

# Accounting for violence in Eastern Congo: Young people's narratives of war and peace in North and South Kivu

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## **Abstract**

In the last two decades, wars and mass violence have marked much of the life of ordinary people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In its eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, an entire generation has grown up knowing little else than conflict and deprivation. This article intends to give a voice to young Congolese in this troubled region in the heart of Africa. The article is based on the results of a survey that was conducted at the end of 2009 among nearly one thousand students. It examines the way young people in the Kivu make sense of the prevalence of violence in their home-provinces and the solutions they envision for a peaceful future. In its analysis, the article exposes a predominant role of 'the Rwandese' in Congolese narratives of war and peace. Influenced by fresh memories of war, various respondents exhibited Manichean views and deep-seated feelings of resentment towards those who were deemed responsible for the Congo's recent suffering. This article argues that, unless such understandings and sentiments are acknowledged and addressed, the risk of further escalation of conflict will continue to loom on the horizon. Educational

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and cultural programmes targeting the youth and their views of ‘the other’ are here proposed as a promising peacebuilding measure that should complement existing efforts to promote stability in the region.

## **Introduction**

During the last two decades, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been the scene of unremitting armed conflict and unspeakable violence. While the country has been slowly emerging from war and destruction, its eastern provinces of North and South Kivu continue to be plagued by widespread insecurity. Reports documenting the abuses suffered by communities in the Kivus abound (OHCHR 2010; UNJHRO 2013). So do academic studies which attempt to explain the causes and dynamics of protracted conflict in the region (Chrétien and Banégas 2008; Clark et al. 2002; Lemarchand 2009; Prunier 2008, 2009; Reyntjens 2009; Scherrer 2001; Stearns 2011; Turner 2007). In these accounts, the voices of young people have been largely absent. Although the suffering endured by Congolese children and youth has been widely acknowledged, their experiences and views have not been sufficiently taken into account. This neglect represents an obstacle to adequately understanding and effectively addressing the ordeals of those who constitute the greater number of victims and perpetrators of the recent violence and on whom all hopes for the future are laid.

The present article intends to give a voice to young people in this part of the world. It does so by presenting the results of a survey that was conducted in eastern Congo from September to December 2009 as part of the author’s doctoral research on the politics of history, identity and education in the Great Lakes Region of Africa (Bentrovato 2013). The primary aim of the survey was to explore young people’s historical representations against a backdrop of contested memories and bitter controversies surrounding ‘the historical truth’. Through a standardised questionnaire presenting a series of open-ended questions, respondents were invited to recount and evaluate the history of their nation and its trajectory until the present day, based on their knowledge and experience. They were also prompted to reflect on the history of the surrounding region and

to thereby share their views and opinions on neighbouring countries and their inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

Survey participants included 999 boys and girls who were drawn from sixteen public and private secondary schools. Schools were sampled in the two provincial capitals Goma and Bukavu, in the towns of Rutshuru and Kiwanja in Rutshuru Territory, and in the villages of Sake and Kirotshe in Masisi Territory. Born between 1989 and 1996, most respondents were aged between 13 and 20 at the time of the survey. Among them were young people from various ‘tribes’, including Hunde, Nande, Nyanga, Hutu, Tutsi, Shi and Rega, and from various religious communities, i.e. Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic. While greatly diverse, much of the surveyed population shared a common experience of violence and displacement. The majority reported having been displaced at least once in their lifetime due to wars, rebellions, banditry or natural disasters.

The accounts to which this article provides an insight aim to shed light on how young people in North and South Kivu understand and articulate the experience of violence that deeply affected their communities and their own lives. It includes their personal testimonies of the dramatic events and the lessons they have learnt for the present and the future. The investigation was conducted with the conviction that narratives constitute useful analytical tools for grasping perceptions and feelings held by both individuals and collectivities, including their preoccupations and aspirations. As beliefs and perceptions tend to inform attitudes and behaviours, an inquiry into the way the past and present are understood and framed in societies emerging from violent conflict has the

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1 The questionnaire, which was composed of twenty-five queries, was distributed in schools in eastern DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi to a total of 2500 pupils. This article focuses on Congolese responses to the above-mentioned core questions of the cross-country doctoral study on which it draws. It reports and discusses some of the most meaningful and representative responses to the most relevant guiding questions with regard to the topic of the article. Other questions, the results of which are beyond the scope of this article and will be published elsewhere, aimed to assess the level of young people’s knowledge and interest in the subject of history, to identify the main sources of their historical knowledge, and to invite suggestions on how to improve the teaching of history based on their personal experience.

potential to reveal, explain and perhaps even anticipate the causes and risks of a relapse into war and the possibilities of sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Before examining young people's representations of the recent violence and their visions for the future, the article will sketch the historical context in which their stories were collected. In light of the prominent place of Rwanda in discourses on violence and peace, particular attention is paid to delineate the recent history of bilateral relations and its portrayal by Congolese students living in the perpetual war-zone close to the Congo-Rwanda border.

### **The historical context**

The DRC has known a largely violent recent history. Victim of a notoriously ruthless and exploitative colonial rule, this vast and mineral-rich country in Central Africa has experienced no less turbulent times since independence in 1960. The history of independent Congo has been punctuated by military coups and political assassinations, dictatorship and misrule, wars and rebellions, and mass violence and systematic spoliation. Over the last two decades, unprecedented levels of violence and insecurity have plagued North and South Kivu in particular. On the hills along the Congo-Rwanda border, civilians have suffered immensely as a result of persistent military activities.

Unfriendly relations between the Congo and Rwanda have been regarded as an important driver of this region's enduring and bloody conflict (Reyntjens 2009; Ndaywel è Nziem 2009; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). Their relationship reached breaking point in the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Here, an estimated 800 000 Tutsi and 'moderate Hutu' were brutally massacred in a frenzy steered by Hutu extremists then in power. As Tutsi rebels seized control of the country, numerous *génocidaires* fled into eastern Congo. Based on the argument that the Congo was supporting state terrorists, Rwanda intervened in the affairs of its larger neighbour on several occasions. In 1996, a Rwanda-sponsored rebellion headed by Laurent Kabila conquered power after violently dismantling Hutu refugee camps in the Kivu. Accused of heading a puppet regime, the new Congolese president soon dissociated himself from the former allies. Against a backdrop of escalating tensions, Rwandan troops re-intervened in eastern Congo in 1998. This action

ushered in 'Africa's World War' – 'the deadliest war in the world since World War II and the deadliest in Africa ever recorded' (Coghlan et al. 2004:iii). Rwanda justified its involvement on security and humanitarian grounds. State officials accused the Congolese government of allowing militant Hutu refugees to operate on its territory undisturbed. Also, they denounced massacres, including genocide, against Congolese Tutsi. During the war, anti-Rwanda and especially anti-Tutsi sentiments intensified. Tutsi in the Congo increasingly became the target of demonisation and xenophobic attacks. They were accused of being collaborators and foreign agents in disguise bent on colonising the rich territory (Reyntjens 2009).

The war ended in 2003 under the presidency of Joseph Kabila, son of the murdered Laurent Kabila. Despite the official peace, insecurity continued unabatedly in the Kivus. Among the main spoilers of the peace were undisciplined army soldiers, local Mayi-Mayi militias, the Rwandan Hutu rebellion *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), and renegade army officers, spearheaded by Laurent Nkunda (Stearns 2008). In 2004, this Tutsi officer from North Kivu managed to briefly capture Bukavu with the alleged support of Rwanda. Two years later, he founded the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP), a rebel movement which claimed to want to protect the Tutsi from genocide. Tensions escalated in late 2008, when the CNDP succeeded in reinforcing its military positions in North Kivu. Its military advancement was accompanied by countless abuses, most notably in Kiwanja. Again, while Rwanda was blamed for backing the CNDP, the Congolese State reportedly relied on the FDLR and Mayi-Mayi groups to counter the CNDP threat.

In January 2009, the two states restored diplomatic ties. Presidents Paul Kagame and Joseph Kabila hailed a 'new era' of strengthened bilateral relations following more than a decade of hostilities (Usher 2009). As a sign of rapprochement, the Rwandan authorities arrested Nkunda as he fled across the border. On its part, the Congolese government committed itself to neutralising the FDLR. After three years of relative calm, the renewed friendship faltered in the wake of accusations against Rwanda's alleged military support of the 'M23', a new Tutsi-led rebellion which captured Goma in late 2012, raising fears of yet another regional war (ICG 2012). In November 2013, the rebellion was defeated, with many of its members

retreating to Rwanda and Uganda, where they have been reportedly seeking to regroup (UNSC 2014a). In the meantime, Rwandan Hutu militias continue to destabilise the region, supposedly with the support of Congolese forces.

Twenty years after the 1994 genocide, relations between Rwanda and DR Congo remain tense. In January 2014, tensions surfaced in a verbal clash between the two countries' representatives at a UN Security Council session, bringing to light the continued acrimony and mistrust between the two neighbours (UN 2014b).

### **When life turns into one's own 'worst nightmare': Kivu's violent history seen through young people's eyes**

The Congo's turbulent recent history deeply marked the country's young generation. Their accounts exposed predominantly negative perceptions of the country's past and a resulting sense of pessimism, frustration and resignation towards the present and the future. The Congo was commonly represented as a tragic victim of a 'bad' and 'sad' history of endless pain and distress. Considered by many to have 'plunged into the abyss a long time ago', notably since the arrival of the white colonisers, the country was deemed to have experienced its 'worst nightmare' in the course of the last two decades. This was depicted as a time of greatest suffering by those who were also first-hand witnesses and victims of this history in the making.

In presenting the history of their home-provinces, respondents widely suggested that war had been its dominant feature and a constant variable throughout time – at least since the day they were born. Peace, on the other hand, was believed by some to have never existed in the region. On account of its exceptional volatility, the Kivu was occasionally recognised as occupying a unique place in the country's history. As one student explained,

It is in this part of the Congo that all wars and rebellions originated. It is here that wars and troubles have historically reigned up until today.

Congolese pupils illustrated at length the violence to which their communities had been subjected in recent years. They recurrently referred to the 'horrible' and 'grave' human rights abuses and the 'unjustifiable crimes' that had taken place in a climate of unremitting insecurity and impunity. These included killings, sexual

violence, abduction and forced conscription, forced labour and enslavement, and pillage and destruction of property. Students often drew attention to the brutal nature of the abuses and to the low value attributed to human life in the Kivu. Innocent people, including their loved ones, were said to have been slaughtered 'like animals' and to have been 'dying like flies'. Vivid imagery associated with the element of blood was used to depict the extreme violence that had plagued the Kivu. One respondent portrayed his province as a 'red' region, where 'blood is flooding in the streets'.

Insecurity was reported to have caused massive death, displacement, and disease, as well as a general disruption of every-day life activities and a consequent aggravation of socio-economic hardship. The lack of security was seen as a primary cause of the region's chronic condition of poverty, unemployment, famine and malnutrition. According to one respondent, 'parents suffer because we can no longer harvest due to the FDLR who roam from field to field and our military who steal our crops secretly'. Students recounted the direct impact war had had on their life. They highlighted, for instance, how their education had been regularly disrupted due to forced displacement and the impossibility of paying school fees as a result of their parents' assets being pillaged or destroyed. According to one pupil's testimony, '[i]n North Kivu, we always have war, and our studies therefore cannot evolve'.

Young people's accounts revealed widespread recognition of the shared victimhood of all civilians living in the war-torn areas of eastern Congo. As one girl pointed out, 'everybody has been affected by the war, including women, children, and the elderly'. Another pupil underscored people's miserable existential condition by affirming that 'the Congolese man suffers'. Confronted with ongoing suffering, young Congolese lamented a lack of efforts to ensure truth and justice for the committed abuses. They expressed little hope of ever achieving accountability and redress for the violent death of their family and friends.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Rwanda was believed by some to be able to 'help us become civilised and organised'. Echoing the appreciations often uttered by young Congolese, one respondent pointed out that, 'in neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, there is good work ethic, respect of laws and punishment for everybody who infringes on them, [and] less corruption. They are small countries, but they are well-organised, and they respect and value their wealth'.

## **‘Who is behind all this suffering?’: ‘The Rwandan threat’ and the externally imposed misery**

The question of responsibility for the general state of despair in the Kivu was frequently raised by young Congolese. Overall, they appeared to have little doubt about the identity of those to blame for the region’s perpetual suffering.

Fingers were occasionally pointed at local actors. Accusations were levelled against the Congo’s selfish, corrupt, and incompetent leaders. One student, for instance, blamed the insecurity caused by army soldiers on a government that had failed to take charge of the needs of the ‘courageous’ military. Their unlawful activities were justified by suggesting that soldiers had been obliged to steal from the population in order to cater for their welfare. Others traced the problem of child-soldiers and juvenile delinquency to the government’s neglect of the needs of young people in the Kivu. They referred in particular to the State’s inability to guarantee adequate education and employment opportunities to the youth of eastern Congo. According to these respondents, such a deplorable situation had forced many desperate and frustrated youngsters to abandon their homes and to live on the street, exposing themselves to the risk of recruitment into militias and criminal gangs. More rarely, accounts denounced an unpatriotic population that had been insufficiently supportive of the government’s efforts to counter the country’s various security threats.

The threats to which pupils commonly alluded were perceived to have primarily come from abroad. According to the dominant narrative recounted by young Congolese, at the core of the recurrent violence in the Kivu were its enviable natural resources, which had turned the region into a much-coveted booty for rapacious foreign stakeholders. Rather than a blessing, the exceptional wealth with which the country had been endowed was thus widely viewed as a curse that had brought misery and poverty instead of progress and development. Among the threatening outside forces were ‘the whites’ or ‘the Westerners’, especially ‘the Americans’. They were at times unequivocally accused of being ‘the main cause of our misery’ and the ‘real winners’ of ‘our’ wars. For the most part, their guilt, according to students’ accounts, consisted in having repeatedly hidden behind the various armed groups that had ravaged the country, financing and arming them with the aim of gaining

access to the Congo's wealth. In particular, Western countries were criticised for having backed the criminal activities of the main spoilers of the peace in the Kivu: the Rwandese. Occasionally depicted as mere puppets of neo-colonial powers, regional actors, spearheaded by Rwanda and its people, were typically situated at the top of the list of wrongdoers in the Congo. 'It was them', many argued, who were responsible for bringing war and extreme violence to the DRC. According to a student in Bukavu,

In South Kivu, people used to live together peacefully in the past. The situation however changed with the war that was brought by our neighbour Rwanda.

The centrality of Rwanda in the understanding of the recent violence expressed by young Congolese clearly emerged in their analyses of the origins of the Congo's 'worst-ever nightmare'. Two events were identified as marking the region's dramatic rise in insecurity. The first was the 1994 genocide. The students pointed to the devastating effects of the massive influx of militant Rwandan Hutu refugees following the 'Tutsi' take-over of Rwanda. The second was the First Congo War of 1996–1997. The respondents referred to Laurent Kabila's initial alliance with the Rwandese during his 'liberation war' against Mobutu's dictatorship and to the subsequent 'invasion' by Rwanda following Kabila's unfulfilled promise to relinquish parts of eastern Congo to his former allies.

The Rwandese were often collectively blamed for the extreme suffering that the Kivu had experienced in the last two decades. They were demonised by reproducing negative stereotypes that have long circulated in the region. In accordance with old clichés associated with the Tutsi in particular, Congolese respondents widely depicted Rwandans as bellicose, ruthless, domineering, parasitic, deceitful and cunning people. History was believed to have shown that Rwandans are a people of criminals, killers, rapists, and *génocidaires*. According to one student, they were in fact 'the biggest murderers of the whole region'. Accounts reported how Rwandans had first exposed their 'bad heart' and 'satanic spirit' in 1994, when 'they massacred their own parents and siblings'. These 'evil' people were said to have subsequently turned their malevolence towards the western neighbour, thus demonstrating their unrestrained thirst for power and their strong 'spirit of conquest, expansion and domination'. Referring to the Rwandese as 'aggressors', 'invaders', and 'tyrants',

various respondents observed that Rwanda, together with its Ugandan and Burundian collaborators, had proven to be 'our great enemies' as they turned the Congo into a battlefield and into 'a cake to be shared'. Congolese students frequently explained their country's misery through its misfortune of bordering envious, greedy, and hostile nations which had persistently sought to destabilise their once powerful neighbour with the aim of 'colonising' and annexing its rich eastern regions. In the words of one respondent in Rutshuru,

Our province of North Kivu has known several wars because we live next to countries that want to expand, especially Rwanda. These foreigners tirelessly try to occupy us and to drive us away, we the owners.

Another respondent similarly lamented that 'these impostors breathe with our oxygen, evolving and enriching themselves thanks to the Congo's wealth at our expense'. In the students' views, foreign predatory practices, coupled with the government's inability to control and exploit Kivu's resources, had caused a country as potentially rich as the Congo, 'which does not lack anything', to become one of the poorest countries in the world.

Congolese respondents abundantly described the adverse role played by Rwandans in the Congo and the 'horrible' crimes and abuses they had reportedly committed there. Embracing a widely accepted Manichean representation of Congo-Rwanda relations, one pupil affirmed that 'Rwandans don't like us; they hate us and abuse us'. A Hunde student in Sake vividly recounted,

In the province of North Kivu, for example in Walikale, people suffer a lot because of Rwanda, which is hidden there. I know and have seen with my own eyes the war of the Rwandan rebels: they have killed us, and raped our mothers and our sisters; they have stolen our minerals, and taken our fields and our animals by force; they have burned our houses and built houses for themselves. The Rwandan invaders treat the Congolese like their dogs and behave as if this was their territory.

Brute force was believed to have been commonly used by the 'barbaric' Rwandese to achieve their malicious aims. Revealing deep mistrust towards their Rwandan neighbours, young Congolese also warned of their innate hypocrisy

and dishonesty, and of their tendency to conceal their true nature with the purpose of advancing their vested interests. Two respondents observed,

The Rwandese are complicated people; you never know what their position is. That is why I am afraid of them.

The Rwandese are cunning people and their aims are well-hidden. But I can see that the Rwandese have been engaging in a hidden conflict with the Congo. Like in the story of 'the Crow and the Fox', the Rwandese pretend to love us, but in reality they have other ideas in their mind: they only think about the wealth of our country.

In relation to the supposed untrustworthy nature of the Rwandese, Congolese students reproduced the stereotype of the beautiful but mischievous Rwandan girls, who had the 'habit' of entertaining secretive relationships with their 'brothers' whilst pretending to be loyal to their Congolese partners. Besides references to concealed emotions and hidden objectives, another recurrent theme, related to the accusation of Rwandans' duplicity, was an almost paranoid denunciation of a Rwandan 'habit' of lying about their real identity and of 'infiltrating' the DRC by pretending to be Congolese. Exposing such fraudulent practices, a Nande student in Goma stated,

The DRC had welcomed the refugees from Rwanda and up until today they continue to infiltrate our province saying they are Congolese. They like to invade our country under false name. But I know that it's Rwanda that is the main actor of everything that has been taking place here in the Congo.

### **'The Hutu FDLR' and 'the Tutsi CNDP': Living at the mercy of two 'Rwandan' evils**

Whereas Rwandans were often indistinctly blamed for the Congo's misery, in numerous cases students were more precise in pinpointing the ethnic and political affiliation of the assailants. On the one hand, fingers were pointed at the Hutu FDLR. These Rwandan rebels were widely reported to have been wreaking havoc in the region since fleeing Rwanda in 1994. One respondent from Walikale recounted,

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Here in North Kivu we suffer a lot: the Rwandan Hutu FDLR rebels threaten us, killing and raping people, and stealing their goods.

The cross-border military pursuit of these insurgents by the Rwandan national army was mentioned as an additional cause of suffering. According to a Hunde respondent in Kiwanja,

Today, we are bothered by Rwanda, which says it is looking for the FDLR while they are in fact mistreating the Congolese.

On the other hand, countless accusations were levelled against the 'Nilotic' Tutsi. In the words of a Hutu respondent in Sake,

The Tutsi always trouble us here ... there are some Nilotics who bring wars to North Kivu. They are the ones who planted hatred between Hunde and Hutu. Thank God today we are united.

No clear distinction was generally made between Rwandan and Congolese Tutsi. The 'Tutsi enemy' was typically associated both with the Rwandan government and its army, and with 'their' CNDP rebellion. Reported to have 'come from Rwanda' and to have been led by 'a Tutsi of Rwandan origins', Nkunda's rebel movement was commonly denounced for collaborating with the Rwandan government with the aim of taking over the Kivu and the entire country. A Nande respondent in Kiwanja maintained that,

It's the Rwandans who threaten us through their CNDP rebels, killing the population, stealing and smuggling the rich resources of the Congo into Rwanda, looking for fertile lands for their cows, wanting to dominate us and to annex the Congo to Rwanda and wanting to be Congolese by force, but without results.

Another student further challenged the 'so-called' 'Congolese' identity of these 'Tutsi from Rwanda'. This respondent reiterated a belief in the connivance between Rwanda and the CNDP as well as in a practice of Rwandan 'infiltration under false name'. He declared,

I lived with so-called Congolese Tutsi who came from Rwanda in 1994. They are the ones who form militias such as Nkunda's CNDP, who forced us to work for them.

Congolese students provided numerous first-hand testimonies of 'Nkunda's War'. In South Kivu, respondents spoke of '*la guerre de Mutembusi et de Nkunda*' of 2004 and of the brief seizure of Bukavu by these 'two Rwandan rebels'. In North Kivu, accounts referred to the wars that had been fought between 2006 and 2009 in the respondents' home-towns of Kiwanja, Sake, and Rutshuru. The CNDP was accused of brutally and indiscriminately killing and wounding innocent civilians, including babies and the elderly; of raping women and girls of all ages; of kidnapping and enslaving civilians, including young boys, forcing them to transport weapons and ammunition; of displacing many, both internally and externally; of pillaging and destroying goods and properties; and of causing hunger and disease. Students in Kiwanja offered their personal testimony of how, a year prior to the survey, their town had been the victim of a 'terrible' massacre or a 'genocide', during which, as recounted by one respondent, 'the FARDC [national army] soldiers were fleeing faster than the population'. In reaction to the suffering caused by Nkunda's men, Congolese pupils referred to the fresh capture and imprisonment of 'this criminal' with joy and relief. Feelings of satisfaction were nevertheless mitigated by suspicions surrounding the circumstances of Nkunda's arrest and subsequent custody in Rwanda. Echoing expressions of frustration at a lack of clarity and accountability for heinous crimes committed in the country, questions were raised about the veracity of reports on Nkunda's imprisonment as well as about the reasons why this villain had continued to 'hide' in Rwanda instead of being handed over to the Congo to face justice.

A contrasting view was presented by one of the very few Tutsi respondents who participated in the survey. Rather than depicting the CNDP as a tormentor of the Congo, this pupil's account exalted the movement as a defender of the Congolese population from the threat posed by the Rwandan FDLR and as a guarantor of peace and security in the Kivu. Here, Nkunda was portrayed as the founder and leader of a righteous movement, as a man who had been committed to peace and whose legacy needed to be preserved in the wake of his disappearance from the Congolese scene. In the words of this respondent,

Since the day I was born, I have heard of the FDLR, who came from Rwanda after having exterminated the Tutsi people of Rwanda and who fled to Congo, causing insecurity in North Kivu. As the FDLR was killing and displacing

many, the CNDP came to defend the Congolese people from the Rwandan people's FDLR. During the time that the CNDP was here, we have had a period of agricultural activities. Now that its founder Nkunda is no longer there, each of us is responsible for promoting the ideas that he left us in order to live well with our neighbours and with foreigners.

### **Bringers of an elusive peace: the State, God, and the UN**

Young Congolese elaborated extensively on those they considered to be responsible for starting the war and for committing odious crimes against civilians. Conversely, little attention was paid to the efforts made by various parties to resolve the country's political crises. Among those who were seen as having worked towards bringing peace to the Kivu was incumbent President Joseph Kabila. He was portrayed as a peacemaker who had promoted both internal dialogue and a bilateral rapprochement with Rwanda. The figure of God was also recurrent. Religious arguments were frequently used to explain both the hardship experienced and the relief brought by peace efforts. While the war was depicted by a student as 'a test of God', its (elusive) end was presented as the result of 'divine grace' and of 'the almighty God' acting through the hand of the president. More rarely, young Congolese recognised the contribution made by the international community to the management and resolution of the conflict. They were particularly thankful to the UN, and more specifically to its peacekeeping force, for its role in supporting peace through demobilisation activities.

Whilst extolled by some for their positive involvement in the Kivu, both the Congolese government and the international community were occasionally criticised for 'doing nothing' and for 'having turned a blind eye to the violence'. The most critical accounts accused government officials of having allowed foreigners to have free rein in eastern Congo and to practise what was referred to as 'neo-colonialism' or 'indirect' and 'clandestine colonialism'. Deep concerns were expressed about the risk that the Kivu might one day be sold by corrupt politicians. In the view of young Congolese, their leaders had proven not only unable to seriously confront and counter negative foreign forces, but also willing to give in to their provocations. In the words of one student in Goma,

Here in the Congo I can see that soon our province could be sold if we don't pay attention, because our authorities are very corruptible and our neighbours are ready to buy our country.

The national army as well, whose soldiers were variously depicted as brave men or as coward defectors, was generally represented as having failed in its task to protect the population and defend the nation. In a few cases, the military response against the perceived Rwandan menace was said not to have been sufficiently supported by a civilian population which was otherwise usually depicted as a passive and defenceless victim of its 'evil tormentors'. Only a handful of accounts stressed the courage of Congolese patriots who had stayed behind to help the national army defend the country against the aggressors. Among them was the testimony of a Hunde student from Masisi Territory. Highlighting the support to the army's resistance given by his entourage, he proudly stated, 'as for us, we have fought side by side with the government's soldiers'.

As for God, his actions were never questioned or challenged. In not a single case did students express a loss of faith in God or a belief of having been abandoned by their 'Father' and 'Saviour'. Congolese respondents demonstrated a strong reliance on God by summoning his help in the country's recovery from anguish and despair. Placing the country in God's hands, one student invoked his protection by stating,

God help us against the Rwandans, who want to take our land; God help us to survive and to live in peace again.

### **Addressing relations with the (former) enemies for the sake of peace: Young people's hopes and fears**

Addressing relations with the Rwandan neighbours and (former) enemies emerged as a major concern as well as a topic of considerable dissension among young Congolese. Disagreements among the respondents were recorded in relation to their assessment of the nature of current and prospective relations, and their visions and recommendations on how to best prevent further conflict and destabilisation in the region.

## Young people's assessment of current and prospective bilateral relations

Overall, Congolese students seemed to agree that bilateral relations had been conflicted in the past. Looking ahead, they were found, however, to substantially diverge in their assessment of the current situation and in their expectations for the future.

Among the most positive narratives were accounts that expressed hope about the Congo's improved relations with its Rwandan 'neighbours', also defined as 'friends' and 'brothers'. In these accounts, the emphasis was placed on reporting the two countries' extensive cooperation in such fields as diplomacy, security, humanitarian assistance, economy and commerce, and energy. They mentioned the re-opening of each other's embassies; the military alliance against the FDLR during the joint operation *Umoja Wetu*; the assistance provided to each other's refugees, for instance during the 2002 volcanic eruption in Goma; the promotion of commercial exchanges in the framework of the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL), as well as a deal on joint power generation. This promising evolution was said to have been confirmed at the 2009 Goma meeting during which the countries' presidents had expressed their commitment to strengthen bilateral ties. While generally positive, these accounts revealed a varying level of confidence in the reported process of rapprochement. Several students showed their trust in the successful resolution of past conflicts. According to one of them,

Our neighbours have always been our friends, despite a few occasions of conflict, which have now been resolved.

Others instead disclosed a degree of uncertainty about the chances of seeing this much-welcomed process succeed. As explained by one respondent,

Today we are in a phase of resolution of the profound regional conflicts and wars of aggression that had developed with our neighbours since 1996. Lately we have started to improve our relations with them, hoping that this time they have put their hands on their hearts and will respect the commitments to cease their bad habits of invading us.

In contrast to narratives that emphasised the recent reconciliation between the Congo and Rwanda, a divergent view described bilateral relations as continuing to be dire. In the words of one student, 'Rwandans and Congolese don't like each other; they fight like cats and dogs'. In these more negative accounts, official acts of cooperation and solidarity were either utterly overlooked or strongly played down. In the latter cases, young Congolese highlighted the mere political nature of the rapprochement and the failure of this process to take root among the people. Opinions seemed again to differ with regard to the prospects and expectations of a possible resolution of hostilities. The more hopeful predictions for Congo-Rwanda relations augured a termination of the ongoing conflict:

According to history and from what I see today, relations between us and especially Rwanda are not good. Disagreements exist between us, but I know that they will end one day.

Gloomier analyses instead projected a continuation of hostilities and even a looming scenario of apocalyptic inter-state war. One student declared that,

I think we will always have problems between us. In fact, according to me, one day a terrible fight will break out between the DRC and Rwanda. In the Kivu especially, everyone who is Congolese will eventually end up being either a soldier or a Mayi-Mayi to fight against Rwanda.

### **The way forward to long-lasting peace: Young people's visions and recommendations for the future**

In their narratives of war and peace, young Congolese commonly expressed their vision and recommendations for the way forward in Congo-Rwanda relations. The majority of respondents seemed to hope for strengthened regional dialogue, unity, and cooperation for the sake of long-term peace and prosperity. In the words of two students:

We must reconcile with each other, because eternal conflicts will not build anything. The past is the past. Let's now prepare for the future.

We must unite because unity is strength, and we must love each other because in this world neighbours must be best friends.

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In these statements, responsibility for an improvement of relations appears to be felt as having to be equally shared between Rwandans and Congolese. In other narratives, the obligation to amend the relationship between the two countries and peoples was instead primarily placed on Rwandans. Based on the understanding that Rwandans had been the principal source of Congolese suffering in recent years, their behavioural and attitudinal change towards the neighbours was often presented as holding the key to regional peace. One respondent declared:

Rwandans have to understand that it's time for them to make peace and to be polite towards their neighbours. In fact, if the Rwandese were to cease their provocations and aggressions, we could finally unite in a common fight against poverty and under-development.

Against the backdrop of 'provocations' that were believed to be hindering peace and reconciliation, several specific suggestions were advanced on ways in which Rwandans could restore relations. In particular, Rwandans were urged:

- to cease their militant activities in the DRC and, especially, to stop supporting rebels such as the CNDP;
- to extradite Nkunda, 'the aggressor of the Congo', so that he could face justice at the International Criminal Court (ICC);
- to renounce their expansionist aims and to acknowledge that 'our country belongs to us';
- to accept and be frank about their Rwandan identity, and to stop calling themselves Congolese; and, finally,
- to favour the repatriation of the FDLR.

Whereas the abandonment of 'bad' practices by Rwanda was generally placed at the centre of a possible resolution of hostilities, the main responsibility conferred on the Congolese themselves was a preparedness to forgive their neighbours for the committed wrongdoing. As affirmed by one student,

We are obliged to live in peace with our neighbours, and we have to forgive them for all the pain they have caused us.

Occasionally, the Congolese were encouraged to leave the past behind and to reconcile with their 'hangmen' based on religious arguments. One respondent maintained that the Congo's neighbours, regardless of their misdeeds, 'deserve

to be loved because they are also God's children'. A different argument in favour of forgiveness towards the Rwandese was raised by another student. Showing his faith in humanity, this young Congolese pleaded the former enemies to be given a second chance to prove themselves good neighbours. In his words, 'human beings can change: the enemies of yesterday can become the friends of tomorrow'. In a few of the responses, Congolese pupils demonstrated their personal willingness to reconcile with the neighbours. Among them was a young respondent who asserted her intention to follow the example set by President Kabila. She declared,

I think I will visit Rwanda one day. As our president met and signed an agreement with Rwanda's president, me too I am going to have a relationship with the people of Rwanda.

A certain readiness to surmount past hostilities was likewise expressed by a student who, while still evidently resentful towards Rwandans, appeared to be willing to open a dialogue that could repair damaged relations. In his words,

I find it difficult with those people, but if debates were organised, perhaps the situation could be remedied and I could change my mind towards them.

Such reconciliatory views and attitudes were not shared by all respondents. Holding on to a memory of the 'criminal' involvement of Rwandans in the Congo's affairs, a noticeable number of young Congolese revealed deep feelings of mistrust, fear, resentment, and revenge, as well as hostile dispositions towards their eastern neighbours. In a rather confrontational tone, one student seemed to solicit a robust collective reaction to the perceived imposed suffering. He provocatively stated:

This war is caused by some Rwandans who invade us all the time to take over eastern Congo, making us suffer a lot. If one day they were to succeed, we will be killed by the Rwandans. So, the question is: what are we going to do about it?

Overtly antagonistic visions of the best way forward were not uncommon. Rather than encouraging and welcoming increased and improved relations with Rwandans, these respondents abhorred and warned against any rapprochement with 'those people'. This position was founded on the belief that a 'soft' approach would only grant Rwandans the opportunity to cunningly advance their predatory aims whilst disguising them as attempts at reconciliation. Their recommendation

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to the Congolese authorities was to definitively break all relations with Rwandans on account of their being both unnecessary and deleterious. These youngsters suggested the expulsion of all Rwandans after establishing who is and who is not Congolese as well as the closure of all borders in order to protect the country from foreign intruders and insurgents and from further exploitation. Three statements are particularly striking for their unequivocal expression of xenophobic fears and ideals of (ethno-)national purity:

At the moment we do not know who is Rwandan and who is not. There is a total confusion with the wars they impose on us. Let the Rwandese stay Rwandese and the Congolese be Congolese.

Everybody has to return to his own country; we don't want this agreement that opens the borders because they will then come to our country to exploit and to steal our land for their cows. I say No!

I think that if we could have the Tutsi return to Egypt, and the Hutu FDLR to Rwanda, we would finally have peace. In the end, the Tutsi in Rwanda should recognise that the Hutu are *originaires* and that the country belongs to them.

Concerns were specifically raised about the thousands of Congolese Tutsi refugees still living in Rwanda. Their prospective return to the DRC was seen both as a potential source of renewed conflict and as a new opportunity for Rwandans to shrewdly infiltrate the Kivu to pursue their agenda. As stated by one student,

I think that we could still have conflicts, because they say that they are Congolese while everywhere we can have infiltrators coming from Rwanda. We should put an end to this.

Several respondents showed a personal refusal to reconcile with those against whom they appeared to still hold deep rancour. Such sentiments were strongly conveyed by three students in particular. One expressed her intention to abstain from any contact with her neighbours; the other two communicated their desire to avenge the suffering caused by the enemies:

Personally, I don't want to have anything to do with the Rwandese. I have a bad memory of them and I really don't like them. In fact, nobody in my family likes them, and every time we see these foreigners we feel bad because of the war they bring us.

I wish the Rwandese our same suffering. Once there will be war in their country, we will not help them and we will support their enemies. I want them killed.

Nkunda's war in North Kivu has killed many people. That is why, if there is a way to revolt against the Rwandans, and if they tell people to go there, I think I will also go.

Two other students, respectively from North and South Kivu, similarly articulated a readiness to take up arms to defend the homeland from a threat of Rwandan domination and occupation. They declared:

The Rwandese are my enemies because they want to take my Congo, and I will fight them if I need to. Rwanda has no reason to try and take North Kivu because this is a province of the DRC, our country; this is the land that our ancestors left us.

I am Congolese and I am proud of it. I will remain Congolese and I will defend my beloved homeland from its enemies until I die.

These statements reflected young people's widespread feelings of patriotic love and pride, of ancestral attachment to Congolese land, as well as of reverence towards the readiness to fight and die for what was recurrently referred to as 'my beloved and beautiful country' and 'my dear homeland'. Heroism, according to young Congolese, was mainly determined by martyrdom in defending the nation against foreign menaces. One student explained, '[i]n our country we have two national heroes: Lumumba and Mzee Kabila; they are our heroes because they died for our country'. Once again, religious arguments were not lacking in students' narratives on the way forward. Rather than encouraging forgiveness, religion was this time summoned in a context of retribution. Young Congolese raised the concept of divine ordeal, whereby Rwanda, described by a student as 'a damned nation', would eventually have to account for its wrongdoing before God. In the words of one respondent,

As a child, I don't have a bad heart towards this country. I know that God will make Rwanda pay for what it did to us.

## **Breaking the cycle of violence: Addressing young people's negative views of the 'other'**

The findings summarised in this article lead to the conclusion that the memory of the recent violence experienced in the Kivu, and of the adverse role allegedly played by Rwandans in the region, is deeply ingrained in the minds of the Congo's young generation and continues to feed negative stereotyping and prejudice against the eastern neighbours. This memory appears to have influenced young people's level of confidence in the resolution of historical conflicts between the two countries, with predictions for the future ranging from a peaceful end of all hostilities to the gloomier projection of an all-out war. Tired of suffering, the majority of respondents seemed to hope for reconciliation on condition that Rwanda abandon its longstanding 'criminal' practices in the Congo. Feelings of mistrust and resentment were however found to be also widespread, leading some to warn against any rapprochement with 'the enemies' and to articulate their willingness to fight against 'the Rwandan threat'.

The many resolute expressions of mistrust, hostility and vengefulness that emerged in the survey expose the considerable challenges of changing perceptions and repairing relations in this conflict-ridden region. While the existence of antagonistic and uncompromising views among the Congo's young generation raises concerns for the future, the survey also indicated a possible way out of a cycle of revenge and conflict escalation. A review of students' testimonies demonstrated how the painful experience of war almost invariably led to the conclusion that Rwandans are 'bad neighbours'. Conversely, direct experiences in settings that transcended this clearly traumatic event, for instance in the everyday life with Rwandan schoolmates, neighbours and visitors, proved to be more diverse and to elicit different sentiments, i.e. negative or positive. As reported *in extenso* in Table 1, in telling their experience with Rwandans in settings beyond war, some students recounted stories of abuse and hostility that confirmed and reinforced negative perceptions of Rwandans. Others instead told stories of friendship and kindness, which explicitly challenged and debunked 'common knowledge' on the wickedness of the Rwandese. Generally, the more reconciliatory opinions and attitudes appeared to be shaped by a direct positive experience with 'the other', which had prompted a reconsideration of common negative stances that had been nurtured by a haunting memory of war and by hear-say.

**Table 1. Experiences by young Congolese with their Rwandan neighbours**

Negative experiences and confirmation of prejudices	Positive experiences and debunking of prejudices
<b>DURING THE WAR IN THE DRC</b>	
<p><i>The only experience that I have with the Rwandese is their war against us. My personal experience with Rwanda is that when the Rwandese come to the DRC we experience theft, violence and killings. Personally, I had a childhood friend, and the Rwandese cut his head and raped his sister to death. Since then, and to this day, I hate Rwanda.</i></p>	
<b>IN EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE DRC</b>	
<p><i>I have never been to Rwanda, but I see these foreigners in our country, and seeing what they did and do here, I don't like them.</i></p>	<p><i>I have never been to Rwanda, but I have studied with some Rwandans in my school here, and we are good friends. By spending time with them I discovered their good heart in comparison with what people here think of them.</i></p>
<b>DURING DISPLACEMENT TO RWANDA IN THE WAKE OF THE 2002 VOLCANIC ERUPTION</b>	
<p><i>At the time of the volcanic eruption that displaced us, they didn't take good care of us. They must have forgotten how we welcomed them during their genocides.</i></p>	<p><i>I have good memories of the Rwandese, who are believed to be mean people and brutal killers. At the time of the volcanic eruption, they proved to have a good heart in welcoming and taking good care of us. My family and I, for instance, were displaced to Gisenyi, where we were received by people whom we didn't even know. They welcomed us in their homes for a few days, giving us a place to stay and food. Hereby I want to thank them again.</i></p>
<b>DURING VISITS TO RWANDA</b>	
<p><i>If a Congolese goes to Rwanda today, he will be mistreated and will risk his life. For example, one day I was in Gisenyi, and I was robbed of everything I had because I am Congolese. Instead they come here, walking with their revolvers on the street, and doing what they want in our country.</i></p>	<p><i>Rwanda is a country which the Congolese suspect of being inhabited by very mean people, whereas when I arrived there I was very well received by our friends the Rwandese.</i></p>

The contrast that emerges from the respondents' testimonies validates the importance of investing in opportunities that can favour positive and constructive contact. In its reflection on possible avenues to promote peace in Central Africa, this article argues that greater investment should be made in initiatives which are aimed at building bridges between young people in the region and at providing opportunities for them to connect and to positively engage with each other, for instance in the framework of cross-border sporting, cultural and social activities, as part of a larger array of measures aimed at reconciling nations among which tensions have long been rife. Through initiatives that facilitate positive encounters and interactions in a safe environment and that promote dialogue and collective action, chances can be created to surmount division and tension and to bolster young people's commitment to non-violent conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Ideally, such encounters would encourage the development and strengthening of a sense of belonging to a larger community, thereby raising the stakes for averting renewed armed conflict in the region. The positive impact of such initiatives, which have been extensively experimented with in conflict-ridden societies elsewhere in the world, such as Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Bosnia, and Israel (McKeown and Cairns 2012; Abu-Nimer 2004; Hodson and Hewstone 2012), was confirmed by two Congolese respondents who recounted,

Despite our past misunderstandings, my relations with our Rwandan neighbours are perfect today because we have the chance to organise sports events, which have brought us together, reinforcing our relations.

Today I love our neighbours and I don't keep grudges against them. By meeting them, I've realised that what happened was caused by a few crooked individuals and that their actions don't have to result in cutting relations that were acquired long time ago.

Rather than being *ad hoc*, such opportunities, which have thus far been greatly neglected in peacebuilding work in the region, should preferably become a component of much-needed structural educational programmes that are geared towards the deconstruction of prejudice, negative stereotypes and of images of the enemy, and towards the appreciation of the experiences, views and feelings of 'the others'. These should constitute an integral part of endeavours aimed

at forming the next generation of leaders and at promoting understanding, solidarity and cooperation in this protractedly unstable part of the world. In the future, structural interventions in this field can encompass a coordinated process of curriculum and textbook revision that would better respond to the need to promote young people's critical appreciation of the region's history and current affairs, and expose them to the stories of 'the other' across the border. In light of the particular challenges involved in dealing with the shared violent past, efforts should eventually be made to ensure that schools in the region teach about mutual experiences of past and present suffering while at the same time encouraging young people across the border to work towards a shared future. Schools should sensitise pupils to the reality that the history and destiny of Rwanda and DR Congo are deeply interconnected, and that any way out of conflict and misery is necessarily a path that ought to be taken together. Joint investigative commissions can be formed to support regional educational programmes and to guarantee accuracy and inclusiveness of views in didactic materials. Regional organisations would be well-positioned to play a decisive role in favouring such cross-border activities as part of efforts to promote cultural integration and cooperation for the sake of regional understanding and cohesion. Inevitably, the success of these types of initiatives greatly relies on a genuine willingness on the part of national governments to loosen their typical and sometimes paralysing grip on public narratives about the nation's past, present, and future.

### **Conclusion**

This article has aimed to give a voice to the experiences and views of young people living in the Congo's volatile provinces of North and South Kivu. Their narratives of war and peace conveyed a widespread sense of national victimhood at the hands of external forces, most notably 'the Rwandese'. In what appeared to be told as a story of Rwandan wickedness in the Congo, the emphasis was placed on describing the abuses endured by a defenceless Congolese population. Influenced by fresh and vivid memories of war, numerous students displayed deep-seated mistrust, resentment and vengefulness towards those who were deemed responsible for the Congo's recent suffering. In light of the reported findings, this

article ultimately warns against the risk of further conflict escalation by laying bare a situation which could provide fertile ground for violent mobilisation. In a context in which structural drivers of youth involvement in violence seem to abound, including general frustration and disillusionment due to deprivation and prolonged exposure to armed conflict, one should be particularly wary of discourses which attempt to offer explanations and solutions to people's past and present ordeals by drawing on traumatic memories to single out a collective identity group. It is the conviction of the author that, as long as young people's antagonistic understandings and sentiments are not systematically addressed, for instance through educational and cultural programmes, the cycle of violence and revenge will likely continue. This article concludes with a plea to capitalise upon the potential positive impact of initiatives promoting young people's constructive encounters with 'the other'. Such initiatives should be further developed as a promising peacebuilding measure that could effectively contribute to breaking the cycle of violence in this chronically unstable region of the world.

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