

Follies in fragile states

How international stabilisation failed
in the Congo



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Prologue

I first resolved to write a book like this on a balcony in northern Sri Lanka. It was June 2007, and my last night in the port town of Trincomalee before starting a convoluted route out of the country.

As if on cue, anti-aircraft fire had started in the early morning and not let up. Earlier in the year the separatist Tamil Tigers had used tiny Czech training aircraft to drop a few handmade bombs on the capital. The attack was ineffectual and mostly for propaganda purposes. But it had made Navy forces paranoid and now they fired wildly into the air at the slightest hint of an unidentified flying object. Coloured tracers were arcing into the sky over Trincomalee harbour, accompanied by occasional dull thuds of artillery targeting who-knows-what on the ground.

This made it a little risky to do one's thinking outside. Local security forces were not exactly precise in their use of force and on several occasions I had seen them literally firing with their eyes closed after a Tiger ambush, spraying from a rifle propped loosely on one hip.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling: *What the hell happened? What have I been doing for the last two years?*

I'd arrived in 2005 with bold ambitions and impossible optimism. The job was coordinating post-conflict programs with the United Nations. They were premised on a ceasefire signed a few years prior between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—bringing a halt to decades of fighting.

A panoply of development agencies had promptly set up satellite offices along the peculiar 'forward defence lines' that separated the two sides, accompanied by a Scandinavian monitoring mission intended to build confidence during negotiations. For my little part in the drama I occupied a UNICEF office in the town of Vavuniya, two-thirds of the way up the island. I rented the second floor of a house from an intrigued local family, bought a bicycle and an array of gaudy plastic furniture, and got to work trying to turn around a struggling program.

Shortly afterwards, the tit-for-tat incidents started. Concealed claymore mines scattered policemen's bodies across the dusty roads that I biked to work. Government thugs abducted suspected Tiger supporters in unmarked vans and 'disappeared' the bodies, the screaming of families two or three doors down waking me up in the middle of the night. Over the course of five or six months, this escalated into open battle. There was increasingly regular skirmishing and artillery fire across the forward defence lines. A colossal truck bomb slaughtered nearly 100 sailors at one stroke, the town of Habarana going temporarily insane around me while I pleaded for radio guidance from UN security advisors. Afterwards I was moved between offices repeatedly, sometimes running away from the violence and sometimes towards it.

Then came an end-phase variously described as 'gruesome', 'blood-soaked' or 'unnecessarily brutal'. (Or per TIME magazine, marking 'the end of human rights'.¹) Government forces ripped through territory once held by the Tigers and pinned the remnants on a strip of beach on the north-eastern coast. They sealed this space up, a hundred thousand plus civilians included, then shelled it relentlessly. In the end they got what nobody expected—a decisive victory after thirty years.

Agitation for a credible accounting of war crimes continues to this day. Meanwhile the political climate became increasingly authoritarian. Power concentrated in the hands of the Rajapaksa clan, upcountry nationalists who can communicate authentically with a frustrated and marginalized peasantry. Their senior advisors went on international tours hawking the 'Sri Lankan approach' to counter-insurgency, although the jury is still out on whether violent opposition will crop back up again.

From the UN perspective, we saw our work disappear under the rising tide of violence. Painstakingly built infrastructure was destroyed—the people we had 'reintegrated' in their villages were displaced anew by fighting and then again by government fiat. Many of them ended up in giant internment camps set up right nearby my failed 'post-conflict' projects, a poster of a gloating President Rajapaksa towering above the sad little shacks.² To add insult to injury, the government manipulated the UN agencies into providing health and education services to those held inside.

The failure was so glaring that it led to the rarest of events—a formal inquest. The report of the 'Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel' was released in November 2012. (After the document was leaked, the Secretary-General figured he might as well just publish it.) It noted a scrupulous refusal on the part of the UN leadership team in Colombo to engage with 'political' issues, which 'seemed to encompass everything related to the root causes of the crisis and aspects of the conduct of the war'.³ This was linked with 'a grave failure of the UN to adequately

respond to early warnings’ and failure to establish ‘an adequate system to collect information on killings and injuries until the beginning of February 2009’.

For my part I never wrote that book. Instead I parlayed the experience into a graduate scholarship and then bigger jobs in bigger crises. I held off the shame and frustration by working on experimental initiatives that challenged the status quo in minor ways: closer integration of the various bits and pieces of the UN; development of new peacebuilding institutions to plug the gaps; and the turn to proactive ‘stabilization’ of eastern Congo.

The problem was that Sri Lanka turned out to be just the first time. Over the course of a decade in the aid business, I have acted out the same drama over and over again. The same mix of frenetic yet quixotic effort, then the same mix of relief and shame on leaving the stage. Friends outside the aid bubble are often bemused by the track record. In response, I’ve taken to telling them it’s a numbers game.

Well ... we’re talking huge stakes here, ten or twenty million people. If you get that to work one or two times, over the course of a career, that’s still pretty good.

Pull the lens back, and the numbers game is even more apparent. My personal story faithfully reflects the much bigger story of the last ten years, during which enormous ambitions to reshape ‘fragile states’ have been left frustrated and ultimately scaled back.

The highest profile cases were certainly Iraq and Afghanistan. In the former country the US-led invasion in 2003 was followed by confusion, a slide into near civil war in 2006-07 and then shifts in strategy (the ‘surge’) that seemed to stem the bleeding. The trauma and expense were astronomical. Credible estimates put war-related deaths from 2003-11 at 461,000, and financial costs to the United States at something like USD 3.1 *trillion*.⁴ So it was a sad discovery for all involved that progress was always reversible. Political institutions do not so much evolve onwards and upwards as jump between different states of equilibrium, some of them worse than others.

The point was vividly illustrated while writing this Prologue. A resurgent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria had formed opportunistic alliances with tribes in Anbar province. One result was the occupation of parts of the city of Fallujah. Black flags flew over government buildings and the optics, as politicians say, could not have been worse. The US Marine Corps had stormed Fallujah in 2005 in perhaps the bloodiest engagement of the entire war—not long after an abortive and embarrassing experiment with ‘Iraqification’ of its security had failed. So interviews with veterans cropped up everywhere. Here is one representative passage:⁵

“No one cares anymore,” he says. “It’s heartbreaking to say it, but it’s true.”

Gonzalez is still proud of his service, of his fellow Marines, and what they accomplished in Fallujah. But he now wonders, for the first time, whether that sacrifice was worth it ...

Did they die in vain? He pauses for a long time, his eyes brimming with tears.

“It's looking that way,” he says softly. “For a time I thought it was worth it, and now, you know, I question it. And it's eating me up more and more.”

To my ears this was all too familiar. I have lost count of colleagues streaming out of ‘stabilization’ and ‘post-conflict’ interventions over the last few years in the wake of major crises, despondent that they were back behind square zero.

First came the spectacular collapse of Mali in late 2012. A military coup made a mockery of twenty years of international support to democratic governance, support that had been frequently touted as an example for the region. Then a ragtag coalition of Touareg discontents and Islamists swept across the country, with only last-minute French military intervention averting a total collapse. A few months later it was the turn of the Central African Republic. A fringe rebel group took the capital by force in March 2013. This was rapidly followed by counter-mobilization of disorganized and violent militias, widespread communal violence and ethnic cleansing. Concurrently, South Sudan also slid into serious civil conflict. This was a case widely thought to enjoy all possible advantages. There was strong interest from the countries that mattered, almost unlimited money, a capable figure at the head of a large UN stabilization mission. But as at date of writing it remains balanced on the edge of a grave humanitarian crisis.

My own nadir—the failure that has really stuck with me—was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Here I worked two and a half years with the United Nations system to stabilize the country's tragically violent eastern provinces. The net results can be summed up in one incident: the capture of the most important city in the conflict theatre by insurgents in November 2012. It was a humiliation for both the Congolese government and its international partners. What's more, it came after no fewer than fourteen consecutive years of UN peacekeeping forces on the ground. It was not a catastrophe on the scale of those in the Central African Republic or South Sudan, but it did put an exclamation point on a dismal failure of ambitions to improve the lot of some fifteen million people.

This book is about what went wrong in the Congo. It is an attempt to return to the balcony and this time salvage something from failure. After many false starts that ‘something’ turned out to be the Five Follies, a short list of propositions why our hard work never added up to meaningful results. I put them forward not as a grand theoretical scheme but as cautious generalizations about work in this most complex and fascinating of regions.

In early reviews the most common question was of course: Do they apply elsewhere? The short answer is that I suspect they do. In fact an early proposal for the book used a different country example for each of the Follies, pulling together the full range of crises that I have worked on. But this proved too hard to follow, and certainly much too reliant on simply asserting the way things were rather than taking the time to demonstrate. Less was more. Here I feel that I am safe ground citing a legitimate classic of policy studies, Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow's study of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.⁶

On the one hand, substantive instance; on the other, conceptual argument. Today we must confess that we are no longer certain where one begins and the other ends, or, indeed, which is the head and which the tail of this coin. But we are certain about the impulse that led us to pursue these two aims jointly.

With this in mind I am writing for two target audiences. The first is the engaged member of the public. There are plenty of people who care about the Congo, and about what can usefully be contributed in fragile states. In fact there is enormous latent energy here. Aid professionals respond snidely when it manifests in celebrity activism, or blink-and-you'll-miss-it phenomena like #Kony2012 and #BringBackOurGirls. But ultimately there must be a 'pull' factor for what matters. As a fine study of British policy-making put it, 'consideration of alternatives is not an agenda item for some grand strategy session of civilian generals; it is part of the evolving societal process by which dissatisfied people try to respond to felt needs at any time.'⁷

This process unfolds in classrooms, editors' offices, houses of worship, and a thousand other places. In this respect a colleague of mine once noted that 'the distance from the bush to Goma is enormous; that from Goma to Kinshasa greater still. The distance from the bush to Addis Ababa or New York is completely unbridgeable'. I would dearly like to prove her wrong.

The second target audience is the critical practitioner. The few ethnographic accounts that have been written of the aid business tend to report a 'culture of secrecy', and a sense that critical accounts 'ruptured relationships and broken the rules of fair play'.⁸ I think that this is too strong. On a day-to-day basis, colleagues encounter tremendous situational constraints which exert vastly more influence on outcomes than they can ever hope to. They are also isolated from both those responsible for political oversight and those they are attempting to assist. It is hardly surprising that such conditions result in strong group solidarity against outside criticism, much as one finds for police or military institutions.⁹

Yet I also know that colleagues are not beyond self-reflection. To quote a recent head of the UN Development Program, 'each of us has had our own moment of truth when the head finally controlled the heart and we came to realise .. that things are never simple'.¹⁰ I invite practitioners

to relate my account to their own such moment, whether nodding in agreement or shouting in denial.

A note on roles and sources

This book is written in the first person because I was a (minor) protagonist. From 2009 to 2011 I worked as an evaluation specialist in the UN peacekeeping mission, called first MONUC and then MONUSCO, in a team charged with coordinating the activities of the wider UN family. The main resource for *Follies in Fragile States* was thus ‘participant observation’ during this period, comprising thousands of hours of interviews and more informal conversations. The supplementary resource is more sporadic involvement before 2009 and after 2011, as a consultant, informal advisory and sometime lobbyist.

My focus is on how international agencies interpreted and reacted to events on the ground, and this means frequent recourse to internal records. I have noted these sources for the benefit of those with access to archival material, but do not reproduce sensitive or confidential information that has not already come into the public domain. I also quote extensively from UN and government officials, but do not attribute the remarks except where they were already speaking ‘on the record’ in public forums.

It is an unfortunate fact that ordinary Congolese voices are not so well-represented. In fact Folly #5 concerns precisely this problem, the tendency to limit serious policy conversations to a small group of officials in Kinshasa. ‘These officials’ views are amply reflected in meeting minutes, strategic frameworks, email correspondence, and thousands of other documents. But there were few serious ‘listening projects’ to capture perspectives from below, and from the periphery. In the course of writing this often left only the two unpalatable alternatives of silence, or substituting my own vague paraphrasing for the actual words used. I can only hope that I have handled this dilemma with more sensitivity than is normally the case in policy work on the Congo.

Introduction

This book is about efforts to reshape countries in crisis. It reflects on a decade's work around the world, spurred by the realization that the results have been slim or perhaps even negative.

In one sense it is the perspective of someone who knows, or suspects, where the bodies are buried. The fact that most interventions in fragile states have not lived up to expectations is plain to see. The question is rather what to do with this fact, because there is both opportunity and motive to ignore it. The opportunity arises because such interventions layer a complex system onto a complex system. A mad jumble of foreign actors find allies and enemies amongst an equally confusing array of domestic factions, and the resulting mess seems to actively defy attempts to establish causation, contribution or responsibility. The temptation to take this 'out' exists because identities are thoroughly bound up in the job—*we are the good guys*. Self-interest leads us to leave our failures against stated ambitions unstated, or redefine them as success against narrow technical criteria.

Here I try to take failure—both personal and institutional—more seriously. I take a single case, efforts to 'stabilise' the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo from 2007-12, and deconstruct a rather complex history into a few 'big ideas' on what went wrong.

An inquest is well-justified by the case's own merits. Congo exemplifies in many ways the steady expansion of ambitions to reshape fragile states that has occurred in the background of international relations over the last twenty years. And yet, as the New York Times put it, 'many critics contend that nowhere else in the world has the United Nations invested so much and accomplished so little'.¹¹ Core goals to build local capacity and draw down the UN's largest peacekeeping mission were not achieved, and the numbing tide of everyday atrocities ebbed and flowed without much regard to announcements of new peace accords and strategic frameworks. For lack of better ideas this led the Security Council to put ever-increasing stress on 'protection of civilians' under imminent threat, directing twenty thousand foreign soldiers to try and police an un-policeable land. This approach hit its limits when political shifts led rebels to rout the national army and capture the biggest city in the conflict theatre in late 2012.

At the same time, looking at the Congo might tell us something useful about interventions elsewhere. Ambitions to reshape ‘fragile states’ have grown up incredibly quickly, and the approaches to pursue those ambitions are likewise new and unproven. In the DRC’s case I argue that our work was handicapped by a group of dangerous half-truths and peculiar assumptions—the Five Follies. These were system maladaptations attributable more to the politics and economics of intervention than any careful reading of problems on the ground.

As an interpretive framework this is no doubt too cute by half. But my hunch is that the Follies are common sense questions that must be asked for any stabilization or ‘post-conflict’ intervention.

The effort is timely, I think, because the ‘fragile states’ agenda is far from dead. In the Anglophone world a generation of security and foreign policy professionals has been traumatized by the adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan—but circumstances conspire against retirement from the stage. In the course of writing this book two entirely new complex UN operations were launched in Mali and the Central African Republic, while a third was reconfigured in South Sudan. All three were driven by great power interests that are unlikely to disappear. These included fears of regional destabilization and transnational terrorism (Mali); Chinese import dependence and aspirations to global influence (South Sudan); and sophisticated international advocacy efforts to mobilize voters in the rich democracies (all three cases).

The suddenness with which all these crises struck was a pointed reminder of an unfortunate fact—that complex problems are frequently also urgent problems. We have no right to sit back and take an experimental attitude, but must rather learn on the fly.¹² That means using real, living cases to the fullest extent possible.

Pre-modern medicine

The French crisis consultant Pat Lagadec works on major wildfires, nuclear incidents, liquidity crises and the like. He often writes about *brutal audits*—situations where ‘at a moment’s notice, everything that was left unprepared becomes a complex problem, and every weakness comes rushing to the forefront’.¹³ These are situations that surpass the capacity of existing systems to cope; where normal frames of reference seem to crumble and the outcome that was to be avoided at all costs has somehow managed to occur.

The concept is apt for work in fragile states. Here international involvement is just a small part of a turbulent system. We have to rely on theories of how the rest of the system will respond to outside pressure, and where the best points of leverage might be found. The problem is that the

sheer complexity of the situation means that we can be wrong for a long time without realizing. Effects are delayed, or mutated by contact with the plans and reactions of a hundred other actors. But on occasion a brutal audit comes along and unambiguously disproves the theory. Sri Lanka, the Prologue to this story, was one such case. It has been described as the UN Secretary-General's 'Rwanda moment'; he himself conceded that there had been a 'systemic failure' with 'profound implications for our work across the world'.¹⁴

There are many other examples. A conservative list, sticking just to the last decade, would include Haiti (2004); East Timor (2006); Somalia (2006); Iraq (2006-07); Cote d'Ivoire (2010); Mali (2012); the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2012); the Central African Republic (2013); and South Sudan (2013-14). Each of these countries received substantial international assistance for stabilization and governance, and each followed the same trajectory. First a period where lofty policy goals and realities on the ground were a long way apart—accompanied by optimistic official narratives repeatedly denying the gap. Then a dramatic failure that stripped away all pretence, rapidly growing and metastasizing along the fault lines and vulnerabilities that were always already present. Finally a reset and reconfiguration of the work, trying to coax the genie back into the bottle.

What should we conclude from this? Is it just a numbers game, as suggested in the Prologue? Is our success rate just *inevitably* low?

The honest answer is: We don't know. In fact, we can't know. Much of the work that is currently attempted to stabilize and reshape fragile states was unknown ten years ago, and virtually all of it twenty years ago. Against this we are dealing with social and political systems whose evolution is most comprehensibly described in centuries. The consequence is that the data just isn't available. As a perceptive observer of Afghanistan has put it, our 'techniques resemble the early days of medicine, when the human body was poorly understood and doctors prescribed bloodletting, or drilled into skulls to treat madness.'¹⁵

To grasp how rudimentary the science really is, consider two trends over the last twenty years. The first is rapid *quantitative* growth. For UN peace operations, the average lifetime cost for missions started between 1985 and 1994 was USD 585 million. For missions between 1995 and 2004 it was USD 2.35 billion, a fourfold increase even adjusting for inflation. For those between 2005 and 2014 it is already 4.29 billion, notwithstanding that the meter is still running for five of the seven!¹⁶ Likewise for bilateral aid. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee, the club of rich country donors, didn't even keep a 'working list' of fragile states until 2005. But it recently noted approvingly that resource flows to these countries has doubled in real terms over a decade and now accounts for 38% of total assistance.¹⁷

The second trend is *qualitative* expansion, i.e. growth in the kinds of tasks that are attempted. Consider the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States. This is the 2011 product of an elaborate consultative process involving some forty-five governments and most of the key multilateral institutions in the development business. It is intended to map out future orientations for foreign aid to fragile states, with the point of departure five ‘peacebuilding and statebuilding goals’.¹⁸ These are: legitimate politics; security; justice; revenue and services; and economic foundations.

This is a remarkably broad remit. The technical and political complexities that underlie work on any one of these themes are enormous. But it has become par for the course to intervene in all of them simultaneously. In the peacekeeping sector, ‘statebuilding’ work of this kind was pretty much unknown up until 1991. Then came a few initial forays in El Salvador, Cambodia, and Bosnia. From there it is as if a switch had been flipped. From 1995 onwards the Security Council mandated UN peace operations that cut across those big, intimidating themes in no fewer than fifteen countries.¹⁹

For development agencies there are similar pressures. The Millennium Development Goals were formulated in September 2000 to ‘create an environment conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty’. The preamble included some aspirational language on peace and governance—but the eight goals themselves related to extreme poverty, primary education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, burden of disease, environmental sustainability, and the size of aid flows.²⁰ Each was subsequently associated with quantitative indicators, compiled and managed centrally to track achievement towards the target year of 2015. As the deadline approaches, expectations have expanded for successor arrangements and it is now commonplace to argue for targets on conflict and fragility. To take the highest profile example, the UN Secretary-General convened a high-level panel in 2013 including several former heads of state. It recommended targets, among many others, to ‘Enhance the capacity, professionalism and accountability of the security forces, police and judiciary’; ‘Reduce violent deaths per 100,000 by x [sic] and eliminate all forms of violence against children’; and ‘Stem the external stressors that lead to conflict, including those related to organized crime’.²¹ Just as for the original Goals, these would be linked with ‘precise metrics’ for centralized analysis and reporting.

At this point some caution is surely appropriate. It is clear that these are pressing concerns, and that we do not have the luxury of doing nothing. (Neither did those early medical practitioners!) But it has been a remarkably short span of time to invent a wholly new art and science.

The need for prudence is perhaps best illustrated by a quick glance backwards, at the brief history of the aid business. Here it is now conventional to acknowledge multiple ‘lost decades’ of effort. Successive orthodoxies had to play out at massive scale and for long periods before it was

accepted that things were just not working out as anticipated—first capital formation in the 1950s and 1960s, then basic needs in the 1970s, then aggressive liberalization in the 1980s. The profession cycled through each of these in turn before settling into a sort of eclecticism that tends to eschew grand theories in favour of nationally-specific problem-solving.

There is no reason to think the same fate unlikely for the ‘fragile states’ agenda, which boasts both bolder objectives and country ‘clients’ who are considerably less able to defend themselves against technocrats looking to test out their bright new ideas. To borrow a metaphor from Karl Popper:²²

Science does not rest upon rock-bottom. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or ‘given’ base; and when we cease our attempts to drive our piles into a deeper layer, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.

Well—we are a long way out into the swamp, and the building has been built very quickly. And for my part, I think that there is convincing evidence that some of the pillars are rotten.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a good place to explore the intuition, because amongst the patients of the new interventionism it is perhaps the longest-standing and most intensively treated. Every year from 2007-12 it hosted the largest or second-largest UN peace operation in the world; was in the top five for appeals for ‘emergency’ humanitarian aid and in the top ten for dependency on bilateral aid.²³ At the political level it hosted no fewer than five special envoys. But all this effort did not translate into progress against stated policy goals. The fact largely escaped comment until the brutal audit came—the split of the *Mouvement de 23 Mars* from the national army and the capture of Goma, the most important city in the conflict theatre, in December 2012. At this point the UN’s work in the country was widely derided, turning a crisis for the Congolese into a crisis of credibility for the world body.²⁴

In the aftermath of such an event, the Harvard leadership guru Ron Heifetz has suggested that effective leadership has two elements. The first is *stabilization*, stemming the bleeding and buying time. This certainly occurred. The UN deployed its first-ever ‘Intervention Brigade’ to shift the balance of forces on the ground; bilateral states stepped up diplomacy and yet another political framework (dubbed the ‘Framework for Hope’) was agreed between countries in the region. The second element, however, is *adaptation*. This means investigation of the habits and practices that led to crisis and the ‘innovation, experimentation and creativity required to learn new ways of doing things’.²⁵ This certainly did not occur. The story that led up to the fall of Goma wasn’t investigated with much seriousness, and the UN and bilateral aid providers managed to avoid serious scrutiny once the initial media interest petered out.

The present book attempts to fill this gap. My aim is to decompose ‘failure’, a complicated historical narrative, into specific hypotheses on ‘what went wrong’. Which of our pre-modern medical techniques muddled through to the desired result, and which inadvertently caused harm?

Action and stagnation

In 2007, Congo was thought a qualified success story. The 2003 Sun City Agreements had ended a five-year war that had sucked in no fewer than seven countries. The transitional government that followed had then been wound up by more-or-less successful elections to install a President and National Assembly. These institutions were far from perfect but able to play ball with the international community—a fact to be signalled in 2010-12 by cancellations of old international debts to the tune of five billion dollars.²⁶

The exception was the East of the country. This is a flexibly defined chunk of territory that runs roughly from the southern tip of Burundi up to the top of Lake Albert in Uganda, and a few hundred miles into Congolese territory. It had been the cockpit of the last war and the political accommodations worked out in the Sun City Agreements had not calmed the situation here to the extent that people had hoped. The situation remained precarious, with many factions who had not bought into the new political status quo and a steady drip of everyday atrocities.

The biggest single vulnerability was the Congolese army. This was an unstable patchwork of the belligerents left standing at the end of the war, ‘divided against itself, with Kinyarwanda speakers poised to fight members of other ethnic groups and to fight among themselves according to the Tutsi-Hutu line of cleavage’.²⁷ It was clearly ready to fall apart if the right thread was tugged, a scenario that had already knocked on the door in 2004, 2006 and 2007.

Meanwhile many smaller players felt marginalized by political machinations happening a thousand miles away in the capital. Thorough-going militarization after eight years of bush war meant this translated into dozens of armed groups that never quite demobilized. They retained both capability and willingness to skirmish with each other over resources and more intangible grievances. The most ferocious was the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP, after the French acronym). This was a descendent of one of the belligerents in the Second Congo War, put together by senior officers who felt they had lost out in the political transition. They kept flirting with the new national army but never consummating the relationship, with agreements in 2007 and 2008 breaking down quickly and then yet another tentative rapprochement in early 2009. On each occasion there was a chain reaction amongst

smaller militias who feared being left in the CNDP's sphere of influence as they had been during the war. They were bankrolled by local business and political elites who shared those fears and also by the national army, who kept getting routed on the battlefield.

Sharing this already complex ecosystem were a few more exotic species. Most notable were the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a mutant offspring of the *génocidaires* who had fled from Rwanda into the DRC in 1994. They lived a predatory and opportunistic life with no local political agenda beyond survival. However they were relatively well-organized and trained and thus often enlisted by local communities in score-settling amongst themselves. Other factions that didn't fit the usual mould included the FNL, a small Burundian insurgency that found Congo a convenient home, and the ADF, a peculiar Islamist group originating from Uganda. After long obscurity the latter would burst into international prominence in late 2014 after (murky) involvement in a string of gruesome massacres.²⁸

All this was in a region where the relevance of the central government had always been in question. Mobutu Sese Seko had been a dictator for thirty-two years, finally dying in 1997. But he had ruled by the judicious use of patronage and skilful manipulation of factions against each other, rather than an overwhelming concentration of force. The East had not lived under a heavy hand, and indeed had resisted many of Mobutu's centralising efforts.

Two subsequent wars had not improved the situation, with the belligerents pulling apart state institutions or else bending them to their will. By any conventional measure—policing, taxation, even physical access—DRC was an archipelago state, barely present outside the major urban centres. Communities functioned and in a few cases even thrived. But in Thomas Hobbes' formulation, they 'lived without a common power to keep them all in awe'.²⁹ Security, transport infrastructure and most social services were subject to the unofficial motto of the Mobutu period: *débrouillez-vous*, manage it yourself.³⁰

This was most dramatically illustrated by an epidemiological survey that estimated a total 5.4 million 'excess deaths' between 1998 and April 2007—due not to battle but rather disruption to basic sanitation, health services, subsistence farming and trade.³¹ (The figure led to the standard media tag 'the deadliest conflict since World War II'.) At a day-to-day level, shifting patterns of insecurity continued to keep between one and a half to two million people displaced at any one time. For the rest, a survey in 2007 found that about 20% of respondents felt safe meeting a soldier, and less than 40% when meeting a stranger of any kind.³² The big reason for this was near-total militarization of competition for economic resources. This ranged from the omnipresent 'checkpoints' on roads—taxing a bundle of cassava here, a few hundred Congolese francs there—through grazing disputes resolved at gunpoint, right up to the big prizes of remote mines and the cross-border trade of fuel and timber.

Faced with this situation, international actors had enthusiastically taken on public functions. The United Nations Mission in the DRC (MONUC) had been launched during the war and by 2008 had grown to an authorized strength of 20,575 military personnel, 1,440 police and nearly 5,000 civilian staff. Of these 90% were deployed in the East, with the first priority to protect civilians under the imminent threat of physical violence.³³ In practice this meant a far-flung network of ninety or so field deployments that acted as a sort of UN 911 service in parallel with local police and military.³⁴ Concurrent with this a dizzying array of humanitarian agencies had also set up permanent shop. One representative appeal document asked for funds to underwrite health services for 5.3 million people, and to support the food security of 4.3 million people. It explained that these needs were driven by ‘crises’ on the one hand and ‘general poverty and precariousness’ on the other.³⁵

Of course all this posed an obvious question: What was the exit strategy? Nobody was comfortable with what amounted to a sharing of sovereign functions.³⁶ The Congolese government first suggested a drawdown plan for MONUC in 2007, shortly after President Kabila’s inauguration, and then stepped up its efforts aggressively in 2009. The UN’s financial contributors were not averse to the idea, with peacekeepers costing USD 1.3 billion annually and the humanitarian agencies asking for another seven hundred million on top of that.

The plan, when it came, was not short on ambition. In late 2008 the Security Council directed MONUC to help the central government in ‘disarming the recalcitrant local armed groups’.³⁷ The following year it expanded on this: the UN system was to aim for ‘consolidation of State authority throughout the territory’. This included the ‘completion of activities of [demobilization] of Congolese armed groups or their effective integration in the army’; and ‘deployment of Congolese civil administration, in particular the police, territorial administration and rule of law institutions’.³⁸ All this for an area comprising—on the most restrictive interpretation—about 190,000 square kilometres and some fifteen million souls.

In formulating these goals, the Council was constantly egged on by Western advocacy groups. Human Rights Watch offered a typically optimistic recommendation in 2009:³⁹

Develop a new and comprehensive approach for disarming armed groups, including the FDLR, that emphasizes protection of civilians, apprehending those wanted for crimes in violation of international law, a reformed disarmament and demobilization program, and options for temporary resettlement of combatants and their dependents within or outside of Congo.

The Enough Project chimed in with an ‘Action Plan to End the World’s Deadliest War’. It proposed an American / French / British sally against the FDLR, precise tracing and documentation of mineral supply chains, and ‘reform of the Congolese justice system so that it

prosecutes the warlords who use rape, village burning, and other attacks on civilians as tools of war'.⁴⁰

Now let's jump forward to early 2013. To put it mildly, all those bold ambitions were not realized. A credible overview from an independent think tank indicated twenty-four significant armed groups active at date of writing, the accompanying map a crazy quilt of colour blotches with notations like 'diverse factions of same franchise'.⁴¹ This was fully consistent with intelligence estimates within the UN. I spent a lot of time writing sentences like the following in my little office in Goma:⁴²

Security remains the major challenge in many areas. The proximate causes of violence are not yet addressed; and work with civil institutions remains premature. At the same time: There is no political framework for action in the security sector and the role of the [stabilization strategy] remains limited.

This comes from a public report and is already much too polite. We had supported small police deployments to locations where they were shot at, kidnapped and ultimately driven off. (Occasionally with the collaboration of the local community.) In others they huddled in rapidly disintegrating tents, derided as the 'UNOPS police' in reference to the UN agency that had procured—and of course branded—their equipment.

In late 2010 a small armed group took over the ultra-remote town of Luvungi for a little while, perpetrated some unusually savage violence, and then disappeared back into the bush. Some months afterwards the UN mission prodded Congolese police to deploy in the area, dropping them off in UN helicopters with yet more tents. The press release that followed almost defies belief:⁴³

About a hundred women, the majority of whom were rape victims, met with the delegation on arrival. The mood was festive. Changes were visible everywhere in the town.

Today, the population feels entirely confident, and can express itself freely. Economic activity around the village is picking up, and the villagers are now contemplating the future, leaving behind a painful past.

The same armed group 're-captured' the town—or rather walked back in with minimal fighting—two months after this press release was written. They killed a few people, assaulted many more, and then left again. Of course this fact was buried in an anodyne UN narrative report rather than a press release, while international organisations squabbled in the pages of *Foreign Policy* over the precise number of victims of sexual violence for the original attack.⁴⁴

In short, something was off. We were speaking a polite language—territorial administration, prosecuting warlords, permanent demobilization of combatants—in an environment that was considerably more anarchic. Local leaders were playing real politics. They relied on linkages with hugely unreliable armed factions and a thoroughly criminalized economy for any real influence. Efforts to train them in record-keeping and budget execution were accordingly a little beside the point. Or rather—didn't take their lived political reality seriously. They were much more concerned about sudden, violent shifts in political equilibrium.

They were frequently proven right, but most definitively in December 2012. This is when the *Mouvement de 23 Mars* captured the city of Goma, shortly after splitting from the national army. This was as unambiguous a failure as one can imagine versus overall policy goals. Government forces had been routed despite maximally favourable operational conditions, the direct support of the UN peacekeeping mission, and the city being indisputably the highest value target in eastern Congo.

Against this background, 'apprehending and prosecuting' anyone began to look a bit fantastical. Far from drawing down, the peacekeeping budget for Congo actually *grew* by 7% in real terms from 2007-12. After the fall of Goma the UN's presence was further strengthened, with a new brigade specifically tasked with combat operations. For the bilateral partners funding aid projects the picture was no prettier. Twelve of the biggest commissioned an evaluation of their work in 2011 and received back a rather blunt response:⁴⁵

Fundamentally, it is difficult to define the progresses achieved by the interventions towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding, as the contextual analysis is defective. In fact the operational instruments such as humanitarian aid fill the gap left by donor strategies.

Meanwhile the various institutions estimating Congo's overall 'fragility' saw no improvements. They kept the DRC in company with Iraq at the peak of its crisis in 2006-07, or Sudan just before the secession of South Sudan.⁴⁶ In fact the best known ranking, the Failed States Index, actually pushed the Congo down from seventh-most fragile in the world in 2007 to second-to-last in 2012. People haggled about the precise number but could not deny the overall pattern, which is best described as *action and stagnation*.⁴⁷

Each year the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations returned to the Security Council for renewal of MONUC's mandate for 22,000 peacekeepers. Each year a funding appeal for humanitarian agencies would circulate for the 'Congo crisis', the world's second or third-biggest, with an explanation of 'challenges' copied from the previous year's appeal and a few per cent added onto the price tag. The fact that this pattern could repeat itself with little controversy, right up until the brutal audit finally came in late 2012, is a very troubling fact. As the British parliamentarian Rory Stewart asks in respect of Afghanistan: 'Why was no-one ever exposed?'

Why did neither colleagues nor bosses nor the public ever challenge such sublime “cautious optimism”?’⁴⁸

The Five Follies

In answer to this, I believe that a number of serious maladaptations prevented us asking the right questions. For brevity I call them the Five Follies, and they are as follows:

The makeover fantasy—A simplistic idea of the ‘extension of state authority’ as an unalloyed social good. This ignored serious unresolved questions about how public institutions should be governed and to what ends, and prevented identification of widely shared *goals*.

Policy without politics—The failure to understand the fears, uncertainties and interests that lay behind inertia on sensitive issues like security sector reform. This prevented the identification of viable *pathways for change*.

Geography denial—The construction of a fictional entity of ‘eastern Congo’ that left planning and analysis at unworkable levels of abstraction. This prevented effective *adaptation* to huge variations in conditions across the theatre of operations.

The coordination panacea—The insistence that more analysis and more planning were the answers to all of the above failings. This put off indefinitely a serious discussion of *resourcing*, as basic maladaptations and gaps on the ‘supply side’ were never confronted.

The iron triangle—A policy process dominated by a small group of Kinshasa-based officials, rich country governments, and the expert policy community. This limited *feedback*, the message that core public priorities were not making it into the policy process.

These are best summarized as shoddy, casual decision-making practices.⁴⁹ I do not go further and suggest that all can be explained by a lurking ideology (neo-liberal ‘empire in denial’) or specific professional norms (‘peacebuilding culture’).⁵⁰ Rather each Folly has its own history, and is reinforced by different incentives. It must also be emphasized at the outset that they were shared by many local counterparts, who so often spoke in the peculiar dialects of ‘statebuilding’ and ‘peacebuilding’ that they simply forgot those ideas that didn’t translate.

Based on this overall scheme the plan of the book is straightforward. The focus is on ‘stabilisation’, loosely defined as the Congo escaping dependence on massive foreign security

assistance and emergency relief in its eastern provinces. With one eye on this overall goal we pick our way through the Follies sequentially. In each case I reconstruct decision-making in a key priority area, so far as possible letting the original documents and stakeholders speak for themselves. I then compare the assumptions and mental models with how the situation actually evolved on the ground, digging deep into the actions and reactions of specific individuals and communities.

The overall effect is to jump in and out, revisiting the same situation from different ground-level perspectives. This is partly to avoid the sanitizing effects of distance. The story is quite often bloody, and it is useful sometimes to emphasize that ‘stakeholders’ deal with real stakes. But it is also because the story is irreducibly complex. Discussing any individual ‘variable’ stripped from its context is bloodless in a different way—it substitutes an observer’s perspective for that of the participants who actually shape events. I aim instead for an approach outlined by Aaron Wildavsky, perhaps the greatest modern observer of how policy is made:⁵¹

By quoting extensively from participants, by paying careful attention to the features of their environment as they describe it, and by examining the explanations they give for their own behaviour, we hope to create a recognisable context within which recommended change must take place. Hopefully participants .. will recognise in our book the world in which they work and want to use it both to explain to others what they do and to examine their own behaviour.

The method reacts against a system that usually does precisely the opposite—it compartmentalizes, and tells simple stories. This has been driven home for me many times, but perhaps most vividly in a conversation with a senior UN official in Kinshasa in 2009. He was tall and Scandinavian, fond of loud ties and ‘business’ jargon that was never used quite correctly. He was also considered a hot talent and knew how to make the right noises to get ahead. I quote:⁵²

At the end of the day .. you’re not accountable for these overall results. We can’t talk about results for return and recovery in general. Accountability is really about contracts, the specific commitments we make in project documents to our donors. That’s what we sign on to.

On this view, the proper level of analysis is the project agreement—a few million dollars passed from a single donor (say the United Kingdom) to a single agency (say the UN Development Programme). Most of these projects have success indicators and some are even formally evaluated. The problem is that it ends there, with this very parochial viewpoint. Overall success is left undiscussed because everybody reserves the right to define it for themselves.

Even where there have been formal post-mortems of failures in fragile states, they have been kept within tight parameters. The Review Panel that followed the debacle in Sri Lanka (Ban Ki-Moon’s ‘Rwanda moment’) was directed unambiguously to the ‘final stages of the war’, and the

‘contribution and effectiveness of the United Nations system in responding to the escalating fighting’.⁵³ This occluded the uncomfortable fact that the UN system had been present in the country all the way through three decades of violence. (In fact Sri Lanka had often been cited as a success story for development work.) Earlier post-mortems for action in the face of genocide in Rwanda and Srebrenica skirted around the history of policy engagement in precisely the same fashion.⁵⁴

That tendency is amplified, or enabled, by a lack of serious outside scrutiny. What is striking about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for someone working in an opaque inter-governmental bureaucracy, is that they have been *picked to death*. There was heavy parliamentary / Congressional oversight; ceaseless third-party muckraking accounts; credible surveys of public opinion; strong investigative reporting (after a slow start) from an array of news outlets; and a torrent of insider accounts from mid-level and senior-level officials. But one finds none of this for those crises which are left to the UN and regional organizations. Accounts from knowledgeable insiders are remarkably rare.⁵⁵ The rich countries that foot the bill never regard any individual dossier as a significant political issue because their contributions are individually small. The institutions that are tasked to supervise—the UN Security Council and its African Union counterpart—seem constitutionally incapable of doing so. Meanwhile the press instinctively distrusts the official narrative, knowing spin when they see it, but is unwilling to bear the costs of investigative reporting in these very difficult contexts.

Follies in Fragile States is a modest attempt to break those habits. It is muckraking, with a lot of narrative detail and an array of colourful characters. I wrote it in the firm belief that there is ‘no arcane form of social science that has to be mastered before one can begin to think about development policy’.⁵⁶ Intervention in the Congo—and in other ‘fragile states’—is indisputably an area where policy-makers and the public can be informed consumers, and ask the right questions.

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