

# THE “CURSE” OF MINERAL RESOURCES IN AFRICA: INTERNATIONALISING CONFLICT AND CIVIL WAR IN THE DR CONGO

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore the impact of conflict and civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter the DR Congo) and their ramifications on international relations among African and European nations and also America. For many scholars of African history and international studies, the DR Congo has remained a “powder keg” or “an active volcano” that can explode anytime, mainly because the country possesses vast mineral resources which make it irresistible for countries to intervene and thereby undermine the national sovereignty of the DR Congo. Countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad, Burundi and Eritrea have been involved in the conflict in the DR Congo for reasons that are essentially political, social, economic and strategic in nature. Rwanda and Uganda are accused of destabilising the internal peace and stability of the DR Congo, although both countries deny the allegations. By extension, the two countries are also accused of being cohorts of America and France and of working towards extending capitalism in the DR Congo. The article argues that although the countries involved justified their intervention in the DR Congo by giving reasons such as maintaining national sovereignty and promoting peace, stability and democracy, the reality is that all of them have shown a keen interest in taking control of the country’s mineral resources. Thus, it is hoped that this article will reveal the economic and political dynamics that have underpinned the conflict and civil wars fought for years in the DR Congo with the aim of explicating the hypocrisy exhibited by countries involved in the DR Congo debacle.

**Keywords:** mineral resources; DR Congo; civil war; conflict; Africa; international relations; America and France

## INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO CONFLICT AND CIVIL WAR IN THE DR CONGO

The history of civil war and conflict in the DR Congo is mired in controversy, and its impact on the African continent has invited the attention of international forces. Depelchin (2005) traces the history of violence in the Congo to the time about 150 years ago when the British explorer, Sir Henry Stanley, travelled down the Congo River and discovered that its banks were endowed with vast amounts of mineral resources, some of which had never been discovered in Europe (Depelchin 2005). King Leopold II of Belgium was struck by reports, particularly those written by Stanley, that described the spectacular riches and economic possibilities of the Congo. Following the Berlin Conference of 1885, Leopold took over control of the Congo by using flattery and petty gifts to bribe natives into signing treaties. Hochschild (2001) writes that if chicanery failed to yield the result of persuading native authorities to cede land, Leopold often considered violence as a viable option. Ultimately, Leopold managed to acquire thousands of miles of land, which he secured under his name as private property and not under Belgium as the colonising force. The King established the International African Association, an organisation whose historical mission was to colonise the Congo, although the mission was masked as providing humanitarian aid. Leopold plundered the mineral resources of the Congo and caused the untold suffering of the Congolese through forced labour on the notorious rubber plantations.

After gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, the new state of Zaire (now the DR Congo) progressively deteriorated under the brutal dictatorship of Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko who conspired with Western powers to assassinate the first prime minister of Zaire—Patrice Emery Lumumba. Rwafa and Tarugarira (2013) contend that the BBC documentary series *Storyville* reveals how Western powers installed Mobutu Sese Seko in power after the death of Lumumba and kept him in power for 32 years while he fomented violence among “real or imagined” enemies. Mobutu systematically looted the mineral resources of his country, conspiring with Belgium, Britain and America. Thus, the civil war and conflict that continued to shred the political and economic structures of the Congo were partly a response to the dictatorship of Mobutu and partly a result of the desire of various rebel groups to get direct control over the Congo’s vast mineral resources. Today, the DR Congo is variously referred to as a “powder keg” (French 2005), a “volcano waiting to explode” (Williams 2011) and a “land cursed with mineral resources” (Lalji 2007) mainly due to the country’s vulnerability to rebel attack, government counter-insurgency, economic mismanagement and foreign intervention.

## THE “CURSE” OF MINERAL RESOURCES IN THE DR CONGO

Within the study field of political economy, there is a theory referred to as the “resource curse” according to which the argument is that the higher the amount of resources in a developing nation the higher the risk in that nation for conflict, civil war and slower development. Following observations made by Auty (1990) and Sachs and Warner (2001) it is becoming increasingly clear that countries rich in natural resources tend to perform badly due to an increase in cases of conflict, civil wars, corruption, a reduction of economic diversification, and reduced investment in human capital. The DR Congo is a country that seems to respond naturally to the “curse” of economic mismanagement, conflict and civil wars. In fact, a cursory study of the history of conflict and civil war in the DR Congo reveals that between 1998 and 2002 approximately 3.3 million people died in the DR Congo in a bloody conflict largely ignored by the international community. All the parties involved in the conflict showed little respect for human life and dignity. Most of those who had died were civilians, killed as a result of war, starvation or disease.

Statistics provided by Sachs and Warner (2001) indicate that between July 2002 and March 2003 at least 5,000 civilians in Kivu and Ituri died violent deaths. In addition, 50,000 civilians are estimated to have died in 1999. The extra-judicial killings were attributed to the Congolese army or government-backed militias who terrorised villagers that were thought to be supporting rebels from Rwanda and Uganda and accused of destabilising peace in the DR Congo. In northern Katanga, which is rich in mineral resources such as diamonds, gold, cobalt, tin, tantalum and tungsten, the Mai Mai militias supported by the government are held responsible for the looting of mineral resources, the practice of cannibalism, the burning of houses, and the rape and harassment of innocent civilians. Between 1994 and 2004, Laurent Nkunda—a former general in the armed forces of the DR Congo—formed a rebel faction that operated in Nord Kivu and was sympathetic to Congolese Tutsis and the Tutsi-dominated government of neighbouring Rwanda. Under the guise of protecting Tutsi populations in the DR Congo, Nkunda caused the displacement of 200,000 civilians, bringing the total number of people displaced by the Nord Kivu conflict to two million. He also caused civil unrest; his rebel soldiers raped women, caused large food shortages and what the United Nations called “a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic dimensions” (Hammond 2011, 136). As if that was not enough, during a BBC interview on November 10, 2008, Nkunda threatened to topple the government of the DR Congo if President Joseph Kabila continued to avoid direct negotiations. According to Sachs and Warner (2001), while Nkunda claimed on the one hand that his rebels protested about attacks on Tutsi populations by the Mai Mai militia sponsored by the government, Nkunda appeared on the other hand to be projecting the political ambitions of Rwanda bent on pushing her economic interests in the DR Congo. The mere mention of Rwanda complicates the politics of intervention that created an international stage in the DR Congo where

“African actors” competed to politically and economically outwit each other under the guise of protecting the national sovereignty of the DR Congo from rebel movements.

## AFRICAN ACTORS: POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT AND CIVIL WAR IN THE DR CONGO

The civil war and conflict in the DR Congo attracted different African countries who seized the opportunity to further their political and economic interests. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002), the history of conflict and civil war in the DR Congo can best be understood within the context of three phases. The first phase, which started on October 6, 1996, was motivated by Rwanda’s entrance into the DR Congo with the purpose of destroying the remaining Hutu soldiers and the *interahamwe* (those who work together) genocidal elements that had escaped to the Congo after slaughtering 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda in 1994. To fish out these genocidal elements from the DR Congo, Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, needed the help of Laurent Kabila—the then leader of a rebel group operating in Kasai and eastern Congo. Kabila could not give up this opportunity because he wanted to advance his long-standing desire to launch a campaign against field-marshal Mobutu Sese Seko who had become a “thorn in the flesh” to African nations because of his destabilising activities in Central and Southern Africa.

The political deal struck by Paul Kagame and Laurent Kabila had political and economic ramifications. As French (2005) argues, the deal reached by these two central figures was that Kabila was to receive support from Kagame to eliminate Mobutu whereas Kagame was to be allowed to have access to some mineral resources in the DR Congo. However, the deal did not simply go unnoticed—it attracted the attention of Uganda which had long been considering the prospects of controlling the vast mineral resources in the Katanga and Kisangani areas in the DR Congo. When Kabila embarked on his military expedition to oust Mobutu, he received full blessings from Rwanda and Uganda. In addition, Kabila enlisted the support of the Banyamulenge—Tutsi pastoralists who had adopted the DR Congo as their homeland after fleeing genocidal wars in Burundi (in 1972) and Rwanda (in 1994). Kabila’s Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) destroyed Hutu communities and caused a massive inflow of refugees in Burundi. Since the inflow involved some Hutu rebels who had escaped from Rwanda, this caused an international outcry from the Tutsi minority government that was ruling in Burundi and that feared it would be overwhelmed by a Hutu population, thereby increasing the epistemic conditions for conflict and genocide such as the one experienced in Burundi in 1972. Prunier (1995) argues that the decay and collapse of Zaire under Mobutu did not only reduce the capacity of the country to deal with gnawing poverty but it also exposed this richly endowed country to external invasion, occupation and plunder.

President Kabila got the reins of power under the guidance of Rwanda and Uganda and later of Burundi. Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) points out that James Kabareke, who led the Rwandan army, served as chief of staff of the Congolese Army. In addition, the Congolese Tutsi, who had close relationships with the Rwandan Patriotic Front led by Paul Kagame, occupied senior positions in Kabila's administration. For her part, Uganda stationed a full battalion of its army in the DR Congo, presumably to stop the incursion of Ugandan rebels back into the country. But, as Kabila sought to assert himself as the legitimate leader of the DR Congo, his radical shift in foreign policy affected his international relations with Rwanda and Uganda. Jennings (2000) asserts that the decision by Kabila to send Rwandan and Ugandan troops and advisers home on July 28, 1998 invited the ire of Rwanda and Uganda who quickly sent an army to invade the DR Congo on August 2, 1998, five days after Kabila had made this fatal decision. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002), the invasion of the DR Congo by Rwanda and Uganda brought to the fore the "second phase" marked by ruthless partition and plunder of the DR Congo's resources. This phase lasted from 1998 to 2003.

The invasion of the DR Congo was fast and furious. On August 2, 2003 a coordinated assault on the Congolese sovereignty and Kabila's rule took place as Rwandan and Ugandan troops began invading the country. The intention was to launch spontaneous attacks on the DR Congo which would leave no chance for Kabila to mobilise forces as well as support from other countries. Kabila experienced a tough time as the Goma garrison of the Congolese army joined the invaders; Rwandan soldiers, who were still in Kinshasa, and their Congolese allies rose against the Kabila regime. But, as Taylor (1999) contends, Rwanda and Uganda had miscalculated African regional and international political dynamics. The "idealistic" relationship that had once cemented nationalistic leaders such as Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe) and Eduardo Dos Santos (Angola) was to be put to the test by the international political dynamics that characterised the conflict and civil war in the DR Congo. Unwittingly, Rwanda and Uganda did not expect the interventions of Angola and Zimbabwe on Kabila's side. Although Angola was officially invited by Kabila to intervene, the country had its own special interests in the DR Congo. For instance, it may not be far-fetched to say that Angola feared that Unita rebels were likely to use the DR Congo as a base for launching attacks against Angola. There were also possibilities that the Rwandan and Ugandan governments could use the attack on the DR Congo as an opportunity to support Unita rebels who were causing political havoc in Angola. The international relations among Angola, Rwanda and Uganda thawed, leading to a war that was fought inside the DR Congo. This caused considerable suffering among the local Congolese. Angola defeated Rwandan and Ugandan armies in the south-west before they moved to Matadi and Kinshasa while the Zimbabwean troops defended the Ndjili International Airport in Kinshasa. Zimbabwe joined the conflict in the DR Congo in order to conclude contracts and economic agreements with Kabila. Also, the DR Congo war offered an opportunity for President Robert Mugabe to raise his profile as the custodian of peace

on the African continent and the world over (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). Robert Mugabe has been accused of letting his military generals plunder mineral resources in Katanga and Kisangani under the guise of protecting local populations from Banyamulenge rebel movements. The international dimensions of conflict and civil war in the DR Congo can also be explained in terms of the activities of “European actors” who worked behind the scenes to influence the political and economic dynamics of the DR Congo by supporting insurgent elements from Rwanda and Uganda.

## EUROPEAN ACTORS: THE DR CONGO AND ITS VULNERABILITY TO FOREIGN INTERVENTION

Much as the conflict and civil war in the DR Congo defined the contours of international relations in African states, the debacle also invited players such as America and France to get on board. The involvement of European nations and America in the DR Congo—often dominating current debates about the global role of nations in Africa—constitutes what Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) calls “phase three.” In phase three, America and France occupied the centre stage in the conflict in the DR Congo because both countries had strategic interests in rare mineral resources such as cobalt, which is used to produce microchips for cell phones and computers. America and France wanted their transnational corporations to have access to the DR Congo’s minerals. It has been the greatest fear among the Americans that if rare minerals, such as diamonds and uranium, fall into the hands of terrorists, this would spell disaster for American strategic interests, especially against the background that America is already fighting ceaseless wars with Al-Qaeda—the major terrorist organisation in the world today. In fact, Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002, 34) notes that there are allegations that Al Qaeda has “used diamonds purchased in Sierra Leone [and] the Democratic Republic of [the] Congo ... to fund its terrorist activities, in turn laundering these commodities through Dubai.”

For most countries, particularly America and France, the DR Congo remains vulnerable, suspect and problematic in that the country is viewed as a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism alleged to be the brainchild of global terrorism. The DR Congo is also suspected of providing epistemic conditions for narco-trafficking (for which there is a ready market in the USA) and human disasters such as war—all of which call for American intervention. Currently, reports are circulating that Rwanda and Uganda are supporting rebels and are also working together with Americans to undermine the democratically elected government of Joseph Kabila. The “subterranean” motive is to loot as much as possible of the DR Congo’s minerals before a much stronger and self-assertive government is put in place to guard against the foreign pillaging of the country’s minerals. According to Carroll (2002), these accusations cannot simply be dismissed considering the fact that in 1998 the US military trained Rwandan troops in counter-insurgency, and the fact that a US military and diplomatic team was seen at the Rwanda-Congo border when war broke out on August 2, 1998. The international

relations between the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda are characterised by accusations and counter-accusations, with the DR Congo accusing the other two countries of getting sponsorship from US multinational companies and the World Bank to continue with acts of aggression in the DR Congo.

The presence of France in the DR Congo has drawn some mixed feelings among academics and critics of international studies. On the one hand, scholars such as Pottier (2002) are of the belief that French intervention in the conflict in the DR Congo is highly suspicious since it is the same country that supported the Hutu *genocidaires* of President Juvenal Habyarimana that carried out a genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and Mobutu Sese Seko who contributed to the downfall of the DR Congo through his acts of extravagance. On the other hand, critics such as Newbury (2001) say that the involvement of France in the DR Congo should not be viewed only in negative terms since it is France and Belgium that provided the much-needed platform for the negotiations among the Kinshasa-based political regime of Joseph Kabila, civil organisations, and the Rwandan- and Ugandan-backed rebels, such as the group led by Laurent Nkunda—a Tutsi who is purported to be fighting for the rights of Congolese Tutsi. The recurrence of conflict in the DR Congo, which is often attributed to the activities of rebels, is held responsible for the underdevelopment of the DR Congo and other war-torn regions in East, North and West Africa.

## RESOURCE MINERALS: THE BANE OF AFRICAN IMPOVERISHMENT

Generally, most countries in Africa that have suffered from and/or are reeling under civil wars and conflict are victims of impoverishment. The conundrum is: Why is Africa poor when the continent can boast of vast amounts of underground mineral resources? To resort to the argument of the “resource curse” is to seemingly succumb to reducing everything to the will of metaphysics and supernatural powers in explaining the case of Africa’s impoverishment. Studies that were carried out by Addae-Korankye (2014) indicate that Africa’s impoverishment should be attributed to, among a host of other factors, poor resource management, corruption and greed, lack of comprehensive policy frameworks to manage resources, and bureaucratic incompetence.

The case of the DR Congo in Africa provides evidence that confirms the validity of the argument that to have minerals is one thing but to use them productively in order to alleviate poverty among the general populace is another thing.

## CONCLUSION

This article traced the historical origins of conflict and civil war in the DR Congo, starting with the colonial activities of King Leopold II who plundered resources in the DR Congo under the guise of providing humanitarian aid. The article also discussed

how the weaknesses of Mobutu Sese Seko paved the way for the involvement of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi in the conflicts in the DR Congo. It was indicated that the activities of Rwanda and Uganda shaped the international relations among African countries that were sucked into the vortex of conflict for different political, economic and strategic reasons. The invasion of the DR Congo by Rwanda and Uganda led to the involvement of other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Angola, Tanzania, Chad and Eritrea. These countries had different motives apart from the common and belaboured cause of wanting to protect the sovereignty of the DR Congo. With Burundi joining Rwanda and Uganda, the DR Congo divided African countries into distinct camps—all fighting to secure some material benefits from the DR Congo. The situation was made worse through the involvement of America and France—countries that also seemed to have been pushed by economic motives rather than the desire to stop war and promote democracy in the DR Congo. Whereas America feared that the DR Congo could be used by terrorists as a launching pad to attack the country’s sovereignty, France was motivated by the desire to correct its past sins in which it supported the corrupt and dictatorial government of Mobutu Sese Seko. This article clearly revealed that the DR Congo would for some time remain a place torn apart by the consequences of rebel attack, government incompetence, and the effects of regional and foreign intervention. Another conclusion reached was that international players deliberately wanted to maintain the DR Congo in a feeble state so as to create conditions that rendered the DR Congo ungovernable, thereby increasing their chances to intervene and benefit materially by plundering the country’s mineral resources.

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