

The Congo War and Its Affects on the Environment



On June 5, 1997, violent skirmishes broke out in the Congolese capital, Brazzaville, between supporters of former President of Congo, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, and of the current president at that time, Pascal Lissouba. The unrest quickly turned into a full scale civil war, with political divisions dividing the country into northern (Denis Sassou-Nguesso) and southern supporters of (Pascal Lissouba). heavy fighting was mainly contained to Brazzaville, though also extended into the interior of the country. Large sections of Brazzaville were destroyed and violence, looting and a breakdown of law and order ensued. Angolan government troops entered the war primarily from accusations of the Lissouba government giving assistance to Angolan rebels. The French government also sent military advisors to train the Sassou-Nguesso forces. After several months of fighting and around 10,000 killed in the capital alone, the rebel Denis Sassou-Nguesso, with the aid of Angolan government troops, emerged victorious in October of 1997 and was quickly inaugurated as president. An uneasy peace ensued but fighting broke out again in late 1998 and early 1999. Parts of the capital and large areas in the southwest of the country were affected. Peace accords were concluded in November and December 1999 providing amnesty for many of the Lissouba supporters. Hostilities have for the most part ended and restoration is now underway in Brazzaville and other cities but the political climate is still shaky.

The impact of the war on conservation efforts starts with the operation headquarters for projects in Nouable-Ndoki which were shut down as efforts in the field were reduced to a minimum while much of the staffs and equipment were taken outside of Congo for safety. Park security was maintained. During the war, guns and ammunition became rampant, AK47s being the choice weapon. A general breakdown of law and order began as government agencies shut down. Looting and increased poaching ensued with hundreds of refugees fleeing north into the forests bringing with them an increased stress on the environment. With no government officials to enforce any law and order, anyone with an AK47 was able to hunt and smuggle out wildlife products such as ivory without any risk. The long-term impact on conservation is that the government of Congo will be more concerned with rebuilding the infrastructure of the war torn cities making conservation a background concern at best: consequently, efforts to raise capital will certainly revolve around the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, mining and timber making the likelihood of new reserve initiatives unlikely. Moreover; restoration is being facilitated primarily by French petroleum interests especially In Brazzaville. The government is increasingly in debt and shows little signs of stabilizing its economy, becoming increasingly reliant on foreign interests including the United States. Currently the Sassou-Nguesso government is seeking loans from the European Union. The likelihood of huge bank loans from the EU would mean more roads and infrastructure built into the interior of Congo which would open up more territory for settlement and resource exploitation. What this means is that the current park at Nouable-Ndoki and surrounding territory may be the last refuge possible in the Congo.