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Congo

Partition talk

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"Territorial integrity and sovereignty are not outmoded concepts, nor are they luxuries for the rich and powerful. Those who talk about partition of the Congo as a solution are offering a prescription for expanded and continued violence."

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Justin Podur was in Bukavu in 2009 and 2011. This article was first published on 12 July 2012 on his blog [The Killing Train](#).

When Belgium realized in the 1950s that, given that France and Britain were losing their African colonies, it would no longer be able to hold on to Congo, it set about trying to guarantee continued control over the strategic aspects of the economy, especially the mines. At first, it sponsored its local political groups, but lost control of these. The next step, just after the Congo became independent, was mercenaries and proxy warfare - a huge international crisis and United Nations mission that was, in the 1960s, called "The Congo Crisis". The political strategy accompanying the acts of Belgium's mercenaries (many of which were from apartheid South Africa) was to support the secession of Katanga province from the Congo. Once a dictator, Mobutu, came to power, the international community allowed him to crush the secessionists.

Decades later, the international community was not capable of stopping a real genocide in Rwanda. After the Rwandan genocide, when the victors in the Rwandan civil war took over that country and the losers of the civil war fled into Congo, the international community helped Rwanda invade the Congo. Rwanda's reason for invading was to force the Rwandan refugees to return and stop them from continuing to threaten the new Rwandan regime, headed by Paul Kagame. Rwanda's reason for staying in the east, however, was economic control. In the 15 or so years that followed, Rwanda has effectively controlled the eastern provinces of the Congo. The mining business goes through Rwanda. Several political and armed groupings (the RCD-G, the CNDP, now the M23) work on Rwanda's behalf to control the east and provide a local cover. Each time the Congolese government tries to assert control over the east, there is a flare-up, a rebellion, in which the Rwandan proxies rise to the challenge. The latest flare-up, in November 2012, in which M23 took Goma and are now negotiating with the Congolese government in Uganda, was indicative of this pattern.

The Economist analyzed this latest round accurately as follows:

"Goma's fall humiliated Congo's president, Joseph Kabila, who yet again watched his army crumble and a chunk of his ramshackle country fall into rebel hands with Rwandan support. But nor was the M23's victory a rousing success for Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame. Foreign donors have cut tens of millions of dollars in promised aid to his country as punishment for helping the rebels." [1]

The cutting of aid to Rwanda, now a member of the UN Security Council, was a political setback for Rwanda's ambitions in the Congo and is the reason M23 is negotiating instead of advancing to the next military objective, at great cost to civilian lives on its path. Because Rwanda's ambitions cannot be fulfilled without the international community, that complex set of donor countries and powers that has the ultimate say in that part of the world.

It is in this context that some of the recent commentaries about "solutions" to the Congo conflict should be read. The key piece is J. Peter Pham's NYT op-ed, "To Save Congo, Let It Fall Apart" [2]. Pham, who works for the NATO-affiliated think tank the Atlantic Council, writes:

"Rather than nation-building, what is needed to end Congo's violence is the opposite: breaking up a chronically failed state into smaller organic units whose members share broad agreement or at least have common interests in personal and community security."

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Pham concludes that *"at least in some extreme cases, the best way to break a cycle of violence is to break up an artificial country in crisis and give it back to its very real people."*

Such a plan, if it were accepted by the international community, would be the perfect culmination of Rwanda's plans: the Kivus would become occupied statelets, whose mining wealth flows directly to the West, via Rwanda and Uganda and the various networks that the UN Expert Panels have repeatedly described in detail over the past decade. There is no reason to think that destroying the Congo's sovereignty would lead to democracy. Rather than reversing the de facto occupation, it would give it legal status.

The current Congolese government is unpopular in the Kivus, but this is at least in part because it has neglected the east and failed to protect it from external predation by the Congo's neighbours. The solution to this cannot be to hand the east over to those neighbours. Federalism and decentralization are popular proposals in the Congo, but Congolese nationalism is strong - no one is interested in breaking the country up.

But even if no Congolese are interested in the breakup of their country, Pham is not alone. Sam Akaki, writing for a Ugandan newspaper, *The Daily Monitor*, asks the rhetorical question: "Should Uganda and Rwanda be condemned as meddlers or applauded as midwives in the inevitable birth, by caesarean means, of the Republic of Eastern Congo?" [3] Akaki compares the eastern Congo to South Sudan, but the comparison doesn't make sense. South Sudan fought a war of independence for decades, leading up to a referendum in which the people of the country voted massively and overwhelmingly for independence. The eastern Congo has been under foreign occupation by a country (Rwanda) that has invaded the whole of Congo twice (in 1996 and 1998), an occupation that has led to a broad social collapse and the unnecessary deaths of millions of people.

Territorial integrity and sovereignty are not outmoded concepts, nor are they luxuries for the rich and powerful. Those who talk about partition of the Congo as a solution are offering a prescription for expanded and continued violence.

[1] The Economist. December 8, 2012. [Power Vacuum: Although they have handed back a city, the rebels have not faded away.](#)

[2] J. Peter Pham. November 30, 2012. ["To Save Congo, Let It Fall Apart".](#) NYT.

[3] Sam Akaki, November 23, 2012. ["Will eastern DR Congo be Africa's next baby state?"](#) *The Daily Monitor (Uganda)*.