

# Brazzaville—The Congo

## Dying Cities in An Unknown Civil War (1997)

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The four-month long 1997 Civil War in the Republic of Congo is a case-study in urban combat, since more than 62.5 percent of the Congo's more than three million people lived in cities. These citizens could be found in the capital, Brazzaville (1,059,000), the economic capital and coastal port of Pointe Noire (647,000), and Doilise (with 80,000 residents or half of the Congo's remaining urbanites, the Congo's third largest city).

Roads are rare in the Congo and air-fields more rare. The Congo River is one of two major national thoroughfares, and the 520-kilometer Congo-Ocean line between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire is the other. Congo-Brazzaville has had a violent history since receiving its nationhood in 1960. There have been a dozen coups, aborted coups, and one miniature civil war, as well as eight presidents. Four leaders were overthrown, one was assassinated, and another was executed.

Denis Sassou Nguessou ruled from 1979 until 1992, when democratic change swept parts of Africa after Soviet communism collapsed in Europe. Nguessou's African-style Marxism got along very nicely with Moscow, and, in his day, with French President Chirac.

In 1992 Pascal Lissouba was elected president in the country's first democratic elections, ending Nguessou's 13-year military rule. Lissouba inherited an economy

that was in critical condition and a country with a badly damaged infrastructure.

In the years following the election, both men built personal militias and attempted to incorporate them into the Federal Army. These lightly armed, generally undisciplined units would become the kindling for open warfare five years after Lissouba took office.

Since other nations relied on the Congo's natural resources, the civil war could not be fought out in a vacuum. One of the strategic power generation centers in the area is the Inga hydroelectric complex; its two dams which generate up to 2,700 megawatts of electricity out of an installed capacity of 100,000 megawatts are located on the

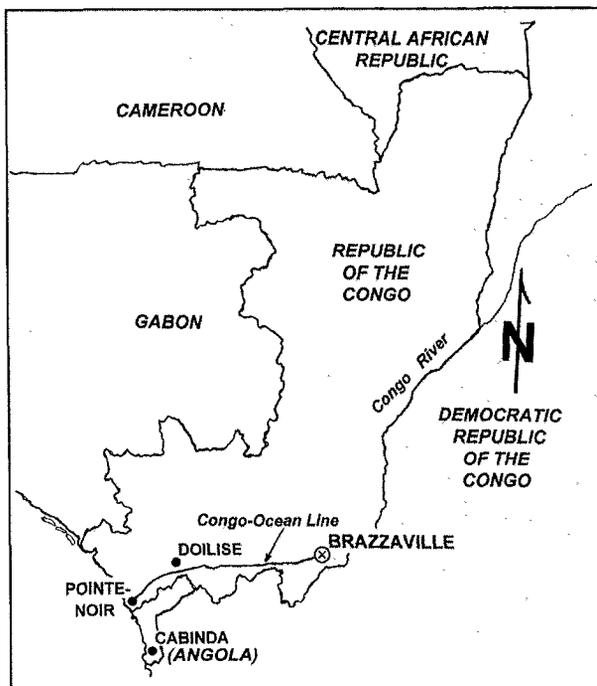
Congo river, one about 250 kilometers downstream from Kinshasa and the other about 50 kilometers upstream toward Matadi, the country's major seaport. Throughout the civil war, the Inga complex was operating at 35 percent of capacity (slightly above 1,500 megawatts) due to Congo's economic hardships. But Inga still supplied power to Kinshasa and the mining companies of Katanga in southeastern Congo, as well as northern Zambia and several countries in southern Africa.

The Congo was also Africa's fourth-largest oil producer and had vast untapped reserves. French and U.S. oil companies naturally took an interest in developments, but the standard of living was low and, since the nation was poor, some Congolese barracks didn't even have beds.

Lissouba began the war on an apparently firmer footing than his rivals; with the power of the Federal Army behind him, possession of the country's military bases, rail line, and major urban areas, as well as the country's bank accounts. But Nguessou, a northerner from a minority tribe, needed the support of the center and south of the oil-producing former French colony if he was to consolidate his hold over a nation with a history of bitter political and ethnic rivalry.

### The Civil War Starts

On the night of 4-5 June 1997, the Cobras, militia loyal to former president Nguessou, resisted



a Congolese Army attempt to arrest two members at Nguessou's residence in the northern Brazzaville suburb of Mpila. The men had been accused of fomenting unrest in the Cuvette region (northern Congo) in May. The Army unit that was sent was outgunned and within hours, the city echoed with gunfire as the Cobras and the Zulu militia loyal to Lissouba took up arms. By midday, fighting between the Cobra militia loyal to Nguessou and the troops and Zulus had spread from the northern districts of the capital to the city's center.

Within hours, Brazzaville had turned into a dangerous, chaotic field of gang warfare, fiefdoms, and marauding freelance gunmen. Most of the fighting took place along the streets of Poto-Poto, Moundali, Plateau, and Moukondo wards. Law and order broke down completely, the remnants of what used to be the national army fractured into ethnic-based factions loyal to regional warlords.

Two days later, any part of town had become a hazard—except for the still-neutral Bacongo. Munitions were obviously not in short supply. The Cobras seized the naval base on the Congo River and an armored regiment camp at Mpila shortly after hostilities broke out, where Nguessou's residence was located. Nguessou's forces received additional artillery pieces from Gabon.

Strange lulls would occasionally take place while the city was being sacked. At one point Nguessou's Cobras and their arch enemies the Zulus were looting Brazzaville's largest supermarket at the same time, so absorbed in plundering that they forgot to fight each other.

Nguessou's militias cut Brazzaville in two from the 7th to the 9th of June, using mortars, machineguns, grenades, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and tanks inside the city. Roadblocks sprang up across the city, and the government declared a dusk-to-dawn curfew. Lissouba's forces moved reinforcements into Brazzaville's center on the night of 7-8 June, with light tanks firing salvos of rockets on the working-class districts inhabited by Nguessou supporters.

With several thousand foreign nationals in the city, a French-American-

Belgian team was formed to airlift them out of harm's way. French units quickly moved into Brazzaville's Maya-Maya International Airport and set up an operations center at the aero club. Although the airfield was ostensibly out-of-bounds for the warring sides, Congolese militia units frequently fired over the site or fought close to it; some positions were placed only 100 meters away.

A scheduled Air France flight that was canceled on the 6th was able to leave the next day with 90 passengers on board. One French soldier was killed and five wounded in clashes with militiamen on the night of the 7th. While heavy weapons fire continued in central Brazzaville on the morning of the 8th, the evacuation of French nationals from danger areas under military escort also continued. They were escorted to official French locations in the city, in particular the French Embassy and the cooperation mission. The American airlift of expatriates was suspended because of the fighting, and an American diplomatic vehicle was shot at on the 8th.

Liaison officers of the regular Congolese Army helped French troops on the ground, but no evacuation order had been given for the 2,000 or so French nationals who lived in Brazzaville. They had been advised only to stay at home and keep in touch with the embassy by telephone.

About 500 French troops from other bases in Africa were due to arrive in Brazzaville on the 9th to back up the 450 already there. Six French light armored vehicles had to be flown in from Chad to ensure convoy protection to retrieve the remaining expatriates in the city.

By the evening of the 11th, the Brazzaville airport had become a strategic point for everyone in the Congo. The French Army had evacuated about 500 civilians aboard 12 planes, and the UN had chartered two planes to evacuate more than 200 personnel of the World Health Organization.

The 15th was the last day of the evacuation operation. Five rotation flights to Pointe-Noire and Libreville were scheduled, four by the French

Armed Forces and one by the UN, to evacuate the last foreigners from Brazzaville.

### The War Continues

On 5 July, both sides agreed to a cease-fire. Nguessou's spokesman, however, accused Lissouba's forces of continuing to reinforce their military positions by sending tanks and Liberian mercenaries as well as UNITA (Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) soldiers up from Pointe Noire. The rail line running east to west through the city became the dividing line between the militias. By 9 July the Cobras controlled two-thirds of the capital. While outnumbered, they proved to be better disciplined than their opponents.

Indecisive fighting in Brazzaville continued throughout July and August and into the fall, despite several attempts at diplomatic solutions. A UN peacekeeping force recruited from neighboring countries was also discussed, but it never materialized because the situation never stabilized enough for it to be deployed.

### Final Offensive

The situation around Pointe Noire over the 11-12 October weekend became unclear when the governments of Congo and Angola accused each other of aggressive moves. The Congolese military command asserted that Angolan troops had crossed the border, but Lissouba's forces claimed that the invaders were subsequently repulsed. Luanda, meanwhile, accused Congo of attacking Angolan territory.

On the 12th, Congolese troops were accused of having intercepted a column of Angolan soldiers in the southwest en route to Doilise (100 kilometers from Pointe Noire), and a complaint was lodged with the UN Security Council. Colonel Louembe, commander of Lissouba's Pointe-Noire Military Region, made the decision to surrender the economic capital, and thus spared it from futile destruction. The Pointe-Noire mayor's "Requin" (Shark) militiamen also avoided a fight with the invading Angolans.

About 1,000 Angolan troops, backed

## THE PREWAR CONGOLESE REPUBLIC ARMY

The following figures represent the open-source estimate of the prewar Congolese Republic Army. Presumably, not all of the major weapon systems worked. And it was difficult for media sources to track new shipments of small arms and light weapons during the course of the war.

While the Congolese Army was trained and modeled on Soviet forces for internal security rather than on force projection, it was a shaky organization even before the 1993-94 mini-Civil War. The prewar muster strength was about 8,000, with most units seriously under-strength and much of the equipment

presumed to be unserviceable. Eastern Bloc and Cuban advisors were withdrawn in the early 1990s. The army was traditionally recruited from the Mbouchi Kouyou area in the north. While a Presidential Guard battalion had been forming, the armored battalions were little more than strong companies.

Infantry battalion groups included the infantry battalion (apparently organized on the Eastern Bloc standard), a signals platoon, a light tank troop (3 x PT76 or Type 62), an artillery battery (generally eight tubes), an engineer troop, and a logistics group.

Infantry weapons included various

9mm submachineguns, 7.5mm MAS 49/56 and M24/29 light machineguns (LMGs), 7.62mm NATO FN-FAL, and CETME 58 rifles, 7.62mm AK47-AKM, RPD and RPK LMGs, 7.62x54Rmm RP-46, and 12.7mm DShK HEAVY mg. Support weapons included 57mm M18 recoilless rifles and RPG-7s.

The civilian police mustered a pre-war strength of about 2,000, with 20 companies scattered across the country. During the course of the fighting and afterwards, they appeared to be a force quite independent of the army.

### UNITS

Two Armored Battalions  
Two Infantry BN Groups  
One ParaCommando Battalion  
One Artillery Group  
One Engineer Battalion  
Independent Infantry Bn  
Signals Bn (-)  
Supply/Log. Bn

### MAJOR EQUIPMENT

#### TANKS:

20 x T-34/85  
11 x Type 62 Lt. Tanks  
5 x PT76  
15 x Type 59  
25 x T-54/55

#### VEHICLES:

25 x BRDM-1/2  
50 x BTR-50/60/152  
10 x OT-62

#### ARTILLERY:

82mm Mortars  
82mm Mortars  
10 x 120mm Mortars  
6 x 75mm M116 Pack Howitzers  
57mm ZIS2 ATGs  
76mm ZIS3 ATGs  
10 x 100mm M1944  
85mm Type 56 Field Guns  
8 x 122mm M30 (M1938)  
122mm Type 54  
122mm D-30  
130mm M46  
122mm BM21 MRL (about six)  
(About 50 working field guns total)

#### ANTI-AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS:

14.5mm ZPU-2/4  
8 x ZSU-23-4  
28 x 37mm M1939  
57mm S-60  
100mm KS-19

2 x Alouette III  
2 x SA 316  
2 x AS 365C

#### AIR FORCE:

22 x Combat Aircraft  
9 x helicopters

Captured at Pointe Noire's  
Agosino Neto airport military  
annex (12 October 97):

One operational Mi-24, one Hind  
being assembled  
Three Mi-8 'Hips'  
Two small Antonov transport  
planes (both operational)  
One MiG-21 being fitted out and  
Five MiG-21s needing serious  
repair  
Two BRDM armored cars  
Ten dilapidated MiG-17s

by armor, attacked Doilise, which would cut Lissouba's soldiers off from Loudima, a strategic town in the economically important region 400 kilometers from Brazzaville.

Also on the weekend of 11-12 October, Bernard Kolelas, former prime minister under Lissouba threw in his Ninja militia on Lissouba's side to recapture Brazzaville's airport, but this combined force was not able to stop the Angolan/Nguessou sweep through Brazzaville's southern suburbs. When Brazzaville's Maya-Maya airport was taken by Nguessou's forces, Angolan troops were reported there. The Cobras also destroyed two Hind helicopters during the battle for the capital's airport.

On the morning of the 13th, Lissouba loyalist units began a two-hour long

helicopter rocket attack on Cobra units that had taken control of the international airport on the 10th. A Nguessou MiG-21 retaliated on government positions in southern Brazzaville's suburbs, killing about 20 people, mostly soldiers.

Angola's ambassador originally told the UN that Angolan forces had mounted hot-pursuit raids into Congo-Brazzaville on 13 October against UNITA and then returned to their base in the oil enclave of Cabinda.

When the Cobras, with the help of some of Kolelas's men who had switched sides, took the presidential palace and the last pocket of resistance fell around midday on 14 October, the Battle of Brazzaville was over. Many of Nguessou's units ended the war grouped on a bridge marking the southern edge of the capital.

Nguessou loyalists claimed that they had been greeted as "liberators" in parts of the city formerly under the control of government forces. While dozens of Ninjas fell in the last battle, very few Nguessou militiamen were killed, because they had been preceded by several tanks (type and number unspecified).

On 15 October 1997, after five months of civil war, General Sassou Nguessou returned to power. President Lissouba fled Doilise, where he had been holed up since fleeing the capital, and after a brief stopover in Togo, arrived in Burkina Faso on the 19th, where he was offered refuge on "humanitarian grounds." Lissouba was last in Burkina Faso on 3 October, at the height of the war, to plead for Burkina Faso troops to take part in an African

Faso troops to take part in an African intervention force. This, of course, never materialized.

The Angolan troops suffered higher casualties than expected, and it was unclear whether their equipment was flown home or redeployed in other parts of Congo-Brazzaville where pockets of fighting continued as the Cobra militia units tightened their grip on the country.

### Arms Resupply

Arms deliveries by way of Angola, Gabon, and Senegal made it possible to equip Nguessou's militias, both before and during the height of the civil war. On the very day the war started, tons of very heavy cases (and T-shirts) took off from the Le Bourget airport in Paris and made a stopover in Franceville, Gabon, before Nguessou's men took delivery of them.

In August 1997, Lissouba got six Mi 8 and two Mi 24 helicopters (other reports limited to four Russian gunships, type unspecified). Lissouba's camp used the oil revenue regularly paid to the Congo presidency to buy the helicopters and pay Ukrainian pilots. Other equipment (such as light tanks and smaller artillery pieces) were expected from Russia and Belarus, but had not yet arrived when Brazzaville fell.

Around the same period, Nguessou's militia got MiG-21s and SA-7 MANPADS surface-to-air missiles. Angola had been funneling weapons and logistical support to the Cobras, apparently in retaliation for Lissouba's support to UNITA.

The Angolans offered the port of Luanda to receive nearly 200 tons of Brazilian arms, which were forwarded through Gabon to Sassou's supporters. Western aid agencies and news services alleged that both sides recruited professional soldiers, including Israelis, Rwandan government forces (FAR), Hutu Interahamwe militia, FAZ (former Zairian President Mobutu's Army and Presidential Guard), Gabonese, Chadians, Moroccans, Central Africans, and also Libyans, as well as Liberians and

Angolan UNITA rebels. Whether these were employed as trainers, unit leaders, or weapons systems specialists (save for the Ukrainian helicopter pilots) was never specified.

A South African firm was also accused of being involved, but publicly denied the allegations, as such support would be contradictory to their existing contracts with Luanda. At the end of the campaigns, some Russians, French, and Belgians were held on suspicion of aiding Lissouba in Pointe Noire. Most claimed to be civilian cargo pilots and apparently were later released.

### Lessons Learned

Tactical information from this war is sparse and, since this account was taken from open sources, back-filtered through a wide variety of journalists. From the very first firefight, Lisbon's Army and his "cookies" militia were not prepared to fight a determined opposition in either a conventional or a guerrilla war.

Most of the fighting during the June-October period was limited to the capital and its surrounding suburbs (this later changed drastically with the renewal of fighting in December 1998). Predictably, the war caused an overnight refugee problem as the already strained city services completely collapsed. The economic capital of Pointe Noire managed to stay neutral, because it was far removed from the tribal dividing line and had vocal representatives of the civilian population.

Since regular army units were few, the Congo Civil War could be more accurately described as "conventional mob warfare." Limited television footage showed unidentified fighters using the "spray and pray" method of fire control and in particular Lissouba's forces, both militias and Army units, were continually referred to as undisciplined. While both sides looted, Nguessou's fighters were apparently less distracted. Major weapon systems, such as tanks, helicopter gunships and fighters, were committed in small groups and

most frequently as individuals. Tanks were used without finesse, as little more than mobile artillery, and coordinated attacks were apparently beyond the capabilities of most commanders. The RPG, mortar, and artillery piece dominated Brazzaville's battlefields.

Save for the Ukrainian Hind pilots and crews, the effectiveness of non-native and "professional" soldiers is impossible to determine as of this writing. But if they had been truly effective, one side or the other would have developed a clear advantage before the Angolan ground offensive.

The Angolan decision to commit a ground force—roughly one infantry regiment with one attached tank company—turned the tide in favor of Nguessou. Battered as it was from nearly 25 years of constant fighting with the rebel UNITA, the Angolan Army had accrued substantial combat experience. Attacks, in conjunction with Nguessou allied units, appeared coordinated with what little air support could be mustered from Nguessou (the Angolan Air Force's own combat and transport assets were bogged down dealing with UNITA and supporting their ally Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo).

It didn't take much to roll up Lissouba's units, even when neutral militias threw in with the doomed President. Like many wars, however, the real problems came after the shooting stopped on 15 October 1997.

Fighting flared again in December 1998, and still gives no signs of abating.

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