

“If left untended, Congo's tragedy will continue to infect Africa--from North to South; from East to West. I believe that the United States can make a profound difference in this crisis.”

– President-elect Obama, December 16, 2005

The Problem

Since war broke out in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC or Congo) in 1998, more than 5 million people have died—most of them from lack of access to food and health care. And though the conflict officially ended in 2003, fighting has continued, mainly in the country's eastern provinces.

Ongoing conflict between the Congolese government, led by President Joseph Kabila, and multiple rebel and militia groups has created widespread regional instability and a devastating humanitarian crisis in which over a million people have been internally displaced, 45,000 die each month from conflict and disease, and sexual violence is at unprecedented levels.

Despite numerous attempts to end the conflict in the Great Lakes region, overcoming the multiple challenges to lasting peace has proven difficult. Among others, such challenges include the lack of sustainable livelihoods to keep young people from joining militias, the easy access to guns facilitated by porous borders, and the illegal exploitation of Congo's vast natural resources. The situation is further exasperated by weak governance, the inability to effectively bring together former rivals towards a common agenda for the nation, and the lack of trust between Congo and the key regional powers, Rwanda and Uganda.

Rebels, militia, and the national army have all been implicated in crimes of unfathomable proportions. UNICEF estimates that hundreds of thousands of women have been raped, constituting the worst pandemic of sexual violence in the world. Gang rape, rape of girls as young as eight, and genital mutilation of rape victims are pervasive. All parties to the conflict have forcibly recruited as many as 40,000 children to fight and carry out atrocities.

Over the years, the US has played an important role in responding to the Congo crisis, using its diplomatic strength to facilitate recent peace agreements. US actions include supporting the UN peacekeeping mission, the transitional elections process, and the provision of emergency relief, health, education and other basic services. The DRC Relief, Security and Democracy Promotion Act of 2006 reinforced the importance of these activities and recommended a comprehensive review of progress in these areas. Consolidating real gains in the region, however, will require an even greater investment of US influence, expertise, and funding. If the US does not act, the consequences will be grave not only for Congolese, but for the region as a whole.

A comprehensive US policy in the DRC must address:

- Resolution of the conflict in the east
- Immediate security and protection of civilians
- Regional stability
- Economic development
- Humanitarian and development needs
- Gender based violence
- Good governance, accountability and the rule of law
- Reforms in the security and justice sectors
- Appropriate and transparent control and management of natural resources

Short-term Recommendations – First 100 Days

President Obama should:

- Direct the Secretary of State to assign or appoint a senior level diplomat along with an appropriately resourced team, to handle the crisis in the Great Lakes Region.
- Instruct the Secretary of State to develop a comprehensive interagency strategy on the Great Lakes region.
- Present a budget to Congress that fully funds the US share of the MONUC peacekeeping budget and work with Congress to ensure it is enacted into law.

Additional Background Information

The protracted war in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the deadliest conflict since World War II. Over the past decade, fighting between government forces and rebel groups in the eastern region of the country has resulted in the loss of more than five million lives. The war, which began in 1998, and which stems in part from the 1994 Rwanda genocide, at one point involved armies from eight neighboring nations and was labeled “Africa’s First World War.” It came to an official end with a comprehensive peace agreement signed in 2002, which the US helped to broker. While Rwandan and Ugandan troops – which had been fighting directly and through proxy groups in the east – withdrew, former Rwandan soldiers, many of whom participated in the 1994 genocide, remained in hiding in the eastern Congo and are implicated in much of the violence that occurs today.

In 2006, the country held its first presidential and parliamentary elections in 40 years. Despite hopes that the post election period would usher in peace and stability, it has proven difficult to break free from decades of exploitation, persistent conflict, economic stagnation, and corruption. These factors have left Congo extremely poor – despite its unrivaled regional natural resource wealth – with virtually no modern infrastructure and minimal basic services for the majority of the population that lives on less than \$1 per day. Instability continues to plague the eastern provinces and has deprived the region of almost all modern infrastructure. Opportunities for education and jobs are limited, making recruitment of young people easier for armed militias, and the challenges of integrating formerly violent opponents into a new political system have created enormous obstacles to securing peace. Because of porous borders, weapons and military equipment still flow into the region with ease, fueled in part by the illegal exploitation of mineral wealth.

As a result of the DRC Relief, Security and Democracy Promotion act of 2006, the GAO issued a report in December 2007 to follow up on progress towards achievement of the Act’s objectives. The report concluded that no mechanism existed for assessing overall progress on US objectives. Moreover, multiple US government agencies were operating in the DRC, yet there was no overall coordination mechanism to ensure implementation of the act’s policy objectives or progress towards them.

Today, over one million people are internally displaced and over 300,000 live as refugees in other countries. Recent attempts to end the longstanding conflict include the Nairobi Communiqué, signed by Rwanda and DRC in November 2007, which aimed to disarm and repatriate former Rwandan soldiers who fled to Congo after the genocide. The Goma agreement, signed by the government and twenty two armed groups in January 2008, called for a cease fire and laid out a plan to end hostilities. Despite the slow progress in implementing the agreements, and the serious challenges to their viability, both agreements are considered the last best hope for sustainable peace in the region.

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