

THE GREAT AFRICAN WAR

Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006

Outline

A unique combination of factors explains the occurrence of successive wars in the Great Lakes Region (GLR) and their unravelling. These factors were contingent, i.e. they did not need to occur or to occur at the same time. I analyse six of these factors.

1. Extreme state weakness in Zaire/DRC: “black hole” surrounded by nine neighbours; vacuum filled by other neighbouring and nonstate actors.
2. Impact of neighbouring states’ civil wars, most prominently those from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Angola, but also the South Sudanese conflict. These wars have extended territorially to Zaire/DRC (this was possible only in a weak state environment). Conflicts without intrinsic links have merged into one major war. Core issue was the unfinished Rwandan civil war.
3. Alliances were circumstantial, all players reasoning in the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. E.g. 1996-7 war: Kinshasa-Hutu-Sudan-France vs. Uganda-Rwanda-Burundi-Angola-UK-US. Such alliances are by definition frail, and they shifted wildly during the 1998-2002 war.
4. Local and regional issues of identity and exclusion. E.g. Tutsi excluded in pre-genocide Rwanda → RPF invasion and civil war → genocide and defeat of old regime → refugees (incl. defeated FAR and militia) → renewed war → exclusion of Hutu → potential of new violence
Other example: issue of kinyarwanda-speakers in Kivu (Nkunda)
Particularly dangerous if identities straddle borders (e.g. Tutsi in Kivus and Rwanda/Burundi)
5. Particularly from 1998: wars seen as cheap, indeed profitable. Resource based conflict added to previously mentioned factors that remained. UN reports on illegal exploitation of DRC resources: “Elite networks” from Rwanda (institutional gain) and Uganda (military-commercial entrepreneurs of insecurity); local players; military commercialism (e.g. Zimbabwe).
6. Colossal humanitarian fallout. Close to 6 million people dead in GLR since the early 1990s. Generally speaking: impunity for crimes, except some “Victors’ justice”. This leads to resentment and frustration, and to structural violence. Issue of transitional justice and its dilemmas (cf. Burundi and Northern Uganda).

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