

Bulletin of Refugees International

Eastern Congo: Beyond the Volcano, A Slow Motion Holocaust

RI Vice President of Policy, Joel Charny and RI Advocate, Anne Edgerton recently completed a field mission to eastern Congo. Anne Edgerton is currently in Nairobi, Kenya.

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The eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in the eastern Congo on January 17th destroyed half of Goma, a city of 500,000 people, caused over 100 deaths, and sent thousands of the town's residents across the border into Rwanda to seek temporary shelter. As destructive as the volcano was, the devastation of its impact pales in comparison to the consequences of the on-going conflict in the region. This war is a human disaster of unimaginable proportions, the equivalent of daily volcanic eruptions, but with far greater social and economic consequences.

Refugees International just completed a two-week humanitarian assessment mission to the eastern Congo, a mission capped by the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo. After many interviews with Congolese children, local NGO leaders, and the staff of UN organizations and international NGOs, the picture that emerges is a tapestry of pain for the Congolese people, who are at the mercy of armed groups who steal crops, murder civilians, rape women, and capture children with impunity. The efforts of the international community appear feeble and ineffective, dwarfed by the scale of the suffering they are intended to mitigate.

The 1999 Lusaka Peace Accords nominally provide the framework for an ordered withdrawal of foreign troops from Congolese soil, the disarmament of rebel groups (the so-called "negative forces," including the Interahamwe, the Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda), and an inter-Congolese dialogue leading to the formation of a unity government for the country. While a few gestures have been made to withdraw foreign forces to lines of control and achieving a ceasefire, the critical steps towards genuine peace have not been taken. Indeed, fighting in the east has actually increased in recent months as Congolese parties to the conflict, especially the Rwandan-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) and the Mayi-Mayi (the armed group contesting the Rwandan occupation) try to demonstrate their strength to gain greater representation within the inter-Congolese dialogue.

The most plausible scenario for reducing the conflict would involve the Rwandans agreeing to withdraw their troops from the Congo in exchange for international security guarantees along their border and the cessation of the Kinshasa government's support for the Interahamwe and the Mayi-Mayi. Neither Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, nor Joseph Kabila, the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), appear willing to reach such an accommodation, leaving the Congolese people caught in an endless cycle of violence that is justified by the intransigence of the other party. The Foreign Ministers of Britain and France just completed a joint tour of the region, and they admitted on departure that the political picture was bleak.

The UN Observer Mission to the Congo (MONUC) has been deployed to monitor the implementation of the Lusaka Accords. MONUC merely observes the violence that swirls through the country, while frustrated and bewildered Congolese hope for more aggressive action from the international community to stop the conflict.

Since access to embattled communities is so difficult, RI can only provide isolated examples to describe the catastrophe in the eastern Congo:

- In Shabunda, the Mayi-Mayi use rape as a tactic of war to prevent displaced women seeking shelter in the town from accessing their fields; as reported on ABC News Nightline, in one incident alone last year 40 women were raped;

- In north Katanga province women were unable to bring their children for a vaccination day because they had no clothes and could not be seen in public in daylight hours; men in the community work only in the pre-dawn hours for the same reason;
- Child prostitution and sex slavery are proliferating. In Goma, a preliminary survey by a local NGO found that 38 out of 41 child sex workers were displaced from the countryside due to the war and economic hardship;
- All the armed groups have a systematic policy of pillaging fields at harvest time and stealing crops from farmers trying to bring it home or to market;
- In Kindu, the capital of Maniema province and once the breadbasket of the Congo, the impossibility of marketing agricultural products means that a bag of rice has no more value than a bar of soap; unmilled rice is used on muddy roads to give traction to trucks.

Much of the violence derives directly from the collapse of the state. With the government barely functioning, commerce impeded by insecurity, and the only viable economy resting on the exploitation and smuggling of primary products such as coltan, diamonds, and timber, there is no way for large segments of the population to make a living. The breakdown in the village economy drives boys and young men to enlist in the army, where they are not paid or fed, but at least they get a gun. Much of the violence in the east is totally devoid of a political or strategic rationale; it is banditry to allow soldiers to survive. According to a human rights officer for MONUC, the best way to achieve an immediate reduction in the level of violence would be for the rebel government in the east, the RCD, to begin paying its soldiers and providing them with one meal per day.

Despite the obstacles, courageous humanitarian personnel attempt to work with Congolese authorities and local communities to gain greater access and respond to the needs that they find. A promising approach being taken by the UN system is to focus on rehabilitating the internal transportation network, especially rail lines and river barges, to ease the flow of commercial goods and allow humanitarian supplies to reach isolated areas. The simple task of repairing a bridge can have an immediate humanitarian impact. International and local NGOs are working with community-based peace committees that try to negotiate access for relief supplies with the local commanders of the armed groups. These all-volunteer committees would benefit from an infusion of small amounts of resources to give them the means to expand their efforts.

While MONUC's logistical support to humanitarian efforts is appreciated, it is interpreting its limited mandate too conservatively. Especially lacking is a public communications effort to disseminate information widely on the security situation and the human rights abuses that its personnel observe. Previous large-scale peacekeeping efforts in Kosovo and Cambodia, for example, have used radio broadcasts aggressively to build awareness among the public of the critical challenges faced by the respective missions. MONUC needs to clearly explain its mission to the Congolese people and make a conscious effort to increase its overall credibility through a public information campaign. Already there are reports of MONUC soldiers raping women and demanding the services of child prostitutes in Kisangani and Goma. After embarrassing episodes in Cambodia, where such behavior was condoned, the UN had made public commitments that these actions by peacekeepers in the future would not be tolerated. Given the Congolese frustration with MONUC's apparent indifference to their suffering, the commanders and civilian personnel of MONUC have no choice but to implement a zero tolerance policy for inappropriate behavior by its personnel. RI raised this issue with a MONUC child protection officer, who informed us that one rape case is proceeding and MONUC is cooperating with the investigation. She stressed that MONUC is willing to take action if credible evidence of misconduct is presented.

The UN humanitarian system is attempting to manage the response to the emergency in the Congo from Kinshasa. While this approach is understandable in that it supports the principle of the territorial unity and integrity of this vast country, the practical consequence is the relative neglect of the eastern region of the country where the needs are greatest. In the east regional humanitarian coordinators have to divide their time between their agency duties and

their overall coordination tasks, while waiting for key decisions to be made in remote offices more than one thousand miles distant in the capital. RI believes that the UN needs to appoint a high profile humanitarian coordinator for the eastern Congo, a senior official who would work under the direction of Kinshasa, but who would have the necessary weight and authority to advocate for a greater humanitarian response in the east and for greater access from the belligerents.

What is taking place in the eastern Congo at the moment is nothing less than a slow-motion holocaust. Yet RI cannot recommend a massive external intervention to stop the violence because the political will necessary to bring a halt to the war is lacking both internationally and among regional and local actors. The humanitarian community is left to make the best of an awful situation, bringing relief where temporary openings appear.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- The international community, especially the United States, Britain, France, and Belgium, put greater pressure on the leaders of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to implement the Lusaka Peace Accords. After an appropriate interval, economic sanctions, including the freezing of the overseas bank accounts of those benefiting from the economic exploitation of Congo's resources, should be the penalty for continued intransigence.
- The United Nations appoint a senior official to serve as humanitarian coordinator for the eastern Congo, based in the region, but working under the direction of the overall humanitarian coordinator for the country.
- MONUC implement a large-scale, sustained public information campaign, primarily through radio, to explain its mission and report its observations to the Congolese public.
- Donors provide greater funding support for infrastructure improvements, especially for the continued rehabilitation of transportation networks throughout the Congo.
- UN agencies and international NGOs provide funding to community-based peacebuilding efforts, especially supporting local committees that are creating humanitarian space through negotiations with armed groups.
- MONUC adopt a zero tolerance policy for soldiers having sex with minors and raping women.

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