

Between Two Spaces

This research discusses the social mobility of combatants and introduces the notion of circular return to explain their permanent state of movement between civilian and combatant life. This phenomenon is widely observed in eastern DRC, where Congolese youth have been going in and out of armed groups for several decades now. While the notion of circular return has its origins in migration and refugee studies, we argue that it also serves as a useful lens to understand the navigation capacity between different social spaces of combatants and to describe and understand processes of incessant armed mobilization and demobilization. In conceptualizing these processes as forms of circular return, we want to move beyond the remobilization

discourse, which is too often connected to an assumed failure of DDR processes and tends to ignore combatants' agency and larger processes of socialization and social rupture as part of armed mobilization.

- Koen Vlassenroot, Emery Mudinga and Josaphat Musamb





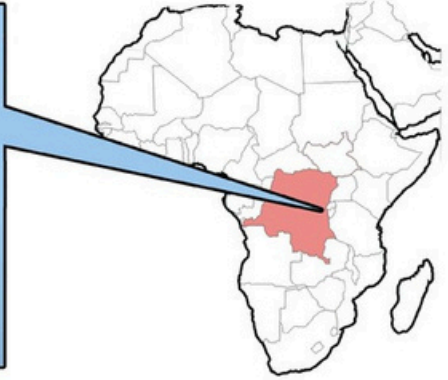
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Victor Ndula is an editorial cartoonist, illustrator and comic artist who lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya, where he lends his voice to social commentary through his cartoons. A member of the global organization Cartoon Movement, and Cartooning for Peace, he has attended and exhibited his work at Cartoon festivals in Switzerland, France and Germany, and his work has also been exhibited in Peru, Doha Qatar, Amsterdam and at the London School of Economics.

Between two Spaces

Movement between civilian and combatant life in Eastern DR Congo





THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC) HAS SEEN MUCH CONFLICT IN ITS PAST, MOST NOTABLY IN THE CONGO WARS, BETWEEN 1996 AND 2003. SINCE 2003, HIGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE CONTINUE TO BE PRESENT.

IN EASTERN CONGO, RURAL YOUTH HAVE JOINED ARMED GROUPS, REBEL MOVEMENTS OR LOCAL DEFENSE FORCES IN SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS.



SINCE THE PEACE AGREEMENT OF 2003, THERE HAVE BEEN ONGOING ATTEMPTS TO DISARM THESE COMBATANTS, WITH LIMITED SUCCESS.





I DONT FEEL WELCOME HERE ANY MORE!

RETURNING HOME OFTEN MEANT RETURNING TO A STRANGE PLACE.

INSTEAD, YOUR HOME WAS WITH YOUR FELLOW FIGHTERS.

IF XAVIER WASNT SUCH A GREAT SOLDIER HE WOULD BE A WONDERFUL COOK!

HAHAHA HAHAHA!

I HAVE NO HOME, NO RESOURCES AND NO JOB, I'M HUNGRY RIGHT NOW. I MIGHT BE FORCED TO STEAL BREAD TO SURVIVE!



THEY RETURN TO A SOMETIMES HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT...



THIEF! THIEF! STOP THAT THIEF!

I REMEMBER YOU! WHEN YOU WERE A SOLDIER, YOU STOLE MY PIGS. I WANT JUSTICE!

AND ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR PAST MISDEEDS.



OF COURSE LIFE AS A COMBATANT WASN'T EASY EITHER.

'TO BE OR NOT TO BE?'

BUT THESE ARE NOT THE ONLY FACTORS, AND OVERALL DDR FAILED TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DECISION TO JOIN OR LEAVE AN ARMED GROUP.

COMBATANTS NAVIGATE BETWEEN DIFFERENT SPACES, BASED UPON A MULTITUDE OF INCENTIVES, INCLUDING ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES, STATUS, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS.

'I WANT TO PROTECT MY COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY!'

ME TOO!

ME TOO!

IN THE EARLY 1990S, MOBILIZATION IN RURAL AREAS WAS MOSTLY A COLLECTIVE EFFORT GUIDED BY CUSTOMARY AUTHORITIES.

NOWADAYS, PEOPLE JOIN AN ARMED GROUP BECAUSE OF COMPLEX INTERPLAY OF MOTIVES, SENTIMENTS AND INTERESTS, A LOT OF THEM ALSO INDIVIDUAL.

'I WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES!'

'I WANT TO PROTECT MY COMMUNITY!'

'I WANT TO BECOME RICH!'

DESPITE THE AMBITION TO PROTECT THE COMMUNITY, ARMED GROUPS NOW ARE OFTEN CONSIDERED A REFUGE TO DEAL WITH JOBLESSNESS AND A SPACE OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND SELF-REALIZATION.

SUFFERING WAS THERE, BUT ARMED GROUPS HAVE ALSO BEEN A SCHOOL TO ME. WE HAVE LEARNT TO BE PRUDENT BEFORE ACTING, WE HAVE LEARNT HOW TO LIVE IN GROUP WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS. THE SUFFERING WAS A SCHOOL TO US.'



I MISS THE GOOD OLD DAYS

A LOT OF COMBATANTS WHO LAID DOWN THEIR ARMS AND WENT THROUGH A DEMOBILIZATION PROGRAM WERE DISAPPOINTED WITH CIVILIAN LIFE.



WELCOME TO MY FIGHTING GROUP, I ASSURE YOU, YOU WILL BE VERY HAPPY HERE!

WHAT OFTEN HAPPENS IS THAT COMBATANTS SHIFT ARMED GROUPS (INCLUDING THE REGULAR ARMY) AND DEMOBILIZATION IS SIMPLY A PASSAGE TO FIND NEW OPPORTUNITIES ELSEWHERE.

A LIFE AS COMBATANT DOES NOT EXCLUDE TIES WITH CIVILIAN LIFE.

WHAT NEWS OF HOME COUSIN?



OFTEN, DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES ARE MOBILIZED TO STAY IN TOUCH, WHEN MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE IS LIMITED...

...AD HOC MESSENGERS, SUCH AS MOTORBIKE DRIVERS, TRADERS OR FRIENDS ARE ASKED TO PASS A MESSAGE.

CAN YOU TELL MY FAMILY I AM WELL?

SOME SOLDIERS SEND MONEY, OR ARE INVOLVED IN BUSINESS ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR FAMILIES. IN OTHER CASES, COMMANDERS TRADE WITH BUSINESSMEN FROM THEIR OWN COMMUNITY, OR RUN A BUSINESS LIKE MOTOR TAXIS OR HOUSES FOR RENT.

MY BANANA HARVEST IS READY FOR THE MARKET!

SOLDIERS SOMETIMES EVEN VISIT THEIR HOME VILLAGE WHEN MILITARY OPERATIONS ARE HAPPING CLOSE BY.

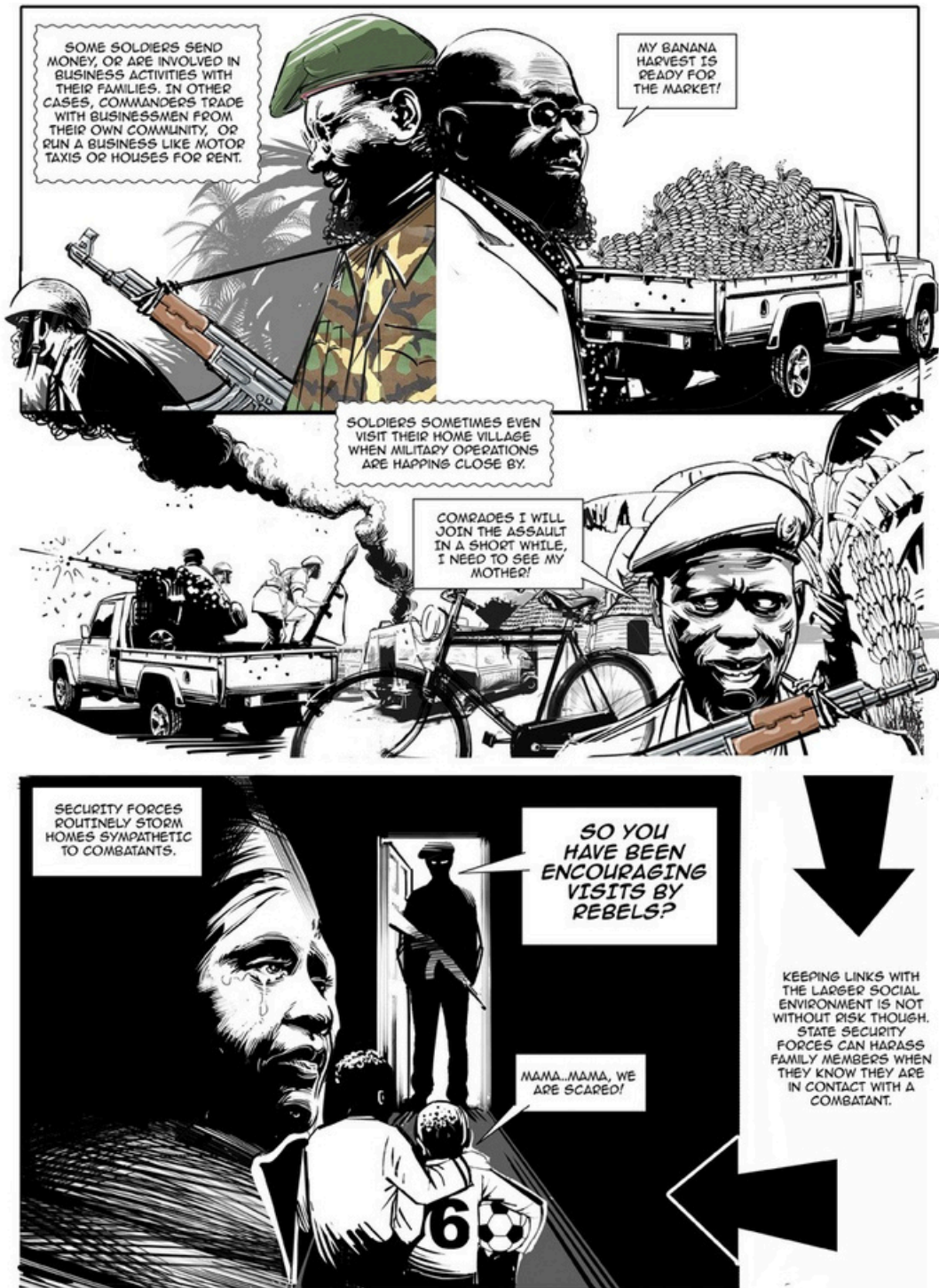
COMRADES I WILL JOIN THE ASSAULT IN A SHORT WHILE. I NEED TO SEE MY MOTHER!

SECURITY FORCES ROUTINELY STORM HOMES SYMPATHETIC TO COMBATANTS.

SO YOU HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGING VISITS BY REBELS?

MAMA...MAMA, WE ARE SCARED!

KEEPING LINKS WITH THE LARGER SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IS NOT WITHOUT RISK THOUGH. STATE SECURITY FORCES CAN HARASS FAMILY MEMBERS WHEN THEY KNOW THEY ARE IN CONTACT WITH A COMBATANT.



THE SIMPLE NARRATIVE OF DEMOBILIZATION OBSCURES THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE DECISIONS COMBATANTS MAKE TO JOIN ARMED GROUPS OR LEAVE THEM.

ALTHOUGH THEY PLAY A ROLE, INDIVIDUAL INCENTIVES GO BEYOND THE SEARCH FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ARMED GROUPS PLAYS VERY IMPORTANT ROLE.

WHEN REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS DO NOT COMPENSATE FOR WHAT IS LOST BY LEAVING AN ARMED GROUP..

..BUT LEADS TO A MARGINAL POSITION IN SOCIETY..

THE DECISION TO TAKE UP ARMS AGAIN IS ATTRACTIVE.

