

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Beginning

### ARRIVALS

I first arrived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in early 2006, deployed as a child protection adviser to the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission. Having just completed a posting in war-ravaged Liberia, I had already witnessed the impacts of terrible violence and destruction. While I had experienced the positive potential of international aid interventions in conflict zones, I had also been confronted by their failures. My faith in the capacity of an individual to “do good” in the world was slightly shaken, but I was not yet ready to surrender it. Still hopeful, I was intent on continuing my quest into the darkness of humanity, trusting that, in the end, light would be found, and good could be done.

If any country needed good, it was the DRC. It had just emerged from a devastating war fought on a continental scale. Millions of Congolese people had died directly and indirectly from the violence.<sup>1</sup> Following more than a century of misrule

and violent exploitation, the DRC was one of the poorest countries in the world. When I arrived there, life expectancy at birth was barely fifty years, while health care and other basic services were almost entirely absent throughout large parts of the country. Atrocious human development indicators belied the DRC's extreme natural resource wealth.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the DRC hosted the world's largest international peacekeeping mission.<sup>2</sup> My rapid indoctrination to UN peacekeeping started in Kinshasa, the vibrant but decrepit Congolese capital. My early days in the DRC were a blur of meetings, briefings, and security orientations, as I navigated the bewildering administration that churned behind high white-and-blue, barbed-wire-topped walls. On my third day in the country, I was informed that I would be dispatched to Kisangani to manage the UN mission's child protection mandate in the two eastern provinces of Orientale and Maniema. I took to peering at my freshly printed maps and to burying myself as deeply and quickly as I could into the available history of eastern DRC.

Through this early orientation, I learned that the city of Kisangani, nestled in the vastness of the Congo Basin forest, had been administratively established in 1883 as a trading hub under Belgium's King Leopold II. Before independence from Belgium in 1960, Kisangani had served as a center of Patrice Lumumba's anticolonial resistance movement. In 1964, the Simba rebellion against the Western-supported government in Kinshasa—one of the many Cold War transpositions on the African continent—based its military operations out of Kisangani, drawing on reserves of soldiers and mercenaries of all nations and presaging the entrenched internationalism of Congolese wars. In the post-Cold War era, Kisangani would again witness catastrophic

violence. During the 1996–2003 wars—what Gérard Prunier would term “Africa’s World War”—thousands of civilians perished as Uganda and Rwanda fought for control of the lucrative eastern region.<sup>3</sup> The UN peacekeeping mission that I had just joined was still endeavoring to piece the country back together after those wars.

It did not take me long to appreciate how such a violent history becomes manifest in the present. In places so destroyed by war, so cut off from any prospect of economic development, people were left to fend for themselves as services and support systems decayed all around them. With their poverty constantly closing in, people had little recourse but to express fury. Quick eruptions of mob violence occurred regularly in Kisangani. More than once, John—my long-suffering, devoted, and now departed Congolese colleague—would save me from a rock-throwing crowd poised to hijack any passing white UN Land Cruiser, shouting at me to close my window, lock my door, and drive through the crowd or make a quick U-turn to escape.

By 2006, the front lines of conflict had at last receded from Kisangani’s sprawling streets. In their place, urban misery had encroached, appropriating any hope for peace and bringing chronic desolation. Destroyed by the war and asphyxiated by the absence of infrastructure that could sustain legitimate trade, the local economy of Kisangani was devastated. Consequently, the social supports that had held life together so precariously during the many decades of extreme hardship were now barely holding on.

One obvious indicator of this failing social system was the rapidly rising population of street children. By 2006, their numbers in Kisangani had swelled, as children living in households on the furthest edges of precarity were pushed out of their homes,

blamed by adults for all possible household hardships, from AIDS to the breakdown of families, to the suffocating impossibility of meeting daily survival needs. With no recourse but to their own capacities to navigate the streets of Kisangani, these children would become an important focus of my child protection efforts there. I followed them into the depths of postwar misery, where accusations of modern witchcraft flourished. I convened meetings with parents, pastors, and community leaders; organized radio awareness campaigns; mobilized lawyers; and conducted countless visits to church compounds where extreme torture was being sold as exorcism by profiteering pastors.

I exhausted all available possibilities to convince those I met that children must not be sacrificed in reaction to all that had come before them. But the tides had long since risen, and I could not help these children. In my personal journal, I documented one of uncounted moments of hopelessness I confronted in the streets of Kisangani:

19 November 2006: Sunday night. I light a candle in honour of La Vie, the corpse of the boy we uncovered this morning. His body, mutilated by the black-gray scars of a hot iron, was already starting to swell in the heat of the midmorning sun. How old had he been? Maybe seventeen? No one knew. A child of the street, mourned in trembling wails by his street sisters, by the angry tears and clenched fists of his street brothers—to everyone else, his was a life worth nothing. Shuttling between the morgue, the mayor, the funeral procession, through the Kisangani streets down to the river, we laid his body in a pirogue to cross the river Congo—to the home of a father who had so long ago abandoned his son—to its final resting place.

Within me, such poverty and helplessness transformed into anger and an overwhelming sense of defeat. My time in Kisangani was hot and hard and left me without any feeling of satisfaction in a

job well done. But before these grim expressions of humanity's hardship could extinguish what was left of my faith, UN human resources took over. I was to be urgently redeployed to Goma, where emergency child protection support was needed in response to the resurging conflict there.

#### DOCUMENTING VIOLENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

My first glimpse of North Kivu came through the small, round window of an Antonov aircraft. We landed with a jarring bump, not far from the active Nyiragongo volcano. A rainstorm had just passed, and the mist rose from the warm earth in a prism of late afternoon sunlight. The erupting landscape of Goma was unlike any place I had ever been. Its penetrating natural beauty had—I would learn—humbling power over life and death. A land of extremes, the Kivus would reveal to me the very worst and the very best of the human experience. There, I would learn the limits of my own capacity.

Minutes later, I arrived at the UN base, just across the street from the airport. The tension and uncertainty were palpable; it was 22 November 2006, and Goma was very close to being seized by the current main rebel force. Although various peace deals had been negotiated to end the war at a national level by 2003, the incredible natural resource wealth of the Kivus meant that there remained too much to gain from conflict and too much to lose from peace. The logics of violence thus continued to govern, as armed groups served local, national, regional, and, above all, commercial interests, while the languishing population fled, submitted, and sank deeper into its misery.

Walking across the volcanic gravel toward my assigned container-cum-office, I was met by Luis, the head of the UN human

rights section, as he emerged from his dust-covered Land Cruiser.<sup>4</sup> He and his team of human rights officers were just arriving from the small town of Rutshuru, where they had traveled to document a recent massacre. Exhaustion grayed their faces, but they incarnated a bound-up energy and a clear-sighted sense of purpose. “Ah, Claudia! Welcome to Goma. We’re glad you’re here.” Luis took my hand in his with warmth, then continued in his next breath: “We’re just back. It was horrific. Women, head first in latrines, stomachs lacerated. We need to go write this up. Let’s talk later?”

I had arrived in Goma. Like the colleagues I had just met, I would very soon become mired in the dark extremes of human possibilities. My own work would focus on grave human rights abuses against children. The gruesome potential of what people can do to each other would become the substance of my days. The suffering and pain I would witness were beyond anything I had ever fathomed. I would document these atrocities until late at night, then send my reports on to Kinshasa. Sometimes, some of the details I had written would be included in the daily dispatches to New York, to be read as part of a morning briefing over coffee.

I quickly immersed myself in the pulsing beat of the Kivus, and it was only a matter of days before I was consumed by the same agitation, rage, and focus that I had sensed in my first meeting with Luis. I became absorbed in the terribleness of it all. There was no time to think, only to react, to decry, to move faster, to try to stanch the endless flow of abuses. Another journal entry, written two months after my arrival in Goma:

19 January 2007: How to wash away the pain? Her tears? The memory of her smell, a rank mix of blood, urine, semen. The odor of her fear that still hangs everywhere around me—I can taste it. Helpless

but trying to help, I bring her to the hospital, and finally leave her there. Later, I recount this day to [my supervisor] in Kinshasa over the phone. She hears and advises, and then suggests that I take a shower once home, “not a bath. You cannot sit in this,” she says. “You must wash this day off so that you can keep going.”

Of course, my supervisor knew that such feelings never wash off, not really, that the only way to continue to do this kind of work is to be fully steeped in it, to embody it, to work harder and more extremely, to push all possible limits.

My days in Goma were incredibly intense, but also uniquely fulfilling. Working in a zone of active conflict made every action—and nonaction—seem consequential. Each day was so full of new emergencies: forced child recruitment to armed groups, sexual violence, abductions. Each violation was to be investigated, referred, then documented. The frenetic energy made it feel like I was doing something, that my actions were making a difference.

But even as I pushed through each day, each report, something began to nag at my conscience. My professional title was child protection adviser, yet I was increasingly unable to deny just how little “protection” I was providing. I could not stop the terrible acts of violence, only document them. I could advocate and follow up, but I could not prevent the abuses from happening in the first place. While I understood on a conceptual level that there was a role to be played in making such terrible abuses known to the wider world in the hopes that this knowledge might one day generate enough political will to end them, I was mostly overwhelmed by a sense of defeat. I often felt like an accountant, enumerating violences, counting horrors that I could do nothing to stop. I held on to a belief that writing down this human suffering would somehow contribute to its end.

Later, I would read the work of political economist David Keen, who described the futile and dehumanizing act of amassing “catalogues of human rights abuses” and who noted the inconsequential change that usually results.<sup>5</sup>

My discomfort grew, and once I allowed myself to examine my unease more deeply, I began to understand that there was something wrong about the fight in which I was engaged. The stark contradiction between the absolutist discourse of “inalienable rights” and the daily reality of abuse experienced by most people became too much for me to ignore. The more carefully I listened, the more I could hear the historical depth, political complexity, and global interdependence of the violence against which I was so desperately trying to protect children.

Yet in a context of “humanitarian emergency” and “rapid response,” there was no time for reflection, for questioning, or for understanding. There was no space for complexity. Another journal entry, a month later:

20 February 2007: Last night, shots fired off again, this time in quick succession, somewhere very nearby. Silence. I turned off my light, then laid, taut in attention, ready to flee, white currents pulsing in the arches of my feet. I searched the shadows then realized that it's the shadows I don't know enough, that I must learn to know if I am to survive here. Sound, sight, then smell. . . . I could smell another body, but then nothing, then realized it was the smell of my fear, clad in fetid army green, unwashed and overused and dangerously powerless. Finally, eventually, I fell asleep, and now I wake to this new day, not with courage, but exhaustion. I'm not on solid ground anymore. Nothing is as it first seems.

Even as the battles continued to wage never very far away, I was reasonably safe. Just like the thousands of privileged others endeavoring to “do good” in the DRC, I lived behind high walls,

was escorted and secured. Unlike the millions of Congolese who welcomed us, we could escape when the situation became too difficult or too compromised.

#### LEAVING, RETURNING

Eventually it was time for me to leave, but even as I boarded my outbound flight from Kinshasa, I was already planning my return. I was heading to London, where I would begin doctoral research under the supervision of Dr. Zoë Marriage at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Zoë quickly became my guiding light, and with her I began sorting through my experiences in the DRC, trying to make some theoretical sense out of what I had seen and lived. Many of my early hours with Zoë involved her listening deeply and questioning patiently. From my mind-set of impassioned reactivity—This is terrible! We must do something!—she steered me toward a more reflective mode that would instead wonder: Interesting, why does this keep happening?

I considered the questions I wanted to answer and then elaborated the research methods that would guide my fieldwork. I immersed myself in the literatures of anthropology, political economy, psychology, and sociology as they related to violence across time and geographic space. I was influenced especially by the ethnographic work of Philippe Bourgois, who showed through his research—decades earlier and continents away—that violence does not simply disappear, is not merely survived, but is transformed and incorporated into our ways of perceiving, being in, and re-creating the world.<sup>6</sup> Eventually I decided that the goal of my research would be to understand young people's experiences not just of the terrible violences of war but also of their

everydays, of their processes of coping and ways of simply getting on with life, despite the violence everywhere around them.

Over the course of the following decade, I would return to the DRC in varying professional and research capacities. In 2009, I served with the UN Security Council–mandated Group of Experts on the DRC to support investigations into grave human rights violations.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in late 2009, my focus turned to ethnographic research with young people. I alternated between periods of fieldwork as a student and—to pay for my studies—as a researcher commissioned by various international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including Save the Children UK, War Child Holland and War Child UK, and Oxfam GB. Later, I would travel to the DRC as a researcher with the Small Arms Survey, and then for the USAID–Education in Crisis and Conflict Network.

Throughout, I relied primarily on qualitative research methods, including interviews, group discussions, and participant observation. My priority was to ensure that the research could be safely conducted while creating as few risks as possible to my research participants and collaborators. In those years foreign researchers were rarely targeted or attacked in the DRC (regrettably, this is no longer the case), yet the participants or the individuals supporting me could have been threatened. I carefully weighed the risks and anticipated harms involved with the research and anchored my methods not only in the Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth but also in international child protection standards and guidelines specific to conducting research with children in contexts of violent conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Between 2006 and 2016, approximately two thousand people directly informed this research.<sup>9</sup> They came from villages and

cities throughout the Kivus, Orientale, or Maniema or else lived in Kinshasa and neighboring Rwanda. They included young people, their parents, local leaders, religious actors, military commanders, demobilized soldiers, government authorities, and my professional colleagues. These individuals were the vital force that drove my research; their narratives form the cornerstone of this book.

My extended period of fieldwork and repeat visits to the DRC provided me the opportunity to conduct truly grounded research. Multiple phases of fieldwork spread over several years allowed me to fully engage with the relevant theoretical literatures across disciplines and to then weave this theory back into the experiences of life in the DRC. Some of my young Congolese research participants were eager to engage with and challenge the concepts and theoretical constructs that I would bring back to them. As such, this book documents an iterative and organic process of theory influencing my understanding of violence influencing my engagement with theory, and on it continues.<sup>10</sup>

The insights and knowledge provided by my Congolese research participants continue to infuse my ongoing work with young people far beyond the DRC. My theoretical engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's law of conservation of violence—which examines how violence is reproduced through social, political, economic, cultural, and historic structures—influences my current research with young people not only in other conflict settings but also on the margins of European society today.<sup>11</sup> By tracing trajectories of violence, and by considering the pathways through which violence is conserved by society and by individuals, it becomes possible to see how, for example, ongoing conflict and adversity lead to migration outflows, which lead to

populist fear-based political rhetoric in destination countries, which leads to exclusion, which leads to deeper inequalities, which lead to continuing violence. And on it can go without end.

#### TRANSFORMING VIOLENCE?

Like electricity, violence follows the path of least resistance, transmitted not only in the relationships between people and their immediate social structures, from one person to the next, from one generation to the next, but also through the global economic systems in which we are all embedded. According to Bourdieu, as long as the social, political, and economic structures that are conducive to violence remain in place, violence will be conserved. However, Bourdieu's metaphor also offers us the conceptual possibility of a different kind of outcome. If electricity can be transformed, then what would be the individual, social, political, and economic changes required to transform the structures perpetuating such terrible human suffering toward ends that are peaceful, dignified, and humane?

It is to contribute to such processes of transformation that I have written this book. My initial aim had been to share with global audiences—to “make explicit”—the experiences of young Congolese people so that others might also learn from and be inspired by their strength, courage, and capacities to survive.<sup>12</sup> However, the case study of the DRC also presents empirical evidence on how good-willed international interventions are not adequately responding to the needs of people they claim—indeed exist—to protect. The narratives in this book elucidate some of the individual and social experiences with and impacts of international interventions. They beg reflection on the possibility that such interventions may be contributing to greater

harms in the DRC by obscuring the complexities and rootedness of violence. Such obscuration—clad in aid projects and donor funding appeals—precludes the clear analyses and effective collective action that would be needed to deconstruct the systemic inequality and injustice that perpetuate violence in the DRC and beyond.

I am aware that such a critique is hazardous in an era when political cynicism is deepening and when populist rhetoric is increasingly used to mobilize fear and to attribute blame for adversity and hardship. Providing evidence of the failures of current international protection efforts may risk buttressing the political proponents of harsher and more insular policies. Yet, as taught by the eighth-century Buddhist scholar Shantideva, ours is an interdependent existence—any of the most pressing issues facing our world today serve as testimony to this old wisdom. It is increasingly undeniable that sooner or later we will face the consequences of our actions and nonactions in perpetuating or transforming violence.

Rather than pandering to cynical interests, this book is intended as an offering to honest debate and critical reflection among the researchers, students, practitioners, and policy makers who are concerned with—and in many cases devoting their lives to—redressing the global injustices of our times. In anticipation of possible frustration among readers, I disclaim from the outset that this book does not offer solutions to end violence in the DRC. As the following chapters will show, the DRC has been the “beneficiary” of many decades of exogenously imposed “solutions.” Based on my experience, the inefficacy of international protection responses is at least in part due to the implementation of simple and technical responses that insufficiently account for, or even understand, the historical depths of violence, its pervasiveness

throughout Congolese society, and its intimate linkage and interdependence with the global economic and political system.

As the narratives presented here will show, current approaches to addressing violence in the DRC are not working or at least are not producing the necessary positive results commensurate to the energy and resources expended. In some cases, they are leading to negative distortionary effects; for just two examples: the global outcry about militarized sexual violence has led to a warping of the Congolese justice system and the valorization of women as victims, while the international ban on conflict minerals has also led to unintended consequences, increasing hardships for the artisanal miners digging for their daily survival.<sup>13</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are the massive global development processes that aspire to lofty ideals and the achievement of measurable targets, yet which—despite the billions of dollars invested in them each year—have changed very little, if anything, in the daily lives of the vast majority of the Congolese population.

It is also important to note that this book is not intended as an academic text. While it builds on my doctoral dissertation and years of applied research, my aim has been to make it accessible to a broad audience. This is in line with the mission of the California Series in Public Anthropology, which is to increase understanding and knowledge of major public issues.<sup>14</sup> For readers interested in the theoretical foundations on which this book has been based, or for deeper knowledge about the DRC, references are clearly indicated in the endnotes and bibliography.

This book is my personal story, and I share it with the hope that it may contribute to the efforts of the many thousands of highly committed and caring protection actors toiling to redress the dysfunctions and injustices of the world, giving them the

space to pause and to reflect. By questioning the benevolent assumptions and self-evident truths that shroud existing international aid approaches, protection actors may be encouraged to probe the jarring dissonance that exists in the spaces between proclaimed universal rights and the lived experiences of so many hundreds of millions of people today. Renewed reflexive attention on the concept of “do no harm” can support a critical examination of how protection efforts might be inadvertently obscuring the global structures that perpetuate violence.<sup>15</sup> Such reflection might also illuminate the functions that such obscuration may serve.<sup>16</sup> It is through such processes of honest questioning that humanitarian energies may become more usefully channeled toward truly transformative ends.

This book is divided into seven chapters that roughly sketch the trajectory of my own journey into the DRC. Chapter 2 begins with an account of my early years working on the issue of children associated with armed groups. The chapter then takes a historical perspective of the founding violence of the Congolese state, and how these structural violences laid the foundations for the continuing militarized conflict in the Kivus today. Expanding upon Bourdieu’s law of conservation of violence, the chapter ends by looking at the mechanisms through which violence is conserved, including through politically expedient reliance on identity-based discourses to mobilize fear and hate, themes that will be taken up again later in the book.

The third chapter deepens the exploration of young people’s daily lives in the Kivus. Through testimonies of coping and survival, the chapter bears witness to the capacity of young people to endure the unrelenting burden of entrenched poverty and introduces the concept of psychological resilience, considering its relevance in the resource-poor and socially fragmented

Congolese context. It demonstrates how young people have little choice but to submit to violence in the hopes of surviving it, and thus yield to continued future violence.

Chapter 4 considers how violence is embodied. It problematizes the international focus on militarized “rape as a weapon of war” and considers the negative impact of such international attention. The discussion then turns to other expressions of sexual violence in the DRC and the negative impacts that accompany the selective addressing of only some manifestations of violence. After considering existing gender relations, and how the international focus on militarized sexual violence contributes to exacerbating existing gender inequalities, the chapter closes with a discussion of how structural violence manifests in the bodies of young girls who have few options for survival other than to engage in transactional sex.

The fifth chapter traces the pathways of survival that many young people in the DRC travel each day. Drawing on the sociological understandings of tactical agency, this chapter examines how traditional, family-based support networks have been so weakened by structural violence as to no longer be able to offer the minimum standards of care for their children. It also offers new perspectives on patronage relationships from the view of the “client,” whose portrayal of weakness is a tactical choice that both facilitates survival and reinforces weakness, further conserving the structural violences that are increasingly difficult to escape.

Meanings of violence are explored in chapter 6, which considers how processes of meaning attribution help people to cope with unending violence. The chapter highlights the paradox of how identity-based discourses that fuel the conflict in the Kivus are also psychologically helpful in coping processes. In contrast,

despite the generalized conditions of lost hope, this chapter documents the narratives of young mothers and older siblings who reveal how caring for children and younger siblings can reignite aspirations and hope for a better future. This chapter considers the processes through which young people's visions of themselves and their aspirations continue to be defined by violence.

Chapter 7 focuses on international approaches to violence in the DRC. It begins by problematizing international protection interventions, highlighting the dissonance between aspirational international norms and lived experiences of violence in the DRC. It critiques the persisting "aid illusion" in the international humanitarian system and strongly argues that more aid money will not end ongoing violence in the DRC. The discussion turns briefly to the global political economy and how it interacts with and fuels violent conflict in the DRC. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how international aid interventions could be reconceived in ways that might do less harm. It suggests that the focus on "doing good" might be more effectively exercised closer to home, with citizens in the global North engaging their political agency to shift the prevailing paradigms of power and inequality that contribute to the conservation of violence in the DRC and beyond.