

Peace plan for DRC: another illusion?

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The search for peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues. On Sunday 24th February, a peace plan for the country was signed in the Ethiopian Capital, Addis Ababa, by several countries, blocs and organisations with a stake in the stability of the DRC and the wider region.

They included the United Nations, African Union, member countries of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Does this mean that the long suffering Congolese are about to see the end of their misery? You would have to be an incorrigible optimist even to imagine that. There are many sceptics who will actually say that there have been such plans and agreements before and they have all come to nought. They will ask: has anything changed? Is there a stronger will that will push what has hitherto been immovable? Others will point to the large number of countries and organisations involved and say not much can come from such a diverse group. They have different agenda and approaches to peace, security and stability in the DRC. Those more genuinely involved in the search for lasting peace in DRC will more likely say that statements of intent and general principles, exhortations to greater commitment and appeals to good behaviour are not in themselves sufficient to bring about security and stability. Indeed, as President Paul Kagame said at the signing of the agreement in Addis Ababa, the only way to end instability is via a holistic approach that addresses the multi-faceted root causes. And to put what has been going on in the DRC in perspective and remind some actors that they have often gone about it the wrong way, he said, "any meaningful contribution towards lasting peace in DRC and the Great Lakes Region has to abandon the self-defeating practice of selectivity in both memory and responsibility regarding the known, longstanding causes of recurring conflict". Still, the agreement is an important step on which real progress can be built. For a start, the agreement recognises the crucial, even indispensable role Congo's neighbours and regional organisations can play. As President Kagame said, "the pursuit for durable peace requires the collaborative engagement of the entire region and the international community". Comments from some Western capitals have been cautiously supportive of this role. The question is whether that guarded endorsement can turn into full support. There is, however, a disturbing trend that casts doubt on whether the just signed agreement has a chance of success or whether it will be stillborn. Every time there is a movement towards peace in the DRC, negative reports suggesting it cannot hold suddenly appear. Such reports, whose intention seems designed to undermine the Addis Ababa Agreement, started coming out a few days before it was signed. For instance, a few days before the agreement was signed, there were media reports that the M23 rebels were poised to attack and retake Goma. Mr Roger Meece, the MONUSCO chief, is reported

to have told the UN Security Council that rebel movements had been observed in the hills overlooking Goma, only four kilometres away. He said they were moving arms and equipment, and digging in for a possible offensive on the town. As always, the story about M23 is incomplete without bringing in a foreign element. According to Meece and UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon, the rebels within firing range of Goma were “well-supplied, well-provided and well-armed”, all of which suggests (to them) an external hand. The intention of these reports is clear. It is not to create the atmosphere for peace, but to pressure the Security Council into endorsing an enforcement force to fight the rebels. Other reports mentioned divisions within the M23 leadership as a threat to the fragile truce in eastern DRC. One group is allegedly allied to Bosco Ntaganda and is in favour of a renewed offensive. The other, said to be loyal to Sultan Makenga, is more cautious and prefers to wait for the outcome of the peace talks in Kampala. Again, the thinking behind stories of internal divisions in M23 is easy to understand. The feared attacks and resulting instability provide another argument for pre-emptive military intervention by the enforcement force some groups have been advocating. With this kind of thinking that obviously favours a military solution to the complex Congolese problem, what chance is there for real peace? The chance has always been there if only all those involved can listen to the wise counsel and well-informed and well-intentioned recommendations of neighbours. But if they continue to ignore it, as seems likely, the just signed agreement will only be another addition to the list of such documents – nothing more. That need not happen. There is now a framework from which to begin.