

A Forgotten War – A Forgotten Emergency: The Democratic Republic of Congo



In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a complicated civil war continues to broil, despite the signing of the Lusaka peace accord in July 1999. An unofficial front line diagonally cuts the country in two, as heavy artillery and bombings cause thousands in the West of the country to flee in late 2000. Smaller-scale attacks, arson and massacres have displaced hundreds of thousands in Province Orientale and North and South Kivu. Neither the DRC government, the rebels, nor their backers in neighbouring countries, show any sign of fully implementing the accord.

Statistics in this war are difficult to attain, but non-governmental organisations (NGOs) estimate that more than a million people may have lost their lives in the last two years due to the conflict. The United Nations Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimates that about 33% of the population are now vulnerable. Government spending on health and education have each dropped to less than 1% of government expenditure, leaving nearly a third of the children malnourished, 10% acutely so.

Oxfam GB works throughout the country providing clean drinking water and improving hygiene conditions to over half a million people. However, while we work with other humanitarian organisations and the UN agencies to reach the most vulnerable, a large portion of the humanitarian needs are not being met. This is partly because of insecurity, and partly because of restrictive administrative requirements in government-held areas. There have been remarkable improvements in the health of the populations the international community *has* been able to assist; for example, after the start of a comprehensive water and sanitation programme in the territory of Djugu, cholera has declined from 599 registered cases to 13 cases. However, with chronic shortfalls in funding for humanitarian assistance in the DRC, there are *accessible* populations in urgent need of assistance that are not being reached.

In 2000, donor response to the DRC was weak. The UN consolidated appeal – one indicator of funding levels among many – had a shortfall of nearly 40%. In 1999 donor governments gave just \$8 per person in the DRC, while providing \$207 per person in response to the UN appeal for the former Yugoslavia.¹ While it is clear that both regions have significant needs, there is little commitment to universal entitlement to humanitarian assistance.

The international community is essentially ignoring what has been deemed ‘Africa’s first world war.’ The DRC remains a forgotten emergency. Falling outside of the media spotlight, and experiencing persistent shortfalls in pledged humanitarian aid, the population of the DRC has been largely abandoned to struggle for their own survival.

Aid alone is not enough, however, and political pressure must also be brought to bear in support of the peace agreement and increasing the security throughout the country. This is a forgotten emergency in a forgotten war. It is by no means a simple conflict, and there are no easy answers. However, there will not be peace in the region unless the war in the DRC is fairly and effectively solved.

With more than two million people displaced by the conflict, the international community must give this war the attention it deserves. Increased international attention *and* increased humanitarian aid will be the lifelines for the population of eastern DRC. **A war of this magnitude warrants a much stronger and co-ordinated response among agencies, donors and international leaders.**

To mitigate the effects of this ‘forgotten war’ and to begin to find a workable solution, Oxfam GB recommends:

1. **The international donor community must greatly increase the level of humanitarian aid available to the DRC.** This aid should be diversified from merely a focus on food aid, to include human rights, education, and support for primary health. Donations should be increased to levels where international standards for relief – such as the Sphere standards – can be reliably maintained.
2. **There must be concerted international pressure on those in control of the districts with large numbers of displaced people to improve security and eliminate the barriers to the delivery of relief.** All belligerents must be pressed to respect humanitarian principles and human rights.
3. **Pressure needs to be brought to bear on the DRC government, the warring parties, and on neighbouring countries to abide by the Lusaka accord.** The UN should introduce an arms embargo on DRC and all the combatant countries. In addition, arms-producing nations should tighten up export procedures to ensure that shipments of weapons to the region do not further fuel the civil war in the DRC.

¹ Oxfam International. *An End to Forgotten Emergencies*. November 2000.

Political background:

Mobutu Sese-Sekou, one of Africa's longest-ruling and most corrupt leaders, was overthrown by Laurent Kabila in 1997, with the overt support of Rwanda and Uganda. Kabila's government, based in Kinshasa, proved unable to control insurgencies in the eastern part of the country. Rwandan and Ugandan rebels launched guerrilla attacks on their own countries from DRC's border region, terrorising Congolese civilians as well. As relationships between these governments soured, Kabila ordered the withdrawal of all foreign troops from DRC territory in July 1998.

The current war began in August 1998. At present, the Congolese opposition to Kabila consists of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la democratie* (RCD), and the *mouvement pour la liberation du Congo* (MLC). The main supporters of these forces are the governments of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. The RCD has since split into various factions; the two main groups include one faction loyal to the Rwandan government, known as RCD-Goma, and the other under control of the Ugandan government, known as the RCD- *mouvement de liberation* (RCD-ML).

Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe have entered the conflict on the side of the government, as did Chad, although the latter withdrew in mid-1999. Sudanese government aircraft have been reported to be bombing opposition positions as well. In the East, the unsure political situation and the influx of arms into the region have exacerbated existing ethnic tensions. Fighting that previously took place by machetes and spears is now fought with AK-47s and mortar rounds. Arson, attacks and massacres, particularly between the Hema and Lendu people of Ituri district, have displaced some 180,000 people since July 1999 and killed an estimated 40,000. Although these attacks are ostensibly over land, local authorities are convinced that the power vacuum left by the wider war has led to inter-factional power struggles within the local rebel movement; this has allowed extremists from both sides to manipulate ethnic tensions for their own gains, principally land and resources.

While Kabila's military controls the capital, the RCD forces have control of much of the north and east. It has become a military stalemate. Efforts to forge a peace agreement had some success when six countries involved in the war signed a peace accord in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, in July 1999. The accord calls for a cease-fire, disarmament of armed factions, the withdrawal of foreign forces, and Congolese political dialogue. **However, all warring parties have continued to violate the cease-fire since signing the document.**

The Lusaka accord also called for the creation of a Joint Military Commission (JMC) to monitor the cease-fire. The UN Security Council authorised the deployment of military liaison officers to prepare for the peacekeeping force MONUC (*mission de l'organisation des nations unies en Republique democratic de Congo*). At present, however, less than a hundred military observers have been dispatched in the DRC, and no armed observers have been allowed to operate. Restrictions on movement and the small numbers mean that the mission is inadequate to monitor the cease-fire.

The EU has had an arms embargo on the DRC since 1993. The UN has embargoes on UNITA – the rebel army in Angola, known to be launching attacks from rear bases in the DRC – and on non-governmental Rwandan forces. However, there are no embargoes on the supply of weapons to the governments involved in the conflict, so arms easily flow into the DRC from many sources. After decades of war, the region is awash with weapons.

Until May 2000, the UK continued to export military spare parts for aircraft to Zimbabwe – despite the latter's participation in the war in the DRC – following earlier shipments of Hawk aircraft. Since the unrest in Zimbabwe, however, these shipments have come to a halt. Legislation is currently being considered to tighten up export controls. At present, there is little regulation of arms brokered to the region and little monitoring of the end use of arms exported. **Oxfam GB is calling for arms-producing nations to tighten up export procedures to ensure that shipments of weapons to the region do not further fuel DRC's civil war.**

Health and social implications:

Although statistics in this region are notoriously difficult to attain, NGOs report that more than a million people may have lost their lives in the two years of conflict. While the vast majority of deaths are due to outbreaks of disease and malnutrition, it is the war that has left these people in such desperate conditions.

The highest death rates have been among the two million people internally displaced by the conflict. Violence, fear and intimidation have forced these people into precarious circumstances, often again and again. In addition, over 300,000 Congolese are now refugees in the Republic of Congo, Tanzania, the Central African Republic (CAR), and other countries.²

Both sides have trouble garnering significant popular support, as there have been massive human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict.³ This is a war fought with both heavy artillery and small arms. Arson, violence, torture, and arbitrary killings of civilians have been executed with impunity.

In addition to the war-related deaths, there has been a breakdown of infrastructure. Government allocated spending on health and education has fallen to less than 1%.⁴ Moderate malnutrition affects 32% of the child population, and acute malnutrition hits some 10%.⁵ **The majority of schools are no longer operational, leaving an entire generation of schoolchildren basically illiterate.**

The population is left with virtually no government infrastructure or services in most of the country. Many of the displaced people are living with host families, but even these local solutions are reaching a breaking point. An unknown number – but estimated to be in the thousands – live by their wits in the forest, having been chased from their homes by attacks or fire. They remain too terrified to return, despite precarious living conditions and health problems. As the war simmers on, areas that were once left unaffected by the conflict have become increasingly unable to cope.

Economic Situation:

The country has thoroughly exhausted its economy after years of war, compounded by decades of corruption and mismanagement. Despite great mineral and hydroelectric potential, the DRC has experienced negative growth in the last decade. Hyperinflation set a world record at 24,000% in 1994.⁶

Mining has fallen to 10% of its earlier levels, and the formal economy has practically ground to a halt.⁷ The export of diamonds was once a major source of funding for the DRC government, but many of these diamonds have now been driven to the black market, through to neighbouring countries. DRC's riches in minerals – including gold, copper, cobalt, zinc, and others – has exacerbated the ongoing conflict, as local and regional powers vie for control of the resources.

On December 1, 2000 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on “conflict diamonds.” They called for all diamond producing, processing, exporting and importing countries to find ways to break the link between illicit transactions and armed conflict. Oxfam GB has lobbied for the implementation of an international certification scheme. This would curb the funding of violence by limiting the illegitimate trade in rough diamonds. In addition, the UN Security Council has mandated a panel of experts to investigate the connection between armed conflict and the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC.

Humanitarian funding situation:

² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian affairs (UNOCHA). *Ms. McAskie's Briefing*. 28 November 2000.

³ See Amnesty International : *Democratic Republic of Congo: Killing Human Decency*.

⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit. *Democratic Republic of Congo*. (Country profile). 1999.

⁵ World Food Programme (WFP). *Brief on WFP Relief Operation: no. 6110*. 31 October 2000.

⁶ Economist Intelligence Unit.

⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit.

The UN consolidated inter-agency appeal for 2000 received only 61% of requested funding.⁸ In addition, over 82% of financial and in-kind donations was for food security and food assistance.⁹ The office of human rights received nothing. **Programmes in primary health, epidemic control, child protection, and confidence building received little or no funding at all.**

This is clearly not an integrated donor strategy in a country with more than 2 million displaced, a collapsed health and education system, and a population exhausted by years of war and decline. **Importantly, the lack of funding makes it impossible to monitor human rights abuses, let alone carry out an effective programme of protecting civilians.** Even just the presence of international monitors has been known to lower the incidence of abuse, and could initiate a more pro-active international engagement in the human rights situation in the DRC. MONUC, too, needs to be strengthened in numbers of personnel and should have better access to much more of the countryside.

Although the World Food Programme (WFP) did receive the majority of its required food in 2000, the agency experienced constraints on the food pipeline. This was mainly due to the delayed pledging and late arrival of donor contributions. The bulk of the food was received after the end of May, delaying emergency operations. WFP reports that this forced the suspension of general distribution programmes in the east.

For the whole of the country, however, the UN inter-agency appeal is only part of the picture. The European Community's Humanitarian Organisation (ECHO) donated 20 million Euros from June to December of 2000 and has allocated 35 million Euros for the year 2001.¹⁰ The British Government's Department for International Development (DFID) donated £1,322,000 in 1999/2000.¹¹ The US government donated \$33 million in the fiscal year 2000, of which \$13 million is allocated to its Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).¹² Other government bodies have been supporting NGO programmes as well, particularly in the eastern part of the country.

While some donors, such as ECHO, have been more generous than others, it is clear that funding levels are still far below what the magnitude of the crisis demands. The humanitarian situation in the DRC requires donors to have a firm commitment to funding projects in all parts of the country. This is not a simple emergency with quick solutions. Donors must work with longer-term strategies when considering assistance for people who have been displaced for over a year. A different kind of approach would incorporate education, health and shelter by working through local structures. UNOCHA's plan for consultative committees in affected communities is a good start in supporting and working through local civil society, including representatives of the displaced.

Some donors have objected to increasing their funding because of uncertain security and the consequent difficulties of getting access to those in need. There *are* very real concerns about security, relating both to the war and to lawlessness. In the Northeast Equateur province, bombings are frequent, forcing thousands to flee to neighbouring CAR or the Republic of Congo-Brazzaville. Banditry and the possibility of riots hamper the security of both local and ex-patriot staff of all the humanitarian organisations across the country.

In rebel-controlled areas the difficulties are usually due to insecurity, while in government-held areas restrictive administrative requirements are the main problem. The result is that the people with the most critical needs in the DRC are indeed inaccessible. Forest dwellers and other displaced people in the Kivu provinces, for example, are isolated due to terrain and insecurity. International agencies have made progress in negotiating access, notably for the national immunisation days. These negotiations are rather piece-meal, however, and often rely on the personalities and preferences of the authorities involved.

⁸ UN OCHA, personal communication. November 30, 2000.

⁹ UN OCHA, *UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Democratic Republic of the Congo 2001*. 8 November 2000.

¹⁰ ECHO. Meeting on DRC 2001. 24 November 2000.

¹¹ DFID, Statistical Database. 17 November 2000.

¹² United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Personal communication. 6 December 2000.

However, there are *accessible* populations in urgent need of aid that could be reached if more humanitarian assistance was available. Due to the level of financial shortfalls, Oxfam GB and other NGOs have been unable to provide assistance to all those in need who are within reach. In addition, we are unable to provide assistance to the level of internationally-recognised standards for humanitarian aid. These standards, such as Sphere, were agreed upon, along with a humanitarian charter, as the *minimum* assistance to meet essential needs with impartiality and respect for life with dignity.

In the places where we *have* been able to assist, the improvements are impressive. In Djugu territory, for example, there were 599 cases of cholera in 1999.¹³ In 2000, after the start of a comprehensive water and sanitation programme, there were only 13 cases.¹⁴ Other water-bourne diseases have declined rapidly as well.

Much more could and should be done. Under-funding humanitarian programmes is not an effective solution to the crisis. **What is needed is significantly more humanitarian aid, and sustained international attention. Diplomatic pressure on the involved governments and warring parties to improve security, protect the civilian and displaced populations, and reduce the obstacles to delivery are crucial parts of a more effective approach to humanitarian aid and ending the war.**

¹³ Dr. Lobho Romby. *Rapport Epidemiologique et Rapport de Service*, 1999.

¹⁴ Dr. Lobho Romby. *Situation Humanitaire dans le Zone de Sante Rurale de Rethy*, 2000. Cases registered up to September 2000.

To ensure effective humanitarian assistance and to begin to find a long-term solution to DRC's war, Oxfam GB recommends:

- **Donor governments should quickly respond to the war in the DRC, recognising that it is one of the worst humanitarian situations in the world.** Donors should immediately support the 2001 UN-OCHA Consolidated Appeal for the DRC, requiring US\$139.5 million (about £97 million). To avoid the pipeline problems experienced this year, pledges should come in the early months of the year. Donors should work with international agencies to reach international standards in relief – such as the Sphere standards.
- **The international donor community must also diversify their humanitarian aid to ensure that the human rights, primary health, and education have the resources they need.** An effective donor strategy would immediately fund the UN Office for Human Rights to monitor abuses, would support educational initiatives for internally displaced children, and would fund nutritional and epidemiological programmes as well. A longer-term approach is needed when working with populations displaced more than a year.
- **International leaders must come together to put intense pressure on the warring parties to adhere to the Lusaka peace accord.** UN Security Council members should use their leverage with allies in the region to bring the fighting to a halt. The UN should introduce an arms embargo on DRC and all the combatant countries. In addition, arms-producing nations should tighten up export procedures to ensure that shipments of weapons to the region do not further fuel the civil war in the DRC.
- **All diamond producing, processing, exporting and importing countries should take responsibility for the illicit trade in “conflict diamonds” fuelling the war in the DRC.** Every effort should be made to accelerate the negotiations for an international certification scheme for rough diamonds.
- **The international community must come together to assert concerted pressure on those in control of the districts with large numbers of displaced people to improve security and eliminate the barriers to the delivery of relief.** Particularly the government of DRC should be obliged to minimise the administrative procedures hindering relief. The protection of displaced people and civilians – from attack, malnutrition or death by curable diseases — needs to be prioritised. All belligerents must be pressed to respect humanitarian principles and human rights.

Oxfam GB works throughout the country providing clean drinking water and improving hygiene conditions to over half a million people. This US\$3.5 million programme includes providing water and sanitation to therapeutic and emergency feeding centres for the displaced, as well as addressing longer-term water and hygiene requirements in urban centres.

December 2000

For further information contact:

Amelia Bookstein, Policy Advisor, Conflict and Natural Disasters Team
Phone: +44 1865 31 24 91

Helen Palmer, Press Officer, Media Unit
Phone: +44 1865 31 23 75

First published by Oxfam GB in December 2000.
Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-1-84814-114-8 in October 2010.