

DIFFICULTIES OF AGRICULTURAL CULTIVATION (PRACTICE) IN A WAR ENVIRONMENT : TESTIMONY OF A HUMANITARIAN WORKING IN MWESO/DR CONGO

Pretext : Why am I writing this short essay ?

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The Eastern part of DR Congo has been in turmoil for decades. Given the geopolitical history of the Great Lakes region, it appears that Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi destabilize the DRC State through rebel groups that pledge allegiance to them. These rebel groups include : the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (Codeco), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF/NALU), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the March 23 Movement (M23), the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), the Nduma Defense of Congo-Renovated (NDC-R), the Nyatura and the Mai-Mai.¹ Currently, with the conflict between Rwanda and DR Congo, the attention is focused on the disguise of the Rwandan army behind the intrusion of the M23 movement within the borders of the Northern Kivu Province, specifically in the Rutshuru Territory, where the M23 rebel group controls Bunagana and other DRC villages. In my current reflection, I would like to describe some challenges negatively affecting agricultural activities such as theft (the stealing of crops). These challenges are attributable to the war that has largely been exacerbated by the weak presence of the Congolese government in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories (particularly in Mweso). These territories have been under the occupation of rebel groups for a long period. My analysis will derive from my interaction with the inhabitants of the Mweso region. However, before this analysis, I will give a brief context of the volatile situation in the Masisi Territory.

¹ Congo Research Group, *La cartographie des groupes armés dans l'Est du Congo : Opportunités manquées, insécurité prolongée et prophéties auto-réalisatrices* (Baromètre Sécuritaire du Kivu, 2021), pp. 5-6.

Context

After 28 years of war (since 1994 with the Rwandan genocide that forced many Rwandese to flee to DR Congo), the Northern Kivu province has been experiencing an unstable situation created by the continued presence of various armed groups due to the absence of government soldiers that would provide security for the province. In the absence of a strong government army, several armed groups have organized themselves to gain control over specific areas. Armed groups control part of the northern territory of Masisi. The Mweso region (within the Masisi Territory) is a rural area located six hours from Goma (105 km), the capital of Northern Kivu province. The road to Mweso is in a deplorable condition. The presence of the State is hardly noticeable. In this context, various militias compete to control the mines, land, and roads that allow them to collect taxes illegally. This has often led to increased violence against civilians. In their quest to control more territory, these armed groups fight with each other. They wage war on the government army as it tries to dislodge them. These clashes often result in the displacement of civilians, the closure of schools, the destruction of school infrastructure, physical and sexual violence, famine, and other calamities. Displaced people settle in camps or reside with host families for a few weeks hoping that the situation will improve in their home villages. Having left their villages, the displaced civilians do not have easy access to land. Yet agriculture remains their primary means of survival. They are thus unable to meet their primary needs. One phenomenon that results from war and the scarcity of (and inaccessibility to) land is the “stealing of crops.” Stealing occurs in other areas, but its effect on the Mweso region is unbearable.

“Stealing crops” is a sign of a people abetted by war in DR Congo

There has been an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine since February 24, 2022. Unfortunately, as this war drags on, the fear of a global cereal crisis which could translate into widespread famine intensifies. Due to unending war, this kind of crisis is already being lived in the Eastern part of the DR Congo, specifically in the Mweso area I am talking about in this essay. Actually, upon my arrival in Mweso to work with JRS², I was struck by the scarcity of food and the high prices of food in the market of Mweso. But why is food scarce, and why are the prices high ?

2 Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is a Jesuit NGO created by Fr. Pedro Arrupe on November 14, 1980 with the mission of accompanying, serving and advocating for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. In this sense, the Jesuit Refugee Service/Goma/DRC helps both vulnerable refugees and internally displaced people to send their children back to school. JRS/Goma/DRC intervenes in 5 Camps (Mungote, Kahe, Mweso, Kashuga, Ibuga, Kalembe-Kalonge).

From my interaction with some people from Mweso about the sources of income, I got to know that land is the primary source of income because of agriculture, mining, and livestock. While agriculture is the first source of income, the inhabitants of the place are discouraged by the theft of field crops or, as the title suggests, the “stealing of crops.” In reality, all the 50 people I talked to about the challenges they face as farmers said that they are always disappointed by the theft of their crops even before they attained maturity (harvest time). Now, I wanted to know a bit more about the causes of this stealing.

The first explanation by assumption from the people I interacted with was that there is not enough land for everyone to cultivate. In reality, many people living in refugee camps are either forcibly displaced from their land or are refugees. Thus, they do not own any land where they are displaced.

The second explanation was that due to the proliferation of armed groups in this area, people hardly go to their farms for fear of being raped and abused by the militias. Before farming, every farmer must pay a tax called “*rengera buzima*”³ to get access to their farm for only one month. After one month, this notorious tax must be renewed. Any farmer who is caught farming without having paid this tax is seriously molested with the risk of losing his/her life.

The third explanation was that due to the large number of refugees and internally displaced people, it is not possible to avoid the “stealing of crops” phenomenon. Many people living in refugee camps do not have any land to cultivate. And if they do, they are discouraged from farming because of theft. Consequently, as many people do not farm, crops are scarce, and there is an increase in stealing.

The fourth explanation was that due to an unending war, many people do not have the financial means to invest in agricultural projects for their survival : in a war situation, economic activities do not run thereby preventing production and affecting the circulation of money in the economy that causes serious problems for the people.

From what has been said, I draw that the weak presence and performance of the Congolese government in Masisi and Rutshuru has resulted in an unending war with many adverse consequences among which, is the phenomenon of “stealing crops” that is causing the scarcity of food in the market of a village-like Mweso. This phenomenon is generally observed in the Masisi Territory and in areas where armed groups, refugees, and internally displaced people are concentrated. Therefore, the State has to

3 “*Rengera Buzima*” is a Kinyarwanda word meaning to *protect life* or to *save life*. Any farmer who wants his/her life safe and protected in a war zone must pay this tax. In addition to paying this tax, many farmers are obliged to donate a portion of their harvest to militia groups in the area. At times, militia groups may come in any farm and harvest before the owner. Any refusal to comply with this command may result in losing one’s life.

sort out land issues⁴. The State must not abandon its responsibility in the hands of militia groups who collect taxes from poor farmers.

Conclusion

Apart from human losses resulting from the insecurity prevalent in the Masisi Territory, people have been abetted and forced to practice the “stealing of crops” to survive. Still, the scarcity of crops leads not only to price hike but also to famine and malnutrition. Yet it must be emphasized that access to food is a fundamental right of every human being and a source of security, identity, and social peace. The Congolese government should be re-established in this region to take full power and tackle this issue. Then the rebel groups should be dismantled from the area. The question of land conflict should be seriously treated so that justice could be rendered to the people who lost their land in 1938. In addition, many refugees living in camps and host families willing to stay in DR Congo should be relocated to other areas (far from the borders with Rwanda and Burundi) where they can be given a portion of land to cultivate. This relocation should be done so that these refugees willing to remain in DR Congo accept to go to any place that the State will send them to (it could be better to follow the example of Uganda where refugees receive a portion of land to cultivate in order to become self-reliant). Those among the refugees who are eager to go back to their country of origin should be treated decently in the process of their repatriation. More importantly, more effort should be put into welcoming them back to their country of origin. The education of the young generation in this region should be taken care of so that in their various schools, children are initiated to cultivate peacebuilding, conflict resolution skills, and the importance of becoming self-reliant through honest means. ■

4 Many portions of land were given or cheaply sold by the autochthones (Hunde) to the Refugees from Rwanda during the colonial time (around 1938). The younger generation of the autochthones is becoming more conscious of the great importance of the land, but unfortunately, there is no more land for them. They start fighting to gain back the ground given or sold to the Refugees. In this sense, some armed groups are born for the sake of protecting the economic interest of the autochthones. The same phenomenon will rise on the side of the Refugees, who will constitute their own militia groups to protect what they acquired long ago.