

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
The Democratic Republic of the Congo: An Update

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Introduction

Co-Chairmen McGovern and Hultgren, Members of the Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you today. Thank you for convening this critical meeting to follow-up on your hearing last year, and maintaining a focus on the worrying situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I am the Director of Global Affairs with Search for Common Ground (Search), one of the largest organizations dedicating to building peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and around the world. Search began working in the DRC in 2001, at the request of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and has since established six offices, working with more than 120 staff and dozens of partners (almost all Congolese). We support local peacebuilding efforts, security sector reform, conflict-sensitive humanitarian and development programming, and inclusive governance with direct assistance to mediation and dispute resolution, creative media production, and support to local youth, women, traditional, religious and governmental leaders. While my testimony is informed by the time I have spent with Search, the opinions and perspectives are my own.

I will focus my remarks today on local conflict dynamics in the Eastern DRC and the Kasais, places where Search is actively engaged. I will give a brief snapshot of dynamics in four conflict-affected provinces: the Kasais, Tanganyika, and the Kivus, with a focus on events of the past year, since your last hearing on the matter. I will follow with some general observations on trends and thoughts about how the U.S. might engage in the country.

Long-Growing Tensions Boil over in Tanganyika

Historically considered one of the relatively more stable regions of the eastern Congo, Tanganyika Province has seen a spiral of violence between Batwa (a pygmy group) and different Bantu groups living in the area (notably the Baluba), which has resulted in intercommunal killings and the displacement of approximately half a million, many to horrendous conditions.

The current conflict has been sparked by an “awakening” of political consciousness and organization among the Batwa, facilitated by mobile technology and increased awareness of political and civil rights. The Batwa consider themselves indigenous to the region, but like many pygmy groups, they lived off the land as hunters and had lesser access to education, health, water, and other services than their settled Baluba neighbors. Batwa hold few positions in local government or among the powerful customary chieftaincies, and those who have settled often work informally as hired help to Bantu neighbors. Batwa activists have decried of systematic exploitation, sexual

abuse of Batwa women, and discrimination. Many Bantu and local leaders greeted the newfound activism by Twa leaders with incomprehension, seeing it as the result of outside agitation to upset the formerly “harmonious” relations between groups. Some affirmed that Batwa were too “backwards” to play a greater role in public life.

Throughout the second half of 2016 and into this year, rhetoric and hate speech have escalated, attacks and armed groups formed among both Baluba and Batwa communities, breaking out to violence including killings, village-burnings, and intimidation of those seen to be collaborating with the other “side.” In February of this year, the government held the Kalemie Peace Forum with support from MONUSCO and Search. Presentations at the Forum revealed a stark divide between groups on three issues: (a) the historical relationship between Bantu and Pygmy, including whether there was labor exploitation and forced marriage; (b) land access, the use of forests, and the economic future of Batwa who did not want to settle down; (c) the sharing of customary authorities and political power. This is exacerbated by the continued presence of armed groups on both sides, economic and food insecurity, and the abuses committed during the conflict. While the Forum created an opening, follow-up activities have been slow over the past six months. Search is working with civil society groups and local peace committees in villages throughout the region, with support of USAID’s Human Rights Mechanism to follow-up on the Kalemie forum. At the same time, violence is steadily increasing. Frustrated with the lack of progress, the government last week promised a new military campaign against pygmy militias.

The *Kamuina Nsapu* Insurgency and Violence in the Kasais

In June 2016, a dispute over the customary powers triggered an insurgency and humanitarian crisis when the central government refused to acknowledge the authority of customary leader Jean-Pierre Mpandi over the Kamuina Nsapu Grand Chieftaincy. Mpandi, a government critic, allegedly called for resistance. He was killed along with several followers in August 2016 and the survivors went into rebellion. Killings and retaliation between the KN insurgency and national security forces escalated dramatically and spread from Kasai Central to the wider province. Serious human rights abuses have been documented on both sides, including: the execution of government officials and suspected sympathizers, massacre of surrendered fighters, rape and killings of non-combatants, the reported recruitment of thousands of child soldiers by KN insurgents, the kidnapping and assassination of two international members of the UN Group of Experts in March 2017, more than 600 attacks on schools, churches and civilian infrastructure. The UN reports finding 80 mass graves. Hundreds, and likely thousands, have been killed and an estimated two million are displaced.

The Kasai provinces have historically been a stronghold of the opposition UDPS and its veteran opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi. The provinces are also home to well-established and relatively autonomous customary institutions with a history of independence and conflict with state authorities, and a legacy of land disputes. The current conflict has come on top and exacerbated three existing fault lines: (a) local conflicts and mistrust between Luba-speaking ethnic groups seen as being pro-KN and Pende, Tshokwe and other groups; (b) between customary authorities themselves, and between customary and government authorities; and (c) between security forces and civilians aggravated both by heavy-handed security tactics as well as the reported defection of military and police leaders to the KN insurgency. To the extent that the conflict between the state and the KN becomes a wider conflict between those who are for and against the government, the conflict risks to become increasingly intractable.

Unlike in Tanganyika, Congolese government, UN actors, and even the Catholic Church have been directly targeted by armed groups, which add complexity to peace efforts. While several high-level government delegations have sought to pacify the region, there is a great degree of inbuilt suspicion, given the government’s

role as a party to the conflict. At present, we have seen an apparent reduction in violence in recent weeks, but our sense is that this may be more attributable to the overwhelming military deployment rather than any substantive changes on the ground.

Political Competition is Opening Old Wounds in the East

While conflict escalation in the Kasais and Tanganyika represent relatively new phenomena, tensions are rising again in North Kivu, South Kivu, and the former Province Orientale, a region that has historically been the epicenter of the Congo wars. This region is still home to more than 60 armed groups of varying sizes, per some estimates, each tied to ethnic communities and economic interests. To begin a quick overview of five conflicts where Search is working:

- Beginning in the far north, the situation in Upper and Lower Uélé provinces remains extremely fragile. The region has received more than 40,000 refugees from new violence in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, repeated attacks throughout the areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army, and increasing tension between local populations and the semi-nomadic Mbororo clan of Fulani herdsman moving into the region from CAR and the Sahel.
- Further south in Ituri, tensions between Hema and Lendu have flared in recent months. The immediate trigger has been renewed activities by the FRPI rebel group in Southern Irumu resulting in serious abuses and displacement. Because the FRPI are seen as close to the Lendu, tensions have flared with Hema and other communities. The FARDC have relaunched military operations in the zone last month.
- Violence in and around Beni and Lubero, in the mineral- and timber-rich northern part of North Kivu. Political competition and unresolved grievances within the *Nande* ethnic community has kicked off a vicious cycle of violence and insecurity drawing in ex-combatants, Mai-Mai fighters, the ADF-NALU rebel movement, and the FARDC, and has included cycles of violence that claimed hundreds of lives, often civilians.
- Continuing southwards in North Kivu, ethnic tensions and hate speech are increasing between Hutu and neighboring Nande and Hunde communities in southern Lubero, Rutshuru and Masisi territories, especially in Bashali and Bwito. This area has long been the one of the major key theaters of the Congolese wars, with deep tensions between communities, a heavy presence of armed groups, and well-entrenched political and economic patronage systems.
- Down along the Rusizi plains – the strategic strip of agricultural lowland situated between Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC – a long-running dispute between Barundi and Bafulero traditional leaders over which of the two communities should hold the customary chieftaincy (and thus manage land allocation) in the border area has historically been a political bargaining chip. National and provincial leaders have historically offered to endorse the primacy of one or the other group's claim in exchange for their votes, and tensions are increasing again, even as activities by FDLR, Mai Mai and Burundian armed groups continue.

What Conclusions Should We Draw about Recent Local Conflicts?

As we review this past year, and look ahead, there are four key observations that I'd like to underscore.

1. *Political conflicts are wakening old demons. But the demons have a life of their own.* To some extent the triggers of each of the four conflicts I described above had their origins in patronage systems and jockeying of power by political elites. At the same time, the cycles of violence that have been unleashed – which lead to displaced camps being burned outside of Kalemie, or a baby dashed against the rocks in Beni – have roots in

legacies of trauma, fear, and desperation occasioned by decades of war and injustice. Even if the cause of these crises is political, they self-perpetuate by feeding into pre-existing conflicts over land, power, and identity, usually defined in ethnic terms. Elections will not of themselves resolve the Bantu-Pygmy inequality or settle intercommunity disputes on who manages land on the Rusizi Plains. Reconciliation is possible. We have seen local peace committees emerge and succeed in Tanganyika; we have seen promising efforts in the Kivus, and longstanding conflicts resolved in Equateur. But success will require accompanying an electoral process in the near term with a long-term focus on working with Congolese actors to build peace.

2. While the actions of armed security actors including the FARDC and MONUSCO are important, they are ill-equipped to solve the current crisis. These localized conflicts do not easily lend themselves to a military solution. The ability of foreign peacekeepers to prevent deeply-entrenched communal violence is limited. Concerted efforts to decrease tension will require structural collaboration– a “peace architecture” – linking leaders and citizens across ethnic lines to decrease tensions and prevent violence, and tying these efforts to actions by FARDC, MONUSCO, Police and civilian authorities.
At the same time, while there has been progress in recent years, the FARDC continues to struggle with the legacy of ill-discipline, parallel command structures, and heavy-handed tactics inherited from its origins in the armed groups that fought in the Congo wars. Continued weaknesses have been demonstrated in recent examples of military abuses. Search has worked for more than a decade with the FARDC units, and seen progress in shifting attitudes, behavior and performance of individual soldiers. Yet there is a tremendous need to institutionalize security sector reform, moving from a strategy based on tailored support to “model units” and technocratic Kinshasa-level reforms, towards working with military schools, in order to institutionalize SSR efforts and prepare a new organizational culture among the new cadre of Congolese soldiers and police.
3. We should discard the stereotype of “le Congo passif.” History plays a big role in driving the conflicts that we are discussing today, and many of the same personalities and clans have governed political life for decades. But it would be a mistake for analysts to revert to old stereotypes of “big men” charting the future of the country on the backs of a passive population. Young Congolese are increasingly connected to each other and to the wider world, and with the wider economic, social and political aspirations that come with it. At the same time, they are faced with a political system at every level – from national leaders to the *chef de bloc* – that does not present a clear channel for political participation and change. When this commission met last year, Professor Dizolele underscored the ambition among Congolese youth, and the desire and ambition for progress. Whether this frustration and ambition is manifested into economic development and a new form of engaged citizenry, or in participation in the continued cycle of armed groups will depend largely on the Congolese youth themselves, and on the channels and opportunities created by today’s leaders.
4. The current situation is untenable. Today we see escalated conflict in Tanganyika and the Kasais. But as I outlined, the contours that made these regions are also present in communities throughout the East. Unresolved conflicts over resources, power, and identity exist throughout the country. Economic desperation, youth frustration, and the incentives of politicians to exacerbate existing conflict for political advantage is present in every region of the country. While national and local elections won’t resolve underlying conflicts overnight, if the current period of political limbo persists without a clear electoral timetable, it exacerbates the challenges that these risks will multiply.

What is the Role for the United States Government?

It is undeniable that international humanitarian and peacekeeping assistance over the past two decades has saved hundreds of thousands, and probably millions, of lives. It has been a heroic effort, a testament to the importance of the DRC to regional security, the role it plays in a globalized business environment and economy, and to the values and generosity of the international community, including the American people. It is one I'm proud that my organization and I have been able to contribute to. Yet, at the same time, twenty years and billions of dollars after the start of the Congolese war, who would have thought we would still have one of the direst displacement crises on Earth? One of the largest peacekeeping operations? Recognizing that the US has moral, security, and business interests in the stability of DRC, I would like to suggest three things to ensure that our assistance helps the DRC move towards long-term stability and peace:

1. *Pilot New Models of Engaging in Fragile States.* International assistance – including U.S. assistance – in the DRC and in many fragile states has been disjointed and out of sync. Various programs focus on security, development, humanitarian assistance, governance, and diplomatic engagements, but they are planned on different cycles, with different funding streams, and different understandings of needs and priorities. Because this approach is piecemeal, the sum is not greater than the parts. The U.S. should develop a holistic approach to engagement in the DRC aimed at addressing the fragility and violence that drive humanitarian needs and security threats through integrated programming. One successful model is PEPFAR, which broke administrative and funding silos and brought civil society and the private sector together to holistically respond to the immediate HIV/AIDS crisis, address root causes, and build local capacity to prevent future outbreaks. This multi-sectoral, flexible, problem-focused approach is sorely needed to break the short-term and piecemeal cycles that govern much of the engagement in the DRC and other fragile states.
2. *Support and Resource Flexible, Civilian-Led Solutions to Crisis.* The primary cause of human suffering in the DRC is man-made. Peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance can play a vital role in addressing the symptoms of crises in the Kasais, Tanganyika, and elsewhere, but they do not address the causes. There is a broad consensus from academics, local groups, and the humanitarian actors that locally-led peacebuilding must be a key component in the international response to DRC's conflict-driven humanitarian crises. Yet, even as the human and financial costs of conflict are rising, the U.S. has few mechanisms to rapidly channel resources to mitigate them. Funds appropriated for disaster assistance palliate the needs of the displaced, but these funds cannot be used to resolve the conflict that displaced them in the first place. Peacekeeping funding can support an armed South African soldier to patrol hotspots in North Kivu but cannot support a group of Congolese pastors to mediate the conflict in those hotspots. We need Congress to fully fund the Complex Crisis Fund, the flexible pool of resources that USAID uses rapidly dispatch small amounts of funding to groups on-the-ground to resolve emerging conflicts before they become large-scale crises.
3. *Recognize That This is a Generational Crisis, and Act Accordingly.* The current crises faced in the DRC are rooted in nearly a century of misrule and war. Yet as intractable and cyclical as the problems appear, the DRC is a large, rich, and important country, and the U.S. has a long-term strategic and economic interest in its stability. U.S. diplomatic and development assistance should focus on the long-term, supporting youth to forge a new economic future, supporting the next generation of military and police to forge a new security sector, and supporting young leaders to promote reconciliation, reject violence, and develop a new political culture to overcome the legacies of injustice and intercommunal violence.