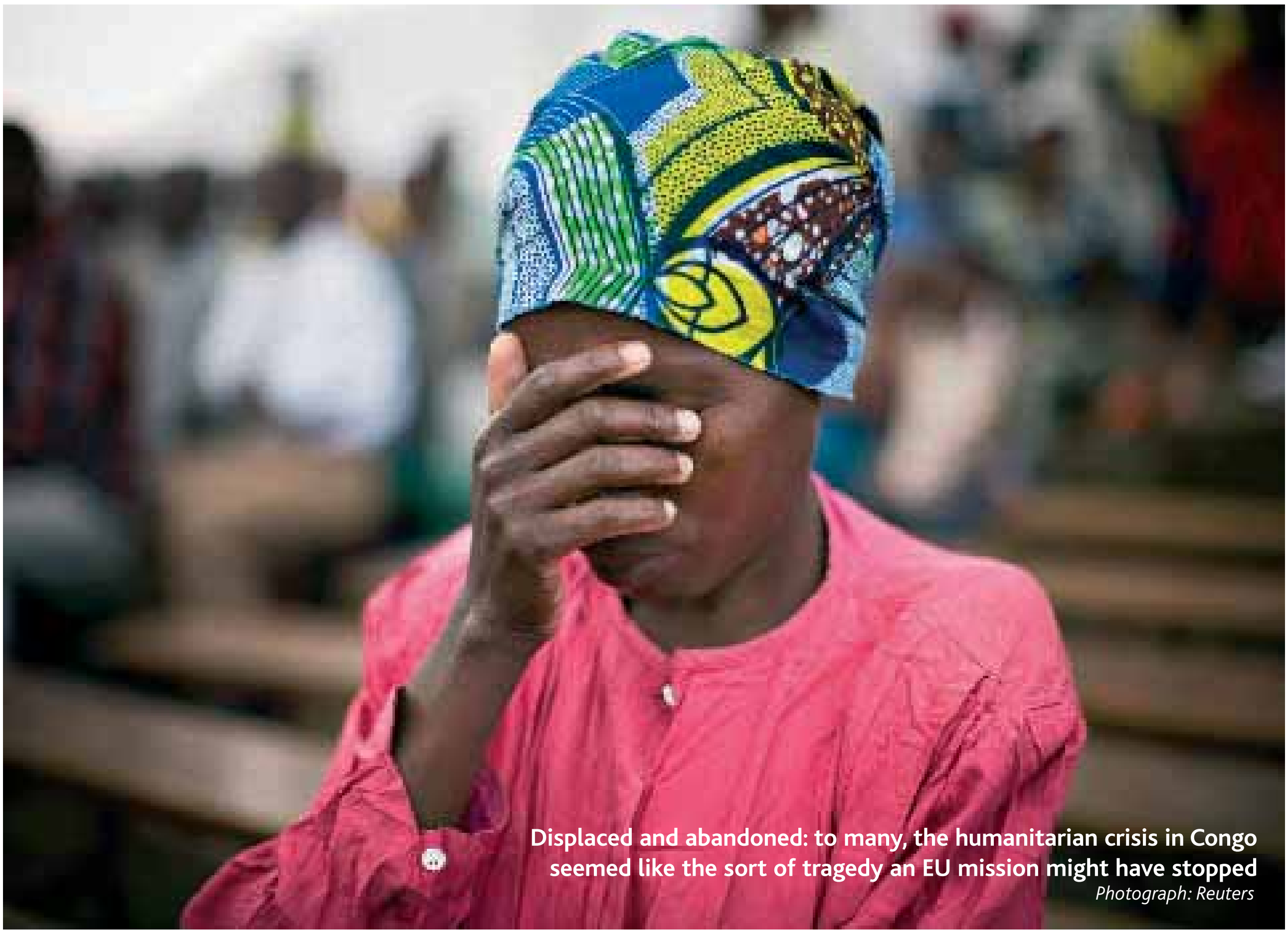
VIEWPOINT

The EU's failure to agree on a military mission in Congo comes at a time of deepening mistrust within Africa of Europeans' intentions, argues **Richard Gowan**

GOOD INTENTIONS, BAD OUTCOMES



Displaced and abandoned: to many, the humanitarian crisis in Congo seemed like the sort of tragedy an EU mission might have stopped

Photograph: Reuters

> The Congo crisis tested three widely proclaimed EU priorities: its partnership with Africa, its strategic support to the UN, and its belief in the need to protect the vulnerable

In July 1898, a French military expedition reached Fashoda, an isolated fort on the Nile. The troops had marched for over a year across Africa to claim the outpost for the Empire – but the British were there too, with gunboats. For a few months, it seemed the stand-off might spark war. But Paris decided that this would be futile, and the French withdrew.

This was the imperial game at its most bizarre. Yet France's retreat signalled a strategic shift: disputes with Britain over Africa would now be decided by diplomacy, not force.

The French remained ready to use force against others in Africa, most obviously Africans. Even last year, French troops were in action to defend allies in Chad and Djibouti. But the Fashoda incident is a classic case of a major power recognising the limits to its military options – the political cost of picking a fight was simply too high.

Such moments of recognition litter history, although they often come too late. Outgoing Israeli premier Ehud Olmert recently described the 2006 Lebanon war as "the first war in which the military leadership understood that classic warfare has become obsolete." The European Union is the product of similar, tragically belated, insights in the 1950s.

And in the autumn of 2008, the EU's leaders collectively recognised their lack of credible military options in response to the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

That crisis – with rebel forces outmanoeuvring UN peacekeepers and displacing 250,000 civilians – looked like the sort of humanitarian catastrophe the EU is supposed to stop. The Union had, after all, sent troops to ensure stability in the Congo in 2003 and 2006.

This time, calls for a European intervention came from an astonishingly broad variety of voices: from former Czech President Vaclav Havel and former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer to Oxfam and the UN itself. But while EU ministers met on the crisis repeatedly, they consistently failed to offer troops.

Diplomats were quick to blame each other: France and Belgium wanted to act, but Britain and Germany were against it, and so on. The net result may have been the EU's Fashoda.

The Congo crisis tested three widely proclaimed EU priorities: its partnership with Africa, its strategic support to the UN, and its belief in the need to protect the vulnerable. Yet even combined, these priorities did not create enough momentum for military action.

There are good tactical reasons why. Even if EU troops had deployed at top speed, the rebels would have had time to take hostages, including UN peacekeepers.

"Rapid reaction" is a strategic goal for the EU. But you can never be rapid enough. As New York University's William Easterly says, "killers are much quicker than interveners."

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Interventionists unite: European publics may genuinely believe in humanitarian missions, but many in Africa remain wary of their former colonial masters' aims

Moreover, many of the EU members with significant recent experience of peace operations in Africa – including not only France but Ireland and Sweden – already had soldiers in the EU operation in Chad. This did not necessarily rule out going to Congo. As prospects for an EU operation receded, the Swedes looked into contributing troops under UN command. Yet the sense of European overstretch reduced the chances of mounting a new mission.

The EU's militaries, busy rotating troops through Afghanistan, have been suffering intervention fatigue. This has been reinforced by the financial crisis, which almost certainly means budget cuts ahead. The Chad mission is expected to cost roughly €400 million.

Justifying yet another expensive mission in Africa would have been difficult, especially as reinforcing the existing UN mission in Congo offered a comparatively cheap alternative.

Put these factors together and it is reassuringly easy to argue that the EU stayed away from Congo for purely tactical reasons. Had the timing been better, or the security situation more promising, there is no way the Europeans would have stayed away. By this logic, the crisis was tragic and an embarrassment for the EU, but not really a turning point for European security cooperation. The EU's no-show in Congo was overshadowed by its deployment of a naval force off Somalia to fight pirates and protect aid convoys.

But the failure to intervene in Congo may reflect deeper flaws in the EU's attitude to fragile states. To see why, it is necessary to go back to 2003, when the EU sent its first, largely French, military mission to Congo to back up endangered UN forces in a crisis very like that of 2008.

That was essentially a by-product of the Iraq war. It was meant to prove that the EU could still launch operations in spite of its divisions over Iraq, and that the Union still had a shared commitment to the UN too. The mission also showed that Western military expeditions didn't have to be about regime change. This won African support, with South Africa sending attack helicopters to help out – rather more than most EU states actually provided.

The operation was a short-term success. It contributed to an image of Europe as the "good interventionist" in contrast to the US – an image affirmed by more expeditions to Africa and the European deployment to Lebanon in 2006.

But the EU's efforts are not always so impressive. In 2006, invited to patrol with Brazilian peacekeepers in Haiti, I was taken to a strong-point in the slums of Port-au-Prince. A platoon of marines with six armoured cars watched over horrific poverty. Across the road was a pristine playground funded by the European Commission. It was entirely empty.

European enthusiasm for a peace operation can be more seriously counter-productive. Take East Timor. Portugal, the former colonial power, has been a leading supporter of the UN's efforts to assist the young Pacific state over the last decade.

One result is that the Timorese have adopted Portuguese as their official language, including in education. This is madness: nobody uses Portuguese in Asia. The policy will retard Timor's growth.

Yet the real challenge for the EU is neither wastefulness nor well-meaning but silly aid projects – both are trademarks of all interventions everywhere, whoever is in charge. Instead, it is growing international scepticism about Western and even UN interventions.

It is hard for European publics to understand this scepticism. Most genuinely see engaging in somewhere like Congo as a humanitarian enterprise – polls in Germany, Spain and Sweden in December found majority support for an intervention.

But to many in Africa and elsewhere, it is harder to forget colonialism – or ignore the competition for raw materials that is pushing Congo up European agendas. Even Western interest in tiny East Timor looks self-interested if you note that it has oil and gas reserves that China might like to get hold of.

In this context, many developing countries are generally suspicious of European interference in their neighbourhoods. In a recent study for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Franziska Brantner and I showed that international support for European positions in human rights votes at the UN has fallen significantly over the last decade.

This is particularly notable among African governments – even African democracies now support European stances on rights less than half the time. The distrust is infecting how the UN deals with troubled states. South Africa led opposition to European and US efforts to get a Security Council resolution responding to last year's electoral violence in Zimbabwe.

African countries with peacekeepers in Darfur have also clashed with the West over the International Criminal Court's decision to indict the Sudanese president for war crimes. They argue (not without justification) that this manoeuvre has put their troops in danger.

If it is hard for Europeans to get consensus on human rights and international justice, it is not surprising that they worry about how their own military interventions are seen. We still want to be perceived as good interventionists. But this can lead to strange results.

Preparing the operation in Chad, EU planners wanted to distinguish their peacekeepers from French troops who had previously protected the (ugly) regime there. When it turned out that Irish troops had very similar battle dress to the French, Brussels insisted they get new uniforms. This has not stopped Chadian militias shooting at the EU force.

In the Congo case, African governments with their own interests in the country quickly proposed sending troops to fight alongside the UN, possibly to forestall suggestions of an EU presence. This was a complicated manoeuvre – some of those involved (like Rwanda) back Congo's rebels while others (Angola and South Africa) support the government. But all seemed inclined to sort things out – or if necessary, fight it out – locally.

Events outside Africa also suggest that the age of "good interventionism" is over. Russia has subverted a lot of the arguments the EU uses to justify its actions, claiming the Georgian war as necessary to defend its "peacekeepers" and vulnerable civilians. And if the basic case for EU interventions was that they were better-intentioned than their US equivalents, the departure of the Bush administration makes the contrast harder to make.

How should the EU respond? If humanitarian intervention looks weak, some activists would like to preserve the "humanitarian" bit, saving lives for its own sake. Early on in the Congo crisis, it was suggested that EU troops could go on an "aid only" mission.

> **The EU is not the Red Cross. It still needs access to raw materials and energy supplies, and so its decisions will never be seen as solely altruistic**

This is a noble cause. But the EU is not the Red Cross. It still needs access to raw materials and energy supplies, and so its decisions will never be seen as solely altruistic.

More hawkish analysts think that Europe should tilt the other way, and free interventionism from humanitarian pretensions. The EU should be clearer about its interests and how using force can meet them. If propping up Chad's government is in the European interest, let's say so and pick off any rebels or bandits that threaten our friends!

There is just one problem: can you imagine making that case in the Council of Ministers? If you cannot, you have to ask what the EU's other options are. Perhaps future operations will resemble the naval deployment off Somalia, containing problems emerging from failing states rather than intervening directly.

But the EU cannot avoid addressing the causes of conflict altogether. It needs to reinforce its efforts to build up effective governments worldwide, training up specialists who can fix everything from drains to legal systems. And it needs pragmatic diplomacy to persuade developing countries to overcome their suspicions of Europe.

The EU still needs to boost its military muscle as well. One day, a crisis like Congo may cause the EU to intervene fast and hard in a failing state. But it will only dare to do so if they have reversed the broad strategic trends militating against European interventionism.

Like Fashoda for the French, Congo has brought home the EU's limitations as a global power. The real test is whether it accepts those limitations, or tries to overcome them.

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