CRISNO 426

DRC CIVIL WAR

Background:

A regional conflict centered in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) erupted on 29 July 1998 and terminated on 30 July 2002. The DRC war has often been referred to as Africa's World War, as there were seven crisis actors (the DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Chad), numerous peripheral actors, and resulted in the deaths of over 2.5 million people.

Background

In May 1997, rebel groups, backed by Rwanda, captured power in Zaire and deposed President Mobutu Sese Seko. The country was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Laurent-Desire Kabila was installed as president. Relations between Kabila and the Rwandan government did not remain cordial for long, as the predominantly Tutsi government in Rwanda lamented that the Congolese government had not taken a stronger stance against Hutu militia groups accused of staging attacks against Rwanda from the DRC.

Summary:

Among growing tensions, in a decree on 29 July 1998, Kabila ordered all foreign troops to leave the country and dismissed James Kabarehe, a Rwandan Tutsi who had apparently been serving as his chief military adviser. This triggered a crisis for Rwanda. On 2 August, fighting broke out in Kinshasa, and the DRC government blamed Rwandan soldiers for starting the conflict. The rift between Kabila and his former allies had sparked a new rebellion, backed by Rwanda and Uganda. Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Chad sided with Kabila, and sent their troops in his support. As a result, the violent conflict that broke out on 2 August triggered a crisis for the DRC, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Chad. Uganda’s crisis was triggered on 21 August, when forces from Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe mobilized and entered into the DRC (Chad’s forces mobilized one day later).

Rebel forces, backed by Rwandan and Ugandan troops, began to advance towards the capital, Kinshasa, in late August 1998. The intervention of troops from Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Chad turned the tide and the rebels were pushed back. As the crisis continued in a cycle of rebel advancement and retreat, in July 1999, the governments involved in the war signed a peace agreement. The following month, troops from Uganda and Rwanda, clashed briefly in the city of Kinsangani, prompting frantic diplomatic efforts to ease tensions. The efforts seemed to yield some result: in the same month, the two principal rebel groups signed the agreement. Peace was, however, short-lived.

In October 1999, allegations of ceasefire violations emerged, and in February 2000, renewed fighting broke out. In August 2000, leaders of the countries involved in the war met in Lusaka, but the summit broke down. In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguard, and his son, Joseph Kabila, assumed power. In February 2001, Kabila met Rwandan President Paul Kagame in Washington, paving the way for peace talks. In February 2001, Ugandan and Rwandan troops began a pullback as a goodwill gesture. In November of the same year, however, a UN panel of experts restated its earlier assertion that the warring parties were deliberately prolonging the conflict, in order to plunder the region's rich natural resources, including gold, diamonds and timber. Many observers also believed that Angola's involvement in the war was driven by its interest in possible oil reserves in the area. In January 2002, amid ethnic clashes, Uganda reinforced its troop presence, fuelling fears that the war would continue.

Negotiation rounds took place throughout the conflict, but without initial success. Notably, a cease-fire agreement brokered by President Chiluba of Zambia was signed on 10 July 1999 in Lusaka, Zambia. Although this peace accord received support from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the EU and the UN Security Council, it never achieved a tenable peace. Another major peace agreement occurred in Sun City, South Africa between the DRC and Uganda on 10 April 2002. President Mbeke of South Africa brokered the agreement, but it failed because Rwanda refused to agree to the power-sharing arrangements.

The crisis for the system ended on 30 July 2002, after President Kagame of Rwanda and President Kabila of the DRC signed a peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa. The conditions of the agreement called for a withdrawal of Rwandan troops in exchange for the disarmament of Rwandan Hutu rebels seeking refuge within the DRC. Although the Pretoria agreement only involved Rwanda and the DRC, it provided the crucial impetus for hostilities to diminish across the system and marked the end of all major confrontations among the crisis actors. (Uganda and DRC reached a formal peace agreement of their own on 7 September 2002, but this occurred after Uganda had already begun preparations to withdraw its troops.)

At the actor level, the Pretoria agreement marked the end of the crisis for the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe, who all were actively involved in the conflict up until 30 July 2002. Angola, Namibia and Chad all unilaterally pulled out of the conflict prior to the termination of the crisis at the system level. Chad began to withdraw on 30 April 1999; Namibia complied with a UN-sponsored pull-out on 12 May 2001; and Angola announced its withdrawal of troops on 9 November 2001.

The United Nations was active in supporting the peace efforts. For example, the Security Council approved observer troops to assist in the implementation of the Lusaka accords, and the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC) was involved in mediation efforts. However, the effectiveness of the UN action was only marginal, as there was considerable disagreement about the mandate of the UN presence.

The United States' involvement was primarily limited to political statements of approval or disapproval, and there is evidence that the US was covertly involved in training troops on both sides of the conflict. However, the US did not have a significant influence on the crisis dynamics.

References:

Keesings Online; Africa News Service; Panafrican News Agency; British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); The New York Times; Reuters; The Washington Post; AllAfrica, Inc; The Associate Press; The Independent (London); Deutsche Presse-Agentur.

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