6. WAR

a) The genocide in Rwanda

6 April 1994, 8.30 p.m. A plane is making its approach to the airport at Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. In the darkness, a ground-fired missile streaks up and strikes the aircraft. It plunges down in flames. There are no survivors.

On board were the presidents of Rwanda itself and of neighbouring Burundi. In chapter 3, section f, is described how these two countries in the heart of Africa had for several years been in the grip of violent conflict between their two main ethnic groups: the Hutu (making up over eighty per cent of the region’s population) and the Tutsi (making up over fifteen per cent). President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda was a Hutu. He had been in conflict not only with the Tutsi who, in the shape of the RPF resistance movement, had invaded the country in 1990 from Uganda, but also with part of his own divided Hutu community. President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi was also a Hutu. Just a few months prior to the missile attack, he had succeeded Melchior Ndadaye, the first elected Hutu president of Burundi, who had been assassinated by Tutsi army staff soon after his inauguration. Despite the numerical superiority of the Hutu in both countries, their political control of the area was far from automatic. Indeed, both countries had been ruled for a long time exclusively by Tutsi. Their democratisation, which began immediately after the end of the Cold War, was blocked in Rwanda by the RPF invasion and in Burundi by the opposition of the mainly Tutsi army. In both countries, the two groups were locked in a ruthless and unprincipled power struggle in which the ends were invariably taken to justify the means.

And the means included bringing down a presidential plane. Although the perpetrators were never identified, it was widely assumed that the plane had been shot down by Tutsi, perhaps belonging to the RPF. However, this might not have been the case. The hill outside Kigali from which the missile was fired was in the hands of members of Habyarimana’s presidential guard and Belgian soldiers from the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). This fact gave rise to widespread speculation, especially because witnesses claimed to have seen white men driving away at top speed immediately afterwards. In the light of events soon after the crash, however, it is not unlikely that the perpetrators were in fact Hutu, however odd this may seem. The president’s Hutu community was divided into ‘moderates’ who wanted to share political power with other groups (both Hutu and Tutsi) and ‘extremists’, for whom the preservation of Hutu power was the only consideration. The extremists felt that President Habyarimana had made too many concessions in the Arusha peace agreement and could therefore no longer be relied upon to guarantee Hutu power in Rwanda. This meant that he was regarded as an enemy – for example, by members of his own presidential guard on the hill near the airport at Kigali.1

For years this used to be the most likely version of the events surrounding the attack on the president’s plane. However, in 1994 a thorough French investigation was published in which the RPF was held responsible. According to the report, RPF leader Paul Kagame, the current president of Rwanda, had personally given the order for the downing of the plane. The RPF had been known to be able to penetrate deeply into enemy territory, so it might have also been able to enter the area around the airfield for a brief period in order to launch the assault.

The downing of the plane was dramatic enough, but what followed was truly astonishing. Within an hour, blockades went up in the streets of the capital and houses were searched. People were gunned down on the spot, not just one or two, but large numbers. Whole families were massacred with rifles and knives. The perpetrators were soldiers from the army, backed up by irregular troops (mainly the Interahamwe militia). Their members, numbering around fifty thousand (as many as in the army), had been armed and given all other necessary support by the military.

The operation was conducted systematically. The execution squads had been furnished with lists of people to be killed. The first victims were high-ranking Hutu officials suspected of jeopardising Hutu power through their support for the Arusha peace agreement. Among them
was the head of the transitional government, Agathe Uwilingiyimana. Her bodyguard consisted of ten Belgian soldiers who were members of the UN Assistance Mission. They were told to lay down their arms and accompany their captors to a military camp, where their throats were cut.

The death of the Belgian peacekeepers prompted Brussels to withdraw the Belgian contingent from Rwanda. Belgium’s example was followed by other countries that had supplied troops for the UN Assistance Mission. The whole peacekeeping force in Rwanda (numbering 2,500 troops) was in effect dismantled. Its mandate had not permitted armed intervention in combat situations, nor was it equipped for such action. The hostilities in Rwanda escalated so rapidly that there was no time to organise more effective international intervention, even if there had been support for it among the leading members of the UN. Instead the foreign powers, headed by France, confined themselves to evacuating their own subjects and other Westerners from Rwanda. Left to itself, without the prying eyes of foreigners, the country became the scene of an appalling bloodbath, the nature and extent of which would only gradually dawn on the international community.

Once they had worked their way through the lists of people slated for execution, the army and militias began to systematically eliminate the whole Tutsi population. From the capital, the slaughter spread throughout the country. The chain of command was clear. Senior army officers gave the orders and made use of the machinery of civilian government. In many cases, the church (a highly respected institution in Rwanda) also played a questionable role. The killing was not random, as in Somalia or Liberia. On the contrary, it was highly organised, with the army and local government efficiently coordinating the execution squads. At first, one district was spared: Butare (in the south of the country), the only one in Rwanda headed by a Tutsi. After two weeks, however, the leadership in Kigali lost patience; the administration of Butare was replaced, militant Hutu were flown in and inflammatory rhetoric did the rest. Butare too was engulfed in the bloodbath.

The mass killings in Rwanda meet all the usual criteria for genocide. They were directed at a single racial category (the Tutsi) with the intention of wiping them off the face of the earth (in Rwanda at least). The massacres were literally intended as a ‘final solution’, like that envisaged by the Nazis for the Jews. Every Tutsi was to be killed – male or female, young or old, right down to babes in arms. Nobody was exempt. Women and girls were frequently raped before being killed. The instruments of slaughter were sometimes guns, often knives or simply whatever came to hand. Many of the bodies were mutilated. Mounds of corpses littered the streets. There was virtually no escape. The Tutsi minority was consistently outnumbered and had nowhere to go. Only a few isolated individuals managed to avoid the slaughter by hiding out for a long period, for example in an abandoned roof space or up a tree in the forest.

Insane as it may sound, the genocide was almost entirely successful. Estimates differ, but it appears that of the over nine hundred thousand Tutsi living in Rwanda in April 1994, only around a hundred and thirty thousand managed to escape death at the hands of their murderous fellow countrymen. The remaining eight hundred thousand or so were all killed. This is an inconceivably large number.

Admittedly the number of Jews murdered by the Nazis was far greater, but in that case the killings were spread over a period of years and involved what might be described as an industrial process. In 1994, Rwanda was a densely populated but preindustrial agricultural country. The genocide was carried out manually, but at a pace five times that of the annihilation of the Jews in Europe. Around eighty per cent of the killings took place in the six weeks following 6 April. What was Rwanda like during that period and in the months that followed? The country must have been littered with corpses. Some were dumped in anonymous mass graves, some were burnt to death collectively (for example, in churches or other places where the victims had sought refuge), and some were simply thrown into the rivers. The waters flowing out of Rwanda were full of human remains. In Lake Victoria they formed reefs of bodies.

Towards the end of May, the genocide began to lose momentum, mainly because so few people were left to kill. The country had descended into chaos and normal social structures had completely broken down. The transitional government established on the basis of the Arusha
peace agreement was gone, and the army and militias were preoccupied with the massacres. The invading Tutsi army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), had stopped fighting following the Arusha agreement but now resumed its campaign. It was too late to save the bulk of the Tutsi population, but it could still reverse the balance of power in the country. It advanced steadily, occupying large areas, and in July seized the capital, Kigali.

Fearing retribution, the Hutu population fled before the advancing RPF forces. More than a million people sought refuge outside the country, where many of them were to suffer hunger, cholera and other hardships in the next chapter of the Rwandan tragedy. Meanwhile, in Rwanda, the RPF did its best to restore some sort of order. A new government was formed, based on the distribution of ministerial posts agreed to in Arusha, but with no extremist Hutu members. Their place was taken by members of the RPF. A Hutu was appointed as president, but the real power behind the government was the military leader, Paul Kagame. The post of vice-president was specially created for him, but in due course he acceded to the presidency.

Not surprisingly, the advance of the Tutsi army and its seizure of power were accompanied by a certain amount of bloodshed, with the emotions of the forces running high as a result of the genocide. Initially, the lack of reliable information from inside Rwanda and accounts by the Hutu who had fled to the neighbouring countries (and, naturally enough, were keen to play down their own part in the killings) led the international community to believe that a double genocide had occurred. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the secretary-general of the United Nations, succinctly summed up the situation as one of Hutu massacring Tutsi and Tutsi massacring Hutu. This simplistic view was used to justify nonintervention. After all, what were ordinary people supposed to do if in some faraway country they decided to start cutting each others’ throats?

Of course, not everyone shared this hands-off attitude. People around the world demanded that the international community take notice. Eventually, the French returned to Rwanda, mounting a humanitarian and military mission called Operation Turquoise, in the fear that otherwise Anglo-Saxon forces might enter the Francophone country. By the time the French soldiers arrived in Hutu-controlled territory, the genocide had almost been completed and the RPF was rapidly advancing across the entire country. The leaders of the RPF were against the French presence, because they interpreted Operation Turquoise as a French move not to end the genocide but to defend what remained of the old regime and keep it in power. That proved to be impossible, but the French did rescue the Hutu elite, including the officials responsible for planning and executing the genocide, who were surrounded by RPF forces at the lakeside near Rwamagana. The Hutu leaders were evacuated, first to Zaire and then on to France and Belgium. Operation Turquoise was certainly highly controversial, both in Rwanda and elsewhere. After a few weeks, the French government called off the operation. It had not accomplished much, beyond making an extremely difficult situation even more complicated.

In any case, the idea that two genocides were taking place simultaneously was factually incorrect. True, the Tutsi army’s advance and occupation of the country cost the lives of around a hundred thousand civilians, most of them Hutu, but – however shocking – it was in no way comparable to the genocide of the Tutsi. Although dreadful atrocities took place, no evidence has ever been found of any RPF plan to systematically exterminate the Hutu. Indeed, given the numerical ratio, any such plan would have been sheer absurdity. Even so, the RPF leadership cannot be entirely absolved of guilt for the genocide in Rwanda. By launching an invasion from Uganda, they deliberately placed the lives of the Tutsi population of Rwanda at risk. The RPF should have known that Hutu anger at the invasion was likely to be visited on innocent Tutsi civilians.

Finally, mention should be made of the slaughter of an estimated thirty thousand moderate Hutu by Hutu extremists. This brings the number of Rwandans killed in 1994 to a total far exceeding nine hundred thousand - an inconceivably large number, especially since the total population of Rwanda was only seven to eight million at the time the presidential plane was shot down.

Causes and consequences
The extermination of over ten per cent of the population of a country within the space of a few weeks is an incomprehensible event and clearly distinguishes the genocide in Rwanda from large-scale massacres elsewhere in Africa. In the early 1990s, Rwanda was certainly not a failing and disintegrating state. The violence that occurred was not the result of collapsing state authority that set off a violent struggle for power among splinter groups. On the contrary, it was the terrible efficiency of the state apparatus that made it possible to kill so many people in such a short time.

Rwanda had not descended into a state of chaos in which everybody was murdering everyone else, as people like the UN secretary-general (quoted in the previous section) wanted the world to believe. His description of the situation could not be viewed in isolation from its political implications. After all, if the Hutu and Tutsi population were indeed engaged in exterminating each other, as if in obedience to some law of nature, then there was no point in external intervention. After all, nature would always take its course.

In reality, however, there was just one well-organised group engaged in murdering a clearly defined section of the population (diagram IX). Even the chain of command was clear. The genocide was directed by Colonel Théoneste Bagosora. His deputy, the minister of defence, Major General Augustin Bizimana, was in charge of the logistics of the operation and ensured that army units unwilling to participate in the genocide did not actively obstruct it. These two were supported by a wide range of people in Kigali, mainly army officers, who took care of the logistics. They had links with people in the each district, both in the gendarmerie (present throughout the country) and in civilian government. It was they who sent out the murder squads, mainly members of the army and young Interahamwe militiamen.
Diagram IX: The genocide in Rwanda

International actors

International ties of the elites

National elites

Hutu

Domestic ties of the elites

Tutsi

General population

Hutu

Tutsi

= the killings
It is hard to believe that normal government institutions and public officials were prepared to countenance this operation and implement it with such care. But the preparations had been meticulous. As early as 1992, a ‘zero network’ of people within the army had begun planning the extermination of the civilian Tutsi population.\(^6\) As time went on, the plans were more and more openly discussed. In the early months of 1994, the public was inflamed by radio broadcasts and, as it were, mentally prepared for the storm ahead.

The success of this approach was connected with the history of conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda and the surrounding region. Large-scale violence between the two had been common in the past. As recently as 1993, for example, the assassination of the president of Burundi had led to around fifty thousand deaths. So the genocide in Rwanda was part of an established pattern, although the vast number of killings was exceptional even for the Great Lakes region.

The usual political and socio-economic causes of conflict provide an inadequate explanation for the genocide, although there certainly was a political power struggle, as well as socio-economic differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi. In an effort to identify factors which may have exacerbated the tensions between them, some researchers have pointed to the population density of the region around the Great Lakes.\(^7\) With around two hundred people per square kilometre compared with a continental average of only twenty-five, Rwanda and Burundi were certainly by far the most densely populated parts of Africa. The hilly landscape of the two countries was relatively fertile, but even so the population was pushing the limit of what the land could support, given the primitive agricultural techniques still in use. Each year, an average farming family in Rwanda or Burundi had access to less land. Given the virtual absence of any means to modernise the economy, the ever-increasing population could be seen as a curse.

Another, primarily psychological, explanation is based on the observed fact that socio-economic and other differences between the Hutu and Tutsi had actually been shrinking in the years before. The Hutu government in place since independence had gradually eroded the traditional socio-economic superiority of the Tutsi. The two peoples were becoming ever more similar and the many mixed marriages taking place reflected this fact. Even so, it was primarily the tensions between the two that laid the foundation for the conflict. This is the same strange phenomenon that was witnessed in the former Yugoslavia, where an explosion of extreme violence occurred and ‘ethnic’ differences resurfaced after years of intermarriage between people of Serb, Croat and other origin. The rapprochement that had taken place between the groups seems to logically contradict any attempt to explain the violence on the basis of the differences between them.

Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok has made an intriguing attempt to sort out this paradox by reference to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the ‘narcissism of minor differences’.\(^8\) Freud noticed that individuals sometimes hugely exaggerate very minor differences between themselves and other people in order to confirm or strengthen their own identities. This is logical, since the individual identity is largely based on the idea of being different from other people. Accordingly, any blurring or elimination of such differences poses a threat to personal identity.

Blok applied this theory to ethnic groups. While political and sociological theorists had viewed the levelling of differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi as beneficial to the unity of the country, Freudian theory saw it as a threat. It made it increasingly difficult for individuals who had always regarded themselves as Hutu or Tutsi to maintain that self-image. When tensions in the country increased, people wanted to know who they were. The national Rwandan identity was clearly not yet firm enough to fill the vacuum. Under political pressure, the population reverted to the old contradistinctions, even though they had to exaggerate the tiny remaining differences out of all proportion in order to do so. In this way, the traditional Hutu and Tutsi enmity was revived and provided the basis for an explosion of violence.

What were the consequences of the genocide? By mid-1994, Rwanda was in ruins and its population was traumatised. In the years that followed, Rwandans were to remain the most
introverted people in Africa. Many of them had been too deeply shocked by the atrocities ever to talk openly about them. Almost everybody had witnessed the murder and mutilation of friends, neighbours and colleagues. Families had been wiped out or torn apart. People used to living in the midst of relatives and in close-knit communities found themselves suddenly alone in the world. They had frequently been forced to abandon their homes and had no idea what they would find when they eventually returned. The country was full of wandering orphans and soon there was a new group of children, born of rape.

Suspicion was rife. Who had done what? Was anyone truly innocent? Many of the guilty sought refuge outside Rwanda, only to be cornered by RPF forces in Zaire/Congo. The new regime’s troops captured many camps in the provinces of North and South Kivu, killing ex-combatants (if they had not managed to flee deeper into Congo) and forcing civilians to return to Rwanda. Undoubtedly, however, many of the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide escaped retribution.

In the second half of 1994 and in 1995 over a hundred thousand Rwandans were arrested on suspicion of participation in the genocide. Given the extent of the slaughter, this was no very startling number, but it still swamped the Rwandan prisons and courts. It would take many years to try all the prisoners and meanwhile they were jammed together in small cells awaiting their turn. From 2001, therefore, an experimental attempt was made to speed up the process by taking groups of prisoners accused of playing relatively minor roles in the atrocities (for example, ‘simply’ having murdered a few fellow villagers) back to the places where they were said to have committed their crimes. There, the assembled community decided whether the accusations were true and, if so, what penalty should be imposed. The village assembly acted as both judge and jury. This approach ensured that thousands of young Rwandans received some form of trial or were returned to the community relatively quickly.

The United Nations also took over part of the task of trying alleged perpetrators of the genocide. In the Tanzanian city of Arusha, where the Rwandan peace agreement had been signed as recently as 1993, the UN set up an international tribunal to deal with the alleged ringleaders. The tribunal has been subjected to a barrage of criticism for its meticulous and therefore cumbersome approach. It has insisted, for example, that the evidence against the accused should be completely watertight, even though evidence in cases of genocide is generally extremely difficult to collect. Lawyers have managed to spin trials out to great lengths and – unlike the Rwandan courts – the UN tribunal cannot impose the death penalty. Critics have complained that this ‘civilised’ approach is in unreasonably sharp contrast to the barbaric deeds of which its beneficiaries stand accused.

Even so, the tribunal has been able to score some major victories. In 1999, for example, it became the first international tribunal ever to find a former head of government guilty of genocide. The leader in question was the former prime minister, Jean Kambanda, who received a life sentence. The tribunal hopes to be able to try a total of around a hundred major perpetrators, a task which it may not complete until 2008.

The lessons of Rwanda were too bitter for the international community to ignore. Come what may, it was imperative to intervene to prevent any new genocide. The problem, however, was that military intervention in another country to prevent genocide was only legally possible with a mandate from the United Nations Security Council. And that kind of mandate was not easy to get. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) wanted to intervene when the Yugoslavian government was known to be taking increasingly aggressive action against the Albanian minority in the country (mainly resident in Kosovo), but was unable to obtain a mandate due to Russian opposition in the Security Council. It was to a large extent the shock of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that made the Western countries decide in 1999 to take action in Kosovo independently of the UN. This produced the phenomenon of ‘humanitarian intervention’ (military intervention undertaken for humanitarian reasons without a mandate from the Security Council). The genocide in Rwanda also had an influence on the international community’s attitude towards armed conflicts elsewhere in Africa. In early 2000, for example, a large-scale UN peacekeeping operation began in Sierra Leone.
An important lesson learned by the Rwandan Tutsi was that, at the end of the day, they could rely only on themselves. This was what motivated the firm action taken by the Tutsi, and in particular by the government of Rwanda, in the Great Lakes region from 1994 on. Following the genocide, the Rwandan government was fairly paranoid, displaying an exaggerated suspicion of the outside world that no doubt seemed justified to a group which had just survived genocide. An obvious comparison can be drawn with the Holocaust and the subsequent attitude of the Jewish state of Israel. Successive Israeli governments have invariably attached top priority to national security, if necessary subordinating other interests – including respect for the rule of international law – to that aim. Mindful of the historical background, the international community resigned itself to the situation.

Similarly, the security of the Tutsi was the overriding consideration for Rwanda’s strongman, Paul Kagame. Where necessary, he was fully prepared to ignore international law. This made Rwanda, like Israel, a special case in the eyes of the world. Because of its dramatic history, Rwanda was given greater latitude than other countries. The greater part of the international community turned a blind eye its to transgressions. After all, it was difficult for countries that had virtually ignored the systematic extermination of a large part of the Rwandan population to censure the survivors when they took action to protect their own people. And so it was that the consequences of the Rwandan genocide helped pave the way to a war that would ravage the whole of Central Africa.

The Hutu extremists had gone a long way towards their aim of exterminating all the Tutsi in Rwanda. Out of the original population of over nine hundred thousand Tutsi, only around a hundred and thirty thousand had survived the slaughter. Nevertheless, the previous ratio between the two groups in the Rwandan population was swiftly restored. The new RPF-dominated government encouraged Tutsi emigrants to return from neighbouring countries, even if they had been living there for over twenty years. A total of approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand Tutsi streamed into Rwanda from Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire. Their first move was to look for the homes and lands that they or their forefathers had once possessed. They found them in rack and ruin, occupied by other families, or abandoned (but perhaps eventually to be reclaimed by some returning displaced person or refugee). The country’s turbulent recent past thus sowed the seeds of continuing strife. Assuming that the majority of those who had fled the genocide or its aftermath would eventually return to Rwanda, and given the new influx of Tutsi, there was no decline in the overall population of the country. Rwanda remained overpopulated, full of ethnic tensions and short on means of resolving them in a humane and conclusive way.

Central Africa’s Great War

After the end of the cold war, the position of African elites became weaker because of the loss of strategic influence of Africa in the world. In order to find new allies, people in power began to look over their borders, to other people in power in other African countries. These contacts had always been weak or even non-existent. Beginning in the 1990s, these inter-African contacts started to become stronger. Interaction between African states in the same region became a subject that had to be taken into account in the study of the position of African elites. Central Africa was probably the best example of this.

Starting in April 1994, over a million refugees streamed out of Rwanda. Many of them had been implicated in the genocide. Most crossed the border into the Zairian province of North Kivu, an area larger than the whole of Rwanda but with a far smaller population. The huge influx of Rwandan refugees placed severe pressure on living conditions in the province, and the international community, ashamed of its failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda, responded with a large-scale programme of humanitarian aid to ease their plight.

However, the conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi was not yet over. Hutu militias tried to recover and regroup in Kivu in order to return to Rwanda and ‘complete’ the genocide. Naturally enough, the new Tutsi government in Kigali, led by Kagame, was determined to prevent
this and counted on the support of President Mobutu of Zaire. He, however, saw no reason to assist; civil strife between ethnic groups in distant provinces presented no threat to the president in Kinshasa. But Mobutu had not reckoned on the determination of the new Tutsi leaders in Kigali, for whom the security of their own people was the be-all and end-all, even in their relations with the government of Zaire. If Mobutu would not cooperate, he would pay the price.

In October 1996, therefore, serious resistance to Mobutu emerged in eastern Zaire, instigated by the Rwandan army. One of the many Zairian resistance groups, which had previously been relatively weak, suddenly proved capable of successful military action. Its leader was the hitherto unknown Laurent Kabila and the group of local Zairian rebels included many people of Tutsi descent (known in Zaire as Banyamulenge).

The support of the Rwandan government must have made an enormous difference to Kabila. At the start of his uprising, dramatic events occurred in the Rwandan refugee camps in eastern Zaire. Tutsi refugees were press-ganged into Kabila’s rebel army or enlisted voluntarily, while Hutu opponents of the Kigali regime were killed on the spot or transported back to Rwanda (or in some cases Burundi), if they did not manage to escape by seeking refuge deeper inside Zaire. As Kabila’s troops advanced westward towards Kinshasa, these Hutu refugees and fighters were driven ahead. The individual fate of these people – numbering hundreds of thousands – is generally unknown, but the mass graves discovered later speak volumes.

The collapse of the Mobutu regime in 1996-1997 seemed to herald a new era for Zaire. The outside world was persuaded that the nation, under Kabila’s leadership, had rid themselves of the hated dictator. Many people in Africa and elsewhere felt that the fall of the ‘dinosaur’ heralded the end of the neocolonial era. Here was Africa engaged in its own liberation. But sentiments in the Democratic Republic of Congo (the new name that Kabila gave the country after taking power) were rather different. Many people felt far from liberated. It was difficult, especially for those in the capital, to get used to the Rwandans who surrounded the president. And, as time went on, the Rwandan support which had been necessary to bring Kabila to power, gradually undermined his authority in the nationalist city of Kinshasa.

If Kabila wanted to survive in Kinshasa, he would have to free himself from his role as a puppet of Kigali. He would need to build up powerful grassroots support for himself and get rid of his Rwandan advisors. Accordingly, Kabila began to adopt a more independent attitude. He refused to participate in a plan put forward by Uganda and Rwanda for economic cooperation, and eventually even integration, in the Great Lakes region. In order to construct an independent Congolese army from a ragtag bunch of ethnic militias, Kabila started to make use of the Mai Mai in the east of the country, who were traditionally the sworn enemies of all Rwandans, whether Hutu or Tutsi. He even began to use Hutu who had participated in the genocide for his own purposes. This increased the tension along the border with Rwanda and was probably the factor that eventually drove the Kigali government to take action. The chief-of-staff of the Congolese army, James Kabarehe, had previously served in the Rwandan armed forces. At the request of Rwanda, he now plotted to carry out a coup d’état in Kinshasa.

Kabila realised the danger just in time. He dismissed Kabarehe and ordered his Rwandan advisors out of the capital and all Rwandan forces out of Congo. But Kagame was not about to give up quietly. On 1 August 1998, Rwandan forces in Kinshasa advanced on all the strategic points in the city. At the same time, a rebellion broke out in eastern Congo, along the border with Rwanda, looking suspiciously like a replay of Kabila’s own uprising against Mobutu. This time, however, Rwanda’s involvement was more overt: columns of Rwandan army vehicles drove across the border into eastern Congo and Rwanda’s ally Uganda declared its support for the ‘insurgents’. In the small town of Goma on Lake Kivu, virtually on the Rwandan border, they set up an alternative Congolese government. Whatever might eventually transpire in distant Kinshasa, it was clear that the two countries were determined to bring order to the tumult of eastern Congo.
The Rwandan government tried to force events in the Congolese capital by launching a spectacular military airlift to faraway Kinshasa. However, the Rwandan military failed to seize the city, mainly because they found themselves unexpectedly facing a force of seven thousand foreign troops supporting the Congolese government. With lightning speed, Kabila had called on the help of Angola, which had also been instrumental in his rise to power. At this critical moment, with his control of the country at stake, he was prepared to accept the inevitable quid pro quo.

With Angola’s help, Kabila was able to parry the direct Rwandan threat to his regime. The Rwandan military decided to withdraw overland to territory controlled by the UNITA rebels in northeastern Angola, whence they were eventually flown back to their own country. In the Congolese capital, however, tension persisted. The inflamed nationalist feelings of the Kinshasans turned them against all foreigners, in particular if they looked like Tutsi. The head of Kabila’s private office went so far as to label all Tutsi in Congo microbes and vermin needing to be eradicated. So it was that the most reckless of Rwanda’s attempts to secure Congo for itself in the ethnic struggle in the Great Lakes region, or at least to neutralise the country, had the counterproductive effect of turning a considerable proportion of the Congolese people against Rwanda and fanning the flames of ethnic hostility.

That was not the end of the war in Congo. In fact, it was not really even the beginning, which came in August 1998, when Rwanda and Uganda launched a new offensive in the east of the country. Other countries joined with Angola in support of Kabila’s regime. After that, the war in Congo and around the Great Lakes became exceedingly complex. It came to display every hallmark of contemporary warfare in Africa: a complicated internal situation; foreign intervention (not only by African states, but also by countries outside Africa and by international organisations); political, economic, social and cultural issues; participation by both ‘new’ and ‘old’ leaders; the involvement not only of regular national armies, but also of militias, gangs and young drifters with no future prospects; trading in arms, diamonds, oil and coffee concessions, typical of the economy of war; use of every kind of weapon from modern fighter aircraft to machetes; huge numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, many of whom were involved in the hostilities; and a motley assortment of shifting internal and external coalitions.

Some order can be discerned amid this chaos if we distinguish between various levels of conflict. The first, and by far the most important, distinction to make is that between the two regional power blocs: a ‘Great Lakes’ alliance of Rwanda, Uganda and, to a lesser extent, Burundi, versus Congo and the allies of President Kabila (Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia). All these countries and their individual roles in the war are discussed below.

At stake in the conflict between the two blocs was their ability to retain or extend their geographical spheres of influence, in the interest of security or, in other words, physical control over ethnic groups and fighting forces. But there were also economic motives for the war. Congo is extremely rich in mineral resources and everyone wanted a share. Each country or faction occupying part of the territory of Congo immediately began to extract natural resources for its own gain. This meant that Congo was, in practice, carved up into a number of zones of occupation, even if their borders varied over time. None of the governments that were drawn into the fighting in Congo made any formal claim to its territory. It was not, therefore, a matter of openly declared territorial ambition at the expense of Congo, but rather of taking military and economic advantage of the weakness of the government in Kinshasa.

The second level of conflict was domestic. There was a long-running civil conflict going on between a shifting set of rebel groups and the government in Kinshasa. President Kabila’s authority was challenged by a host of disparate and often mutually hostile groups and individuals. The role of this armed opposition within Congo cannot be viewed in isolation from the conflict that was being waged at the international level. Foreign powers and Congolese resistance groups provided armed support for each other wherever they thought it useful to do so.

The situation in Congo and surrounding area was further complicated by a third level of conflict: civil wars in the adjacent countries which increasingly spilled over onto Congolese territory. The prime example was in Rwanda, where the postgenocide regime in Kigali was fighting armed
Hutu groups in eastern Congo (many of whose members had served in the former Rwandan army). The Rwandan situation was one of the main causes of the war in Central Africa. But the governments of Uganda, Burundi and Angola also took armed action inside Congo against resistance movements formed of their own nationals.

Finally, the fourth level of conflict was fighting by armed groups like the Congolese militias, the Interahamwe (Hutu) and the Mai Mai (who had a different ethnic background), in the provinces of North and South Kivu in eastern Congo. These groups were initially thought to have no political goals of their own, but it eventually became clear that they were linked to President Kabila in Kinshasa. They often operated on the basis of informal instructions from the national Congolese army.

Large-scale warfare engulfing almost the entire continent was a new phenomenon in Africa. Over the centuries, the continent had experienced violent episodes of many kinds, but they had always been limited in scale, if only because of its low population density. The colonial era produced its own particular tensions and hostilities, but they were kept under control by the European powers. After independence, this situation persisted for the duration of the Cold War. The worldwide confrontation between East and West translated into many local conflicts within Africa, but the global superpowers were careful to prevent these from escalating to the point where they might themselves become directly involved.

With the end of the Cold War, the situation changed dramatically. International control was removed from the continent and African states were able to pursue independent policies, unconstrained by the superpowers. Unaccustomed as they were to such freedom, it took them some time to take advantage of it in their relations with their neighbours and more distant countries. Their delay in doing so was also due to the weakness of the ties between them, friendly or otherwise. Their isolation from each other was a result both of their historical background and of the virtual absence of physical infrastructure. Ideologically, it was reflected in the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other African countries, which was a central provision of the OAU Charter.

However, new freedoms always attract people eager to exploit them. The rulers of countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Eritrea, as members of the generation of ‘new leaders’ discussed in chapter 4 (section e), saw no moral objection to interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, particularly neighbouring countries that had descended into chaos. One such country was Congo. The postgenocide government of Rwanda had given top priority to restoring order and security within its own borders, but was unable to achieve this without the cooperation of the authorities in its huge neighbour. First Mobutu and then, soon after his removal, his successor Kabila were uncooperative. The result was a new Rwandan intervention (supported by Uganda) in the Congolese political scene.

The new mentality on the part of Rwanda and Uganda’s leaders encountered fierce resistance from the other countries in the region. Protest was voiced not only by the Francophone countries (especially nearby Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon, the Central African Republic and Chad) which – accustomed as they were to the order imposed by Paris – abhorred this kind of African international activism, but also by Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Sudan. The war in Congo revealed a faultline between ‘new-style’ and ‘old-style’ international conduct on the part of African governments.

There were still other motives for participating in the war in Congo. Engaging in a foreign campaign was a proven means of distracting attention from domestic political problems. There was also the lure of Congo’s mineral wealth. And considerations of prestige and power could also persuade countries to go to war, feeling that they would no longer count in the region if they lingered on the sidelines.

The motives of the various parties for taking part in the war and their roles in the hostilities are discussed in detail later in this chapter. First, however, it is worth considering the situation to the northeast of the Great Lakes. Around the same time that the new leaders Kagame and Museveni intervened in Congo, eventually precipitating a war in the whole of Central
Africa, the new leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afwerki) were also entangled in hostilities. Against each other.

Ethiopia and Eritrea once again at war

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea that broke out in the summer of 1998 was a complete surprise to the outside world and even to many experts on the Horn of Africa. In the preceding weeks there had been border skirmishes, but virtually nobody seriously expected hostilities of such magnitude. There was simply no real reason for them. In fact, cooperation between the two countries had been surprisingly good since Eritrea had broken away from Ethiopia in the early 1990s. The leaders of the two countries were on friendly terms. Moreover, Western governments were under the impression that both Meles Zenawi (in Ethiopia) and Isaias Afwerki (in Eritrea) sincerely wanted what was best for their two countries – something they did not necessarily believe of all African leaders – and this made the two of them popular among international donors.

Even after fighting was under way between the two armies, the world was still mystified about the exact nature of the rift. An answer was not forthcoming from the governments in question. They each refused to take responsibility for the war, claiming that it was the fault of the other for displaying aggression against a peace-loving neighbour. Observers could only guess at their underlying motives. And their guesses were heavily influenced by their personal feelings about the two countries.

Eritreans thought that Ethiopia had been unable to stomach the success of its former province and was out to put its small northern neighbour ‘in its place’. They emphasised the economic and monetary situation; Eritrea had been gradually disentangling its affairs from those of Ethiopia, a process completed in 1997 when the Ethiopian currency, the birr, was replaced with a separate Eritrean currency, the nakfa. Ethiopians, on the other hand, laid all the blame on Eritrea, claiming that the successes of the past decade had given the authorities there an inflated sense of self-importance. Still, the exact purpose of the Eritrean attack remained unclear. The ostensible focus of the dispute was an arid and infertile patch of border territory offering nothing of any particular value either above or below ground. Nobody seriously believed that this minor border dispute was the real reason for the war.

The assertiveness (or, as some would have it, inflated ego) of the Eritrean regime may indeed have been the main reason. Having won its own independence by force of arms, a rare occurrence in Africa, Eritrea was determined to take control of its own development. No task seemed too great for the little country, with a population of just three million. Likewise, the government showed that it would stand for no nonsense in its relations with neighbouring states. In the internal conflict in Sudan, Eritrea openly supported the rebels against the government in Khartoum, correctly pointing to anti-Eritrean Islamic forces inside the Sudanese government. At times, little Eritrea actually seemed to be heading for an armed confrontation with its vast neighbour Sudan. It came even closer to war with Yemen, on the other side of the Red Sea, when the many islands in the straits between the two countries became a subject of dispute and the Eritrean navy began firing on the Yemenis. It took considerable international pressure to prevent further escalation of the conflict.

In fact, Ethiopia was the only adjacent country that Eritrea had not threatened with force since its independence. With its large population (twenty times the size of Eritrea’s), Ethiopia was the natural leader in the Horn of Africa and perhaps it was precisely this fact that inflamed the Eritrean government. It is probable that Eritrea saw Ethiopia as a giant with feet of clay. After all, many people assumed that the Ethiopian government was dominated by people from the northern province of Tigray, bordering on Eritrea, and that the many other ethnic groups in Ethiopia would eventually attempt to cast off the Tigrayan yoke. Perhaps Eritrea thought that Ethiopia was already disintegrating and that the process could be accelerated by launching a vigorous and well-placed military attack on northern Ethiopia to break the power of Tigray. Ethiopia might
then fragment, leaving little Eritrea, with its formidable armed forces, as the major power in the Horn of Africa.  

As it happened, however, the outcome of the Eritrean attack was very different. Ethiopia did not disintegrate but actually became more united. Although it was dominated by Tigrayans, the government in Addis Ababa showed a surprisingly bellicose spirit. Domestic political considerations played a major role. The prime minister, Meles Zenawi, used the war to strengthen his standing in the country. No leader ever wins popularity by relinquishing national territory. The independence of Eritrea following a successful war of secession was therefore a sore spot with the Ethiopian public and a potential Achilles’ heel for the regime. The fact that Ethiopia had ceded the port of Assab to Eritrea was a particular problem. Although Assab had been part of the Italian colony of Eritrea, after Eritrea had once again become part of Ethiopia, Assab had become part of a different Ethiopian province. For this reason, many people in Ethiopia felt that it had been unnecessary to cede the city to Eritrea. By doing so, Meles had deprived Ethiopia of direct access to the Red Sea. The critics complained that the government put Tigray’s interests first, above those of the country as a whole. In order to end these and other doubts, the Ethiopian government responded harshly to the Eritrean attack on its border. It was determined to teach Eritrea a lesson it would never forget.

The result was one of the largest-scale wars in modern African history. The world looked on in amazement as hundreds of thousands of troops from two of the biggest and best-equipped armies in Africa fought each other tooth and nail. This was the exact opposite of the key security problem that had emerged in Africa since the end of the Cold War, that of weak states unable to control internal ethnic tensions. By contrast, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea conformed to the standard Western model of armed confrontation between two countries, two governments and two armies. It involved powerful, centrally led organisations with such a grip on the minds of their soldiers that they were prepared without hesitation to leave their trenches and advance to almost certain death in very large numbers. In this sense, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was quite atypical of Africa and more reminiscent of the European battles of World War I.

On both sides of the border, nationalist feelings ran high. The thousands of Ethiopians in Eritrea and the many Eritreans in Ethiopia paid the price. In 1998, Addis Ababa expelled no fewer than forty thousand of the latter, including people who had lived in Ethiopia for as long as thirty years. Others were interned in camps. Some were Ethiopian citizens; formal nationality was seen as less important than ethnic origin. With thousands of mixed marriages and countless other personal ties between Ethiopians and Eritreans, the result was many tragedies for individuals and their families.

Eventually both countries became weary of the war. There was a virtual stalemate on the battlefield, although Ethiopia eventually gained the upper hand. The human cost was high – probably around fifty thousand casualties on both sides – and the material damage was enormous. The area around the battlefields was ravaged and further back from the lines the bombardments had taken their toll on civilian life and property. To keep the war machine running, Ethiopia and Eritrea – both among the poorest countries in the world – each had to spend nearly half a million dollars a day. International aid to the two countries – previously darlings of the donor community – was halted, making it financially and economically ever more difficult to sustain such a large-scale war.

After a year of fighting, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea began to realise that they had to negotiate a ceasefire. There was little alternative, but they still needed to save face. International mediation by agencies like the OAU was the answer. The two countries met in Algiers (Algeria being the chairman of the OAU at the time) and, after months of wrangling over the details, finally signed a peace agreement in late December 2000.

Eritrea conceded to the establishment of a demilitarised zone within its territory on the border with Ethiopia so that peacekeepers from the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) could monitor the ceasefire. UNMEE was led by the Netherlands and Canada. Eritrea was allowed to deploy police, but of course no soldiers, in the demilitarised zone. There was some tension when the Eritrean government sent frontline troops into the zone disguised as
policemen (or militias). However, this did not really threaten the peace agreement. Meanwhile, the border between the two countries was to be precisely surveyed in order to engineer an agreement on the exact demarcation.

Continued fighting in Sudan

In 1998, several countries bordering Sudan became involved in wars. This influenced the internal struggle between the north and south of the country. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia gave the government in Khartoum some respite, since it meant that both neighbouring countries would concentrate their energies and resources on fighting each other rather than directing them against Sudan. It also reduced their support for the Sudanese resistance. Ugandan involvement in the war in Congo had a similar effect. The Sudanese government even allowed itself to be drawn into the latter conflict to some extent, by acquiring from Kabila the right to use airfields in northeastern Congo. This meant that the Sudan could provide direct support for Ugandan rebels operating on the border with Congo. In turn, this Sudanese strategy gave the government of Uganda an additional reason to send in troops to occupy part of Congo.

However, these international intrigues caused no more than a ripple in the civil war inside Sudan. The roots of the dispute lay far back in time. Through the Nile valley, Islamic influences filtered down from the Arab countries into what is now Sudan and hence into black Africa. A few hundred kilometres to the south of Khartoum, the advance of Middle Eastern culture was blocked in the early nineteenth century by the very different topography of southern Sudan (where the desert gives way to savannah and marshes) and also by the intervention of the British. From that time on, the territory that is now Sudan was divided into a northern area with a Muslim population of Arab extraction and a smaller southern area with a population of black Christians and animists.

From the moment of Sudan’s independence, there were always great tensions, and frequently armed conflict, between the two areas. This conflict can be interpreted either as a political war of independence (waged by the south against the rest of the country) or as a cultural and religious war (waged by Arabs against black Africans). However, the most logical explanation is that it was a war waged by an expansionist Islam against the British presence and legacy in Sudan. When the British departed in 1955/1956, the Islamic advance resumed. The southern Sudanese had been opposed to British decolonisation, fearing that the northern Sudanese would step into the power vacuum. After a period of peace in the 1970s, the war flared up again in the 1980s when – mainly under the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran – the government in Khartoum became increasingly fundamentalist and aggressive.

Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the civil war raged on unabated, despite international attempts to end it. It was useless to point out the economic damage and human misery it was creating or the impossibility of a decisive military victory for either side. Khartoum was determined to achieve the political, military, religious, cultural and economic subjugation of the south. Indeed, it was difficult in practice to distinguish between these various dimensions. For example, Khartoum wanted to impose the same social constraints on women in the south as existed in the north. Government troops tried to prevent women in the south from engaging in trade, for example in foodstuffs. However, such female trading activities were common throughout the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. A prohibition on it ran deeply counter to local cultural traditions and economic realities.

In 1989 the Sudanese army executed a coup d’état against the then civilian government. The inspirer of the coup and the strongman behind the newly installed military government was a religious leader and politician named Hassan al-Turabi. He was the ideologue of the National Islamic Front (NIF) and the brain behind the strategy for the islamisation of the country. Under his leadership, Sudan was to become the bastion of Islamic fundamentalism in sub-Saharan Africa.

In 1999, however, there was a rift between the army leaders and the fundamentalists. In a surprise move, the head of the army and military junta, Omar al-Bashir, managed to rid himself
of Turabi. He then obtained confirmation of his presidency by calling elections in the part of the country controlled by the government. He won with a huge majority. Having consolidated his power in this way, he showed himself accommodating towards other parties, announcing his intention to include representatives of other parties in government and to end the war with the south by means of dialogue and negotiation. However, these plans were frustrated by Turabi. Although once the fiercest opponent of the rebels in the south, he now made overtures to them, suggesting that they should join forces with him against the ‘oppressive’ Bashir regime. He also called on the Sudanese people to rise up against the government. In 2001, Turabi was even detained for some time on suspicion of conspiring with the rebels in the south.

Politicians in northern Sudan were fairly easily able to form coalitions with turncoat rebel leaders in the south because the resistance in the south was heavily divided. Although the black African peoples in the region shared an unwillingness to be dominated by the Islamic, culturally Arab north, they had nothing else in common. Of the widely dispersed southern population of approximately five million, half were Dinka. The many much smaller minorities were afraid of a Dinka hegemony. This, combined with the very rudimentary physical infrastructure of the large southern region, with its many marshes and lakes, encouraged the different peoples and fighting forces to act in isolation from each other. Nevertheless, most remained affiliated in some way with the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), set up when the civil war resumed in the early 1980s.

During the Cold War, the SPLA received most of its support from the communist regime in Ethiopia, but after the fall of that government in 1991, it came more under the influence of the West (with support from the governments of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda, which were likewise supported by the West). Unlike the old Soviet Union, the new Russian Federation had little interest in the war in Sudan. However, it still attempted to sell arms in exchange for hard currency – an offer the government in Khartoum was glad to accept on more than one occasion. China also assisted the Islamic regime, mainly in protecting the Sudanese oil industry.

In 1997, the government in Khartoum came under military pressure when the southern rebels, assisted by Eritrea, opened up a new front in the east of the country. This threatened the economically and militarily important link between Khartoum and the ports on the Red Sea coast. Relief came a year later when war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, dramatically reducing the support they were able to give the Sudanese resistance movement. Eventually Eritrea even found itself under such pressure that it sought a rapprochement with Khartoum, but the war with Ethiopia petered out before any close link could be forged between Khartoum and Asmara.

Inevitably, the war in Sudan had serious consequences for the civilian population. None of the leaders in either the north or the south was much concerned with the development of the potentially wealthy country. The vast majority of the population, especially in the south, was poor and miserable. The lack of security was perhaps the worst problem. After the war was resumed in 1983, almost two million people perished and no fewer than four million were forced to flee the war zone. Most of them remained on Sudanese territory, often building shanties for themselves on the periphery of cities like Khartoum in the centre of the country or Nyala in the west. Others lived in camps in the south. Hundreds of thousands sought refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda. For its food supplies, the south was dependent on international aid routed through Kenya. This cost the international community around a million dollars a day.

Africa’s wars produced many child soldiers. By the turn of the century, there were around a hundred and twenty thousand of them. In the Sudan as elsewhere, children were heavily involved in the fighting, especially as members of southern resistance groups. There were local cultural reasons for this. Fighters were recruited through family connections. Following their initiation at around the age of twelve, boys were regarded as men and therefore suitable recruits. As the war dragged on, many child soldiers were orphans who had been born during the war and never had a normal family life. For them, the armed resistance group was a substitute family and its leader a proxy father. International pressure, in particular from the United Nations Children’s
Fund (UNICEF), brought about the discharge and demobilisation of some child soldiers, but they had difficulty adjusting to civilian life. There was even a fear that they would choose to return to the fray once they had been re-energised by a period of proper nourishment.

In both northern and southern Sudan there were widespread and extremely serious violations of human rights. The tradition of slavery and slave trading continued throughout the war. The northern army and related militias frequently raided the south in search of boys. To prevent them from joining the southern resistance groups, they abducted them and bore them off to the centre and north of the country, where they were forced to do all sorts of chores. As in previous centuries, Western aid organisations (in particular religious groups from the United States) attempted to purchase the freedom of these present-day slaves, openly collecting money for the purpose. This method attracted international criticism on the grounds that the payments created a financial incentive to capture slaves and that there was no guarantee that the newly emancipated slaves would not be immediately recaptured and put back on the market for ‘liberation’.

Congo and the enemies of Kabila

The drama in Sudan was not destined to retain the world’s attention for long. By the millennium, it was the great war in Central Africa that was dominating the face of the continent. There were two reasons for this: the large number of belligerent parties and the duration of the hostilities. Instead of lasting just a few weeks, as the aggressors had expected, the war dragged on for years. Its complexity has already been discussed in this chapter. Very roughly speaking, the parties can be divided into two groups: on one side the enemies of the Congolese president, Laurent Kabila (see below), and on the other his allies (see next section), whatever their motives for taking part may have been.

On the subject of Kabila’s opponents, it is arguable that the Congolese president was in fact his own worst enemy. Admittedly, he could not help the fundamental weakness of his position: without foreign assistance, he would never have obtained the presidency. But even with foreign support, Kabila never managed to do anything positive for Congo. In that respect, he was no better than Mobutu. Their regimes were similar in both style and policy, and Kabila’s rule was – if possible – even worse for the country. Kabila lacked Mobutu’s political instincts, and as a result actually plunged Congo into war.

Just as Mandela was in many respects the personification of all that was good in Africa, so Kabila became, in a sense, the embodiment of all that was wrong with the continent. He came to symbolise the disappointments of the 1990s, which were partly the result of unrealistically high expectations. Because Kabila had been brought to power by Museveni and Kagame, it was immediately assumed that he would be a ‘new leader’ of their calibre, someone who could get Congo back on track. In fact, however, Kabila proved to be a product of Africa’s bad days in the 1970s and 1980s.

This was clear from the way he ran domestic politics, calling parliamentary and presidential elections only to postpone them, and finally suspending them entirely for the duration of the war. They were never to take place under his rule. He did, however, respond to national and international pressure to engage in political discussion with the opposition and other parties. And, just as Mobutu gave in to pressure and called a national assembly in 1991, so Kabila permitted religious leaders to organise a ‘national consultation’ in 2000. Representatives of government, industry, civil society and academia took part, together with traditional leaders. Even though Congolese rebel groups were not represented, the meeting rapidly transformed into an anti-Kabila forum demanding the resignation of the government, the liberation of political prisoners and the launch of a genuine national dialogue.17

Realising that the consultation was not working to his advantage, the president decided to establish a competing ‘constituent assembly’, the members of which were either appointed by him or at any rate on his side. But Kabila failed to control even this group; at its first meetings it attacked the government for the way it was running the country. But even more than criticising Kabila, the members of the constituent assembly were interested in lining their own pockets. If they were only there to applaud and rubberstamp Kabila’s decisions, they wanted at least – as
befitted true political clients – to be properly rewarded for their efforts. Kabila quickly lost patience with them. In October 2000, just two months after the official opening of this ‘parliament’, the president ordered the police to clear the offices of the representatives in the parliament building. The people of Congo would once again have to do without political spokesmen.

For those Congolese not averse to violence, there remained the option of armed opposition to the government in Kinshasa. Under Kabila, as in Mobutu’s time, the country was full of armed gangs, militias and rebel movements, all operating in a disorganised way, with or without their own political agendas and support bases. What made them more dangerous during Kabila’s presidency than in previous years was the certainty of substantial foreign support. Kabila himself had been the first Congolese rebel leader to benefit from such support, and now he risked falling victim to it. The weak armed forces available to the government in Kinshasa were capable of exercising some control over stray rebel groups, but not of resisting a serious attack by a foreign army.

The greatest problem for Kinshasa was the alternative government in Goma, which suddenly appeared on the scene in August 1998, simultaneously with the invasion of eastern Congo by joint forces from Rwanda and Uganda. This ‘Goma regime’ consisted of members of a resistance movement calling itself the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). Apart from its self-proclaimed interest in democracy, nothing was known about this movement. Its leader, a history professor named Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, admitted that it had yet to draft a political manifesto. Furthermore, the Goma regime was still searching for a support base. The explanation for this curious state of affairs is that the RCD was actually a front for the Rwandan and Ugandan presence in Congo.

The later rupture between Kigali and Kampala was mirrored by a schism within the RCD. Wamba, whose leadership of the movement was already shaky, withdrew from Goma with his supporters and organised his own breakaway RCD further north, supported by Uganda. The Goma RCD continued to rely heavily on Rwandan support and pursued a purely military strategy, without bothering to develop any clear Congolese political identity. By contrast, Wamba’s breakaway RCD adopted the strategy that Museveni had pursued in Uganda and built up a highly motivated militia via a programme of political education amongst its followers. Even so, Wamba’s RCD remained too weak to be of much real use to Uganda and the Ugandan army gradually switched its support to another anti-Kabila group, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), which was active throughout the north of the country. By the beginning of the new millennium, the MLC had become the most highly organised and motivated Congolese fighting force, with the potential to constitute a real threat to the government in Kinshasa.

However, the real military threat to Kabila came from abroad. The Rwandan and Ugandan invasion forces were among the most powerful armies in Africa. Rwanda had more than twenty thousand men in Congo and Uganda around ten thousand. Rwanda’s motive for intervening in Congo was clear enough: to conclude the unfinished conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu. The motivation of the Ugandan government in Kampala was less obvious. It probably feared that its ambition to dominate the region would be in jeopardy if it did not intervene in Congo’s affairs, but it also claimed a right to defend itself against rebel movements operating out of northeastern Congo. Kabila had fed this Ugandan fear by giving Sudan permission to use airfields in northeastern Congo to supply the anti-Kampala rebels.

Many people in the outside world accepted the security arguments cited by Rwanda and Uganda for invading Congo as reasonable and even legitimate. But the longer the occupation of eastern Congo went on, the more important the economic motives seemed to be. Kabila’s enemies shared his awareness of the country’s natural wealth. For a long time the plundering of Congo’s resources by the neighbouring countries tended to be ignored but in 2001 the United Nations published a report focusing on this aspect of the affair. Although the report was heavily criticised for overemphasising the roles of Uganda and Rwanda and for its occasional lack of hard evidence, it did put the presence of the two countries in eastern Congo in a new light.
According to the UN report, a special section had been set up inside the Rwandan army in Congo to plunder the economic resources of the occupied areas in a systematic way. Minerals were moved to Rwanda, bank vaults were emptied and production plants were dismantled and transferred piece by piece to Rwanda. The Rwandan army forced hundreds of prisoners to work in Congolese mines producing columbite-tantalite, coltan for short, a material used in the manufacture of mobile phones and therefore an extremely profitable trade commodity at the time. But other products, including gold, diamonds, timber and coffee, were also appropriated and sold. In this respect, Uganda was less systematic than Rwanda. The exploitation of Congo’s wealth was mainly left to private individuals, although they needed political and military support to run their operations. For example, the leading Ugandan businessman in Congo was reportedly a younger brother of President Museveni. The governments of Rwanda and Uganda denied any involvement in these military and economic activities and claimed to be unfairly accused by the UN report.

But their activities in Congo were betrayed by their national export figures. Exports of gold from Uganda (which itself produced little of the metal) faithfully reflected the course of the war in Congo. They increased after Kabila came to power with the help of Uganda, dipped in 1998 following the breakdown in relations between Kabila and Uganda (and Rwanda), and immediately shot up again once Uganda had occupied part of eastern Congo. From 1999 onward, Uganda and Rwanda engaged in more intensive economic exploitation of eastern Congo and were able to use the profits to meet much of the cost of their military operations. In this way, the occupation was not only economically self-sustaining but also became a source of income for the governments of both countries. As a result, there was no reason to bring the war to a rapid end. In the long run, it would be much more profitable for the governments in Kigali and Kampala to carve Congo up between them (although they would still have to demarcate their respective spheres of influence) than to allow eastern Congo to be absorbed into a new, unitary Congolese state.

However, the growing emphasis on economic interests meant that Rwanda and Uganda found themselves increasingly in competition with each other. It was not easy to demarcate the zones of occupation, if only because the personal economic interests of local military commanders sometimes overshadowed those of the governments in Kigali and Kampala. Perhaps President Kagame of Rwanda wished to demonstrate his independence from his patron Museveni, just as Kabila had demonstrated his independence from both of them. Whatever the reason, on no fewer than three occasions, widespread fighting broke out in Kisangani, the main city in northeastern Congo, between units of the Rwandan and Ugandan armies, with Rwanda maintaining the upper hand. Thousands perished, including many Congolese civilians, and hundreds of thousands of other civilians fled into the surrounding jungle. The fighting was only ended with difficulty and under heavy international pressure requiring the intervention of the UN Security Council itself. This surprising turn of events in eastern Congo dented the international image of both Rwanda and Uganda and gave Kabila the idea that time might be on his side.

The other member of the crumbling international front against Kabila was Burundi. Following the deaths of two Hutu presidents in 1993 and 1994, the country was riven by major internal tensions and there was no practical prospect of compromise or cooperation between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. In 1997 army leader and former president Pierre Buyoya led a coup which placed power firmly back in Tutsi hands. The international community responded by imposing sanctions. As long as Kabila was allied with Rwanda and Uganda, Buyoya's Tutsi regime in Burundi had nothing to fear from Congo. At that time, the Burundian (Hutu) resistance was operating mainly out of Tanzania. In 1998, however, the change in Kabila’s policies put him on a conflict course with Burundi. For safety’s sake, Buyoya had his soldiers occupy the Congolese side of Lake Tanganyika. At the same time, Burundian rebels were welcomed to Congo, because their aims were now consonant with Kabila’s. Indeed, Kabila could make good use of these battle-hardened and highly motivated troops. Rewarding their commanders richly, he absorbed thousands of Burundian fighters into the Congolese army in the east of the country. They swiftly became its core.
From that point on, the international struggle surrounding Kabila was inseparable from the internal strife within Burundi. Acting via ex-President Mandela of South Africa and others, the international community brought heavy pressure to bear on Burundi to reach a political settlement. In Arusha, Tanzania, Buyoya’s regime and no fewer than nineteen Burundian political parties signed an agreement ending the war. However, the armed resistance operating out of Congo refused to sign. Kabila could not afford to lose the support of the Burundian military, and offered their commanding officers persuasive financial inducements to fight on. The war in Congo had to continue and this had the effect of prolonging the civil war in Burundi which, in the last decade of the twentieth century, cost the lives of almost a quarter of a million people in that country.

Congo and Kabila’s allies

In addition to around sixteen thousand Burundians, Kabila’s army also included tens of thousands of Rwandans. The majority of them were exiled Hutu, many of whom had served in the Rwandan army under the pregenocide regime. They numbered no fewer than forty thousand and were highly motivated to fight, since they had a clear interest in winning the war. In addition, Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia provided battalions led by their own officers. Other countries in the region, including Congo (Brazzaville), Gabon, the Central African Republic, Chad and Tanzania, supported Kabila less directly, either out of a belief in his right to defend himself against the illegal attack by Rwanda and Uganda or for pragmatic reasons, to preserve the balance of power in Central Africa. However, these countries provided no troops, either because they did not dare to or because they had too many domestic problems of their own. Finally, the war in Congo also involved irregular militias and mercenaries of many different nationalities. The whole miscellany was completed by military advisors from North Korea and also China. North Korea was probably hoping to be rewarded with Congolese uranium, which it could use for nuclear bombs, although it is highly uncertain whether Congo could in fact have provided it. Kabila probably paid the Asian countries in cobalt, a metal used in the aircraft industry. Kabila needed such copious and varied support simply to survive. Unaided, his own forces could never have fought the war. Admittedly, the Congolese army had around fifty thousand men, but it was poorly equipped and even the so-called elite troops were unreliable: more than half of the army was likely to desert if called upon to fight. To deal with this problem, frontline troops were paid regularly (unlike the others). To make matters worse, the Congolese army was divided between Swahili-speaking troops from the east of the country and Lingala-speakers from the west. Since Kabila was from eastern Congo, those from that region now had the upper hand in the army. Since it was extremely important to them to keep control of soldiers from other parts of the country and to ensure that Kabila remained in power, they were the only members of the army who faced battle with any enthusiasm. The rest were almost always unwilling to engage in action. The same was true of the mood in the country at large. Although there had been a fierce nationalist response at the time of the Rwandan attack in 1998, especially in Kinshasa, this ebbed away later.

Amid his throng of allies, Kabila’s own position was weak. An obvious way of strengthening it would have been to share power with prominent Congolese leaders with their own support networks. This might also have strengthened the regime’s ethnic and regional power base. But Kabila’s fear of losing his dictatorial grasp on power was clearly too great to allow him to adopt this course. He did precisely the opposite, and surrounded himself with people who – like himself – had lived for long periods outside Congo and therefore lacked any current power base within the country. The only real powers with which he was willing to ally himself – when driven by military necessity – were foreign governments. They sent whole battalions to Congo in order to prop up his regime. In essence, Kabila thereby placed large parts of the country in the hands of foreign powers. Rather than share sovereign authority, he preferred to share the territory of the country. Congo was carved up among armies and fighting forces which often operated as competing gangs. Kabila tried to remain the top dog, but there was no way he could retain control of the whole country under the circumstances.
A major section of the army over which the Congolese president had no control were the Angolans. Angola's intervention in Congo must be viewed in the light of its own civil war between the government and the UNITA resistance movement. In the early 1990s, there had been some hope that the internal struggle in Angola might be coming to an end. After reaching an agreement with the government, UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi stood for election, but was defeated. In a country operating on a winner-takes-all (and therefore loser-loses-all) principle, there proved to be no place for him in the postwar democratic system. This made it inevitable that he would decide to resume the civil war.

The Angolan civil war therefore entered a new phase, which resembled the previous one at first sight but differed from it in terms of the reduced international support for UNITA. By allowing the peace process to fail, the resistance movement had forfeited the sympathy of its former allies (in particular the United States and South Africa). Cut off from the sea (because the entire Angolan coastline was controlled by the government in Luanda), the resistance groups in the often remote areas of the interior found their ability to fight limited by their access to supplies of such essentials as weapons, munitions, petrol and spare parts for road vehicles.

All these things could be bought on the international market. The weapons came principally from the surplus arsenals of the former Eastern Bloc states. Bulgaria, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were the biggest suppliers. Since UNITA’s only trade and supply routes ran north through Congo, the power vacuum in that country gave the resistance movement a unique opportunity to rebuild its fighting capacity. By 1997-1998, on the eve of the war in Congo, UNITA had once again mustered an impressive army of up to sixty thousand well-armed rebels. The Angolan government awaited the new escalation of the civil war with apprehension. Knowing that it was facing a difficult challenge, it opted for the daring strategy of striking out at UNITA via Congo. If the movement’s supply lines there could be cut, UNITA would eventually be forced to give up the struggle and government troops might be able to finish it off for good.

So Angola’s military support for Kabila in the war in Congo was seen by the government in Luanda primarily as a means of opening up a second front in its own civil war. Kabila was a minor consideration. Given the considerable military threat on its own territory, however, Angola could not make many troops available. Four months after the start of the war in Congo, UNITA decided to launch a major offensive in Angola. Throughout 1999, there was large-scale fighting in the centre and north of Angola with modern military equipment. The government in Luanda was forced to move troops from Congo to the home front. But gradually the strategy of cutting off UNITA’s supply lines through Congo started to take effect. Towards the end of 1999, the rebels faced a serious petrol shortage and malfunctioning equipment could not be repaired.

For the next year, UNITA continued to lose ground and by the end of 2000 the entire territory of Angola was effectively back in the hands of government troops. As a regular army, UNITA had ceased to exist. This was a major success for the government in Luanda but did not automatically spell the end of the civil war. UNITA was not so easily finished off. The UNITA army fragmented into smaller forces, which hid out here and there in the interior and carried out small raids. The military front had disappeared, but the interior was still far from secure. The Angolan war entered another new phase, in which sporadic low-level violence threatened the security of the entire country.

Kabila benefited greatly from the strategy of the Angolan regime. The Angolan troops constituted a strong defensive line for his seat of government in Kinshasa and helped the Congolese army to maintain its military grip on strategic points elsewhere in the country. Modern Angolan planes and attack helicopters at bases just over the border inside Angola could be called in at any moment to provide support for ground troops. By the new millennium, although the Angolan government was still grappling with UNITA, its involvement in Congo’s tangled affairs had nevertheless turned it into a regional superpower dominating the western area of Central Africa.

The result was that in Central Africa, as in the Horn of Africa, alliances were reshuffled. During the Cold War era, the governments of Zaire/Congo and Angola had belonged to opposing camps, with Kinshasa allied to Washington and Luanda to Moscow. The rules of the Cold War game had demanded that each of them try to undermine the other by supporting its rebels and in this sense, it had been a logical move for the Angolan government to support Laurent Kabila in
his attempt to depose Mobutu. Once Kabila’s coup succeeded, however, there was a Luanda-Kinshasa axis and Luanda’s aim was to prevent groups in the Congolese interior seizing power from the government in Kinshasa.

Another powerful foreign ally of Kabila was Zimbabwe, which provided over ten thousand well-trained and highly disciplined soldiers, equipped with tanks, aircraft and a range of relatively up-to-date equipment — about a third of its army in total. Many people were surprised by President Mugabe’s decision to intervene in the conflict on such a scale. But Mugabe had good reasons for doing so. Firstly, he envisaged a major future role in Africa for himself and his country and therefore could not afford to remain neutral. Moreover, by intervening to protect Kabila, he was defending the principle that one African country should not attack another. Mugabe’s personal friendship with Kabila must also have been a factor. In the domestic sphere, a military action on foreign soil was a convenient way of distracting attention from the tensions that were starting to emerge as a result of political, economic and social decline (see chapter 10, section g). Finally, the Zimbabwean elite were keen to join the scramble for a share in Congo’s mineral wealth.

Kabila realised that this was a price he had to pay. He made an arrangement with Mugabe to fund the Zimbabwean war effort with the profits of various Congolese companies. At its heart was a provision that Zimbabwe’s Ridgepointe Central Mining Group would take over the management of Gécamines, the Congolese mining company. 

In the event, however, the financial benefits were smaller than Zimbabwe had hoped. Congo had virtually no hard currency and payments in its own currency were worthless to Zimbabwe. The only alternatives were barter and payments in kind, but these proved difficult to arrange. Congo’s debts to Zimbabwe piled up swiftly, while Zimbabwe found itself in an economic crisis and was struggling with its own rapidly mounting debts. Within two years, Zimbabwe’s role in the conflict had cost the country around two million dollars. In itself, this was not a vast sum, but the country could not really afford its military involvement in Congo. Mugabe was aware of that, but was afraid of a domestic backlash if he withdrew. Moreover, his entourage was still hoping for a share in Congo’s riches. So Zimbabwe remained actively involved in the war.

This catalogue of Kabila’s allies would be incomplete without some mention of Namibia, the smallest country to engage more or less formally in the war on Kabila’s side. According to the Namibian president, Sam Nujoma, a friend of Kabila’s, Namibia had felt obliged to respond to Kabila’s appeal for support from members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). However, its military contribution was small – less than two thousand soldiers plus some ordnance – and played no significant role in the war. The economic benefit to Namibia consisted of the chance to supply fish to Congo in exchange for a share in Congo’s diamond industry, made over to a brother-in-law of Nujoma.

The Lusaka Accord: untangling the web

The war in Central Africa can be regarded as Africa’s First World War. It resembled its European counterpart of 1914-1918 in the swiftness and suddenness with which a whole region was plunged into violent conflict as multicountry coalitions engaged in hostilities. And in Africa, as in the Europe of 1914, people thought the war would soon be over. The aggressors thought that victory would be easy but the defence proved stronger than expected and a military stalemate developed. As time went on, the war has become almost a permanent feature of life in Central Africa.

The nature of the conflict was determined principally by the geography of Congo. The country was huge and thinly populated, with few transport links. Rivers (and, for the well-equipped armies, aviation) were important means of transport. Armies and fighting forces of all sorts roamed the vast country trying to find (or avoid) each other. In many areas, especially along the eastern border with Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, a variety of armed groups operated with or against each other, sometimes creating complicated military situations.
For the more regular armies, however, the main targets were the Congolese mining areas, which offered rich pickings both to fund the war effort and to line the pockets of individual leaders. In such potentially wealthy areas, especially in the diamond-rich provinces of Kasai and Katanga (in the south and southeast of the country respectively) fronts developed on which a well-organised conventional war was fought. In the north there was a separate front, with fighting between the MLC resistance movement and troops defending the Congo River town of Mbandaka, gateway to Kinshasa.

There was no lack of weapons. The next-to-last section of chapter 5 describes the ease with which, from the 1990s on, all the warring parties in Africa could purchase arms on the international market. The main suppliers to the Congolese army were Zimbabwe (which was building up its own defence industry with help from China), Libya and Iran. Zimbabwe itself was using fighter aircraft supplied by Great Britain in the 1980s and equipment from the former Eastern Bloc. Rwanda obtained many weapons from South Africa, which had inherited a major arms industry from the apartheid regime. Uganda relied more on the former Eastern Bloc, but had also built three arms and munitions plants of its own. Almost all the national armies involved in the war supplied arms to irregular forces and militias. The weapons were largely financed out of taxes on the export of minerals (such as diamonds) and other commodities from the occupied territories, but warring parties also obtained loans from foreign companies in exchange for mining concessions.

Some countries and organisations strove to reduce the flow of arms into Central Africa. As early as 1993, the European Union imposed an arms embargo on Zaire as a means of putting pressure on Mobutu’s dictatorial regime. In 1997, this embargo was automatically transferred to Congo. In 1994 a UN arms embargo was imposed on the non-state parties to the conflict in Rwanda. Efforts were also made to cut off funding to the combatants. Diamond certification was introduced in order to reduce the income of various parties in Congo and Angola (and, indeed, in Liberia and Sierra Leone) by restricting their access to the international market. However, the diamond trade was complex and convoluted, involving large numbers of shady middlemen. It would take years to bring it under control.

From the start of the war in 1998, the international community, with some Western and African countries leading the way, imposed heavy political and diplomatic pressure to abandon hostilities. All the countries involved suffered serious damage, with the exception of Angola, which was becoming more and more powerful while making relatively small sacrifices. On the initiative of Zambia, a neutral member of SADC, a major conference of all the warring parties was held in mid-1999 in the Zambian capital, Lusaka. In August, a year after the outbreak of war, this produced the Lusaka Accord, signed by six African heads of state and more than fifty rebel leaders, which was intended to lead the way to lasting peace in Congo.

The Lusaka Accord was in part a ceasefire agreement but went further. It was realistic, acknowledging the fundamental threats to regional security and sources of political instability. Since one crucial factor was the de facto absence of a Congolese state, the accord provided for a two-track approach: an end to hostilities, coupled with a domestic political dialogue within Congo, elections, a new national army and the restoration of government authority throughout the country. To promote internal dialogue, the OAU appointed Ketumile Masire, the former president of Botswana, to act as facilitator. However, Masire found it impossible to establish a dialogue between the government in Kinshasa and other parties in Congo. President Kabila was simply not a man for negotiated solutions, especially not at the expense of his own authority. Kabila felt justified in his refusal to engage in dialogue because no progress was achieved on the other track of the Lusaka Accord, the ending of hostilities.

The accord provided for a UN-mandated peace force to patrol the ceasefire, disarm belligerents and arrest war criminals. If such a force could truly be assembled, however, it would be some time before it could be put in place. The parties to the Lusaka Accord found themselves with no alternative to undertaking the initial supervision of the ceasefire on their own. The result was a peculiar situation in which the warring parties themselves had to monitor compliance with
the agreement. They set up a joint military commission for the purpose, headed by a neutral chairman, again designated by the OAU.

Initially, the international community lent only moral support to the peace process. The problem was seen as too large and too complicated to do more. Africa would have to sort out its own affairs. In diplomatic jargon, this was known as finding ‘African solutions to African problems’. Nevertheless, the United Nations did manage to make a start on assembling a peacekeeping force to monitor the implementation of the agreement in Congo. In 2000, the first part of the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) arrived in Central Africa. However, inadequate cooperation from the warring parties prevented it from playing a role of any importance.27

The main obstacle to ending the conflict was actually that none of the non-Congolese parties had anything to gain from the restoration of Congolese state authority over the entire territory. The many countries involved in the war – on whichever side – all preferred to see a weak government in Kinshasa. In the end, the only way for Rwanda and Uganda to guarantee the security of their borders was to do it themselves by occupying eastern Congo. Kabila’s allies had other factors to consider, but the result was identical. Zimbabwe was increasingly war-weary and preoccupied by domestic difficulties, but this did not mean that President Mugabe could withdraw from Congo without loss of face. And without Zimbabwean troops on Congolese soil, his entourage could forget about the income from the Congolese mines. For the time being, therefore, Harare preferred to maintain its sphere of influence in southern Congo. Angola likewise had reasons to prefer the current situation, in which it was the most powerful country in west Central Africa. After all, a strong government in Kinshasa could not be expected to comply so readily with Angola’s wishes.

The longer Congo’s neighbours continued to occupy the country, dividing it into different spheres of influence, the more they came to rely on its practically inexhaustible mineral wealth. They exploited it with a dogged determination equalling that of the European powers in the colonial era.28

And the Congolese themselves? Did the majority of them favour the restoration of a unified state? The question was impossible to answer. There was undoubtedly a feeling of unity inside Congo, based on a century of shared history and recently reinforced by a surge of nationalism in response to the attacks from abroad. However, this had been insufficient to prevent rapid fragmentation of the country and its people over recent years. It was unclear which ethnic groups still hoped to see central state authority restored. It proved difficult to set in motion the internal Congolese dialogue for which the Lusaka Accord provided and which was intended to restore some semblance of normality to domestic politics. In August 2000, the Congolese government actually formally rejected the Lusaka Accord.

In the end, however, Kabila’s opposition proved to be of little importance. His role in the drama was about to end. On 16 January 2001, Laurent Desiré Kabila was gunned down in his palace in Kinshasa by one of his own bodyguards. Bystanders immediately killed the assassin, so that nothing certain is known about the motive for the killing. Inevitably, some people suggested that he might have been acting on behalf of a foreign power, such as Rwanda, but no evidence of it was discovered. It is more likely that he had a personal grudge against the president, for example because he had been passed over for promotion or had not received his pay.

The murder of Kabila was sudden and unexpected, but not actually surprising. Kabila himself had always feared assassination. He was well aware of his weak power base and many enemies. He had always been afraid that, like his illustrious predecessor, Patrice Lumumba, he might fall victim to a Western plot or local treachery. Indeed, it was his paranoid suspicion of those around him that had made him expand the country’s internal security system – probably the only part of the state apparatus that did expand under his regime.297 The country was full of security officials spying on the population and on each other. Ethnic background was a major factor in staffing decisions. The more closely departments worked with the palace, the more closely linked their staff had to be to Kabila’s own ethnic group. The special presidential guard in charge of palace
security was composed exclusively of people from Kabila’s birthplace: Manono in the southeastern province of Katanga. In the end, however, all his efforts were in vain.

Following the death of the dictator, the regime’s survival depended entirely on its foreign allies. At the funeral, the mood was embattled. The states that had fought against Kabila were asked not to send representatives. Of the Western nations, only Belgium had a political presence, in the person of its minister of foreign affairs. The Kinshasa public suspected the Belgians, like all the other white people present, of involvement in the murder. Belgian journalists were assaulted by a furious mob and Zimbabwean soldiers briefly detained a Belgian security official accompanying the minister. It was a clear illustration of how times had changed in Congo.

Behind the scenes, there was immediate consultation between a number of remaining members of Kabila’s regime and the presidents of three friendly countries: Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia and José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola. It was they who chose Kabila’s successor: his young son Joseph. Although inexperienced and virtually unknown, Joseph Kabila immediately showed himself to be of a very different calibre from his father. He had an aura of integrity and was charming and open in his dealings with the outside world. Right from the start, he announced that peace was his main priority, followed by a better standard of living for the people of Congo (another new direction) and, finally, a greater role for the people in governing the country. In particular, he emphasised the need for greater democracy, although he stressed that it had to be introduced in an orderly fashion.

With the help of strong international pressure, Joseph Kabila succeeded in reviving the peace process. One after another, the neighbouring countries withdrew their armies, although Rwanda probably maintained a secret military presence in eastern Congo, an area that remained insecure. The UN gave its MONUC operation a stronger mandate, including the authority to enforce the peace. By 2003, the MONUC force was composed of some 10,000 soldiers from nationals around the world. The Congolese president embarked on good-faith talks with the rebel movements, which led to the installation of a transitional government in Kinshasa. All factions were represented in this government, which was led by Joseph Kabila but included four vice-presidents, thirty-five ministers and twenty-three deputy ministers from the various groups. The government, counting on generous international support, set itself the task of restoring Congo’s state structures and organising elections in 2005.

The war had left the country in a humanitarian crisis. It was difficult enough to deliver public services to most of the provinces in peacetime; in wartime it was completely impossible. All over the country, basic services like health care, education and the provision of drinking water had virtually disappeared. The population was destitute. International humanitarian aid was only reaching some of the camps. By the turn of the century, more than one and a half million people were thought to have perished, two hundred thousand in combat and the rest as a result of malnutrition and disease. Still more had been uprooted. There were close to two million refugees and internally displaced persons. The widespread fighting, although generally of low intensity, was producing a genuine humanitarian disaster.

Conflict prevention on the agenda

As mentioned above, the number of violent conflicts in Africa and the number of states and other parties involved in them increased rapidly in the closing years of the twentieth century. They included not only wars between countries but also civil strife, and were frequently a combination of the two. The promise of the immediate post-Cold War era, with the prospect of cooperation rather than rivalry between the main international powers, had fizzled out and the disadvantages of the new world order began to make themselves felt, in particular in the form of declining international solidarity with Africa. Added to the tendency towards disintegration (see chapter 5), this increased the risk that violence would flare up. In view of the devastating impact of armed strife on countries and communities, conflict prevention came into the spotlight, in international politics and diplomacy as well as in Africa itself. After all, an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. The longer the delay in intervening, the higher the cost in terms of human life and
damage to property. Moreover, the more the violence escalated, the more difficult it became to resolve a conflict. Nevertheless, it was easier to pay lip service to conflict prevention than to put it into practice.

It is hard to prove that conflict prevention has been successful in any specific case. After all, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether tensions which in fact have not escalated would have done so without preventive measures. Even so, there was soon a general belief that conflict prevention was not proving as effective as had been expected.

Early warning of impending conflicts was not the problem. Indeed, there tended to be far too many warnings. Not only were national and international nongovernmental organisations monitoring potential and actual problem areas all over the world, but parties directly involved always sounded the alarm, often because they stood to gain personally from international intervention in a conflict that had not yet got out of hand.

The problem tended to occur at the stage of moving from early warning to early action. When should action be taken in response to an early warning, and who was to take it? There were usually deep-rooted causes of violence and in Africa these generally had to do with the declining effectiveness of state institutions. This was not easy to remedy in the short term. It was not enough simply to call on the hostile parties to keep calm and negotiate a solution, or to send an envoy to preach that message in the potential trouble spot. Moreover, the powers that really counted in international security tended to give higher priority to places where violence had already escalated than to situations which still seemed to be under control. Accordingly, initiatives to end conflict remained more common than measures to prevent it. That was why, for example, the international community took no action in response to the many signs of an impending genocide in Rwanda. The warnings were disbelieved, ignored or disregarded.

The poor results of international conflict prevention have led to a flood of reports on the subject. From small NGOs in faraway places to the secretary-general of the United Nations, everyone has had something to say on the subject. A striking feature of their contributions to the debate has been a preoccupation with the causes of conflict. To some extent, this has to do with the difficulty of devising effective measures, but it is also connected with the absence of a convincing conflict theory. I think there was a general assumption that problems and solutions should be of the same kind. For instance, a complex problem was thought to require a complex solution, and it was believed to be impossible to understand the solution without understanding the problem. Discovering that kind of connection between the cause and the solution would indeed be extremely useful for policymakers, but in practice it has proved – unfortunately - an elusive goal.

As almost all studies in the field have indicated, conflicts tend to arise from a combination of causes. Violence most frequently results where no political mechanisms are available for nonviolent conflict regulation. Hence, conflict prevention goes hand in hand with the establishment of legitimate states and the solution is almost always political. Sometimes the build-up of tension immediately preceding an outburst of violence can spur the necessary reform, but often it is too late by that stage. One major case in which that political reform is often put off is when it could be damaging to the powers that be. From their point of view, it may be logical to defend through violence what they would stand to lose in the event of a peaceful solution.

If the state is disintegrating, the situation may be more complicated. Conflict prevention is almost impossible if state institutions are not functioning effectively. By increasing the capacity of the state and promoting democratisation (and, importantly, forms of power-sharing), donors can help African countries to manage their own internal conflicts in a peaceful manner. Where conflicts have arisen primarily as a result of the disintegration of the state structures, the emphasis should be placed on institutional strengthening and better governance. Measures of this kind are regarded as a form of structural conflict prevention.

It is almost impossible to put an end to violence if the state is disintegrating. Many conflicts in Africa have involved countless parties and there was often no arrangement that suited everybody.
Even if the leaders were content with the outcome of negotiation, the question was whether their supporters would accept it; they often had their own reasons to prolong the armed struggle, for example because they had better chances of earning a living that way than in the peacetime economy.

The role of the international community in preventing and resolving armed conflicts in Africa has been complicated by rivalries among the main powers involved. There has almost always been a split separating France from Britain and the United States. Paris interpreted the growing power of Museveni and Kagame in Central Africa as an Anglophone conspiracy against the traditional hegemony of France in that part of the continent. Anglo-French rivalry has also been a factor in West Africa. London was determined to retain its position as the main player in Sierra Leone and was therefore disturbed by the French government’s support for President Charles Taylor of Liberia, who had made a pact with the rebels in Sierra Leone and had good relations with the French-speaking countries of Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Although France’s rivalries with Britain and the United States were never overt – after all, they were allies and were officially pursuing the same aims in Africa – these countries’ covert pursuit of their own national interests in Africa nevertheless constituted a major obstacle to conflict prevention or resolution.

The rivalry between the British and the French in West Africa abated somewhat when France took on the task of stabilising the Ivory Coast in 2002. Now that the French had assumed a role similar to that of the British in Sierra Leone, the two countries were brought closer together by adversity. Since it looked as though neither Sierra Leone nor Ivory Coast would be ready to stand on its own two feet for quite a while, both Britain and France felt stuck; it would be extremely difficult for either one to extricate itself in the near future. They were both victims of circumstance, who could at least use each other’s moral support.

In the 1990s, there was increasing demand for UN intervention to prevent or end conflicts, but it was usually requested at the close of a conflict rather than the beginning, to prevent violence in the first place. It was no great problem for the UN to meet the demand for more peacekeeping operations. After the Cold War, it became easier for the members of the Security Council to cooperate and to agree on the dispatch of UN peacekeeping forces. In the 1990s, therefore, UN operations were launched in a variety of African countries, including Angola (UNAVEM), Liberia (UNOMIL), Rwanda (UNAMIR), Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Ethiopia/Eritrea (UNMEE), Congo (MONUC), Ivory Coast (MINUCI) and again Liberia. Despite all this activity, there was widespread criticism of the UN, focusing on its ineffectiveness. After hundreds of UN peacekeepers were taken hostage in Sierra Leone in 2000, a critical internal report was released. The Brahimi Report on UN peace operations argued that UN peacekeeping forces should be allowed to take firmer action in the future.33

A related problem was the fairly universal unwillingness among the industrialised UN member states to take part in peacekeeping operations and the consequent delays in launching them. If the UN wanted to respond effectively to warnings and to prevent escalation, time was of the essence. The earlier the intervention, the greater the chance of success. Violence quickly leads to polarisation and hatred, making a political solution ever more difficult to achieve. Even so, the members of the UN showed little willingness to provide military personnel or even equipment for use in preventive action in Africa, let alone to respond quickly. For this reason, various countries, including the Netherlands and Canada, suggested the creation of a UN rapid reaction force on permanent standby. However, the idea met with little support among the permanent members of the Security Council. Most Western countries were still willing to provide financial and logistical support for peacekeeping operations, but – following the failure of the operation in Somalia – they generally refused to send their troops to Africa.

Around the turn of the century, the biggest peacekeeping operation in the history of the United Nations was conducted in Sierra Leone. The situation there was problematic because, while the international community was determined that there should never again be such a bloodbath, none of the potential suppliers of troops had any particular national interest to pursue. Sierra Leone’s former colonial master, Britain, proved to be the only Western country prepared to deploy its
own troops in the country. The British marines were indispensable in getting the peace process started in Sierra Leone, where they were assisted by non-Western UN member states, which still tended to be willing to undertake peacekeeping duties in Africa if paid well. The other Western states confined themselves to supplying financial or other support for a peacekeeping force made up of troops from developing countries. It seemed as though the tone had been set for the future of international peacekeeping in Africa. In 2002, the French took on a similar role, as the core of an international peacekeeping operation in Ivory Coast, as did the United States in Liberia in 2003 (though with a far smaller presence on the ground).

More and more, it was up to African countries to keep the peace on their own continent. They were aware of the challenge. As early as 1991, a major pan-African conference was held on the subject in Lagos, Nigeria. The OAU and the various regional organisations set up departments of conflict prevention. The successor to the OAU, the African Union, made plans for a peace and security council of its own. ECOWAS went furthest in promoting peace and security in its own region, by playing an active role in conflict resolution in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Western countries saw this as a good example of an African solution to an African problem.

The West did, however, help African countries and organisations to build up their own peacekeeping capacity. France, the United States and Britain were especially active in this area and began working together to provide such support. The French programme for the Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities (RECMAP) was the biggest of its kind, providing equipment, training, technical support, transport and funding to help set up potential African peacekeeping forces. In 1996–1998, five West African countries took part in a first major peacekeeping exercise. In the 1998–2000 exercise in Gabon, there were eight, and in 2002 there was a still larger exercise in Tanzania in East Africa, involving more than ten African countries and twenty international donors. On that occasion there were not only troop manoeuvres, but also theoretical training in political and military matters for the officers.

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1 For a discussion of the various theories about the downing of the plane, see Prunier, The Rwanda Crisis, pp. 213–229. Much of the information in this section is taken from Prunier’s book.


3 For an eyewitness account of the corpses lying around for months, see Wagner, ‘All the Bourgmestre’s men: making sense of genocide in Rwanda’, pp. 25–26.

4 Prunier, The Rwanda Crisis, p. 181.

5 Prunier, The Rwanda Crisis, p. 240.


7 Percival and Homer-Dixon, Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: The Case of Rwanda; Smith, ‘Postcolonial genocide: scarcity, ethnicity, and mass death in Rwanda’.

8 Blok, ‘Het narcisme van de kleine verschillen’ (English version: ‘The narcissism of minor differences’).

9 See the detailed evaluation of the genocide, The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience.

10 For two completely different interpretations of Kabila’s meteoric rise to power, see Vansina, ‘The politics of history and the crisis in the Great Lakes’, p. 38.

11 For a clear description and analysis of these events (in Dutch), see Vlasblom in the NRC Handelsblad newspaper, 17 October 1998 (p. 35), under the heading ‘Verstrikt in de nieuwe tijd. Kabila en de geopolitieke kentering in Afrika’ (‘Caught in a new era: Kabila and Africa’s geopolitical transformation’).

12 In the words of Yerodia Aboulaye Ndombasi, who was later to be appointed minister of foreign affairs. The remark earned him an internationally circulated arrest warrant, issued in Belgium in 2000 following criminal charges filed by members of the Tutsi community in that country.

13 Based on the excellent report Scramble for Congo by the International Crisis Group.

14 With thanks to Jan Abbink, Ethiopia specialist at Leiden University’s African Studies Centre.
Richard Pankhurst shows in *The Ethiopians* how nationalism (in the form of ethnic and tribal loyalties) has developed in Ethiopia, principally in terms of the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

For statistics on Sudanese refugees, see Van Baarsen, *The Netherlands and Sudan*, p. 30.


For details of the size and strength of the various fighting forces in Congo, see ICG, *Scramble for the Congo*, p. 4.


Bossema, ‘Legers buurlanden plunderen Congo systematisch leeg’ (‘Armies from neighbouring countries systematically pillaging Congo.’).


ICG, *Scramble for the Congo*, p. 65.

For information on individual countries and armed groups, see Bootsman, *De herkomst en financiering van wapens in het Grote Meren conflict (The Origins and Financing of Weapons in the Great Lakes Conflict)*, pp. 11-21.


ICG, *Scramble for the Congo*, pp. 70-79.

Lindijer, ‘De Afrikanisering van de hebzucht’ (‘The Africanisation of greed’).

ICG, *Scramble for the Congo*, pp. 50-51.

An outstanding analysis of the fundamental problems of conflict prevention is provided by Nathan, ‘The four horsemen of the apocalypse: the structural cause of violence in Africa’.


For a list of possible measures to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts, see the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum *Conflicthantering. Denken en handelen (Conflict Management: Thinking and Acting)*.