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DRC-Rwanda: Why the 27 June Agreement is not Enough and How CENCO-ECC might Improve the Odds of Peace

Erik Kennes

On 27 June, a Peace Agreement between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Rwanda was undersigned in Washington, witnessed by the US government. The agreement is based on the “Declaration of Principles” undersigned on 25 April by the Congolese and Rwandan Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

This is the last in a series of agreements and arrangements concluded over the last 25 years which never resolved the basic problems underpinning the recurrent conflict, notably the foreign security and economic policy of Rwanda, and the structural weakness of the DRC state and security forces. In their conception or implementation, they did not address the fundamental “root causes” of the crisis in the East either. Will it be different this time?

Two elements are new: it is the first direct bilateral peace agreement between DR Congo and Rwanda, to a certain extent guaranteed by the US state department. It is concluded between the real decision-makers but ignores most existing procedures and regulations set up after previous crises. Secondly, it considers economic aspects crucial for durable peace, while political issues are simply discarded.

Whether this is the first step to a comprehensive and lasting peace in the region, or simply a ceasefire before the next round of fighting will depend on the genuine political will of the parties involved to make it happen. The main reason for the repeated failures of previous agreements were the involved parties’ double agendas – they did not really want peace – and their refusal to

tackle the real, complex, and deeply rooted causes of the recurring war in East Congo. This is where the initiative from the Catholic Bishop’s Conference (CENCO) and the Protestant Churches association (ECC), which wants to address the real problems, becomes a key element to bring about durable peace. It is not enough, it is far from perfect, but it is the best available option.

A. NO AFRICAN SOLUTIONS FOR AFRICAN PROBLEMS

The long series of wars and rebellions which started in 1996 with the overthrow of the Mobutu regime were basically about two problems: Rwanda’s security problem and the weakness of the DRC’s state structures, including their armed forces. Rwanda adopted a maximalist security policy, justifying armed interventions in neighboring countries if necessary. The presence of Kinyarwanda-speaking communities in East-Congo, allegedly the object of ethnic discrimination, provides them with a useful tool for continuous interference. Economic motives have played an increasingly significant role, including important trade volumes, land ownership in DRC, control of transport networks and outright theft of mineral resources. In the current conflict, Rwanda may have the intention to establish permanent control of areas in East-Congo.¹ It is a matter of debate whether Rwanda’s economy is structurally dependent on the resources of its neighbor country or not.

Since 1998, one national agreement, one bilateral agreement and two broader regional arrangements were set up to tackle the various crises originating in East Congo. In 2002, the Sun City talks and the Pretoria agreement

created a transitional political order ending up in the 2006 Constitution. This agreement put an end to the 1998-2002 war and set up a political system characterized by checks and balances. It ensured political stability, which was put at risk when Joseph Kabila wanted to modify the presidential term limits and, even more importantly, when the current president Tshisekedi wanted to replace the constitution by a new one allowing him to remain in power.

A bilateral agreement between the DRC government and the armed rebellion CNDP (National Congress for the defense of the People, led by Laurent Nkunda) was concluded on 23 March 2009.² It included provisions for the end of the conflict, demobilization, and reintegration of CNDP combatants, the transformation of the CNDP into a political party, an engagement to publish an amnesty law and an agreement to organize the return of refugees and IDP's. To address more fundamental problems of ethnic agendas and perceived discrimination, mechanisms for a policy of reconciliation implemented at the local level were provided for, as well as suggestions for addressing problems of the country's governance. While the provisions for ending the conflict were respected, the articles addressing more fundamental problems were never implemented. The inadequate implementation of this 23 March 2009 agreement officially motivated the first M23 rebellion in 2012-2013.

Finally, two regional arrangements were set up to ensure durable peace. In December 2006 national stabilization efforts were brought to the regional level with the "Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region", undersigned by 11 states in a regional conference. Its executive secretariat "International Conference on the Great Lakes Region" must monitor the implementation of the pact and its 10 legally binding protocols and 4 programs of action. It entails a comprehensive multi-sector peace and stability plan for the Great Lakes Region, which unfortunately was only very partially implemented for lack of real engagement from the member states³ once they considered it as no longer compatible with their national interests.

After the first M23 rebellion in 2012-2013, unilateral declarations from the DRC government and the M23 (cautioned by a joint ICGLR-SADC joint communiqué) replaced an agreement between the parties in conflict and provided for immediate measures such as demobilization, reintegration etc. The broader issues, beyond the immediate armed conflict, were referred to another regional arrangement: the 2013 "Peace Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region" also called the Addis Ababa Framework agreement. The implementation of the agreement, pushed through by the United Nations but requested by Joseph Kabila, was to be monitored by a regional follow-up mechanism as well as by national follow-up mechanisms in each member state. A UN Special Envoy was appointed to coordinate the various initiatives in progress.

However, once the immediate crisis subsided, the undersigning parties lost interest in the agreements. Moreover, the two regional arrangements covered mostly the same ground, and its executives (ICGLR and UN Special Envoy) took parallel initiatives. Typically, both were sidelined in the second M23 crisis which started by the end of 2021. Until 2025, negotiation efforts were conducted under the aegis of the East African Community (EAC)(called the "Nairobi process" for the demobilization of armed groups, excluding the M23) and of the African Union (AU)(called the "Lusaka process" for the conflict between the DR Congo and Rwanda).

Both processes got stuck and when President Tshisekedi's regime was at its weakest facing the military advances of M23,⁴ his diplomatic team succeeded to convince the US administration to explore possibilities for access to DRC Critical Raw Materials against diplomatic support for the DRC and a promise for private investments.

These efforts led to the signing of the 27 June peace agreement. Will this agreement succeed where the others have failed? Does it address the more fundamental issues or is it limited to defusing the crisis? An analysis of its content reveals some important gaps and ambiguities. As for the previous agreements, its implementation depends



on the genuine political will of the parties and, in this particular case, on the type of pressure the USA is willing to put on Rwanda and on the DRC.

B. PITFALLS OF THE 27 JUNE AGREEMENT

The content of the agreement is mostly not vastly different from previous agreements, with respect for territorial sovereignty, resolution of conflicts by peaceful means, withdrawal of foreign forces, demobilization, and reintegration of members of armed groups etc. However, as already mentioned, there are two important new elements and a rather unilateral focus on the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, the heir of the militias responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda).

First: the “peace deal” is the first bilateral peace agreement between the DRC and Rwanda, contrary to previously concluded regional arrangements. It addresses the key actors in the crisis but ignores existing African regional mechanisms and agreements, and consequently other influential actors as e.g., Uganda⁵ which also has a regional agenda serving its own interests.

As already mentioned, the implementation of previous agreements was slowed down or stopped when the military threat disappeared. In this case of a bilateral agreement, US pressure may prevent Rwanda or the RDC to walk away from it, but this may then depend on the interpretation by the US of several of its articles and the amount and type of pressure they are willing to apply. This will be particularly important because of the lack of clarity of the provisions concerning the FDLR.

The core of the agreement is the commitment to neutralize the FDLR, a not so easy task. Since 2022, the FDLR⁶ has doubled its effectives estimated at 3000 members and it is the spearhead of the DRC government army, controlling several “wazalendo” armed groups.⁷ A neutralization of the FDLR will thus considerably weaken the FARDC and create a security risk facing the Rwandan army and M23 troops in case the latter do not respect the agreement.

For Rwanda, the reinforcement of the FDLR strengthens its argument about the necessity to take defensive measures against a perceived security threat – i.e., to be present on DRC territory. Still, despite their strong organization, adequate equipment, and ruthless internal discipline, the FDLR could not make the difference facing the stronger Rwanda-backed M23. But Rwanda consistently considers the FDLR also as an ideological threat;⁸ if identification and localization of the FDLR troops⁹ in Government – controlled as in rebel-controlled territory is already an extremely arduous task, then the elimination of an ideological threat is it even more. The neutralization of the FDLR, as a central issue in the agreement, may then well become an elusive and never to be reached objective, and provide the eternal justification for Rwanda to remain in the DR Congo. The DRC – naively? - seems to rely on US pressure to refrain Rwanda from further military action under FDLR-threat justification, and to force the Rwandan Defense Forces to leave the occupied territories.

It is also still no clear whether Rwandan troop removal should happen before or after the neutralization of the FDLR. According to a recent interview of Rwanda’s foreign minister Nduhungerehe,¹⁰ the first priority is the neutralization of the FDLR, after which the “Rwandese defensive measures” would be lifted. This seems to be consistent with the annex to the peace agreement which includes the Concept of Operations against the FDLR. However, the Minister also states that no common operations with FARDC are provided for (as happened before in 2009). According to the Minister, each party should develop its own strategy – which means that the RDF would be allowed (or allow itself) to remain in Kivu to struggle against the FDLR. This permanent excuse to intervene is consistent with the recent UN Group of Experts report stating the real intention of Rwanda to permanently control the occupied area and its natural resources. It is not consistent with the concept of operations which says explicitly that the anti-FDLR operations must be conducted by the FARDC.

A further problem is that the M23/AFC is hardly mentioned in the agreement. The movement is referred to the Doha negotiations, the result of which is left open. This means that,

in the 27 June agreement, their political claims are simply ignored. Does this leave the way open to a future political settlement between the DRC government and the M23/AFC? Or is it rather a green light for neutralizing the movement even with military means? Shall Rwanda simply withdraw its support from the M23 in exchange for permission to engage in military operations against the FDLR?

Quite significantly, the agreement mentions the M23 in the section about disarmament and integration of armed groups, which is evidently conditioned by abandonment of all military activities by the M23. This is less than certain: much will depend on their capacity to resume their military offensive in case their claims are not met in Doha. The government seems to be prepared for this possibility and spares no effort to accumulate arms and equipment in Kisangani¹¹ to block any possible advance towards Kinshasa. Kinshasa's rearmament efforts, echoed by the M23/AFC troop recruitments, combined with the ambiguous attitude of Rwanda concerning the withdrawal of its troops, do not abode very well for peace in the region. In case the agreement does not hold and the M23 takes Kalemie, this may easily trigger a reaction in Lubumbashi and Kolwezi, where the Tshisekedi regime is rejected by the local Katangese population.

A further formidable challenge for the agreement's implementation is the fate of the innumerable armed groups, officially integrated into the FARDC government army as a reserve force. The agreement provides for their demobilization through the Nairobi/Luanda process, but the failure of the many earlier demobilization efforts may raise skepticism, as well as the important reduction in available international funding. The numerous groups called wazalendo will claim compensation for their war effort which may be backed by further armed violence. In many other areas, e.g., in Fizi and Uvira, the actions of armed groups predate the war and are linked to pervasive local conflicts which were never addressed.

Return of the refugees from both countries is also provided for, but this was already the case with the CNDP agreement in 2009 with no result so far. A return of the DRC refugees in Rwanda (among whom a group which

arrived already before the Rwandan genocide in 1994, sometimes family members of M23) would end a rebel recruitment base for Rwanda. In the DRC, their return (provided it is preceded by a thorough identification process) would confront the important challenge of reintegration into their villages of origin and conflicting claims over land.

A Joint Oversight Committee composed of representatives of both parties, the USA, Qatar, and the African Union is supposed to manage disputes of the agreement's implementation. A Joint Security Coordination Mechanism with three representatives of each party plus the USA and Qatar as observers should coordinate the FDLR neutralization operation. These mechanisms seem thus, again, rather weak and with insufficient accountability provisions, and implicitly dependent on USA pressure – which may possibly be important.

It's the economy, stupid.

The second new element of the agreement, the economy, is supposed to contribute to durable peace by motivating shareholders to prefer money over bullets. This is totally in line with the USA transactional diplomacy.¹² The parties commit to the progressive setting up of a regional economic integration framework based on existing efforts (ICGLR, EAC etc.). This framework should then facilitate private investments, which is key in the process. Private investments by the USA are a huge challenge in a country which has one of the world's worst business climates.¹³ What are they thinking about? One of the key issues for the USA is the southern part of the huge Manono lithium deposit, which is eyed by the Kobold Metals company (also active in Zambia). The acquisition of this concession, however, may not be as easy as it seems¹⁴ and it is outside the conflict area. On the other hand, a trans-border hydropower project Ruzizi III, on the border between Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC will likely be completed as a peace-supporting effort,¹⁵ an initiative certainly welcomed by the local population.

According to the agreement, DRC and Rwanda will also bilaterally launch or expand cooperation on issues as



national park management or transparent, formalized end-to-end mineral value chains, from mine to processed metal. The idea behind it seems to be mining of the minerals in DRC and processing in Rwanda, provided the DRC gets royalties and equity in the processing plant(s).¹⁶ This would in principle work for tin (with Luna Smelter in Kigali)¹⁷ but difficult for tantalum for technological reasons – tantalum only melts at 3000° and its processing puts a heavy burden on the environment. According to geologists, artisanal coltan exploitation is more profitable than industrial exploitation because more efficient. The announcement of a possible takeover of the tantalum-rich Rubaya mine by a consortium around the US firm First Global therefore comes as a surprise, including the announced project to construct a coltan smelter in Kigali.¹⁸

Gold, the most important mineral commodity in informal trade in the region, is another matter. The Aldango gold refinery in Kigali, which could be earmarked as refining facility for Congolese gold, has its equivalent in Bukavu (Congo Gold Raffinerie, first blocked by the government then by the war)¹⁹ which economically makes much more sense for evident reasons. Formalization and transparency of the most important economic sector, gold exploitation and trade, is a herculean task with so many necessary preconditions (most of all restoration of state authority and an efficient mining administration) that it is impossible to realize in a short or medium term. Unfortunately, a key sector for peace and employment, which is agriculture, is forgotten in the framework.

Unspecified economic audits and anti-corruption mechanisms (art. 7 iii) are supposed to guarantee transparency in management of mineral supply chains, infrastructure projects and resource sharing agreements. This provision superbly ignores the existing certification and traceability mechanisms set up by the ICGLR or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and excels by its vagueness.

The entire set-up is more specific and more pragmatic than previous very generally formulated agreements, but they still are conditioned by a genuine will to bring peace from the various parties. Over the last decades, Rwanda demonstrated its determination to control directly or

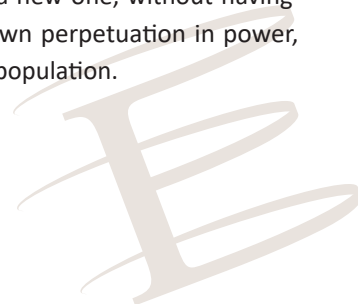
directly parts of East-Congo –an intention confirmed by the latest UN Group of Experts report.²⁰ Several reports document elevated levels of repression against the local Congolese population and serious human rights abuses in the occupied territories. Will Rwanda, with a thoroughly militaristic regime, prefer to exert its influence by doing business rather than by force? Will they be satisfied by limited gains after their important investment in troops, logistics – and casualties? This is less than obvious.

The DRC president gained some popularity by his refusal to give in to Rwanda. Will the DRC President, who for electoral reasons took an overly aggressive stance against Rwanda while lacking an efficient government army, be risking granting economic favours to a regime he vilipended a few months ago?

Trust between DRC and Rwanda still seems to be hard to find: during a 4 July press conference, President Kagame expressed his skepticism about the readiness from the DRC to neutralize the FDLR.²¹

Another potentially detrimental problem for the implementation of the peace deal is the governance from President Tshisekedi which has profoundly divided the DR Congo. To his credit, he never engaged in self-defeating anti-Tutsi rhetoric. But his regime, in an unprecedented move, relies largely on his own community of natives from the Kasai provinces, against the other DRC communities. This ethnic dominance, reinforced by limitless greed and disrespect of the law by the many members of the presidential family and cronies,²² repression against anyone who criticizes the President or who is suspected of sympathy for his political rival, former president Kabila, has created important tension and antagonism inside the DRC. A reconciliation process is a necessary precondition for the implementation of any peace deal, as well in East Congo (which was never done before) as in the rest of the country.

Moreover, efforts by President Tshisekedi to replace the current constitution by a new one, without having other arguments than his own perpetuation in power, profoundly divided the DRC population.



Finally, the issue of justice is not touched upon in the agreement. Shall the many war crimes committed in the region by M23 and RDF be buried under the “deal”, ignoring massive suffering from the population?²³ Can we imagine a genuine and transparent economic cooperation between the two countries after reports about massive looting of mineral and other resources, the setting up of parallel governance structures,²⁴ replacement of customary chiefs, forced displacement of families from Rwanda to the DRC, with the ultimate aim to proclaim Kivu an autonomous region?

An optimistic interpretation may consider the agreement as a good starting point, requiring determination and consistency from all parties involved to make it work and overcome all difficulties and pitfalls.

A more cynical interpretation may conclude that the 27 June agreement meets the interests of the main three involved parties: Rwanda gets a tool allowing it to remain in the Eastern part of DR Congo as long as necessary reaping important economic benefits; the DR Congo president through this agreement remains in power in Kinshasa and can benefit from profitable cooperation projects; the USA gets access to key strategic minerals and other business opportunities.

The agreement correctly addresses issues of economic cooperation and integration as key elements for durable peace, most of all because only job opportunities will motivate people to lay down arms, but for this to happen an important series of preconditions are necessary, this is where the Churches come in.

C. THE CENCO-ECC INITIATIVE: AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY

Previous agreements did not, or only partly, implement provisions about issues of governance, reconstruction, or reconciliation at the local level. Reconciliation includes management of exclusion and ethnic agendas. It is one of the “root causes” of the many crises in the East and must, among others, be addressed for any peace to be durable. The recent peace initiative taken by the Catholic

and Protestant churches focuses on these problems.

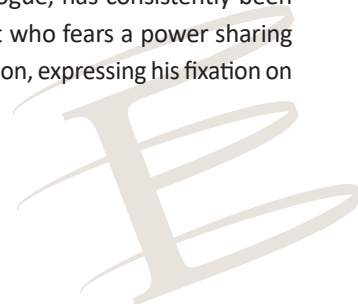
On 15 January 2025, the Congolese Catholic Bishop Conference (CENCO) and the Association of Protestant Churches (ECC) announced an initiative for a “Social Pact for peace and living well together in DRC and the Great Lakes”.²⁵ “... the Social Pact (...) is intended to be a structuring and inclusive instrument for establishing lasting peace through dialogue involving all stakeholders”.²⁶ This ambitious initiative includes many of the never implemented provisions of the previous agreements.

It has two components: an effort to bring all relevant actors together in a political dialogue to establish peace and national cohesion; and a program to lay the foundations for a durable peace at the grassroots. The entire initiative is to be coordinated by the catholic and protestant church structures up to the most remote parishes - the only structures covering important parts of the country and the only institutions having (real) moral authority.

A nationwide campaign calling for peace and reconciliation will be followed by “citizen’s workshops” where selected proposals and analyses coming from experienced and practical experts on the ground will be discussed in peace-related thematic groups. They cover proposals for realistic solutions of the “root causes” of the crisis and governance problems in the various geographical areas.

These contributions constitute the groundwork for drafting a series of “road maps for the nation’s recovery”²⁷ to be synthesized in a social pact which would then be the object of a national appropriation process. This initiative can thus put on the table the conditions necessary for the correct implementation of the current peace agreement, and any other peace agreement for that matter. Under leadership of the DRC president, this social pact shall be brought to the regional level to organize a “International Conference for Peace and living well together in the DRC and the Great Lakes.

The first aspect, political dialogue, has consistently been refused by the DRC president who fears a power sharing arrangement with the opposition, expressing his fixation on



the protection of his presidency. He applies the long-tested tactics of poaching the opposition to circumvent the idea of a dialogue. Even then, the drafting of the fundamental components of the social pact can be considered separately and is extremely important, for two reasons.

The first one is the need for realism and for determination. Within the DRC, fundamental problems are often ignored and replaced by heated slogans which never provide any solution. A heated-up debate about ethnic identities e.g., continues to consider that the Banyamulenge (Tutsi from the highlands around Uvira) are not Congolese and must be chased away. This has been blocking peace for decades in the Uvira area and must be addressed with realistic and courageous solutions. The social pact initiative allows in a first phase to clearly formulate the fundamental problems in the East and suggest real solutions. Many key issues as local reconciliation, the extraordinarily complex land problem, administration of decentralized entities, the problem of armed groups... are rarely addressed and are rather manipulated by interested military or political actors for their personal benefit. The recent peace agreement ignores these fundamental issues.

The second reason is the need for the Congolese to be heard. All too often during the last decades, elites at the top and regional or international actors decide for the population. This includes the current peace agreement. This cycle, which guarantees the eternal resumption of conflict, must be broken and the directly involved actors be heard if one wants a lasting solution.

Many international officials appreciate the initiative but do not take it seriously and dismiss it politely as idealistic. This is incorrect. Even if only partially implemented, it can provide a new lens to look at the extremely complex situation in the East. It helps decisively to avoid simplification which never brings a solution. It creates a new frame of reference for all actors involved to work towards a comprehensive way out of the crisis. It may impose itself on the region to block the monopolization of analyses by the regional powerholders. The social pact initiatives need support, because in the current constellation of peace agreements, elites at the top again

take decisions determining the future of a people and a nation. As one civil society member formulates it: the CENCO-ECC initiative wants to save the state, not a regime.

D. TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

In the end, the two main problems mentioned above remain unaddressed: the expansionist security and economic doctrine of Rwanda, and the structural weakness of the DRC state and security forces. Obviously, the victim of it all is the population of the DR Congo who have been going for decades through an endless ordeal.

The CENCO-ECC initiative relies on one of the few institutions enjoying the trust of the population and embodying moral and ethical objectives. It reaches deep into most DRC cities and villages and can have more impact than any other institution. A well-coordinated initiative under proven very competent leadership may open a perspective on a longer-term solution. If Rwanda indeed uses the 27 June agreement to strengthen its control over East Congo, albeit in the economic sphere, the CENCO-ECC initiative is also important for the voice of the Congolese population to be heard, independently of the voice of its government. Moreover, the aim of ECC-CENCO has always been to approach the M23/AFC rebellion as Congolese citizens being part of the DR Congo and not as instruments of Kigali. This approach could be the substratum for any peace agreement to durably work.

Obviously, this does not solve the two basic problems mentioned at the beginning of this brief: the expansionist policy of Rwanda and the structural weakness of the DRC state and security forces. But it could provide a solid, legitimate and authoritative basis to claim solutions to these issues too. Given the current likelihood of a resumption of the armed conflict, it is urgent.

Erik Kennes is a Senior Research Fellow in the Africa Programme at the Egmont Institute and an Associate Researcher at the Institute of Development Policy (IOB) of the University of Antwerp.



Endnotes

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- 24 Final report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, June 2025 (unofficial copy), para 26 and annex 16; para 27 and annex 17.
- 25 See <https://pactesocialpaixrdc.org/>
- 26 CENCO – ECC Pacte Social, *Cadre programmatique global*, 2025, p. 4.
- 27 See Didier MUMENGI, Initiative du "Pacte Social pour la Paix et le Bien-Vivre Ensemble en RDC et dans les Grands Lacs". *Note de présentation technique*, 2025, 4 p. Also Didier MUMENGI, *Le Congo et les Grands Lacs. La paix tout de suite... Pourquoi et comment ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2024, 251 p.





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