

Forced to Flee: The Plight of Congolese Refugees

Migration and Refugee Services/
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Background

In 1999 Cardinal Theodore McCarrick lamented the situation confronting the Congolese people, “who for decades have suffered from the consequences of economic chaos, civil war, misgovernment, official corruption, and external intervention.” Nearly fifteen years later, the bishops continued to condemn the ongoing violence in the region that has taken the lives of 3 to 5 million people and which represented “the world’s deadliest conflict since World War II.”

The reasons for the long term violence and suffering in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) include a weak central government that suppresses opposition to maintain its authority, a corrupt military whose leadership often work toward their own enrichment, the interference of foreign militia groups into the DRC’s internal affairs, and continuing struggles over control of land and mineral resources. With violence continuing to affect Congolese civilians, it is not surprising that many try to flee their violent conditions to a place of safety. One consequence is a refugee crisis of significant proportions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that since the beginning of 2012 as many as two million Congolese have been internally displaced and at least another seventy thousand have fled into Rwanda and Uganda. This is in addition to the tens of thousands of other Congolese who had



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already escaped into a surrounding country. Of these populations women are particularly vulnerable, as many of them cope with the loss of their husbands and children, and still others with the trauma of sexual violence.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops Respond

In October 2011, a delegation that included bishops from the United States and staff from Migration and Refugee Services/United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, visited Uganda to examine the plight of Congolese refugees living there. While Ugandans are generally welcoming of these refugees, many problems

persist: Congolese refugees trying to sell their wares in the markets of Kampala are often harassed by local officials, health care for Congolese refugees is generally unavailable, and protections for Congolese women in particular is virtually non-existent--thus leaving them open to exploitation and harassment. Access to educational opportunities are severely limited for refugee minors, thus severely restricting the breadth of opportunities that would otherwise be available to them. In response to these findings the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has offered policy recommendations to U.S. government officials and policy makers that aim at achieving increased protections for these vulnerable populations. These include:

- The resettlement of Congolese women at risk and other vulnerable populations should be expanded in Uganda. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has agreed to resettle fifty thousand Congolese over the next four years. This is a promising start in which MRS/USCCB expects to play a prominent role.
- Assistance should be increased to meet educational costs for Congolese refugee minors in Kampala and the settlements, along with the provision of more health and psycho-social services.
- Shelters should be constructed and operated on an ongoing basis for vulnerable women and vulnerable children, including unaccompanied refugee minors, in Kampala and the settlement camps.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Refugee populations are in need of your assistance, both through material support when they arrive and continual advocacy efforts on their behalf. To learn more about this situation and how you can help advocating on behalf of Congolese and other refugee populations, please visit: <http://www.usccb.org/about/resettlement-services/how-to-help.cfm>.
- If you are interested in assisting MRS continue its important work with migrants and refugees, please consider making a donation to the National Catholic Migration Fund at www.usccb.org/mrs-ncf.

