

June 15, 2003

## **Machetes Set Aside for Guns In Congo's Bloody Conflict**

Influx of Modern Weapons Gives Rise to Growing Brutality

By Emily Wax  
Washington Post Foreign Service

BUNIA, Congo -- It happened at dawn. In the damp morning light, with sleepy eyes, Elekana Batsi spotted a band of drunken, red-eyed militiamen stumbling toward the hut where he lay. He forced his 87-year-old mother awake. Run, he told her, grabbing her hand. Run with your spirit.

So Durcil Batsi raced barefoot on the red earth of her village last Saturday with dozens of others. They hurried past the squawking roosters and the mud huts that dot this corner of the world where there is no electricity and virtually no running water, let alone phones to call for help.

"We were running so fast," Elekana Batsi, 61, recalled with hazy eyes. "Don't be afraid, I told her. We will make it."

But the bullets were faster. Batsi's mother collapsed to the dirt as soon as they pierced her flesh. One shattered the back of her skull, one cut into her right shoulder, the last penetrated her lower leg. And an old woman died not warm in her bed, but bleeding from three wounds inflicted by teenagers with automatic rifles.

"If we were running from people with machetes, we would have outrun them and lived," Batsi whispered as he sat, still stunned, inside his hut. "An old woman should not die this horrible way. Why do they have such weapons?"

The new reality of ethnic conflict in this lawless corner of Congo is a grandmother shot from behind, a small playhouse bombed and a church choir missing half its members, many of them killed by rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s. A massive, sudden influx of modern weapons in a place where televisions are rare and running water is considered a luxury has turned a long-running rivalry between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups into a far more brutal conflict than the outside world can imagine.

"Just a short time ago, this was a typical African war with machetes and matches," said Marcus Sack, head of mission for German Agro Action, an organization fighting world hunger. "Now they are using all kinds of things -- mortars, Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers. We are practically ready for weapons of mass destruction to come next."

The fighting between the Hemas and Lendus is just one facet of the complex civil war in Congo that has taken an estimated 3.3 million lives since fighting erupted in August

1998. Several African nations entered the conflict -- some on the side of the Congolese government, some on the side of the rebels trying to seize power -- and local factions found weapons and support suddenly plentiful.

Rwanda and Uganda sent troops into northeastern Congo and enlisted the help of local militias to fight forces loyal to the Congolese government. But their initial alliance disintegrated into a contest for control of the northeast, fought largely by their local proxies. Here in the lush, mineral-rich Ituri district, an estimated 50,000 men, women and children have perished since 1999.

Caught in the tangle of foreign interests were two edgy and impoverished ethnic groups: the Hemas, who are traditionally herders and traders, and the Lendus, who are farmers. The two groups had lived side by side since the 17th century, but in the late 19th century Belgian colonizers favored the Hemas, using them to run local government offices and manage Lendu workers on plantations and in mines.

The first serious tensions between the two groups did not emerge until 1966. That gave way to bloodshed in June 1999 when, according to human rights groups, a Hema businessman produced fake title deeds to evict Lendu families from land he claimed to have acquired. Two hundred people died in two days, many killed with guns given to local militias by Ugandan and Rwandan troops. Between June and October of that year, 5,000 to 7,000 people were killed and 100,000 were displaced.

"Everyone used to use locally made machetes. Now it's weapons everywhere you turn," said Ben Uchya, an English teacher who has lived in Bunia for 27 years and has studied its conflicts, collecting facts and figures on pieces of paper that he carries around town in a plastic bag. "Part of the blame is on the backs of foreign powers that inflamed any tensions that were there."

A 1999 peace accord required all foreign troops to leave Congo, and last month the last Ugandan units pulled out of Bunia. But the fighting hasn't stopped, nor has the outside support of the warring militias. Rwanda's ethnic Tutsi government continues to support Hema groups to protect its borders from Rwandan Hutu militias who came to Congo after carrying out the genocide there in 1994. The Congolese government is backing Lendu factions here.

Last month, more than 430 civilians were butchered in a battle for control of Bunia. Many clearly were killed with machetes, but rifles, rocket launchers and mortars caused many other deaths, U.N. investigators say.

U.N. peacekeepers have so far been unable to stop the killing, largely because they have lacked the authority to disarm the gunmen.

During last month's carnage, a small contingent of U.N. troops -- mostly from Uruguay, a country that hasn't fought a war since its independence in 1828 -- was powerless to intervene. Seven of the unit's officers are being treated for mental breakdowns. Two U.N.

observers, Maj. Safwat Oran of Jordan and Capt. Siddon Davis Banda of Malawi, were found shot in the head after Lendu fighters accused them of collaborating with the Hema.

This month, the United Nations dispatched a larger, French-led force. But even as the force's members begin to assemble here, their commander has said they will not take weapons away from combatants -- a stance that has drawn strong criticism.

"How can the violence stop if the guns are not taken away? Everyone here is now armed to the teeth," said Nigel Pearson, a physician with the aid group Medair who authored an Oxfam report on arms proliferation. "And there is a cycle of fear and killing and helplessness. It's making the situation far, far worse."

Bunia, currently controlled by Hema forces, looks more like a scene out of an old Western movie than a crossroads town in central Africa. Young men with bands of bullets around their necks twirl grenades and hoist rifles on their backs. Instead of horses, they speed around in pickup trucks. At dusk, they lounge in their truck beds, sipping warm beer.

The sour smell of death hangs in the air, especially over a tent that was converted from a storage depot for dead bodies into lodging for foreign journalists. Dozens of dogs, pigs and ducks roam the town like scavengers.

Drunken militiamen recently burst into a local aid worker's house, held rifle butts to the heads of the five people inside and demanded \$1,000 from each of them. Last week, a five-hour firefight with rocket-propelled grenades and mortars rattled the town as residents rushed for cover.

And still the Congolese try to maintain some semblance of life. At Nyakasanza Catholic Church, the white-and-red-robed choir softly sings "God Have Mercy." As clouds of incense float in the air, young children in clean white dresses swing pompoms made of plastic and older boys dressed in red gently shake tambourines.

Half the choir is missing -- some are dead, some have fled. Outside the church, bullet casings lie on the grass and young boys with guns and oversized army fatigues swagger by.

"Half of my people were attacked and killed by guns," said Theodore Wanican, the choir director, who watched the armed boys parading around beyond the church's gates. "These modern things are making our lives a hell."