

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
Elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
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Thank you, Congressman McGovern and the other members of the commission for holding this public hearing on the upcoming elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Testifying to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is a true honor, and today's discussion on the human rights situation the DRC comes at an important time.

I work at the McCain Institute for International Leadership, an organization focused on keeping Senator John McCain's legacy alive, particularly in the area of advocating for human rights around the world as a key tenet of United States foreign policy. He wrote in his last book *The Restless Wave*, "I believe the United States has a special responsibility to champion human rights in all places, for all peoples, and at all times." Those words ring truer now more than ever, especially in a place like Congo, where millions have been killed and displaced over the past two decades. The United States has a responsibility to stand up for those who continue to be needlessly oppressed and denied the right live in peace.

The United States has had a long history of involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and that relationship continues. Congo is the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa and its immense human capital and natural resource wealth has made it a center of global interest for centuries. That interest has also resulted in conflict and human suffering that persists. In recent years, the United States' humanitarian efforts to curb violence and bring peace to Congo have been significant; however, these efforts, on top of international efforts, have not brought the intended goal of building a lasting and durable peace.

The elections to take place on December 23, 2018 are meant to be historical. They *could* result in the first peaceful transfer of power from one elected president to another. But I am cautious to say they could – because with less than a month away from election day, I fear that violence may erupt in the run up to elections or in the aftermath. I am hopeful that no violence occurs and that the will of the people is allowed, and they elect a new president, members of the National Assembly and provincial assemblies.

It is the responsibility of Congolese authorities to guarantee free and fair elections. The election commission, commonly referred to in its French acronym, CENI, has had two extra years to prepare for these elections, meant to be originally held in late 2016. The CENI has had two years to build trust in a discredited institution after disputed 2011 elections. To be fair, the CENI is under immense pressure to manage an election in a country that is the size of the United States east of the Mississippi, but they seem to have chosen a difficult path to rebuild confidence in the process. Yes, more people have been registered for elections than ever

before, and CENI should be commended for that feat. However, the choice of using electronic voting in a country with very little electricity is questionable at best, since paper ballots are the norm and have been used in the past.

As I stated previously, it is ultimately the responsibility of the Congolese government officials to guarantee credible elections, but knowing that the credibility of the election itself is under question, the United States is duty bound to query the legitimacy of the democratic process. In fact, during the past five years, the Obama and Trump administrations have actively engaged on the human rights and electoral situation in Congo. During the Obama administration, two Special Envoys for the African Great Lakes region were appointed: former Senator Russ Feingold and former Congressman Tom Perriello. Just in the past few weeks, the Trump administration appointed Dr. Peter Pham as the new Special Envoy to African Great Lakes. Dr. Pham is a respected scholar of African politics and his appointment is a welcome one.

Additionally, the United States' Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, has been outspoken about electoral process and many give her credit for securing an actual date for these elections. She visited Congo in 2017 and has held many discussions at the Security Council during the past year, continuing to put pressure on the Congolese government to hold the elections in December. Her visit and consistent message to the Congolese authorities have also been echoed on Capitol Hill.

The House of Representatives and the Senate that also have sent clear messages to the Congolese people that they support their human rights to choose their leaders in a peaceful, transparent and credible process. This hearing today shows that. Current bipartisan legislation introduced by Representatives Christopher Smith, Karen Bass, Ed Royce and Elliott Engel shows this House supports democracy and accountability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Senate has also passed resolutions on maintaining the need for the United States to remain actively engaged.

Finally, elections will likely take place in December or in the near future, if they are delayed. The executive and the legislative branches of the U.S. government have made expectations clear to the Congolese government. United States leaders should continue to watch Congo closely and uphold its responsibility, to quote Senator McCain, "to champion human rights in all places, for all peoples, and at all times."