In Congo, trapped in violence and forgotten

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On the first market day after the militia retreated, as the midday sun broke through the mist, hundreds of villagers gathered on a grassy hillside.

Vendors sold fresh cabbage, corn and potatoes without fear of being robbed. Women bought pink dresses and orange cloth without fear of being raped. Children kicked a tattered ball made of twine without fear of being dragged away and forced to carry a gun.

As dusk fell, no one rushed home.

But Bernard Kamanzi was nervous. The top government official here, he knew such bursts of freedom always vanished quickly. And he knew something the villagers didn’t know: The Congolese soldiers who had been fighting the militias and protecting the village had withdrawn that morning.

“The militias could come back at any moment,” he said. “That’s the fear we have.”

The village in eastern Congo lies at the epicenter of one of Africa’s most brutal and longest-running wars. It is both military base and refugee camp, both killing field and sanctuary, a place woven from chaos and resilience. Civilians trapped in relentless violence struggle to live. Death arrives in many forms — guns, machetes, disease and hunger.

It is a war that has claimed an estimated 5 million lives, many from starvation, disease and other conflict-related causes, since 1998 — more casualties than the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq combined, and more than any conflict since World War II. It is a war that the world’s largest and most expensive U.N. peacekeeping mission has failed to quell. The peacekeepers, heavily financed by Washington, are now engaged in [their most ambitious effort](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-volatile-congo-a-new-un-force-with-teeth/2013/11/01/0cda650c-423f-11e3-b028-de922d7a3f47_story.html) in years to end the fighting.

And yet the war remains invisible to most outsiders, who have grown weary of the unending cycle of violence. Today, relief groups have trouble raising money to help Congo as more publicized upheavals in [Syria](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrias-assad-thinks-he-is-winning-he-could-be-wrong/2014/09/08/09c5044e-a6ca-45d0-91a8-c9eacd4c92f8_story.html), [South Sudan](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/to-south-sudans-woes-add-famine--50000-kids-at-risk-of-death/2014/08/23/19c21638-2949-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a_story.html) and elsewhere grab the world’s attention.

The story of Kivuye over a few months this year offers a glimpse into why the conflict seems so complex and in­trac­table, and the solutions to Congo’s misery so elusive. Even during brief periods of calm, when hope begins to grow, residents still grapple with the forces the war has wrought.

On the day the market reopened in Kivuye, the most liberating day in years, villagers didn’t know that the militia had retreated only to the forest, waiting for a chance to return. They didn’t know that in a few days another warlord who once ruled the village would come back. They didn’t know that in a few weeks, Congolese army soldiers sent to protect them would commit mass rapes nearby.

And they didn’t know that the U.N. peacekeepers based less than five miles away would soon depart. Their presence, however faint, was a sign the world still cared.

Now, that would vanish, too.

‘They are all destructive’

Sprawled across an emerald hued hilltop, Kivuye is an expanse of mud huts, plywood shacks and tiny shops connected by rugged paths. There is no electricity, no running water and no cellphone reception. A valley below is covered with fields, a quilt of different shades of green.

A craggy road that snakes through the village’s center has carried armies of every stripe, from jaded peacekeepers to renegade soldiers to fighters who believe that bullets bounce off their bodies. Cars rarely pass by.

Driving through the hillsides of Masisi territory on the way to Kivuye.

Congolese climb steep hillside to a displacement camp in Mweso.

If anyone knows the arc of Kivuye’s destruction, it’s Azarias Mataboro. At 73, the village’s former tribal chief walks with a cane and speaks in a rattling voice. But his memory is as clear as the frigid water in the spring nearby.

He remembers when Belgian colonialists operated tea plantations, employing villagers. And though the Belgians brutally lorded over Congo, he remembers them as more benevolent than the three rulers who followed: an American-backed, corrupt dictator who changed the country’s name to Zaire and favored leopard-skin hats and French champagne; his equally venal successor, who wore Mao-styled suits and had his portrait placed everywhere; and his son, who now presides over Congo.

Under the colonialists was the last time Kivuye had a good road, the last time the village had a well-built school or a reliable source of income.

“Life was good,” Mataboro said.

Mataboro also remembers the roots of Kivuye’s tragedy.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994, when ethnic Hutu extremists slaughtered 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers, gave birth to Congo’s mayhem. As the violence was ending in Rwanda, a million or more Hutus fearing reprisals fled across the border into Congo, triggering a succession of conflicts. One called “Africa’s first world war” involved several other countries. Congo’s vast mineral deposits — including gold, copper and coltan, used in making cellphones — were plundered by all sides.

[Twenty years later](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/20-years-after-the-genocide-rwanda-looks-to-a-tech-revolution/2014/04/04/bbde2df2-bb4a-11e3-80de-2ff8801f27af_story.html), the genocide’s legacy reverberates here in its most dramatic form, even as Rwanda enjoys peace and prospers. Congo’s armed groups remain engaged in a murky contest over power, wealth and identity, and tensions between Hutus and Tutsis still play out with intensity.

“We are still feeling the impact of the Rwandan genocide,” said Faustin Mbara, a priest in the town of Kitchanga, along the route to Kivuye, whose Catholic parish oversees scores of villages in the region. “The spirit of vengeance spread, and it continues today in the Congo.”

[[Related: Ghosts of the Rwandan genocide remain potent obstacle to peace in Congo]](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2014/09/27/ghosts-of-the-genocide-remain-potent-obstacle-to-peace/)

Today, tarpaulin shacks cling to the sides of Kivuye’s hills. Refugees have been arriving since 1996, when a revolving door of militias and rebel groups began to torment the area, swelling the village’s population from a few hundred to several thousand.

As many as nine armed groups have controlled Kivuye with impunity. They include members of the extremist Hutu force that orchestrated the genocide in Rwanda. The militias have shattered not only families but also traditions and bonds that existed since African kings ruled the continent. Now, the village is almost all Hutu. The Tutsis and other ethnic groups have fled to areas safeguarded by their own community’s militias, or to refugee camps.

“In this war there aren’t any good guys or bad guys,” said Joanna Trevor, the Congo program director for the aid agency Oxfam. “They are all destructive.”

Mataboro mentally tallies his own loss over the past two decades, employing the grisly arithmetic used by many of the villagers:

*They burned my house down seven times.*

*I fled four times from the village, from four different militias.*

*My wife was killed by one of the militias.*

Everyone’s a target

Col. Bigirabagabo seized control of Kivuye in December.

A Hutu in his mid-to-late 30s, Bigirabagabo was a former government soldier who defected to launch his own militia. So secretive, villagers never saw him; they didn’t even know his first name. Nor did his own gunmen, who described him as ruthless. U.N. officials and peacekeepers didn’t know anything about him either.

Innocent Bauma, a 15-year-old former fighter, said he witnessed the warlord kill five of his own men for disobeying orders.

“He shot them,” recalled Bauma, who ran away after the incident and surrendered to the Congolese army. “If you make any mistake, he kills you.”

For more than a year, Bigirabagabo’s fighters plundered hamlets in the region. But when the warlord who had been ruling Kivuye agreed to join a government disarmament program, Bigirabagabo and his fighters took over.

No one challenged the militia. The village police force had only six members and one rifle. And whenever the blue-helmeted U.N. peacekeepers passed through Kivuye in their white and black trucks, the fighters would hide behind huts or in shops.

“It’s so difficult to see or try to find the militias,” said Capt. Miguel Cioffi, the peacekeepers’ company commander from Uruguay. “When they see the blue helmets they run away.”

Like his predecessor, Bigirabagabo ordered every resident to pay a “right-to-life” tax of roughly $1.30 each month. Most villagers earn an average of $5 to $7 a month.

The fighters gave out receipts that made it easy to prove who had paid — and who hadn’t. When the villagers returned from working in the fields, fighters confiscated their day’s earnings or the crops they were bringing home for dinner if they hadn’t paid the tax.

Everyone was considered a target; ethnicity didn’t matter.

The gunmen stopped Kanyeshamba Gwagitare days after he arrived in Kivuye in January and struck him 20 times with a thick cane for failing to pay the tax.

“You flee, thinking you are going to your brother, thinking he will protect you,” said Gwagitare, who had arrived here with his pregnant wife and their five children after escaping another militia. “But instead of protecting you, he beats you. What can you do? He has a gun. You keep quiet.”

On market days, the militiamen exacted bribes at gunpoint from vendors and ambushed buyers. That, and the taxes, had stopped most villagers from coming to the market. One day, the fighters whipped the deputy police chief half to death for trying to arrest one of their comrades.

Ignoring long-held tribal hierarchy, the fighters undermined the village elders. They also clipped away at Bernard Kamanzi’s authority.

Slender and bald, Kamanzi holds the title of chief of post, a position equivalent to mayor. He lives in a hut perched on a hill. At night, he can see the generator-powered spotlight of the U.N. base. It shines like the North Star, guiding refugees fleeing militias to a settlement of shacks that rose up next to the compound.

Kamanzi hasn’t received his official salary in 14 years. Yet he remained committed to his job, even as the militias eroded his influence.

“Col. Bigirabagabo was acting as the chief of post, the chief of police and the chief of the village,” he said over a breakfast of beans, corn and spinach in his hut. “His men were arresting anyone they wanted.”

It was a delicate balancing act just to survive.

Kamanzi had to bow his head in respect when speaking to the warlord’s young and illiterate fighters. Whenever they visited his hut, he had to buy them beer. He had to hand over money from fines and judicial disputes, and borrow money to pay for the warlord’s cellphone credits.

Eventually, the villagers stopped going to Kamanzi for advice and help. Some turned to the village’s new rulers to resolve disputes. “It was humiliating,” Kamanzi said. “But I was buying time to save my life. Otherwise, he would have certainly killed me.”

In early March, the warlord and his 50 men retreated from the village when a government army regiment arrived and set up camp nearby. It brought a sense of hope, evident on that first market day after the militia left.

With a soldier posted in front of his door, Kamanzi was back in charge. The villagers were coming to see him again.

For a while, all he was concerned about was his work.

A view of the largest town in the region, Kitchanga.

A view of Kivuye at sunset.

A disintegrating society

In Kivuye, there are many [types of devastation](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/08/01/ST2009080101429.html?sid=ST2009080101429).

Weddings used to be festive occasions, with plenty of drink, food and dance. Cows, goats and pigs were slaughtered in celebration. Since the militias arrived, though, weddings have been rare or muted. No one wants to draw attention.

Most villagers can’t afford to get married anyway. Take Bahati Nchimiye. He hasn’t given a dowry of a cow, a goat and clothes to his in-laws for their daughter. According to village traditions, that means they are not legally married. But they live together and have two children, a relationship unheard of two decades ago.

“I haven’t paid the dowry because I don’t have money,” said Nchimiye, 18, a radio repairman. “Her parents have kept quiet. They know we are in a war.”

Girls have become less favorable now, village elders say, because parents can no longer demand a dowry. Soccer games, too, have disappeared as many boys have joined an armed group, or left to avoid being forcibly recruited.

Villagers can also no longer afford to celebrate Christmas or Easter. Once, farmers would invite the entire village to help harvest crops in season. The hosts would brew beer and cook food in appreciation. Nowadays, with so much poverty and displacement, such festivities have vanished.

Instead, thefts have become common, disintegrating the social bonds of the village.

“The population is poor because they have been paying the ‘right-to-life’ taxes to the militias,” Kamanzi said. “Many commit robberies against their own neighbors.”

In a place the world has forgotten, villagers suffer even when their tormentors have vanished.

A militia slaughtered several of Marisiyana Bizimana’s relatives, including four children, in a nearby village. Seven months pregnant, she and her family fled to Kivuye, where the fighters beat up her husband and forced them to pay the “right-to-life” tax and bribes.

Now, with no money left for medical care, she was giving birth inside their mud hut.

Two women — her neighbors — held her down. Another pulled the baby.

“They took a piece of wood to cut the umbilical cord, but that didn’t work,” she said. “So they had to search for a razor blade.”



A medical attendant presses on a child’s feet, which are swollen because of acute malnutrition. While the lands around Kivuye are extremely fertile, taxes imposed by warlords and a lack of safety prevents many residents from adequately feeding their families.

A year ago, Bizimana would have delivered her baby at a government clinic in Kivuye. But the aid agency Doctors Without Borders, which supported the facility, withdrew from the village because of more urgent needs elsewhere. And with the government absent in much of the region, the clinic has all but collapsed.

“There is a tiredness of the Congo,” said Magali Roudaut, who at the time was the head of Doctors Without Borders for eastern Congo.

The U.N. World Food Program has been forced to cut back on aid in eastern Congo due to sharp shortfalls in funding, and more than 4 million Congolese are now facing “acute food insecurity.”

Few aid agencies have ever come here anyway. It takes 10 hours to drive to the village from the provincial capital, Goma, in good weather. When the weather turns bad, silvery sheets of rain slap down hard, turning the road into mud. Attacks also keep aid workers away.

Dressed in a brown dress — the only piece of clothing she owns — and a red scarf, Bizimana held her newborn inside her hut, made of mud, straw and reeds.

A few feet from her shack are latrines built five years ago, their sheeting emblazoned with “USAID – From the American People.” The aid workers funded by the United States haven’t been back since, village elders said.

Bizimana still has nightmares of seeing the bodies of her brother-in-law’s four children, whose necks and bellies were slit with machetes. She had cried “until she was tired.”

Her own family could have suffered the same fate, so she named her son Nfiteumukiza.

In the Kiniarwanda language, one of several languages spoken in eastern Congo, it means “I have a savior.”

Outside the health clinic, less than 200 yards away from Bizimana’s hut, a 2-year-old baby named Sifwe cried. She was bloated and had sores on her head.

“I have not been able to find food to feed my child,” explained her mother, Nyiramana Nzabomimpa, 36, herself visibly distressed. “She hasn’t eaten in five nights.”





Left: A medical professional organizes the pharmacy inside the Kivuye medical clinic. The clinic has only a modest stock of medications. Right: Nyiramana Nzabomimpa, 36, along with her 28-month old baby, Sifiwe Nikuze, and two other children outside the health center in Kivuye. Sifiwe was found to be malnourished and was sent for treatment in Mweso.

The clinic is a plywood shack with wood beams, a muddy dirt floor and a patched-up tin roof that leaks. A purple bucket hangs from a scale to weigh malnourished children. There are three thermometers, but one is broken. There is one stethoscope.

There are no doctors, and only four nurses. They haven’t been paid in more than two years.

When Doctors Without Borders was here, the clinic treated an average of 50 patients per day, free of charge. Now, it treats 25 per week.

“Nowadays, people don’t have the means,” said Augustin Bazamanga, 45, the head nurse at the clinic.

Nzabomimpa’s baby was so severely malnourished that the nurses referred her to the nearest hospital in Mweso, an eight-hour walk away. When they arrived, Sifwe was battling lung problems and a high fever; she was also anemic, according to the Doctors Without Borders aid workers at the hospital. They fed her through a tube.

A Congo clinic at the center of the conflict

Slowly, Sifwe grew stronger.

“If she had arrived one day later, she would have died,” said Delvaux Nyongolo, 43, who is in charge of the hospital’s nutritional program.

Symbol of failure

On this day, Kamanzi was in a bad mood.

The Congolese soldiers who left two weeks earlier still had not returned to protect the village. Bigirabagabo and his fighters were lurking in the forests. Worse, [the warlord who ruled Kivuye before them](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2014/09/27/the-turns-in-a-warlords-life-and-in-congos-war) had returned to the area and was living just five miles away.

“The fear is that he may regroup his fighters and restart his rebellion again,” said Kamanzi, who clutched a black walkie-talkie and wore a black and green windbreaker.

Within hours, Kamanzi would hear some more disturbing news: The U.N. peacekeepers were being deployed elsewhere.

Now known by its French acronym MONUSCO, [the U.N. mission](http://monusco.unmissions.org/) began here 15 years ago. With more than 21,000 peacekeepers, the United States pays roughly a third of its $1.4 billion annual budget. But the operation has been unable to stop Congo’s violent trajectory.

On a hillside below the peacekeepers’ base, a white, Russian-made U.N. helicopter lay like a clipped bird. A few months ago, it crashed while trying to land.

For many villagers, the fallen machine became a potent symbol of the U.N. failure in Congo.

Without the peacekeepers, though, the population would have suffered more.



Congo residents attend a church service in Kitchanga, the largest town in the area that has been the site of fighting this year between militia fighters and Congolese forces.

Last year, the [United Nations launched a combat brigade](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-volatile-congo-a-new-un-force-with-teeth/2013/11/01/0cda650c-423f-11e3-b028-de922d7a3f47_story.html) of 3,000 soldiers — the first such U.N. force — to back the Congolese army and fight the militias. While there have been successes, human rights groups accuse the force of supporting a corrupt government and an undisciplined army with a history of committing abuses.

In this corner of Congo, the peacekeepers — from Uruguay — were not part of the combat brigade. They arrived more than two years ago, but the militias continued to rule.

“Our mission is only civilian protection,” said Cioffi, the company commander.

But it was difficult for the soldiers, who knew none of the main languages spoken in this part of Congo — no French, Swahili or Kiniarwanda — to communicate with the locals to cultivate sources and acquire intelligence. Any action to protect civilians was never preemptive, and often too late.

“Once, the militiamen arrived in the night and fired on the tents of the refugees,” said Celestine Nzabarinda, 44, a village elder. “Two children burned to death inside their tent. MONUSCO arrived in the morning.”

Janvier Mada, a community leader and a refugee himself, recalled a time last year when he complained to the peacekeepers that a warlord was recruiting people from the camps to join his militia. The peacekeepers responded by patrolling the village twice a week, and the warlord’s men backed off. But that was only temporary.

“Now, the peacekeepers don’t patrol. They just pass through,” Mada said.

In early April, tents were being packed up at the U.N. base. Ukrainian technicians were working to remove the downed U.N. helicopter from the hillside.

Jean Bosco Mutuyimana, who ran a coffee shop in front of the base, shook his head. “We fear the rebels in the bush will come back soon,” he said. “When MONUSCO leaves, I may leave as well.”

Inside the base, there was apprehension, too. The peacekeepers’ departure meant the end of a program to rehabilitate militiamen, including child fighters. Around 10 to 15 fighters were being disarmed each week, Congolese employees of the program said.

“The militias are still around,” said one of the workers, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he feared he would lose his job if he was critical of MONUSCO. “They haven’t surrendered to the army. It’s not the end.”

After the U.N. peacekeepers left, the Congolese army’s 804 regiment took over responsibility of safeguarding civilians in Kivuye and surrounding areas.

Instilling fear in villagers

“They were in military uniforms. They had weapons,” the frail mother of five said in a low, cracking voice in Kitchanga, the largest town in the region.

She lay beneath a white sheet on a rape-clinic bed.

Eyes closed, she described when she went searching for food in the forest a week earlier, when she ran into Congolese soldiers hunting for militiamen protecting her ethnic group.

The soldiers were from the 804 regiment.

With the militia gone, Congo’s soldiers had become the foe.

“When I wanted to cry, one pointed a gun at my mouth. I kept quiet as all four soldiers raped me until they finished,” she said. “After, they tied me up with my own clothes. They beat me with a stick so hard that it nearly broke my back. Then, they left.”

At least 13 other women were raped a week earlier about 15 miles from Kivuye. In separate interviews, five of the victims described the abuses, as did the Congolese social workers who counseled them. Rape has long been a weapon of war in Congo, used by every side to instill fear and control the population.

The 804 regiment’s commander, Lt. Col. Desire Chibi Chabeme, said he was unaware of the rapes, adding that people telling such “stories” are “enemies” of the army and of Congo.



Women from the Kitchanga area pass Congolese soldiers as they return from searching for relatives who were unaccounted for after a day of heavy fighting near Ndumba. The civilian population fled as the Congolese army was engaged in combat operations against the Mai Mai APCLS militia near the village.

There were problems with the regiment even before the U.N. peacekeepers left. A short walk from the U.N. base, soldiers forced several dozen young men at gunpoint to carry their luggage and ammunition to the front lines, according to villagers who were forcibly conscripted and spoke in separate interviews.

“If I refused, the soldiers would have beaten me,” said Innocent Zigamwe, who was forced to carry a large crate of ammunition for seven hours. “They didn’t pay me. They didn’t give me food. They didn’t even thank me.”

The soldiers targeted anyone they suspected of being a militia sympathizer. In one incident, five drunken soldiers detained a teenager near the U.N. base. They forced him to kneel on the dirt and tied him up with a red plastic strip. One soldier smacked him in the head.

“We arrested him because he worked with the enemies,” said Maj. Marc Bwahiro, the unit’s commander. “He is a betrayer.”

But their prisoner yelled out: “I am innocent. I don’t belong to any militia.”

Several villagers confirmed what the youth said. The next day, the soldiers released him after his relatives brought the soldiers some beer, friends of his family said.

The endless war

Many of those who have suffered the most have abandoned Kivuye.

In the town of Kashuga, about a seven-hour-walk away, several generations of villagers from Kivuye live a hardscrabble existence in a refugee camp. They include Furaha Uwimana, who fled with her five children after fighters stabbed her husband to death.

She and other villagers had heard that the army was in control of their region. But nobody was planning to return to Kivuye. They had given up on their government and the U.N. peacekeepers.

“I can never go back to the place where they killed my husband,” Uwimana said, pain etched on her face as she stared blankly at the wall of her hut.

Last year, Chantal Mukamana also fled Kivuye and ended up at the [Mugunga refu­gee camp](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-traumatic-arc-of-a-refugee-camp-congos-war-runs-deep/2013/11/07/22de1dbe-470b-11e3-95a9-3f15b5618ba8_story.html) in the shadow of the active volcano Nyiragongo near Goma. It was here where hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Hutus sought refuge after the genocide. Now, two decades later, the camp is filled with desperate Congolese.

“The war in Congo is an endless war,” said Mukamana, 35. “We no longer know if even God can end this war.”

Back in Kivuye, Kamanzi was brooding inside his hut. Since the U.N. peacekeepers departed, along with their bright spotlight, questions have roiled his mind.

Will the militias return? Will the peacekeepers return?

And how long will the villagers’ market day — and their freedoms — last?

On this night, the answers were as invisible as the valley now covered in darkness.

