

WIDE ANGLE

‘WITH PEACE COMES MONEY’: CONFLICT AND CORRUPTION IN GOMA, EASTERN CONGO (DRC)



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Associazione Nazionale
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RESEARCH CENTRE
ON CIVILIAN VICTIMS
OF CONFLICTS



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Cover photo: Tshukudu, the Congolese scooter doing everything in Goma

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In the eastern Congo (DRC) millions of civilians are suffering economic hardships and poverty as a consequence of years of war and violence. One of the major problems in people's daily life is the lack of money and work opportunities. For many small scale traders, street vendors and entrepreneurs in the Congo, corruption is a major problem to their own and their families economic growth and stability. Many entrepreneurs share the experience that more than half of their income ends up in the personal pockets of government agents, such as the police, military or state officials. If they don't pay they face the risk of being subjected to violence. What is a day at work like for these traders and entrepreneurs? What problems do they face? How do market vendors selling vegetables at the local market experience their situation and what problems do they face? This photo reportage share stories from street vendors and local businessmen in Goma, the capital of North Kivu, in order to shed light on how conflict and corruption affect people in their daily life.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Corruption, War, Money, Violence, Conflict.

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Introduction

The eastern territories of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have suffered from war and violence for over a decade. More than four million people have died directly due to the war or to related consequences, such as poverty, malnourishment and lack of healthcare. The crisis has forced million of people to flee their homes and UNHCR reports that Congo currently has one of the highest numbers in the world of people fleeing conflict and more displaced persons than any other country. Years of conflict have left the country in political crisis, rooted poverty and widespread corruption. The DRC is currently one of the most corrupt countries in the world with a more or less institutionalised system of kleptocracy, first introduced by the Belgian colonizers, then by the former Mobutu regime, and now by the current President Joseph Kabila.

Goma, a history of war

In 2016, I was in Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, to conduct research on the relationship between violence and corruption. My work was part of a larger research project called 'Violent Exchange' based at the Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY) in Copenhagen, Denmark.¹ As a side project to my research, I carried out a photo project on small-scale traders/entrepreneurs and market sellers in order to document how people make a living in their everyday lives, and how they experience conflict, corruption and poverty. Through stories, narratives and interviews, I documented their responses and considered the ways in which corruption is linked to violence.

The photo project was carried out in Goma, a city that has played a major role in Congo's history. The town is located on the northern shore of Lake Kivu, next to the city of Gisenyi in Rwanda. It is a relatively small border city with roughly one million inhabitants. During the conflict, Goma has functioned as a political, economic and administrative hub as well as a center for the refugee crisis following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when more than one million Rwandan refugees crossed the border to Congo escaping mass-violence and atrocities. Shortly after the refugee crisis, a severe cholera epidemic broke out in and around the refugee camps, and claimed thousands of additional lives.

The more recent history of Goma continued to be a violent one. During the first Congo war (1996-1997) when Kabila overthrew the Mobutu regime, and during the second Congo war (1998-2003) that claimed millions of lives, Goma continued to play a political and economic role. In 2012, a rebel group called the M23 seized control over Goma and tens of thousands of civilians fled the area again. The political climate is still tense; in 2016, protesters gathered to demonstrate against what they claim is President Joseph Kabila's attempt to cling to power through a postponement of the election. Following the political developments and violence, human right activists and local journalists opposing the government continue to be arrested and freedom of speech is almost nonexistent.

¹ <https://dignityinstitute.org/home/>

Opportunities and Challenges

Today, despite political tensions and a general climate of uncertainty, the security situation in Goma is relatively stable. It continues to function as an attractive economic epicenter in the North Kivu region. People from all over DRC are flocking to the city in search of opportunities, to flee violence in the peripheries, in hopes of getting an education, to find a job or secure a better future. In addition, due to years of war and instability, the capital of the North Kivu province has become a town with a large international presence. People from all over the world are coming to Goma to work in the humanitarian sector, extractive industry, infrastructure and investments. The massive influx of international businessmen, NGOs, peacekeepers and UN agencies have triggered the economy and pushed housing and food prices up, creating a lot of financial stress among the already poor populations and those with limited resources. Everywhere in the city new colonial style villas are being built and rented out by investors to those who have money, resulting in clear divides between the rich and the poor.

Corruption and Violence

Corruption greatly obstructs development and sustainability in any country. In many countries there is a clear link between violence, or the threat of violence, and corruption. In the Congo, corruption is one of the major causes to cycles of poverty and people feel unsupported by the state and there is a lack of faith in the government. Rebel groups have used corruption and the absence of good governance to recruit new members, thereby enabling more violence in the Kivu provinces.

In Goma, like elsewhere in the Congo, corruption is visible at all levels of society and is a major problem, especially for the poorest and the most vulnerable. A woman selling vegetables at a local market, for example, earns per day less than a couple of dollars, half of which goes to pay illegal taxes to official and semi-official state and government agents (e.g. police, military, and border controllers) or to the markets private owner. 'Nothing is for free in Goma' is a common phrase among street vendors, meaning that the small income they gain will go toward bribes. Among those I talked to it was usually mentioned that 'bad governance', lack of money and war were the main reasons for poverty, and people generally said that 'only peace can bring money'. Corruption is a major threat in people's everyday lives and those who do not pay bribes or illegal taxes risk being subjected to humiliation and violence. People also said that eliminating corruption on state levels and on local levels in society, while building resilient communities, would not end the war but would be one step towards building peace in Congo.

(The photo project was supported by a Micro Media Grant, provided by Marie Curie Alumni Association).

“My business is selling vegetables only. I don’t make much money but I can pay school fees for my 3 children. The problem I have is with the tax collectors. Authorities from the tax office in Goma come to the market and ask for money. They say I must pay 6 dollars in tax per month and one dollar for the trash bin. They put the money in their pockets. If we don’t pay, we are pushed away. We are obliged to pay.”



“I’m 23 years old. I have a diploma and a specialisation. I sell meat at the market, because there are no jobs in Goma. I make around 3,500 F per day (a little bit more than two dollars). There is no economic growth in Goma because of the war. With peace comes money.”



“Our responsibility is to keep the market safe. Fighting takes place sometimes because of competition. For example, if two people sell the same fruits, and there are not enough buyers, a conflict can arise. And sometimes traders without licence are trying to get into the market.”



“Everyday I cross the border from Rwanda. Business is better in Goma. I sell tomatoes. I make 1,000F a day (a little bit more than 50 cents). I can't afford to rent a space at the market. The government should do something to boost us, to support.”



“We have to pay rent for occupying space on the street. It’s a private road and they come and collect our money, maybe once a week or once a month. If I pay rent? Pay with what?”



**“The problem is not our business.
The problem is electricity.
Business is good but, as you can see,
we use mostly generators and it’s
very expensive to buy petrol.
The government doesn’t support us.”**



“On a good day I have around 50 customers. I borrowed some money to buy my motorbike and it was a good investment. Some people rent motorbikes from other guys but they don’t make much money. I have to pay a lot of taxes for the license plate, road, traffic etc.”



“In my business I face many difficulties with security. I’m in the wood industry. I have to travel very far to get my material in Masisi and Walikale, and other areas where there are many rebel groups. My drivers are not safe. They are afraid of kidnappings and violence. Along the way we have to pay so many bribes; there are many roadblocks and illegal taxations.”



“My shop is located on a very dangerous street. Many gangs live here on the street and they take drugs. They used to come to my shop and steal some small things and it was not safe. I found my own strategy: I give them a little something, small money or food. Now they protect my shop. They are my security.”



“We grind flour. We are in a public market without regulations. There is a rumor that the market is going to be displaced; we are afraid to lose our business. Tax collectors come when they want and collect money. There are no rules.”





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