

CONGO'S BUSINESS DREAMS FLATLINED BY VIOLENCE



BUTEMBO: A man and two goats rest at a gas station in Butembo. The high unemployment rate is considered 'normal' by Godefroid Kambere Matimbya, deputy mayor of the North Kivu province city of Butembo, which counts over a million inhabitants. Rich in minerals, forest and arable land, Butembo has been torn for over two decades by armed conflicts, with violence and insecurity impacting economic activities for more than 10 years. — AFP

BUTEMBO: The question is so absurd that Butembo's deputy mayor misses a beat before answering. What is the town's unemployment rate? "Unemployment is the norm around these parts," says Godefroid Kambere Matimbya. "There aren't any businesses." Butembo is no ghost town, but a city of 1.1 million in Democratic Republic of Congo's restive North Kivu province. Fabled for its natural riches, the lush east of the country abounds in forests, lakes, farmland and mineral-packed peaks. For many, its wealth is its curse. "Nothing has gone right for the past 10 years or so" in Butembo, Kambere says. In fact, for the past two decades rival armies and insurgents have ripped through North Kivu, fighting each other, stealing resources, uprooting and killing civilians in their wake.

Butembo—"the city of ficus trees" in Kinande, the language of the local Nande ethnic group—was once known for its coffee farming and a cornucopia of worldly goods. Electrical appliances, clothing, shoes: the coveted foreign items used to draw shopkeepers from neighboring provinces in one of the world's least developed countries. Today it would be too dangerous for traders to travel the roads to Butembo. Butembo also once boasted an industrial-scale factory, the Cobeki soft drinks maker. But it went out of business in the transitional period between DR Congo's second civil war (1998-2003) and its 2006 elections.

Living 'by the grace of God'

The period that followed, in the wake of President Joseph Kabila's election, has not treated the region any better. Around 700 people have been killed, mostly hacked to death, in attacks since October 2014 around Beni, its neighboring city to the north. Beni, now a shell of a city, no longer buys Butembo's goods. "The people have been run out of the fields, and now must live by the grace of God," Kambere says. "Insecurity is the big problem," says Butembo's Polycarpe Ndivito Kikwaya, president of the local branch of the Congolese Business Federation. Foreign goods do still make it to Butembo although only in "very, very small" numbers, shipped to the Kenyan port of Mombasa and then transported via Uganda.

But with the insecurity, "buyers no longer come since they are afraid of being robbed" along the way, he explains. Strangely, it is the period of civil war from the late 1990s that fires up economic nostalgia. Butembo then was the stomping ground of the RCD/K-ML, a militia group backed by neighboring Uganda. "Business was good," recalls Elie Kwiravusa, a member of Butembo's Civil Society Coordination grouping of local citizens. "During the rebellion, we could trade goods," he says. "The rebellion was profitable for people"—unlike today, he adds. — AFP

UNDER FIRE, ICC VOWS TO HUNT PERPETRATORS OF ATROCITIES

S AFRICA, BURUNDI, GAMBIA TO LEAVE INTERNATIONAL COURT

THE HAGUE: The International Criminal Court's prosecutor said her investigations into alleged war crimes would not be impacted by the plans of three African countries to withdraw from the court and she would keep going after the perpetrators of atrocities. Fatou Bensouda said her office would press ahead with the preliminary investigation in Burundi and her work had the support of more than 120 other member states. Gambia, South Africa and Burundi notified the United Nations in October and November of their plans to withdraw from the ICC.

The withdrawals become effective one year after the notification is filed. To date, all but one

of the court's 10 investigations have been in Africa and its five convicted suspects are from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Mali. The ICC rejects allegations of bias against African nations, arguing many of the cases were brought by African governments themselves and that it has 10 preliminary inquiries or investigations into alleged atrocities in Afghanistan, Colombia, Georgia, Iraq, the Palestinian Territories and Ukraine.

Bensouda, a Gambian former justice minister, said the court began its work in 2002 with overwhelming African support and that African countries had requested the ICC's intervention.

"Even if one country decides to withdraw from the ICC, this I believe, for the continent, speaking as an African, is a setback for the continent and this is also a regression for the continent," she said. Russia, which is not a member of the court but signed its founding Rome Statute, said this month it would remove its signature and the Philippines is considering withdrawing its membership.

'Don't look away'

Bensouda countered concerns of a mass departure of member states and said all other states had renewed their commitment to the court, which has a mandate to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The ICC is a court of last resort, only intervening in member countries when national jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to prosecute mass atrocities. Bensouda launched a preliminary investigation in Burundi in April after political violence killed hundreds of people and forced hundreds of thousands to flee abroad. "We will continue to do our work with respect to what we have started in Burundi," she said, saying its obligations under the Rome Statute remained until the one-year notification period ended.

If, during that time, prosecutors determine that crimes must be formally investigated, Burundi would be obligated to cooperate with the court, she said. In the Philippines, which joined the court in 2011, the prosecutor warned in October that the extrajudicial killing of thousands of alleged drug users and dealers could constitute crimes that fall under her jurisdiction. The allegations are not the subject of a preliminary investigation, the first legal step toward a prosecution. "It is important as prosecutor of the ICC to raise concerns," she said. "It is also important that I don't look away because this is exactly why this court was established." — Reuters



THE HAGUE: Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda waits at the court room of the International Criminal Court (ICC) ahead of a trial, at The Hague in the Netherlands. — AFP

IN GERMAN SCHOOLS, STEEP LEARNING CURVE FOR REFUGEES AND TEACHERS

HOCHHEIM AM MAIN: For 15-year-old Mustafa, the trickiest part about learning German is knowing when to use the articles der, die or das. "And the umlaut," his classmate Majd reminds him, sending both Syrian teens groaning in mock frustration at the vowel alteration, one of the quirks of German grammar. But they're not really complaining. Having escaped the fighting at home and survived the harrowing journey to Europe, they are glad to be back in school. For them, as for young refugees everywhere, it's the first step back to a normal life.

But they are fast learning that the hard work is only just beginning for pupils and teachers alike. Mustafa, Majd and their families were among the nearly 900,000 migrants who streamed into Germany last year. Around a third of them were minors, and the country now faces the Herculean task of absorbing the newcomers into its school system. The obstacles are formidable. Most of the youngsters don't speak a word of German on arrival and have usually missed months, if not years, of school. Many are also scarred by the experiences that led them to flee their homes in the first place. "It's a huge challenge," said Ilka Hoffmann, a board member of the GEW, Germany's largest teachers' union.

She estimates Germany will have to hire some 24,000 new teachers to cope with the influx, and that's without including the urgent need for more psychologists and counselors in schools. "Trauma manifests itself in different ways," Hoffmann said. "We're ill-prepared in that regard." The Kultusministerkonferenz, a grouping of the nation's state education ministries, has calculated that educating the child refugees will cost an extra 2.3 billion euros (\$2.5 billion) a year.

'Intense'

In German classrooms today, Chancellor Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das" (We can do it) motto about integrating the migrants is more than just a catchphrase. It's a daily assignment. Mustafa and Majd are enrolled in the Heinrich-von-Brentano school in Hochheim, a picturesque town west of Frankfurt. To cope with the refugee arrivals, the school has set up two so-called "intensive classes" for 22 pupils where the immediate focus is on learning German, the

same approach that has been taken nationwide.

In Mustafa's small classroom, where most of the students are from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the atmosphere is jovial, but their teacher Michael Smiraglia says there's no denying the daily difficulties. With pupils ranging from the gifted to those who are still learning the Latin alphabet, Smiraglia has to tailor his lessons to a range of levels and come up with several approaches to the same exercises. Then there's the added challenge of working with teens who have lived through traumatic events, which can trigger disruptive or antisocial behavior.

"I quickly found that the name 'intensive class' also meant it would be intense for me as a teacher," Smiraglia said, while his pupils, in halting German, read out a dialogue about ordering lemonade and ice cream. He says his background as a family counselor, which saw him work with traumatized youths, has proved "immensely helpful" in bonding with the class. "I have pupils aged 12 to 15 who have feared for their lives," the bespectacled, soft-spoken teacher says, stressing the importance of giving the teens a safe place to share their stories. "It's a gift for me when they open up to me because it

helps me understand them better and deal with things like inappropriate behavior."

Breaking the ice

For the students the real test of their progress will come when they move on from the cocoon of the intensive class to regular classes, where teachers have a curriculum to follow and may not have the time or tools to focus on their individual needs. To ease the transition, the Brentano school's refugee pupils already spend several hours a week with their German peers for lessons such as English, maths or sports.

The results are mixed, with Mustafa pointing out that language remains a barrier. "The teachers speak so fast, I don't understand much." But the mingling has helped break the ice between the newcomers and their German schoolmates, as has playing football during break times. "We play together and then we also learn a bit more German," says Mustafa. Generally though, the teens in the intensive classes admit they tend to stick together in their free time, speaking in their native tongues. "I don't have a lot of contact yet with the German kids," says 14-year-old Marjan from Afghanistan. "But everyone is very friendly." — AFP



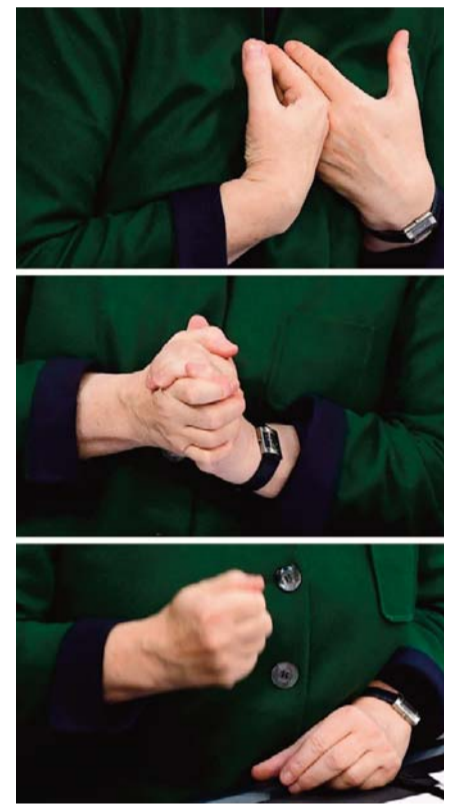
HOCHHEIM AM MAIN: Refugee students attend a lesson in their classroom at the Heinrich-von-Brentano-School in Hochheim am Main. — AFP

MERKEL WARNS AGAINST FAKE NEWS DRIVING POPULIST GAINS

BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned yesterday against the power of fake news on social media to spur the rise of populists, after launching her campaign for a fourth term. Speaking in parliament for the first time since her announcement Sunday that she would seek re-election next year, Merkel cautioned that public opinion was being "manipulated" on the internet. "Something has changed—globalization has marched on, (political) debate is taking place in a completely new media environment. Opinions aren't formed the way they were 25 years ago," she said. "Today we have fake sites, bots, trolls—things that regenerate themselves, reinforcing opinions with certain algorithms and we have to learn to deal with them."

Merkel, 62, said the challenge for democrats was to "reach and inspire people—we must confront this phenomenon and if necessary, regulate it." She said she supported initiatives by her right-left coalition government to crack down on "hate speech" on social media in the face of what she said were "concerns about the stability of our familiar order." "Populism and political extremes are growing in Western democracies," she warned. Last week, Google and Facebook moved to cut off ad revenue to bogus news sites after a US election campaign in which the global misinformation industry may have influenced the outcome of the vote.

But media watchers say more is needed to stamp out a powerful phenomenon seen by some experts as a threat to democracy itself. Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats are the odds-on favorites to win the German national election, expected in September or October 2017. But she is facing a strong challenge from a resurgent rightwing populist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has her liberal refugee and migration policy in its crosshairs. It is currently polling at



BERLIN: Combo of pictures shows German Chancellor Angela Merkel gesturing as she gives a speech during a session at the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) yesterday in Berlin. Merkel addressed the parliament on key domestic and foreign issues during a week of budget debate. — AFP

around 12-13 percent which could complicate the complex maths of coalition building after the poll. All of Germany's mainstream parties have for now ruled out forming an alliance with the AfD. — AFP

BACK TO THE 1930S NATIONALISM? HISTORIANS BATTLE COMPARISON

PARIS: In the 1935 novel "It Can't Happen Here", an ignorant American demagogue called Buzz Windrip becomes president, promising to make a depressed and fearful country proud, rich and safe again. Eight decades later, the satirical piece of fiction by Sinclair Lewis has gained a new lease of life, becoming a bestseller online following Donald Trump's stunning victory in the US election.

Observing Windrip at a presidential campaign event, a journalist describes him as "almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic." Written as virulent nationalism spread disastrously in Europe, and to a lesser extent in America, the book's revival reflects a surge of interest in one of the 20th century's darkest decades. The parallels between the current time and what one writer describes as the "Morbidity Age" of the 1930s has led to a fierce debate between historians about how far the comparison can be taken.

"We are facing a cataclysmic moment," renowned British writer and broadcaster Simon Schama warned following Trump's election, recalling that Hitler came to power via the ballot box in the 1930s. Antony Beevor, another best-selling heavyweight on European history, rebuked him. "It is too easy for alarmists to fall for the temptation of lazy historical parallels," he wrote. So, as the return of ultra-nationalism, xenophobia and anti-elitism spur Trump, anti-EU voters in Britain and a host of far-right parties in Europe, does history offer comfort or cause for concern?

First, the bad news

Some historians point to several striking parallels. The Great Depression of the 1930s, sparked by the Wall Street crash of 1929, has echoes of the global financial crisis caused by the sub-prime crash of 2008. Seething with anger at the financial and political elite, struggling or unemployed workers in the 1930s grew bitter and despondent and openly questioned the future for their children.

Many blamed foreigners or Jews,

and became attached to an idealized past, and worried about the spread of their enemies, abroad and at home. In the 1930s, the threat was Communism, now it is radical Islam. The expansion of transatlantic shipping, air mail, radio, industrial mass production and Hollywood cinema gave a sense of time accelerating and the world closing in. French historian Pascal Blanchard, who has written a book on the period, calls the 30s "the start of globalization" that generated many of the same cultural and economic anxieties visible today. Governments reacted by trying to protect their economies with tariffs and barriers, sparking an international trade war.

On the other side of the world, a nationalistic Asian power with territorial ambitions added to concerns. It was Japan, which invaded the present-day Asian hegemon China in 1931. In Austria, where the far-right came within 31,000 votes of winning a presidential election in May this year and could still win in next month's re-run, a far-right chancellor came to power in 1932 and destroyed the country's democracy. As fascism spread, the decade was defined by Germany looking to avenge its humiliation after World War I. Could Vladimir Putin's Russia, pained by the decline of the Soviet Union, be the modern equivalent?

Not so fast...

Ian Kershaw, a world authority on the rise of Hitler, admitted to AFP that during his research for a new book on Europe from 1914-1949 some similarities "make the hair stand up on the back of your neck." "But I don't think we are returning to the dark ages of the 1930s because there are big differences as well as superficial similarities," Kershaw insisted. Chief among the differences is the role of Germany, now a beacon for liberal democracy, committed to peace and a lynchpin of the stabilizing force that is the European Union, Kershaw says. The Europe of today, "admittedly flaky in parts when you look at Hungary and Poland", bears no comparison with the authoritarian states of 80 years ago. — AFP