

Unspeakable fear

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LAURENT Kabila, supposedly a representative of a new kind of African pragmatism and common sense, appears to be on the run. Some of the recruits he promised a wage and – bizarrely – sardines, have been shot by their own side while travelling to the front. There are fears he will engulf his neighbours in a regional conflagration: with the Southern African Development Community divided over whether to shore him up, and Nelson Mandela warning that sending in foreign troops will only make things worse.

The Congo, perhaps unfairly, has always been a symbol of the anarchic. The horror of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, was the unspeakable fear of humanity which knows no humanity. It was also the fear that anyone caught in it could regress to the savage. The belief that the Congo has remained stuck in a morass of ignorance and violence is pervasive. What's happening in the Congo now has done nothing to alter that belief.

For those with long memories, Kisangani, which fell to Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo more than a year ago, was once called Stanleyville. It was founded by the Welsh-American adventurer, Henry Morton Stanley. It was taken in 1964 by Belgian paratroops travelling in American and British transport, with the purpose of rescuing European and American hostages held by Simba rebels.

The Simba troops of Nicolas Olenka were famous, at least in the propaganda war, for their atrocities. The paratroops were only partially successful. Before they had taken the town, many of the hostages were murdered. The Congo was living up to its reputation for irrational violence. This reputation goes back a long way: even David Livingstone reported that his men were afraid to go on towards the copper mines of Katanga and that he was forced to turn back.

Fairly recent television pictures of wild and naked men on the Rwanda border armed with spears and guns suggest that in that vast country there are at least pockets of primitive savagery. But how do we know? They may be school teachers who dress like this at weekends; this is how profound our ignorance of this great sprawling country is.

A few years after the hostage rescue fiasco, Stanleyville entered literature with VS Naipaul's Bend In The River, so producing the second English literary masterpiece set in the Congo. Naipaul describes the desolation of the place, the burned-out suburbs, the destroyed town, and the over-grown gardens.

acids.

The Congo, you feel, is a place which is just waiting to reclaim its own. It will never become a modern state. Missionaries, mercenaries and adventurers all, in the end, yield to the inevitable, and return home. Buildings fall down, roads disappear into the jungle.

It is particularly ironic that, nearly 30 years later, Kabila, Che Guevara's old companion at arms, should be trying to defend Kinshasa. There have always been questions about Kabila. For a start, what sort of man can run a rebel movement for 30 years? And what sort of regime did he institute when he got to Kinshasa?

Nobody was expecting a South Africa, but at the same time the world was expecting something better than the regime of Mobutu. When South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, a sophisticated man, helped negotiate Mobutu's end, it was clearly painful for him to be photographed with this relic of another era. Now, if his enemies are to be believed, Kabila seems to have taken up Mobutu's reins cheerfully.

For a Westerner, the idea that there is a country where normal rules do not apply is strangely disturbing. Maybe ignorance is our chief obstacle to understanding what is going on there. But the West, perhaps because of its inglorious role there during the Cold War, is standing aside during the present conflict. There is a distinct feeling in the corridors of power that the Congo is too fragmented, too irrational, too intractable to be capable of settlement.

There is also the fear that somehow a place like this can only drag you down – as Conrad said of Kurtz. "It was they that possessed him and made him their own to the innermost thought, the slightest stir of blood, to his last breath." At the turn of the century, there was a fear that evolution could go into reverse, and the Congo was just the place to set the process in motion. This had happened to Kurtz.

When Belgium abandoned the Congo in 1960, only 136 children had completed secondary school the previous year in a country of 14 million. There were just 16 university graduates. For years the West felt guilty about the chaos which set in.

Now the prevailing feeling is cynicism and hopelessness. After all, nearly 40 years have passed, more than half the whole colonial experience. Perversely, this abandonment by the West increases the pressure on South Africa, both to take a lead in Africa, and to succeed at home, because South Africa represents the last chance of Africa to confound the cynics.