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Blood River

Tim Butcher

Michel was at work in his radio station, a standard-issue UN container at the garrison headquarters built in the ruin of a Belgian-era cotton factory on the outskirts of Kalemie. He was deep in thought, trying to work out how to deal with an imminent public-relations crisis: peacekeepers in Kalemie and elsewhere across the Democratic Republic of Congo had been caught paying local girls, under the age of consent, for sex. Michel had just come from a meeting where the scale of the problem had been revealed. He seemed happy for the distraction. I introduced Benoit, an aid worker from Care International, and told him my worries about security. 'Benoit says there are mai-mai [local rebels] all along these tracks. Do you know anyone local who could help me get through?'

'There is one person I know who dares to travel regularly through the bush. He is a pygmy and runs a small aid group here in town. His name is Georges Mbuyu.'

Benoit and I piled into Michel's Jeep and drove to a derelict Belgian villa. A small man wearing plastic flip-flops emerged. When he saw Michel, he grinned. The pair greeted each other warmly in Swahili. I told him I wanted to go overland from here to the Congo river, to follow the route used by the explorer Stanley, but needed help with security. He thought for a moment. 'I cannot remember the last time a white man went through that area. It has been many, many years. But I know some of the mai-mai near town. Some are not rebels, they are just villagers who want to protect themselves. These are good people and I can talk to them.'

'Would you be prepared to accompany me, by motorbike, towards the river?' I tried not to sound desperate. For a moment, Georges was quiet. 'I cannot go with you all the way, only some of it, but I think you will be safe if I go with you.'

It was Benoit who spotted the problem. 'We have only two bikes, there is no space for Georges, and how would he get back here to Kalemie?'

Michel was optimistic. 'My friend knows a man with a motorbike, who might be prepared to rent it.' Half an hour later, a grubby-looking man called Fiston Kasongo appeared. His eyes were bloodshot and his breath smelt of alcohol. 'If you want a motorbike, I am your man,' he said. He could barely

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stand, he was so drunk. He led us down a track where he had hidden a bike in some long grass. 'There is my bike. It is a great bike.'

I could see Benoit was not convinced. But Georges was game, and that was enough for me. Fiston wanted $125. Benoit's eyes flickered disapprovingly, so I offered $50. Fiston did not hesitate. He shook my hand, and asked for a down payment to buy some fuel. I gave him $20 and he disappeared, weaving along a footpath through the high grass in a cloud of blue exhaust smoke that spoke of an engine in distress.

As I emerged from the house on the morning we were to leave Kalemie, Benoit appeared to be wrestling with eels. It was still dark, and with my head torch all I could make out was his shape, leaning over the back of one of the motorbikes, struggling with various long, black things with a springy and clearly disobedient life of their own: he was using old bicycle inner tubes as luggage straps to attach my kit to the back of his motorbike.

Wearing a bright-yellow plastic raincoat, with heavy gloves, kneepads, goggles and black, shiny wellington boots, he looked like a ninja North Sea trawlerman. The 100cc motorbike was now sitting heavily on its rear wheel, with my rucksack, a jerrycan and various other pieces of gear bulkily taking up most of the rider's seat. Above the handlebars was another hulking arrangement of fuel bottles, water canisters and other bundles. And on top of it all, Benoit was wriggling into two rucksacks - one on his back, the other slung in reverse across his chest.

He could see I was sceptical. 'It's OK; these bikes are amazingly strong.' I found him reassuring. The same cannot be said for Fiston, who had turned up stinking of booze, and swaying extravagantly. Benoit would ride alone with his unfeasibly large load; Odimba, Benoit's colleague from Care International, would follow with Georges as a passenger; and I would sit behind the sozzled Fiston and pray for him to sober up.

The engines of the three bikes stirred into life. In silent Kalemie even these puny machines sounded impressive. I love starting a journey very early in the day: it offers the comforting sense that if something goes wrong, there is still the whole day to sort it out. As we left Kalemie before dawn that August morning, I felt a strong sense of wellbeing.

We were within a few degrees of the Equator, but the early-morning temperature was comfortable and the bush was still relatively open savannah, not the dark, claustrophobic hothouse of true rainforest. With good rivers, heavy dew and rich soil, no wonder the early Belgian colonialists believed they had found an Eden (so rich is the Congolese soil, agriculturalists boast you can actually watch the forest growing if you stand still long enough).

I was bouncing happily along, tucked up behind Fiston, when I saw Odimba slowing, peering down at his rear wheel. The tiny form of Georges slipped off the back of Odimba's bike. Flat tyre. Within a few minutes Odimba had

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undone the wheel, slipped off the tyre and begun searching for the leak. It reminded me of repairing punctures on my bicycle as a child.

While Odimba dried and prepared the inner-tube hole, Benoit cut a patch from his store of old, recycled tubes, the ones he used as luggage straps. Having cut the right shape, he used a file to scour the surface of the patch. 'It will take 12 minutes for the glue to be ready,' Benoit announced with typical exactness.

I turned back to the feathery grasslands and listened for the sound of birdlife. There was almost none. Georges explained that hunger drove villagers to trap and kill all the birds.

Exactly on cue, 12 minutes after administering the glue, Benoit and Odimba replaced the tyre and we were off again. And exactly 20 minutes later we had our first encounter with the mai-mai.

The track had narrowed to a thin file between dense undergrowth, and I saw Benoit slow to negotiate a tricky bit of ground. All of a sudden he braked and flung his weight to the left. Slowly from the bush on the right side of the track emerged two gun barrels - rusting Kalashnikovs - held in the bony, dirty hands of two anxious-looking people, a teenage girl and a man old enough to be her grandfather.

I swallowed drily. Georges turned back towards me and asked me quietly for cigarettes. What I saw were the descendants of the African tribesmen met by Stanley. They were wearing the same necklaces of feathers, bones and fetishes he had described, but their clothes were more modern and they had nothing on their feet. I watched Georges rummage in his shoulder bag for a wad of pamphlets.

I recognised them as publications from the UN mission base in Kalemie, a sort of local newsletter with photographs of UN-sponsored events and good-news stories about the peacekeeping mission. These seemed to have a magical effect on our two armed interrogators and they immediately lowered their weapons and began to laugh and relax.

Through Georges's smiles, he told me what was going on. 'They are guarding their village. It's a few hundred metres over there in the bush, but they know that if trouble comes, it comes along this track. They told me there is a bigger mai-mai group in the area, and they have heard of villages being attacked and people killed. There is no problem with these guys, but we must be aware of the other group. They will definitely give us trouble.'

The mai-mai of eastern Congo are known for their cruelty, violence, even cannibalism, but in this old man defending his village I saw something less threatening. He belonged to mai-mai who act like a Congolese version of Dad's Army, trying to protect their villages from armed attack by the many outsiders who have run amok here for the past 40 years. These local mai-mai do not cause problems because they rarely move far from their homes. It

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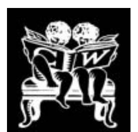

is the ones who wander who cause the chaos. The nomads survive by plundering whatever they can find.

Benoit was anxious to get on and, with a nod from Georges that indicated the danger had passed, he restarted his bike and careered off down the track. We followed, but we had not got far when we had our second flat tyre, this time on Fiston's bike on which I was riding pillion. I felt the rear go soggy, and then we were down to the hard rim, bumping to a halt.

After the calm of the first repair, this second one was much more tense. 'Look at this inner tube, Fiston,' Benoit said sharply. 'There are more patches than original tube. It must have been mended 20 times. And look here at the side of the tyre. It is worn away. It's almost useless.' My early-morning excitement had long gone and I was trying to calculate the impact of these delays.

After Kalemie, my next safe haven was in the town of Kasongo, where Benoit's Care International colleagues were based, but that was still almost 500km away. With marauding mai-mai in the area, Benoit knew that to dawdle was dangerous. But with these breakdowns, it was looking increasingly likely we would have to overnight in the bush.

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