



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on the Democratic Republic of the Congo February 2012

*If democracy is the power of the people, by the people and for the people, one must respect the people. In the current situation, the people battered, bruised and frustrated, watch powerless, a process that has never reflected its will and which appears in places to be nothing more than an arrangement between political actors... We want peace... It is in the name of peace that the Church will continue to call political leaders to justice, love and truth.*

-- National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), January 11, 2012

#### **BACKGROUND**

The conflict in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continued throughout 2011. It has caused an estimated 3-5 million deaths since 1998, making it what observers have called “the world’s deadliest conflict since World War II.” People continue to be driven from their homes. The systematic and brutal rape of thousands of women and girls, and increasingly men and boys, by armed groups is reportedly the worst in the world today.

The violence and resultant suffering persist for several reasons. First, the central government is weak and suppresses opposition in order to stay in power while many officials benefit from the illegal sale of minerals out of eastern Congo. Second, the Congolese army is rife with corruption, poorly paid, and some elements of the army actually run a number of the illegal mines in eastern Congo. Two foreign militia groups, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) continue to attack communities, illegally exploit mineral resources, and have not been brought under control by the Congolese army nor have civilians been protected from attacks. Third, in eastern DRC local ethnic groups clash over citizenship and access to land and mineral resources, and gather support from neighboring countries. This gives rise to numerous smaller militia groups. The UN has substantial forces in the DRC as well, but they are largely limited to stabilization activities instead of proactively defending people from militia attacks.

Conflict over land, ethnicity, and natural resources has a long history in Eastern Congo. When the Belgian colonial power forced tens of thousands of Rwandans into eastern Congo over 100 years ago, it launched an enduring conflict over who is an indigenous Congolese and has the right to land in the area. When the Rwandan army pushed the FDLR, a largely Hutu force, into Eastern Congo in 1994, this huge influx of people militarized the conflict over indigenous ethnicity and land. Many Congolese militia groups sprang up to defend their ethnic group and their land.

In 2011 the DRC held its second presidential and legislative elections since the end of the Mobutu era. Prior to the election, the Parliament revised the constitution to eliminate a second round Presidential vote even if no candidate won more than 50% of the votes in the first round. According to official results, incumbent President Joseph Kabila won the election with 49% of the vote while Etienne Tshisikedi got 32%. Throughout the campaign and after results were published, the government arrested and intimidated opposition party candidates and their party members, resulting in about 40 deaths. The large majority of international observers concluded that the election results lacked credibility due to logistical problems and fraud. The U.S. Government stated that the fraud and mismanagement was such that it is not possible to declare definitively which candidate won the election.

**Conflict Minerals:** There is one sign of progress. The Congo Conflict Minerals law, passed in 2010, offers the chance to control the illegal buying and export of these natural resources and thus end the financing of the militia groups. The Securities and Exchange Commission is now developing the regulations that will require companies to study their mineral supply chain and to declare the source of the minerals that go into their products. This reported information should also be made public so civil society in and outside of the DRC can confirm its veracity and monitor companies’ implementation of all regulations. (See Backgrounder on Extractives.)

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN DRC

The Catholic Church is a major institution in the DRC. Fifty-five percent of DRC's 60 million people are Catholic, making it the largest Catholic population in Africa. In the absence of functioning government structures, the Catholic Church, along with other churches, has for decades provided most of the basic services such as health care and education. Catholic Relief Services supports the Church with a multi-sector relief and development program throughout the DRC. In the last few years it has significantly expanded its programs in the East.

The Catholic Church deployed 30,000 election monitors during the recent election. The Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a scathing statement on the elections that declared: "We believe that the electoral process was tainted by serious irregularities that bring into question the published results. We urge the election organizers to call up the courage and the honesty to draw the conclusions that are required." The Bishops' Conference characterized the process of compiling the final results "shameful for the country" and called on the government to admit its errors and open a dialogue. The Church warned that the government runs the risk of creating a serious crisis that would be difficult to resolve and called on political leaders to be politically mature. The bishops also urged the government's electoral commission to correct the errors that have undermined people's confidence or resign. Thus far, the Government has not responded.

## USCCB POSITION

Helping to end the conflict in the DRC is an important priority for the USCCB. The Bishops' Conference and CRS were strong supporters of the Congo Conflict Minerals Act that passed in 2010. In October 2011 Bishop Nicolas Djomo, the President of the Congolese Episcopal Conference and Sister Marie-Bernard Alima, Secretary General of the National Peace and Justice Commission, visited the United States to advocate for greater assistance to the electoral process. They met with the Securities and Exchange Commission to urge the adoption of rigorous regulations that will end illegal minerals exploitation and provide transparent information to the DRC and international civil society for monitoring purposes.

**ACTION REQUESTED:** The United States should:

- 1) Work with other international donors and the UN to resolve the electoral impasse in a way that provides transparency of election results and initiates a national dialogue that reflects the will of the people.
- 2) Continue to fund long-term development assistance to Eastern Congo and the UN peacekeeping mission sufficiently so it can fulfill its mandate to provide civilian security and weaken the FDLR and the LRA through peaceful means.
- 3) Collaborate with international partners and with the Congolese Government to build a professional, disciplined, and well-paid national armed force committed to the respect of the human rights of all people.
- 4) Implement regulations to the Congo minerals law that will reduce, if not end, the illegal mineral trade.
- 5) Help prevent and respond to sexual violence with assistance to survivors, their families and communities.
- 6) Strengthen democracy, transparency and accountability by building effective local government structures and an independent judiciary and by promoting civil society participation.

**For further information:** Visit [www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) or contact *Stephen R. Hilbert*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3196 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), [shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:shilbert@usccb.org)