

SLEEPING THROUGH THE SLAUGHTER

By Jessica Hatcher, Photos: Phil Moore



In the last few months, I've spent time in the Democratic Republic of Congo where I used an embarrassing screw-up by one of the world's most publicly accountable organisations as a bargaining tool to get a story. A mistake by the United Nations means I saw something I shouldn't have*, and when I agreed to agree it never happened, they reluctantly allowed me to join a massacre investigation mission in the most damaged part of what is, if their own statistics are to be trusted, the most damaged country in the world.

I was to accompany a three-person Human Rights Team into one of the remotest parts of the Masisi district in Eastern DRC. I was expecting something like the cast of *The Matrix*, but what I got was a Head of Mission who wore Prada loafers, a spherical Congolese lady with a kind smile and another guy who wore a Thailand tourist T-shirt and fell asleep all the time. The UN histrionics surrounding our departure made it seem like we'd be spat out into an as yet unseen sequel of the Hollywood blockbuster, but in truth, we were middle-class happy campers on holiday.



The Human Rights Team were travelling to Katoyi Village from the provincial capital Goma to find evidence that a Congolese group called the Raia Mutomboki had spent the last month slaughtering more than 200 local villagers with machetes and spears.

Originally, the Raia Mutomboki – quaintly described by the *New York Times* as the "angry villagers" – had formed to defend the native Congolese population from the Rwandan FDLR militia. (You might

recognise that acronym from **The VICE Guide to Congo** – they're the guys who were exiled from their home country when an old regime they'd helped commit genocide was overthrown.) But at some point the Mutomboki decided to take matters into their own hands, and have become just as proactively bloodthirsty as the Hutu FDLR. In the attacks the Human Rights Team were there to investigate, the Mutomboki had allegedly started targeting anyone they heard speaking the Rwandan language Kinyarwanda, assuming them to be Hutu regardless of their tribe or ethnicity. Prior to our departure, I was told that no one – journalists, humanitarians, infantry with helicopter gunships – had been able to access the villages to confirm any of this yet. Which, if you know the size of the UN's mission in Congo, begs the question: Why the hell not?



The mission in Congo (acronym: MONUSCO, hashtag: #MONUSELESS) is the largest and most expensive UN operation in the world. It has some 20,000 military personnel there, at a cost of nearly \$1.4 billion per year. As such, you'd think they might be on top of things, but whenever a massacre takes place on their watch, the peacekeepers – who've been there since 1999 – have to deal with accusations of uselessness.

As our Oryx helicopter touched down in Katoyi village, me perched on the Head of Mission's crate of claret select, I caught my first glimpse of the temporary MONUSCO military base the Human Rights Team would operate from. Thirty-six Uruguayan peacekeepers were living there under canvas, in a circular barbed-wire pen the size of a football pitch. Though many of them said they hated it, being a "peacekeeper" for the international community paid a lot better than the \$700-a-month they'd bank back home.

As the platoon commander explained to me, they get caught between a rock and a hard place. "We all have families back home. I want us to get out there, but if it's not safe I have to make the right decision for everyone concerned." By "out there", he meant the villages where these massacres are reportedly taking place.



During my time there, hundreds of villagers arrived at Katoyi, bringing with them stories that only served to compound the urgency of the UN's response. Patrick Borama, a slight 26-year-old from a village nearby, described the Raia Mutomboki as a group of semi-naked young Pucks who stormed into his village screaming their intention to kill all Kinyarwanda speakers. They wore foliage and attacked using machetes, spears and "some machine guns".

Patrick made it to the sanctuary of the forest alive, but his sister had a bullet in the back as she fled, while his nephews were gutted with machetes. His mother had a knife in her chest. Patrick knows this because he went back a week later to bury their disintegrating corpses.



The Katoyi police commissioner showed us photographs of decapitated women and children on his phone. His blithe commentary made for a sinister slideshow. "Ah yes, here's another – a machete in the head," he'd say. The last attack he described had taken place one week previous, with between 12 to 15 people losing their lives. The Head of Mission wasted no time. We would leave tomorrow at 6AM, he said, eyes shining at the prospect of mass graves. The sleepy guy had nodded off. Work done, the Head of Mission cracked open his box of wine.

At 4PM, the police commissioner showed up again, this time with two shy, young men who had just escaped an attack a few kilometres away – the closest yet. They couldn't say how many people were killed – they didn't hang around to find out – but saw the usual array of machetes, guns and spears wielded by men killing Rwandaphones.



This was good, I thought, because tomorrow we would be able to confirm it. Except – oh, no, the expedition was cancelled because these murderous Robin Goodfellows might still be around, and that might make it dangerous. MONUSCO and the Human Rights Team had a point, but I failed to understand why the five-hour hike through unknown forest that we'd originally planned might have been any less dangerous. Cue more red wine.

As I considered the limitations of this "mission", my Uruguayan compadres fed me Play-Doh scented long-life biscuits and South American maté tea. The doctor said the only good thing about the ration packs the UN provides is that they paralyse the bowel – no one enjoys a movement in a portaloo shared by 40 men.



That night, Uruguay played arch rivals Venezuela in a World Cup qualifier. The two-way radio was rigged to deliver live commentary to one poor man's camp bed; it strained under the weight of the whole platoon. I fell asleep to the nostalgic sound of grown men emoting over sport, and in the morning was told I'd missed a stunner.

In the 85th minute, with Uruguay leading 1-0, Venezuela scored the equaliser. The narcoleptic UN Human Rights Team member, clearly on high alert, had jumped like an electrocuted cartoon from his fireside seat and run to the safe bosom of the platoon – he had confused the sound of men's hopes dashed with that of the Mutomboki coming to get him in his sleep.

Trussed in flak-jackets and topped with blue helmets, the time had come to deploy to the Katoyi village chief. I learned two things on the way. One, Prada loafers, as demonstrated by the Head of Mission, are not good on slippery terrain. Two, the chief had a letter signed by the Mutomboki stating their manifesto.

The letter was written in Swahili and surprisingly cordial. "I greet you in peace," it said. "We are informing you of the war by Raia Mutomboki against FDLR to go back home to Rwanda... Based on the information we have, you are building a camp for them... We have a plan to come there and see if they are there. If they are there, encourage the Congolese to move away from the Hutus." It was a barely veiled threat towards the Hutus living in Katoyi. Bullet-points listed murder, rape and looting amongst the Rwandans' evil deeds. Two particularly bigoted bible verses endorsed the rationale. The chief also had a list of 120 people killed between the 17th and the 22nd of May by the Mutomboki – 80 percent were women and children. In the next few days, I gathered statements that attested to many more. In Kahunde, at least 15 dead. Marembo, 20. Bitoyi, more. "They were trying to kill all the Kinyarwanda speakers in all the villages," a Congolese Hutu told me, shielding a seeping gunshot wound on his right arm.



Then the chief revealed another document: a handwritten command structure for the Raia Mutomboki. The chief suggested Rwanda was arming the Mutomboki, a theory that, if proven, would fuel the international row over an allegedly Rwanda-backed uprising led by rebels that has now seized control of much of the province. It would suggest Rwandan complicity in the mass murder of Hutu people who largely originate from within its borders.

"Nothing is what it seems in Congo," cautioned a sage Uruguayan.

The words "nothing is what it seems" rang in my ears when a pink-cheeked red-head with curls and curves announced her arrival at the base. "How did you get here?" the platoon commander asked suspiciously, while I eavesdropped. "Motorbike," she said. MONUSCO had presented getting here as a Mission Impossible – "There are no roads to Katoyi," they said, just a helicopter or five-day hike. But here was this cute British chick, and – come to think of it – I'd seen a number of NGOs arrive and depart in wholly-unmodified 4x4s.

When another helicopter landed, bringing the deputy brigade commander for a strategy meeting, the sole portaloos surrendered to the power of the rotors blades and extended its welcome by shedding

all four walls to reveal a free-standing bowl that looked almost poetic in the morning mist. The commander had but one pressing question: "Have you been able to confirm these massacres?" The platoon commander summed up the military's position. From a helicopter, he had seen only life as normal. "We have not been able to reach the villages. The reports are hearsay," he said. The Head of Mission cut in with a defence of his team's position. "We came to verify. We talked to 45 people... separately and confidentially," he said. When pushed to give a figure, he estimated at least 200 dead.

"But have you seen anything with your own eyes?" asked the commander. The Human Rights Team had conducted a four-day investigation from plastic patio chairs in the centre of the base, herding witnesses in and out like cattle. Now it was time to go home, their findings constituted a success, and would be written up with exactitude to produce an internal report based on "hearsay".



The trouble with investigations like this in Congo is that decades of bloodshed and humanitarian assistance have so confused the natural order of things that it can be near-impossible to know what's what. If a group of Congolese took up jogging around here, they could well displace a proportion of the populace without trying; people have learned to expect massacres and rapes when they see running men, and at the first sign of war they duly flee.

Dinner on the last night was tuna and spaghetti cooked in drinking chocolate, thanks to an administrative error by photographer Phil. it was time to go home. The mission had not been wholly unsuccessful: three FDLR defectors evacuated back to Goma with us, with their seven children and three wives, signing up for a rehabilitation scheme.

As the helicopter lurched into flight, the girls searched out our hands and knees for tactile reassurance, squeaking and gripping like a vice. The men sat with unreadable expressions at the back of the hold. As we flew over Goma the woman opposite me, a wife and mother, looked impossibly sad, staring out of the window at Lake Kivu shining blue and silver in the morning light. As I glimpsed the manicured lawns and stuccoed walls of President Kabila's opulent lakeside residence, I was overwhelmed by a sense of second-hand moral outrage on behalf of these people. In failing to establish the truth when it gets rough, are we, the international community, failing these people as much as those elected to lead them? In the better-schooled words of Oxfam policy wonk and Congo expert Samuel Dixon: "It is unacceptable that violence in Congo goes unstopped and under-reported. While world leaders rightly condemn Syrian massacres, the human tragedies happening in Congo are hidden at best, ignored at worst".

While my experiences of the UN mission in Congo weren't wholly negative, my impression is that perhaps it's not working as hard or as boldly as it could to lead Congo out of the mire.

**If you're still wondering about that thing I saw that I shouldn't have, don't, it wasn't even that interesting.*

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