



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Congo 1996–2003

#### Executive Summary

This conflict may be viewed as either an international conflict or as a hybrid conflict, in contrast to a purely civil war or insurgency. It is sometimes referred to as the “First African World War,” in which conflict took place between the military forces of several countries, and fighting took place in Congo (initially Zaire), Rwanda, and Uganda. It could alternatively be viewed as a civil war with extensive military engagement of neighboring countries. The origin of the conflict was the ethnic slaughter within Rwanda between the Hutu majority government and the Tutsi tribes. A genocidal slaughter of the Tutsis in 1994 resulted in close to 1,000,000 killed. The atrocities that occurred in neighboring Rwanda led to more than 2,000,000 refugees relocating to the eastern border of the Congo. The refugee camps became a safe haven for Rwandan Tutsi tribal militants who preyed on the Congolese. Congo’s dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, utilized his military forces to push the Rwandans out of the Congo. Rwanda and Uganda perceived Mobutu’s actions as intolerable and jointly invaded the Congo, leading to the overthrow of Mobutu. He was replaced by the rebel leader Laurent Kabila, who changed the name of the country from Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or “DRC,” in 1996.

After a short time in power, Kabila turned against his Ugandan and Rwandan allies, expelling their forces from the Congo. In 1998, forces from Uganda and Rwanda invaded the Congo again, in an attempt to overthrow Kabila. Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe sent in forces to support Kabila. In 2001, Kabila was assassinated and replaced by his son, Joseph Kabila. Unlike his father, Joseph facilitated the peaceful departure of Rwandan forces, followed by the Pretoria Accord (2002), which led to the withdrawal of foreign forces and ended the fighting between warring factions. A transitional government was established, which made Joseph Kabila president, with four vice presidents that represented the “former government, former rebel groups, the political opposition, and civil society.”<sup>1</sup>

The Congo Civil Wars (1996–97 and 1998–2003) were considered to be in proportion with that of World War II, with nine African countries involved in the fighting and with over 3,000,000 killed from violence, disease, and starvation.<sup>2</sup> The DRC continues to be stricken with political unrest, poor infrastructure, widespread poverty, and malnutrition. Uneven wealth dispersion with three out of five Congolese living on \$1.25 per day maintains a high level of instability.<sup>3</sup> Interethnic violence continues throughout the DRC, which can be attributed to groups trying to control portions of the country’s abundance in mineral resources.

#### Assessing the Five Factors

##### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**No.** (40 percent) Prior to the civil wars, most people living within the Congo would not call themselves Congolese nor would they have identified themselves with the nation. Before the arrival

of the millions of refugees that flooded into the Congo, the country had over 200 ethnic groups, the majority of which are Bantu, including the Mongo, Luba, and Kongo. The four largest tribes, the Mongo, Luba, Kongo and the Mangbetu-Azande (which is Hamitic) made up approximately 45 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> The DRC is a linguistically diverse and geographically divided country with over 215 distinct languages. If “two Congolese people meet at random, it is extremely unlikely they will speak the same native language.”<sup>5</sup> Although some other countries that have several different dialects do maintain strong national identities, the Congolese associate more with their tribes, which are tied to a specific language, than with the government that uses French as the national language.

**2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

**No.** (30 percent) Prior to 1996, few Congolese believed in their government. The government before, during, and after the civil wars provided limited services and ruled unjustly. As seen in many third world countries that have an abundance of natural resources, the Congo was ruled by a dictatorship that reaped the country’s wealth from precious metals and stones. A very small percentage of the population, an elite class, received the vast majority of the gross national product. In terms of the Congolese belief in their government, “[T]here are many soldiers, but no state. . . . [There is] no peace to keep; countless armies and militias groups, but no single, unified reason for their existence.”<sup>6</sup> Potentially, some of the populace that resided in vicinity of the capital, Kinshasa, saw some legitimacy and benefits of the government, but most of the Congolese resided in rural areas that were deemed lawless, with little to no government presence.

**3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?**

**No.** (25 percent) The DRC government was insufficient in protecting the population. In conjunction with weak governance and institutions, corruption throughout the government was rampant, as well as an absence of the rule of law. All of this contributed to ongoing violence perpetrated by armed groups against civilians. These armed groups “subjected Congolese civilians to widespread rape and sexual violence, massive human rights violations, and extreme poverty.”<sup>7</sup>

**4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

**Yes.** The Tutsi militias, who were fighting against the Congolese government and the Hutu militias, were supported by Rwanda and Uganda. The Tutsi rebels received supplies, equipment, and weapons from both Rwanda and Uganda. Additionally, the Tutsi rebels were provided sanctuary within the border areas of both these countries.<sup>8</sup>

**5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

**No.** Pre-1996, the DRC’s military capabilities were insufficient and in no way competent in maintaining the peace. The DRC military was funded mostly internally but did receive some US assistance beginning in the 1960s to facilitate the curtailment of Communism.<sup>9</sup>

Although the military did follow the orders of the government, warlords and militias exploited resources and ruled through violence (killing and rape), all done with impunity. The corruption within the police and military, coupled with lack of training and education, created a security force that was more prone to conducting criminal acts than maintaining control over the country.

<b>CONGO 1996–2003</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>YES</b>

## Outcome

The government in power at the start of the conflict, the Mobutu dictatorship, did not survive the first two years of the conflict. His successor, Laurent Kabila, was assassinated and replaced by his son. The conflict ended with a coalition government that included other tribal elements and former rebel groups. It would have to be considered a government defeat. All five factors were against the Mobutu regime from the outset. This case study supports the Five Factors theory.

## Endnotes

1. Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Security Assistance,” U.S. Department of State: Archive (website), October 20, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/pm/64639.htm>.
2. Tara Young, “5 Facts about the Congo War,” Borgen Project (website), September 12, 2013, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171224204313/https://borgenproject.org/5-facts-congo-war>.
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4. “Congo, Democratic Republic of the,” in *World Factbook* (Washington, DC: CIA, continuously updated), accessed April 9, 2018, last updated November 7, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/congo-democratic-republic-of-the/>.
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8. “Q&A: DR Congo Conflict,” *BBC News* (website), November 20, 2012, accessed April 11, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11108589>.
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