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Netwar and Cyberwar in the Killing Fields of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Jeff Shantz

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Rather than simply encouraging, facilitating or transforming war, as Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) discuss, info tech is based in war. Indeed the wars over the resources of cyberwar and netwar are fought in the forms of cyberwar and netwar. The information age is rooted in the bloody killing fields of low-tech territories.

The shifts in how societies come into conflict and in the waging of war, as suggested by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993), are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Netwar and cyberwar have influenced the context and conduct of that war. Ironically the shift to netwar and cyberwar has itself played a part in the Congo war, informed, shaped and driven by the need for the very resources required to wage netwar and cyberwar. It reveals the extent to which Arquilla and Ronfeldt have underplayed the extreme violence of netwar.

The death toll from the war in the DRC, which began in 1998, is higher than in any other since the Second World War, with an

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estimated 4.7 million killed in the last four years alone (Economist, 2003: 23). The International Rescue Committee (IRC), an aid agency based in New York, reports that the mortality rate in the Congo is higher than the United Nations (UN) rates for any other country on the planet (NewsAfrica, 2003: 6). Despite these horrible facts, the crisis has gone largely unnoticed and unreported in the West.

The UN Group of Experts on Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and other forms of Wealth in the Congo concluded that resource exploitation was directly responsible for the ongoing "an economy of war" in the region. Illegal exploitation of resources had established a predatory network of elites, including army and government leaders and multinational companies. Multinational companies played the crucial roles, both direct and indirect, in this situation. Indeed without the corporations the illegal mineral trade would not be possible.

Ismi (2002: 14) details the stunning extent of economic and political interests in Africa: "Nearly 80% of the strategic minerals the U.S. requires are found in Africa, including 90% of the world's cobalt, 90% of the platinum, 40% of the gold, 98% of the chromium, 64% of the manganese, and one-third of the uranium." Significantly, these minerals are all indispensable components in jet engines, missiles, electronic components and iron and steel — the raw materials of imperialist tools of conquest.

Of particular importance in understanding imperialist intentions in Congo are the interests of the mining company American Mineral Fields (AMFI). Ominously the industrial enterprises set up by AMFI are also "interested in the contract for the construction of the orbital platform around the world that is destined to replace the Russian station MIR" (Baracyetse, 2000). The space platform is a centrepiece of the proposed National Missile Defence system driven by George W. Bush and his Vice President Donald Rumsfeld. Indeed, the space station cannot be built without many of the rare metals located in eastern Congo's mineral-rich Ituri province.

The National Missile Defence system is projected as a \$60 billion venture.

Central in the struggles for control of strategic minerals in DRC is a little-known but highly sought after mineral called columbite-tantalite or coltan. While an extremely rare mineral it is a virtually ubiquitous part of the information society. In processed form coltan is a crucial component in the manufacture of mobile phones, jet engines, night vision goggles, fiber optics and capacitors, air bags and computer chips. All of the new technologies cited by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) as impelling a military technology revolution are reliant on coltan, most from the war ravaged mineral fields of Congo.

Coltan miners work long hours in extremely hazardous mining conditions. Most miners sell their labour to one of the many rebel groups in the area, which in turn sell the ore directly to multinational mineral companies (Vick, 2001). Battles over control of the coltan mines is the direct cause for much of the fighting in areas surrounding the concessions. "It is capitalism in its purest form," according to Robert L. Raun, president of US-based Eagles Wings Resources, a company that has purchased Congolese coltan for several years. The price for a ton of coltan ranges from US\$100- US\$200000

Illegal resource extraction has allowed for the constitution of criminal cartels, formed or protected by military commanders, in occupied areas. The UN report warns that these cartels, connected with global networks, pose the next serious security threat in the region.

The UN report notes, significantly, that the illegal plundering of eastern Congo has been facilitated by Western companies, governments, multilateral institutions and diplomats (Ismi, 2001). As one example, coltan exports from Rwanda were carried by Sebeba, the national airline of Belgium while the necessary financial transactions were carried out by Citibank (Ismi, 2001). Deals between Rwandan coltan sellers and US companies were promoted by the

US Honorary Consul in eastern Congo, Ramnik Kotecha, who himself was dealing in coltan (Ismi. 2001).

Lenin identified as a key basis for imperialism the extensive networks of close ties and relationships involving even very small capitalists. Recent discussions of cyberwar have brought back a focus on the importance of networks for the working of contemporary geopolitics. The state of disorder in Congo facilitated the emergence of new networks operating in areas where the formal state was in a process of collapse (Taylor, 2003). This situation encouraged the emergence of "warlord capitalism" and a "shadow state" (or states) "which retained enough substance to negotiate with and benefit from international capital's willingness to conduct business with such entities" (Taylor, 2003: 51). Imperialist involvement in Central Africa has given rise to and instituted a form of informal regionalism comprising a "shadow network" of states, private armies, businesses and various elites, both inside and outside of Africa. The involvement of transnational business and state networks "were neither peripheral nor determinative in the political trajectories of Uganda, the Congo, and the Great Lakes region in general. They were, and are, constitutive" (Latham, Kassimir and Callaghy, 2001: 2).

The structural context that has nurtured the particular regional processes in the Congo has been conditioned by neoliberal globalization, notably through the imposition of structural adjustment programs in Africa. Neoliberal globalization has encouraged the formation of, often illicit, cross-border networks with multinational corporate linkages. Significantly, "instead of bringing about stability and (legitimate) growth, impulses generated by globalisation have contributed to the further deepening and development of criminal networks and decidedly quasi-feudal forms of political economy" (Taylor, 2003: 52).

It seems that it is no longer necessarily the case that presidents are dedicated to a project of establishing control over a specific recognised territory, with all the bureaucratic encumbrances and

Taylor, Ian. 2003. "Conflict in Central Africa: Clandestine Networks and Regional/Global Configurations." *Review of African Political Economy*. 95: 45-55

Vick, Karl. 2001. "Vital Ore Funds Congo's War." *The Washington Post*. March 19

requirements to maintain some form of consensual balance...Now, the informalisation of economic and political activity can counterbalance the erosion of state capacity and power. By expanding internal and external clientistic networks, elites within conflict-ridden spaces pursue what Duffield refers to as 'adaptive patrimonialism' (Taylor, 2003: 52).

The war in Congo exhibits the complex character of cyber war and netwar and the vastness of networks composed of extensive relations between state and non-state, local, regional and global actors. Arquilla and Ronfeldt's suggestion that states, far from diminishing in all of this, as Van Creveld (1991) supposed, will actually be transformed by these developments is also borne out by the Congo war. In the Congo war interconnected networks on the ground (and in the air) link up with corporate and state hierarchies in the metropole.

These new processes of state formation, rather than minimizing the state as neoliberal ideologues might suggest, present transformations of the state which may in fact facilitate its centralization. Structural adjustment it has created changes in the international system impelling a transformation of the Southern state into an 'enabling state', creating forms of governance suited to the era of cyberwar (Biel, 2003: 80).

Taylor (2003: 52) argues that, rather than representing an anomalous form of regional project, "the type of alliances and transboundary networks currently reconfiguring Central Africa may well offer a prophetic vision of what may be in store for vulnerable and peripheral areas of the world." As Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) have stated: "The future may belong to whoever masters the network form."

In recent years the US has looked for new means of military intervention in Africa, a process that has intensified since September 11, 2001 (Biel, 2003). The US is not necessarily looking for large-scale military base facilities since force can be deployed directly from the US (Biel, 2003). Thus much attention has been placed on

increased investment in long-range deployment strategies for agile and mobile forces (Biel, 2003). This has encouraged the emergence of new forms for the relationship with military proxies. "Like military bases, direct subsidiaries of the core firm are a thing of the past, but instead the structures would be more informal. The post-September 11th discourse indeed explicitly centres upon building a network, a 'coalition of coalitions'" (Biel, 2003: 85).

A focus on cyberwar and netwar in the Congo requires a rethinking of the notion of state collapse in Africa which has long been used to justify US intervention. In cases of "failed states" the imperialist agenda may include the reconstitution of "new state machines" which will primarily benefit rebel groups (Biel, 2003). The most prominent model is probably the promotion to power by the US of Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has openly confirmed this expectation with respect to finding "exactly those sorts of people" to play a similar role in Somalia (Biel, 2003).

In the Congo, Western imperialism has preferred informal or illicit governance structures through proxies and militias, in effect a militarization of society and governance. The imperialists' preferred strategies are either to install obedient leaders or divide the area into minor enclaves, each led by leaders who can be influenced or intimidated to allow the mining companies to get what they want. They hope to achieve their objectives through the dismembering of Congo and its partition into a series of microstates lacking financial resources and economic infrastructure, what might be termed a form of balkanization.

Nkrumah (1965) long ago noted that neo-colonialism is the breeding ground for the "limited wars" that have marked the last half-century. Neo-colonialism undermines the formation of larger regional or continental units that would make "limited war" impossible. "Limited war" is only possible where small or weak states exist. In such cases a decisive result can be won "by

landing a few thousand marines or by financing a mercenary force" (Nkrumah, 1965: xi).

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