

'LUCID, LACONIC, AND ELEGANTLY WRITTEN'

MICHELA WRONG, AUTHOR OF *IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MR KURTZ*

RADIO CONGO

SIGNALS OF HOPE
FROM AFRICA'S
DEADLIEST WAR

BEN RAWLENCE

RADIO CONGO

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A black and white illustration of a radio station. It features a small wooden building with a gabled roof, a tall antenna tower with a diamond-shaped top, and palm trees in the background. The scene is set on a small island or peninsula with wavy lines representing water.

Signals of Hope from
Africa's Deadliest War

BEN RAWLENCE



ONEWORLD

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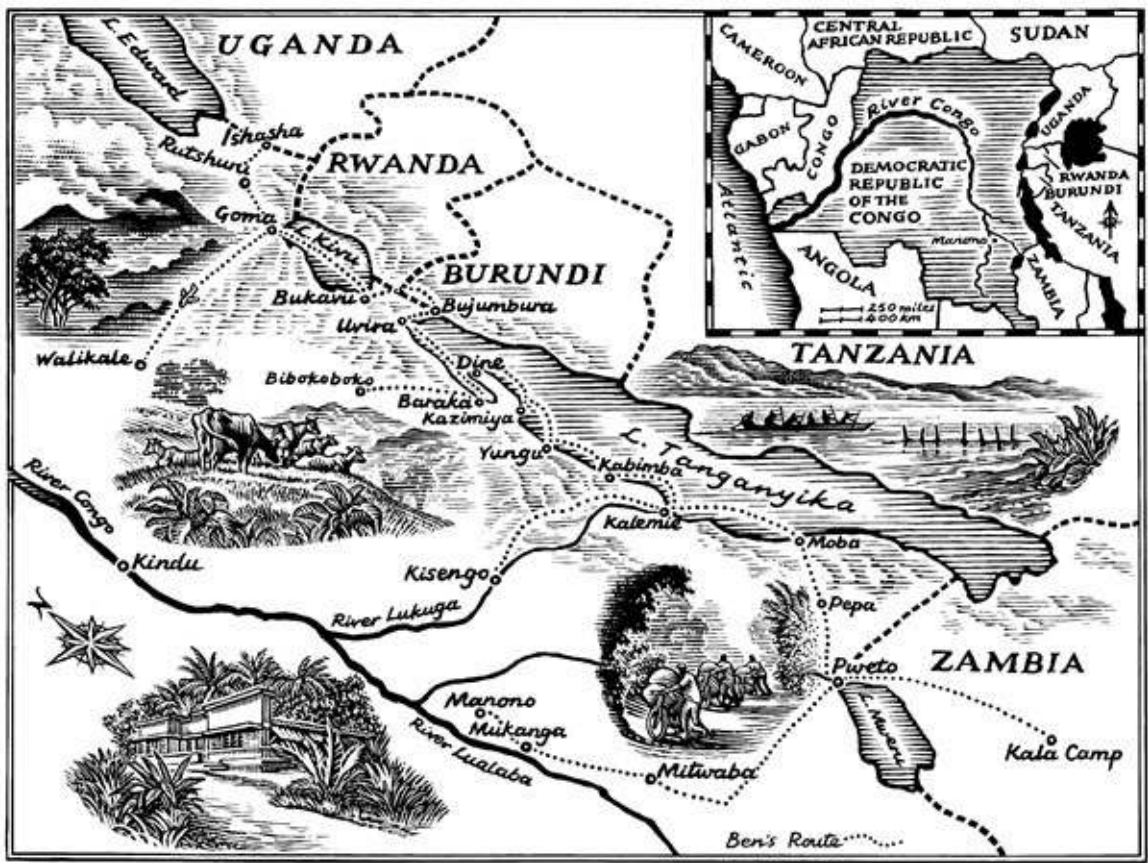
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Still there are too many people in Europe who only know how Africans are dying, not how they live

HENNING MANKELL



Prologue

IN MANONO, THE RADIO sits on a small four-legged wooden stool in the mud, its aerial bent in several places, the battery door held together with tape. Arranged in a rough circle around it are about twenty men and several women, sitting on benches, chairs and upturned crates; a few are leaning against the pine trees that rustle quietly in the night breeze. They are priests, nuns, teachers, a waitress. Some hold their chins in their hands, others pull on cigarettes, and every now and then an exclamation goes up in reaction to the news. The radio speaks of war in the north, of politics in Kinshasa and of more war in Iraq. An orange moon lies sullen in the treetops that frame the compound where we sit, but I am the only one admiring it.

Manono lies deep in the forest on the upper reaches of the Congo River in the east of the country, four days' ride on a motorbike from the shores of Lake Tanganyika. The main road linking it to the other towns of the east has been destroyed; goods arrive by barge or on the occasional humanitarian organisation plane that, when the weather allows, lands on the old airstrip. The people listening to the radio know what is happening in Baghdad but have little idea about the news from the town of Kongolo, several days' journey up the river, or Mitwaba, five days' walk to the south. Like thousands of other towns emerging from Congo's recent wars, Manono is an island in a sea of forest. News reaches Manono but news of Manono rarely reaches anywhere.

RADIO CONGO

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The lost city



Manono, 1966

A WIDE GRAVEL DRIVE leads up to a house. A car stands in front. The house is rectangular and so is the covered veranda that looks out over a lush tropical garden. The shadows of tall trees creep across the drive and obscure half of the house. The visible half is a fiesta of right angles: a jutting roof above the porch, square windows and sharp flat slabs that cap a wide ridge of concrete on the upper floor. From the way the light bounces off the shiny surface of the car, it seems to be the middle of a hot afternoon. Perhaps the master and mistress are having a siesta and barefoot, uniformed servants are sweeping the floors. Is there a figure in the doorway; is that a slight lightening of the shadow, a white face peeking out at the jungle?

Opposite the house in the old photograph, beyond its frame, are other villas of modern design. One is smaller, with a stepped roof in imitation of a medieval castle, and geometric patterns scored in the concrete walls. A veranda slices the house in two, like a knife through fruit. The windows of the one next door are round portholes, painted blue, two on the front and one on the side, giving the house the look of a ship beached among the palms. Beyond is another fanciful villa, with a long curving façade next to that another, then another, the houses dotted through a forest that has been fenced and thinned into garden but which nevertheless threatens to swallow, at a moment's notice, this beautiful art deco suburb.

The street is made of marram; crushed and pressed gravel. It bears the fresh tyre marks of elegant automobiles: Citroens, Renaults, and Peugeots, with long running boards, rounded bonnets and polished hubcaps. At the end of the street is a pair of huge mango trees, which shade one end of a swimming pool that otherwise shimmers in the heat. Black and white children splash, or hurl themselves off the high board under the careful gaze of lifeguards. From his little wooden hut, the attendant comes out to sweep the paving stones and collect any mangoes that fall into the pool during the season.

Bordering the pool is the school; its oblong walls cut with tall metal windows arranged in neat symmetrical lines. Beyond, tennis courts lie hot and red, their brushed clay smooth and calm against the unruly thatch of the elephant grass. Behind the courts lies the golf course; rich, green, billiard-table baize, pocked with sand, where men in white circle, halt, swing and pirouette like dancers in a strange, slow-motion ballet.

The road curves past the golf course and the tennis courts in a wide arc strung with electricity pylons, until it reaches a small roadblock. There, policemen salute and raise the barrier for the cars of those who live in the wealthy quarter so they may drive down the long, broad avenue towards the cathedral, with black tiles and a gabled roof; a Flemish refugee adrift in the African bush.

The streets of the town are lined with little box hedges that squat beneath telegraph poles. In the centre is a huge four-storey brewery that makes beer for export across the region. At the end of another wide boulevard, fringed with mango trees, looms the mine works: the source of the town's prosperity and the region's wealth. It is a massive operation, employing thirty thousand people and state-of-the-art technology: Africa's only tin works, smelting its own ores and exporting pure metal. The tailings form a great towering white mountain that matches in its tidy geometry the modernist cubes of the villas in the town below.

This is the town of Manono in the newly independent, former Belgian colony of Congo. The airport terminal has an arched doorway, and a rectangular tower that looks as if it were made of Lego. Here,

other Belgian, French, British, German, Greek, Portuguese, South African and Lebanese colonists from across central Africa touch down for a holiday, a tantalizing taste of 'modern' civilisation away from their jobs but closer to home than Europe, weeks away by boat. New planes are beginning to hop across the continents but they still take a while.

The Belgian mining company Géomines has made Manono into a model modern town. Wealthy visitors stroll down the boulevards, lamp-lit courtesy of the hydroelectric power station. The *supermarché*, in its sleek whitewashed skin, over three storeys high, is stocked with all the latest European products, as well as beer, meat and dairy goods from Katanga's modern farms and factories. Well-dressed white teenagers in the cafés near the petrol station perch on red leather, listen to rock-and-roll, and eat ice creams, just like their peers in the USA.

Nineteen-sixties Manono a Corbusier dream lit by Edward Hopper, a modernist experiment in the jungle.



This was the city I glimpsed in 2007, in old promotional photos of Manono and Katanga province, published by Belgian mining companies in the 1950s and 60s in the dog days of Belgian rule and on the cusp of independence, to reassure investors, and perhaps themselves, that things wouldn't change with the end of European rule. The sharply focused prints on the glossy pages of the thick brown volume were so at odds with what we hear of Congo now – war, rape and conflict minerals – that it seems almost impossible that at one point this city built on tin was wealthier and more advanced than some European towns wracked by post-war deprivation. The Belgian modernist architects of Manono working in the 40s and 50s, thought that they were building a scientific future full of optimism, progress and hope. Seeing that dreamy hopeful vision expressed in concrete, I wondered what had become of those ideals, of Manono, of Congo?

I came across the photos in the library of my Alma Mater, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, as I was planning a trip to eastern Congo and Lake Tanganyika in 2007. Elections had passed relatively calmly the previous October and peace seemed to be settling, despite some flare-ups around the city of Goma, in the province of North Kivu. I wanted to visit the country as it emerged from conflict, to share in Congo's post-war experience and see where the future might lead – to peace or back to war.

In the map room, I requested all the maps of eastern Congo they had. The librarian brought out the original Royal Geographical Society maps of Lake Tanganyika, drawn by Speke and Burton in 1858 they were stored in a scuffed red paper folder with a drawstring. Then came the Belgian colonial maps, 70s atlases of Zaire, and some military flying charts, dominated by huge white spaces where no surveys had been done.

Eventually, I found Manono, on a bend of one of the main tributaries of the Congo River, in northern Katanga province. It was on its own, far from any other towns, with a little symbol for an airstrip. Several roads led to it but I suspected those to be of little use nowadays. It was hundreds of miles south of the conflict zone in the north and hundreds more miles from the capital of Katanga province, Lubumbashi, on the Zambian border. Lake Tanganyika was far to the east. Manono's only connection to this vast nation, this vast continent, seemed to be the river curving away west to the Atlantic.

I began to ask how I might get there. The more I researched, the less I knew. I tried to find out about the logistics of travelling south along Lake Tanganyika, about the security situation and the likelihood

of finding a boat. No one had any idea. The United Nations had a few patchy reports, the most useful information being that the roads on the maps no longer existed. No foreign journalist had filed from outside the main towns in the conflict zones farther north in recent years. A leading Congo analyst, who had followed the war for years, told me: 'Sorry mate, never been south of Uvira'.

Yet south of Uvira is a vast territory that until very recently had been ravaged by war. Lake Tanganyika is over six hundred miles long and borders the provinces of South Kivu and Katanga, a region larger than France, half a million square kilometres, a huge area of a huge country where the conflict was beginning to recede. I thought that there, in this big silent quarter, must be hundreds of stories waiting to be told. If I could reach Manono, I could find out how the people had fared during the war and catch a glimpse of what peace might look like.

Unlike the foreign correspondents who dash in and out of towns that they can reach by plane when the fighting flares up, I resolved to travel slowly, overland, starting with the warring north-east and moving down the lake through the silent south-eastern quarter of the country, that huge chunk between Lake Tanganyika and the Congo River. And finally, although I had no idea how, I would arrive at the modernist dream on the river under its square mountain of tin: Manono.

‘What you wanna go there for?’



A traditional wooden canoe on the Burundi shore of Lake Tanganyika

‘CONGO, NOW WHAT YOU wanna go there for?’ asks Jim in a drawling, slightly drunken, southern American accent. Jim is a big man. One of the biggest I’ve seen. He used to be in the US Special Forces and says he has fought in every major world conflict since Vietnam, even those in which the US was not involved.

‘Because the United States is never not involved.’

Jim and a dozen other mercenaries are sitting around a low cane table by the hotel pool, enticingly aglow with underwater lamps. If you only saw the men’s feet, in matching white socks and sandals, you might think this a meeting of missionaries. They are here in Bujumbura under contract from the US government, to train the Burundian military. At least that’s what they tell me.

The hotel looks out over Lake Tanganyika; the hills on the opposite shore are Congolese. The silent quarter to which I’m heading extends west through those hills, to Manono and the Congo River and thousands of miles beyond. I have come here *en route* to the conflict zone around Goma, to assess the security situation across the lake. Apparently, there have been clashes recently but no one in Burundi seems to know a thing. After several days knocking around Bujumbura, I haven’t found anyone who’s been in Congo, apart from these guys, but the mercenaries are cagey.

‘Of course, I ain’t never been to the Congo officially but I can tell you, you don’t wanna be goin’ there’, Jim warns.

Even after an armful of beers, these guys don’t let their guard drop. Jim is proud his son has followed in his footsteps by joining the Special Forces but prays that he won’t be sent to Iraq. Ricky, a weathered ex-soldier from Tennessee, shortened his jail term by joining the French Foreign Legion, although he almost regretted his decision when his initiation involved crawling through a cage of baboons with a rucksack stuffed full of bananas. Frank, the quiet one, with narrow spectacles, specializes in ‘technology’. Their world is a scary place, where nothing is certain, life is cheap, and life’s pleasures should be enjoyed when they present themselves.

These are exactly the kind of people I don’t want to meet. They are generous and funny and revealing about their lives, but not about the lives of those I want to talk to – the Congolese. Instead, I am drunk with Americans. There are reasons for that, of course. As Jim says, the US is always involved somehow. Many different histories have brought us to this place, at this moment, all of them involving Congo’s unfortunate geology. Blessed with deposits of ninety per cent of the world’s minerals, Congo will forever be a place where foreign soldiers have to pretend they haven’t been.

A lot is at stake in those dark hills, whose crisp perforated ridge is just visible against the darkening sky and beyond the glow of the pool: gold, tin, coltan, wolframite, manganese, copper and diamonds. The mercenaries know better than me but they don’t ask too many questions about my trip. Instead, they give me a gallon of water and advise me not to trust anyone at all. When I try to disagree, they just smile, equating my innocence either with being European or lacking combat experience, or both.

‘Tell us, Ben, how does it feel to be British?’ asks Ricky, to roars of laughter.



Despite being fascinated as a boy with the river and the jungle, the stories of Livingstone meeting

alien African societies for the first time, and of course Tarzan and Tintin, I had never really considered going to Congo. For all my adult life, the country had been at war. When I left school I went to Africa, to Tanzania, to spend nine months attempting to teach English to very patient and generous students in a quiet, pretty school on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. I first became properly aware of Zaire, as it then was, one morning in April 1994, when the maths teacher with whom I shared a house came running into the living room wrapped in a towel, shaking his large Chinese radio with both hands.

‘Listen, listen, the rivers are running red!’

The Rwandan genocide had begun. Long-standing rivalries and political tensions were distilled into a flammable mist of hate that issued from the extremist Hutu radio stations, first among them the infamous *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*. A tide of Rwandan Tutsi refugees flooded into Tanzania and the rivers that flowed down from the hills of Rwanda into Lake Victoria did indeed turn a shocking red. The Hutu *genocidaires*, the perpetrators, fled the other way, into Zaire, along with two million Hutu refugees, almost a third of Rwanda’s population.

I didn’t know it then but the genocide in Rwanda was to lead directly to the unravelling of Zaire and its rebirth as the war-wracked Democratic Republic of Congo. The slaughter of Tutsis and the mass exodus of Hutus into Congo acted as a catalyst, turning the low-level tension and violence between different Congolese ethnic groups and political factions into what has been called Africa’s first ‘World War’. It was a war that was to last for over a decade, drawing in a dozen foreign countries, making refugees of tens of millions and leaving over four million dead – four times the death toll of the genocide.

Two years later, in 1996, I was back in Tanzania, learning Swahili at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. With my fellow students, I listened in wonder to the news on the radio of the unlikely success of the rebels marching on Kinshasa in Wellington boots. In September, Rwanda invaded Zaire, in hot pursuit of Hutu militias who were rearming in the refugee camps around Goma. But after they had hunted and massacred as many Hutus as they could find, including bombing refugee camps and slaughtering women and children, they didn’t return home. Around half a million refugees were pushed back into Rwanda, while the former Hutu government, army and *Interahamwe* militia, along with another half a million people, fled further west, deeper into Zaire.

Rwanda decided that the leopard-skin-wearing dictator of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, could not be trusted to eliminate the Hutu threat that threatened to fester in his nation’s vast eastern forests. Other regional powers had also tired of Mobutu and plotted his removal. Now was their moment. With foreign help, and the blessing of the United States, Rwanda’s new Tutsi government concocted what looked like an indigenous Congolese rebel movement made up of ethnic Tutsis, which the Rwandan army propelled across the country, almost unopposed, to end Mobutu’s thirty-two-year reign in 1997. The puppet rebel leader who succeeded Mobutu as president and renamed Zaire as the Democratic Republic of Congo, was called Laurent Désiré Kabila.

For a few fragile years, Kabila struggled to get to grips with the wreckage that Mobutu had left behind: an empty treasury, a mining industry that had become the dictator’s personal bank account, a bureaucracy choked with nepotism, a country whose infrastructure was a memory. Kabila tried to assert himself and emerge from Rwanda’s shadow but when he ordered the Rwandan forces to go home, they turned on him.

This second war proved to be much bloodier than the first, as shifting alliances between Congo’s neighbours and the promise of mineral loot caused Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Sudan, Chad and Libya to intervene on different sides. The writer Gérard Prunier likened the Congolese war to the Thirty Years’ War in the seventeenth century, in which Poland was simply the battleground for plunder and the settling of scores among European elites, and nothing to do with the interests of the

people who lived on the land.

Most foreign countries withdrew from Congo following the 'all-inclusive peace agreement', signed in South Africa in December 2002, but the Congolese government did not control the whole country. The number of players had been reduced but the game was not over. The war died down but refused to die out completely as the Congolese national army contended with Mai Mai militias run by local warlords who were out of control, and with invading Rwandan and Ugandan forces who were making too much money out of mining to want to go home.

Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001; his son Joseph, just twenty-nine years old, claimed the presidency. When the transitional government set up by the all-inclusive agreement finally delivered real elections in 2006, Joseph became the first democratically elected leader of Congo since Patrice Lumumba, who had been assassinated in 1961. Holding elections in a country still at war might seem like a foolish idea, and the polls were indeed followed by violence. In the capital, Kinshasa, forces loyal to opposition leader Jean-Pierre Bemba went on the rampage; in the Kivus, Laurent Nkunda, a rebel general who had fought for Rwanda during the war (and who still took his orders from Kigali), went on the offensive.

By 2007 Bemba was in exile, the subject of an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court. Conflict had subsided in most of Congo, although Nkunda was still fighting in North Kivu, the eastern province in which the war had started a decade earlier. I began, after ten years working in different parts of Africa, to think about a visit. Congo remained the most fascinating, beguiling and, I suspected, misunderstood country on the continent and I wanted to see it for myself.



With the mercenaries' admonitions ringing in my ears, I sit on the shore of Lake Tanganyika, staring at the hills of eastern Congo twenty miles away. The mountains look inscrutable; they bring sunset an hour early to Bujumbura, so high into the sky do they reach. The rain that falls on those hills drains into the Lualaba, the Lukuga and the many tributaries that form the mighty Congo River, which cuts across the plains, past Manono and the countless other towns in the interior, away to the west, to the sea.

My stopover in Burundi has yielded precisely nothing about the logistics of going south down the lake and provided zero reassurance about my hunch that an absence of news reports from the remote and seldom-visited areas far away from Goma means an absence of fighting. But who knows? If a gun goes off in a forest and no one hears it, did it really fire? I guess there's nothing for it but to leap and hope, trust the people who live there to feed me, give me shelter and help me along to the next place, contrary to everything the mercenaries say. I shall have to see whether the famous Swahili hospitality has survived the war intact.

The night draws down like a blind; the mountains form a black wall against the fading pinks of the sky. At the foot of the hills, one by one, sprinkles of yellow lights appear. There are people there, somewhere, cooking dinner, putting children to bed, settling in for the night.

Under the volcano



Volcanic debris in the streets of Goma

THE APPROACH TO GOMA airport is over Lake Kivu, so that planes coming in to land skim low over the water and aim straight for the volcano that stands sentinel behind the town. As we perform this manoeuvre, the co-pilot opens the window to decrease cabin pressure, a strange procedure that makes me grip my seat a little more tightly. He then leans out with a video camera to record the approach over the lake. My knuckles whiten. Is this normal? The dashboard labels are handwritten and the passenger cabin is choked with the fumes of aviation fuel. When we're safely down, I joke with the pilot about the ropey plane.

'Are you kidding?' he replies in all seriousness. 'This is the only plane in Goma with an international aviation licence.'

The war started here. The waves of violence that flowed westwards through Congo had their origin in the sinewy history of the Kivu provinces in the far east. Rwanda is just up the hill from the runway. Kigali is fewer than two hundred kilometres away. Like a volcano that has spread its lava across the land but is still smouldering and may yet have another bellyful of fire to share, North Kivu is the caldera and Goma its capital.

I begin to ask around among the journalists and UN staff for anyone with news of Manono and that is how, one night over a tableful of expensive beers, I meet a man shaped like a barrel and with a laugh like a hyena: the journalist and impresario Jean-Baptiste. J-B runs a radio station called Racou FM in Rutshuru, the front line in the conflict zone, just outside Goma but he occasionally travels to Manono to help Radio Manono, the station there. He thinks my plan to travel overland to Manono is the funniest thing since the Congolese government tried to send a rocket – no more than a firework really – into space.

'But there is a plane, an airport, you can fly from here!' he shouts, pressing his sides and slapping his hand on the table. I try to explain the value of travelling slowly, talking to people, understanding the war and its effects.

'Ahh, you're a journalist. Like me', he says, and the smile leaves his face, as though being a journalist were a mournful thing.

'Radio is the spider's web that is holding this country together', he proclaims grandly.

He explains that, in this devastated land, local radio stations are a community's ears, the receivers of news from the rest of the world for people cut off by lack of roads, impossible terrain or the price of petrol and phone calls. And they are its eyes; the beacons of warning or hope that transmit the goings-on in a town to the surrounding countryside, creating and defining an association among those who live within its range. Those who work in radio are the best informed, he says, and he urges me to seek out the radio stations and local journalists to help me as I venture into the more remote parts of the east.

'But first, you must see Goma', he insists.

Goma's hotels are a revolving hot desk for war reporters, most of whom file from here. I had therefore planned to avoid the town but, as J-B points out to me with his wagging finger and cackling laugh, to do so would be like trying to understand the south of England without visiting London or to understand Cuba without seeing Havana. Goma is a carnival of war, money and minerals; the heart of the conflict economy that pumps real blood around the east.

'To truly understand the war', J-B proclaims, 'you need to follow the cash'. And he hands me the

number of a tax collector, Olivier.



Mount Nyiragongo, an active volcano, towers over Goma town. At night the sky above the crater simmers orange and passing clouds catch a spark and burn red. When the national park is not over-run by rebels and when the volcano is not threatening to erupt, it is possible to climb the mountain and camp on its rim, looking down at the boiling rock a thousand feet below.

Life here is precarious, under threat from sky, land and lake, which is full of dissolved methane that has seeped from underwater fissures. Goma is on a geological fault line as well as a political one and this lends the place an edge, an urgency. When I visit, the town is full of rumours about a forthcoming strike against the rebel general, Laurent Nkunda, who, though he fought under the elder Kabila in 1996, has accused his son of corruption and has defied the Congolese army since 2004. The people fear that, if provoked, Nkunda will simply take Goma. It's no wonder that its inhabitants aren't living for tomorrow, they are living for today.

What that means of course depends on who you are. Some are living day to day, while others are spending money like there's no tomorrow. You have to be almost schizophrenic to survive in Goma. For the refugees who pour out of the countryside in waves and wash up on the shores of Lake Kivu, life is miserable, and it is their stories – of rape, violence, helplessness – that most frequently adorn foreign newspapers. 'Rape Epidemic Raises Trauma of War' and 'Congo on the Edge of War' reports in the *New York Times* during my visit to the east. For thousands, life caught between Nkunda and the Congolese army is horrific but for others, war is good for business. The shocking, untold story of Goma is that it is a boom town; the fates of the refugees and the businessmen are bound together. This is what J-B wants me to see and for the next few days he sets out to show me the money trail.

Olivier is an imposing six foot three, with large hands and broad shoulders. He shows up to meet me in a brown and white pin-stripe suit, with oiled hair and pointy brown shoes. His face has been bleached so that it is a shade or two lighter than his hands but not yet the burnt red of the more ambitious bleaching operations favoured by Congolese women. He proves to be the perfect guide. As we stroll around the market he grants nearly everyone a nod, a smile or, for a chosen few, a handshake.

As far as I can understand, the tax system in Goma works as a kind of franchise. Olivier collects a percentage from all the traders, usually negotiable, depending on how well they are doing or how badly he needs the money. He then pays dues to the municipality and stops the local government from preying on the traders. He isn't armed but the arrangement has the feel of a protection racket. He says there is a lot of competition and that it's very hard work, although on today's evidence it is difficult to see where the work part might come in.

Olivier walks me through the closely knit neighbourhood of Goma's commercial district. The streets are a constant mess of puddles and lava – a souvenir of the most recent eruption, in 2002, when Nyiragongo blanketed the town with a sheet of molten rock. Lava flowed straight down the main high street, streaming into shops and setting them on fire. The residents, resourceful as ever, simply graded the rock, made it into a road and moved the shops up a floor.

Behind the high street and between the concrete buildings are tiny wooden shacks with tin roofs, from which an incessant clatter of sewing machines rings out. Brightly-coloured cloth of every possible pattern festoons their outsides. Busy tailors are a sign of prosperity; new clothes are not cheap.

Nor are cars. In Goma, traffic jams are an everyday occurrence; the narrow roads are not wide

enough for all the motorbikes, trucks, black-windowed four-wheel drives and pedestrians that jostle atop the lava. A motorbike totters by, with a twenty-foot-long bowed pole mounted on the back, from which dangle hundreds of loaves of bread. Female porters carry enormous loads on their heads, sweat pouring down their puffing faces. Children sit on oil drums by the roadside, selling dirty red fuel in Coke bottles, and through every crowd thread young men trailing lianas of scratch cards for mobile phones. The town courses with energy, as though the volcano is breathing down everyone's neck.

This is the daily reality for the inhabitants of the war-ravaged east: a permanent state of insecurity that shortens horizons and intensifies the now. Plans beyond a few days ahead in such circumstances are considered foolish and no one can say with any certainty what I might find around the next corner, let alone hundreds of miles south on the road to Manono.

The next day, just as the sky is turning purple, making the volcano loom larger than ever in the dusk, I get a phone call. It's J-B.

'We're going dancing. Come to the stadium, now', he says.

I find J-B in an Internet café built into the side of the *stade de l'unité*, along with three other journalist colleagues, all desperately filing their stories by the light of a single dirty bulb. We must queue to cross the road on a set of stepping stones that span the giant puddles. When we get to the other side J-B knocks on the door of what looks like a cupboard. Two narrow shutters open to reveal a shop selling a mix of candles, batteries, sweets and nylon underwear; the usual. Two men are counting large amounts of dollars on the top of a wooden box.

'My wife's family', announces J-B.

The men look up and nod while their fingers continue fluttering among the notes, unconcerned. We leave our bags there for safekeeping and cross the stepping stones back to Nova, J-B's favourite bar. It is only seven o'clock on a Friday night but the place is jumping with people. They are dancing to music: *bolingo*.

Bolingo, sometimes called *ndombolo*, is derived from soukous, Congo's signature guitar-driven music that sprang from the ubiquitous 'rumba' of the 30s and 40s. It's a six-eight shuffle, speeded up and strung together with fast, high and ever-so-sweet melodic guitar and accompanied by what can only be described as crooning. 'Bolingo' means 'I love you' in Lingala, the Bantu language widely spoken in Congo, and is the subject of so many of the songs that the term came to denote the music itself.

The song blaring through Nova changes, and an entire table of well-dressed, middle-aged people leap to their feet, sending drinks and chairs flying. On the dance floor men in suits and women in fine fabrics grab each other and grind manically.

A succession of suitors comes to chat to J-B. Pierre, a lawyer with gold cufflinks and a huge Rolex, says Goma's frantic air is caused by money. He complains that the booming economy has accelerated the decline of the judicial system. It has become, he says, 'a catastrophe'. Previously, the judges wanted one hundred dollars for a decision; now they want five hundred dollars, even a thousand. The more they eat the more they want.

'The war here is about money, too. Tribalism is not the main problem in Congo – it is money of all colours', he says.

Two government men in smart trousers and regulation pointy shoes and gold watches stay longer than the rest. They are wearing 'Save the Gorilla' t-shirts: NGO chic. J-B is wearing one stamped MONUC – the ultimate status symbol in Goma, the brand of the UN peacekeepers.

I ask one of the government men about taxes and why Congo doesn't do more to curb the smuggling of tin, gold and timber over the border into Rwanda, a trade that loses the national treasury millions of dollars a year and fuels the continuing conflict. He can't see the problem. Goma is thriving, people are working, life is good. A beaming finger waves at the people dancing violently and with hot boozy breath he croaks 'do these people think there is a war on?'



It's getting dark when I leave. I retrieve my bag and walk down the road, searching for a taxi or a moped. I must look a little forlorn standing in the shadows of the tall dark trees, because a car's headlights pick me out and a battered Toyota comes into view and crunches to a halt. Three young men peer out and offer me a lift. They are freelance tax collectors, like Olivier, collecting levies on coltan, tin, petrol and shops. They think I am a businessman. A white man not working for a charity in Goma must be after money, they say, as if there is no other reason to be here.

'A tourist? No. That's not possible. You are researching business, mining, aviation, what is it?'

I try to assure them otherwise but they are unconvinced. They are full of optimism at the money to be made in Goma, if only one had some capital and they cannot believe that I don't want to go into business with them.

'That's a shame. If you want to do petrol business here we could really talk, *vraiment!* Think about it, it's a great business', says one.

They propose that I would import the petrol from Rwanda or Uganda and they would take care of all the paperwork. Their terms are vague: 'There would be some that goes to the government, and then there is our discussion...'

The biggest opportunities, according to them, are in petrol and tin, and tin is the best bet by far. Tin is a large part of what keeps Goma afloat, and a whole division of the army busy in mining it. Nearly all that tin comes from one mine in North Kivu, Bisiye.

Bisiye has long since taken from Manono the mantle of Congo's largest tin mine. But whereas Manono was a wonder of mechanisation and heavy industry, a model of twentieth-century technical know-how, its twenty-first-century counterpart represents a step backwards: thousands of miners claw ore out of the mud with their bare hands. Comparing the new world to the old seems a necessary part of my trip. So, before I turn south, it is to Bisiye that I resolve to go next.

Meeting the colonel



Calculating the price of conflict minerals

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