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Congo War Toll Soars as U.N. Pleads for Aid

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

BUNIA, Congo, May 26 — They call the machete a weapon of mass destruction here.

Its ghastly wreckage can be found inside what passes for this town's only functioning hospital. On a thin foam mattress lies a wide-eyed old man who has survived an attempted decapitation. Nearby, a mother with black moons around her eyes nurses two wounded children back to health and mourns for another two, freshly killed.

It is estimated that more than three million people have died in Congo's four-year war as a dizzying array of rival rebel armies and their patrons from nine neighboring countries have fought over Congo's enormous spoils. Gold, diamonds and coltan — a mineral used in cellphones — are among the precious loot in this northeastern province called Ituri, and peace deals so far have done nothing to stanch the bloodletting. The latest massacre took place over several days this month, as militias belonging to rival Hema and Lendu tribes battled for control here in Ituri's largest town.

Today, the death toll stands at 350. Most have been buried in unmarked graves since their remains offered few details about who they were, let alone which of the warring ethnic groups they belonged to. As many as 17,000 people are huddled inside the tent cities that have sprung up in a United Nations compound, at the airport and in the heart of town.

An eerie calm hangs over Bunia. There is no telling when the next round of carnage will unfold, or whether the United Nations Security Council will send troops to bring order. The secretary general, Kofi Annan, has appealed to member countries to send soldiers for a multinational force here.

By the standards and logic of war in Congo, the Bunia massacre was neither unexpected nor extraordinary. The only thing that distinguished this one was that it happened before the eyes of United Nations peacekeepers who had warned of its risks.

The grim facts that led to the carnage here were no mystery to anyone, certainly not to the members of the Security Council who sent in the peacekeepers. Troops from Uganda were pulling out of Ituri under a multinational peace deal. Rival warlords were at one another's throats. Indeed, there was no peace to keep in Congo's northeast, certainly not by a paltry force of some 300 blue-helmeted Uruguayan soldiers who were deployed with orders to guard United Nations property and to escort aid workers.

Bunia turned out to be a peacekeeping mission from hell.

When the fighting broke out between rival Hema and Lendu forces, child soldiers taunted the blue helmets, first with insults, then mortars, then by tossing a body over the fence into the United Nations compound. Townspeople grew so terrified that they tried to climb over a barbed wire fence to get to the safety of the compound. A stray bullet landed in the tent city that emerged spontaneously on the grounds, and a woman napping on a foam mattress was killed instantly.

"I ask for a lot of troops, but troops haven't arrived," said an embattled Col. Daniel Vollot, the sector commander of the United Nations forces in Bunia. "Ituri is a military operation. We have not the means to carry on that mission. People say you are not able to provide security. We don't have the strength for that."

Then came the worst. A little over a week ago, the bodies of two unarmed United Nations military observers were found about 40 miles north of here. The two men, natives of Jordan and Malawi, had been assigned to gather information on armed groups operating in Ituri. Their bodies left no doubt that they had been mercilessly murdered; one had been disemboweled.

Since then, all military observers in Ituri have been pulled back to Bunia. They now gingerly patrol its streets, facing the scowls of armed children, some of whom look to be no more than 10 years old, who parade around Bunia in oversize double-breasted suits and combat fatigues, twirling bright green hand grenades in their tiny palms, as though they were shiny new toys.

If nothing else, the Bunia massacre has revealed, with graphic and embarrassing detail, the impotence of the international reaction to the horrors that have befallen Congo, United Nations officials, aid workers and rights advocates say.

Most of the war's three million-plus fatalities have been attributed to starvation and disease among people in small villages who have been routed or have fled in terror from their homes and are forced to fight for survival in the forests. The Security Council has authorized 8,700 soldiers for the United Nations mission in Congo to monitor peace in the country, which is about a fourth the size of the United States.

"It's an abysmal response by the United Nations," said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch in London. "If the United Nations is serious about peacekeeping, the protection of civilians, if they are going to prevent mass killings, this is a critical test."

Last week, prompted by Mr. Annan's appeal, military teams were sent to assess the prospect of deploying a combat-ready multinational force in Bunia. Britons, Canadians and South Africans have expressed interest in pitching in, while the United States, though unlikely to send troops, has indicated its support for such a multinational force.

The only long-lasting solution for peace in Congo, American officials here say, is to persuade outsiders, namely Uganda and Rwanda in the east, to stop arming proxy fighters

and to support a peace deal recently negotiated between warring factions. That peace deal is currently bogged down over differences in how to construct a national military.

It is unlikely, however, that any permanent peace can be forged without restoring a measure of order here in Ituri. The blood bath in Bunia has made that plain, said the United Nations undersecretary general for peacekeeping operations, Jean-Marie Guehenno, during a visit to this town on Sunday. "There is an immediate challenge: to convince the international community to deploy troops," he said in an interview here. "It is a sort of wild violence that can still be contained."

Persuading United Nations member countries to send their men and women to Central Africa is only part of the challenge. The logistics of any such operation are daunting. It is impossible to drive to Bunia. Its airport is decrepit and potholed, making it extremely difficult to actually bring a thousand troops here.

The tangle of colonial history and ethnic rivalries in the Congo conflict means, moreover, that any such force must be seen as impartial. The Rwandans, for instance, still smarting from what they see as French complicity in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, are unlikely to accept a French-led initiative.

Also, as aid workers here point out, sending a force to secure Bunia, effectively a Hema-controlled town, would be to ignore the ethnic Lendu, who have been forced to flee. By some estimates, 50,000 of them are now encamped south of here; no aid groups can reach them because it is unsafe.