



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

### Background on the Democratic Republic of the Congo February 2011

*We should not hide our eyes from the truth. Is it not true that the dream of building a Congo better than before has been dashed? In our opinion Congo has regressed instead of advancing... After 50 years of existence, our country is dependent on international training and support for its functioning and its survival. Can we believe that this 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary will be a turning point towards a better future?*

- 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Message, National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), June 2, 2010

#### **BACKGROUND**

The conflict in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continued throughout 2010. It has caused an estimated 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 International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued five arrest warrants against Congolese fighters for war crimes or crimes against humanity.

The violence and resultant suffering persist for several reasons. First, the central government is weak and suppresses opposition in order to stay in power and some 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 armed militia groups continue to attack communities 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 with support from neighboring countries, this gives rise to numerous militia groups.

In an effort to defeat the militia, the DRC and Rwanda launched efforts to destroy the largest militia groups. One militia group, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), a largely Tutsi-dominated group formerly supported by Rwanda, was integrated into the Congolese army, but continues to maintain a separate command structure and to operate independently. The DRC government launched three military campaigns against the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a rebel group of Hutu extremists whose leaders were involved in the 1994 Rwanda genocide. These campaigns showed initial successes, but large civilian displacements resulted, the FDLR command structure survived intact, and it has taken back much of the territory it lost, remaining a potent military force.

The UN peacekeeping force came under intense international and local criticism for their logistical support to the army campaigns and for their failure to stop the army’s rampant human rights abuses. The DRC government asked for the withdrawal of UN by August 2011, but the UN and donor nations have continued to insist that the UN stay until the government can ensure the protection of civilians. As a concession to the DRC, the UN force reduced its troop strength by 2,000 and has shifted its mandate from a peacekeeping force to a stabilization force. Donor nations are making efforts to professionalize the Congolese army and give it human rights training.

The DRC also teamed up with Uganda to launch a similar military offensive against the Ugandan Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in the far northeast of the DRC that drove the LRA from their bases. But these gains were quickly reversed when the LRA retaliated against population centers, killing hundreds of people, and displacing thousands more.

Issues over land, ethnicity, and natural resources add to the complexity of the conflict 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 ethnicities and land. Many Congolese militia groups sprang up to defend their ethnic group and their land.

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In 2011 the DRC will hold its second Presidential election since the end of the Mobutu era. The Parliament has revised the constitution to eliminate a second round Presidential vote even if no candidate wins more than 50% of the votes in the first round. This means that the leading candidate in the first round becomes president no matter how few votes he wins--a change that greatly favors the ruling party since it will be difficult for the many opposition parties to unite and present a single candidate. The government has started to arrest and intimidate opposition party candidates and their party members. Despite its promises, the government has failed to conduct government reforms and to decentralize political power to the local level.

**Conflict Minerals:** There is one sign of progress. The rampant illegal exploitation of natural resources by all the armed groups, much of which are smuggled into neighboring countries and exported onto the international market, fuels the conflict by providing revenue to the various militias, the DRC government and army, allowing them to divide the country into small areas of influence. Fortunately, the issue of resource-fueled conflict in the DRC has now led to increased international advocacy and action in the U.S. Congress to stop the practice. In 2010 the Congo Conflict Minerals law passed and its provisions offer the chance to control the buying and export of these natural resources and thus end the financing of the militia groups. (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 past year it has significantly increased its programs in the east. CRS also supported successful Church programs in non-partisan civic education and election monitoring in 2005-06.

### **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 last year. In October 2010 Bishop William Skylstad, a member of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, conducted a pastoral visit to Eastern Congo to meet with Church leaders to express the solidarity of the U.S. bishops. The Conference urges the U.S. to work with the DRC government to increase its services to the people and to harness the DRC's natural resources for the common good. The U.S. should work proactively with the international community and MONUSCO in Eastern Congo to promote a just and sustainable peace.

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

- 1) Continue long-term development assistance to Eastern Congo.
- 2) Work with other international donors and MONUSCO and with the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda to peacefully resolve the problem of the FDLR and the LRA (and all other foreign parties to the conflict) and address neighbor country involvement in the illegal exploitation and marketing of minerals.
- 3) Fund MONUSCO sufficiently and mandate it to provide civilian security.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Implement regulations to the Congo minerals law that will reduce, if not end, the illegal mineral trade. Implement a comprehensive plan to prevent and respond to sexual violence with priority to strengthening multi-sectoral assistance to survivors, their families and communities, ensuring adherence to international standards and best practices for gender-based violence in humanitarian interventions, and promoting accountability for perpetrators.
- 6) Strengthen Congolese democratic institutions to be transparent and accountable by supporting:
  - an effective decentralization program and establishing an independent judiciary;
  - civil society to participate in working for a better future for the people of the DRC; and
  - a free and fair election that represents the will of the Congolese people.

**For further information:** Visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/drc.shtml> 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)

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