

AFRICA, TERRORISM AND EBOLA: THE WRONG EQUATION

by Gemma Parellada*

Fishing boats carrying fresh tuna; timber sailing from the second-biggest rainforest after the Amazon; air-bases for drones; the source of chocolate; military intelligence (or American spies); cocaine trail... Behind the curtain of Ebola and terrorism, south of the Sahara desert, lies a subcontinent which is ignored so long as no white person is infected or if there are no kidnappings, despite it being the source of our daily well-being. Snapshots of daily life are drowned out by the images of disaster, producing a distorted version of reality.

Rainforest and genocide

(Bambari, Central African Republic, May 2014)

There's an old concrete bridge in the middle of the African rainforest. On the west bank: tanks at the ready, surveillance equipment to control the area, state of the art assault rifles and sophisticated western equipment on the front line. French soldiers, needless to say, well armoured. The French flag waving in the breeze.

We are in the heart of Central Africa's brutal conflict; the continent's 'new' war broke out after the conflict in Mali. Both are (former) French colonies.

On the other riverbank, past the bridge that spans the river: a group of angry youths yell at the French. They've thrown together a makeshift barricade of tables and stools and brandish sticks and machetes. There are also axes and bows. The same tools they usually use to cultivate the fields and hunt are the ones taken to confront the French military. A few militiamen and a few rifles, but most are upset, frightened civilians. Muslims.

The French cannon fires at the nameless youths. Two legs get blown off and three civilians get killed. Tomorrow the French army will also take to the air in



a helicopter and destroy a pick-up driven by the armed group that controls the region: the former Séléka. New deaths add to the body count of this terrible 'inter-community' war without making news.

A few hours earlier, an extraordinary peace reigned in Bambari. In a country driven mad by genocidal violence, General Ali (a former Séléka member) had managed to maintain an oasis of coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. But the Anti-balaka warriors are approaching with the clear goal of eliminating the Muslims. And the French military are not stopping them. Theoretically they are a peace-

keeping force, deployed in the eyes of the world to prevent the fighting and atrocities. But in Bambari they fail: the reality is quite the opposite.

On Tuesday peace reigned. On Wednesday the French ambassador and the general who commands the troops of Operation Sangaris (as the intervention by French troops in Central Africa is known) jumps off the helicopter coming from the capital, Bangui. In a packed amphitheatre they publicly humiliate General Ali and the military authorities, announcing that only international forces 'are legitimate', and they go back to Bangui, without halting the Anti-balaka advance.

By Thursday Bambari is the Wild West. Barricades, gunshots and the first casualties. The initial fighting breaks out between the Muslims and the French. Fear, the explosions and confusion soon divide the population, as in the rest of the country. The oasis is destroyed.

WE ARE IN THE HEART OF CENTRAL AFRICA'S BRUTAL CONFLICT. THE CONTINENT'S 'NEW' WAR HAS CONTINUED IN MALI, BOTH (FORMER) FRENCH COLONIES

Mediterranean WhatsApps and the gold next to the bridge

(Barcelona, June 2014)

The mother tells her daughter to go drink up her hot chocolate. Keys, iPhone purse... she tosses them all into her handbag. They're running late for school. WhatsApp to her colleague: 'Just setting off, I'll be there in a couple of minutes.' The hands of her gold Rolex indicate that it's the middle of rush hour. 'Uff, these hold-ups always come at once... gotta stop for petrol'. She picks up her friend on the corner and drives down Diagonal Avenue. On the radio the weatherman announces it's going to rain and then they start talking about that African virus again... Ebola. 'Poor things, it's the last thing they need, with so much hunger and war, and now this terrible virus'. To the girl: 'make sure you eat all your lunch darling, an awful lot of children go hungry'.

Africa is a long way off. Never mind that the morning cocoa her little angel drinks with such joy, and even the chocolate that drives her wild, come from the Ivory Coast (post-election conflict in 2010), that her smartphone (and tablet and laptop...) works thanks to minerals mined in the Congo (the

worst conflict since the Second World War), that the petrol that fuels their dangerous manoeuvres to avoid being late comes from Nigeria (from a polluted Delta) and will soon come from South Sudan. And in spite of the fact the gold wristwatch has come a long way from a huge mine called Ndassima, worked by artisanal miners and located a short distance from Bambari bridge; a bridge in the middle of the Central African rainforest where young Africans face the French army.

This notwithstanding, when the mother hears people speaking about Africa (such a general concept) she thinks of sick children, Ebola and terrorists. Because that's what newspapers, radios and TV's talk about...

(A fictional collage based on flashes of reality)

Bloodstained dealers. Bloodstained markets

(Rwanda, April 2014)

The candles sputter all around the stadium in a city that still smells of the impossible. It's hard to forget that only 20 years ago, in this very stadium, there were hundreds of individuals killing and hundreds of individuals dying.

The commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide is a shameful reminder of human brutality and also the perverse relationship between global producers and consumers. And the blindness with which we look at Africa. During the mourning period the genocide's macabre 'anthem' is heard time and again. 'Never again' goes the song with a melody that grips the brain. It's the same music that endlessly fills the radio, the TV and the roads that wind round tiny Rwanda, these terrible days of memory. Where nowadays buses go about their business, twenty years ago this is where the first victims fled from the massacres. And the executioners followed. It takes several hours to stumble across the border. And there,



in the Congo, we can find the aftermath of a conflict that has shifted focus rather than ended. No other war has killed as many people since the Second World War: some 5 million. It is the heritage of the Rwandan genocide.

'Never again' goes the song.

I recall a conversation with a South African entrepreneur (a trafficker), years ago, at a Chinese restaurant in Kigali, the Rwandan capital. He was also getting ready to make the short journey made by the survivors, the executioners and the buses. And the same route the minerals take in reverse. 'It's easy to get the tin and coltan [blood minerals used in technological devices, such as smartphones] out of the Congo. Here in Rwanda we put a seal on it and then

it doesn't count as blood minerals. And bam, it's on the global market!'. As with Liberia and Sierra Leone the war did not stop the diamond trade (quite the opposite). In the Congo the trade never stops. The UN peacekeepers are unable to halt either the war or the trade in minerals.

Morning begins with a light mist covering Kigali's thousand hills. Further south, an amputee athlete is being cross-examined in a South African court. He has the power to gain attention, more so than the Congolese girl Claudine, who was kidnapped and raped by a group of soldiers while still a child. More than Deholo, who will be hacked to death by machetes in Bangui in a couple of months' time.

I have just escaped from the TV marquee in Pretoria, South Africa, which has sat outside the court for months, to come to Rwanda to remind myself how hollow this 'Never Again' sounds. But the morning mist rises in Kigali and the top presenters and the attention remain focused on the court in Pretoria...

WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF FIGHTING, IN THE HEART OF BAMBARI'S CHAOS, AND THE MUD WALL THAT INEFFECTIVELY PROTECTS US DOESN'T EXACTLY ENCOURAGE ONE'S APPETITE

'Never Again' ring the speakers at the stadium which burns candles, while in the Central African Republic the 'never' disappears. The wave of revenge tainted with genocide reminders doesn't manage to get the same attention as the Pistorius drama.

Excalibur in the African Havana (Maputo, Mozambique, September 2014)

An avalanche of tweets about Excalibur fills my feed that evening in Maputo. A bad connection usually gives me a pain in the neck, but this time it spouts quickly at 140 characters compass the obscenities of this biased world.

I'm just back after a talk with the editor of a brave Mozambican newspaper and have just finished a Skype call with Monrovia. The ding-dong ends my conversation with a fellow Liberian journalist who has the dejected bearing of those who report on a frightened capital contaminated and condemned by Ebola. Meanwhile, everyone on the Iberian Peninsula is talking about a dog. Huge oil and gas reserves have recently been discovered off Mozam-

bique's shores, 'we hope this wealth doesn't become a curse', the editor adds pessimistically, 'like what happened in Congo, South Sudan and Mali'.

Parenthesis

2011 began with France bogged down in the Ivorian conflict. In 2012, it sent troops to its northern neighbour, Mali. In 2013 it sprayed a new rain of soldiers, this time in the Central African Republic, also a former French colony. And after every rapid military response the European Union and the United Nations end up following in its footsteps.

A sprinkling of soldiers dressed as 'peacekeepers' which, for the moment, has borne no fruit, at least in terms of peace.

Genocide in the rainforest and terrorists in the desert

Gunfire is the new music and it can be heard everywhere. But there are also loud explosions. It's the first hours of fear and there's absolute confusion. Ibrahim insists I eat something. And when this corpulent old militia leader tells you something with his imposing voice, it's an order. But we are in the midst of fighting, in the heart of Bambari's chaos, and the mud wall that ineffectively protects us doesn't exactly encourage one's appetite.

Ibrahim used to trade in diamonds. Perhaps he still does. He's a trader or a trafficker depending on who's doing the labelling. Normally he 'traffics', but when the merchandise is bought by a western company it immediately becomes 'trade'.

Last year, in the deserts of Mali, this young smuggler couldn't have put it any clearer: 'it is not we who consume cocaine, it goes to Europe, it just passes through here. For us it's just business'.

Crossing the dunes, following the profitable Sahara route taken by the cocaine you arrive in one of the conti-

ment's darkest corners. It's called Arlit and, apart from being in the middle of a red terror alert area, it hosts two radioactive fissures from which France obtains a third of its electricity. In the midst of a desert, the hostility of the climate is mixed with the harsh work of busy miners. The camels and the Tuaregs' robes are lost among workers in blue overalls in a kind of encampment that, paradoxically, lacks electricity. The French army has chosen to establish its 'anti-terrorist' base right here.

If the mines were to suddenly stop production, huge power problems would snap at France and at the neighbouring countries to which the state power company sells kilowatts.

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WE BELIEVE IN THE ENERGY IN THIS COUNTRY

If we're characterised by anything, it's by our energy.
Here, we walk until there's nowhere left to go.
We leave difficulties behind and sidestep discouragement.
And, if we fall, we get up again with a smile on our face.
Because we know that the best part of the road is always the end.
A country like this deserves all the good that's coming to it.

THAT IS WHY ENDESA IS GOING
TO CONCENTRATE ITS EFFORTS ON SPAIN