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## A “Deal with the Devil” in the Heart of the Great Lakes

*Cyclic violence has raged in the eastern DRC for almost 30 years. Crisis Group experts Onesphore Sematumba and Nicolas Delaunay visited Beni, in North Kivu, shortly after Uganda launched a military operation against the Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamist insurgency based in the region.*

**ONESPHORE** Scattered laughter breaks through the patter of Congolese rumba at Inbox, a restaurant in the centre of Beni, a major town in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo’s (DRC) North Kivu province. I make some small talk, too, amid the hubbub, but then the conversation turns serious. The man I’m speaking to, a member of the local administration and a long-time contact of mine, looks down at the plastic table between us, contemplates his beer and grimaces lightly. I have just asked him a “ticklish” question.

The date is 13 December 2021. For the last fortnight, and with Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi’s approval, the Ugandan army has deployed to the countryside around Beni to fight the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist militia originally from Uganda but based in the DRC’s east for many years.

The Ugandan army’s intervention is a direct response to a triple bombing on 16 November 2021 in Uganda’s capital Kampala, which was attributed to the ADF. Uganda may also be looking to secure its economic interests in Congo – notably the construction of a road that will eventually link Ugandan border towns

to Beni, Butembo and Goma in North Kivu, which should boost trade between the two countries. Uganda strengthened its deployment from 1,700 to more than 4,000 troops in the first few months, extending their range to the northern province of Ituri this past February. For Kinshasa, its neighbour’s military support is a boon. The “rapid and robust” response to insecurity in the country’s east that Tshisekedi promised when he assumed office in January 2019 has so far yielded mixed results.

My colleague Nicolas and I are in Beni to take the temperature of this town, which counts over 350,000 inhabitants, and to peek underneath the Congolese and Ugandan leaders’ positive portrayals of the military collaboration. We want to know what the people of Beni think about the Ugandan presence in their region. This is the question that now “tickles” my companion at Inbox.

Despite the rosy projections in Kinshasa and Kampala, the Ugandan deployment in the eastern DRC is far from straightforward. Uganda has a fraught history with North Kivu and, farther north, Ituri. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Ugandan armed forces occupied



Onesphore (left), talks to Christophe, a cocoa cultivator who was forced to leave his fields. Beni, DRC.

large parts of these two provinces, engaging in looting, murder and rape, and leaving painful memories among the people. On 9 February, the International Court of Justice, the UN's highest judicial body, ordered Uganda to pay \$325 million to the DRC in damages.

I expected Beni's residents to be angry that Ugandan soldiers were coming back, but I found much milder reactions. "It takes what it takes", says a man Nicolas and I meet on the street. A young civil society representative later adds: "I hope the Ugandans will help us". Another interlocutor, a woman of local prominence, replies with another question: "And why not?"

Do the people of Beni have short memories? I share my astonishment with my companion at the restaurant. He pauses for a moment, then gives me a determined look: "You know, Onesphore, a desperate situation calls for desperate measures. And if we have to make a deal with the devil to defeat the ADF, so be it".

I'm taken aback by his response, but then it starts to make sense. Perhaps naïvely, I had forgotten for a moment that for the past three

decades, we have been powerless to quell the violence in the eastern DRC. My contact has reminded me of all that the people of this region have suffered for so long – the death and destruction that has made them so disillusioned with the Congolese government and army that they've become fatalistic. It does not matter where the help comes from, as long as it comes.

**NICOLAS** The town of Beni (not to be confused with the Beni territory that surrounds it) is at the heart of a zone in which several armed groups, including the ADF, operate. The safest way to get there is by air. Onesphore has often driven to Beni, in the province's *grand nord*, from Goma, the economic and administrative capital of North Kivu, but the road is difficult and dangerous. Just 10km north of Goma, the tarmac disappears, giving way to 340km of poorly maintained dirt road that turns into a muddy rut when the rains come.

Travelling on the slippery, bumpy track is a minor inconvenience, however, compared to the other dangers along this vital route for

the region's economy. For years, armed groups have been extorting, racketeering, kidnapping and killing along this narrow road surrounded by a lush forest, an ideal setting for ambushes. Since 2016, provincial authorities have established a military escort system on a long stretch of the road, but with mixed results. It was on this road, some 20km north of Goma and on the edge of the Virunga National Park, that Luca Attanasio, the Italian ambassador to the DRC, was shot dead on 22 January 2021, when the UN World Food Programme convoy in which he was riding was attacked.


So it is on a flight organised by MONUSCO, the UN mission in the DRC, that we travel to Beni to carry out our research and document it in pictures. As we near our destination, the plane window lets us glimpse a patch of reddish earth, laying in the middle of a dense thicket of green.

Over the years, Beni has often been spared the worst of the various armed groups' depredations. Its city centre is bustling. Motorcycle taxis and trucks rumble by the stalls set up along the main road, which are overloaded with clothing, palm oil and bananas. Sitting on plastic chairs under parasols, money changers swap Congolese francs for U.S. dollars and vice

versa, while loudspeakers inform passengers of arriving buses.

Our sense of normality is short-lived, however, as signs of the 30 years of violence that have marked the eastern DRC abound. Alongside the back-and-forth of motorbikes and trucks is a constant stream of Congolese army pick-ups, mounted with guns, and UN peacekeeper armoured vehicles. Here and there, we see graffiti proclaiming: "No to violence!" Other scrawls call for the departure of MONUSCO, which some consider too passive.

Cocoa beans lie drying on large tarpaulins, their powerful smell another reminder of the pervasive insecurity. Cocoa, which transits mainly through Uganda before being exported outside the African continent for processing, is an integral part of the war economy that has developed around the Great Lakes region's natural resources. "There is gold in Bunia, coltan in Masisi, cassiterite in Walikale, and then there is cocoa in and around Beni", says Christophe, a farmer who used to grow the plant in Mbau, north of Beni, before armed groups forced him out of his fields. "Unfortunately, the same thing often happens", he explains. "We work hard to grow cocoa and then the ADF come and take over our crops at harvest time".



Onesphore holds dried cocoa beans in his hands in Beni, DRC.

“Whenever we produce a lot of cocoa, the massacres increase”, adds a woman farmer we meet in Kipriani, a neighbourhood in northern Beni.

With Beni the closest thing to a safe haven – here, a very relative term – in the area where the ADF operate, thousands of internally displaced people (IDP) have found refuge there. They often live with family members, friends or acquaintances, as there is no IDP camp in the town. “My three uncles and three aunts were killed in the same house in 2015. The bandits cut them to pieces”, recalls Divine, a 25-year-old woman who survived a massacre. “It was the ADF. They attacked my village a few weeks ago”, murmurs a young man we meet in the dark corridor of a school a few steps from the town hall, his arm carefully wrapped in a sling. “A blow from a machete... but it’s better now.”

The day after we arrive, as if to confirm what everyone already knows, the local media headline a deadly ADF attack near the town of Mangina, about 25km west of Beni.

The daily violence and displacement takes a profound toll on people we meet here in Beni; they feel suffocated under its weight. Aside from the brutality of the massacres they described, what I find striking is the difficulty they have in making medium- or long-term plans: they can do no more than live from day to day. It is as if an entire population is forbidding itself to dream or to envision a future that might be snatched away at any moment by a bullet or a machete’s edge.

For the consequences of insecurity have been vicious. Between 2018 and 2020, the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri experienced the second-largest Ebola outbreak in history, resulting in over 2,200 deaths. At the time, a journalist friend of mine returned deeply affected by what he had seen and heard in North Kivu, where the violence was hindering the health officials’ efforts to respond to this deadly virus. “A blow that worsens the effects of another”, as he put it.

Onesphore, who was born in the eastern DRC, sums up the fragility of life here with his usual sense of humour. “We have a saying

here: ‘Life expectancy is 24 hours, renewable each day’”.

**ONESPHORE** Violence in the eastern DRC is an extremely complex cocktail, and its main victim is the civilian population. Since the 1990s, armed groups have come and gone in this resource-rich region. Most of these groups, those commonly known as *Mai-Mai*, consider themselves defenders of their communities in a competition for political or customary power, land resources or access to infrastructure. Add the failings of the Congolese state in providing basic services, the proven links between some politicians and local militias, and the lack of socio-economic opportunity, and you have ideal conditions for the recruitment of young militiamen.

Other sources of violence lie in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, the DRC’s neighbours to the east. Some armed groups, such as the ADF, originated there before retreating to the lawless zones in the eastern DRC – and operating there. But the regional nature of this insecurity goes further: the deep rivalries among these three neighbouring countries – manifested mainly in competition over the DRC’s mineral resources – also fuel violence, while impeding regional and international diplomacy. All three countries have intervened militarily in the eastern DRC in the past. While, officially, they were seeking to thwart rebellions hostile to their governments, they were also waging proxy wars by supporting rebel groups opposed to their rivals.

The human toll of these cycles of violence is extremely high. Despite some controversy over the method of calculation, the most common estimates hold that armed conflict in the eastern DRC and the related humanitarian crises have resulted in some 6 million deaths since 1998.

When he came to power in January 2019, President Tshisekedi said a top priority was to tackle insecurity in the eastern DRC. After two years with no tangible results, he enacted two key measures. First, in May 2021, he declared a state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri, the two



Onesphore talks to the survivor of a massacre perpetrated by an armed group in North Kivu. Beni, DRC.



provinces most affected by the violence. Then, from 30 November 2021, he agreed to military cooperation with Uganda.

These two measures have something in common: they illustrate the Congolese authorities' tendency to favour a military response to insecurity in the east, to the detriment of measures that could resolve land disputes, give youth better economic prospects, prosecute politicians that have ties to armed groups, or build effective and peaceful regional diplomacy.

As a Congolese citizen, I tell myself that, at least, the Congolese authorities have not abandoned the fight to bring security to my region, despite the endless cycles of violence. But the realism imposed by my research into these conflicts' causes leads me to harsher judgment of our leaders and their stubborn belief that someday they will achieve peace mostly through force of arms. While force has its uses, its victories will remain inconsequential until they are accompanied by measures that get at the root of the problem.

After authorities established the state of siege, army and police officers replaced

governors and mayors in Ituri and North Kivu. Residents greeted this measure with the same mix of enthusiasm and resignation that attended the Ugandan soldiers' arrival. When I visited the town of Bukavu in South Kivu in May 2020, some inhabitants even said they felt jealous that the government had not declared a state of siege in their province, too. Just a few months later, however, this exceptional legal measure had failed to stop massacres in North Kivu and Ituri, and these same people no longer asked for it to be applied where they lived.

The "pooling" of Congolese and Ugandan forces, as it was described by Kinshasa, initially involved a Ugandan military deployment between Beni and the border. This deployment has since been extended to Ituri. The term "pooling" is misleading: in reality, the Ugandan and Congolese troops conduct their operations in parallel. They keep each other informed of their respective actions but do not fight in mixed units. For the time being, their operations have seen only limited success. Several ADF camps have indeed been taken, hostages have been released, weapons seized and rebels

arrested. The epicentre of the ADF attacks has even shifted slightly to the north. But the massacres go on.

Moreover, the ADF seem to have made a point of reminding everyone of their striking power, despite the military pressure they face. On 25 December 2021, the day after the capture of Kambi Ya Yua, one of the group's main camps, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a Beni restaurant crowded with customers celebrating Christmas. At least eight people were killed in the attack. That restaurant was Inbox, where I have met with contacts a dozen times.

To top it all off, the Ugandan operations on Congolese territory – which both countries' armies extended for two months on 1 June – could pave the way for a dangerous proliferation of uncoordinated, and even competing, foreign interventions in the eastern DRC. Since Kampala received authorisation to deploy its forces, the Burundian army has entered South Kivu to hunt down rebels from the Burundian RED-Tabara group. Last February, Rwandan President Paul Kagame raised the possibility of sending his country's troops to the DRC to fight the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda, FDLR), a remnant of the Rwandan Hutu militia that massacred much of the Tutsi minority and many moderate Hutu during the



A sign at the entrance of a hotel in Beni-ville, a city in the North Kivu province of DRC.

1994 genocide. Kagame justified his talk of intervention with allegations of links between the FDLR and the ADF. More recently, he has accused the Congolese army of working with the FDLR to fight another militia, the March 23 Movement (M23).

As I was saying: a complex cocktail ...

**NICOLAS** We sit in the town hall's waiting room under the gaze of Félix Tshisekedi, whose portrait hangs on the wall. We are patiently waiting for the police colonel who, by the terms of the state of siege, is standing in for the mayor. Silence reigns inside the building, occasionally interrupted by the clatter of boots as soldiers and police officers come in, and the echoes of a distant market street.

A police officer inspects our papers, including the document from the information ministry authorising us to film and take photos. "That's a nice bit of paper you've got, but it's not the right one. You should have gone to the defence ministry, not information. We're under a state of siege here, remember?"

Two days later, after several meetings with the mayor, his councillors and the intelligence services, it seems that our papers are in order after all.

One of our contacts gives us some perspective on the situation when we meet one evening in our hotel bar: "It's their way of reminding you that they're in charge during the state of siege". We tell him how surprised we are to see Beni's town hall so quiet. As Onesphore remembers it, the building used to swarm with visitors on administrative errands or seeking a favour from the mayor. "People are suspicious now. They don't trust the police or the army", he explains. "That's why there's no one there".

Indeed, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, or FARDC, are also a piece of the puzzle of violence in the east. The population, the UN, diplomats and human rights organisations often accuse the military of collaboration or even complicity with armed groups operating in their area. These links develop around activities such as mining or running



illegal checkpoints. UN investigators and human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, have also accused the Congolese armed forces of taking advantage of the region's instability to carry out extortion, murder and rape of their own.

"I support peace, I support the FARDC". The faded billboard at the northern entrance to Beni does not fool anyone. Local wits even say its appearance – old and dilapidated – reflects the actual state of relations between the population and the army.

**ONESPHORE** The broken ties between the eastern Congolese and the security forces – and authorities more broadly – explain the guarded optimism we found in Beni regarding military cooperation with Uganda. In the end, though, even this faint hope for progress was dashed.

Seeing the reaction of Beni's inhabitants, I feel I recognise a phenomenon that I have unfortunately observed many times in the eastern DRC. I call it "the transfer of expectations":

the Congolese are so tired of their army and government's ineffectiveness that they no longer expect much from them, preferring to place their trust in foreign actors. But if these actors, too, let them down, then they will hold those "*venus d'ailleurs*" to account.

On 20 November 2012, the M23, a Congolese rebel movement backed by Rwanda and Uganda, attacked Goma, the town in which I have lived for 32 years. After putting up weak resistance in the northern part of city, the Congolese army retreated to Minova, a town 50km to the west. Like thousands of other Goma residents who crowded along the roads, I watched in stupefaction as the columns of tanks and soldiers moved westward, leaving the city at the rebels' mercy. "This is a politicised war", some soldiers said to justify their departure when questioned. They were referring to the supposed links between the rebels and certain politicians or officers, which apparently dissuaded front-line troops from fighting the M23. And yet the next day, when several hundred



A man sells clothes under a billboard calling for support for the Congolese armed forces (FARDC). "I choose peace, I support the FARDC", says the billboard, Beni-ville, DRC.



A UN-armoured vehicle is stationed in a street of Beni-ville, in the Eastern DRC's North Kivu province.

young people demonstrated against this “strategic withdrawal”, they gathered in front of the UN base in Goma. They demanded explanations from the Uruguayan peacekeepers, not from the fleeing Congolese leaders and soldiers.

The population’s hostility toward MONUSCO is also understandable. The Congolese people see soldiers marching through their streets who are better armed and trained than the FARDC, but who carry out few military operations (there are exceptions, such as the Force Intervention Brigade that was created in 2013 after the M23 took Goma). Anger at MONUSCO’s perceived indifference is fermenting in the streets of Butembo, Beni and Goma. Young people from citizens’ movements and pressure groups have mounted demonstrations against MONUSCO, even blocking the passage of its convoys or pelting them with stones. In response, MONUSCO tirelessly repeats that the population’s security is first and foremost the responsibility of the Congolese defence and security forces. The peacekeepers can support the Congolese forces, the UN mission says, but cannot replace them.

Does “the transfer of expectations” onto foreign forces mean that Congolese have definitively turned their backs on their leaders? No, as some events show.

The Beni town hall, where we met the mayor, is brand new. It was inaugurated barely a year ago to replace the old town hall, which was burnt down in November 2019 by demonstrators protesting the authorities’ failure to end violence. Of course, I would never condone demonstrations that take such a turn for the worse. But I tell myself that if Congolese still take their frustrations out on the government from time to time, it means that they have not completely given up hope that the authorities will one day manage to mitigate their problems. And that is as it should be, because while external actors can help in many ways, it is up to the Congolese to build peace if they want it to last.

Until that day comes, life in the eastern DRC continues to unfold to the rhythm of various cycles: hope and despair; bursts and lulls of violence; ill-conceived negotiations that end in failure; elections that give rise to new violence;



regional tensions that heat up and cool down. And so on.

Although the ADF was the centre of attention when we visited Beni in December, another rebel group is now making waves in North Kivu. The M23, which retreated in 2013 shortly after it captured Goma, resurfaced at the end of 2021 in Rutshuru, a territory about 100km north of Goma and bordering Uganda and Rwanda. Thought to be moribund, the group caught the military authorities off guard. Since November 2021, it has carried out numerous attacks on the Congolese army, forcing civilians to flee their homes. On 13 June, the M23 even took control of the Bunagana post on the DRC-Uganda border. At the same time, diplomatic tensions have intensified in recent months, with Kinshasa accusing Kigali of supporting the M23, while Kigali accuses the FARDC of cooperating with the FDLR in fighting the M23.

**NICOLAS** These cycles of which Onesphore speaks, and the eastern DRC's inability to break out of them, come up in every encounter, in every conversation we have during our research in Beni.

On the last day of our visit, this research takes us along a road in the city's south, where every passing truck, car or motorbike raises clouds of dust, irritating the eyes and lungs. Leaning against the counter of his shop, a dark and cramped room of a few square metres on the ground floor of a concrete building, Ibrahim recounts how, a few years ago, at the age of 17, he joined a *Mai-Mai* group.

With no vocational prospects, and appalled by the proliferation of violence, he thought – naïvely, by his own admission – that he could help change things by joining a militia. “I saw the mess this country was in and I felt disappointed”, says Ibrahim, who claims to have



Ibrahim, a former member of a so-called *mai-mai* armed group, leans on the counter of his small drinks shop in Beni, DRC.

given up fighting for good now that he has a job selling drinks.

What about the grievances that drove him to join an armed group? “Well, the situation is still the same”. He says it timidly, but his judgment brooks no appeal. He points out that he found his job through a Congolese NGO that helps rebels demobilise and then, in a second phase, rebuild their lives, so as not to take up arms again. Indeed, while not unusual, Ibrahim’s reintegration is the exception rather than the rule. The Congolese government launched a new disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program in the east in March. It remains to be seen whether it will be more successful than previous ones, whose effectiveness has been minimal.

“The DDR programs are neither well-designed nor well-funded, so obviously many demobilised young people return to the bush sooner or later”, says Noëlla Muliwavyo, a Beni civil society leader and member of the African Association for Human Rights, a Congolese NGO. “Take, for example, the way we treat the communities in which we want to reintegrate ex-rebels. We don’t prepare the communities for it. We don’t communicate with them. We don’t give them any resources. And then, overnight, without any explanation, we bring a former rebel into a community that has suffered a great deal from violence, that has seen many of its members killed. How can you expect this to work? How can you expect this community to welcome that person?”

In general, our contacts in Beni deplore the fact that the state is not addressing the

root causes of the eastern DRC’s conflicts, the factors that drive so many young people to take up arms. As long as the state does not provide adequate responses to land disputes between communities, to ties between armed groups and politicians, or to the lack of economic opportunities, rebel groups and militias will continue to find willing young recruits. At the same time, some of the people we speak to regret that the Great Lakes countries are unable to end the dangerous power struggles that have fuelled instability in the eastern DRC for too long.

Onesphore had warned me before I arrived in the DRC. The numerous issues linked to insecurity in his country’s east are completely intertwined, forming a tapestry whose complexity is sometimes difficult to grasp. And yet I leave Beni convinced that although the violence in the eastern Congo has brought the region to its knees, it will not yield.

Before boarding the plane back to Goma, I ask Onesphore if our life expectancy has been prolonged by another 24 hours. In a burst of laughter, he replies: “One day, we will do better than 24 hours”. In the meantime, he says: “You must understand that humour is our form of resilience. It is our way of making an unbearable daily reality a tiny bit bearable, in the hope that one day, things will be better”. ■



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