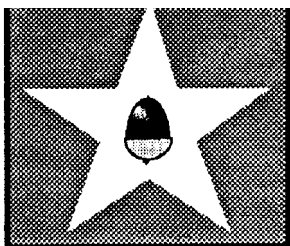


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

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**Cities & Infra-State Conflicts**

**May 2001**



**M21**

## CITIES & INFRA-STATE CONFLICTS

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*Infra-state conflicts are closely linked to the "city" - in other words, a symbolic area with concentrated bureaucratic organisations, common public assets and demographic resources. Thus cities - and particularly Third World mega-cities - tend to become the main objective for a warlord or a violent political organisation such as the Revolutionary Unity Front in Sierra Leone or the Taleban. This article analyses new kinds of urban warfare.*

For some years now, the spotlight has tended to focus on infra-state conflicts involving violent political organisations which hope to compete with or even replace states that have little self-assurance, or are perhaps even in a state of "collapse", although the term "collapse" is certainly not devoid of Western-Centrist value judgements ("collapse" compared to what, after all, if not compared to the model of a Western state?), and such conflicts have now become a routine problem. They no longer take place between States, symmetrical and Clausewitzian conflicts between organised, identified, structured and hierarchical armies, but rather between States of greater or lesser substance and organisations with more or less confirmed political programmes which often have predatory economic objectives (asymmetrical conflicts).

In this context, infra-state wars are closely connected, and connected in many ways, to the concept of the "city", a concentration of wealth, an organised centre and shantytown, a mixture of the unofficial sector and of legal activities<sup>1</sup>, of marginality and integration - cities both licit and illicit. Forests or mountainous regions can undoubtedly serve as useful permanent bases or points of departure for axes of conquest. For example, the Revolutionary Unity Front (RUF) orchestrated its conquest of Sierra Leone from a chain of mountains and the Liberian forest from March 1991 onwards (Mount Bea in the South and Lofa Mano National Park). Forests may even be used as a symbol of mobilisation and organisation. The RUF created an enclosed, even "sectarian" social system<sup>2</sup> in the depth of Sierra Leone's Eastern forest (the "Rufland").

But above all, it is sheer weight of numbers that makes cities an unbeatable objective: the number of cities in developing countries is increasing rapidly. Between 1990 and 2025, around 90% of the world's urban growth will take place outside the Northern hemisphere.<sup>3</sup> Every day, the urban population in Southern countries increases by 150,000 people.<sup>4</sup> By 2025, it will have reached 4.5 billion.<sup>5</sup> From a demographic point of view, any infra-state conflict whose ultimate objective is the seizure of power and/or economic exploitation of a geographical zone must take this reality into account, both now and in the future. This is all the more true since, while cities such as Seoul are generally well-structured and delimited, numerous cities in the South are developing on their periphery, with all the associated difficulties arising from the cumulative burden of demographic growth, rural exodus and, in certain cases, the flight of civilian populations from zones of

combat.<sup>6</sup> In Turkey, for example, this type of district on the outskirts of Istanbul is designated *gecekondu*, which means literally "built during the night".

## The City As A Resource & War

Although the social symbolism of the city varies from one culture to another, it seems that it is most often considered as a "refuge", a fantasy place where riches abound, but which, in reality, often does not have the resources that its assumed role would demand. For example, 30% of African urban populations do not have access to the municipal water supply.<sup>7</sup>

### Urban symbolism & War

Various elements can explain the attraction of cities, be it real or imagined:

A city is a structured social space, assumed to enjoy a concentration of common public resources (water, electricity, social services etc) or food. Even if they are embryonic, or quasi non-existent, such resources may potentially attract destitute and often rural civilian populations.<sup>8</sup> And this general movement is accentuated by conflict. Rural populations gradually flee as the warring parties advance, particularly if the latter have the reputation of inflicting violence on the civilian population. Cities have a transport infrastructure (airport or port), something that may be taken into account by the general population when forming a strategy for flight (abroad) but which is just as much a strategic objective for a political entrepreneur hoping to exploit his country's formal or informal economy.

This attraction should probably also be linked to the transnational spread of the Western model of a city. Whether more or less vaguely, schematically, the city is generally associated with Western standards in respect of the matter, because of the cultural projections exported by the North (films, in particular). It is even truer that the actual zone of conflict (choice of capital, the geography of names, road structures) has itself sometimes been symbolically created by the Western coloniser. Civilian populations are thus seeking refuge in a city that does not exist.

Another, far more important element must also be added: in a configuration where resources are rare, cities - and in particular the capital - hold a great attraction for the warring parties. (It must be said that they also have a certain attraction for journalists, who enjoy greater logistic resources there than when doing their job in other "less comfortable" places - the "hotel bar journalism" syndrome). Materially-speaking, cities present a tempting target. Generally, as a place where riches accumulate and are found in concentration, they will be considered attractive by any warring party. They are places where populations gather (these can be subjected to racketeering and "cleansing") and where accumulations of durable and non-durable goods are to be found (ensuring that the logistic requirements of the dominant faction can be met). Cities are sometimes voluntarily used by one of the warring parties as a place where civilian populations are concentrated in order to exert control over them. When a scorched earth policy is adopted in campaigns, cities accommodate displaced populations among which attempts can be made to provoke reactions of dependency and submission vis-à-vis the armed forces, the latter being presented as defending their existence and championing their interests. Far from their production bases, these populations - often peasants - demonstrate a high degree of dependency in the spheres of food, ideology and emotion. They witness the disappearance of their normal universe, their peasant way of life and their values.<sup>9</sup>

## Cities &amp; Infra-State Conflicts

The city is still a place of symbolism where state or religious power is exercised. Conquering a city, a capital, would thus bestow on the conqueror a type of institutional and formal legitimacy, albeit seized by force. For example, once he became master of the capital of Congo-Kinshasa, L D Kabila denied his opponents any representation in the peace negotiations<sup>10</sup>: his forces in the national capital helped to confer upon him some of the aspects of a Head of State and he was thus no longer on the same level as his unfortunate rivals. Without doubt, the symbolic weight of the capital has various effects - ranging from symbolic to fantasy - because of the "inevitable over-politicisation" of what goes on there.<sup>11</sup> Cities will therefore most often be a target for the parties because of the following calculation, expressed schematically:

Total or partial control of the capital = control of state infrastructures = legality = international and domestic recognition.

State structures, even those in a state which is failing, has little self-assurance or is fragile, touch on various spheres which are vital for the organisation of society:

- Central administrations which control peripheral administrations in all spheres;
- Military headquarters or intelligence services, their assets, their premises;
- Control of diplomatic representation abroad;
- Production of national currency which ensures prestige and which allows civil servants to be paid (incidentally, this symbolic dimension of currency is crucial: in October 1994, when one Afghan faction attempted to introduce a new 5,000 Afghani note into circulation, another faction refused to use it<sup>12</sup>).

To give an example of what is at stake as far as control of the urban area of a capital city is concerned, between April 1992 and the arrival of the Taleban in September 1996, Kabul became "the conflict's principal military and political prize".<sup>13</sup> Within the context of a rebellion, the main Afghan political organisations attempted to take over the city, including by establishing alliances with components of the declining state administrations (police, secret services). A three-party alliance - Abdoul Ali Mazari's Hezb-i-wahdati<sup>14</sup>, Ahmad Shah Massoud's Djamiat and Rashid Dostam's Djoumbesh - victoriously shared Kabul until the Taleban arrived in 1994.

Possession of an airport (or a port) is another step in the direction of legitimisation. Very often situated close to the capital, and an organic link to the rest of the world, the airport or port also helps to legitimise whoever is in possession thereof. First of all, it facilitates the transportation of troops and thus increases their mobility, which can have decisive military consequences. In the context of infra-state wars where violent political organisations only rarely have an air component, control of an airport - and especially that which serves the capital - gives added power. However, in addition to conferring military or logistic superiority, aviation and an airport also legitimise whoever is in possession thereof because they are the symbol of the state, of an army that is structured and "rich", and sufficiently in control of its territory to organise permanent transport structures. Ultimately, an airport or port provides the archetypal means of exporting/importing all possible raw materials, commodities or armaments.

A city that has been invaded may experience different fates depending on the players fighting in it and the stakes for which they are playing. All types of confrontation are possible. A state-controlled or other army may attack another (eg the second battle of Brazzaville in 1997). A state-controlled or other army may take action against an organised population (eg the German Army against the Parisians during the liberation of Paris). A state-controlled or other army may take action against an unorganised civilian population - in particular in the event of occupation of the city in question. In January 1999, the RUF occupied Freetown and attacked the inhabitants in a highly organised and forceful manner (3,000 dead, 5,000 injured, thousands of young girls or women raped, more than a hundred people with limbs amputated).<sup>15</sup> Eye-witness statements confirm that specific RUF units were set up to accomplish particular types of violence (generally specifically targeted, or at least motivated), which is indicative of meticulous preparation: for example, "burn house units" or "cut hands units", the latter specialising in amputations and lacerations.<sup>16</sup>

If it symbolises or harbours the adversaries of the violent political organisation which invades it, or if it focuses months of resentment and suffering accumulated during fighting throughout the rest of the territory, a city may be the object of controlled sacking. Its fate may also vary "depending on the role it was able to play during the war".<sup>17</sup> It may be considered as a type of reward for the victorious soldiers, with their leader allowing them a certain amount of predatory leeway for a limited period of time. In this case, sacking of the city must be anticipated (looting, rape, mass executions): in brief, a vengeful and/or short period of predation which is both compulsive and brutal. When Brazzaville was seized in 1997, the Angolan soldiers and the Cobra militias sacked the private apartments of the vanquished President of Congo and, under the watchful eye of the cameras, trained their weapons on his photograph. In addition, eye-witness accounts indicate that, for a few days, the military commanders also authorised their troops to loot any quarters that had been spared until then. The intensity of these acts of violence is all the more significant given that the hierarchical relationships or the ties of allegiance that bind the top to the bottom of the violent political organisation are finely stretched.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Players & The Geography Of Combat In A City At War**

An urban war is a complex and nebulous universe where several worlds coexist and where various players with differing attitudes and capabilities cooperate with or confront each other during the crisis - a generalised process of interactions.<sup>19</sup> The juxtaposition of civilian populations and warring parties is the first that comes to mind. A superficial analysis might consider that civilians merely have a strategy of flight from the fighting, ie a strategy of survival and/or preservation of their possessions, that they are simply at the mercy of the fighting they witness, the media information they receive from one or other of the camps or the rounds that whistle above their heads. This is why, when the violence escalated in 1992, 500,000 people out of a total 1.2 million fled Kabul. However, in numerous urban conflicts, away from the areas where the fighting is taking place, economic life continues, people still go to work, live and consume that which is available (eg Brazzaville in 1997 or Bucharest during the fighting to bring down Ceausescu). Between the zone where the fighting is at its most intense and those urban zones where life continues in a more-or-less peaceful vein, there is a whole range of levels of intensity of violence and consequently, a whole geography of urban warfare, a division of the city which shifts along with developments in the hostilities.

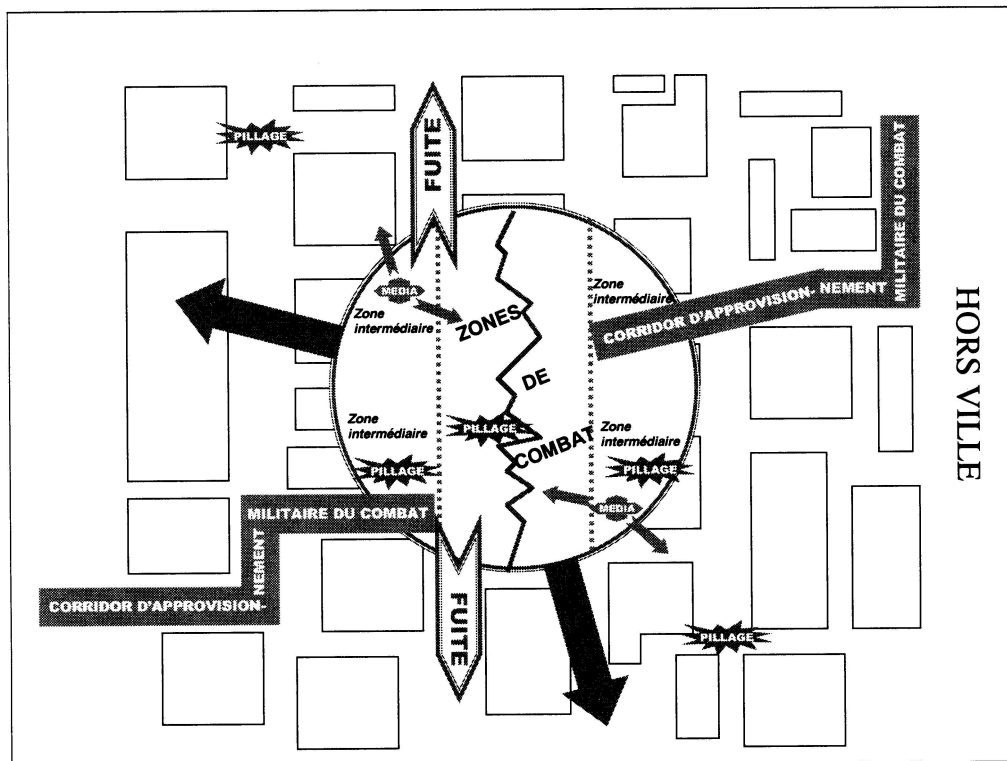
## Cities &amp; Infra-State Conflicts

First of all there are the *combat zones*, which are (to a greater or lesser extent) concentrated and limited, and are generally centred on the domination of public buildings, corridors of power and information, the basis of a political and administrative authority yet to come. These zones may shift little by little, depending on the players' weapons and/or strategies, and on their capabilities at any given moment (do they have ammunition or food and water? Are they tired or not?) These combat zones may extend throughout an entire city. They are, by and large, areas where combatants are predominant - civilians are more-or-less "non-existent" (flight) or hidden (survival). The intensity of the fighting will potentially be at its highest here, where there is a confrontation between two or more political organisations which are attempting to prevail in the streets at war.

Then there are the *intermediate zones*, sandwiched between the still-peaceful city and those areas that have been overrun by fighting, zones of "social depressurisation" where civilians in flight, soldiers going to join the fighting and those who are able to leave it (the injured), aid organisations and the logistics of military support all coexist between *check-points*, guard posts and curfew. Journalists also attempt to do their job in these zones, from where they are able to gain access to the combat zones in order to "provide a flavour of" the conflict:

"So close to the objective, the theatre of operations seemed light years away to the Senegalese special correspondents sent to the front. Our baptism of fire occurred when we arrived at the Bissau naval base, la Marinette. Rebel bombardments were being answered by FOREX firing, which was denser and more prolonged. We were in the thick of the epic struggle for the veritable powder keg of Bra, although we had no helmets or flak-jackets - strangely naked for such an occasion. Which is why our knees and elbows took such punishment from the self-preservation position we soon learned to adopt, namely dropping down into hiding as soon as we heard the whine of a round, and delighting the battleworn soldiers around us."<sup>20</sup>

In this intermediate zone between violence and peace, unpredictability reigns supreme. In a situation where there is disorder, inclined towards what Jaurès calls the "randomness of individual influences"<sup>21</sup>, certain civilians may commit acts of violence that are socially motivated (eg execution or lynching of individuals who symbolise the enemy faction or a particular type of socio-economic domination). Or else they may throw themselves into looting, mingling with the combatants, associating with them in an immediate and informal "pact" of looting, a criminally-orientated mobilisation of small, thieving groups. The following diagram provides a simplified illustration of this constantly-changing shape of a city, as imposed by conflict<sup>22</sup>:



Although there may be a swing from one kind of collective action to another, this type of activity is, of course, different from a more conventional demonstration which uses the urban area "simply as a place through which the demonstrating procession passes".<sup>23</sup> A demonstration, an activity that is ordered, highly visible and organised, is little suited to periods of extreme military conflict. On the contrary, such action requires the kind of order that is found in the existence of a force of law and order and, very often, from a legal point of view, in the prior authorisation granted by public institutions. Now, in the case which interests us, the State, or what is left of it, would not be able to issue any type of authorisation inasmuch as it has other priorities - namely fighting for its survival against opponents who may fight it all the way to its capital. An urban war, particularly in a capital city, also implies the imposition of a curfew which would eliminate in advance any possibility of a demonstration.

Recourse to looting or violence is more similar to a riot, which uses the same urban area as a place of fighting. Whether looting or flight, any coordination of individual actions occurs spontaneously or in accordance with a preconceived strategy (in actual fact, circumstances afford a golden opportunity which certain individuals believe will bring profit, requiring minimal preparation or even mere improvisation): certain inhabitants or the warring parties in the city take advantage of anomic circumstances in order to appropriate possessions that are not their own or to take action against individuals with whom they are in dispute or who symbolise social resentment.<sup>24</sup> Although the sequence "common interest - realisation of the common interest - collective action" would appear to be self-evident, it must not be considered that the immediate circumstances will be the direct cause of acts of looting. In addition to the immediate context, there are also deeper-lying considerations: for example, the influence exerted by the opposing interests of different social groups and by any real and/or perceived social inequalities (eg in Sierra Leone, the juxtaposition of young and old, the contrast between the coastal

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area and the forests of the interior, which occurs in all South-West Sub-Saharan Africa, etc). And there are also the players' strategies. It may be that operations to monopolise resources become the subject of tactical consultation between the combatants. Fighting may stop for the duration of the looting in accordance with defined terms and conditions:

"According to a number of similar accounts, once they had finished looting all the shops behind them, the Lebanese people who were fighting in the streets of the city centre called a truce, agreeing a compromise so that they could sack the shops located between their respective positions. They met, set up a bilateral committee and dispatched joint teams to systematically empty all the shops. Once this had been done, combat was resumed. Sharing the spoils between partners, associates and rivals remained the order of the day."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, looting is a means of disobeying, of indirectly attacking the controls that are supposed to be exercised over all society. The offence of looting demonstrates the weakness of such controls at a given moment in time and wipes out the State's legitimacy "without proposing a substitute, or at least not directly".<sup>26</sup> The release of prisoners, a gesture which allows the political organisation occupying the city to liberate additional numbers of militants or sympathisers, often also allows the release of common criminals as well, which does nothing to improve public security.

In passing, it is also necessary to consider the subversive and sometimes fantasy role played by "provocateurs", who accentuate tensions and *spectacularise* problems of law and order, looting or lynching etc.<sup>27</sup>

The warring parties in a city are clearly the most violent players and those who have the greatest influence as regards altering the urban social balance. The sudden emergence of random check-points, particularly on the outskirts of cities, produces sites of varying degrees of organisation which favour both predation and the enrichment of impoverished troops, and where travellers are systematically relieved of their money and possessions. But the city also brands them with its own influence: directly, first of all, since increasing urbanisation has objective consequences as regards both the progression and conditions of conflict, be it infra-state or other – by swallowing up the transport axes, by becoming more widespread, it increasingly reduces the options for a conventional war of manoeuvres which, in the past, always attempted to avoid just such urban warfare. It is now no longer possible to ignore cities when devising military tactics for use in theatre: they are an imponderable of infra-state wars. For their part, the warring parties, who are (to a greater or lesser extent) autonomous owing to the highly fragmented configuration of urban terrain and the sometimes very flexible structures of the organisations to which they belong, make an impression on the territory and the populations by using their weapons. This aspect reflects the materiel capabilities of the warring parties.

### **The Morphology Of Urban Conflicts**

By and large, the sometimes ill-assorted armies of violent political organisations which are not financially well-off have only limited resources, particularly in terms of equipment and munitions. While this might be detrimental in numerous theatres of operation, it can be an advantage in urban warfare, which by definition involves close combat and limited mobility. Small-calibre weapons are those which are most frequently used and are, indeed, the most suitable: generally speaking, rifles, light machine-guns, machine-guns and rifles with telescopic sights tend to



delimit the intensity and the scope of combat. The most frequently-used type of explosive is the hand grenade. Knives and machetes have also often been used - for example, by the RUF against the civilian population, or in Rwanda. By contrast, armies which are better equipped (ie state armies?) and which have long-range options such as armoured vehicles or heavy artillery are potentially weighed down, even hindered by an unsuitable arsenal. Indeed, how can it be possible to target scattered and highly mobile soldiers, hiding in the nooks and crannies of a town, without also hitting the civilian population among which they are operating? While it is true that warring parties show little concern for the fate of civilian populations and care little about their existence, the fact remains that artillery fire support is ineffective in an urban environment, as is low altitude air support, which can be countered effectively by surface-to-air missiles or rockets. Manoeuvres, too, are difficult to conduct in an urban environment: ultimately, there is no option but to channel all armoured vehicle movements down a city's streets, which increases the chances of ambush. The Russian Army experienced just such difficulties when fighting in the Chechen capital, Groznyy. In the narrow streets, tanks were attacked from the rear and from above by local guerrilla forces and even those tanks which remained unscathed were prevented from moving forwards or backwards by others that had been set alight.<sup>28</sup> In November 1999, Colonel General M Karatuyev, one of the Russian military commanders on the ground, said he believed the Russian forces' success was greatly influenced by their ability to successfully decentralise the selection of targets and by the fact that they had artillery or mortar batteries in each motorised or parachute infantry company.<sup>29</sup>

This concurrence between limited resources and the configuration of the combat environment increases the lethality of infra-state urban conflict. Indeed, in reality, light weapons play a major role in infra-state conflicts. In 101 conflicts between 1989 and 1996, light weapons were the weapons of choice, sometimes even the only weapons used.<sup>30</sup> It is true that they benefit from certain advantageous characteristics:

They are simple. And by contrast to certain weapons which contain electronics or require fuel, they are durable. Requiring minimal maintenance, they can be used for 30 or 40 years. Robust weapons, they do not demand much in the way of logistics that would be worthy of a state-controlled army.

Light weapons can be transported by the troops themselves or by light vehicles. When being moved from the manufacturer/seller to the location of the conflict, they can be hidden among other goods in order to escape customs and police controls.

They have a very high nuisance value. These weapons' increased capabilities and rates of fire (up to 700 rounds a minute) mean that a single soldier can pose a formidable danger.

Furthermore, the sheer quantity of these weapons serves to decrease their sale value: one journalist estimated that, in Rwanda in 1994, there was a Kalashnikov for every bicycle and that a grenade cost less than a kilogram of sugar.<sup>31</sup> In 1996, an assault rifle could be bought for \$15 in Angola or Mozambique.<sup>32</sup> It is generally estimated that between 55 and 72 million rapid-fire assault rifles have been manufactured throughout the world since 1945 - by 54 different states, either autonomously or under licence.<sup>33</sup> And it would seem likely that this trend has only increased further since the mid Nineteen Eighties, given that the number of manufacturers has risen by a quarter (in other words, 300 companies in 70 states).<sup>34</sup> This profusion of companies reveals the desire of certain countries to

attain independence in the matter of arms production and is, undoubtedly, a reaction by manufacturers to increased demand.

All of the above have an effect on the options for settling political differences in countries affected by an infra-state conflict. The prevalence of weapons, their pervasiveness, their dissemination throughout all strata of "civilian" society<sup>35</sup> and possibly also the low incidence of hierarchical structures in violent political organisations all very probably increase the frequency of their use. Weapons, and the arming of a society, give rise to "the impossibility of settling differences by means of negotiation, triggering conflicts and bringing about a high number of civilian casualties."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the victims are generally civilians: a study of the surgical database maintained by the International Red Cross Committee (first begun in 1991) reveals that out of 17,086 individuals admitted to hospitals around the world by IRCC teams because of bullet wounds, 35% were women, boys under 16 or men over 50 years of age.<sup>37</sup> Another study which concentrated on the war in Croatia reveals an even more dramatic proportion, with civilians making up 64% of the 4,339 individuals who were examined because of bullet wounds.<sup>38</sup>

## **Infra-State Conflicts In An Urban Environment In Practice**

Numerous infra-state conflicts in an urban environment could be used to justify the above arguments. In this section, however, only two examples will be discussed, having been selected for both circumstantial and more in-depth reasons: the battle for Bissau in June 1998 and the battle for Brazzaville between June and October 1997. In both these examples, ethnic, cultural, social and economic (presence of precious raw materials) elements all determined the strategies adopted by typical players: ie states seriously threatened by violent political organisations grouped around a charismatic leader, insertion into a more complex, wider crisis involving third party states, transnational Western firms, even private security companies.

### **Case Study: Bissau, June 1998**

As was the case with the complex crisis situations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the Casamance secessionist conflict against the Senegalese state also spread to neighbouring countries. Because of its geographical proximity, and also because the Diola ethnic group was present in various locations in the country, Guinea-Bissau in fact served as a withdrawal base for the Casamance people during the Nineteen Eighties. It seems that certain Guinea-Bissau military personnel close to the centre of power were even responsible for various cases of arms and cannabis trafficking with the Casamance people. Investigations into such trafficking, political struggles within the country and increasing resistance to President Vieira's regime ultimately brought about a violent crisis (in which more than 1,000 people were killed, and 250,000 were displaced). There was also a significant politico-economic element, namely the consequences of Guinea-Bissau acceding to the "Franc Zone" and the effects of increased consideration of French regional interests.<sup>39</sup> From 6 to 7 June 1998, the majority of the Guinea-Bissau Army supported former Chief of Staff General Ansumane Mane, who had been relieved of his duties two days previously and who took advantage of his young officers' desire to also benefit from the national income. The widespread nature of the revolt provoked intervention by both the Senegalese Armed Forces (Operation Gabou, involving 1,300 personnel) and the Guinean Armed Forces (400 personnel), their objectives being to secure the border once and for all, to disorganise the Casamance guerrillas and to ensure that President Vieira remained in power.<sup>40</sup> The number of rebels (almost all of the 6,500 men in the national Army) and the support they enjoyed among the civilian

population, the latter shocked by the links between Vieira and the Senegalese Army, intensified the violence of the conflict, which escalated into urban warfare to decide control of the capital, Bissau, and the camp of Bra, which was the main military base and the country's largest arsenal and had fallen into rebel hands. In addition to the use of personal firearms, the warring parties also used heavier weapons (81, 90, 105 and 120 mm light armoured guns) - including the rebels, who were not supposed to have such equipment. (Delivery of a cargo of weapons by a mysterious Antonov and Anglophone mercenaries were sometimes mentioned.)

### **Case Study: The Fight for Brazzaville, June-October 1997**

The war which erupted in Congo-Brazzaville is absolutely typical of an infra-state conflict in a country with useful resources (in this instance, oil): the warring parties were able to use heavy weapons because of the funds at their disposal and the support they enjoyed from transnational firms, in particular French firms. This conflict destroyed the capital, Brazzaville, and took place almost entirely within this city, thus clearly emphasising the socio-economic, symbolic and operational significance of a capital city. It resulted in thousands of deaths<sup>41</sup> and forcibly displaced an estimated population of 620,000 individuals<sup>42</sup> (figure quoted by the Congolese Ministry for Public Health).

The origins of the conflict lay in the process of transfer of power within the Congo and in the anti-democratic attitude exhibited by certain Congolese leaders.<sup>43</sup> One of the first indications of the crisis was the Army's opposition to the appointment of non-Sassouist and Southern superior officers by the elected government. In January 1992, the Army besieged Brazzaville's radio, television and main roads, and forced the democratic government to yield. The second indication was the change of political alliance that gave rise to clashes in the streets of Brazzaville in October 1992, between Lissouba's supporters on the one hand and the allied supporters of Kolélas and Sassou-Nguesso on the other. The third indication was much bloodier than the previous two. Despite electoral irregularities and the emergence of constitutional disputes, a new National Assembly and a new Government were set up in June 1993. As a direct result of these events, President Lissouba dismissed the Congolese Chief of Defence Staff who had been appointed by Sassou-Nguesso. This development in the crisis was also characterised by the formation of fighting "militias" by the parties involved in the conflict. Y Koula comments on the ambiguity of this word which, in its literal meaning, refers to a troop formed from within civilian society to reinforce the regular Army. Now, such "militias" were a traditional feature of the Congo, but they were at the service of the government and traced their origins back to the decay of the military institution (a perfect symbol of failure of the ethnic opposition between North and South Congo, incapable of assuming a collective national function) and their mission was to ensure the authorities remained in power, if necessary using violent and illegal means to accomplish this.<sup>44</sup> The formation of such "militias" by political adversaries during the democratic period merely represented the pursuit of the old instrumental practice of violence, influenced by permanent ethnic criteria. These private armies (Kolélas' *Ninjas*, Sassou-Nguesso's *Cobras*, Lissouba's *Zulus*, the *Sharks*, the *Falcons*), aided by Western mercenaries, had different methods of organisation and different funding arrangements. The Zulu militias seemed to be self-organised and relatively undisciplined, while the Cobras benefited from weapons and regular subsidies provided by Sassou-Nguesso (thanks to the pillaging of barracks, the weapons and money seized by the Sassouists when they ceded power in August 1992, and to the support provided by transnational firms).<sup>45</sup>

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In June 1997, six light armoured vehicles took up positions around Sassou-Nguesso's villa as back-up for the police who went there to issue a subpoena against two high-ranking Sassouists. No sooner was the first shot fired than the whole of Brazzaville's Northern quarters plunged into violence. The Cobras, armed with assault rifles, advanced on the city centre, the quarter in which the central station was situated, the Institutions of State and the airport. They erected barricades in the quarters they controlled (Mpila and its barracks housing armoured, naval and Engineer regiments, Poto-Poto etc). The Congolese National Army proved unable to do more than slow the Cobras' advance, but did prevent them from seizing national radio and the airport. The government decided to call on troops stationed outside Brazzaville and transported them to the city in leased Antonov-24 aircraft. Lissouba bombarded Brazzaville's northern quarters using BM-21 rocket launchers.<sup>46</sup> On 6 and 7 June 1997, the capital was divided into three: the south was quiet (as, indeed, was the rest of the country), the city centre was controlled by the regular Army who took orders from President Lissouba, and the north was held by the Sassouists. The latter began to use heavy weapons against the symbols of power (T-55 tanks, rocket launchers, mortars). The regular Army responded in kind. In certain areas of Brazzaville, roadblocks were erected to allow theft and dispossession of the civilian population and foreigners. Certain natives of Brazzaville also took advantage of the situation to pillage numerous shops. Fighting with heavy weapons continued while negotiations were organised

and international mediation teams (from Gabon, France) were set up. On 9 June, artillery fire hit Southern quarters where the government had retreated. Seizure of a television transmitter by the Cobras resulted in the Sassouists setting up their own TV station.

France, for her part, reacted by undertaking a military operation to evacuate foreign nationals and sent 1,250 soldiers to the country, their principal mission being to secure the airport. They would leave again, mission accomplished, on 20 June, a few hours before the officially-announced date, apparently leaving behind weapons which the Cobras seized despite opposition from UN and OAU special envoys. On 25 June, the fighting increased in intensity, particularly around the airport. During this same month, in order to reduce the Cobras' superiority as regards equipment, Lissouba bought four Soviet combat helicopters from a South African company. On 24 June, 3,000 soldiers from Angola's UNITA joined Lissouba's militia; an Ilyushin-76 containing Ukrainian mercenaries and helicopters landed at Pointe-Noire. Technicians attempted to restore two immobilised MiG-21 aircraft to working order. Shells were fired on Kolélas' strongholds of Bacongo and Makelekele, as well as on the University Hospital. Adopting a patrimonialist strategy, the government paid civil servants employed in peaceful zones or those who had remained loyal, and centralised payments from Bacongo and Makelekele. The Cobras then targeted the banks and announced a unilateral ceasefire, most likely awaiting resupplies of ammunition and other materiel.<sup>47</sup> Around mid-August, the front line shifted and the government forces entered the northern quarters of Brazzaville (Moungali, Ouenzé).

At the end of August, helicopters flown by Europeans attacked Cobra militia positions and the civilian population living in the north of Brazzaville, in particular the M'Pila and Poto-Poto quarters, as new peace negotiations got under way. It seemed that the Cobras were gradually vacating the capital in order to undertake military activities in the rest of the country: specifically, they attempted to infiltrate the town of Pointe-Noire and at the beginning of September, they attacked the town of Owando, 600 km North of Brazzaville, using heavy weapons. This town was a useful logistic base for acceptance of Angolan and Gabonese aid. Sassou-Nguesso attempted to set up an administration for the territory he controlled, thus adopting the logic of dividing up the country.

It became evident that the regime was in its death throes when the opposition forces gradually advanced on the Presidential palace, despite firing from helicopters. By the beginning of October 1997, they were practically masters of Brazzaville. Indeed, on 7 October, supported by soldiers from Angola and Chad and thus equipped with more sophisticated weapons (aircraft, in particular), the Cobras launched an offensive on the West of Brazzaville and the city centre. On 15 October, at Pointe-Noire, Angolan soldiers and Cobras invaded the city, both by road and from the sea.

## Endnotes

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- 5 Quoted by P Gizemski & T Homer-Dixon, "Urban Growth and Violence: Will the Future Resemble the Past?", casual paper, Project on Environment, Population and Security, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Toronto, June 1995, (utl1.library.utoronto.ca/www/pcs/eps/urban/urban/1.Htm)
- 6 The problems associated with urbanisation as experienced by developing countries have been the subject of much literature. Take, for example: A Gilbert, *Cities, Poverty and Development: Urbanisation in the Third World*, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1992; J Gugler, *Cities in the Developing World: Issues, Theories and Policy*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p1 ff; J Gugler, *The Urban Transformation of the Developing World: Regional Trajectories*, Oxford University Press, 1996; J D Kasarda, A M Parnell (dir), *Third World Cities: Problems, Politics and Prospects (Sage Focus Editions, Vol No 148)*, Sage Editions, 1992 or R E Stren, R R White (dir), *African Cities in Crisis: Managing Rapid Urban Growth (African Modernisation and Development Series)*, Westview Press, January 1999, etc.
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- 8 Regarding this question, as far as Africa is concerned, see J D Tarver (dir), *Urbanisation in Africa*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1994.
- 9 In the case of Guatemala, J Garcia-Ruiz demonstrated this dimension perfectly, the modification of systems of representation, the deconstruction-reconstruction of ideological frameworks and the influence of infra-state war on the political structures of a country ("Un essai de contrôle des consciences dans un contexte de guerre civil" ["An attempt to control conscience in the context of civil war"], in F Chazel (dir), *Action collective et mouvements sociaux [Collective Action and Social Movements]*, Paris, PUF, sociologies, 1993, p125-142.
- 10 Interview with F Gaulme, 13 February 2001.
- 11 D Tartakowsky, "La province sans Paris ou la province contre Paris" ["The Provinces Without Paris or the Provinces Against Paris"], in P Favre (dir), *op cit*, p160.
- 12 Source G Dorronsoro.
- 13 G Dorronsoro, article to be published, entitled "Kaboul en guerre (1992-1996): Etat, ethnicité et conflit social" ["Kabul at War (1992-1996): State, Ethnicity and Social Conflict"].
- 14 The Hezb-i-wahdat, set up in 1990, is a grouping of various Shiite parties of the Hazaras Afghan ethnic group.
- 15 Source UNHCR.
- 16 There have been numerous eye-witness accounts of RUF acts of violence in Freetown. Take that of Mohammed Bah, 51, for example: "The rebels amputated my left leg when they retreated at the end of January. I was in my home with my family when they besieged us. They demanded money, all the money that I had. Then they said: 'While we're taking the money, we are also going to take your possessions. And we have to cut off your hands.' At that point, my family took refuge in the toilets outside the house. I shouted to them: 'Please, I beg you, don't do it!' But they said: 'No, we're going to do it - to send a message to the President.' 'I'm not a politician. There are no politicians in my family. I am just an ordinary man. Why are you going to cut my hands off?' They said they didn't give a damn. They had to take my hands and I had to take those of the President. I said again: 'The President is innocent. He hasn't done anything wrong.' 'We don't care.' All they wanted to do was to take

- my hands ... They forced me to kneel down and ..." etc. (*Radio Netherlands, Wereldomroep*, 28 January 2000).
- 17 C Esmein, "Ville et conflits armées" ["The city and armed conflict"], *L'Armement*, No 40, December 1994, p123.
- 18 See F Weissman on the specific case of Liberia: "Liberia: Derrière le chaos, crises et interventions internationales" [Liberia: Behind the Chaos, Crises and International Interventions"], *RIS*, No 23, Autumn 1996, p82 ff.
- 19 G J Ashworth, in a very remarkable work, described this relationship between war as an activity and cities, in particular in their spatial dimension (*War and the City*, London, Routledge, 1991).
- 20 *Le Soleil en Ligne*, Selegalese newspaper, downloaded on 14 April 2001. See also for analysis of the battle of Bissau.
- 21 J Jaurès, *l'Humanité [Humanity]*, 20 January 1997.
- 22 NB: This diagram has been produced on the basis of our discussions. The elements have been arranged intuitively, leaving quantification aside. Consequently, it is simply a graphical illustration which seeks to demonstrate the subject more clearly.
- 23 P Favre (dir), *La manifestation [Demonstration]*, Paris, PFNSP, 1990, p15.
- 24 What is it that pushes them to act? If one were to reason in terms of costs and benefits, an assessment would have to be made (dangers, advantages to be gained, evaluation of possessions in question etc). In reality, an individual will rarely do this. He responds to deeper or more spontaneous motivations: a desire to act, to confront perceived social injustices, a feeling of impunity, a psychological desire to compensate for the general climate of violence etc.
- 25 A N Messara, "Le citoyen libanais et l'Etat. Une tradition tenace de constitutionalisme menacé." ["The Lebanese Citizen and the State: A Deep-Rooted Tradition of Threatened Constitutionalism"], *Le monde arabe: Maghreb Machrek*, No 125, July-August-September 1989, p82-89.
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- 31 E Glinne in *La Libre Belgique [Free Belgium]*, 30 May 1994 and *The Economist*, 14 October 1995, quoted by B Adam; *op cit*, p109.
- 32 UNIDIR, *Small Arms Management and Peacekeeping in Southern Africa*, UNIDIR/96/2, 1996, p9.
- 33 V Hart Ezell, *Report on International Small Arms Production and Proliferation*, Institute for Research on Small Arms in International Security, Alexandria VA, March 1995, p9.
- 34 S Rana, *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms*, United Nations Doc A/52/298.
- 35 S Nolet of the GRIP in Brussels has also clearly demonstrated the correlation between the number of weapons and the frequency of murders and other injuries caused by bullets, and in particular the economic cost, specifically in terms of the health budget (*La Détention d'armes par les civils [Civilian Possession of Weapons]*, Brussels, GRIP, 2000/1).
- 36 B Adam, "Les transferts d'armes vers les pays africains: quel contrôle?" [Arms Transfers to African Countries: What Control?], in GRIP, *Conflits en Afrique: Analyse des crises et pistes pour une prévention [Conflicts in Africa: Analysis of Crises and Approaches to Prevention]*, Brussels, éd Complexe, 1997, p108.
- 37 D R Meddings, "Are Most Casualties Non-Combatants?", *British Medical Journal*, Vol 317, 31 October 1998, p1249-1250.



- 38 M Kuzman, B Tomic, R Stevanovic et al, "Fatalities in the War in Croatia, 1991 and  
 1992: Underlying and External Causes of Death", *Jama*, 1993, No 270, p626-628.
- 39 The "Francophile" elements of President Vieira's diplomacy were viewed particularly  
 unfavourably by the many officers and civilian veterans who had been involved in the  
 war of independence against Portugal. The destruction of border minefields in  
 February 1998 was regarded by many Guinea-Bissau people as a humiliation  
 (Reuter, "Guinea-Bissau: Landmines Destroyed to Make Amends for Gunrunning to  
 Senegal Rebels", 8 February 1998).
- 40 The tactical objective of this intervention force (FOREX) was to control the logistic  
 route as far as the capital. This meant "creating a front around the port platform in  
 order to guarantee movements from the port of Bissau to the continent. Following  
 consolidation, it was necessary to monitor the approaches to the city and to seize  
 targets on the Port-Bra axis (which proved to be an important base for the rebels, as  
 well as their headquarters), located 7.5 km from the centre of Bissau. And finally,  
 the airport had to be taken." (Interview with Colonel A. Fall, *Le Soleil en Ligne*,  
<http://primature.sn/lesoleil/archi4/report.htm>, downloaded on 17 April 2001.  
[www.ips.org/critical/watch/con1.htm](http://www.ips.org/critical/watch/con1.htm)
- 41  
 42 800,000 according to the *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, US Department  
 of State, 25 February 2000.
- 43 The players were as follows: Firstly, Pascal Lissouba, the first Congolese man to be  
 awarded a PhD in Sciences, from the N'zabi minority ethnic group, and the first  
 President elected by direct universal suffrage. He was Prime Minister from 1965 to  
 1966. In 1977, following repression in the wake of the unexplained assassination of  
 President Ngouabi, he was condemned to death and subsequently to forced labour in  
 perpetuity. Living in exile in Paris, he became a Professor of Genetics at the  
*Université Paris XII* and assumed various functions with UNESCO. In August 1992,  
 he was elected Head of State of the Congo. His party is the Congo's first - the Pan-  
 African Union for Social Democracy. Secondly, Bernard Kolélas, Mayor of Brazzaville  
 from 1995 onwards, of the Lari ethnic group, or Teke. Entered politics in the Fifties.  
 His party is the Congolese Movement for Development and Integral Democracy.  
 Thirdly, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, former President of the Republic from 1979 to 1992,  
 of the M'bochi ethnic group. His party is the Congolese Labour Party. He led the  
 Congo for more than 20 years and played a role in the overthrow of all Congolese  
 Heads of State since 1960. In August 1992, he was beaten in the first round of the  
 Presidential elections by B Kolélas and P Lissouba.
- 44 Y Koula, *La démocratie congolaise "brûlée" au pétrole [Congolese Democracy "Roasted"*  
*Over Oil]*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, p28.
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 "Certain versions also maintain that such arms were diverted from Army depots,  
 while other versions speak of links between Sassou and the Elf petroleum company"  
 (p13).
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 [Review of a war that could have been avoided"], *Géopolitique africaine [African*  
*Geopolitics]*, No 1, 2000/2001, p157. The BM-21 is a Russian multiple rocket  
 launcher comprising 40 launch tubes mounted on a lorry. The crew (5 people) can  
 order firing from the control cabin, which favours use in an urban environment. The  
 rockets launched have a maximum range of around 20 km and a new salvo can be  
 fired after 8 to 10 minutes.
- 47 Sassou-Nguesso's military advisor confirmed: "We realised that we only had 700  
 cartridges left. Everyone was in a cold sweat. We considered the situation and  
 General Sassou-Nguesso announced a unilateral ceasefire." (*Le Figaro*, 21 October  
 1997). It should be noted that this same military advisor subsequently took delivery  
 of equipment in a region controlled by Sassouists.



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Translated by MOD Linguistic Services.

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ISBN 1-903584-28-0

**Published By:**

**The Conflict Studies Research  
Centre**

Directorate General Development and Doctrine  
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst  
Camberley  
Surrey  
GU15 4PQ  
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346  
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**ISBN 1-903584-28-0**