

# CONGO'S DAILY BLOOD

*Ruminations from a failed state*

By Bryan Mealer

**O**n some nights Dave and I would sit around over beers and discuss the depression, how living alone on this river, in this steaming mess of a city, made you forget you had the power to leave. The crumbled roads out of town only led to other choking cities with little to offer, or simply turned wild and melted back into the bush. The red-eye to Europe lifted off every night but never truly took you away. The key to maintaining your sanity in this place was to get out whenever possible, and most of the *mundes* did. Congo's plentitude of horror and paranoia was the burden we chose to drag behind us, for that was our job. But when you stayed too long, you left yourself open, allowing the ghosts, rumors, and scary sounds that inhabit the rainy nights to climb up your neck.

As wire-agency reporters based in Kinshasa, Dave and I agreed that busy weeks saved us from this unhappy end. You get one or two stories in the morning and ride the wave through the afternoon, just in time for sundowners or a hearty dinner to

put you off to bed. Slow weeks lifted the shield and left you suddenly vulnerable, pacing your bedroom with all the murders, disease, and gross mutilation of the past weeks stirring around in the air-conditioning, struggling to make sense of themselves.

The depression made you paranoid and suspicious, made you more susceptible to the fevers and myriad pestilence that crawled out of the earth. It kept you out at degenerate nightclubs until the sun rose over the palms, and it was on one of these nights that we found ourselves in the VIP Saloon.

The bar was just off Kinshasa's main boulevard, and it was usually filled by midnight with shifty Lebanese diamond dealers, French and Belgian mercenaries, and the few Congolese who could afford the \$5 beers and sodas.

We ordered two bottles of local Skol at the long, lamp-lit bar and stared out onto the floor, where long-legged Congolese prostitutes in miniskirts and flame-red boots watched themselves dance in the wall of mirrors. The Euro pop on the speakers was loud and monotonous but



*Bryan Mealer's previous article on Congo, "In the Valley of the Gun," appeared in the May 2004 issue of Harper's Magazine.*

punchy enough to lift us from our doldrums.

We'd suffered four days with no stories, and neither of us had really left our apartment. We'd enjoyed a nice run before hitting the current slump. In mid-March, United Nations humanitarian chief Jan Egeland had announced that Congo had become "the world's worst humanitarian crisis," a disaster that was being virtually ignored by the rest of the world.

Dave and I took this as fantastic news, because it meant we'd somehow edged out the tsunami in Asia and the genocide in Sudan in terms of absolute misery. The announcement did wonders for getting my stories printed in American papers. If the story had a heady lead of cannibalism, endangered gorillas, or little girls being raped with machetes, then it might have big enough wings to survive its journey across the Atlantic. Everything else was like punting in a hailstorm. Stories left the desk and crashed straight into a watery grave, where a half-century of dispatches of both-ersome African despair boils at the bottom.

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But now our moment had passed once again, and we were left restless and manic.

Across the bar at VIP, a group of Belgian businessmen sipped J&B while bar girls sat like smiling mannequins in their laps. Two Germans stood in the far corner, twitchy and bug-eyed, taking turns doing bumps of cocaine in the bathroom.

Dave had just returned from an assignment across the river in Congo-Brazzaville, where notorious Ninja rebels had ambushed his convoy. No one had been hurt, but a dope-crazed Ninja had jumped into Dave's truck, held two grenades to his head, and stolen his cherished jungle boots.

"Two grenades in one hand, and a bloody joint between his fingers," he howled, demonstrating with a cigarette. We laughed about it now over beers. Sometimes even the most rotten assignments seemed like holidays once we got back to Kinshasa.

"The U.N.'s saying the Mai Mai are sporting fetuses around their necks," he said.

"Oh, lovely. I hear the Lendu wear human kidneys on their bandoliers. I think I saw it once."

"I say we round up a few for Fashion Week, mate. Do they allow Kalashnikovs on the runway?"

It was our usual banter, tasteless and maybe a little too loud. But something about it must've

struck a nerve in Dave, who went quiet for a minute, then said: "I haven't written one story in six months where someone didn't die."

"Same here," I answered. "I'm thinking of counting all the dead people in mine."

I wonder how many I'll get."

**Y**ou could never count all of Congo's dead, the way they kept piling up. The country is slowly emerging from a five-year war that has killed 4 million people, mostly from war-induced sickness and hunger, and aid groups estimate 1,200 people still die every day. The war drew in seven African armies at its peak, and helped create and maintain tens of thousands of militiamen who still live by the gun, killing and maiming at will. The militias have all but commandeered the eastern half of the country—rich in timber, gold, diamonds, and coltan—which they've divided into personal fiefdoms at the expense of the population.

Near the eastern border with Rwanda, packs of Hutu rebels survive in the forests only by looting. These rebels, who fled into Congo after participating in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, control huge swaths of jungle too dangerous for U.N. and Congolese soldiers to police. They carry out regular massacres and are known for rounding up a village's women and gang-raping them while family members are forced to watch. Farther north, near the Ugandan border, other militias simply exterminate everything alive, then loot and burn what's left. Often these militias butcher the dead on the battle floor and feast on hearts and livers, both as ceremony and as a tactic of cold intimidation. Its effectiveness is superb.

Maj. Gen. Patrick Cammaert knew all of this too well, and more. He sat in the posh, flower-decked bar of a hotel in Bukavu, the eastern city on the Rwandan border that had become the U.N.'s command post in dealing with the Hutu rebels. The Dutch general was in charge of more than 14,000 peacekeepers in eastern Congo, stretching from the Ugandan border to the southern province of Katanga, and there was never a moment when his command wasn't hot.

It was early June, and Cammaert had just returned from the dense forests of the South Kivu territory, where Hutu rebels had just sliced up the village of Nindja, hacking off the hands and feet of their victims and removing their kidneys. The Hutu had been assisted by Rasta gunmen, an even more macabre band of killers consisting of Mai Mai militia, Hutu, and renegade Congolese soldiers. During the raid, Rastas had kidnapped fifty young girls, who were most likely taken to mountain camps and raped day after day before being left for dead. Panicked villagers had fled into the mountains, where many were likely to die from exposure and disease. The general was trying to decide whether to send troops into the



jungles to protect the population and how to keep his men from being ambushed.

The general removed his blue beret and rubbed his temples. He'd toured the scene of the killings. "The brutality, it's beyond comprehension," he said, the words trailing off. "Innocent kids, two years old, just *beaten* to pulp."

No one at the U.N. had any idea how deep the evil ran in the jungles. The tiny U.N. mission that began in 1999 with 90 staffers observing a rebel cease-fire had since grown by sheer necessity to encompass much of the country's infrastructure. Congo is now the U.N.'s largest, most expensive mission, with 16,700 peacekeepers and a combined annual budget of nearly \$2 billion. Congo's peacekeepers, along with U.N. agencies, have been saddled with trying to eradicate some 20,000 militiamen in the east, while at the same time trying to assist more than 2 million people displaced as a result of war and the ongoing raids. More recently, they've attempted to midwife a democracy by arranging elections in a country three times the size of Texas, a country lacking roads, electricity, telephones, and local governments. Battling the various militias while planning elections in Congo has unexpectedly become the single most ambitious project the world body has undertaken in its sixty-one-year history.

What was heavy on the general's mind that night in Bukavu was how to purge 10,000 Hutu and Rasta fighters from the east, a mandatory assignment before elections could take place. Cammaert had already lost twelve peacekeepers

in combat in the northeastern hills this year, and there the terrain was wide open and ideal for open-ended assaults. The mountains and jungles near Rwanda were an altogether different war zone, where the probability for ambush was extremely high. But the general had just pulled a brilliant maneuver, convincing the U.N. brass to bring in units of Guatemalan special forces, American-trained jungle fighters who could creep through the dense terrain to stage surgical strikes on unsuspecting Hutu. Once the rebels were flushed into open territory, MI-25 attack helicopters could dispatch them.\*

It was certainly one of the most ingenious moves the U.N. had managed, but it also was possibly one of its worst mistakes. The decorated general, who'd just served as Kofi Annan's top military adviser in New York, now found himself in a lead role in Congo's confusing nightmare. And Cammaert had his own bad dream, the one in which he's the U.N. commander in the world's next Mogadishu. "I'm losing sleep," he said, staring off into nothing. "I can't stop thinking about those forests."

**N**owhere has the mettle of U.N. peacekeepers been tested more than in northeast Ituri

\* On January 23, 2006, eight of the Guatemalan special forces peacekeepers were killed in an ambush near the northeastern border with Sudan. The attack was carried out by rebels from Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army who'd recently crossed into Congo.

province, where raids and fighting between ethnic Hema and Lendu militias have killed more than 60,000 people since 1999. Trained and armed by both Uganda and Rwanda during Congo's war, the two militias routinely battle for control over lucrative trade routes across Lake Albert and for concessions on area gold mines. Over the years, Ituri, like the rest of eastern Congo, has become the gun dump of the world, with foreign businessmen funneling Cold War-era weapons and heavy artillery to militia leaders through Uganda.



On February 25, 2005, near a tiny village called Kafe, a gang of Lendu militiamen ambushed a foot patrol of Bangladeshi peacekeepers and killed nine. During the well-coordinated attack, the other peacekeepers fled the scene, and the Lendu stripped the dead U.N. soldiers' uniforms and equipment. The peacekeepers had been sent to Kafe—part of a vast, hill-swept territory called Djugu—in late January to protect more than 100,000 people who'd fled battles between Hema and Lendu fighters over taxation rights to the nearby lake. The Lendu staged a series of looting raids on Hema villages, punctuating their attacks by burning down homes and even eating some of the dead. The villagers, who'd managed harrowing escapes from these attacks, walked dozens of miles to four separate camps in the remote hills, and once there started dying by the hundreds from cholera, dysentery, and measles.

In late March, I boarded a U.N. flight for Bunia, the capital of the Ituri province and headquarters for the 5,000-strong U.N. Ituri Brigade. One week after the ambush, peacekeepers gunned down some sixty Lendu fighters using armored vehicles and MI-25 attack helicopters. The assault was led by Pakistani ground troops, hardened from battling Al Qaeda in the mountains of Pakistan, and as-

sisted by Indian helicopter pilots. Locked in a years-long face-off on their own borders, the two armies now combined to create a rolling killing machine along the bloody hills of eastern Congo.

A rush of cold nostalgia settled in my chest when I stepped off the plane at the Bunia airport. I'd come here for the first time in April 2003, as a freelancer, to cover a massacre by Lendu militia in the distant hills, only to be caught in another killing spree right here in town. I'd stayed in Bunia close to a month while the Ugandan

army prepared to withdraw after five years of fighting their war. During those weeks, the Lendu and Hema battled the army daily with mortars and heavy machine guns, waiting to ravage the town once the troops had gone. I'd been caught in some fierce gunfights on these dusty streets and experienced mortal fear for the first time in my life. During that time, only a few hundred U.N. peacekeepers were in Bunia, and their mandate forbade them from protecting civilians. Just when it was almost too late, I'd managed to evacuate myself on the last Ugandan plane out of Congo, and that night the town fell. I returned nine days later to find the town in ruins and controlled by drunken child soldiers. Mangled bodies littered the streets and rotted in the equatorial sun, and every morning I watched as they were torn apart by wild dogs. Friends and contacts had disappeared or been killed. Nothing was the same in Bunia, and since then nothing has really been the same for me.

I left Africa several months later. Five hundred people had been slaughtered that week, and the U.N. had done nothing. Bunia had been a blip on the news radar, and back in New York no one seemed to know anything about it. For a year I sat with those faces, the bloated bodies, the dogs, and the smell, and never gave them a good reason for dying. All the gangsterism and hatred became tangled into a question I couldn't resolve. So when I was offered a job as Congo correspondent for the Associated Press, I took it, hoping that maybe I'd come to understand what I'd missed before. I wasn't out to change anything, I wasn't that pompous. But it had been my story, it was now part of me, and I had to bring the

terrible tale to a conclusion that at least made some kind of sense.

**B**unia had been drastically transformed since I'd seen it last. The U.N. mission had tripled in size, and there were no longer any teenage soldiers,

in wigs and painted fingernails, prowling the streets with rocket launchers. Several new restaurants and hotels had opened, including an enterprising Indian joint at the Hotel Ituri that catered to Indian and Bangladeshi troops, plus the massive influx of international press and foreign aid workers. There was a lopsided pool table in the bar of the Indian restaurant, and every night a dozen Italian aid workers would line up to play two hefty Congolese girls who'd established themselves as local sharks. The two girls played for bottles of beer, knocking back one after another, yet they never weaved or staggered, and I never saw them lose. The Italian men wore their hair long and kept it clean and bouncy, even in Bunia's thick dust and heat. They wore tight designer jeans and pointy leather shoes and thundered through town on silver Ducatis, which they had shipped in from Italy. The Italian women were young and loud, and would fall down drunk in front of tables of staring Congolese.

I was having a beer in the restaurant one night with an old friend, a hardened U.N. logistics officer who'd been through the war, seen enough gore to fuel a lifetime of nightmares, and had even seen arrows shot through his truck during the siege. We watched the aid workers spilling their drinks and running into tables. "Look what's happened to this town," the officer said, his face twisted in disgust. "These kids don't have a fucking clue what happened here." Bunia had also become a backwater feeding ground for cowboy journalists looking for serious action. You'd see them at dinner, outfitted with elaborate GPS devices and dressed in the latest Columbia rip-away pants, talking about cannibals, gun-fights, and maximum coverage. The ones who rolled in hot from New York were the best, like a photographer whose business cards were shaped like dog tags, metal and all. One day he sat on the steps of his hotel smoking cigarettes, cursing a press officer at the U.N. because she wouldn't let him embed with peacekeepers like he'd done in Iraq. He'd just come back from one of the displaced camps in Djugu, where he'd photographed kids dying from cholera and measles. "The light," he said, "was just *fantastic*."

A few days later I landed a seat on a U.N. chopper that was taking Ross Mountain, the U.N. deputy in charge of Congo, on a tour of three of Djugu's camps, where more than 75,000 people now stayed. Mountain had served as Kofi

Annan's special representative in Iraq through October 2004, before arriving in Kinshasa in December. He was a straight-talking Kiwi who never tried to sugarcoat the U.N.'s mistakes or bad judgment calls, and there'd been many. Every week Mountain would take trips into the thick of Congo's misery to get a look for himself, and this week he'd asked to see the great catastrophe of Ituri.

Staring down from a chopper over eastern Congo was like glimpsing a prototype of Earth during the first days of creation. *Where are all the people?* I always wondered from my high seat, usually en route to some backwater camp where war and sickness had already claimed them before they ever had

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a chance to live. The camp in Tche was located forty miles north of Bunia amid a panorama of sweeping, green hills. About 25,000 people had congregated in the crook of a narrow valley, which quickly became an ideal container for disease. At least twenty kids were dropping every day from measles and drinking dirty water, and groups like

Médecins Sans Frontières were working without sleep just to slow down the death rate. About 350 Pakistani peacekeepers were dug into the valley and had brought tons of steel and firepower, but it wasn't enough to stop kids wasting away from diarrhea.

The helicopter landing zone was on a ridgeline overlooking the camp, and as we approached I could see that the Pakistanis had arranged some sort of welcoming ceremony nearby for the guests. The camp had also spread up onto the ridge, and hundreds of its ragged and desperate residents stood below eagerly watching the helicopter

land. But as we touched down, the rotor wash from the chopper blades blew the thatched roofs off several huts and sent a wall of red, stinging sand into the crowd. Children screamed and scattered in all directions. The plastic tables and chairs meant for our ceremony sailed through the air and slammed into people's backs,



Photograph of a woman who was attacked by Lendu forces, Ituri province © Marcus Bleasdale/IPG 2003

knocking them over. As the wheels bounced and settled, someone from Mountain's entourage shook his head and yelled, "Jesus Christ, what have we done?"

The people had returned when I stepped out of the chopper. Some now stood pressed together behind a high wall of razor wire, while others perched in trees, watching and waiting. The eyes stopped us dead, even after the blades stopped spinning. We stood frozen in the awkward silence. But Mountain broke the ice for all of us. "My God," he gasped, walking forward, "look at all these kids who aren't in school." A Pakistani colonel ferried off Mountain and his staff, so I headed down into the camp to get my story. Amid the haze of cooking fires and strange morning shadows, I saw Johnny Ngure, my old translator from Bunia, who'd lived through the war and was now a U.N. interpreter. I ran over and tackled him with a giant bear hug. He had saved my skin several times during those bad weeks in

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Bunia, and I hadn't seen him since. I immediately enlisted him to translate Swahili for me, and we made our way through the camp, speaking to people who'd escaped the village raids with little but their lives. One man who still stands out in my mind was named Ali Mohammed. He'd walked outside his hut in Loga just in time to watch Lendu teenagers butcher his mother and two children with machetes. He'd escaped by throwing himself down a mountain and tumbling to the bottom. He was still dressed in the long, torn nightgown he'd been wearing during the first shots of the raid, now his only material possession. I didn't have time for many interviews. The chopper stayed no longer than thirty minutes in each camp, long enough for Mountain and his staff to speak with aid workers and military personnel, get off some snapshots, and declare that, yes, this was *indeed* the world's worst humanitarian crisis. We then climbed back into the bird, fired up the blades, and sailed off again like a white ghost over the hills.

A week later, U.N. peacekeepers pulled out of the camps at Tche, Gina, Tchomia, and Kafe, leaving more than 100,000 people in the hands of poorly paid, ill-equipped Congolese soldiers, who promptly began looting the tents as soon as

the blue helmets were out of sight. A cholera epidemic had already descended on two camps, so when hundreds of people fled the marauding troops, many also carried their deaths with them into the tall grass.

**T**he March operation in Loga—when peacekeepers killed around sixty fighters—had also resulted in a number of civilian deaths, according to villagers. Peacekeepers had taken small-arms fire as they'd approached a crowded market and responded by pounding the market with mortars, while gunships hovered overhead and emptied their cannons. The militia had used the market vendors as human shields, the U.N. said, and women and children were also seen firing guns. As with most peacekeeping operations, there was no way to confirm the U.N.'s information. In fact, most of our days were spent trying to decipher the official sludge that slid from under the door of the U.N. headquarters and still remain credible. To sell the world body's new method of peace enforcing to the world press, the U.N. relied on Kemal Saiki, a short, chain-smoking Algerian with a hard-on for war. Saiki was a tough talker who routinely issued threats and ultimatums to the militias from his air-conditioned office 900 miles away, a real Sgt. Slaughter for the struggling blue helmets. A former spokesman for OPEC, Saiki was better than past public information officers the U.N. had employed. But still, when it came down to numbers and hard facts, you often filed at your own risk.

One Friday night I'd called Saiki to follow up on a raid that had begun that morning south of Bunia. The blue helmets were tearing down another Lendu camp, and we knew they'd made contact.

"How many dead?" I asked.

"Eighteen casualties," he said.

"No, I mean dead. How many militia killed?"

"Yeah, eighteen," he said. "Eighteen fatalities."

I ran with the story. Hours later, Dave called and said he got thirty-eight dead, and Radio France International was reporting ten, all from different sources within the U.N. At the weekly press conference days later, Dave and I cornered Saiki to get an explanation.

"Look, we're all getting different numbers," I said. "Which is it: eighteen, thirty-eight, or ten?"

"It's eighteen," he said. He then leaned in and whispered, "Look, what really happened was the helicopter fired eighteen shots, and it got mistaken for eighteen *shot*. Get me? We don't really know."

"But you told me eighteen," I said.

"Yeah, or it was eighteen militia standing on the roof of a house when the helicopter released its rockets. The roof collapsed, the people disappeared. Boom. Eighteen."



He pulled out a cigarette and made his way to the door.

“Why are you so obsessed with death counts?” he said. “This isn’t Vietnam.”

**N**ews of the dead came in several ways, and sometimes when you wanted it least—two beers into the night after filing all day, or just when you reached a restaurant and put in your order. If Dave was there, and it was something small like a plane crash (Soviet-era Antonovs fell out of the sky in Congo nearly weekly), we’d exchange a haggard look and start making deals. “If you wait, I’ll wait,” we’d say, just to finish our food like normal people. We never waited long; the desk and telephone controlled us like tin men. But while we sat there with a mouthful of food, the dead now among us to sort out, one of us would shoot a glance and repeat our sacred news-grunt mantra: “If we don’t file, it doesn’t exist.”

Many reports of attacks, rapes, and massacres came through confidential sources within the U.N., and to them from humanitarian officers, local government officials, or residents—often those who’d escaped attacks and then walked several days with children and festering wounds to a military post. I had a contact within the U.N. who shuttled information to me through instant messaging, usually blood-soaked with raunch when it flashed my screen: *Hear about the attack near Tchomia? Eighteen Hema lost their livers.* Most often the jokes came out of boredom or those dark recesses where coping mechanisms had terribly malfunctioned after years of being in the bad bush: *Have you thought much about the Ituri cook-*

*book? I have an addition: stewed hearts of Hema in mother’s milk. Or perhaps kidney brochettes with peacekeeper pie?*

We all lived our jobs, and the jokes were a good way to keep cocktail parties from becoming mired in gossip or humanitarian jargon. If some U.N. brass was nearby, not part of our clique, we’d take off our shoes and start measuring the size of our toes, or launch into make-believe Rambo odysseys of Ross Mountain (whom some had nicknamed “Mohammed”) that usually began with the deputy U.N. chief losing his mind on voodoo cocaine and disappearing into the jungle like Kurtz, naked and smeared in mud, whispering to his knife, “To kill a Rasta, one must become a Rasta.” With my contact in the U.N., things were never serious, even on those rare occasions when I desperately wanted them to be. During one of those unrelenting weeks of sitting in Kinshasa while filing daily blood from the east, hardly ever leaving the house, I’d said something that probably came off as naive, about never having time to write positive, hopeful stories. The reply was quick and barbed: “There aren’t any happy stories here, pal,” the message read. “This place is a Viking holiday, all blood, rape, and gore.”

**G**radually the cocktail and dinner parties, and later our lives in general, became weighted down by one encompassing subject: June 30, 2005, the day many predicted Kinshasa would crumble in a wave of blood and terror. The date marked the end of the country’s transitional government, which had been agreed upon in 2003,

at the end of the war, by government and rebels. The agreement also made clear that June 30 must also be the date of the presidential election—the first in Congo since the country gained independence from Belgium in 1960.

Anyone expecting real elections in June was living a fantasy. The government was in constant disorder, gutted by corruption and allegiances that fell alongside Congo's four vice presidents, two of whom were former rebel leaders who'd been integrated into the postwar, power-sharing government. President Joseph Kabila had come to power after his father (who'd overthrown the pink-champagne-sipping dictator Mobutu Sese Seko) was assassinated by his own bodyguard in 2001, and he immediately made strides in ending the war, gaining respect from Western leaders. But the president remained surrounded

back in January had sparked massive rioting in the capital that ended when police opened fire into the crowds. I'd only been in town a couple of weeks and didn't venture out into the mobs alone, knowing how easy it would have been for one kid to smash a rock in my face and for me to be lost forever underfoot. But after the official April declaration, rumors quickly spread that June 30 would be much worse, that crazy mobs would run through the streets, and soldiers would be leading the parade of rape and pillage. It was billed as "Congo's apocalypse," a Y2K in the heart of darkness that would terminate in a rain of bullets and machete blades, and I knew I'd be right at the core with no place to hide.

The June 30 fear slowly crept its way into the expat community. Aside from U.N. and humanitarian staff, Kinshasa had many Belgians



by men with agendas, lawmakers with too much money and power to lose in a transparent, corruption-free state. As one American diplomat once told me, "Kabila is alone in a lake of piranhas. He knows the second he puts the first toe in, his whole body will follow."

Decades of corruption and dirty politics, militia attacks in the east, no infrastructure, and two years of foot-dragging by the administration had sucked dry any hope of democracy. So as expected, in late April of 2005, the government extended the transitional government and delayed elections until the spring of 2006.

The first hint of an election postponement

who'd stuck around after independence, having invested everything in a falling star. There were Lebanese, who owned much of the city's commercial center, and Indians, who were booted out by Mobutu in the 1960s and returned after his fall.

The basis of the expats' fear was rooted in *les pillages* of the '90s, three instances when soldiers and residents had grown so tired of Mobutu's neglect and lies that they looted for days, literally stealing the roads from underneath the city's feet. The infrastructure that hadn't withered away from decay was stripped and sold. Government offices still bore the scars where appliances had



been ripped from their foundations and light fixtures had been reduced to dangling wires and crumbling plasterboard. Kinshasa's main post office hasn't received mail in years, but dozens of employees still turn up for work every day, hoping to be paid. Most of the city remains without regular water or electricity, and jobs are a distant memory, reserved mostly for those with family connections or a hand in the government pie. Most streets run with sewage that breeds the malaria that kills countless children in the city.

We'd sit around and listen to the old hands tell about the old days, about watching the city disappear piece by piece in the gunfire and looting while they bravely fought to maintain their small stake. "There were two days between the time Mobutu fled in 1997 and Kabila's rebels advanced onto Kinshasa," my friend Moi would tell us. He was a Congolese businessman married to a beautiful Polish woman, and they'd lived in a large house on the outskirts of town. The city had gone mad after Mobutu's retreat, with ravenous mobs of residents and soldiers looting every quarter. For two days, Moi sat on his roof with a pump shotgun and a case of shells, scattering the crowds that gathered at his gate. Government soldiers would cruise by and listen for the gun blast; the heavier the weapon, the better the chance that they'd keep going. Other security forces raced down the block, gunning down looters and lining up bodies on the roadside. While Moi blasted away on the roof, his wife, Nesh, kept the NBA playoffs on the television below, poking her head out the window every half hour to announce the score. "I was up there trying to save our house," he'd say, "and there was Nesh yelling, 'HEAT 67, KNICKS 55.' BOOM! BOOM!"

Toward the end of April, Congo's army chief of staff appeared on state television to announce something that had alarmed him. Businesses throughout the city were reporting mass buyouts of machetes, and he suspected the surge in sales had something to do with June 30 plans. Average Congolese were buying the Tramontina blades as fast as shop owners stocked them on the shelves, he said, and someone in power was behind their distribution. The main opposition party was vowing to shut down the streets on June 30 with thousands of supporters, but even they denied distributing weapons. I was never able to confirm the chief of staff's claim, but it was bone-chilling nonetheless.

The machete scare was made worse by a spate of grotesque murders throughout Kinshasa's Lingwala slum. People started turning up dead with their legs, heads, arms, and even lips missing. Residents started blaming the killings on the mysterious "Kata-Kata," which means "cut-cut" in local Lingala. Kata-Kata was one of several things, or many things all together: Angolan sol-

diers dressed in Congolese uniforms, Tanzanian and Zambian agents who'd come to overthrow the government, or perhaps members of Kabila's presidential guard, who were killing people to deter protests on June 30. A few even speculated that Kata-Kata was some kind of mutant werewolf who'd crawled out of the forest, an agent of the devil who'd arrived as a harbinger of the end of days. In a country ravaged from a century of colonial depredation, followed by coups, assassinations, and two invasions by outside armies, Kata-Kata came to represent Congo's deep psychological wound, and became the logic

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behind everything bad that happened. Rush hour suddenly started two hours earlier because residents didn't want to be caught out after dark. Gas stations and many other businesses also closed earlier, causing a backup of taxis that left hundreds of terrified people still stranded as the sun went down. Ask someone what was happening, and they'd tell you: *C'est Kata-Kata*.

After a pregnant woman was found butchered in the weeds, my housekeeper, Kasango, asked for his entire month's salary to buy a television. I refused again and again, hating the idea of his family not eating for weeks because Kasango wanted to watch TV. I'd say something callous like, "You can't eat a television!" and he'd reply, "*Patron, c'est Kata-Kata*." I finally gave him the money, discovering only later that the TV wasn't for him but for his daughter, who walked two miles every night to watch television at a friend's house. Buying the television was Kasango's way of keeping her safe at home.

The fear began trickling down into every stratum of society, affecting both the rich and the poor, those with everything and those with nothing to lose. The multitude of Kinshasa's beggars suddenly turned more violent in their panhandling, and friends began reporting mobs of street kids (or *shegue*) jumping onto their cars and pounding the windshields until each kid was paid. I also noticed the change in Kinshasa's roving bands of cripples, who already formed one of the toughest and meanest gangs in the city. Kinshasa was full of cripples: you'd see them every day asking for money in traffic—men with legs corkscrewed behind their backs from polio; war vets missing shoulders, legs, and arms; blind women being led from car to car by ragtag *shegue*. They congregat-

ed on street corners and under shade trees with their wheelchairs and hand-pedaled carts, a mass of shining steel like freaky Hells Angels. They'd gather in front of businesses, thirty and forty at a time, and demand money. If the owner refused, the mob would hurl bricks through windows and smash cars with steel pipes. Many business owners paid them off, which also gave their stores protection from thieves and miscreants.

I was having breakfast at the Hotel Fontana when they staged a small uprising against two police officers. One of the cops had stolen money from a young, legless man earlier in the day, so the beggar had collected his pals to get some payback. Within ten minutes, about forty people had gathered against a concrete wall across the street. They were screaming and jabbing their fingers toward the cops, really threatening trouble. Finally the legless man took it alone. With powerful arms, he thrust his torso forward across the dirt road and reached the cop in seconds. The cop saw him coming, threw his AK-47 behind his shoulder, and braced himself, terrified. The legless man lurched forward, wrapped his arms around the officer's shins, and held on. The cop tumbled onto his back, reaching up to his buddy with pure animal fear.

*The desperation could stay pure for only so long before it soured into panic and rage, which was the next logical step for this place*

Once the officer was down, ten more cripples pounced on him, pelting him with punches and fistfuls of gravel. The Indian manager of the hotel ran out and pulled the gate closed, fearing a riot, shouting "Oh God, not again." The restaurant was filled with gruff U.N. officers and Polish U.N. civilian cops, who stood with me at the window and watched the poor guy try to save himself. All he had to do was start smashing skulls with his rifle butt or use his boots. But a dozen pairs of U.N. eyes were on him, and about twenty more wheelchairs were rolling across the street to get a piece.

"Maybe someone should do something," one of the men said.

"Nah," said another, closing the drapes. "These assholes have it coming."

**W**hile the Congolese waited for some unknown evil to land on June 30, the U.N. was nailing down contingency plans for an all-out collapse. Warehouses and empty offices were being equipped with cots and a week's supply of food to hold more than 1,000 expats. Secret messages were being encod-

ed into popular U.N. Radio Okapi broadcasts, giving U.N. officers instruction on riots and crowd gatherings. The U.N. also staged an ambitious weekend evacuation drill for hundreds of its staff, only to realize a week later that they'd forgotten to inform fifty-five ranking officers. It was no secret to the Congolese that *mundeles* could leave when things got bad, and they hardly trusted the U.N. to save them from marauding soldiers. Many Congolese thought the U.N. staffers only wanted to collect their big salaries and \$1,000 per month in "hazard pay," and to hell with the rest. And at the end of the day, weren't we all U.N.? Why else would a *mundele* be in Congo other than to preach or to make a profit?

As June 30 approached, I began buying dozens of cans of tuna and sardines, 20-gallon jugs of water, and extra fuel for the generator, in the event that I was trapped at home while the streets burned outside. I also bought water jugs for Kasango and Eddy, my Congolese colleague, and gave them money for emergencies, but it didn't change the realities of who would stay and who would get ferried away in an armored vehicle. All the expats were stocking up on supplies or finding ways out, but any Congolese on the streets would tell you, "Yeah, I'd love to buy more bread, but who's got the money for that?"

The desperation could stay pure for only so long before it soured into panic and rage, which was the next logical step for this place. I'd look at the people on the boulevard and wonder when that last straw would break. In the end, we wondered, what would spark the madness? A soldier shooting someone? Some kind of announcement on the radio? A coup? And how bad would it get? I'd look at the people and wonder quietly, *Will it be you? Or you?* The desperation shined on the faces of the street kids when they suddenly appeared in your open window, tugging at your arm and moaning in that put-on devil voice, "Boss, boss, j'ai faim, boss, boss." It was in the policemen who guarded the restaurant when you stumbled out drunk, fumbling for your cigarettes. It was in the eyes of the peanut sellers, the old mamas painting stripes on the road, the countless men lined up under the shade without a job or a pot to piss in, watching you, *le blanc*, walk down the boulevard with your notebook and pen, thinking to themselves, "\$5,000 a month. You fucking U.N. prick."

**I** was having a beer with Dave one night at the Italian restaurant up the road from my house. He'd just returned from covering a soccer match at the stadium, where the Simbas had given a sound beating to the Uganda Cranes. Tens of thousands had filled the stadium, already amped by the matchup with one of Congo's former invaders and the uncertainty of June 30. When



one of Congo's vice presidents, Arthur Zahidi Ngoma, entered to take his seat, the entire stadium bellowed, "Thief! Thief! Kill him! Kill him!" And as Dave later drove off in his car, crowds of teenagers pounded on his hood, sliding their fingers across their throats. "We have our Tramontinas waiting for you, *le blanc*," they shouted. "June 30 will be your day!"

About then Nico and Nick, two Greek businessmen we knew, stumbled into the bar, already drunk. Nick wore a ponytail and was in the steel business. He was a smooth character, in his early thirties, who kept a loaded .45 in his truck. In his basement he'd already prepared several cases of Molotov cocktails, ready to ignite and hurl at the natives when they climbed his gate. "And if that ain't enough," he said with a grin, "I got a dozen gas grenades yesterday from the Belgians." Nico, the other Greek, owned an Acropolis-themed nightclub in Victoire, an opposition neighborhood we all knew would be among the first to pop. Nico had a crew of muscled bodyguards protecting him at the club and always traveled with a hired Congolese soldier carrying a Kalashnikov. Days earlier he'd predicted nothing would happen June 30, but tonight the fear had broken him.

"They're saying the government will cut the power and there won't be water for weeks," he said. "I listen to the staff at the club. They're saying everyone has a machete hidden at home. They're preparing for slaughter."

"Who knows," I said, pretending. "Never trust rumors."

"I hired four more policemen for my apartment," he said. "I can't get enough policemen."

The big Greek took his beer off the bar and walked toward the pool tables. Halfway there, he turned around and pointed to Dave. "If you find my body in the street," he said, "please send it home to my mama."

**A**s we waited in anticipation for the looting mobs and street violence, I took a little comfort in knowing I'd had some preparation. The news wires never send their grunts into danger without plenty of heavy protection and training. Earlier in the year, the agency had sent me through a week of "hostile environment training," held on a grassy farm outside London, where Royal Marine Commandos guided us through the dangers of our trade. The Commandos were top-rate special forces soldiers, steely country boys who quoted poetry and had served in both the Falklands and Northern Ireland. They taught us how to dodge bullets and incoming mortars, how to train the eyes to notice land mines, booby traps, and trip wires rigged to grenades. How to hit a man in the neck and kill him. They showed me how to distinguish light-weapons fire from the burp of automatic long-range assault weapons. I learned how to prod the dirt for mines like bouncing bettys, child-killing butterfly mines, and how to spot a Claymore anti-personnel mine, the worst. I learned how to use a compass and determine my bearings, then find my way home with the sun, moon, and stars, and tell north with rocks and

sticks and shadows. I learned that brick walls disintegrate under one burst of .50-caliber fire, and watched videos of protesters being shot point-blank with shotguns (this to demonstrate how not to challenge Third World riot cops).

Then they taught us how to patch ourselves up in case any of the above weaponry did indeed get us: how to treat a sucking chest wound, plug a bullet hole with a tampon, and stanch the blood spray from an arterial gash. I learned that when you're being mortared at close range, you must always open your mouth and scream to balance the blast pressure in your body so your innards don't turn to jelly. I learned the best way to dry wet socks is to stick them under your armpits while you sleep, and the best way to treat food poisoning is to drink water laced with iodine.

Other days they sent us down lonely wooded paths, opened fire on us from the trees, and detonated large explosions, just so we could practice hitting the deck. I dove into thornbushes and sliced up my arms, crabwalked through the mud behind trees and hills and anything that provided cover. The exercises were exciting and terrifying, because the moment you realized you'd

back, and a helmet to shield my brains from shrapnel. I had all of this gear and training but doubted it would ever save me from mobs with machetes and nail-studded clubs, or soldiers kicking down my bedroom door.

Over the past six years, my agency had lost two staffers, who were killed in West Africa, and two others had been critically wounded. The region was among the most dangerous in the world, aside from obvious places like Iraq and Afghanistan. The nerves of New York editors had long been frayed over African wars, and some felt it wasn't even worth the risk. This point was made clear after I arrived in Dakar, the regional bureau, before continuing to Congo. My boss immediately sat me down, put a gin and tonic in my hand, and told me flatly, "If you're killed in Congo, they'll shut down this whole operation."

**W**e all dealt with the stress and boredom in different ways. Some of us played squash on the mildewed courts of the Grand Hotel, while others went running along the river road, where brilliant sunsets turned the creeping water into glass and gave the diseased city an almost wholesome glow. Many lost themselves in the dark dreary bars or took advantage of cheap dope sold by the bushel, dealt by nearly every kid who sold cigarettes on the streets. There were extravagant costume parties with James Bond themes or where you came dressed as your favorite dictator. (One aid worker threw a party where Jell-O shots were served in hundreds of syringes that otherwise might have been used for vaccinating children.) But during the maximum paranoia of June, our methods of escape began to reflect the violence pressing in. Every Saturday, often after staying out all night, we'd gather in my friend Andy's back yard, strap on gloves and headgear, and fight until we collapsed from pain or exhaustion. It became known as Fight Club Kinshasa.

There were about ten of us, including Dave, some aid workers, and a few guys from the French embassy. Together we had five pairs of boxing gloves, headgear, and leg pads, and usually enough people showed up so that you could fight someone your own size or with the same level of skill. But before any fighting took place, we endured an hour of grueling warm-ups to break the sweat and get us loose, led by Moi and Nico, who'd also been a professional kickboxer in Greece before opening his nightclub in Kinshasa. Moi got



messed up (hid behind a thin pile of leaves instead of the ditch three feet away), a great weight swelled in your stomach. I must've died twice, once after stepping on a land mine, and the second time after the guy next to me snapped a tripwire rigged to a Claymore buried in the bushes. It was the best money anyone ever spent on me.

Back in Kinshasa, I'd put my driver through a similar course in first aid and kept kits in the car stocked with pressure pads, shock blankets, and syringes for makeshift field IVs. In my room I kept a Kevlar vest with porcelain plates at the front and

us started with two-minute drills of jump rope, push-ups, aerobics, and crunches, often coming by and whacking us in the gut with a foam bat, screaming, "You must feel the pain." Nico helped us develop our punches and maintain our guard, often in very punishing ways. He'd dance around us, his broad chest running with sweat, yelling, "Protect yourself!" The second we dropped our guard he pounded us in the face. "What ah' you dewing? I said protect yourself!" One week Dave got hit so hard in the forehead he went behind a tree and vomited.

After warm-ups, Moi and Nico picked two people to fight while the others watched. The fights were ragged and sloppy, all adrenaline and little skill. Once you got hit in the face the first time, everything you'd just learned flew out of your head. Someone would shout, "*Doucement, doucement!*" Gently, gently. But everyone swung his hardest, even when fighting a good friend. We'd back one another into trees with stomach shots, or sweep the legs and send our opponent tumbling down. There were few rules, and sometimes people had to be pulled away, those who'd momentarily lost their heads in the violence. It was a fine rush, until all the poison from the previous night raced to your head and turned you green. Each fight lasted only two minutes but left us so exhausted we didn't speak for long periods afterward. We walked away with bruised ribs, busted lips, and bloody feet, since we fought without shoes or socks. It was something few of us would've done back home in Europe or America, but for many reasons it made sense in Kinshasa.

**A**fter months of rumors, paranoia, and energy spent plotting our escape and survival, June 30 finally arrived. I set out early that morning with Eddy and our driver. The main boulevard was heavily patrolled by U.N. armored vehicles and trucks of Congolese police, whom the government had finally paid a few days earlier in an attempt to avoid a mutiny. Businesses were shuttered throughout the city and few cars ventured on the roads, leaving the wide boulevards open for groups of barefoot children to play soccer. It was silent as the city captively waited for something to happen.

The quiet was shattered once we hit the ramshackle neighborhood of Victoire. Large crowds surrounded our car, with young men pounding their fists on the roof and hood and stuffing the windows with opposition flyers. They were wild-eyed and wound tight, but at least they were keeping their cool. They were saving their hatred for the police. The crowd swelled into the thousands and marched toward parliament, so we raced ahead to meet them. By the time we arrived, there were already hundreds of riot police lining up in formation, cutting off the boulevard in a tight phalanx. The police were new units trained by the

Europeans for crowd control. Each wore all-black riot gear, including molded chest plates and helmets, and carried black gas-grenade launchers. They were sleek, disciplined killers filing onto the boulevard like Darth Vader's storm troopers. Several French policemen with European Union badges stood quietly behind the formation, filming their minions with handheld cameras.

We parked the car, and Eddy and I ran toward the police, making sure to stay close to the French. I'd already been arrested a dozen times in Kinshasa for reporting on the streets, and today I expected no less. I'd even been detained at the airport when I first landed in the country, accused of being a spy for Rwanda. Each detainment ended when I passed along a few hundred francs or threatened to call the minister of information. It was all part of working in this broken country, and you couldn't avoid it. You simply played the game

*Large crowds surrounded our car,  
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and hoped to leave each time with your boots still on your feet.

Eddy and I found a safe place along the road just as thousands of demonstrators poured out of the neighborhoods and headed toward the police lines. The lead marchers held long white banners of the opposition party, and hundreds waved giant palm leaves as a gesture of peace. They reached the wall of police in minutes, and once there all raised their arms with palms to the sky.

The police began rapping batons against their shields in a slow, steady rhythm that grew faster and faster, until a blow from a whistle silenced the menacing beat. The police then took four steps back and leveled their gas guns at the crowd. The first round of grenades hit the closest demonstrators directly in the chest, while subsequent rounds bounced off bodies as they fled in panic. As the demonstrators scattered in the haze of smoke, the police drew their Kalashnikovs and chased them into the narrow streets of Victoire, spraying rounds into the air. Police returned later, dragging prisoners behind them, who were taken to the street and beaten in the stomach with batons.

I'd been shooting photos between the lines, trying to work as my eyes and throat swelled from the gas. I suddenly noticed that the French policemen had left, and just then I heard Eddy screaming from the roadside. Eddy was a small man, barely weighing in at a buck ten. The police had him by the arms and legs and were carrying

him into a vacant field of tall grass. I raced over and threw myself between the police, grabbing Eddy's legs to pull him free. "We're American journalists," I shouted. "Let him go now!" As I struggled with Eddy, I was swallowed in a swarm of police, who threw me to the ground and dragged me through the grass by my shirt. Hands dove into my pockets and ripped out my money and I.D. After we sat in the dirt for half an hour, a police commander walked over and pulled the memory cards from both our cameras, tore the pages from Eddy's notebooks, and told us to leave. I argued and screamed, but when I noticed Eddy's body shaking from fright, I shut my mouth and walked to the car. Only I was an American, only I could argue without fear.

**T**hroughout the day, Kinshasa police opened fire into large crowds and beat people with impunity. Demonstrations in two other cities were put down in similar ways, leading to ten deaths and dozens wounded. Aside from Eddy and myself, many journalists working that day were arrested and jailed. But to the United Nations and every foreign embassy in Congo, June 30 was a smashing success. Howling mobs didn't kick down gates to loot and rape white women, and the city—or the area of the city that really mattered—had been spared from degradation and violence.

"We live in a violent country where there are violent clashes every day," Ross Mountain told me the next day. "The situation ended much better than we'd feared."

Days later, at a Fourth of July party at the American ambassador's residence, I spoke to an American security officer who praised the professional conduct of the police, going on about how they did a "fine, fine job" at crushing the demonstrations, and how he wished he could have been there "cracking skulls right with 'em." Standing nearby was a Congolese priest from Mbuji-Mayi, the opposition stronghold in central Congo, who'd been trapped at his church as police fired into crowds outside.

"They fired tear gas into my church," the priest told the official. "I saw people drop from bullets."

"Aw come on, father," the American said with a shrug. "It wudn't all that bad."

The American was right, and so was Ross Mountain. Things could've been much worse, and lives were spared by the heavy security presence, which stopped crowds from getting too large and possibly going wild on their own people. What had also helped was a voter-registration drive the government kicked off June 20, which by June 30 had already registered 100,000 people in Kinshasa to vote for the first time in their lives. The people finally saw progress, and they spared the city as a result. A rare bit of hope had touched the plagued country. Kinshasa had been saved from impending

doom. But hope never lasts too long in Congo: a week later, a militia raided a village in the east and burned forty women and children alive, plunging the whole stinking place back into the cellar of the world.

**B**y then I was already on a plane back to New York for good. My reason for quitting was mostly personal and had been planned for some time. There was also a mix of uneasy emotions I was never able to resolve with that country, which made leaving a lot easier, and a lot harder just the same.

Several months before, I'd received an email from a friend who'd read some of my stories, wanting to know if there was more to Congo than just people dying. He'd ended the note asking, "Why can't you write more stories we can all relate to?" It was an honest question and one I couldn't answer. It was easy to kick yourself for not writing what you thought should be written. All we really had time to do was react to the killing and dying and hope to make some sense of it, tell it the right way. I'd been there maybe a year, covered a war, and followed it through. It wasn't a long time by any stretch, but it was long enough for me to understand that total comprehension was impossible, no matter how long you stayed.

No one really understood how 25,000 people could walk twenty miles, meet in the same remote valley, and start dying there immediately. No one really understood what drove someone to behold a five-year-old girl with a farm tool or wipe out an entire village for the sake of a few dollars in gold or loot. It's all too abstract, even as I think of it now. It's much easier to pretend these things didn't exist, and maybe they really don't. Maybe when that white U.N. bird lifted off the LZ and out of sight, all the dying people simply melted back into rocks and grass. Maybe if some of them pulled out *People* magazine or said that Britney Spears kept their hope alive, perhaps that would make them human again, give their misery a song we all know. Maybe then we could relate.

Dave and I had a joke we liked to tell the aid workers and U.N. flacks after we'd had too much beer: that there wasn't a single person in Congo who had any idea what was really going on. It wasn't a joke anyone laughed at but it was one we both could agree on, and it offered a little relief. No one had the slightest clue, top to bottom.

As my plane lifted off and over the river, I looked around at the people who were leaving: the preachers and profiteers, the doom junkies and cowboys, all the people like me. I imagined we could all use the break, put the death and dying out of sight and out of mind. But I knew what we all knew, that somewhere in that plane the dead were still with us, and no matter who we were it was still up to us to sort them all out. ■