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ROADBLOCK ETHNOGRAPHY: NEGOTIATING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS IN ITURI, EASTERN DR CONGO, 1999–2004

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This article focuses on the negotiation skills of Ituri-based Congolese relief workers in their dealings with roadblock militias. The testimonies I collected highlight the importance of socio-cultural and political awareness during relief work induced by conflict. It is hoped that their availability will stimulate discussion within the humanitarian community and thus help improve future access policies. The article demonstrates that relief workers in conflict zones do not (and cannot) shed their ethnic identities; that instead they accept that a perceived ethnic identity brings strategic advantages as well as disadvantages. Further, a relief worker's bargaining power is shown to be influenced by militia perceptions of how his/her organization is positioned in the conflict. The article is based on fieldwork in war-torn Ituri, carried out in April–May 2004, prior to which I interviewed expatriate relief workers and missionaries with Ituri experience.

NEW CHALLENGES IN HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Despite the ferocity of the six-year conflict in Ituri, which caused the deaths of some 60,000 civilians,[1] only half a dozen international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) brought relief throughout or during most of the crisis. They included: Medair, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, Caritas-Belgium, German Agro Action (Welthungershilfe) and the Italian NGO Cooperation Internationale (COOPI). My research was restricted to relief agencies and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); it did not cover humanitarians working for the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC). By focusing on access negotiations, and especially on the role of local humanitarians, this article captures an aspect of political awareness that is rarely acknowledged. The testimonies contextualize Hugo Slim's argument that every relief worker, whether part of a UN force or a relief agency, needs to have 'a strong sense of his or her individual position in relation to the violence' in order to maintain

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[1] Human Rights Watch 2005a: 1.

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morale (Slim 1997: 3). Individual positioning, I shall add, is also a political act that makes relief workers more effective in delivering their assistance.

The 'political box' that humanitarians work inside received attention at an Overseas Development Institute (ODI) seminar on Ituri in July 2003. The debate inspired me. At the seminar, Anneke van woudenberg, former Oxfam representative in the DRC, now with Human Rights Watch, addressed the subject of politics:

> To remove oneself from politics is exceedingly difficult in a context like Ituri. When you are there, the definitions of neutrality and impartiality seem to change; it can be very difficult to remove yourself from that situation and to say, 'We are here and we are not with the Hema or with the Lendu.' It is a reality that we work inside a political box.
>
> I came to the conclusion … that [humanitarians] *have to work within the political box.* It's the only way to do it. Within that box, you can set boundaries about what you will do and what you won't do, with whom you will negotiate and whom you will not negotiate with. … While we have to work within the 'box', we still need to find ways to set conditionality. (ODI 2003)

Van Woudenberg's perspective is grounded in the realization that humanitarians tend to treat political economy issues 'as background to the essentially technical business of delivering aid, rather than as a central and immediate aspect of humanitarian need and humanitarian response' (Collinson 2002: 3). Endorsing the position taken up by Duffield (1994), Collinson reiterates that relief agencies 'cannot afford to depoliticize policy by reducing it to a technical matter of organization or good practice' (Collinson 2002: 3). The present article focuses on the ethnic identity of local humanitarian workers, an issue central to any politicized policy approach. Through this focus I hope to contribute to an improved understanding of the complex political and economic contexts of relief operations, thus inviting agencies to consider applying 'an ethical framework to their work [so they can] manage their security more effectively in situations of conflict and political instability' (2002: 3–4, with reference to van Brabant 2000: 4). Applying an ethical framework includes considering the possibility that under certain circumstances, such as when militias massively loot humanitarian stock, relief aid may do more harm than good (Black 2003: 96).

In the public domain, however, agency discourses continue to uphold the image that humanitarians work outside the political box. In a report on its activities in 'neglected conflicts', Oxfam, for example, states: '[H]umanitarian agencies and the United Nations must often negotiate access agreements with all the warring parties. To be successful in such negotiations, it is essential that humanitarians can assert their independence and impartiality from politics' (Oxfam 2003: 16–17). Do agencies work inside or outside the political box? Hoping for some answers, I visited Ituri to explore access negotiations.

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SOCIETY AND HISTORY IN ITURI

For Jean-Pierre Lobho Lwa Djugudjugu (1971a, 1971b, 2002), a Hema anthropologist trained in British structural-functionalism, the violence between Hema and Lendu, the main protagonists in the conflict,[2] is endemic; it stems from historically evolved socio-cultural and economic differences. But this notion of *endemic* conflict needs qualifying. While Ituri has a history of intermittent yet contained violence, the escalation in 1999 would not have occurred had there been a semblance of central authority, justice and policing. From July 1999 onwards, Hema landowners paid Ugandan soldiers to protect and further their interests. A Ugandan military unit commanded by Captain Kyakabale entered Djugu Territory 'to kill Lendu and wipe out entire villages' (ASADHO 1999).[3] Ituri's violence is a transnational affair, initially on account of the Ugandan occupation, more recently because of the involvement of Rwanda. Before Uganda became attracted by 'Congo Gold Fever' (Lobho 2002: 43), most instances of Hema–Lendu violence had erupted following local administrative decisions – some colonial, some post-colonial – that could be construed as favouring one ethnic group over the other. Clashes were violent, but always contained.

Where did it begin? According to Aidan Southall, who studied Alur society in the 1950s, the 'Sudanic' Lendu may have been first (or among the first) to migrate into the area west of Lake Albert some three centuries ago (Southall 1954a: 142). Southall refers to Lendu and Okebo as 'non-Alur tribes whom the Alur had been continuously absorbing as their subjects' (Southall 1954b: 485). He makes the same point about Hema–Lendu relations, situating the earliest Hema migrations in the late seventeenth century. Hema who live in Ituri came from Bunyoro, Uganda, where they were known as Hima, nowadays as Batoro.[4]

> The earliest Hima chiefs to cross Lake Albert were the Gegere who settled among the Lendu south-west of Mount Aboro. They were recognized as overlords by subsequent Hima groups who joined them. Presumably Bantu speakers on arrival, they gradually became entirely Lendu in speech. (Southall 1954a: 151)

While Lobho accepts Southall's reconstruction of pre-colonial Hema–Lendu relations, he stresses that the initial 'integration' of Lendu was not only gradual and peaceful, but also much needed. Lendu, Lobho argues, lived in dispersed clans that clashed frequently and violently. Lendu accepted the authority of Hema chiefs, and of Hema generally,

[2] The term Lendu refers to KiLendu-speaking Lendu (mostly from Djugu Territory), while southern Lendu are known as Lendu-Bindi or Ngiti, and speak KiNgiti. There are also KiLendu-speaking Northern Hema, called Gegere, and South Hema, who speak KiHema. The generic term Hema refers mostly to both South Hema and Gegere.

[3] See reports by ASADHO (1999) and Les Amis de Nelson Mandela (1999).

[4] Cultural affinities between South Hema and Batoro continue today. The Hema Boga, for example, are culturally and linguistically similar to Uganda's Batoro, who speak Lutoro.

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because 'the Muhema used diplomatic skill to maintain law and order' (Lobho 1971b: 90). With the passage of time, 'every Hema family head gathered around him Walendu clients, whom he called "ma bale", my Walendu. The Hema political role became so enormous that the Hema imposed upon all Walendu an entire political organization imported from Bunyoro' (1971b: 90–1).[5]

Lobho's reading of Ituri history reminds us of the functionalist anthropology of Alexis Kagame and Jacques Maquet in Rwanda in the 1950s, an antiquated perspective which the Rwandese Patriotic Front has tried to resuscitate (Pottier 2002). Whatever one's opinion on this, Lobho's reconstruction of harmonious pre-colonial Hema–Lendu relations is valid only up to the late nineteenth century, at which point firearms were introduced along with extreme forms of violence. Southall recalls how the PaNduru (Alur) chief Ujuru 'subdued the Lendu of Anzhou south of Juganda, then, returning south at a call from Nblukba, the Hema chief of the Gegere, he massacred the Lendu as far as Blukwa and Mambisa' (Southall 1954a: 163).

When the Belgian colonialists arrived, 'Alurland had entered upon a period of destructive turmoil which was still on the increase' (1954a: 163). Regarding Hema–Lendu relations, the problem was two-fold: not only had Hema ruling groups imposed domestic serfdom on (many) Lendu, but they had also begun to displace Lendu from their land. Lobho details the displacement:

> While the Bahema were happy just to graze their cattle, they gradually encroached upon Lendu territory, and ended up disposessing the Walendu of a part of their domain. The abundance of land at the time, combined with Walendu hospitality, explains why the latter did not put up much resistance and why they readily accepted the new political order. (Lobho, 1971a: 568–9)

Land dispossession occurred predominantly in Lendu-Gegere areas of Djugu Territory and much less in the Lendu-Bindi area south of Bunia (Irumu Territory), where land was more plentiful and access more even.[6]

To end Lendu subjugation, the Belgian colonial authorities created separate Hema and Lendu villages, gave Lendu their own chiefs, and stopped Hema from grabbing Lendu land. But the plan proved unpopular in the early years. Many Lendu rejected the authority of the newly appointed chiefs (Southall 1956: 320), while other Lendu groupings like the Lendu-Bindi (also known as Ngiti) retained their independence and continued to elude the authorities. Among these independent Lendu, political action was organized at the level of strongly autonomous sub-clans (1956: 161).

Lobho and Southall agree that the initial European encounter was disastrous for the Hema political elite. By the early 1950s, just two

[5] Author's translation.
[6] Ituri has five Territories (*Territoires*): Aru, Mahagi, Irumu, Djugu and Mambasa.

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decades after villages were 'fixed' as mono-ethnic entities, Lendu had started 'to pretend that no other state of affairs had ever existed' (Southall 1956: 153). Hema supremacy continued to decline during the first decade of independence when Mobutu's Zaireanization campaign gave Hema once again the upper hand in matters of administration, education, artisanal fishing and commerce (Lobho 2002).[7] Crucially, from 1973 until 1999, when the present conflict began, Ituri's wealth centred on 'the cattle market, the sale of gold and commerce in general, all avenues where Lendu miss out' (2002: 75).

ANATOMY OF THE ITURI CONFLICT, 1999–2004

Ituri's six-year war began as a series of land disputes in which Lendu opposed the constant loss of 'ancestral land' to powerful Gegere-Hema entrepreneurs. The latter took advantage of Congo's ambiguous Bakajika Land Law (1966) and General Property Law (1973), which allowed ancestral land to be appropriated by state functionaries for the purpose of private sale (see Pottier 2003a, 2003b, 2004). As Lendu farmers saw it, the sale of their ancestral land resulted from blatant collusion between rich Hema livestock keepers and Hema administrators. From an elite Hema perspective, however, Lendu were ignorant of the fine print of land legislation; they needed to be enlightened on how Bakajika was implemented (Lobho 2002: 67). Lobho did not attempt the kind of anthropological analysis we have for agrarian relations elsewhere in eastern Congo, which focuses on political domination and social exclusion (see Fairhead 1992; Schoepf and Schoepf 1987), but instead blamed 'the Lendu' for Ituri's malaise.

Ituri's geographical location and abundance of natural riches have made it a hub for interregional and transnational trade. The region of which Ituri is a part has rich gold deposits (the Kilo complex), diamonds (Bafwasende), coltan (Lubero), tropical timber and – it is still claimed – significant oil deposits around Lake Albert. Uganda, Rwanda and the world at large are well aware of Ituri's exceptional wealth, its high-quality gold in particular (see Human Rights Watch 2005b).

Uganda's national army, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), occupied Ituri at the onset of Congo's Second War (August 1998), which was several months *before* the first Hema–Lendu clashes over land. At this point, Uganda worked alongside Rwanda and supported the Rwanda-backed rebellion of the Rassemblement

[7] In 1999, quite a number of the *collectivités-chefferies* were administered by Hema: sixteen in the Djugu Territory, four in Irumu (but one of them regrouped three old Hema *collectivités-chefferies*), and three in Mahagi. Lendu, too, controlled certain *collectivités-chefferies*, but fewer: four in Djugu (Lendu-Djatsi, Lendu-Tatsi, Lendu-Pitsi, Mabendi), one in Irumu (Lendu-Bindi), and one in Mahagi (Lendu-Watsi). This Hema dominance existed despite the fact that Ituri's pre-war population was made up of about 160,000 Hema as against 750,000 Lendu (IRIN Web Special on Ituri, 16 January 2003). IRIN's source, however, is the ethnographic database of the Summer School of Linguistics, whose census data on Ituri go back several decades. The figures are guesstimates.

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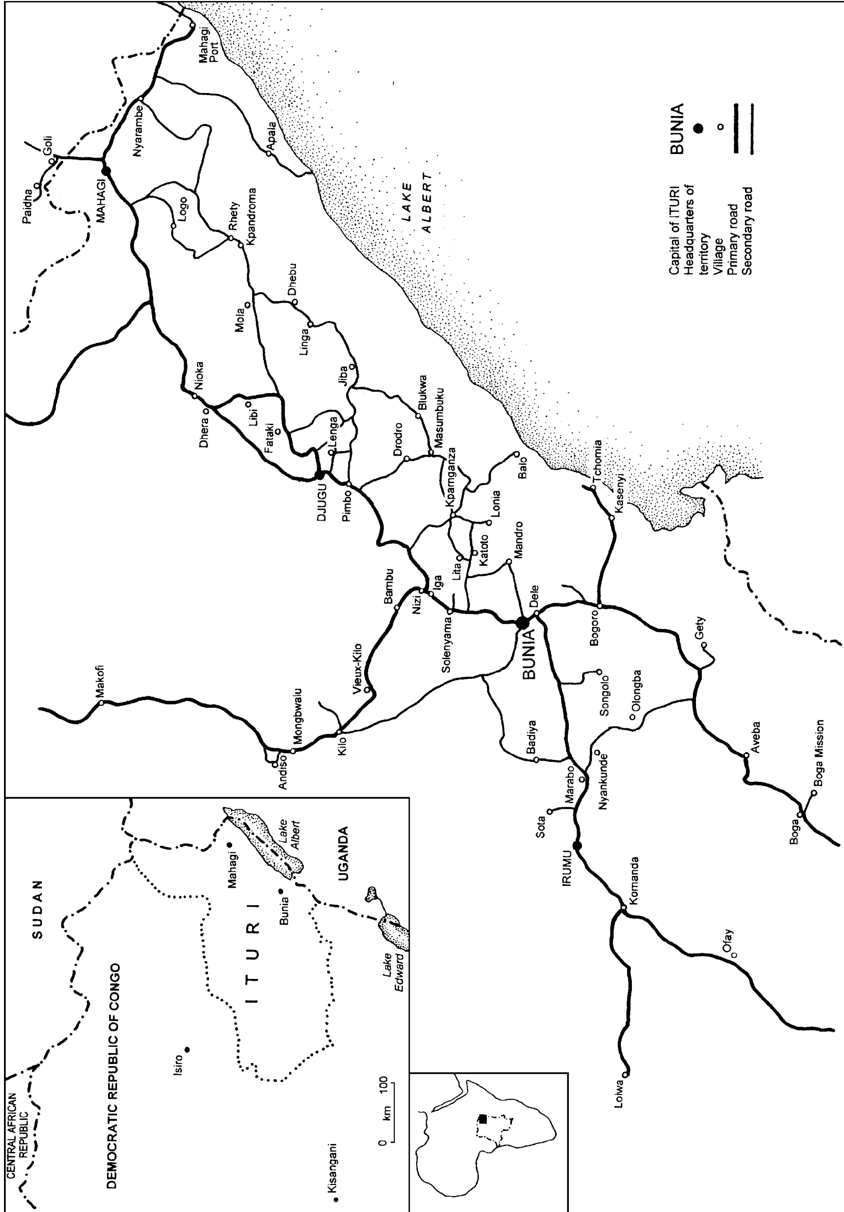
LAKE ALBERT
BUNIA
Capital of ITURI
Headquarters of territory
Village
Primary road
Secondary road
Mahagi Port
Nyarambe
Goli
Paidha
MAHAGI
Apala
Logo
Rhety
Kpandroma
Dhebu
Mola
Linga
Jiba
Nioka
Dhera
Libi
Fataki
Lenga
DJUGU
Pimbo
Blukwa
Masumbuku
Drodro
Kpamganza
Balo
Lonia
Katoto
Lita
Mandro
Tchomia
Kasenyi
Bambu
Nizi
Iga
Solenyama
Dele
Bogoro
Gety
Songolo
Olongba
Vieux-Kilo
Makofi
Mongbwalu
Andiso
Kilo
Badiya
Marabo
Nyankunde
Aveba
Boga Mission
Boga
Sota
IRUMU
Komanda
Ofay
Lolwa
SUDAN
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
Mahagi
Lake Albert
UGANDA
Bunia
ITURI
Lake Edward
Isiro
Kisangani
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Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD). The UPDF had also been in Ituri during the First War (1996–7), allied to Rwanda, when Laurent Kabila ousted Mobutu. However, as the 'coalition principle' honoured in the First War was no longer upheld by late 1998,[8] Uganda severed its ties with Rwanda. As a result, UPDF commanders came to represent President Museveni, not their country, and turned into 'mercenary elements' driven by greed (Hands 2002). After Rwanda and Uganda clashed in May 1999, the RCD movement split. Headed by Wamba dia Wamba, the RCD-ML (Mouvement de Libération) faction became a client movement of the Ugandan occupation and set up headquarters in Bunia, Ituri's capital.

As the squabbles over land multiplied, Uganda's opportunistic army commanders sided increasingly with elite Hema (Human Rights Watch 2002). Ugandan soldiers, analysts noted, were drawn 'naturally' to Ituri's Hema because of cultural and linguistic affinities.[9] South Hema have a pastoral tradition and speak a language akin to that of the Bahima, Museveni's ethnic group. In the absence of any clear authority structure and framework for arbitration, Lendu agriculturalists set up their own village defence groups and resorted to violence. As the conflict progressed, however, individual UPDF officers began 'siding with Hema and Lendu militias alike ... providing them with the arms and ammunition needed to secure their private trade in diamonds, gold and other precious resources' (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004: 401).

The appointment of Gegere (North Hema) businesswoman Adèle Lotsove as Ituri's governor fanned land disputes into open warfare. By the end of 1999, the death toll stood at 7,000 with some 180,000 villagers, Hema and Lendu, displaced from their homes.[10] Although Wamba dia Wamba sacked Lotsove, replacing her with (Alur) Governor Urungi-Padolo, individual UPDF commanders continued to supply soldiers to fight against Lendu and 'look for a large stake in the local economy, buying up gold and timber concessions'.[11] Ituri became polarized; ethnic communities that until 1999 had lived together peacefully were pulled apart.

When in January 2001 Wamba's deputies – Mbusa Nyamwisi (ethnic Nande) and John Tibasima (Hema) – plotted his downfall, the violence spread to Bunia and throughout Irumu. A complex mosaic of alliances emerged. Lendu-Ngiti combatants formed an alliance with Mbusa's troops, as well as with Mayi-Mayi and former Mobutu soldiers (ex-Forces Armées Zairoises), and attacked Nyankunde. Then, following a Hema attack that left 150 Lendu dead, Lendu combatants retaliated with mass murder in Bunia, possibly assisted by Rwandan Interahamwe and Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels.[12] Shortly after,

[8] Interview with David Pulkol, Kampala, 12 July 2004. Pulkol was Uganda's Chief of External Security Operations (ESO) when the Second War got under way.

[9] Gabriel Kahn, *Marchés Tropicaux*, 30 May 2003.

[10] Statistics collected by MSF and ICRC (IRIN, 28 January 2000).

[11] Chris Simpson, BBC News Online, 5 January 2001.

[12] IRIN, 27 March 2001. See also Human Rights Watch 2003.

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Ngiti fighters nicknamed 'les Cubains' entered Bunia from the south, while a Lendu militia, nicknamed 'les Tupamaros', attacked Mwanga and Solenyama, two Bira villages north of Bunia where many Hema also lived. In these attacks, 118 Hema were massacred. A reprisal raid by Hema on Lendu in Mudzi-Pela, Bunia's most prominent Hema *quartier*, left 40 dead; the day is remembered as *vendredi rouge*. With Lendu/Ngiti militias going in for mass slaughter, the attacks of January 2001 bore the hallmark of a concerted 'ethnic cleansing' operation against Hema. Wamba dia Wamba stood accused of fuelling anti-Hema sentiment.[13]

Wamba dia Wamba lost his grip the following month, when Jean-Pierre Bemba, president of the Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (MLC) rebel movement *and* president of the newly formed Front pour la Libération du Congo (FLC), arrived in Bunia with instructions from Museveni. The FLC was Museveni's creation. Within weeks, Bemba removed Wamba, appointed Mbusa as head of the Ituri administration, and declared the war over. It was make-believe. Feeling empowered, Mbusa turned against Tibasima, kicked him out of the region and took control of RCD-ML, which he renamed RCD-K [Kisangani]-ML. More or less simultaneously, first-time clashes occurred between Alur and Lendu in northern Ituri; the violence spilled over into Uganda's Nebbi district. This setback made Bemba pull out of central Ituri to resume his own war against the Kinshasa government. Reacting to Mbusa's betrayal, Museveni sent troops and tanks into Bunia in early 2002, causing Mbusa to flee to Beni. Mbusa then turned to Kinshasa for arms. This opportunistic rapprochement with Kinshasa caused Hema hardliners to launch the Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC), led by Thomas Lubanga.

By mid-2002, with the Ugandan army openly supporting Lubanga's UPC, the civil war escalated. In a matter of weeks, thousands of civilians perished. Bunia's Lendu/Ngiti population fled the town, while tens of thousands of displaced Hema filed in to occupy abandoned homes, especially in Mudzi-Pela. In August 2002, as he seized Bunia, Lubanga launched a pogrom that rested on a virulent racist discourse separating *originaires* (defined as South Hema and Gegere) from *non-originaires* (especially Lendu, Ngiti, Bira and Nande). It was a death sentence for many *non-originaires*. The UPC also seized strategic points like Mahagi and Tchomia. As the level of persecution and outright murder was unacceptable to many non-Gegere, leaders like Chief Kahwa Mandro began to take their distance from Lubanga. In Kahwa's case, however, the split was not irreparable.

At the onset of Lubanga's terror regime, the UPC attacked Songolo, killing many Lendu/Ngiti civilians. To avenge the atrocities, Mbusa's troops and allied Lendu/Ngiti combatants attacked Nyankunde in September 2002, massacring 1,200 Hema, Gegere and Bira civilians (Human Rights Watch 2003: 30). The attackers regarded Bira as allied

[13] *Le Millénaire,* No. 011, February 2001.

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to Hema, which was the case in and around Nyankunde. Bira, however, were by now also being hunted down by the UPC, especially in Bunia where they faced extermination as *non-originaires*. Lubanga gave relief workers some of their most difficult challenges.

In December 2002, the UPC split: one faction stayed loyal to Lubanga, the other to Chief Kahwa. When Kahwa blamed Lubanga for stalling the national peace process,[14] the UPC chief signed a collaborative agreement with RCD-Goma, Rwanda's proxy. Kigali armed the UPC; Kampala recoiled. In a succession of quick moves, Kahwa became Museveni's new protégé and turned his military faction into a political party named Parti pour l'Unité et la Sauvegarde de l'Intégrité du Congo (PUSIC). He joined forces with the Front Nationalist et Intégrationist (FNI) of Floribert Njabu (Lendu) and with the Forces Populaires pour la Démocratie au Congo (FPDC), an Alur group. Together they formed the Front pour l'Intégration et la Paix en Ituri (FIPI), intending to remove the UPC. This they achieved on 6 March 2003, when Bunia fell after 'intense combat between the UPC and a combined UPDF–FIPI force'.[15] FIPI's Lendu/Ngiti militias, however, went on the rampage, targeting Hema homes and the humanitarian offices of OCHA, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization. They accused humanitarians of siding with the Hema and neglecting the Lendu/Ngiti population.[16] The excesses may explain why FIPI fell apart so very quickly.

Within weeks of the regime change, the Ituri Pacification Committee (IPC), whose constitution had been agreed in Luanda (Angola) in September 2002, was sworn in. Having on board representatives of every armed group except Mbusa's RCD-K-ML, the Committee struggled to prepare for Ituri's reunification.[17] Naively, MONUC believed that the IPC could bring peace on its own, even though there was no clear decision on who would police the district. Short-sightedness turned into disaster when Luanda's date for the withdrawal of the UPDF (24 April 2003) was strictly observed. As Uganda pulled out of Bunia, 'on an accelerated timetable' in fact (Refugees International 2003: 7), Lubanga returned to retake Bunia. Somewhat surprisingly, Chief Kahwa was once again, temporarily, fighting on his side. The six-day-long battle left over 400 civilians dead and caused the displacement, often a second fleeing, of most town dwellers. Although MONUC was mandated to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, the majority of its soldiers, a Uruguayan battalion (URUBATT), were trained for 'static guard duty' and hence neither trained nor equipped to carry out the mandate. Bunia was cut in half: Lendu/Ngiti militias controlled the town's southern neighbourhoods; Hema militias (UPC/PUSIC)

[14] Lubanga had not been invited to the peace talks, since he had seized power after the start of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue.

[15] OCHA, *Monitoring de la Situation Est RDC: au 09 mars 2003*.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] OCHA, *Note de situation sur les enjeux humanitaires à Bunia et en Ituri*, 13–14 May 2003.

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the north. As the battle for Bunia peaked, humanitarian and advocacy agencies called on the UN Security Council to authorize the deployment of a rapid reaction force.[18]

It was not until the end of May 2003 that the UN Security Council (Resolution 1484) agreed to deploy a rapid intervention force. The Interim Emergency Multinational Force (IEMF), also known as Operation Artemis, was led by France and mandated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Arriving in June, the Force quickly secured most of Bunia, but could only look on as the violence moved to the countryside. With Lubanga controlling just a few rural pockets (like Fataki and Bule), *rural* Hema became a target for Lendu/Ngiti militia aggression. In Bunia, meanwhile, Lubanga's UPC flexed its muscle. When a high-level political delegation visited Bunia in early August, the UPC demonstrated its appetite for 'resilience and nuisance capacity'.[19] Lubanga's followers vowed to drive MONUC out. One month later, as Operation Artemis ended and MONUC saw its Ituri troops boosted to 5,000 with a Chapter VII mandate, the UN continued to struggle to make Ituri secure. The area's political fluidity and unpredictability went on unabated; military factions mobilized efficiently and at short notice.[20]

After MONUC successfully deployed to Bogoro, Marabo, Iga-Barrière and Bule, halting clashes between the UPC and PUSIC near Tchomia, the UPC carried out its threat to attack MONUC. On 19 and 20 January 2004, MONUC helicopters were fired upon near Drodro and Iga-Barrière; on 21 January, UPC militiamen opened fire on a Pakistani unit at Nizi. William Swing, head of MONUC, summoned Thomas Lubanga (now held in Kinshasa) and expressed his indignation.[21] In February, the UPC attacked the MONUC team that investigated a fresh massacre near Gobu, and killed a Kenyan military observer near Katoto.

Peace finally seemed to arrive on 14 May 2004, when representatives from PUSIC, UPC (now split into UPC-Lubanga and UPC-Kisembo), FNI, FPDC, the Forces Armées Populaires du Congo (FAPC) and the Forces de Résistance Patriotique en Ituri (FRPI) signed the Kinshasa Act of Commitment (Acte d'Engagement de Kinshasa). But hope faded quickly. By early July, FAPC and FNI troops clashed near Mahagi, causing the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians.[22] Weighing the value of the Kinshasa Act, the International Crisis Group (ICG) expressed concern that the DRC Government and the UN had obtained the signatures of military men who had 'entered the

[18] Oxfam, Medair, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International were among the agencies.

[19] OCHA Update on Ituri – August 2003.

[20] German Agro Action Situation Report Ituri, 1–16 September 2003.

[21] Swing also held General Bosco Ntaganda, the UPC's acting army chief of staff, responsible for summary executions, kidnappings, rapes and other barbaric acts in Bunia in March 2003.

[22] For a discussion of displacement dynamics in Ituri, see Pottier (2005).

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negotiations knowing that if their largely unreasonable demands for status, jobs and immunity from prosecution were refused, they would continue their activities without fear of sanction' (ICG 2004: i).

The violence intensified in early 2005. The FNI, allied (again) to Chief Kahwa's PUSIC, emerged as the stronger military force, while the UPC seemed to lose ground. The FNI's ascendancy resulted in the destruction of Hema villages in Djugu Territory, and the displacement of some 80,000 Hema. In an attack on MONUC in February 2005, attributed to the FNI, nine Bangladeshi UN peacekeepers were assassinated. By now, however, several warlords were in Kinshasa, hoping for military recognition and reward. Some did indeed reap. While Lubanga was arrested and Njabu remained at large, other warlords – Jerôme Kakwavu (FAPC), Floribert Kisembo (UPC-K), Bosco Ntaganda (UPC-L) and Germain Katanga (FRPI) – were appointed to serve as generals in the national army (Human Rights Watch 2005a). The full impact of these appointments and arrests on the situation in Ituri is yet to be seen.

RELIEF WORKERS IN THE CAULDRON OF ITURI POLITICS

Before the conflict erupted, there were no national development plans for Ituri, nor were any international agencies present except for the Swiss medical NGO Medair and Caritas-Belgium. Both had arrived in 1997. Welfare assistance, if and where it existed, was delivered via the Church. In the early 1980s, the DRC, then Zaire, had created health districts following the primary health care (PHC) model launched at Alma Ata. PHC came to be delivered through health zones (*zones de santé*) and central reference hospitals (*hôpitaux généraux de référence*), the latter with health centres (*centres de santé*) attached. To operationalize the model, President Mobutu left one third of the country's health districts in the hands of the Church. Under this system, many medical district officers were government-recognized but employed under the auspices of a religious organization. In Ituri, both the Catholic and the Anglican Churches were given official responsibilities for the provision of health.

The absence of any significant development NGO activity *before* the conflict had consequences when humanitarians arrived. Organizations like Oxfam and COOPI initially flew in from other parts of eastern Congo, bringing Congolese staff with them. Unaware of how politically sensitive the presence of Congolese outsiders – or *non-originaires* – was in Ituri, they ran straight into a barrage of criticism and hostility.[23] In the intoxicating days of the first violence, the ethnic status of 'imported' Congolese NGO staff was a matter of serious political agitation. Already by the end of 1999, Hema demagogues openly accused the humanitarian

[23] Interview with Jo Deneckere of the Missionaries of Africa, also known as White Fathers or *Pères Blancs*, Kortrijk (Belgium), 9 January 2004.

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community of partiality, of being blinded by ignorance. The accusation never died down. After Lubanga captured Bunia in August 2002, the Hema association ENTE reiterated the charge:

> From June 1999 onwards, we observed an influx of humanitarian organizations – of the UN system and NGOs working *in Kivu* – towards Bunia. They brought with them Congolese workers from Kivu to the detriment of the Iturians. Worse still, these [UN] organizations and NGOs systematically refused to employ Hema candidates under the pretext that ''Hema were already sufficiently rich and did not need any assistance whatsoever''. Why is it that those from Kivu have a grudge against the Hema? ... [Why do they] lack all sense of impartiality, [and] excel in their unjustified hostility towards Hema? (ENTE 2002: 8–9, translated from French)

In an interview, Professor Karimagi Pilo, key Hema spokesman in Bunia, placed the NGO tendency not to recruit Iturians, by which he meant Hema, in the context of what he called the genocide against Hema. Articulating a strongly felt sentiment among educated, hard-line Hema, Pilo told me in April 2004:

> The UN and the international NGOs are implicated in the genocide of the Hema, and in Ituri's destabilization. The NGOs behave as if they live in a conquered land, as if Ituri were the land of crypto-colonialism. NGOs keep bringing Congolese workers from Kinshasa or Kivu, claiming they cannot recruit locals because they need neutral staff. Tell me, how can someone from Kinshasa be neutral when the Kabila government is fully responsible for the conflict in Ituri? In 1998, Mzee Kabila urged the Congolese population to take up arms against the Tutsi and those who look like them. So Kinshasa sent arms to Ituri to exterminate all Hema.[24]

Such an argument does not reflect the ethnic adjustments that some NGOs made to their recruitment practices, especially following the murder of six ICRC workers in April 2001.[25] On the other hand, the argument illustrates rather neatly how relief workers were constantly at risk of being perceived, inevitably perhaps, as 'play[ing] to the advantage of one side or another' (Slim 1997: 2).

Having arrived in Ituri before the emergency began, Medair found itself in a more fortunate situation. Marian van der Snoek, Medair's medical coordinator in Ituri, recalled:

> When Medair began its work in Ituri in 1997, some two years before the Djugu war, we decided to appoint one Bira, one Hema and one Lendu to

[24] Interview with Professor Karimagi Pilo, Bunia, 21 April 2004.

[25] Following the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) murders, Oxfam reduced the number of expatriates and selected local staff in a way that ensured appropriate ethnic representation. According to van Woudenberg, Oxfam's Country Director from 1999 until 2002, the organization 'achieved a good ethnic spread. With 80 to 90 full-time local staff, our ethnic record was balanced; we did not have too many Hema or Lendu. We were thus able to access all areas of Ituri.' Interview, London, 17 December 2003.

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our senior staff. This resulted not from a consciously implemented ethnic strategy, but was something that just happened *grâce à Dieu*. What was deliberate, on the other hand, was the fact that we worked with Iturians, people who already lived and worked here. It was deliberate in the sense that Ituri was our first project in the DRC, so we did not have any contacts yet with other areas. We did not ''import'' our Congolese personnel from elsewhere, from the Kivus for example, which other agencies did when they arrived. Educated Hema were aggrieved by those 'imports'.[26]

MSF-Holland became the first victim of the Hema hard-line view that relief agencies were anti-Hema. In early 2000, MSF-Holland was forced out of Ituri following the publication of an article and photograph in a Canadian daily. Taken by a Canadian journalist who had accompanied MSF-Holland on a visit to Pimbo, a Lendu village in Djugu, the 'offensive' photograph showed

'how an MSF worker handed a big box marked IDA [International Development Association] to a group of Lendu armed with bows and spears. The article mentioned the gift of medical drugs, but it was the photo that captured the Hema imagination. Circulation of the photograph made MSF's work impossible. We were repeatedly accused of supplying weapons to the Lendu.[27]

To spice up their story, some Hema spread the rumour that MSF had introduced cholera in order to kill Hema children. (Ituri has regular cholera epidemics.) The situation got rapidly out of hand. When vehicles were ambushed and stoned in two separate incidents, MSF decided to pull out.

Hard-line Hema never ceased to accuse humanitarians. The ENTE document (2002) mentioned above also recalled the incident with MSF-Holland, and added a chilling comment on the ICRC murders:

the representatives of MSF-CANADA [sic] took aid wrapped in a box marked IDA into the bush to well-armed Lendu combatants from the militia training camps at Mbau (a photograph of *the ceremony* was later published in a Canadian newspaper). Equally, it would appear that the ICRC visited Pimbo on several occasions in order to deliver aid to the Lendu priest who heads that parish. The priest personally handed the aid to the Lendu militia training camps at Likopi and Mbau. . . . It was not until numerous months had elapsed that the representatives of the ICRC agreed to deliver food and medicines also to the Hema, and this only after [six of their staff] had been callously assassinated *in circumstances that no-one is in a hurry to clarify*. (ENTE 2002: 8–9, emphasis added)

Statistical information released by MSF and the ICRC, showing how Lendu killed with arrows whereas Hema (with UPDF assistance) killed with bullets, and suggesting that deaths from firearms

[26] Interview with Marian van der Snoek, Medair, Bunia, 19 April 2004.

[27] Dr Jannes van der Wijk, then head of MSF-Holland in Ituri, personal communication, 15 April 2004.

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exceeded the other type, goes some way towards explaining the stance of hard-line Hema. Realizing that the MSF/ICRC statistics 'revealed something', Hema politicians spoke of an anti-Hema smear campaign.[28]

Despite the difficulties MSF-Holland encountered, there was still reasonable access to areas affected by the conflict, then confined to Djugu Territory, as can be seen from the record of NGO activity. In 2000, Oxfam set up sub-bases at Fataki and Rethy, both inside Djugu;[29] Medair also expanded its programme (Medair 2000). While access had to be negotiated, which was not always easy, militias did not systematically deny access. Aid was not in abundance, however. Due to financial shortfalls, NGOs were 'unable to provide assistance to the level of internationally recognized standards for humanitarian aid', as determined, for example, by Sphere (Oxfam 2001: 19).

Another episode that shocked humanitarians came at the end of the Lubanga regime. Following the reversal of political fortunes, it was the turn of frustrated Lendu/Ngiti militants to accuse relief workers that they were not helping *them*. . . . Once again, the agencies ended up in a no-win situation. Militia anger resulted in Commander Cobra's ambush of a COOPI vehicle near Songolo. Some mothers and children were killed in the attack.[30] Although humanitarians had already made progress in reaching the 'neglected' Lendu/Ngiti areas, the risk of an ambush had remained high. Lendu and Ngiti combatants appeared not to accept that Thomas Lubanga – and not the agencies – was responsible for the drying up of aid. Cobra's militia accused COOPI not only of neglecting Lendu/Ngiti areas in need during the eight-month 'blockade', but also of switching its assistance to the Hema community after August 2002. The militia had 'proof': not only had COOPI abandoned its nutrition centre at Gety (Ngiti community), but it had then supplied Badiya, a Bira/Hema community, access to which Lubanga had permitted. OCHA reported that on 13 March [2003], a team from the NGO COOPI was taken hostage by a group of Lendu/Ngiti combatants near Badiya village (35 km west of Bunia) when it returned from a humanitarian delivery to its nutritional centre at Badiya. After being captured, the team, made up of four people (one COOPI member and three civilians), was taken to Olongba, [10 km north-west of Gety]. The OCHA-Bunia team then negotiated intensively with the UPDF and traditional Lendu chiefs throughout the rest of the week to secure the unconditional release of the hostages. On 16 March, a delegation made up of Bunia-based Lendu/Ngiti representatives, one driver and a COOPI logistician left Bunia to recover the hostages, whom the captors had promised to

[28] Interview with Anneke van Woudenberg, London, 17 December 2003.

[29] *Le Millénaire,* No. 011, February 2001.

[30] Interview with Morena Bassan, COOPI medical coordinator, Bunia, 4 May 2004.

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free on that same day. The hostages were finally liberated on 17 March.[31]

After the COOPI kidnapping, humanitarian aid by road to areas south of Bunia remained suspended, while aid to Lendu (and Hema) villages north of the town continued.[32] The resumption of aid to the Lendu region had its moral dilemma: Lendu people were suffering while 'their' militias, now well-armed, massacred Hema civilians. But the resumption of aid into the Ngiti region was delayed further and remained fraught with danger. Months after the COOPI ambush, an inter-agency attempt to reach Gety was also marred by a brief kidnapping (see below).

Enough ground has now been covered to turn to the main ethnographic questions. How does agency X know that it is all right to deliver aid to village Y at such and such a time? How do humanitarian workers negotiate with roadblock militias?

ROADBLOCK ETHNOGRAPHY: NEGOTIATING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

Church-based networks play an important role in the flow of humanitarian information. Asked about the logistics of information gathering and fixing a rendezvous, a seasoned missionary indicated that communication is 'no big deal'. Ituri is small, densely populated and has good information networks. He said:

> If you are in Bunia, just find someone from the area in need, someone with the right tribal affiliation. In Ituri, and in Bunia especially, there is always someone who knows someone who can pass on a message and let you have a response. It's as simple as that.[33]

Colleagues echoed the position:

> Contacting villagers 'out there' is never a problem for us, the Church. You just tell a few people 'from there' that you want to send medicines or other essential goods, and they will do the necessary. Everyone knows us! And so we are always immediately informed of humanitarian need or atrocities. Some parishes also have radio contact with Bunia.[34]

Usually linked to church infrastructure, health centres too constitute a dynamic network for gathering information and fixing a rendezvous for delivering aid. Medair's medical coordinator in Bunia explained:

> Some of our health centres (like Aveba) have radios, but others (like Bambu) do not. With Aveba there is regular contact, but health workers from health

[31] OCHA, *Monitoring de la Situation Est RDC: au 16 mars 2003*.
[32] Several interviews with agency workers, Bunia, April–May 2004.
[33] Interview with Thierry Moyersoen, Bunia, 16 April 2004.
[34] Interview with Jo Deneckere, Bunia, 19 April 2004.

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> centres like Bambu must make the first move and contact us. Health workers who cannot be contacted by radio know how to get in touch through the medical resource people (*des personnes clées*) we have throughout Ituri. Of course, we'd love to give radios to every health post, but this cannot be done because of the real risk that militias appropriate the equipment for their own ends.[35]

Medair normally delivers aid in stages. The first step is to contact health workers in a given *zone de santé* in order to gauge the security situation. If radio contact is impossible or risky, contact will be made by letter. Information will also be gathered from Medair's *hommes intermédiaires*, that is, trustworthy influential people who can give reliable information. These *hommes intermédiaires* may be members of health committees (*comités de santé*) or *chefs de groupement* (so-called traditional leaders) or people who do not belong to the military but know the security situation well. If it is safe to do so, the *homme intermédiaire* will travel to Bunia, where a local senior member of staff will arrange to go with him to the rural area in question. This is done incognito, as it is prudent not to advertise one's whereabouts in wartime.

Step two consists of a distribution visit, normally by car. This time, too, the team expects to be accompanied by its *homme intermédiaire*. Radio contact will be maintained *en route*, but only if it is safe to do so. Otherwise, or as an additional safety measure, security information will be gathered as the team proceeds. Only exceptionally, when the conflict is fierce and needs are high, will MONUC be called upon to dispatch emergency aid by helicopter. Step two also involves *indirect* negotiations with military forces and/or militias. A senior staff member at Medair said:

> It is up to the health workers at the centre we intend to visit to make arrangements and obtain the 'green light' from the soldiers or militia in control of the area. Medair itself does not have direct contact with militia groups, unlike German Agro Action, for example. And so, because it is the health workers who deal with the militia in order for us to have safe access, Medair finds it easy to maintain its neutrality.[36]

During the Lubanga regime, however, when the roads into Lendu/Ngiti territory were cut off at the Bunia end, a different access strategy was needed. Because of the blockade, rural health workers would come to Bunia in person to fetch essential drugs, either by bicycle or using private transport (*un véhicule de commerçant*). If the health worker or *homme intermédiaire* were asked to pay something at a militia checkpoint on the way home, which happened routinely but involved only small amounts of cash, payment would be a private matter, not a case of 'the humanitarians are paying'.

Humanitarian agencies also made use of access letters signed by military authorities. Such letters were obtained via OCHA, which

[35] Interview with Marian van der Snoek, Medair, Bunia, 19 April 2004.

[36] Interview at Medair, Bunia, April 2004.

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regularly asked the military factions to provide written guarantees. Although these letters were useful, the frequency with which alliances shifted, and the fact that militias sometimes 'borrowed' uniforms, could make it difficult to know which access letter needed showing at roadblocks. A relief worker once joked: 'There are militia groups you can identify instantly, and there are those who work freelance!' And, of course, access letters can only do the job when militias are free from the influence of excessive alcohol and drugs.

For Medair, the region south of Bunia presented a special challenge during the Lubanga regime. Among its health centres were places like Aveba (Ngiti) and Boga (Hema), which could not be reached by road, but could be reached from the air. Aveba could be reached from Beni (North Kivu); Boga from Bunia. Not without risk, such flights were attempted mostly after May 2003, but some successful attempts were made even during the Lubanga regime. Dr Nigel Pearson, who had worked in the Aveba/Boga/Gety region as a District Medical Officer from 1991 to 1998,[37] recalled visiting Aveba in March 2003.

> As it was premature to use the road, Medair resorted to its tried-and-tested strategy of asking the Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) to fly supplies into Aveba.
>
> Flying medical supplies into Aveba carried a risk, because one Ngiti militia had its base nearby. But this risk was a calculated one in that health workers at the centre would have obtained permission for us to land. We had been in radio contact with the health centre in Aveba, so health staff knew we were coming in. Also, I felt we could take the risk because the MAF pilot, Dave Jacobsson, knew the airstrip well, while I knew the civilian population amongst whom I had worked for seven years. Dave was not frightened at the sight of militiamen, he reckoned they would respect him. We were confident that it was safe to fly in because of the reputation of MAF and Medair.[38]

As Jacobsson's published diary reveals, however, the risk was not negligible. Aveba was 'located in the heartland of the tribal militia that [had] attacked and destroyed Nyankunde', the very town where Jacobsson had had his home and MAF hangar before the troubles began.[39]

In mulling over the risks of this visit, my conversation with Nigel Pearson turned to a central concern that all experienced relief agencies shared: the need to demonstrate impartiality. Pearson reflected:

> Soon after this first visit [to Aveba], Medair flew in a Mungiti supervisor to oversee the distribution and use of drugs to twenty health centres in the Ngiti

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[37] As a District Medical Officer, Dr Pearson was contracted by the Church Mission Society (CMS). He returned to Ituri in early 2003 for a six-months assignment with Medair.

[38] Interview with Nigel Pearson, Oxford, 5 March 2004.

[39] 'Jacobsson's EDRC Diary', *Mission Aviation Fellowship – MAF News*, 23 June 2003.

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region; he stayed for a couple of months. With the supervisor in place, Medair then quickly turned its attention to Boga again, another 'neglected' – but Hema – area south of Bunia. While it was terribly important in March 2003 to show the Ngiti that we were in Ituri *also for them*, it was equally important that we sent that same message to the Hema people of Boga. They too had been without assistance for some eight months.

The agencies' need to demonstrate that they cared for both Hema and Lendu communities is highlighted also in Oxfam's choice of locations where it resumed work later that year. Oxfam reported:

By the end of October [2003], security improved outside [Bunia] and access increased. Cases of cholera in the airport camp were traced to a Lendu market 30 km south of town in a village called Medhu; at the same time, hundreds of displaced Hema established a site near Muhito, about 15 km north of the city. Oxfam GB assessed both sites and carried out public health activities there while maintaining its work at the airport camp and health facilities in Bunia. (Oxfam 2004: 10–11)

Oxfam's Medhu programme was suspended in January 2004 when UPC-Lubanga troops made the area unsafe. At the time of my visit to Ituri, Congolese staff serviced Medhu again, but non-Africans did not visit since General Bosco Ntaganda, Lubanga's representative on the battlefield, was known to be notoriously *anti-Blancs*.

Concern over the ethnic balance of assistance – or what I have called demonstrable impartiality – became a big issue following the ICRC murders of April 2001. A local aid worker commented on the details of the Oxfam programme, which had been reported in a local paper (*Les Coulisses*, February 2001):

When relief work resumed after the ICRC murders, Oxfam worked with all ethnic groups in the region. Oxfam had Swiss funding for rehabilitating the water system in Boga (South Hema area) and in Nyankunde (strong Bira centre), and other funding for rehabilitating water points (*sources*) in Bunia and its periphery – villages like Marabo and Badiya. Oxfam also anticipated the return of IDPs and prepared for intervention in places like Lipri (Lendu) and Mandro (Gegere).

Oxfam started in Lipri in May or June 2001, a quiet Lendu area at that time, because it needed to counter the perception (and fact) that most of the accessible areas were Hema sites. In December, however, with the Lipri programme virtually completed, an escalation of hostilities forced Oxfam out. In Mandro, too, the agency had to pull out, but for a different reason. It left Mandro when the village became a training ground for Chief Kahwa's troops.

But Oxfam was able to keep its 'balanced' approach in Bunia town. Thus in early 2002, when Bunia was already awash with IDPs [internally displaced persons], Oxfam had projects at Mudzi-Pela, where [Hema] IDPs stayed at the Institut Supérieur Théologique Anglicain (ISTA) and at various Catholic schools. At the same time, it had a project at 8th CEPAC, a Pentecostal

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> church which hosted displaced adepts. And there was an IDP project in Yambi, called Shaba Lonu, which lies in the town's Ngiti area.[40]

Oxfam's striving to keep all of Bunia safe in terms of drinking water gave it a reputation for being able to maintain good relations with the key protagonists in the conflict. Oxfam benefited from its ability to demonstrate impartiality, when, after fleeing from its head office in May 2003, it managed to recover equipment that had fallen into the hands of the new occupier, the UPC.

COOPI, too, strove to open nutrition centres in an ethnically balanced way. Thus in August 2003, after MSF-Switzerland took over the running of COOPI's Centre Nutritionnel Thérapeutique at Bunia airport, the Italian NGO opened a centre near MONUC headquarters, thus making its services available to the Lendu/Ngiti population. (At the time, the centre near the airport was frequented mostly by Hema.) One month later, when people returned *en masse* to Bunia following the arrival of a more robust MONUC force, COOPI opened centres in Mudzi-Pela (Hema), Dele (Lendu/Ngiti) and Shari. COOPI also worked in Bunia's Rwambuzi neighbourhood, ethnically more mixed, but with a restricted programme.[41]

The unambiguous demonstration of an agency's impartiality is vitally important in access negotiations. Militias are sensitive to this kind of transparency. In Ituri, where agencies are continually accused of bias, claims to impartiality or neutrality will not be accepted if a particular agency is thought not to operate in a clearly transparent way.[42] (I shall return to this point.)

So what happens when a humanitarian worker or convoy approaches a military or militia roadblock? An experienced relief worker who identified himself as Ngiti shared the following thoughts:

> When [as a humanitarian] you must challenge or make a challenging point, you must do so calmly. I remember once, in Gobu, how a Lendu militia leader who had stopped our car made a verbal attack on my organization. 'You, [agency X],' he shouted, 'are here to spy on us. You work for the other side, you give them arms. I am the extremist!' He looked very aggressive, but I knew from his speech and demeanour that he just wanted to impress. It was bluff. Unimpressed, I challenged him according to appropriate etiquette, staying calm throughout.[43]

Taking aid to Ituri's suffering populations required not only courage, but also a cool head, sound perception, assertiveness, skills in cultural sensitivity, and humour.

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[40] Aid worker interview, Bunia, 23 April 2004. CEPAC is the Communauté des Eglises Pentecôtistes en Afrique Centrale.

[41] Interview with Morena Bassan, COOPI, Bunia, 4 May 2004.

[42] Despite the reconfiguration of the humanitarian principles (Slim 1997), terms like impartiality and neutrality are used in everyday discourse, sometimes interchangeably, as seen in several interviews in this article.

[43] Anonymous interview, Bunia, April–May 2004.

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But what *is* the appropriate etiquette? Xavier (pseudonym), a Gegere Hema relief worker, recalled his biking days in 2001, just before the ICRC murders.

Case Study 1. Bikers en route

> Before the war intensified, I travelled the countryside by motorbike, sticking as much as possible to roads that were safe for Hema.[44] One rule I always obeyed at roadblocks when the situation appeared tense, was to stop my bike at a distance of at least ten metres before the barrier. I then stepped down and took off my helmet as a sign of respect. Then I greeted the leader and answered the two standard questions: 'Who are you?' and 'What brings you here?' I would give my name and that of my organization, and explain my mission. At a Hema roadblock, people would know from the way I speak Kilendu that I am in fact a Gegere Hema. This eased the tension.
>
> The real challenge came when I biked through a Gegere area towards a Lendu destination, and needed to explain that the humanitarian goods I transported were destined for 'the other place'. In such a situation two golden rules were observed. First, never lie about the destination and purpose of your trip. Lying would backfire on the return. Secondly, always carry something, a token gift, perhaps some money or cigarettes, for the militias that stop you en route to a destination where ethnic 'others' live. Handing over this token something was not just a way of showing respect, but also gave me the opportunity to state or reinforce the humanitarian principles, to go over the point again that my organization works with everyone. Later, on reaching my Lendu destination, I would of course be questioned on what I had been doing in the Hema area I had just been through. I would then explain that travelling through the Hema area was the only way I could reach my destination. This was common knowledge, an explanation readily accepted.
>
> In the early days of the crisis, however, I faced the additional problem that rural Gegere in Djugu had been led to believe that Hema did not work for humanitarian organizations. I remember meeting a very aggressive crowd near Drodro, a Gegere centre. The crowd surged towards me shouting '*Humanitaire! Humanitaire!*' – and I feared the worst. But I observed the rules of respect and, after lifting my helmet, spoke Kilendu, revealing my Gegere accent. The crowd backed off in disbelief. Informed that my mission was to reach Drodro, several people then offered information regarding possible danger points on the road ahead. Such updates were essential.[45]

The 'token something' is a gift that still needs to be accepted, though, which is not automatic. Accepting the gift and lifting the barrier, perhaps to allow access to a village where hostile others live, is to some extent an act of faith pinned on trust. Militias will not accept the token gift if they do not trust the organization involved – if they feel, for instance, that the organization is insufficiently transparent.[46] One informant gave me two illustrations of how the ICRC, before the murders of 2001,

[44] Humanitarian dispatches by motorbike ended after the ICRC murders of April 2001 and had yet to resume when I visited Ituri in April–May 2004.

[45] Anonymous interview, Bunia, April–May 2004.

[46] Anonymous interview with former relief worker, Bunia, April 2004.

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had had to turn back to Bunia after 'token gifts' had been turned down at roadblocks. 'I suspect,' my informant clarified, 'that a lack of transparency on the part of the organization was the reason why its ''token gifts'' were turned down. And yet, what it had offered were not insignificant amounts of essential drugs.' Among humanitarians, the perception lives on that ICRC operations in Ituri in 2000 had been shrouded in secrecy – it was hard to get information out of the agency or to collaborate effectively. This secrecy, commented on in the Congolese press following the murders,[47] was perceived by many locals as a lack of transparency and then falsely interpreted by certain extremists as partiality.

Observing the correct etiquette at roadblocks becomes more complex when the Congolese relief worker does not originate from Ituri. The complicating factor is the common (mis)perception that non-Iturians are Kinshasa spies (see Pilo interview, above). A Congolese relief worker who originates from outside Ituri but has lived in Bunia since well before the crisis, shared his thoughts on what it is like to work in Ituri as a *non-originaire*. Reflecting on his experiences at Rhety (Lendu) and Fataki (Hema) before the ICRC murders, Emmanuel (pseudonym) explained how he understood the ground rules for inter-cultural engagement.

Case Study 2. Access and political history

> By 2000, Rhety and Fataki felt the full impact of the Djugu war. Fataki had become virtually pure Hema; Rhety pure Lendu. The relationship between the two villages was very strained, yet I still managed to work in both places and moved between them without too much difficulty, because I knew how to behave in appropriate ways. The ground rules for engaging with Hema and Lendu are culturally and historically specific, and must not be mixed up.
>
> Let me explain. Hema are very sensitive, touchy (French: *susceptible*). They observe and interpret every move or gesture you make, every word you speak. For Hema, body language often speaks louder than words. Hema are reserved, they expect you to be humble. I always humbled myself when dealing with Hema, generally did everything right, and never had a close relationship with a Hema woman. But all my good behaviour notwithstanding, I could not prevent speculation: 'How can we/Hema be sure he is not a Terminator?' people would say behind my back. It was always difficult to know what Hema really felt or thought.
>
> It is different with Lendu. When you talk to Lendu about rural development, for example, they get enthusiastic and will follow instructions beautifully. On the surface, Lendu appear spontaneous, it is easy to get along. But underneath there is a strong sense of inferiority, their historical past as

[47] Although it was generally felt that the murders were a way of intimidating the international community, some journalists also suspected that the ICRC had made itself vulnerable because of its strategy always to do things on the quiet. *Les Coulisses* for example, a paper published in North Kivu, argued that the strategy kept other people's morale down even in the aftermath of the murders: 'the ICRC needs to reveal to the public what it knows about the [murder] dossier. This would boost the morale of many Iturians, including humanitarians and journalists'. *Les Coulisses* 109 (25 May–15 June 2002): 11.

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> vassals clings to them. So they too observe closely – and interpret. They watch out for any sign of superiority on your part, constantly. And gestures, here too, can speak louder than words. The moment Lendu detect that you put yourself above them, the relationship sours very quickly.[48]

Emmanuel was serious about these culturally appropriate ground rules. His reflections made sense against the backdrop of historical developments in Ituri.

When relief aid resumed after the ICRC murders, the more 'courageous' NGOs started travelling in teams made up of Ituri workers with different ethnic origins. Deploying ethnically mixed teams became a major strategy to ensure that the 'correct' ethnic representative was on board in the event of a change in itinerary or an unexpected roadblock. OCHA had pursued a similar strategy when setting up Humanitarian Liaison Committees in Djugu in the early days of the crisis.

My next vignette, too, relates to the sensitive Fataki-Rhety area. It reinforces the point that individual relief workers are judged also against the perceived credibility of their organization, a credibility that hinges on the demonstration of impartiality. Hubert (pseudonym, ethnic Ngiti) recalled how he and a Hema colleague returned to Fataki in August 2001.

Case Study 3. Return to Djugu following the ICRC murders

> The organization I work for was the first agency to return to Fataki (Hema) and Rhety (Lendu village) following the ICRC murders. Although it was a difficult visit, it was comforting for the population to know that we were back to resume our work.
>
> At Fataki, where we spent the night, we met the same people the ICRC team had met before its fatal journey. Our [ethnically] mixed team was our strength: as I myself am Ngiti, it was my Hema colleague who made my presence in Fataki acceptable.[49]
>
> But the situation grew tense the following morning, when our team announced that it would now proceed to Rhety, the Lendu stronghold. For the people of Fataki, Rhety (and Kpandroma) was where the enemy lived. My Hema colleague explained our position: in the past, our agency had served *both* places – Fataki and Rhety – and it wanted to continue to do so. It was an opportunity for us once again to explain the humanitarian principles.
>
> What helped our discussions with local chiefs (*chefs de groupements*) and other members of the *communautés de base* – in Fataki and later Rhety – was that we also had a ready-to-implement project for the rehabilitation of destroyed school buildings. It was mostly a question of replacing the corrugated roofs that had been looted. Over a two-month period our team returned to Fataki and Rhety four times. People ended up taking pride in the restoration scheme, because a rehabilitated building is something lasting, unlike emergency food.

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[48] Anonymous interview, Bunia, April–May 2004.

[49] In August 2001, the rumour still circulated that the ICRC victims, mutilated by machete, had 'obviously' been killed by Lendu/Ngiti elements.

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> Following this experience, we consciously paired other villages – one Hema, one Lendu – that had attacked each other or been attacked by 'the other'. This *visible* evidence of our determination to work on both sides of the conflict became a strength, a strategy that helped whenever we needed to negotiate access. Unfortunately, at this point in time, the war was still to gather momentum.[50]

In highlighting the importance of demonstrations of impartiality, Hubert touched on another principle that matters when access needs negotiating. Humanitarians must not only *show* respect, but also *command* respect. One way in which respect is commanded is by taking every opportunity to draw attention to the principles that guide humanitarian work.

At the end of my stay in Bunia, German Agro Action (GAA or Agro Action Allemande, AAA) invited me along on a visit to Katoto and beyond, where I saw for myself how access negotiations were conducted, in this case with the forces of UPC-Lubanga. In contrast to the other agencies in Ituri, GAA has direct contact with the armed groups. Marcus Sack, head of GAA in Bunia, explained the practice:

> I tell the military that GAA works with the civilian population. I am direct and unambiguous: 'If you – militia X – want to cooperate with us, you will do so as an ally to your civilians.' GAA has a basic understanding with all the armed groups. We listen to them, they listen to us. They know we are neutral, and we tell everyone that we are. Militias that refuse access when we are trying to reach a zone they do not control, are told in the clearest of terms: 'If you do not let us pass to reach the other group, we will tell the world. We will tell *your people*.' We are tough with the militias. Even the Ngiti of Songolo, deemed to be exceptionally difficult to negotiate with, listened to us and let us rebuild the road [to Gety]. I use a language militia leaders understand.
>
> When MONUC demonizes my organization for talking directly to the militias, all labelled 'war criminals', its criticism stems from frustration. MONUC has missed out on the chance to beat the militias and control them. The simple truth is that MONUC does not have the population on its side. Unlike MONUC, GAA has worked in Ituri since 2000, so we know – and know how to contact – all the key players, be they customary or military chiefs.[51]

Visiting Katoto, a strategic Hema site, involved negotiating access with the UPC-Lubanga authorities, military as well as civil. During the negotiations several issues already mentioned came to the fore: respect, demonstrable impartiality, assertiveness, and being clear and determined about the humanitarian principles. Below is a summary of GAA's meeting with the authorities at Katoto on the day I joined in.

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[50] Anonymous interview, Bunia, April–May 2004.

[51] Interview with Marcus Sack, GAA, Bunia, 23 April 2004.

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Case Study 4. Accessing a no-go zone, Katoto, May 2004
Having just secured funding for rehabilitating the Katoto–Blukwa road from the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), for GAA the trip was an opportunity not only to examine the physical state of the road, but also to meet civil and military leaders. Controlled by UPC-Lubanga, the road was a no-go zone for other humanitarians as well as MONUC. GAA had used its extensive network of contacts to announce the visit and ensure our security.

Since the Katoto-Blukwa project was in an early phase, meeting local leaders was more than a question of courtesy calls and compliments. GAA wanted to show that it meant business as a humanitarian organization; it wanted to show respect and be shown respect. Meeting the authorities thus involved a frank sharing of positions.

Before the barrier to the no-go zone could be lifted, our party met with the local UPC commander. As we walked towards his residence, Katoto's *chef de collectivité* welcomed us. He was courteous and reassuring, but appeared none too pleased that GAA had given so little notice. There was some discussion about how much notice GAA had actually given, and how much it should give in future. The welcome was cordial, though; there was praise for the work of GAA. (Later, at various points on the way to Blukwa, the greening results of GAA's earlier seeds-and-tools distribution reinforced the feeling of welcome.)

The *chef de collectivité* then took us to the military chief. A young man, the commander too welcomed us and praised the work of GAA. His entourage looked strikingly Tutsi/Banyamulenge. Was he 'Rwandan'? – it was hard to tell, but Kinyarwanda was spoken. The military chief explained that the rival UPC-Kisembo faction had held Katoto until last February. Katoto village and the area we were about to enter were now in the hands of UPC-Lubanga, effectively those of General Bosco Ntaganda.

The introductory niceties over, Colonel Marcus Sack presented his own credentials. Having the rank of Colonel in the Austrian army, he talked shop with the UPC-L commander. Sack made two things clear: first, GAA works with *all* ethnic groups; secondly, other NGOs, COOPI for instance, would follow once the road rehabilitation project got under way. Sack also stressed that GAA works with the population, which *includes* the military. GAA does not put soldiers above civilians. Nodding in agreement, the UPC-L commander replied that he had just one condition regarding GAA's presence: 'Do not ever come here with MONUC. MONUC is the enemy.'[52] To underscore his acceptance, and break the proverbial ice somewhat, Sack recalled how some months before he had been in Ngiti-controlled territory

[52] The seriousness of the UPC-L commander's 'condition' became manifest in February 2005, when MONUC had begun to move into the area. At this point, GAA was forced to halt its assistance to IDPs in Gina following harassment by UPC-L militias in Lopa. Two days later, nine MONUC soldiers from Bangladesh were killed and eleven others wounded in an ambush at Kafe (OCHA, *Monitoring de la situation humanitaire en Rdc, 19–25 Février 2005*).

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when MONUC helicopters appeared in the sky. (This may have been during a brief kidnapping in August 2003 when an inter-agency reconnaissance party was held up on its way to Gety.) When MONUC helicopters appeared, Sack told the commander, he contacted MONUC headquarters, demanding the helicopters return to base. With its evidence of connectedness and resolve, the anecdote was indeed unambiguous: we/GAA do not mess with you, you do not mess with us; we will work as partners and show mutual respect.

Respect is a key concept in all of the delicate negotiations GAA and other agencies enter. But respect must be mutual. In a different context Marcus Sack said:

> In the act of giving, we/GAA must know for certain that we too are respected. In general, *les Blancs* are not respected. So in addition to providing agricultural seeds and tools, we insist on checking that the distributions are organized exactly as we want them to be organized. By insisting on follow-up inspections, you, as a humanitarian, will also be respected. Respect is everything, but it must be mutual.[53]

The humanitarians' main defence against the persistent accusations of bias is to consciously and continually demonstrate the commitment to impartiality. This is achieved in three ways: by moving in ethnically mixed teams with colleagues who speak up for one another; by offering visible proof that aid is going to 'both sides'; and by reiterating that the organization is committed to humanitarian principles. Even though these principles are no longer adhered to as originally intended (Black 2003; Slim 1997; van Woudenberg 2003), those that do apply are stated and contextualized.

Information sharing

Before I conclude, a word about information sharing seems in order. While it is true that every humanitarian organization had its own network of contacts for accessing vital information, especially regarding the position of army factions and militias, inter-agency intelligence sharing occurred mostly between NGOs that could take their own access decisions at the field level. Such agencies had the greater need for instant, up-to-date intelligence. (Several relief workers told me that 'Whenever we go *sur le terrain*, we know exactly which militia is where.') Intelligence was shared at the weekly meetings called by OCHA, but also informally outside of these meetings, sometimes in secret.

Difficult times, on the other hand, demanded a more intensive sharing of information and also encouraged joint travel. After the COOPI kidnapping incident, in August 2003, there was an inter-agency attempt to reach Aveba by road. A participant recalled:

> Travel in a group gave us added security. The reconnaissance mission included GAA, Medair, the World Health Organization, and COOPI. The

[53] Interview with Marcus Sack, Bunia, 23 April 2004.

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party, however, got stuck at a roadblock near Aveba, where it was stopped by *une petite milice*. The situation was scary, but the [large] size of our party appeared to make a difference. Also, and luckily for us, some civilians who had witnessed the arrest became concerned and alerted the more powerful militia stationed at Aveba. The Aveba militia then sent a message to the 'little militia' ordering our immediate release. The chief of the smaller militia was later reprimanded.[54]

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the Ituri conflict, humanitarian agencies have been accused of favouring and arming 'the other side'. During the early years, the charge of favouritism was articulated especially by the Gegere Hema elite. This changed when Lubanga seized power in Bunia in August 2002 and denied humanitarians access to the Lendu and Ngiti hinterland. When the Lubanga regime ended, it was the turn of Lendu/Ngiti leaders and combatants to allege that they too had been abandoned by the 'humanitarian community', who deliberately favoured the other (Hema) side.

Under these taxing circumstances, in which humanitarians have been abducted and sometimes killed, it is impossible for relief agencies to stay outside the 'political box' (van Woudenberg 2003); they get drawn into it willy-nilly. While relief workers did not abandon their principles, they *had* to engage with Ituri's micro politics when negotiating access to stricken populations. As this article shows, a local relief worker's ethnicity and ability to read politics have vital significance during such negotiations. Relief workers do operate in a 'political box', quite simply because there is no alternative. And they do so with skill, courage, humour and historico-cultural sensitivity. But while Congolese workers are central to the way humanitarian access is negotiated in Ituri, their pivotal role does not receive attention in the humanitarian literature. My research also confirms that the agencies themselves strive to demonstrate their impartiality. Such demonstrations facilitate access and help protect individual members of staff.

I am aware that testimonies of the kind presented here may on occasion have been driven by agency rhetoric. Thus the 'token gifts' which militias receive from relief workers *en route* to a destination where 'ethnic others' live may at times have been larger than acknowledged. A study on emergency relief and reconstruction in Liberia, for example, found that food-distributing NGOs suffered record levels of looting, a problem aggravated by the fact that the caseload of the main food agencies was 'extremely intensive, and possibly unnecessarily high' (Black and Brusset 2000: 18). Ituri was very different in this respect. While some leakages may have occurred on occasion, and there certainly was looting in Bunia in March and May 2003, they happened on a small scale and must not detract from the skilful,

[54] Anonymous interview, Bunia, April–May 2004.

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politically informed negotiations in which relief workers engaged. Such negotiations demanded that local humanitarians position themselves politically. This they did, at the very least, by accepting they had meaningful ethnic identities. At the same time, while there was no alternative to working 'inside the political box', agencies also 'set conditionality' (van Woudenberg 2003), mostly by insisting on the right to demonstrate impartiality. Ituri's colonial legacy, the existence side by side of fairly mono-ethnic villages, made such demonstrations feasible and effective.

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ABSTRACT

Based on field research carried out in 2004, this article focuses on how Ituri-based Congolese relief workers negotiate humanitarian access with roadblock militias. Experiences and testimonies highlight the importance of socio-cultural and political awareness during relief work induced by conflict. It is demonstrated that relief workers in conflict zones do not (and cannot) shed their ethnic identities; that instead they accept that a perceived ethnic identity brings strategic advantages as well as disadvantages. Further, a relief worker's bargaining power is shown to be influenced by militia perceptions of how his/her organization is positioned in the conflict. The overall argument responds to the renewed policy interest in debating the political context of humanitarian intervention.

RÉSUMÉ

S'appuyant sur des travaux de terrain réalisés en 2004, cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont les travailleurs humanitaires congolais basés à Ituri négocient l'accès humanitaire avec les milices en charge des barrages routiers. Les expériences et les témoignages soulignent l'importance de la connaissance socioculturelle et politique dans les opérations humanitaires suscitées par des conflits. Il est démontré que les travailleurs humanitaires en zones de conflit n'abandonnent pas leur identité ethnique (et ne le peuvent pas) et qu'ils acceptent au contraire qu'une identité ethnique perçue présente des avantages en même temps que des inconvénients stratégiques. D'autre part, l'article montre que la puissance de négociation du travailleur humanitaire est influencée par la perception qu'ont les milices de la position de l'organisation de ce travailleur dans le conflit. L'argument général répond à l'intérêt accru à débattre du contexte politique de l'intervention humanitaire.

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