

It's all relative

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Things are better than they were five years ago, but they are still pretty awful



“LAST week, the military situation remained relatively calm across the territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nevertheless, incidents were reported in the Kivus.” This unchanging opening mantra of the weekly press conference held by Congo's UN peacekeeping mission, known by its acronym MONUC, is an exercise in understatement.

Despite the signing in January of a peace deal intended to pacify the country's lawless eastern borderlands near Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, daily clashes still occur between Tutsi insurgents, local Congolese militias and the Congolese army. More than 500,000 refugees who fled the fighting last year are still afraid to return home, with good reason. Civilians are increasingly the targets of

lethal reprisals by all sides. In particular, the conflict has become notorious for the frequent use of rape and sexual violence by all sides as a weapon of war.

But progress in Congo is relative. Just five years ago, it was in the final throes of a war that had sucked in at least half a dozen other African countries and had left much of Congo in ruins after claiming the lives, through disease and displacement as well as fighting, of at least 4m people, the largest such death toll since the second world war. By comparison, today's violence, though menacing, is much reduced.

In 2006 Joseph Kabila became Congo's first democratically elected leader in over four decades in polls that were organised by the UN, and which were reasonably free and fair. But his biggest campaign promise—to stamp out the smouldering embers of the 1998-2003 war—has not been fulfilled at all. The fighting in the two Kivu provinces, which has its roots in neighbouring Rwanda's genocide in 1994, has lasted for more than a decade. And there are worries that a new front is opening in the already complex conflict.

As part of an agreement struck last year with its erstwhile enemy, Rwanda, Congo's government vowed to hunt down and defeat the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). This is a movement of Hutu rebels who have been based in eastern Congo since fleeing Rwanda after helping to orchestrate the slaughter there of nearly 1m Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994. Clashes involving FDLR fighters are on the rise. There are 70,000 more refugees now in North Kivu than when the peace accord was signed in January. A big offensive against the rebels by Congo's army, as demanded by Rwanda's government, risks prompting a new bloodbath and pushing an already dire humanitarian crisis out of control.

The UN is hardly in a position to help. In December Mr Kabila sent in 25,000 of his government's forces to suppress General Laurent Nkunda's Tutsi insurgency in the east, which is aimed against the FDLR. But they were routed by a much smaller force of insurgents, about 4,000. Further compromising their role after the UN's Indian peacekeepers in North Kivu had failed to support the Congolese army's advance, as they had been ordered to do, some of those same blue helmets are now being accused of supplying the Hutu rebels, whom Congo's army is meant to suppress, with ammunition in exchange for poached ivory.

If the situation in the east is dire, the rest of Congo is not much better. Mr Kabila's triumph at the polls has long lost its shine. Much of the country has for months been hobbled by strikes over unpaid wages in hospitals, schools and universities. In the south-eastern province of Katanga, Congo's mining heartland, increased foreign investment has not yet produced new jobs. Instead, as throughout Africa, the cost of food and transport has nearly doubled since the beginning of the year. Crime is up too.

Mr Kabila, at least for now, has managed to keep the lid on growing discontent. But to do so he has had to resort to repression and violence, just as his reviled predecessors did. "Why protest? They'll just kill you," says a market vendor in Kinshasa, the capital, where her business has dwindled as prices soar. "The police will arrest you. We aren't free to protest." The regular crackdowns on even the smallest and mildest public demonstrations are dampening the hopes of Western governments, which generally wanted Mr Kabila to win the election in 2006, that the vote would usher in a new era of political pluralism, let alone peace.

The opposition, already heavily outnumbered in parliament, is fractured and factionalised. Senator Jean-Pierre Bemba, a former rebel leader who had been the opposition's chief figure and runner-up to Mr Kabila in the presidential poll, had been in exile in Portugal since fighters loyal to him were defeated in three days of gun battles in the streets of Kinshasa more than a year ago. However, last month Mr Bemba was arrested in Belgium on a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court at The Hague, which has accused him of war crimes.

Still, bad as things are, they could be worse, especially when viewed through the prism of the recent past. "Five years ago, no one ever would have believed that we'd ever have elections or institutions," says a Kinshasa banker. To that modest extent, there has been progress of a kind.