militias, like the ninjas who control the Pool region, draw most of their resources from the cultivation of cannabis and other illicit activities (Jeune Afrique, January 1999). The intensified militarization of Congolese politics in the 1990s also stemmed from President Lissouba's use of oil revenues for the purchase of sophisticated arms, further escalating the conflict, with the complicity of foreign oil companies (Yengo 1998). However, the sophisticated military equipment has mainly benefited private militias, whereas the regular army has been largely neglected and poorly organized (BBC, 8 January, 1999). Strategically, the fighting has targeted the railway line linking Brazzaville to the oil-terminal port city Pointe-Noire, which constitutes the country's main transport network. The cocoyes militiamen, who aimed at paralyzing the Congolese

economy, succeeded in preventing water and electricity distribution in Pointe-Noire, thus creating problems in industrial plants (BBC, 1 October, 1998; IPS, 5 February, 1999). The number of civilian casualties and displaced persons has been particularly high, as fighting in the capital Brazzaville and other urban centers has enforced the majority of the population to flee their homes.

The military situation during the conflict has been very dynamic. On the domestic level, the configuration of the conflict articulated three different political groupings, contracting temporary alliances and fuelling ethnic and regional divisions. Even Brazzaville has been divided into southern and northern parts, controlled by rival militias. On the international level, the intervention of regional allies and mercenaries and the abundant flows of arms have further contributed to the military escalation of political competition (Yengo 1998).

Angolan President Dos Santos has provided Sassou-Nguesso's government with MiG-23 fighters. Troops from Angola and Chad as well as from Rwanda, supporting government forces, have committed abuses against civilians. Also, Italy is a recent supplier of transport aircraft to the Congolese government. (Armed Conflicts 1998.) France has evacuated its citizens from Brazzaville and deployed its navy along the coast near the port of Pointe-Noire, in order to protect oilrigs and to ensure the continuity of French interests in the Congo.

In 1999, the fall in oil prices on the world market, the hesitation of donors and persistent economic decline, together with the destruction of urban infrastructure sustained the climate of insecurity and suspicion. International organizations have expressed their serious concerns over a catastrophic humanitarian situation in the southern Congo. From October 1999 on, the signs of reconciliation started to appear. In December 1999, the government adopted an amnesty bill for all militias who lay down their arms by the end of 1999. On 29 December, 1999, the government and the umbrella group of rebel militia "National Resistance Council" (CRN) signed the accord of Brazzaville, mediated by the president of Gabon, Omar Bongo. This time, the militias appear to be committed to the accord. The accord provides for a general amnesty, a cease-fire and the cessation of

hostilities. It also recommends the restoration of public administration in the Southern Congo and calls for the recruitment of qualified militiamen into the army and the police. The peace plan provides for a five-year transitional period, led by President Sassou-Nguesso, a round table conference uniting the government with all political parties and civil society and an accord to end hostilities. The current peace accord constitutes the first serious effort to resolve the main structural sources of Congolese conflict, but the success of a peace plan would require important international support to assist especially in the building up of viable institutions and the reconstruction of infrastructure that go beyond emergency assistance. The EU has set the parties' commitment to the electoral process as a prerequisite for its further assistance. It is recognized that the end of the "forgotten war"¹² in the Congo could open new perspectives for greater stability in the whole region of Central Africa.

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¹² The UN has qualified the Congolese conflict as a "forgotten war", shadowed by the mediatized conflict in the neighboring DRC.

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Chronology

- **1991:** End of a Marxist-Leninist single party system. Organization of the national conference and formation of an interim government.
- **1992:** First multi-party elections in the Congo. Pascal Lissouba beats the incumbent military leader Denis Sassou-Nguesso in the process. Adoption of a new Constitution. Dissolution of the Assembly.
- **1993-1994:** Legislative elections amid allegations of serious electoral irregularities and violent confrontations between rival militias and government forces. Cease-fire agreement in January 1994. The alliance between Bernard Kolelas and Pascal Lissouba. organization of private militias remained intact, some elements being integrated into the regular army.
- **June 1997:** One month before new presidential elections, government forces under President Lissouba attempted to arrest members of the private militia led by Sassou-Nguesso. Fighting between the forces of the two rival election candidates escalated into a civil war.
- **October-November 1997:** Intervention of Angolan military troops and equipment in support of Sassou-Nguesso, who became president and formed a new government. Private militias outlawed. Lissouba initiated legal proceedings against Elf Congo, accusing it of complicity in the overthrow of his government.
- **January 1998:** Forum for Unity and National Reconciliation: commencement of a three-year transition period, pending the organization of presidential and legislative elections in 2001. Constitution of a 75-member national transitional council as a legislative body.
- **September-November 1998:** Introduction of a draft constitution. Tensions in the Pool region, with government forces trying to disarm Bernard Kolelas’ ninja militia. Salary arrears of civil servants since several months. Trial of Lissouba, Kolelas and many other ex-government members.
- **December 1998:** The Congolese army and private cobra militia launched an offensive in the Pool region against the Ninja militia of Bernard Kolelas, referring to an attempted coup d’état. Lissouba’s cocoyes join the fighting. Flows of refugees.
- **January-March 1999:** Appointment of a new government. Army shelling and “mopping up” operations to hunt down the ninja and cocoye fighters. Amnesty International concerned over the humanitarian catastrophe.
- **October 1999:** Twelve senior officers and a high-ranking magistrate imprisoned for two years without trial for having backed deposed president Lissouba released as a sign of progress towards peace. MSF report on wartime atrocities. UN reported over 800,000 displaced and returned persons.
- **November 1999:** UN released details of a \$ 17 million Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal (CAF) for the year 2000. The Congo’s armed forces and representatives of the Ninja and Cocoye rebel militias signed on 19 November the Accord of Pointe-Noire. The leaders Kolelas and Lissouba were excluded and expressed their refusal of the accord. The Accord was not signed by Frederic Bintsangou, the leader of the umbrella group of the rebel militia “National Resistance Council” (CRN). The UN report on the systematic rape of children in the Congo’s “ forgotten war”.
- **December 1999:** The Cabinet adopted an amnesty bill for “war-related crimes” between 1993-99. All militias who withdraw from militia groups and lay down their arms by the end of 1999 would benefit from the measure. The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) reported insecurity, food shortages and lack of medical care in the Pool region. On 29 December, the government and the umbrella group of the rebel militia “National Resistance Council” (CRN) signed the Accord of Brazzaville, mediated by the president of Gabon, Omar Bongo. The accord provides for a general amnesty, a cease-fire and the cessation of hostilities; for the restoration of public administration in Southern Congo and the recruitment of qualified militiamen into the army and the police. The peace plan provides for a five-year transitional period, led by President Nguesso, a round table conference

uniting the government with all political parties and civil society and an accord to end hostilities. It also calls for a dialogue to be held with the opposition groups in exile.

- **January 2000:** The OAU and the European Union commended the conflicting parties' willingness to engage in dialogue and reconciliation. Several donors have sent assessment missions on the ground to review their support for the transition process. The refugee flows from the DRC continue.