EDITORIAL

Challenges and prospects for peace in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

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Over the years the Great Lakes Region has been characterised by bad governance and leadership, weak institutions, state collapses, genocide, and seemingly intractable conflicts. Despite abundant natural resources, the people lack basic services and infrastructure, as well as an environment that can consistently guarantee their basic needs. In recent times, the international community has been shocked by the genocide in Rwanda that claimed the lives of almost a million people, the devastating rebellion in northern Uganda, and the deaths of more than four million victims of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

However, despite this sad history, positive steps have been taken towards the restoration of justice, peace and democratic rule. In 2006 we witnessed successful elections in

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Burundi, Uganda and the DRC. The presidential elections and inauguration of Joseph Kabila as the first democratically elected president of the DRC in October brought an air of optimism to the Great Lakes Region. The DRC elections were just one of the objectives of the Sun City Accords. Others included the consolidation of democracy; reunification, pacification and reconstruction of the country; national reconciliation; the formation of a new national army; and the creation of governance institutions.

Coming close on the heels of the events in the DRC was a summit of the Great Lakes Region that brought together 11 heads of state and government in Nairobi in mid-December 2006 to sign a landmark regional pact on peace, security and development. This pact aims to disarm rebel groups, commits regional leaders to a non-aggression and mutual defence protocol, and prescribes a long list of governance, humanitarian and economic programmes. Another notable outcome of the conference was the commitment by governments to embrace the responsibility of protecting their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights committed by or within a state.

Despite these positive steps, the Great Lakes Region still faces enormous challenges. Among these are the ending of the 21-year war in northern Uganda, reconstruction and peacebuilding in southern Sudan, Burundi and the DRC, the termination of violent conflicts in Somalia and Darfur (sources of weapons), the consolidation of democracy, and the development of the requisite political will to sustain the gains made so far. Other challenges facing the region are the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts, the exploitation of sexual violence as a weapon of war, the resettlement of the displaced millions who are scattered in the region and are living in appalling inhumane conditions, and the restoration of justice and durable peace.

To secure a durable peace for the Great Lakes, the countries of the region must consolidate democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights; enhance the capacities of state institutions that can provide basic services for the population; empower civil society to participate in governance; and engage in socio-economic management that seeks to improve the welfare of the people, reduce socio-economic marginalisation, and create an enabling environment for human development. Other critical factors that will come into play are the availability of financial and human resources and good leadership that is visionary, dedicated, focused and disciplined. These gargantuan goals can only be achieved in an environment that is peaceful and stable. Additionally, the international community can help to secure this enabling environment through continued support of regional frameworks for development and peace.

This special issue of the *African Security Review* is a contribution to understanding the challenges outlined above. The articles, besides analysing the realities of the region, propose concrete solutions. For instance, Juma’s article traces the cause of regional
conflicts to ‘shadow economic networks’ of individuals or institutions connected to the international systems of trade and finance, while Cornwell traces the source of the DRC’s problems to its mineral wealth. The efforts to establish durable peace in the region are addressed by Church and Jowell, who analyse how regional institutions have been designed to act as circuit breakers to stop future conflicts, Sadiki, who analyses the skilful efforts of South Africa to steer the DRC towards a peaceful transition, and Mzovondiwa, who points out the important role of women in reconstructing and building peace in the region.

While applauding the initiatives made in the transition, such as the resounding success of the October 2006 elections in the DRC, Kampf warns that peace could be elusive if the root causes of the conflict and suffering are not immediately addressed. While Williams and van Eck foreground the challenges that confront the search for peace in northern Uganda and Burundi respectively, Kubai highlights the critical challenges facing Rwanda in the administration of its much-heralded Gacaca process, which has turned out to be a source of fear for perpetrators. Ruigrok offers useful lessons for post-conflict reconstruction by pointing out the mistakes that have been made in the Angolan disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes.

I hope our readers will find this ASR a rich and useful source of information on the Great Lakes Region. It is a modest contribution to understanding this complex region and I hope that it will generate greater attention to the region at this critical juncture in its history.

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