

Rape of the Congo

By [Adam Hochschild](#)

As if eastern Congo had not already suffered enough, seven years ago Nature dealt it a stunning blow. The volcano whose blue-green bulk looms above the dusty, lakeside city of Goma, Mount Nyiragongo, erupted, sending a smoking river of lava several hundred yards wide through the center of town and sizzling into the waters of Lake Kivu. More than 10,000 homes were engulfed. Parts of the city, which is packed with displaced people, are still covered by a layer of purplish rock up to twelve feet thick.

Far greater destruction has come from more than a decade of a bewilderingly complex civil war in which millions have died. First, neighboring Uganda and Rwanda supported a rebel force under Laurent Kabila that overthrew longtime dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997. Soon after, Kabila fell out with his backers, and later Uganda and Rwanda fell out with each other. Before long, they and five other nearby nations had troops on Congo's soil, in alliance either with the shaky national government in Kinshasa or with a mushrooming number of rival ethnic warlords, particularly here in the mineral-rich east. Those foreign soldiers are almost all gone now, but some fighting between the government and remaining rebel groups continues. For two weeks in June, I had the chance to observe the war's effects, with the best of possible traveling companions: Anneke Van Woudenberg, senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, whose reports have been an authoritative source of information on the country for years.

No one has been harder hit than Congo's women, for almost all the warring factions have used rape as a calculated method of sowing terror. An hour and a half southwest of Goma on bone-jolting roads stand

several low buildings of planks and adobe; small bleating goats wander about and a cooking fire burns on one dirt floor. There is no electricity. A sign reads *Maison d'Écoute* (Listening House). The office of the forty-two-year-old director, whom I will call Rebecca Kamate, extends from the side of one of the buildings; its other three walls are of thin green tarpaulin with a UNICEF emblem, through which daylight filters. The floor is gravel. Kamate pulls out a hand-written ledger to show to Anneke, her colleague Ida Sawyer, and me. Ruled columns spread across the page: date, name, age of the victim, and details—almost all are gang rapes, by three to five armed men. Since the center started, it has registered 5,973 cases of rape. The ages of the victims just since January range from two to sixty-five. On the ledger's most recent page, the perpetrators listed include three different armed rebel groups—plus the Congolese national army.

"What pushed me into this work," says Kamate, speaking softly in a mixture of Swahili and hesitant French, "is that I am also one who was raped." This happened a decade ago; the rapists were from the now-defunct militia of a local warlord backed by Uganda. "Their main purpose was to kill my husband. They took everything. They cut up his body like you would cut up meat, with knives. He was alive. They began cutting off his fingers. Then they cut off his sex. They opened his stomach and took out his intestines. When they poked his heart, he died. They were holding a gun to my head." She fought her captors, and shows a scar across the left side of her face that was the result. "They ordered me to collect all his body parts and to lie on top of them and there they raped me—twelve soldiers. I lost consciousness. Then I heard someone cry out in the next room and I realized they were raping my daughters."

The daughters, the two oldest of four girls, were twelve and fifteen. Kamate spent some months in the hospital and temporarily lost her short-term memory. "When I got out I found these two daughters were pregnant. Then they explained. I fainted. After this, the family [of her husband] chased me away. They sold my house and land, because I had had no male children." From time to time Kamate stops, her wide, worn face crinkles into a sob, and she dabs her eyes with a corner of her apron.

"Both girls tried to kill their children. I had to stop them. I had more difficulties. I was raped three more times when I went into the hills to look for other raped women." Part of her work is to go to villages and talk to husbands and families, because rape survivors are so often shunned. In one recent case, for instance, a woman was kidnapped and held ten months as a sex slave by the FDLR (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda), the Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide and their followers, long the most intransigent rebel group here. After she returned to her village with a newborn baby, her husband agreed to take her back, but only if the baby were killed. Kamate intervened, and took in the child at the Listening House. Living here now are six women

and seventeen children—some of whom keep scampering up to an opening in the tarpaulin to giggle and look.

At one point Kamate has to break off because a new victim walks in off the road, a forty-seven-year-old woman raped just three days ago by three Congolese army soldiers who barged into her house after she came home from church. For twenty minutes, Kamate takes down her story and then quickly sends her to a nearby clinic: if anti-retroviral drug treatment is begun within seventy-two hours of a rape, it can usually prevent HIV/AIDS.

The last time Kamate herself was raped was on January 22 of this year. The attackers, members of the CNDP (Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple), a Tutsi-led rebel group that has since been integrated into the Congolese army in a new peace deal, were four soldiers who targeted her because they knew of the work she was doing. It is for fear of this happening again that she asks me not to use her real name. "After having raped me, they spat in my sex, then shoved a shoe up my vagina. When I arrived home I cried a lot and was at the point of killing myself."

Unimaginably horrifying as ordeals like Kamate's are, they are all too similar to what Congolese endured a century ago. Rape was then also considered the right of armies, and then, as now, was how brutalized and exploited soldiers took out their fury on people of even lower status: women. From 1885 to 1908, this territory was the personally owned colony of King Leopold II of Belgium, who pioneered a forced-labor system that was quickly copied in French, German, and Portuguese colonies nearby. His private army of black conscript soldiers under white officers would march into a village and hold the women hostage, to force the men to go into the rain forest for weeks at a time to harvest lucrative wild rubber. "The women taken during the last raid...are causing me no end of trouble," a Belgian officer named Georges Bricusse wrote in his diary on November 22, 1895. "All the soldiers want one. The sentries who are supposed to watch them unchain the prettiest ones and rape them."

Forced labor also continues today. The various armed groups routinely conscript villagers to carry their ammunition, collect water and firewood, and, on occasion, dig for gold. A 2007 survey of more than 2,600 people in eastern Congo found over 50 percent saying that they had been forced to carry loads or do other work against their will in the previous decade and a half. A few miles down the road from the Listening House, I meet one such person in a camp for people who have fled the fighting; several thousand of them are living here in makeshift shelters of grass thatch, the lucky ones with a tarpaulin over the top. The man is twenty-nine, in T-shirt and sandals, and, like Kamate, doesn't want his real name used. He arrived two days ago from Remeka, a village a few days' walk from here,

that has changed hands several times in recent fighting between the FDLR and the national army. A fresh bandage covers his left eye.

Congolese army soldiers corralled him last week to be a porter. The troops then came under fire and "I took advantage of that to flee. I spent a night in the bush, and when I came back to the village I found the army had pillaged it, and everyone had fled. Other soldiers told me again to carry supplies. When I refused they took a bayonet and jabbed me in the eye." He can see something out of the eye, but not clearly. Doctors don't know if its sight will return. His wife and two children, aged two and eight, fled the village and he thinks they are still in the bush.

Where does such cruelty come from? Four problems, above all, drive Congo's unrelenting bloodshed. One is long-standing antagonism between certain ethnic groups. A second is the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the two million or so people who flowed across Congo's porous border in its aftermath: Hutu killers, innocent Hutu who feared retribution, and a mainly Tutsi army in pursuit, bent on vengeance. The third is a vast wealth in natural resources—gold, tungsten, diamonds, coltan (a key ingredient of computer chips), copper, and more—that gives ethnic warlords and their backers, especially Rwanda and Uganda, an additional incentive to fight. And, finally, this is the largest nation on earth—more than 65 million people in an area roughly as big as the United States east of the Mississippi—that has hardly any functioning national government. After Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001, his son Joseph took power in Kinshasa, and won an election in 2006, but his corrupt and disorganized regime provides few services, especially in the more distant parts of the country, such as Goma, which is more than one thousand miles east of the capital.

Evidence of the nation's riches is everywhere. Battered Soviet-era Antonov cargo planes continually descend into Goma airport filled with tin ore from a big mine at Walikale, in the interior, now controlled by Congolese army officers. On a country road, a truckload of timber, stacked high, passes by, heading out of the rain forest toward the Ugandan border. And then one day in Goma, while I am walking with Anneke, Ida, and another foreigner, a man approaches and asks: Would we like to buy some uranium?

He is perhaps forty, with expensive-looking walking shoes. He claims to have had clients from South Africa, Europe, and Saudi Arabia. The uranium has been tested with Geiger counters, and it's *de bonne qualité!* And safely packed: two kilos inside each seventeen-kilo radiation-proof container. The price? \$1.5 million per container. But this is negotiable....

Also on all sides is evidence of the lack of a functioning government. This does not mean that there are no government officials; on the contrary, they are everywhere, and self-supporting. On rural roads where

less than a dozen vehicles pass in an hour are clusters of yellow-shirted traffic police; we see three large trucks stopped at one, their drivers negotiating. On another road, when people on market day are wheeling bicycles piled high with charcoal and bananas, blue-uniformed police are stopping them to collect a "tax."

There are even dilapidated court buildings in towns large and small, but, a lawyer tells us over dinner, with great feeling, "I've never, *ever*, seen a judge who wasn't corrupt." This is so routine, he and a colleague explain, that in civil disputes, the judge gets a percentage of the property value that the bribe-payer gains. People in such positions are then expected to send some of the take back up the line to those who appointed them; this is called *renvoyer l'ascenseur*—sending back the elevator. Being a judge in an area full of mining rights disputes is particularly lucrative. Other civil servants also earn extra: Goma is on the border with Rwanda, and one of the lawyers explains that the very hotel where we're having dinner was built by a customs official. They point along the street to two more hotels owned by customs men.

Government as a system of organized theft goes back to King Leopold II, who made a fortune here equal to well over \$1.1 billion in today's money, chiefly in rubber and ivory. Then for fifty-two years this was a Belgian colony, run less rapaciously, but still mainly for the purpose—as with colonies almost everywhere—of extracting wealth for the mother country and its corporations. The grand tradition was continued by Mobutu Sese Seko, heavily backed by the United States as a cold war ally, who over three decades starting in 1965 amassed an estimated \$4 billion, buying grand villas all over Europe (one, on the Riviera, was almost within sight of one of Leopold's).

The dictator built palatial homes throughout Congo too, one of them in Goma. It is now the provincial governor's office, and Kabila stays here when he's in town: a sprawling red-brick mansion, whose green lawn, dotted with palms and other trees, rolls down to Lake Kivu. The floors are white marble, and a curving marble staircase leads up to Mobutu's circular office, where there is a huge kitschy chandelier of hundreds of little glass balls. The initials M and B, for him and his second wife, Bobi Ladawa, are intertwined in gold, with many curlicues, on top of an inlaid wood desk and elsewhere throughout the house. Of the his-and-hers bathrooms, hers is the more spectacular, in pink marble with two sinks in the shape of shells, and a large Jacuzzi.

Into the void of the world's largest failed state has stepped a wide variety of organizations wanting to help. In Goma it sometimes seems as if every other vehicle on the deeply rutted streets is an SUV with a logo on the door: Oxfam, Action Contre la Faim, World Vision, Norwegian Refugee Council, HopeIn Action.eu, and dozens more. Many also sport a window sticker: a red slash mark across a submachine gun

and the legend NO ARMS/PAS D'ARMES. But the biggest foreign presence consists of people who do have arms: more than 17,000 United Nations troops and military observers. They are quickly visible in blue helmets, blue berets, blue baseball caps, or blue turbans worn by Sikh soldiers from India. Almost all are from poor countries, where UN peacekeeping is a big moneymaker for their armies. The wealthy nations, although they contribute a few higher-ranking officers and civilian specialists, have been generally loath to risk their soldiers' lives in someone else's civil war. However, they pay most of the cost. A plan that we have to join one Bangladeshi unit on patrol is scrubbed at the last minute because word comes that the ambassador of Japan—a major source of funds—is to visit the base the next day and all hands are needed to prepare.

The UN presence is a mixed story. Far better equipped and disciplined than the Congolese army, these troops have kept a bad situation from getting worse. Yet it is hopeless to expect so few soldiers to provide protection for most civilians in such a vast country. "How many troops would it really take to stop all the fighting here?" I ask one UN official, out of his office. "Oh, about 250,000," he replies.

On the record, officers are brisk, upbeat, and bristling with acronyms. In the UN military headquarters in Bunia, the ragged, dirt-streets capital of the Ituri gold-mining district several hundred miles north of Goma, a cheerful Pakistani paratrooper colonel briefs us in a room filled with wall maps showing AORs (areas of responsibility) of battalions from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Morocco—Nepbat, Banbat, Pakbat, Morbat. Other troops in the area, he says, include Indonesians (who repair roads), Uruguayans (who patrol lakes and rivers), Guatemalans (special forces), South Africans (military police), and Indians (who fly helicopters). Tunisians and Egyptians are on the way. "Last week we carried out a heli-recce" of one trouble spot; when aid groups have trouble going somewhere, the UN gives them a "heli-insertion."

One of the UN jobs here is to train the Congolese army, and this, too, he assures us, is on track. First thing on the agenda: training forward air controllers (puzzling, since Congo has virtually no air force). And how will they do this, given that few UN officers speak either French or any local language? Simple, they will find the English-speaking Congolese officers (although veteran aid workers here say they've rarely seen any). And what if forward air controlling is not their specialty? "We're training the trainers!"

When speaking not for attribution, UN officials are far more somber. I talk to four more of them, military and civilian, African and European. All agree that the biggest single problem is the chaotic Congolese army itself, which numbers some 120,000 ill-trained men. On one country road, heading to a combat zone where one unit is relieving another, we see hundreds of soldiers in green fatigues, but not once a truck filled with

troops. Carrying rifles or grenade launchers, the men are hitchhiking rides with passing cargo trucks and motorcycles. They wave at us, bringing hands to their mouths to beg for cigarettes. Beneath a piece of canvas strung between trees, a solitary sentry manning one checkpoint is sound asleep.

Top-heavy with colonels to begin with, the army has swollen mightily in recent years, since the price of a series of half-effective peace accords has been its absorption of an array of predatory warlords and their followers. Some two dozen different rebel groups signed a peace agreement with the government in Goma last year, for instance. Since then, one of the most notorious warlords, Bosco Ntaganda, known as "The Terminator" and under indictment by the International Criminal Court for conscripting child soldiers, made his own deal with Kinshasa and was appointed a general.

What can be done? The outside world has influence over the Congolese army, because we're partly paying for it. The national government depends on aid money to make ends meet, depends on the UN force to retain control of the east, and sometimes even needs UN planes to transport its soldiers, for there is no drivable road from one side of the country to the other. At a bare minimum, the Western powers have leverage to pressure Congo into purging its army of thugs in senior positions—and could demand far more as well.

A curious, very limited kind of pressure is being applied. Underlying the army's long-standing practice of looting civilian goods and food is that soldiers often don't get paid. "The money comes from Kinshasa," a UN official explains, "then goes to Kisangani"—a city three quarters of the way to the eastern border—"and by the time it gets down to company level there's not much left." To deal with this problem, the European Union has sent a fifty-five-man military mission here.

One member is Bob Arnst, a short, wiry man with a crew cut, who is a sergeant major in the Dutch army. He is stationed in Bunia, and talks about his work one evening in the UN's café and recreation center, where a security guard at the gate has the job of keeping out local prostitutes.

"Everything is in cash. They bring the money in big packages, 120 by 80 by 20 centimeters. In great bricks. We're expecting a convoy now. When the money arrives, they count it again, bill by bill." Arnst and two French soldiers watch the count at the local army headquarters, after which paymasters from half a dozen battalions arrive in SUVs to collect the funds for their units. "Most of them [the paymasters] have very nice clothing. Once a colonel showed up with his bodyguard and I asked, 'What are you doing here?' And he said, 'I've come to see where my money is.' And I said, 'It's not your money.'"

In the days following, Arnst and his French colleagues visit Congolese battalions in the field, usually dropping in by surprise in a UN helicopter. "We ask soldiers, 'Did you get your payment?'"

And if they didn't? On three occasions in the last few months, entire units were not paid. Arnst reported each case to his EU superiors in Kinshasa, and a Dutch colonel applied pressure at the Ministry of Defense. Each time, the commander was forced to turn over the money to his troops—but was not arrested or disciplined.

The situation is worse in some outlying areas; Arnst cites the town of Dungu, in the north, where he believes some troops may not have been paid for four months. Food destined for soldiers sometimes disappears as well. "If they don't have any money, they have a weapon, so..." his voice trails off. Furthermore, there isn't a foolproof system to prevent commanders from pocketing pay for "ghost soldiers" who've deserted. Plus, he says, the pay is woeful to begin with: only about \$40 per month, and another \$8 for living expenses. Military families are "living in tents with holes in them. And if a soldier does get his money, he's got no way to bring it to his family." Hence families tend to follow military units around. The officers are little better off. "Last week a captain came to me and said, 'Can you give me twenty dollars? Ten dollars?'"

From the dozen years of intermittent war, almost everyone has searing memories. Fabien Kakani, thirty-eight, for example, is a nurse at a Protestant mission hospital in the savannah town of Nyankunde, an hour southwest of Bunia. One day in 2002, militia from the Ngiti ethnic group, and an allied force, overran the hospital, burned its library of more than 10,000 books, and began killing an estimated three thousand people of other ethnicities—hospital staff, patients, and residents of the nearby town. "I was working in the ICU that day. I had just made the rounds with the doctor and we heard shots from the hill behind the hospital." He points out the window. "We brought more patients in and locked ourselves in. Then they went to the maternity ward and the pediatric ward and I heard screams as they massacred people there. Throughout the night we heard shots. I was a Bira [a different ethnic group] and I knew they would be looking for me."

The raiders then broke into the ICU, and Kakani and some seventy other people were tied up and marched to a room he shows us in another hospital building, which we pace out as being about ten by twenty-one feet. "We spent three days here. No food, no drink, we had to defecate and urinate on the floor. Children died because there was no milk in their mothers' breasts. We were passing their dead bodies out the windows."

So many people were killed at Nyankunde hospital alone that there was no time to dig graves; the bodies had to be thrown in pit latrines. And the leader of the Ngiti troops who carried out the massacre? He was

Kakani's brother-in law, who wanted to kill members of several rival groups, including the Bira, even though he was married to a Bira, Kakani's sister. The commander of the allied militia force involved in the attack was not on the scene, but in close communication by radio, well aware of what his troops were doing. Following one of the incorporate-the-warlords peace agreements, he became Congo's foreign minister. He is still in the cabinet today, in another position.

After two weeks my notebooks overflow with such stories. But looking at people I meet, even an entire encampment of young gold miners who are almost all ex-combatants, do I see those who look capable of killing hospital patients in their beds, gang-raping a woman like Rebecca Kamate, jabbing a young man's eye with a bayonet? I do not. People are warm, friendly, their faces overflow with smiles; seeing a foreigner, everyone wants to stop, say " *Bonjour!*" and shake hands, whether on a small town's main street or on a forest path. I've never seen more enthusiastic hand-shakers. At night, when the electricity works, the warm air echoes with some of Africa's best music. There is no shortage of ordinary acts of human kindness. When our car's left front wheel goes sailing off to the side of a remote mountain road, leaving one end of the axle to gouge a long furrow in the dirt, the driver of a passing truck, piled teeteringly high with goods and then with people sitting on top, immediately stops and crawls under the car, using his jack in tandem with ours to solve the problem and get us on our way.

What turns such people into rapists, sadists, killers? Greed, fear, demagogic leaders and their claim that such violence is necessary for self-defense, seeing everyone around you doing the same thing—and the fact that the rest of the world pays tragically little attention to one of the great humanitarian catastrophes of our time. But even the worst brutality can also draw out the good in people, as in the way Kamate has devoted her life to other raped women. In Goma, I saw people with pickaxes laboriously hewing the lava that had flooded their city into football-sized chunks with flattened sides, then using these, with mortar, to build the walls of new homes. Can this devastated country as a whole use the very experience of its suffering to build something new and durable? I hope so, but I fear it will be a long time in coming.

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