

IN THE VALLEY OF THE GUN

A massacre unfolds in eastern Congo

By *Bryan Mealer*

The Ugandan army threw a big parade the day they began rolling out of Bunia. Shops closed early, and hundreds of sweaty bodies jammed both sides of the airport road to watch the soldiers march past one last time. A thirty-piece army brass band stumbled through a lackadaisical rendition of the Ugandan anthem, followed by a procession of armored personnel carriers, gun-mounted pickups, and two rattletrap Russian tanks piled with dozens of gaunt, whooping soldiers. The traffic made the dust unbearable, and when the tanks sputtered past they coated the reeling crowd with an aerosol of hot engine grease.

As several companies of soldiers took up the rear of the parade—weathered Kalashnikovs dangling at their hip, gum boots slapping the yellow dirt—young girls rushed out and loaded them with cigarettes, boiled eggs, and bags of peanuts. Farther up the road, groups of women spat at the soldiers' feet and shouted for them to just go away. Uganda's slow withdrawal of 6,000 soldiers from Bunia and the rest of the Ituri province was part of an agreement made with the United Nations at the

Bryan Mealer is a writer living in New York City.

end of the five-year war in Congo, one that had involved five African armies



and had left more than 3 million people dead, more than any other conflict since World War II. The parade, on April 25, 2003, was a colossal event, never mind the size, for it marked the end of a brutal period of war and foreign oppression, and yet, much to our collective fear, it also began a new period of slaughter.

Uganda's presence in Ituri had only deepened the old rift between two tribes in the region, the Hema and the Lendu. The Hema were the wealthy, educated elite tribe of the province, the land and cattle owners who garnered favor under Belgian rule and later benefited under the corrupt and destructive reign of Mobutu Sese Seko. For generations they had dominated the majority Lendu, poor farm-

ers who occupied the remote hills. The tribes disliked and distrusted each other yet coexisted in relative peace, and marriage across tribal lines was not unknown. When Uganda entered the Congo war in 1998, whatever strained harmony that had existed between the two tribes was shattered. The Ugandans trained both Hema and Lendu militias as proxy fighters to protect their black-market trade in pillaged gold, coltan (a mineral used in cell phones), and timber. It didn't take

long before the Hema and Lendu turned on each other, trading their traditional bows and spears for new Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers.

On April 3, 2003, twenty-six miles north of Bunia, hundreds of Lendu fighters had swept through the remote villages of Drodro, Largu, and Jissa, and slaughtered as many as 1,000 Hema residents. The attack, prompted by the blow of a bullhorn, had lasted just over two hours. The Lendu had killed most of their victims with machetes, then split open many of the bodies and feasted on the warm hearts and livers. According to a few survivors, the Lendu had made fires to cook their meat. The massacre had been so efficient and macabre that humanitarian workers in Congo were afraid it was spiraling

into another Rwanda. I arrived in Bunia two days before the parade with plans to arrange a ride into Drodro to document the attack, but it soon became clear that another massacre was about to unfold right there in town.

Anticipating the Ugandan withdrawal, hundreds of fighters, both Hema and Lendu, were gathering in the hills outside of town. The Hema militia had been mostly dissolved after being defeated by the Ugandan army a month earlier, but the Lendu were hitting the army every day, slowly closing in on the town. The last Ugandan soldiers were scheduled to leave Bunia in two weeks, on May 6. When they did, dumb logic told us the Lendu would sweep right in. We all saw it coming: the press corps, aid workers, and especially Bunia's population of Hema, who soon took on the mien of the hunted. Everyone saw the massacre coming, it seemed, but the United Nations. The Lendu were going to sack Bunia when the Ugandans pulled out, and the U.N. was rolling out a red carpet. In one of their dizzying attempts at "pacification," the U.N. mission in Congo (MONUC) had invited both Lendu and Hema leaders into town for talks: tribal "intellectuals" who gave themselves names like "general secretary," along with militia leaders, savage men who'd decorated themselves with phony military ranks and credentials. The Lendu leaders brought in dozens of "bodyguards" from the bush, and none of them was asked by MONUC to surrender his weapons. Thus the fall of Bunia began from within.

After a couple of days I quickly fell into the rhythms of the town. I buzzed up and down the broad boulevard on the back of motorcycle taxis and hired a driver. I checked into the Hotel Takabeya, just on the edge of the bustling market, where the women wore brassy blonde wigs and served me greasy omelettes and tea at 6:30 in the morn-

ing. During the day I'd stop by MONUC to check on rides into Drodro, maybe do some interviews, then have dinner at the Club Hellenique. And at night, cold beers on the patio of my hotel room as the BBC and Voice of America crackled on my shortwave radio.

The Mobutu government had neglected Bunia for decades, leaving the stately colonial buildings along the boulevard to crumble and fade. Fighting between the Ugandans and militias had also left many of the facades pitted with bullet marks. Gasoline was sold by little boys with jerry cans and tin funnels, while down the road gas pumps at abandoned filling stations rusted and got stripped for parts. The skeletons of the Belgian Congo Free State whispered of the glory days in subtle mocking tones: one building along the boulevard still bore a faded billboard from a colonial-era insurance company. "OWN YOUR LIFE," the sign suggested.

My casual routine ended on the fourth day, when Lendu warriors first appeared on the streets. I saw them walking down Lumumba Boulevard with a sickening swagger, drinking beer outside the gates of the Hotel Musafira and getting stoned on the milky potions contained in ampoules that dangled from their bandoliers. They carried taped-up Kalashnikovs across their shoulders and slid their fingers across their throats as they passed young Hema girls. Some wore clear-plastic masks on their faces, sequined prom dresses that glittered in the sun, and punked-out yellow wigs on their heads.

Little by little, they took a piece of Bunia each time the sun went down. After it was all over, they would own a small piece of everyone who had been there, or leave what they had taken on the boulevard to rot in the equatorial sun. They had taken a piece of my interpreter, Johnny, when they murdered his father two years ago;

they shot him in the back as he tried to run away during a raid north of town. His body had lain in the street for three days while Johnny hid in the bush.

I met Johnny my second morning in town, when I walked out of the dining room at the Takabeya and found him standing in the courtyard. Johnny had studied English at Bunia's run-down teacher-training college and lived in a dim, mildew-infested dormitory just behind the MONUC headquarters. After his father died, he'd paid his tuition and rent by pushing wheelbarrows of dried fish from Lake Albert to the Bunia market, a two-day haul through the mountains.

"I hope that you will be happy with my job," he said that day. "It's important to me. My father was a journalist, too."

I often spent mornings having tea with Brigadier General Kale Kayihura, commander of the Ugandan army in Congo. We'd sit under the shade of a small concrete building at the airport, where his men were stationed and gradually departing. What troubled the General most was how MONUC was preparing for his withdrawal. The first of 750 Uruguayan peacekeepers had begun trickling in on April 23, and MONUC seemed positive they could manage the war in the bush that was slowly creeping toward town. To house this colossal international force, the U.N. was flying in tons of cargo every day, erecting a giant prefab city of good intentions that would soon dwarf the town it was meant to help, a blue-and-white empire shuttled about in new Toyota SUVs that filled the streets and every parking lot.

MONUC could feed the people, but they certainly weren't intending to save them: the Security Council's mandate for MONUC permitted soldiers to protect only U.N. staff and property. The mandate had been issued at the end of the war and had worked well for those areas of the country where the fighting had ceased. But in Ituri it would prove completely worthless. The blue flag of the U.N. cast little more than a shadow. The people were on their own, and few of them even knew it. This ugly paradox the U.N. refused to acknowledge: the Ugandans desperately needed to leave, but their presence was



also preventing further massacres. Ugandans were dirty cops, but they were the only law these people had. The General assured me, through a labyrinth of twisted reasoning, that history would regard the Ugandans as heroes once MONUC failed and Bunia was awash in blood.



“Does the Security Council think about the security in this region?” he asked me one day. “Their politics seem to be prevailing over human life.”

“I’m so glad you’re here as a witness,” he added, something he’d say to me on every visit, squeezing my shoulder.

I enjoyed speaking with General Kayihura because he wasn’t afraid of journalists, unlike the U.N. workers, who deflected my every approach as if I were a leper (“Call Kinshasa,” they’d tell me, passing the buck to MONUC’s central headquarters). The General was good with questions if not answers.

“General, some people say your officers are stealing gold.”

“*Stealing gold*. Nonsense. You’ve been here. Have you seen us stealing gold?”

“Personally, no, but . . .”

“What’s with you Americans and Europeans?” He reached out and grabbed my wrist. “I’ve never understood why you people are so thin in the arms.”

One morning I found the General pacing the runway as artillery echoed from the northern hills, near Rwam-

para. “We pulled our men out of there as the U.N. instructed,” he said. “Now these Lendu are shooting civilians.” He walked out past the tarmac into the high elephant grass. “You hear that? They’re using a .50 caliber.” He ordered two gun-mounted trucks toward the shooting, and a few minutes

later the hills rumbled with mortar blasts and antiaircraft guns as the soldiers made contact.

One of his soldiers had just been shot through the chest while guarding a bridge north of town. “They stole his uniform,” he said. “And then those Lendu cut out his tongue!” A voice crackled over the radio saying that the Lendu had been pushed from Rwampara. “Did I tell you that we found the head of one of our soldiers?” he continued. “It was lying in the bush. The rest of him had been eaten. I tell you these Lendu are like animals. They have no remorse!”

Just about then, a cargo plane touched down with one of the first groups of Uruguayan peacekeepers. They stepped out into the white afternoon sun and adjusted their eyes to the harsh light. A few already had on their pastel-blue flak jackets and clunky helmets. “The U.N. is sending these people into a trap,” the General said.

“What business do these men have dying here?”

At the end of my first week, people started turning up dead. For

three days in a row a different taxi driver was found either shot or hacked up in a ditch. A couple of days later I started getting regular visits at my hotel from Jean-Pierre, a short and boxy man who claimed to be a local journalist. He’d wear the same black suit and blue button-down shirt, and he carried a leather briefcase full of photos of dead bodies. Most were massacre victims, people lying in wooden coffins emptied of all their organs; people missing heads, arms, testicles. Each photo sold for about twenty dollars. One morning I was particularly interested in a shot of a guy sprawled in the road, his pond-water eyes staring blankly at the clouds. There was a gaping, sinewy gash in his neck from a machete blade.

“That is the taxi driver killed this morning,” Jean-Pierre said. “Thirty dollars American.”

“Thirty? Why thirty?”

“Monsieur, he is still lying in the road.”

One morning my driver, Oliver, didn’t show up at my hotel. I didn’t hear from him all day and soon began to worry. After two days had passed I became scared that Oliver would show up in one of the photos in Jean-Pierre’s briefcase. Late that afternoon, Johnny came by and said he’d just seen Oliver by the roundabout.

“So when is he coming?” I asked.

“Oliver said he won’t be driving you anymore,” Johnny said. “He’s afraid the Lendu will kill him if he’s seen driving a white man, a journalist.”

Soon all of the taxi drivers stopped working, partly out of protest against their colleagues being killed, but mainly out of fear. There were few cars in Bunia, so without the motorcycles, the streets grew quiet and cryptic. Many people took this as a sign and just stayed home. Bunia began to feel like a town sentenced to death.

Steadily, the paranoia worked its way in. One night I sat at the Hellenique with two South Africans who claimed to be intelligence officers sent to monitor the Ugandan withdrawal. Unlike all other MONUC military staff, they didn’t wear uniforms and were always vague about “their mission.” They didn’t have a vehicle, nor did they stay in rented homes or nicer hotels like other MONUC staff. They

stayed at the Takabeya, next door to me, endured the cold bucket baths and blackouts, and frequently invited the brassy wig-wearing women into their rooms. I liked them a lot.

The three of us sat on a bank of sofas in a dark corner, sharing a big bottle of Primus. The radio behind the bar crackled with Congolese love songs, and the lights flickered from Bunia's shaky current. A few tables were filled with MONUC's mostly Euro staff, in jeans and T-shirts, barking orders in French to Jean, the long-faced waiter, to bring their skewers of brochettes and plates of toasted cheese. The intelligence officers began talking about "the Conflict" in whispers, and I marveled at the things coming out of their mouths. That morning a woman working in the fields had been hacked in the head by a gang of Lendu. When I said the word "Lendu," one of the officers threw a finger in front of his lips and told me to quiet down.

"Please," he said, and motioned to a table of locals, all non-English speakers. "We only use the terms 'the H' and 'the L' when discussing the Conflict."

He surveyed the bar, then leaned in and whispered, "You never know who is listening. For instance, be careful around Jean the waiter. We're still not sure if he belongs to the H or the L."

Soon it became too dangerous even to leave the main boulevard at night. Hit-and-run gangs of Lendu teenagers were kicking down doors in the outer neighborhoods, robbing homes and raping women. The U.N. had banished the Ugandan soldiers from Bunia's streets and would often be called out to intervene during these home invasions.

One morning after a night of heavy shooting, two U.N. employees stood outside the Hellenique smoking cigarettes. One said he had been awakened that morning by a little girl pounding on his door.

"She said the Lendu were in her house and were about to kill her parents," the guy said. "What the fuck am I supposed to do? I called security to go check it out."

"We're not here to protect civilians," his friend snapped. "You can't save the world, mate. As far as I'm concerned, let the bastards kill each other."

The other guy looked up and said, "Then what are we doing here?"

I began to wonder that about myself. During my last few nights in Bunia, I would lie in bed and count the gunshots and try to gauge how close they were to my door. At first I tried drinking myself to sleep, but that only made it worse. After a while I made a habit of packing my bag before going to bed in case I had to run out in a hurry. I'd already started switching hotels every few days and not telling anyone where I was staying.

Paranoia ruled; it engineered our thoughts and actions, guided our conversations and tucked us in at night. Contingency plans, evacuation rosters ("Who's on the U.N.'s evacuation list? Hey, journalist guy, have you seen the evacuation list? Was my name on it?"), and half-cocked theories about when and where the enemy would finally make its play—this was the repartee of frightened military men, hardened souls whose nightmares were cast with teenage boys in prom dresses quartering them in their beds.

During these weeks a theory was circulating that we in Bunia held close and followed like gospel: that the gun boys, full of beer and howling for blood, never attacked before eleven in the morning, on weekends, or when it rained. This theory had held true so far, and it was certainly on my mind as I sat in the Internet café on Lumumba Boulevard. It was morning, a Saturday, and the sky was the color of lead and threatening rain.

Three for three, I thought. In the clear.

My emails to friends had grown cryptic and detached, sent out frozen and scattered like weather bulletins from the bughouse. Most were uncensored descriptions of what was taking place, benefiting only me in my effort to make sense of it.

"Twelve shots last night, long rifle, closer to my hotel than before . . . man found hanging from tree this morning, woman hacked up in a ditch. . . . Just another day in Paradise. Funny, huh?"

I was sending my mother a standard "I'm safe, gotta go . . ." note when the manager of the café walked over to my computer, flipped the power, and shouted, "Go now, we're closed!" I got pissed off and reached to turn the machine back on, but stopped when I saw that I was all alone. The other cus-



tomers were in the next room by the tall windows, peeking out at the boulevard, which had suddenly filled with Lendu soldiers.

There were hundreds of them, more than I'd ever seen before. They carried their beat-up AK-47s and long spears with crude steel points that were chipped and jagged. One wore a 2-Pac T-shirt and a different sneaker on each foot. Many were barefoot and caked with the boulevard's yellow dirt; threads of clothing hung from their emaciated bodies. The fat old man next to me in the café looked horrified. From the expression on his face I guessed he was Hema. He strained to hear the Swahili words the boys were chanting in the streets, then turned to me. "They're saying it's time to pay."

After the last soldier passed the window, I ran outside with a few others. As we stood together at the edge of the

empty boulevard, I saw more boys coming toward us. Someone said they were Hema soldiers coming to fight. As they got closer, we were suddenly surrounded by a hail of gunshots. I turned to run as three bullets smacked into the building behind me, kicking out puffs of dust and concrete. I wanted to hit the ground, but something propelled my legs forward. People came running down the street as gunshots popped at their backs. They wore a crazy electric smile on their faces, the same gimme-danger grin you see on the faces of people who run with the bulls. I was headed back inside the café when a woman in a yellow dress grabbed my hand and said, "You better hide. It's not safe for you here," and led me to a house off the road.

We ducked into a ground-level apartment just behind the café, and she closed the door. The living room was dark, with thin shoots of sunlight cascading through the curtains of a nearby window. Several other women sat on sofas and foldout chairs, whispering soothing words to a few children at their feet. The women were beautiful, immaculately dressed in bright floral skirts, and smelled of strong perfume. Their breezy French mixed with the rolling gunfire and was punctuated by cackling laughter and elaborate hand gestures.

"This happens all the time," said the woman in the yellow dress. She noticed my leg trembling, gave a small laugh, and said, "Are you afraid?" Then she stood up, smoothed the wrinkles in her dress, and disappeared into the kitchen to make tea.

I sat there for twenty minutes while every thought in my head seemed to form and quickly blow apart until there was nothing but gunfire and brief lapses of silence. At my feet two children played like kittens on the floor. Even as the fighting grew more intense, as if someone were emptying a clip in the bathroom, the children never made a sound.

The front door suddenly swung open, sucking every bit of wind from my lungs. But when I saw who it was, I jumped from the sofa and nearly kissed him on the mouth. It was Johnny, sent straight down on Heaven's rope from the warm kitchens of my mother and grandmother. I'd given him the morn-

ing off, and now he was standing in the doorway, winded and smiling.

"I have a motorbike," he said. "Let's go."

We waited while the shooting moved down the street, then ran to the back of the house, where Johnny had stashed a Honda he'd borrowed from a striking taxi driver. I hopped on the back, and Johnny kicked the engine.

"Johnny, how'd you know I was there, man?"

"I just asked someone."

We lit down a back road, through leafy tea fields, and within seconds we were away from the shooting. Once safe, my panic melted away, and I began to laugh so hard I nearly fell off the bike.

So that's what it's like, I thought, the bang-bang, first contact and all that. I felt I should be more afraid, but for some reason there was a calm so crystal sharp that it spooked me. It certainly wasn't from bravery, but whatever it was, it left me with the cleanest, most vivid tunnel vision I'd ever experienced. It could have been a lot worse (weeks later, colleagues of mine would be pinned down on the same street as .50-caliber shells whizzed by inches from their heads). I knew that I'd been kissed with luck, saved by a rainy-day reserve of prayer and a woman I'd never met. But as we drove back to my hotel, the thing that kept running through my mind was, *Yes, yes. That's it exactly.*

Three days later, on May 6, the Ugandan army left Bunia for good. That same afternoon a band of Lendu fighters raided a Catholic mission north of town and slaughtered ten people in their rooms. One of them, a priest named Raphael Ngona, was my friend. The Lendu had Bunia by the throat the next morning, and by evening the town was carrion.

I managed to get a seat on the General's plane back to Kampala. I was apprehensive about leaving, but I simply didn't trust MONUC to protect me. I wondered what would happen to the people I had met, the hotel staff, the boy who sold me cigarettes on the street. Most of all, I worried about Johnny. Before I left for the airport I

gave him a few packs of cigarettes, my French-English dictionary, cash, and a firm lecture on staying safe. "I'll be fine here," he said. "I have to stay for my school. And besides, where else can I go?"

The General had been sitting in the shade at the airport, watching his men load the last remaining gear into trucks and a few idle planes waiting on the runway. His face was pinched and exhausted. He'd come down with malaria the night before. "More reason for me to get out of this place!" he said. He stood up and paced awhile, then sat back down. "I just got a call saying these Lendu are on their way," he said. "What am I supposed to do? I wash my hands of this place. Let MONUC figure it out."

When the last soldier was ready to leave, we boarded a small twin-engine plane and the General sat alone. As the plane circled up and over Bunia, I looked down and saw the Lendu, like a column of ants, marching toward the town.

For the next several days the Lendu went from house to house looking for Hema. They painted their faces coal black and kicked down doors. They pulled families from their beds, from behind furniture, out of closets, then dragged them to the streets and shot them in the head. "Come out if you are Hema!" they screamed as they swept through bedrooms and over back fences. "The Lendu have come!"

When the killing was done, the young boys with their war faces howled and sang as they paraded down the empty boulevard waving the severed hands of the dead.

Then on May 12 there was a glimmer of hope. The Hema militia broke through the Lendu defenses and pushed them out of town. But as soon as the Hema had control of Bunia, they simply looted what was left of the town and started raping and killing Lendu civilians.

The first real lull in the fighting came on May 15, and it was then I found myself on the first available flight back into Bunia, with American missionaries headed back to evacuate church members. Half an hour after takeoff, our copilot, Mike, a handsome, leather-skinned missionary, walked out

FPO
B&W

of the cockpit and sighed so loud I could hear it over the engine noise. More bad news.

"They're sayin' it's still pretty rough down there," he shouted. "Lot of shooting this morning."

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the window and watched the clouds part to reveal the green rolling earth of eastern Congo. I couldn't believe I was going back. As the plane began its descent, I saw the familiar mud huts of Bunia town and slivers of smoke rising from breakfast fires. Mike then informed us that we were going to circle the airport—he was afraid the plane might get shot. Then he bowed his head and led us in prayer.

At the airport I grabbed my backpack and ran toward a sea of U.N. military hardware and people clamoring to leave. The tarmac was choked with chalk-white armored personnel carriers, mountains of sandbags, and dozens of Uruguayan peacekeepers. The sun was white hot, and my tongue was dry and swollen.

Mahmadou Bah, a MONUC press officer, ran up and grabbed my hand. "Don't go anywhere," he shouted over the din of departing planes. "The road's not safe. We'll have to take you in under guard."

I saw another familiar face near the terminal building—it was Juan, one of the Uruguayan peacekeepers I'd met at the Hellenique a few weeks before. When we met, he'd just returned from a long observation mission in the bush with only one other soldier. They'd been given no weapon. While alone in the bush, Juan told me, he'd seen his own death, and he went to bed every night with it playing in his mind. He was now on his way out, his green duffel resting at his feet. God knows what his week had been like. I flapped my arms in the air and screamed his name.

Juan saw me, hiked his bag over his shoulder, and sprinted over. Before I could even say hello, he tossed the bag onto the tarmac and embraced me in a powerful bear hug. When he pulled back, I looked into his eyes; it was like staring into the ocean. Without saying a word, he grabbed his bag, ran to a waiting C-130 cargo plane, and disappeared inside.

I walked back to the terminal and

watched Mike help a group of old women and young children board the plane. Then I watched it leave.

I got a ride with a convoy of aid workers behind a fast-moving U.N. armored personnel carrier. Before pulling out of the airport, the driver told me to prepare myself for what I was about to see. "It's all gone," he said. "They've destroyed it all." The first place we passed was my old hotel, the CAPA, where I had spent my last nights. Through the gates I could see the doors kicked open and garbage strewn across the parking lot. Six teenagers sat out front smoking cigarettes, each one cradling a Kalashnikov across his lap. And when we finally turned onto Lumumba Boulevard, the lifeline of the town, I sank in my seat.

The shops along the boulevard were gutted shells: doors busted off hinges, windows raked with bullet holes, heaps of trash spilling out of entrances. Wooden kiosks had been turned on their sides and smashed to splinters. The gravel on the road was stained with greasy black circles from burning tires.

The boulevard now belonged to the young Hema fighters. They wore baggy army jackets over scrappy T-shirts and grimy blue jeans. A small group of them gathered outside a deserted shop, laughing at a joke someone had told. Farther down the road, one of them walked out of a shop carrying a looted office chair over his head. As we passed, he cocked his chin in our direction and grinned. I caught his eye and felt my face start to burn.

The Lendu had overrun the U.N. peacekeepers almost immediately. As soon as the Lendu stormed the town, the U.N. soldiers retreated to protect their base. Three days into the battle for Bunia's streets, one of the two groups (it's not clear exactly who) attacked the U.N. headquarters with artillery, including two mortar rounds that screamed into the compound and exploded in the yard. When I arrived, the MONUC headquarters looked like a maximum-security prison. The squat concrete fence surrounding the building had been crowned with a silver mantle of razor wire. Five armored vehicles sat parked outside the gate like a row of stones, set between two barricades of more wire and steel. A dozen

armed Uruguayan soldiers stood guard, their faces as weathered and broken as the town.

During the fighting, people had fled their houses and amassed outside the MONUC gates, only to find that MONUC had locked them out. To escape the shelling, some attempted to run headlong through the wall of razor wire. A woman so desperate to get inside tossed her baby over the wire, then barreled through herself. They were both ripped to shreds. When the people realized that MONUC had no intention of protecting them, they rioted. Stones and garbage were hurled at the building. A corpse was tossed over the fence. Tires were set ablaze in the boulevard, and roadblocks were erected from rubble and large rocks. This lasted two days, until the mob grew bigger and stronger and finally crashed the gates. Once they were inside, MONUC had no choice but to distribute plastic sheeting, medicine, and food. Four thousand of them now lived around the headquarters in a space the size of a city block. Aid groups like UNICEF, Oxfam, and German Agro Action were feeding them high-protein biscuits and trying desperately to repair the town's water main, which was cut during the fighting. There was already an outbreak of cholera.

Since all the hotels had been destroyed and were occupied by gunmen, I slept at the headquarters. Every inch of floor inside the building was taken by staff, so my group of journalists got put outside with the displaced. We set up our tents and sleeping bags on the side of the building under a large tarp. We were fenced in by a snaking coil of razor wire, and just beyond it the edge of the displaced camp began. Nearest us, several middle-aged women hovered over small charcoal burners cooking pots of rice. A group of kids sat around them pitching bottle caps.

As I unpacked, I looked up and noticed our neighbors staring at us through the wire. I didn't know how to interpret their gaze, but it wasn't friendly. It was cold and hollow, and I was getting it even from the children. Not knowing what else to do, I waved. Then I looked down and noticed our collective inventory of junk scattered across the dirt: satellite phones and computers, generators, cases of water, canned meats,

gourmet cheese, an espresso maker, whiskey, chocolate bars, and cartons of cigarettes. Ashamed, I quickly gathered my own things, crammed them back into my bag, and hurried off.

When I stepped out from under the tarp, I saw Johnny walking across the grass. A rush of relief swept over me. "You're okay," I shouted, and threw my arms around him. Johnny didn't own a phone, and during the siege I'd worried about him every day. "Things are not so good," he said. "I can't go

home. They took everything I had."

The Lendu had ransacked his room at the campus and stolen what few things he owned. During the first day of fighting, he had been trapped in a house near the market while Lendu carried out their killings in the streets. When he finally made it home a week later, a family had invaded his dorm and taken over. He was now living in the displaced camp and trying to find work with journalists.

While we stood in the grass, John-

FPO
B&W

ny leaned in and rested his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were swollen, and his face looked haggard and worried. "I saw them do it," he said. "I never believed it was true, but when I was hiding I saw them kill an old man and eat from his heart. I saw them do it..."

An emergency hospital ward was set up in one of the deserted buildings across the street from the U.N. headquarters. I waited as long as I could before going over, because I already knew what I would find: the sharp, musty smell of a room full of septic wounds; the dead glaze over the eyes of a kid coming to terms with the fact that he no longer had legs, the way they stared straight through you so that you averted your eyes even though you still asked questions; the emptiness you felt as you hurried out the door and stepped back into the sun that was much brighter than you remembered.

In one bed was a young woman named Neema. She lay there unconscious, her body sprawled sideways across one of the foam mattresses in the center of the cement floor. Her arms were spread at her sides, and the top of her head was wrapped in a crown of bandages. Neema had been giving birth in a clinic down the road during the first hours of fighting. Just as her baby was delivered, a mortar round hit the roof and rained shrapnel through the ceiling of her room. The baby survived, but Neema's brains had to be scooped back into her head.

I stared at her for a long time, perhaps five minutes, trying to understand how she could even be alive. As I stood there, Neema began to move, at first just her lips, then a twitch in her cheeks. Then her body began to writhe on the bed. Her palms slapped the concrete and she emitted a guttural moan, as if lashing out against a nightmare. I realized that she was saying something—it was in Lingala, and I couldn't make out the words. "What's this woman saying?" I asked one of the doctors, a weary-looking older man standing nearby. He walked over, and we watched Neema together. "I'm dying," he said, and turned to see my reaction. "She needs a neurosurgeon

desperately. But there's just no way. She will probably die."

Neema's baby had been taken to a house next to the Hellenique. One afternoon a good friend of mine, Helen Vesperini, a battle-tested reporter with Agence France-Presse, walked inside and discovered the baby languishing on a sofa, getting fed powdered milk once a day. The incident haunted her for the duration of our trip. Finally, mortified, she drew up adoption papers and told the doctor she was taking the baby home.

Neema's story haunted me as well. There'd been dozens of people with ghastly wounds in the ward that day, but every time I passed the hospital I thought only of her. I started making excuses to myself to visit the hospital just to see her. I stood at a distance, pretending to look for someone in her direction, or I just leaned against the far wall and studied her face. Sometimes there was a serene rapture to it, almost a smile. Other times it was full of spirits. Her eyebrows would lift, as if she were about to sneeze, but from the bottom of her stomach came a low cry that built to a peak, then faded to a heavy pant, leaving her face slack. The sound of her voice stayed in my head like the verse of a bad song that kept forcing its way to the surface and repeating.

It was Neema I saw whenever I passed the kids carrying their guns in the streets. She became a symbol of my hatred for them. I didn't even know if they were the ones to blame for what happened, but it didn't matter. If it wasn't Neema, then it was some other young mother, an old man, a three-year-old kid who just happened to be there when one of those cowboys decided to pull a trigger. For two weeks I'd sat in Bunia while the Lendu became our devils and executioners. Yet with just a slight turn of events, these Hema kids had replaced them. I looked for something better in the new raw recruits, a sign that they harbored a greater purpose, a moral rectitude that transcended cannibals, rapists, and thieves. But they didn't, and I despised them for it.

"I'll tell you what we need," a MONUC worker told me one night. He was former military and had come to Congo with noble, pure intentions,

but he had quickly become a hardened, bitter man. We'd sit on the front steps of the MONUC headquarters sipping warm bottles of beer, and he'd often tell me things in strict confidence for fear of losing his job. During the attack, Lendu fighters had stopped his truck and shoved a gun barrel up his nose. An arrow had even sailed through his driver-side window and stuck in the passenger seat, narrowly missing him. Once, he said, a kid stood in the road with his gun leveled, so he hit the gas and ran over him with his truck. "I'll tell you what we need," he said, drunk, with a face as unyielding as stone. "We need an army that can come in here and kill off an entire generation of these fuckers. I mean, what are they gonna grow up to be anyway?"

These kids are worse than animals."

"I'll show you the body," said the young boy now running ahead of me. I had heard there was a corpse on the road near the MONUC compound, so I ventured out to investigate. The boy and his two friends, all three

around ten years old, had raced ahead as any kid would've done when there was a dead body to look at. I knew we were getting close, because the smell hit my throat and hung there. The boys gathered by the side of the road and stared into the ditch, leaning over as if held back by an invisible railing. "It's here," said one of them, pointing down. I saw a black, pulsing mass that erupted in a swarm of flies as I got closer. It was the body of a boy, I think, and the entire lower half of him had been eaten by dogs.

Bunia was full of dogs. I'd never really noticed them before, but now I saw them everywhere. They scurried in and out of open shops and slept in the awning shade. And wherever there was a pack of dogs, there was usually a body nearby.

I'd first noticed them when a few colleagues and I took a walk one day to a village called Yambi Yaya, two miles south, which had been emptied by the fighting. In Yambi's abandoned market area, about six bodies lay sprawled in the red dirt road. We chased several dogs from

around the body of a young girl, around fifteen years old, who lay flat on her back in front of a small, concrete house. There were no signs of machete wounds or bullet holes; it looked as if she had just walked outside and fallen dead in her steps.

One of the girl's legs twisted out from a pink dress; the other had been chewed off at the knee. As we got closer to the girl, I saw something that made my skin suddenly go cold. Five yellow ducklings were gathered at the base of her knee, picking at the flesh.

Even weeks later some of the same guys, steely correspondents, would stop whatever they were doing, look up, and mutter, "Ducks, man. *Fucking ducks.*"

Soon after the trip into Yambi, I started to check out. I was in the close company of murderers, cannibals, child killers, thieves, and rapists. But unlike in the States, where those dark human tendencies are usually hidden from view, these criminals were walking free like gang lords. The same men commanding these boys who gutted human beings

like fish and ate their organs, who strung human kidneys across their bandoliers and raped children in broad daylight, sat in the Hellenique that week drinking on the U.N.'s tab. (Further attempts at "pacification," MONUC had claimed.) Bunia became a world without second thought, a world where no one was good anymore.

The town was now more dangerous than ever. The same day we'd seen the bodies in Yambi, we were in Bunia's emptied market interviewing a ten-year-old Hema soldier when, mid-sentence, the kid suddenly flipped on two women he saw looting a shop. His eyes filled with feral rage, and he began beating them with the barrel of his gun; we threw ourselves to the ground, certain the kid was about to spray his clip. A friend of mine who was with me, Karel Prinsloo, a veteran war photographer with the AP, later summed up our fear perfectly. "Put me in Gaza any day, man," he said.

"At least there I know where I fucking stand."

I reached the turning point that afternoon while walking to the little makeshift market near the U.N. headquarters. (Everything that had been looted was then sold back to the people for a higher price.) On the way I passed several militia mugging for a knot of news photographers. One of them proudly thrust out his chest and displayed his Osama bin Laden T-shirt. Next to him was a teenage girl, tall and beautiful with a model's smile, wearing a floppy leather hat and a chain of bullets across her chest. In one hand she tossed a grenade in the air as if it were an apple.

Back at the camp, things were tense. A few Lendu had been caught sneaking in, attempting to settle old vendettas. A kid was caught with a grenade, and a couple of people had been stabbed. MONUC was cutting back its food rations, and people were getting angry. ("We're trying to get the people to return to their homes," a MONUC staffer told me. "But they'll be killed," I replied.)

I sat down on a milk crate while the others quietly filed their stories. I tried to read a book, but I couldn't concentrate. Some woman was

screaming in the camp nearby. At first I brushed it off, then realized she was screaming at us. I looked up and saw that she was practically through the razor wire, pointing her finger at each of us. The veins bulged from her neck, and her eyes were wide and full of hate. What she screamed was in Lingala, so I never knew what she actually said. But her sentences were punctuated with "*journaliste! journaliste!*" and I soon got the message.

I didn't care anymore. I just wanted her to shut up. I wanted to grab her by the collar, look her in the eyes, and tell her I was just doing my job, that this wasn't my fault, ask her to please *shut the hell up and STOP BEING SO GODDAMN PITIFUL!*

I walked out onto the grass and found a spot to lie down. It wasn't seeing the suffering Congolese that chipped away at me, but the way they took their beatings, the way they woke up every day to viciousness and abuse and still sang songs while they walked down the road. I guess the woman in the camp finally got tired of singing.

The tenacity of the Congolese both impressed and confused me. Here children rarely cried and mothers never wailed over dead children in the presence of others. One man described to me how Lendu fighters had tossed his six-month-old baby in the air and sliced her in half with a machete. How they then rounded up the rest of his kids and butchered them. He'd watched it all from his window, yet when he told the story you'd have thought he was recounting something he'd read in a newspaper.

War and death had become life. "This happens all the time," the woman in the yellow dress had said to me during the gun battle. War and ravage were constants. Disease was always lurking, hunger was something that just happened. They lived with it because it's all they knew. Here, people just died.

I thought of this as dozens of white U.N. Land Cruisers passed by, as their massive logistics base was being built near the airport, as their staff drank beer all day in the Hellenique, as their cargo planes landed every day loaded with photocopiers,

steamrollers, forklifts, guns and ammo, lumber and steel beams, and I wondered if the same charade would work in, say, Cincinnati if five hundred people had been murdered that week, their bodies desecrated in the streets, while the world's hired peacekeepers were forced to retreat to their compound.

It all seemed so ridiculous. I thought about Johnny and Neema and this town I'd grown attached to, only to see it gutted and destroyed. For what? There'd been no struggle, no rage against a despot, no noble sacrifice for a greater cause, for anything. There was only hate and boredom and lust for power—temporary, fleeting power. The point of it all was that there was no point. People just died, and they died for nothing.

For the next hour I lay in the grass, letting the hot sun sting my face. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, hoping to wake up just as a plane landed to take me home, anywhere but Bunia town.

Epilogue: I returned to Bunia several more times in the summer of 2003, then as a reporter for the Associated Press. In June the European Union deployed a 1,100-strong rapid-reaction force to Bunia, led by the French army. The E.U. force had a shoot-to-kill mandate and were quickly able to quell the violence. Humanitarian organizations moved in with food and medicine and enabled thousands to return home. On July 28, the U.N. Security Council voted to give its soldiers a mandate to protect civilians and by November had sent in 4,300 additional troops. Bunia remains relatively calm, but attacks on Hema villages continue in the remote areas of the province.

Johnny continued to live in the displaced camp throughout the summer and eventually returned to his room on campus. With the tide of international press in Bunia during those months, Johnny became everyone's favorite translator; he later worked as a stringer for the AP. As of October, Neema was still alive but severely brain damaged; she slowly recovers. My colleague completed the adoption papers, and Neema's baby now lives happily in Kigale, Rwanda. As for the woman in the yellow dress, I never saw her again. ■