THE CONGO TEST

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"There is but one solution—to restore the unity of the international community," Dominique de Villepin, the French foreign minister, announced last week on French radio just hours before the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1483, rescinding economic sanctions against Iraq. Given France's steadfast opposition to the invasion of Iraq, de Villepin insisted that the U.N. vote should not be understood as bestowing retroactive legitimacy on the American-led war. But, by granting the Anglo-American occupying forces a virtually unfettered dispensation over Iraq—and its oil wells—for the foreseeable future, that is exactly what the resolution does. For the Bush Administration, then, the resolution was a diplomatic triumph, and de Villepin was at pains to argue that his government's accession to it was not, by the same token, an admission of defeat. "What's really at stake here is to see to it that the U.N. is restored," he said. To be sure, he added, "There are two visions of the world"—the multilateralist, U.N.-centered vision of collective security under international law touted by France, and the unilateralist, imperial vision represented by the United States—"but we need to work together." So one hand washes the other, and, de Villepin said, "The U.N. is back."

Not so fast, Monsieur. Certainly the cessation of hostilities at the Security Council and the patching up of the ruptured transatlantic alliance merits a brief international sigh of relief. But the measure of the U.N.'s vitality will not be taken in Iraq. The true test lies in those vexed areas of the world that hold no compelling strategic or economic interest for the United States or for any of the other veto-wielding members of the Security Council. Most immediately, the U.N. is facing that test in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where seven hundred poorly armed U.N. peacekeepers in the northeastern Ituri region have watched helplessly over the past few weeks as massacres by tribal militias have filled graves with fresh corpses at about the same clip that the dead of Saddam Hussein's reign of terror have been exhumed in Iraq.

Accounts of the horror in Ituri have the quality of Hieronymus Bosch's grotesque tableaux of apocalypse: torched villages; macheted babies in the streets; stoned child warriors indulging in cannibalism and draping themselves with the entrails of their victims; peacekeepers—mostly Uruguayans—using their guns only to drive off waves of frantic civilians seeking refuge in their already overflowing compound; a quarter of a million people in frenzied flight from their homes. For nearly five years, such suffering has plagued much of the eastern Congo along the tangled battle lines of warring political and tribal factions, stirred up and spurred on by the occupying armies of neighboring Rwanda and Uganda. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese have been killed in the fighting, and many more have died as a consequence of the displacement, disease, and hunger that attend it. By any measure, Congo is one of the most hellish places on earth, and of all the hells within that hell Ituri province has come to be known as the most infernal.

The trouble in Ituri was fostered during five years of occupation by the Ugandan Army, which sought to assert control over the mineral-rich region by recklessly arming proxy militias of rival tribal groups. When massacres began in and around the provincial capital

of Bunia, in the summer of 1999, Uganda restored a semblance of order. As this pattern repeated itself, tens of thousands of civilians were killed, and Human Rights Watch described the Ugandans as arsonists masquerading as firemen. Last December, when Congo's latest peace deal set a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces, everyone in Ituri predicted a bloodbath. Toward the end of April, the U.N. sent in the Uruguayans, but without the capacity to protect civilians, or even themselves. (Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, mocked the peacekeepers as "dangerous tourists.") The pullout came on May 6th, and, sure enough, the killing began at once, with one tribal militia overrunning Bunia, only to be driven out by another, before a tentative ceasefire was established, allowing the U.N. blue-helmets to begin counting the dead. By the end of last week, that ceasefire was breaking down.

"We've been sending messages every day to New York that this was going to happen, that we need more troops," the French commander of the U.N. peacekeepers told a reporter. "Nothing was done." This has become a routine scenario: massacres foretold, warnings ignored, slaughter erupting under the noses of U.N. forces with useless mandates. The mutilated remains of two peacekeepers were found in Bunia last week, and the commander, who has given shelter to some thirteen thousand civilians, was slashed with a machete at the gates of his compound. As Bunia burned, the U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan—haunted by his failure to heed warnings of the impending genocide in Rwanda in 1994—sent a letter to the Security Council asking its members for a "rapid reaction force" to pacify the region. France, which is also tainted by complicity in the Rwandan slaughter, has said it can muster troops to maintain order until the U.N. can field a plausible force, but only on the condition that other nations join in. At least five governments have said they would consider contributing to a French-led operation. The Bush Administration has expressed support for the project but has refused to commit any troops to it.

During one of the 2000 Presidential debates, the moderator, Jim Lehrer, raised the issue of Rwanda. "There was no U.S. intervention," he said. Then he asked George W. Bush, "Was that a mistake?" In a rare show of solidarity with the Clinton White House, Bush answered, "I think the Administration did the right thing in that case. I do. It was a horrible situation. No one liked to see it on our—you know, on our TV screens. But . . . they made the right decision not to send U.S. troops into Rwanda." In the run-up to the Iraq war, it appeared that Bush had changed his mind. Speaking on Al Jazeera television, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice dismissed the U.N.'s opposition to the invasion of Iraq by reminding her interviewer, "The U.N. Security Council could not act when in Rwanda there was a genocide that cost almost a million lives. There was a very poignant statement by the President of Rwanda recently when he said sometimes the Security Council is not right when it does not act. President Bush believes that, too." And, lest the mantle of the memory of Rwanda's dead be wasted on only Arab audiences, the White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer, struck the same note: "From a moral point of view, as the world witnessed in Rwanda . . . the U.N. Security Council will have failed to act once again." The disingenuousness of these remarks lies, of course, in the fact that it was the United States that prevented the Security Council from acting during the Rwandan genocide, even though no American troops were ever involved or required for the U.N. force there.

As Dominique de Villepin observed, the international order hangs suspended these days between two competing visions, each of which justifies itself by pointing to the limitations, failures, and abuses of the other. The people of Ituri couldn't care less about those debates, as they plead for salvation. It is for such people and such places—places that nobody in what Kofi Annan likes to call "governments with capacity" can find any political grounds to care about—that the U.N.'s system of international humanitarian law matters most. The idea behind that system is that common humanity ought to be reason enough to take an interest in preventing such terrors as extermination campaigns. And the premise behind that idea is that, while action may be costly, the price of inaction must finally be greater. But is that really how the world works? What if the ultimate horror of the Congo nightmare is that there is no price for ignoring it?

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