

Congo: What the International Community and Media should do

Hansueli Homberger, last updated December 9, 2012

The Democratic Republic of Congo is rarely in breaking news, unless armed groups overrun cities on its eastern border. This was the case in 1996, 1998, 2004, 2008 and again last Tuesday, November 20, 2012. Associated Press reporter Melanie Gouby was in the stadium in Goma where the armed group M23 celebrated victory over Joseph Kabila's government troops, assisted by UN blue helmets. The report gives the image of M23 being liberators as it highlights defections of government soldiers, threats of M23 to take all Congo and [cheering crowds of thousands](#)ⁱ. In contrast to this, UN Security Council, Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Heads of the Member States of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the European Union and later the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, unanimously urged M23 to withdraw immediately.

In all similar cases since 1996, the role of neighbouring countries - namely Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda, - is a subject of much debate. The case of Rwanda is particular because it many times denied military involvement in Congo despite having deployed more than [20'000 troops](#)ⁱⁱ in Congo during the bloodiest period of the war between 1998 and 2002. But does it make sense to blame an aid depending [partner state](#)ⁱⁱⁱ of the US-Army project Africom?

Incoherence within the activities of the international community remains a major problem for Congo. Billions of dollars have been invested, coming from donors financing stabilisation projects and also from corporations hoping to get a share in the rally on natural resources. Therefore, Congo must be considered as international affairs, and statements defining incidents like the aggression of Goma as isolated domestic affairs are likely to be propaganda in the worst case or naïve in the best case; in any case, the lives of innocent people are at stake.

The question of responsibility is crucial here but should not distract from the search for solutions to reduce and/or stop the violence. In 2008 the group attacking Goma was basically lead by the same people, which constitute M23 today. Among them is Laurent Nkunda whom the [New York Times](#)^{iv} attributes to be "an agent of Rwanda's extensive business and security interests in eastern Congo" and to have "single-handedly destabilized a large chunk of central Africa". Another M23 leader is Bosco Ntaganda, wanted by the International Criminal Court. The group stopped their aggression in 2008 because they were offered leading positions in the Congolese army. Nkunda then was arrested by Rwanda but never faced trial. The peace agreement signed in Goma 2009 was in fact a power sharing deal rewarding the aggressors. And as the negotiations were behind closed doors, only insiders can tell how much pressure the international community used to get to this deal. Clearly, such secret negotiations provoke speculation and it's likely that parties and their external allies try to exploit media to achieve their goals. Therefore, reporting from conflict zones must be strictly accurate. This was not the case in Melanie Gouby's report, stating on manifestations in favour of M23 in Bukavu which were in fact exactly the opposite: people protested *against* war and violence in the first place, *against* M23 because these people brought war and violence in the past, and against those not keeping promises to protect, namely the UN and the Kabila Government. The fact that Melanie Gouby declares that it was not her who added the paragraph makes the case even more problematic.

Peace deals rewarding heavily armed groups are known to be potential obstacles to peace. In the Congo-Case, this can be tracked back to the so-called peace agreement of Lusaka in 1999. This poses a huge challenge for international diplomacy which is about to lose the last of its remaining credibility in Congo: Power sharing behind closed doors often nullified the outcomes of other more inclusive multi-stakeholder negotiations like the Inter-Congolese Dialogue 2001 to 2003 and a similar Conference in the 1990's. If today Congolese throw stones at UN-vehicles, it's probably because of too many contradictions in the attitude of the international community. This problem is aggravated by the fact that advantages of past power-sharing deals unilaterally went to proxies of Rwanda and Uganda.

The future of M23 will now depend mainly on the supply of armaments and ammunition as well as the benevolence of the international community. The fighting has ceased since November 22, when the unanimity of international pressure on M23 became evident and when the British Prime Minister David Cameron called Rwanda's President Kagame on the phone, [urging him](#)^v to prove that his Government has no links to M23. This leads to another crucial question concerning the origin of the weaponry used by M23 and how exactly this material was filtered in the embargo zone. Such evidence will make it possible to effectively cut the supply chain and finally move towards disarmament in this region where actually far too many arms are in circulation. In a short-term perspective, only the international community will likely be capable to cope with this challenge; this is a good opportunity for the international community to get back some of its lost credibility. The UN Security Council made an important step in this direction with its newest [resolution](#)^{vi} on November 28, urging M23 and other armed groups to permanently lay down their arms. Yet this is not achieved, more coherent activity of the international community is needed, as well as more transparency and unbiased, solution-oriented media reporting.

Violence and the threat of overthrowing the government brought M23 international media attention. Now, ten days later it becomes obvious that this was a manoeuvre to improve their position for negotiations, a strategy that paid-off earlier. Hopefully, the international community and media learned the lesson: Don't give credits to violence, investigate on arms embargo violations, act coherently to stop violence and allow people in Congo shape a peaceful future.

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ⁱ http://www.mercurynews.com/nation-world/ci_22041614/rebels-goma-vow-seize-all-congo

ⁱⁱ <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-a-2002-10-01-26-rwanda-67551367/387662.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.usaraf.army.mil/NEWS/NEWS_091017_NF10_OPENING_CEREMONY.html

^{iv} http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/laurent_nkunda/index.html

^v <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-ministers-phone-calls-with-presidents-of-rwanda-and-drc>

^{vi} http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2078%282012%29

^{vii} <http://www.transcend.org/tms/2012/12/congo-what-the-international-community-and-media-should-do/>

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