



CONGO WAR CLAIMS 1,000 LIVES PER DAY

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Despite the horrific images of the tsunami aftermath in South Asia that continue to draw international attention, the most deadly place in the world remains the African nation of Congo, where fighting has taken more lives than any other conflict since World War II, according to a new report from International Rescue Committee (IRC).

More than 1,000 civilians die each day as a result of the simmering civil war, the group said, citing statistics from on-site medical teams.

Six years of war have claimed about 3.8 million lives - half of them children. According to aid organizations, most of those killed are victims of disease and famine brought on by the war. Most deaths are from easily treatable ailments, including measles, but the victims live in the still-isolated eastern region of the country.

"You could say it is a tsunami every five months, year in and year out, in the Congo. And it can be prevented," said the top United Nations aid official, Jan Egeland, this week as he urged donors to extend generosity sparked by the tsunami catastrophe to the 26 million people facing death in "forgotten crises" from the Congo to the occupied Palestinian territories.

A complicated war

Much of the violence in Democratic Republic of the Congo can be traced to ethnic clashes that have raged throughout the region, and to ongoing power struggles for the region's rich natural resources.

For more than 30 years the Congo was known as Zaire and ruled by a brutal dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko.

But Mobutu's rule began to unravel in the 1990s after ethnic Hutu rebels, known as the Interahamwe, fled into Zaire. The Interahamwe had just orchestrated the mass killing of some 500,000 to 800,000 people in neighboring Rwanda. The victims, mostly ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus, forced the brutal regime from power and many of the leaders traveled just a few hundred miles west into Mobutu's nation.

Mobutu allowed the Hutu rebels to remain, which threatened the now Tutsi-governed Rwanda and another neighboring country, Uganda. So Rwanda and Uganda recruited a rebel leader, Laurent Kabila, to lead a revolt to bring down Mobutu. The Rwandans and Ugandans thought that if Kabila won power, he would protect their countries by forcing out the radical Hutu groups.

New leader, renewed violence

Kabila successfully ousted Mobutu and was hailed as a conquering hero when he marched into the capital, Kinshasa, in May 1997. The people of newly renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo hoped he would reverse Mobutu's years of terror and corruption. Kabila's backers in Rwanda and Uganda also felt they could count on the new leader to no longer harbor Hutu rebels.

Within a year, however, Kabila changed his mind and refused to force the Hutus back into Rwanda. The Rwandans and Ugandans, realizing that the Hutu threat would now remain along their western border, abruptly switched sides and began to support rebels seeking to overthrow Kabila.

Kabila in turn asked for support from Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, all of which had interests in the vast nation of Congo. Angola wanted to pursue rebels from its own civil war who had fled to Congo, and Zimbabwe hoped for a piece of the rich mineral deposits in the country.

From 1998 to 2004, troops on all sides blocked trade routes, plundered food stores, and stopped farmers producing crops. The six countries signed a ceasefire accord in 1999, but fighting continued.

Also during this period, Kabila, who had come to power during a bloody insurrection, met his own bloody end when one of his body guards gunned him down in 2001. Since the assassination, Congo has been run by Kabila's son, Joseph.

Threats of a new war

Most recently, evidence that Rwandan troops have reentered eastern Congo has sparked concerns that the fragile peace settlement could collapse as Congo's neighbors jump back in for another ethnic fight.

United Nations peacekeeping forces in the region reported Rwandan troops in Congolese territory, suggesting an invasion had begun. Rwanda admits amassing troops on the border to stem attacks on Rwanda from Hutus in Congo, but says its soldiers are not in the Republic.

The Congolese government has called for the U.N. Security Council to condemn what it sees as Rwanda's aggression, and impose sanctions.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis in Congo has been described as one of the worst in the world, with extreme levels of hunger, disease, death, and countless abuses of human rights.

--Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra

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