

Rebel Attacks Fuel Gun-Making In Eastern Congo

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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By Michelle Faul

The weapons on display are all homemade: menacing-looking hunting knives, lances made of sticks topped with metal spears, long-barrelled shotguns.

For decades, people in this Congolese town have made guns. But the industry has become a roaring business as people in this remote northeastern region arm themselves against the fearsome rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army.

In this town overrun by refugees from attacks on surrounding villages, master forger Jules Zunga has been making guns for nearly 50 years.

In the shade of a mango tree drooping with unripe green fruit, he uses a machete, a knife and a saw to model the gun stock from a piece of wood. As it takes on the familiar shape, he carves a shaft to fit into a pipe that forms the barrel.

The wood comes from the surrounding forest, the metal pipes from a never-completed program to channel water from a nearby river.

Zunga's guns sell for \$30 to \$40. A second-hand rifle, such as the pre-World War II Browning that hangs on the shoulder of farmer Benoit Kumbongba, costs about \$100.

The most difficult part, Zunga says, is forging the trigger mechanism.

"Those young chaps think anyone can do this. But if you get this part wrong, the barrel explodes when you try to shoot, and we have quite a few accidents this way," he said.

Many more accidents occur when people make bullets. A member of the town's self-defense force, which twice has defeated attacking rebels, holds up a hand to show half his second finger blown away.

Joseph Anidauwe, a health worker, says it happened when he was moving sulfur from a matchstick to the bronze end of a bullet.

People use spent cases to make their bullets, collecting the metal from used batteries and chopping them up into pellets. They stuff the pellets into the bullet cases, fill the end with dry grass, slip on the cap and then use sulfur to force the explosion when the bullet exits the gun barrel.

Anidauwe says town residents have become so expert in the craft, "we should just set up our own munitions factory."