

## Once more up the river

Oliver August GOMA

Governments will have another go at making peace in Congo

The hills around Lake Kivu are alive with gunfire. Thunder-claps rattle cracked windows. United Nations troops trade shells with rebel units dug into the lush land above the shore, a sign that the outside world is working up the courage to confront turmoil in Congo, where millions have died violently or prematurely since the start of a civil war in 1998. Peacemakers have repeatedly failed to end the blood-letting, but diplomats are nonetheless drawing up new intervention plans for 2014. Envoys are consulting regional leaders and international conferences are pencilled into diaries amid talk of a window of opportunity.

### Congo's helpers say they have learned the lessons of past failures

The buzz of activity is in part inspired by what has happened in Somalia in the past two years. That country's two-decade-long civil war is winding down after concerted intervention by African troops and Western governments. Long considered insoluble, Somalia now supplies the confidence for another attempt at fixing Congo, Africa's biggest wound.

Many things ail the vast nation. The government is not only deeply corrupt

but also wildly disorganised. Its writ runs in only a fraction of the country. Warlords and generals fight each other for control of mineral-rich lands, savaging the population and scaring away investors.

The most prominent rebels call themselves M23, or March 23rd Movement, after the date of a failed peace accord. They operate in the country's far east, close to the border with Rwanda, which supports them; the two have ethnic links. In November 2012 the rebels briefly captured the border city of Goma (while the UN watched) and have since battled government forces in the surrounding hills. At least 800,000 people have fled their homes.

The world responded with three initiatives. First, it augmented the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo with a 3,000-strong intervention force, staffed by South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi, roughly modelled on the African Union force that recaptured the Somali capital, Mogadishu, from Islamic extremists in 2012. It will have the same freedom to go on the offensive, a first for the UN, and more precise equipment, including drones. The troops are sent with the express if controversial mission of fighting and potentially destroying rebel factions. Deployment will be completed at the start of 2014.

Second, Congo's neighbours, who have meddled in fighting in the past, have publicly vowed to work together for peace. They have said so before and Rwanda's continued support for M23 casts doubt on their sincerity. But Rwanda has paid

a political price for its behaviour, not least the loss of international prestige and aid, whereas its neighbours have much to gain economically from a peaceful Congo.

Third, Western governments and international organisations have recovered from the bruising experience of the 2011 election, when Congo's government bullied its way to victory. Sensible voices have insisted that national recovery is unimaginable without government co-operation. Diplomatic traffic to Kinshasa, the capital, is on the increase again. The UN has appointed Mary Robinson, a former Irish president, as its envoy to the region.

### Joined-up thinking

Congo's helpers say they have learned the lessons of past failures. The most important is to understand the interconnectedness of Congo's problems. Raping rebels need to be fought, but simply supporting the government's troops is not the answer. They too have an atrocious record. Reforming the armed forces in turn depends on political will and wherewithal in the capital. That is lacking, because of corruption, poor infrastructure and deep mistrust between rival leaders after years of violent conflict. Fixing one of those problems is hard enough, fixing all harder still. Doing so simultaneously, which seems to be required, is truly daunting.

Nonetheless, the new push for peace in the continental curl of the Congo river is welcome. It may not be the last. The problems are so complex that they may well require many rescue attempts. But the latest one is at least more promising than what came before. ■

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Enter the action men, one hopes