ICWA LETTERS

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Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo
February 5, 2004

To: Brent Jacobson, Program Assistant
Institute of Current World Affairs

From: Andrew Rice, ICWA Fellow

Re: Taking Account of Recent Misadventures in Congo

Item 1: 1,680 Congolese Francs, one round of drinks, anonymous hotel bar, Bukavu.

I just wanted to see the vice president.

I think I should make that clear at the outset. I know, Brent, that the tab for my Congo trip ran a little high, and that there were some… well… *irregular* entries on my expense report. But in my defense, I'd just like to say that what happened wasn't entirely my fault.

For God's sake—it was only a *speech*. It was a public place. The local government had declared a holiday that morning, just to assure the guy would draw a crowd! The impromptu holiday meant there was no chance that I could spring my confiscated passport from captivity, my intended task for the day. (More on that in a moment.) So I decided to go downtown to see the veep.

The Place de L'Indépendance, where the rally was held, is situated at the foot of one of Bukavu's many verdant hills, not far from the shores of Lake Kivu. The potholed roundabout was surrounded by billboards advertising Primus, the national beer, and condoms, the national necessity in the age of AIDS, and it was overlooked by a multitude of flimsy houses built into the hills above—some estimates say Bukavu's population more than doubled during Congo's recent civil war. At the roundabout's center was a circle of patchy grass, and an obelisk painted blue and yellow, the national colors.

The vice president's visit was supposed to be a surprise, but news of the rally had spread quickly around town. It was around 11 a.m., and already hundreds of people were gathered around the obelisk. Camouflage-clad soldiers mingled about, machine guns slung over their shoulders, their clunky rubber galoshes sinking into ground softened by heavy rains the night before. Every so often, a flatbed truck packed full of chanting teenagers would descend and disgorge its cargo on the Place. Across the way, at the concrete bandstand where the vice president was to speak, someone was laying a faded red carpet.

People were dressed for the occasion. Making my way over to the rally down the Avenue Patrice Lumumba (formerly the Boulevard Mobutu), I had seen women carrying baskets of mangoes on their heads, wearing wrap skirts of bright green *kitenge* cloth, patterned with the image of the vice president's face. Men wore his smiling visage on silk-screened t-shirts. On the front of the shirts, below the vice

The Place de L'Indépendance, where the vice-president's rally was held.

president's picture, was the phrase "Viva la Président du RCD." The back bore a political slogan: "Peace, Democracy, Development."

RCD stands for *Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie*, or "Rally for Congolese Democracy." Actually, the t-shirt overstated the case: The vice president headed only one of many RCD splinter groups, the RCD-Goma. Until recently, the organization was one of Congo's baffling assortment of rebel armies, the capital-lettered killers who stalked the country for five years, leaving an estimated three million dead, a body count that rivaled or surpassed "all of the other wars in the world combined over this period," according to the International Rescue Committee. Since a peace agreement was signed last year and the man with his face on the *kitenge*, Azarias Ruberwa, became one of four vice presidents in a transitional government, the rebels have been integrated into the national army, and RCD's political wing has transformed itself into a party. But thus far, whatever the t-shirts may boast, many in Bukavu say the RCD has delivered little development, less democracy, and only the most diaphanous sort of peace to its sphere of influence in eastern Congo.

Ruberwa was late, which was to be expected. So I walked out to the obelisk, took a seat on the steps of its pedestal, and pulled out a magazine. I was trying to be inconspicuous. This was impossible, of course: I was one white face among a thousand black ones, and sooner or later I was bound to draw attention. So I was unsurprised when, midway through my article, I felt someone sit down next to me, just a little too close.

I turned to look at the man. He was wearing a red-collared shirt and weathered leather loafers. His eyes were glassy, and though it was before noon, the smell of beer was thick on his breath. He started speaking rapidly in French. At first, I assumed this was just the usual routine: He was sick, or his kids needed school tuition, or he was broke and needed bus money—could I help? Then, he pulled a sheet of paper out of his back pocket and unfolded it. He pointed to the seal of the Congolese government in its upper left hand corner. "Military intelligence," he said in French. "Do you understand?"

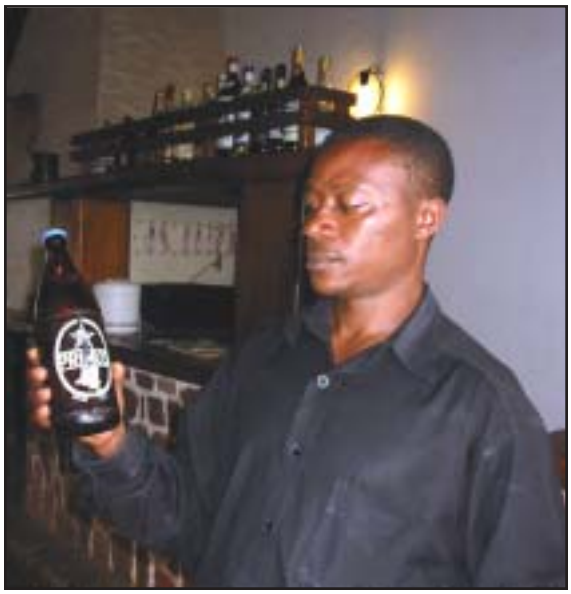
I understood.

The secret policeman asked me if I was a journalist. I said I wasn't. In my parlous French, I tried to explain as best I could about the Institute of Current World Affairs. He wasn't buying it. "What is your mission?" he kept asking me.

That was a toughie. So I tried to walk away, telling him I was heading back to my hotel. The secret policeman followed and stopped me on the street. He was joined by an associate, a man in a gray shirt. Mr. Red Shirt lit a cigarette while Mr. Gray Shirt went to fetch their boss, who spoke English.

After a few minutes, a diminutive man appeared, with two more secret policemen in tow. He suggested we all adjourn to a hotel bar across the street. We walked into a musty, deserted room, decorated with African paintings and a single string of Christmas-tree lights. Mr. Red Shirt pulled out a chair for me on one side of a long wooden table. The diminutive man, who later told me his name was Erik, sat across from me, back-lit by the hazy sunbeams through the window. His comrades took seats around him.

Erik couldn't have been much older than 30. With



Primus, Congo's big strong brew.

his courteous, formal English and his wire-rimmed glasses, he brought to mind a parson or a schoolteacher. I handed Erik a photocopy of my passport as well as my research permit. It was issued by the Ugandan government, but at least it looked official, so I figured it might help. Erik examined the documents closely. Then his face broke into a smile.

"Perhaps we should order some drinks," he suggested.

After a few moments, a waiter appeared from another room with a tray of sweaty bottles: Primus for them, a Coke for me. The waiter handed me a bill for 1,680 Congolese Francs, or about $4.20. Erik took swig from his big brown bottle of beer.

"So," he asked, "why did you come to Bukavu?"

* * *

<u>Item 2</u>: $55, visa, Ambassade de la Répulique Democratique du Congo, Kampala.

Truth was, I was starting to wonder what I was doing in Congo myself.

The plan for the trip had been hatched a just a week or so before, over plates of red curry and pad thai with my friend Emmet. Emmet works for an aid organization in Kampala—his work involves building roads across godforsaken parts of Uganda—and he told me in passing that he was preparing to go to Congo to take a look around. Aid organizations play the same role in African countries that gay men do in American cities. They move into a blighted neighborhood, flush money into the local economy, push rents skyward, demand decent restaurants, and pave the way for timid people like me to visit. Now that there is a semblance of peace in Congo, the engines of Third World gentrification are revving up, and organizations like Emmet's are raring to get in on the action.

"Can I go with you?" I asked, more or less in jest.

I had always wanted to see Congo. So when, to my surprise, Emmet told me he thought it would be fine for me to tag along on his trip, my heart jumped. Swept away on a current of thrill-seeking and bonhomie, the two of us began making plans for the adventure to come. A few days later, I went to the Congolese Embassy in Kampala and bought a visa ($55). I booked an airline ticket to Kigali, the capital of neighboring Rwanda ($199).

This was a trip that would have been difficult six months ago, and might be impossible six months hence. Congo is now more or less at peace. But it's anybody's guess whether the truce will be durable. I knew, moreover, that its civil war was *the* central event in this region

in the last decade: Congo was the place where the era of African post-independence politics died, and a new dispensation was born, one dominated by second-generation figures like Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Rwanda's Paul Kagame, and Congo's tyro tyrant Joseph Kabila. These new leaders talk a good game—they have been hailed as avatars of an "African Renaissance"—but the war in Congo, which degenerated into years of senseless bloodshed and greedy exploitation, suggests a bleaker future.

In retrospect, I realize that the whole idea was foolhardy. I was going to a place I had never been, where they spoke a language I hardly speak—a place, moreover, not renowned as a welcoming destination for foreign travelers. The 19th-Century visitor Henry Morton Stanley braved typhoid, dysentery, smallpox, malaria, hunger, cannibals, attacks by flotillas of war canoes, and a death-defying series of waterfalls to explore the Congo River and claim the territory for his sponsor, Belgium's King Leopold II. During colonial times, Joseph Conrad

took his own jaunt up the Congo River, which inspired him to write *Heart of Darkness*, the novel that forever fixed the country's reputation as a place of elemental malevolence. Nobel Prize-winner V.S. Naipaul, whose novel *A Bend in the River* is a thinly-veiled depiction of the country in the 1970s, writes that the Congolese "lived with the knowledge of men as prey."

Explorer Henry Morton Stanley was the first of many western visitors to encounter a rough time while attempting to navigate the Congo. He lost more than half of his 356-member expedition while traversing the country in the 1870s.

Shortly before we left for Congo, a coworker forwarded Emmet an e-mail that's currently bouncing around the Internet. It featured a picture of a ludicrously engorged boa constrictor, purportedly digesting the body of an oil rig worker it had caught napping in the jungle. "ANYONE WANT TO GO TO THE CONGO???" read the text beneath the grisly pictures. Urban myth or not, the story neatly sums up popular perceptions about the Congo. It's a place that lulls you. Then it constricts around you. If you're unlucky, it gobbles you up.

I figured it couldn't possibly be that bad. Now, I was sitting in a Bukavu bar, clueless and without my passport, smiling at a kindly-looking secret policeman, waiting patiently for the squeeze.

* * *

<u>Item 3</u>: $60, one night's accommodation, the Orchid Safari Club, Bukavu.

So, where *was* my passport?

Let's back up a couple days. Emmet and I flew to Kigali, where we were met by representatives from an aid organization based in Congo. The organization was different from the one Emmet worked for, but its boss had offered to host him in Bukavu. When Emmet had asked if it were all right for me to come along too, the boss had cheerily agreed. The organization had sent a Toyota Land Cruiser to pick us up in Kigali. We climbed in and set out on the long drive through western Rwanda to the border with Congo.

The two-lane road wound around green hills, past stands of eucalyptus trees, and through a thick forest. Until recently, the driver said, the forest was haunted by remnants of the *Interahamwe* militias, the Hutu hardliners who killed an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates during Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

The genocide shocked the world, and laid the groundwork for even more devastating civil war to come in Congo. A rebel army dominated by Tutsis took over Rwanda, stopping the killing after three long months. The genocidal militias, their families, and thousands of innocent but terrified Hutus retreated down the very road on which we were driving. Roughly one million refugees poured over the border into Congo in the space of a week. They took shelter in refugee camps effectively run by the defeated Hutu army, where they were fed and cared for by the United Nations and other international organizations seeking to avert a further humanitarian catastrophe.

The Hutu refugees formed rebel groups, intending to invade and march back to power in Kigali. This made Rwanda's new government understandably skittish. In 1996, it invaded Congo. Rwanda probably intended to do no more than mop up the rebels and establish a secure buffer zone along its border. But, to the world's surprise, the troops of Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko simply turned tail and ran from the invaders. The road to the capital was left wide open. The Rwandans, along with their allies Uganda and Angola and a ragtag Congolese rebel group called the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFL) captured Kinshasa in May 1997, with no more than token resistance from the rotten Mobutu regime. Mobutu himself fled into exile, where he soon died.

The invaders installed rebel leader Laurent Kabila, Joseph's father, as Congo's new president. Kabila *père*, corpulent and corrupt, was intended to be little more than a ventriloquist's dummy mouthing the dictates of Rwanda and its allies. Just to be certain, a Rwandan general was installed as Kabila's army chief of staff. But after a year, Kabila started talking out of turn: He kicked out the Rwandan general, and started making bellicose statements about the Rwandan Tutsis, his former patrons. So Rwanda and Uganda invaded again.

The second blitzkrieg made it all the way to the outskirts of Kinshasa before it was repulsed. Angola, Zimbabwe and numerous other countries rushed to Kabila's aid, less out of affection for the miscreant president than out of a desire to counter Rwanda's growing influence in central Africa. The war settled into a brutal slog. Commentators compared the conflict to the First World War, because it enmeshed so many countries and unleashed so much slaughter for so little evident purpose.

After a few hours on the road, we caught our first glimpse of Lake Kivu, a fig-shaped body of water surrounded by volcanic mountains. The region around Lake

Kivu was the crossroads of the Congo conflict, the place where guns and armies entered the Congo and plundered riches exited. Despite Rwanda's surprise decision to withdraw its 23,000 soldiers from Congo in August 2002, and the subsequent signing of the peace deal, arms are still reported to be flowing into the eastern Congo along the shores of Lake Kivu. There are rumors of new armies forming, and of a brewing third rebellion. According to a recent UN report on the war in Congo, part of which was never publicly disseminated for fear of destabilizing the peace process, substantial arms shipments to Congolese rebel factions were passing through Cyangugu, a Rwandan border town, as recently as last year.

The Land Cruiser snaked through the hills to Cyangugu, around the greenish-blue waters of the lake, past moored barges laden with crates of beer. We stopped at a border post, where the Rwandan official stamped my passport goodbye, then drove slowly over a rusty bridge spanning a narrow inlet. On the other side of the bridge stood the Congolese border post, a low-slung concrete building, where clerks recorded comings and goings in Dickensian ledger books. Once, back in the days of Mobutu's personality cult, there would have been a picture of the dictator hanging in this office, wearing one of his leopard-skin caps and carrying a traditional tribal staff. Now there was just a blue sticker extolling unity in Congo. There was no portrait of Joseph Kabila: The former rebel leaders who ran Bukavu may have made peace with the current president, but they were in no mood to venerate him.

Almost immediately, I could tell there were going to be problems with my visa. One of the border officials carried a scrap of paper on which someone had scrawled my name, and in big block letters, the word "JOURNALIST." I went into a back room, where I met the boss of the border post, and tried to explain that I wasn't really a journalist. (After some thought, I had settled on the phrase "academic researcher," which sounded sufficiently harmless.) But the damage was already done. As a journalist, the border boss told me, I needed special permission to visit, a permit I'd have to get from officials in town.

No one at the embassy in Kampala had told me about the need for a permit, though I had told them who I was, who I worked for, and why I was interested in going to Congo. Other journalists whom I sought out for advice told me it was best to try to avoid the local authorities altogether, and go into Congo as the guest of a local aid organization. (In the aid industry argot, such groups are commonly called "non-governmental organizations," or NGO's.)

I had thought I would have no problems at the border—the NGO hosting Emmet was happy to have me there. Or so I supposed. As I later pieced together, somewhere along the line, someone inside the organization seems to have gotten cold feet, wondering how the local authorities of the RCD—the vice president's men—would react if I wrote something that portrayed their rule of eastern Congo as anything less than completely benevolent. Not only had the NGO decided not to pass me off as its guest, but someone had apparently called the border authorities ahead of time, to tip them off that a "journalist" was on the way.

As I stood outside the border post, wondering what was to become of me and my passport, the boss of the NGO came up and introduced himself. A portly American with a scraggly goatee, the aid man—let's call him "Ray"—told me that for "political reasons," he and his group couldn't have anything to do with me, at least officially.

"You're on your own, pal," he told me soon afterwards, in front of a group of his employees. After a beat, he grinned and added, "Just kidding!" Though Ray was a kidder—his idea of a funny joke was to repeatedly call someone by the wrong name, or to ask a group of people to dinner and then announce he had forgotten his wallet at home—I got the distinct impression that, in this case, he wasn't jesting. I *was* going to be on my own.

The border guards told me I would have to sort out my permit problems in the morning. In the meantime, they would hang onto my passport. There wasn't anything to do, so one of Ray's employees dropped me off at

"Bukavu la vert,*" on the shores of Lake Kivu. Once a cosmopolitan university town, in the 1990s it became a crossroads of Congo's civil war.*

the Orchid, the only decent hotel in town. The Orchid was owned by a Belgian, a gaunt man who always wore a gold-buttoned blue blazer. Its terrace boasted a million-dollar view of the lake, and it had prices to match: $60 a night for a single room, $1.50 for a cup of coffee, $15 for a steak. All day long, the stereo played a constant loop of Cyndi Lauper and Whitney Houston tunes.

My room was along a separate wing fronted by an overgrown, rambling garden. That evening, I wandered around the garden, which ran down a steep hill all the way to the shore, winding around thick-trunked trees covered with cascading bougainvillea. I descended a steep flight of stairs and found myself by the lakeside. Out on the water, the fishermen were ending their day, hauling nets fat with fish onto long canoes. They whistled and sang as they worked; the tunes floated to me over the still surface of the lake, mingling with the thumping sound of their oars against the water.

That night, the rain beat hard against the metal roof of my room, and it took me a while to fall into an uneasy sleep. The next morning, I made my way over the NGO's offices, where Ray informed me that because the vice president was visiting, there was no way I'd be able to get my passport back. All government offices were closed.

"You know," he said, "as soon as they hear that word 'journalist' alarm bells go off."

I suggested, gently as I could, that I hadn't been the one to mention the j-word.

Ray smiled sympathetically. "Well," he said, "that's water under the bridge now."

* * *

<u>Item 4</u>: $20, "gratuity," Erik the Secret Policeman, Bukavu.

"Don't worry," the secret policeman seated to my immediate right said, laying his hand on top of mine. "We are family."

I didn't have much experience in these kinds of situations. Despite what you might assume, Uganda is a fairly civilized place. Once, a gin-swilling army brigade commander stopped me in a hotel bar in Arua, a northwestern Ugandan town, and threatened to have me arrested for not seeking permission to conduct interviews on his turf. But then I produced my government-issued research permit and he retreated. That was the way I stayed out of trouble: By not doing stupid things that gave the people with power an opportunity to get their hooks into me.

But what little experience I had taught me that in these situations, when someone tells you not to worry, it's time to worry. So I did. I started running my hand through my hair, a nervous habit, which the secret policeman to my right—he said his name was Freddy—picked up on. "I said don't worry," Freddy repeated, a little more sternly.

The secret policemen turned their attention to my bag. They took particular interest in a map of Bukavu someone at the NGO had given me. The red-shirted secret policeman took that and disappeared into another room, presumably to study whether I'd been jotting down troop positions. Erik pulled out my magazine and a notebook, and muttered the word "journalist." Freddy noticed a couple of computer disks. "What are these for?" he demanded.

Then they spied the money. Earlier in the day, I had paid for another night at the Orchid, giving the clerk a $100 bill. Dollars have been the *de facto* national currency in Congo since the hyperinflationary days of Mobutu. (The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency alleged that a substantial proportion of the American currency circulating in Congo during Mobutu's last years was money he'd laundered for the Colombian cocaine cartels.) But I had figured it wouldn't hurt to have some Congolese currency too. I had asked the clerk to give me my $40 change in francs. "Francs?" he had asked, looking at me like I'd just asked him for directions to the planet Venus. Then he counted out eight bundles of 20 franc notes, each a couple inches high.

The secret policemen saw those thick stacks of bills in my bag, and their eyes lit up. "Dollars?" Freddy asked expectantly.

"No," I replied. "Francs."

Freddy's face fell. He had me pull the money out of my bag and stack it on the table, forming a little franc mountain in front of me. The secret policemen counted the money, wrote the total amount down on a sheet of paper, and had me sign it. God forbid I think they intended to steal from me, Erik said, his face contorting into an aghast expression.

"Why did you come to Bukavu?" Erik asked again.

2,000 Congolese francs, or $5

One more time, I told him about my fellowship, my hope to see the peace process in action and my desire to see Bukavu, that lovely city by the lake.

"Why did you want to see the vice president?" Erik asked. I told him that when I heard the vice president was coming, I rushed right over, because how often does one have the opportunity to see such an illustrious personage with his own eyes? "After all, if you came to my country, wouldn't you want to see my vice president?" I asked.

Erik nodded gravely. "You know, I have never been to America," he said. Freddy spoke up. "I would like to go someday for further study," he said. He looked at me expectantly.

At some point, my phone rang. Freddy waved his hands—"No, don't answer!" I picked up anyway. It was Emmet, calling to check in. I briefly explained the situation, and explained how he could find the bar where I was being interrogated. Emmet said he'd be over right away.

"*Don't worry*," Freddy insisted when I hung up the phone.

"You know," Erik said distantly, "I don't even have a phone."

About a half-hour later, Emmet appeared. He's an uncommonly tall fellow, skinny and gregarious, and he worked the room as if we were all old friends. He handed Erik his business card, and they began to discuss my situation in French. (Emmet speaks French fluently.) Erik told Emmet that I had been wandering around Bukavu without proper authorization, and so I had been detained, for both the vice president's safety and for my own. Congo was full of unscrupulous people, you know.

Emmet said he understood and promised to take me straight back to my hotel. Erik said that would be fine, so long as I promised not to get into any more trouble. Erik showed Emmet the piece of paper I had signed, listing the amount of money I had on me. He asked me whether I had lost anything. I shook my head no.

Then Erik told Emmet that there was just one small matter we had to address before I was free to go. Their captain had seen them walk into the hotel with me. He would be very disappointed with his secret policemen if they returned from our meeting empty handed. Could we possibly help him out? If it were up to him, naturally, he wouldn't ask for anything. But we knew how bosses could be! Give whatever gratuity we thought was appropriate, he advised.

Emmet pulled out a $20 bill. "Parfait!" Erik exclaimed, snapping up the bill. Then he suggested he and Emmet exchange phone numbers. Erik pulled out his phone—he did have a phone!—and programmed Emmet's number into his electronic directory.

So we were done.

Well, not quite. Erik suggested that we share another round of drinks. Emmet apologized: Unfortunately, we had a meeting to attend. After a moment, the waiter appeared with a bill for the curiously round number of 5,000 francs (about $12.50). I handed the waiter a couple bundles of notes. Erik smiled. I was free.

* * *

<u>Item 5</u>: $16, one bottle Jameson's Irish Whiskey, duty free shop, Entebbe International Airport, Uganda.

Emmet and I hopped into a waiting cab. He apologized for taking longer than he'd promised to get to me. Ray had forbidden him to use one of the NGO's cars for his rescue mission—he didn't want his organization to be associated with whatever trouble I had gotten into. I repaid Emmet the $20 he had given to Erik. He had the cabbie drop him off at his meeting, paid him $5, and asked him to take me back to the Orchid.

I walked into my room, poured myself a healthy nip of Jameson's whiskey, and sat down on my bed to collect my thoughts. I was rattled, nervous. But soon, I found my eyelids drooping. Exhausted by the strain of my powerlessness, I drifted into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

<u>Item 6</u>: $200, "Accreditation," The Big Man, Bukavu.

What is it about Congo—this beautiful, bounteous country the size of Western Europe—that brings out the rapacious spirit within?

Belgium's King Leopold ruled his colony as a private fiefdom, using a high-minded justification, the abolition of the slave trade, to enslave the people of Congo himself, turning the country into a massive rubber plantation. Workers who failed to produce had their ears or hands cut off. Untold numbers died.

Belgian domination lasted until 1960. A brief experiment in elective democracy dissolved into civil war, which ended only when General Joseph-Désiré Mobutu took power in a coup in 1965. The new dictator renamed himself Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu wa za Banga, a moniker officially translated as "the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake."

Mobutu, like Leopold, had high-minded aspirations for Congo. He threw off the country's colonial name, rechristening it Zaire, and mouthed African nationalist ide-

als. But in the end, Mobutu proved just as acquisitive as his Belgian forbears. He nationalized industry in the name of returning the economy to the Congolese. Then his government looted the nationalized companies. The profits from the billion-dollar trade in minerals like copper, cobalt and diamonds disappeared into overseas bank accounts. The same thing happened to many millions more in international aid-funding. Trade slowly shriveled: Agricultural exports in 1990 were just a quarter of what they were in 1965, according to statistics compiled by political scientist William Reno. In the 1990s, as Mobutu began to lose control, even the mining industries collapsed.

The dictator ruled through fear and bribery, paying off cronies with stolen goodies. Commentators dubbed the system "Mobutuism." Mobutu's image adorned every office and every banknote. He lived a lavish lifestyle in palaces around the world. In a typical stunt, he chartered a Concorde to fly him to a dentist appointment in France. Mobutu wasn't discreet about the nature of his rule. "If you steal, do not steal too much at a time," he once infamously advised delegates to a party congress. "You may be arrested. Steal cleverly, little by little." Meanwhile, by the mid-1980s, the government was spending virtually nothing on services like health care, education or road maintenance. An estimated four-fifths of the country's 80,000 miles of roads simply disappeared.

The Rwandans, Ugandans and their allies chased Mobutu from power, but Mobutuism continued to flourish after he was gone. Kabila, who had financed his 30-year rebellion through gold smuggling, immediately constructed his own patronage networks.

In the first war, Kabila's foreign sponsors had reasons for invading Congo—Rwanda, Uganda and Angola were all fighting rebel movements sheltered by Mobutu—but by the time the second war settled into stalemate, all moral justification had disappeared. Like the gold-crazed prospectors in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Rwanda, Uganda, and the rest went mad with greed, falling out with each other over control of Congo's limitless booty. Angola took control of Congo's oil fields. Uganda and Rwanda fought a series of battles in the city of Kisangani over control of the diamond trade. The battles killed an estimated 1,000 people, wounded 1,700 more, and left relations between the onetime allies in tatters.

As the war degenerated, local rebel movements proliferated. The original RCD, formed in 1998, split due to internal rivalries and feuds over treasure. Then the splinter groups themselves divided and subdivided. So RCD begat RCD-Goma, RCD-ML and RCD-National. RCD-Goma begat RCD-Originel, RCD-Authentique and RCD-Congo. RCD-ML begat the APC and the UPC. The UPC begat PUSIC and FAPC. And so on.

The confusing array of acronyms masked a more comprehensible larger battle between three parties in the eastern Congo: Uganda, Rwanda and the Congolese government. Each side wanted to hold on to the mines, forests of timber and other natural resources it controlled. Mimicking the old colonialist strategy of indirect rule, the powers made alliances with Congolese warlords where they found them. Where there were no warlords, they created new ones.

That strategy led to some unsavory partnerships. Kabila's government, for instance, armed remnants of the *Interahamwe* to fight the Rwandans, along with tribal militias who believed that magic made bullets fired at them turn to droplets of water. In the gold-mining northeastern province of Ituri, Rwanda and Uganda armed opposing warring tribes, enabling a campaign of ethnic cleansing so horrific that the UN was forced to send in French peacekeepers last summer. It is even alleged that Rwanda has occasionally made alliances of economic convenience with its archenemies, the former Hutu *genocidaires*, to control areas rich in coltan, a mineral used to make the computer chips in cell phones.

RCD-Goma, the faction of the rebel movement that controlled Bukavu, was widely perceived as a Rwandan proxy. Since it signed the peace deal, its leader Ruberwa has become a vice president and has taken up residence in Kinshasa. But many believe that he and other RCD leaders continue to take their cues from Kigali.

"It has been five or six months since the peace agreement, we have an RCD vice president, and yet we don't feel the hand of Kinshasa here at all," said one African-born aid worker based in Bukavu, who asked that I not use her name. The RCD is a party with "no ideology … a fabrication," she said. It is highly unpopular in the region of eastern Congo it controls, both because its leaders are seen as Rwandan stooges—there is a great deal of resentment among the other tribes against Tutsi "invaders," even though some Tutsis have been living in the region for hundreds of years—and because it has levied exorbitant taxes, while failing to deliver any semblance of service to the people it governs. Instead, luxurious villas have popped up all over the hills of Bukavu.

The morning after my run-in with the secret police, I went over to the headquarters of the local government in Bukavu to see how I might get my passport back. A Congolese employee of Ray's NGO, who felt bad about my predicament, went along with me to negotiate a deal. The Congolese employee—call him Eugene—was middle-aged and wise in the ways of Bukavu and its RCD overlords. He had worked as a fixer for local NGOs for years, staying in Congo through the worst periods of war. He had warned me ahead of time that the local authorities would probably demand a substantial ransom for my passport: I needed it, and they knew that I needed it. They had the power.

The man I needed to deal with wasn't in the office when we arrived. So we waited in the parking lot for a

REPUBLIQUE DEMOCRATIQUE DU CONGO

Coordination des Services
De Sécurité et Renseignements
Direction Provinciale du Sud Kivu

ACCREDITATION

(LAISSEZ - PASSER PRESSE)

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Fait à BUKAVU Le 29 JANVIER 2004.

29 JAN 2004

LE DIRECTEUR PROVINCIAL DE
SECURITE ET RENSEIGNEMENTS

Raphaël LUKEMBA
Administrateur Principal

P.S. : Photographier dans les sites stratégiques requiert une autorisation spéciale des instances responsables (prière vous renseigner au préalable) .

This will cost you 200 bucks

while, until the Big Man pulled up in a chauffeured blue Toyota truck. We followed the Big Man up a flight of stairs to his office on the second floor of the administration building.

He turned out to be a surprisingly young man, with a chubby round face and a plump belly—an indicator of wealth in Africa. He wore a brown safari suit patterned with a swirling paisley-like design. A motorcycle was parked in one corner of his office. Propped up on his desk were snapshots of soldiers in the field. Eugene later told me that the Big Man had once been a *kadogo*, or child soldier, in one of the rebel armies, and that was how he attained his position of premature prominence.

The Big Man pulled out a blue airmail envelope, retrieved my passport from it, and began thumbing through the pages. Then he and Eugene began to haggle in Swahili, the most widely-spoken language in this area of the Congo. After a while, Eugene told me the price: $200 (negotiated down from $400). The Big Man handed me a form to fill out. I handed him four $50 bills, which he folded up and stuck in his front pocket. He returned my passport and told me an official accreditation would be typed up for me within a few hours.

Needless to say, there was no receipt.

* * *

Item 7: $5, ?????????, the Orchid, Bukavu.

After our business with the Big Man was completed, I tagged along with Eugene and his driver while they stopped at the local governor's mansion. While his driver went inside to run an errand, Eugene and I talked for a while about Congo. He was happy that the war was over, but skeptical about the government to come. We stared off into the distance, looking at the metal-roofed shantytowns that had cropped up like toadstools on the hill opposite us since the war started.

"They used to call this place 'Bukavu *la vert*.'" Eugene said, sadly.

Indeed, Bukavu used to be a resort town and a haven for intellectuals who congregated around the local university. Even today, after so much war, the place is bustling with economic activity. In the markets, women sell everything from Indian soap to American cooking oil. On the streets, young men hawk plastic bottles filled with smuggled gasoline. Kids play on the sidewalks, pushing old tires down the road with sticks. People have even started going out after dark again, no longer fearing a firefight might break out without warning.

In the countryside, however, life remains pretty much as it was during the war. "In terms of people's day-to-day existence, there has been no change whatsoever," the African-born aid worker told me. Arguably, she said, things are worse. At least during the war, there were fronts and battle lines. Now, the biggest threat comes from marauding gangs of former rebels: Even those who have been absorbed into the army are paid infrequently, if at all. Many have taken to banditry in the countryside or armed robbery in the towns.

And, of course, there is the problem of the government. One afternoon, Emmet and I were invited to lunch at the home of a prominent local businessman. The businessman's villa overlooked the lake, and a pleasant breeze wafted in from outside, where his servants were pruning the garden. When we arrived, the businessman was watching an Australian Open tennis match on his satellite television, and we sat down with him to watch the third set.

The businessman had been living in Bukavu since the early 1980s, the heyday of Mobutu. "Now it is much

worse," he told us. The number of bribes he had to pay made doing business nearly impossible. Meanwhile, government-connected competitors were smuggling goods in from Rwanda, undercutting his prices. He had complained to the local chamber of commerce, which had done nothing. One of its top executives was himself a big smuggler.

"There seems to be a lot of Mobutuism in the way each of these politicians operate," the African-born aid worker told me. "You've not got one dictator, but several little dictators." It used to be Mobutu's cronies who extorted money from the populace. Now it's the RCD's. It used to be Mobutu's face that adorned the Bukavu market women's *kitenge*. Now it's the face of Azarias Ruberwa, the vice president.

Still, the advent of peace has unleashed a flood of foreign money into Congo, and with it, an influx of investors into places like Bukavu. Every evening, the same dinner crowd would wander into the restaurant at the Orchid: Aid workers, chain-smoking French and Belgian businessmen, members of Bukavu's war-profiteering *nouveau riche*. The tables talked in hushed tones, cutting deals over flickering candles and plates of rubbery fish.

The visitors have been a boon to some industries. One night, as I settled down to bed in my room at the Orchid, I heard a knock at the door. A bit apprehensively—I half-expected to encounter Erik's grinning face on the other side—I opened it.

"I'm your neighbor," said a slight young man with a British accent. The young man explained that he was a journalist too, in town to do a story on coltan mining. He said he was in a fix: Did I have change for a $10 bill? He said he needed it to pay a cabbie.

I gave him two fives, and asked him if he wanted to share a drink with me. He apologized and said he couldn't. "I have to leave early tomorrow morning," he said. Then he abruptly charged off into the darkness.

A few minutes later, as I was drowsily reading my book, I began to hear a woman's muffled moans seeping through the thin wall between my hotel room and my British neighbor's. As the long minutes passed, the moans became yelps, then shouts, and finally built to a crescendo of "Oui! Oui! Oui!"

At least something came cheap in Congo, I thought.

* * *

<u>Item 8</u>: 2,000 Congolese Francs, gratuity.

The next morning, I woke up early, and took a cab to meet Hans Romkema at his office, which is located above a Mennonite Church in downtown Bukavu. Romkema runs the local office of a Swedish organization called the Life and Peace Institute, and in this capacity he has involved in mediating peace talks between the government, the RCD and other rebel groups. I had been told he had extensive contacts within the various rebel movements, which put him in a good position to assess the success of Congo's peace agreement.

"I think on the lower levels … there are some surprisingly positive signs," he told me, drawing on one of the many cigarettes he smoked that morning. Romkema, who is Dutch, had tousled blonde hair, wore a stubbly beard, and possessed a Kremlinologist's knowledge of the alliances, infighting and intrigue among Congo's numerous warlords.

A man works at a sewing machine inside a wrecked bus spray-painted, for some reason, "New York." Despite the war, business—licit and illicit—is booming in Bukavu.

Romkema saw numerous signs of progress. First and foremost, since the peace agreement, all the principal rebel groups have been convinced to lay down their arms and join the government. Former guerrillas have returned to their home villages to farm. In November, the commander of a Hutu rebel army came out of the Congolese jungle and returned to Rwanda after a promise of lenient treatment, which by all accounts the

government has kept. Romkema gave me a copy of a handwritten letter the commander sent back to Congo, calling on the 15,000 to 20,000 men he led join him in returning to Rwanda.

Since Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001, Congo's government has been marginally better-run. Kabila's son, Joseph, has proven to be a more housebroken sort. He's quickly become a darling of international opinion-makers. There are plans to hold nationwide elections soon.

Yet there is reason to be cautious about declaring the war in the Congo a closed book. While I was interviewing Romkema, he received a phone call. His caller informed him that the night before someone had tossed a grenade at the convoy of a former militia commander, now a general in the national army. Romkema fretted that the apparent assassination attempt meant someone was trying to destabilize the peace process.

The chief threat to peace in Congo, Romkema said, was not politics, regionalism or even tribe. It was greed. "If Congo ever gets organized, economically it could become stronger than any other country," Romkema said. But, he added, "If corruption remains like it is, there is almost a guarantee that something new will be started."

The political scientist William Reno argues that what the world is seeing in Congo, as well as in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone, is a new brand of "warlord politics," in which "rulers and their associates resemble a mafia rather than a government," and have dispensed with even the pretense of running a government for anything other than personal gain. "Basically, this government is a couple of gangs of gangsters that have joined," Romkema said. Right now there is peace, because the warlords have decided that war is bad for business. But the problem with government by mafia is that sooner or later, someone is bound to lose out in the struggle to exploit the country's riches, and then everyone will go to the mattresses again.

There are already rumors that some local warlords—assisted by foreign meddlers—are preparing to rejoin the war. According to the confidential UN report on the war in eastern Congo, local leaders, including the governor of the province to the north of Bukavu, are once again training armies in the area around Lake Kivu. (I obtained a copy of the report from a contact in Kampala.) Rwanda is the "architect and orchestrator" of the mischief, the report alleges. Rwanda's intention is to cement its influence over the region even though its army has withdrawn, and to secure its control over mining and other industries. Uganda, meanwhile, is reported to be arming militias of its own to carry on its proxy war against Rwanda.

In early February, a two-day gun battle broke out in Bukavu, the first such disturbance there in months. While I was there, I had heard rumors that Vice President

Hans Romkema negotiates peace agreements between the remnants of Congo's rebel armies and the government. "I think that what keeps the [peace agreement] together," he said, "is that no one in the international community will accept another war. Otherwise, I think there would already have been one."

Ruberwa was really in town not to give a speech, but to fire the local governor, a former RCD military officer. Ruberwa ended up lowering the boom on not only the governor, but also on several other officials, including the mayor of Bukavu and the local security chief. Afterward, the army fought the former governor's private militia. I later heard there was shooting all around the Orchid. Eventually, UN peacekeepers in white tanks intervened, putting an end to the fighting and setting up roadblocks all over town. But sporadic fighting has continued, and Bukavu remains tense.

I was long gone by the time the shooting started. One morning, I had walked over to the NGO to tell Ray I'd decided to leave. Emmet had departed a few days before, taking a $450 plane flight to check out an isolated town on Lake Tanganyika. I felt lonely and cooped up in my hotel. I had had plans to go to take a boat to Goma, another town on Lake Kivu, but the contact I was supposed to meet had decided to go to Rwanda for the weekend. And, after my experiences in Bukavu, I didn't want to show up in another Congolese town alone.

Ray feigned disappointment when I told him I was ready to go home. "I know you've had a tough time here," he said. Then he brightened. "But you know all of these things that happened can all go in your article."

The idea had already occurred to me.

I know that the annoyances I suffered—the harass-

ment, the bribes, the waves of paranoia that passed over me as I walked through town—pale in comparison to the scale of devastation war has inflicted on Congo. I know, moreover, that they don't measure up to what ordinary Congolese go through every day, dealing with rulers who view them as little more than incidental to the real business of government, which is robbery. I'm not telling these stories because I'm proud of them. (In fact, I'm more than a bit embarrassed about my haplessness.) I'm not telling them because I think they are unique. Chaos and corruption are the oldest stories there are when it comes to Congo.

I'm telling you about my experience precisely because it *was* so typical. Congo's corruption has to be seen to believed, and experiencing it helped me understand something about the country. I came to Congo to write about the civil war. About how, among other things, it corrupted all the countries who got involved, however worthy their original reasons for intervening.

After visiting Congo, though, I came to wonder whether I had it backwards. Perhaps corruption is not just another symptom of the problems in Congo. Maybe corruption *is* Congo. For more than a hundred years, a country with the capacity to be one of the most prosperous and powerful on the continent has had a series of rulers who have seen in its abundant riches only opportunities to exploit. Their actions have inexorably led the country down a path to destruction, economic devastation, dictatorship, and civil war.

Sitting here now, in the comfort of my home, it strikes me that all of us—the secret policemen; the Big Man; the smarmy Orchid crowd; the businessman who railed against smugglers and yet paid bribes himself; Eugene, the NGO fixer who negotiated a price for my passport; me, the outsider who came to Congo to write about exploitation and ended up being looted myself—we all were part of a crooked organism larger and older than ourselves. Some of us had good intentions, some of us bad, but in the end we all bowed to the power of the system and did what we had to do. And not without consequences. Feeding the beast perpetuates it. Those humiliated by power don't resolve to do differently. They dream of the day when their own families or ethnic groups get control, when they, the victims, become the triumphant victimizers.

One reason I decided to leave Congo was that I didn't like the kind of person it made me: furtive, suspicious, ill-tempered. One day, I had come back to my room at the Orchid and found half my clothes were missing. It turned out to have been an innocent misunderstanding—the hotel's cleaning staff had seen my crumpled-up clothing on the bed, and had decided to wash them. Nonetheless, I had thrown a fit at the front desk, refusing to pay the relatively small cost of washing. ($1 for a shirt, 10 cents for a pair of boxers.) At that moment, all of my built-up frustration had poured out in purple-faced pidgin French. With the secret policemen, I had been able to do nothing but smile and acquiesce. At the hotel, I was a customer. I had the power to be a jerk.

I felt guilty about it later. As I was packing my things, preparing to leave the Orchid, I noticed I still had one big bundle of Congolese currency in my bag. It amounted to around 2,000 Francs, or $5. I hurriedly stuffed the rest of my clothes into my backpack. Then I scrawled a little note atop the wad of money—"*Merci*!"—and left it on the bedside table. It felt good to be honestly grateful.

I slung the backpack over my shoulder, walked out into the garden of bougainvillea, and left Congo behind. ❑

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