

REFUGEES

NUMBER 145 • ISSUE 1 • 2007

Huge Country, Huge Problems — Huge Potential

Can DR Congo Turn the Page?



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Fulfilling the potential

IT IS A HUGE COUNTRY WITH IMMENSE PROBLEMS. Potentially one of the richest countries in Africa, but currently one of the poorest. A country full of tragic paradoxes.

Its inhabitants are for the most part energetic and creative. They are people who enjoy a good debate, have a great sense of humour and love music – and they are brilliant at getting by on very little.

Meet the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The majority: those who would just like to get on with living, and who came out in their millions to vote in the recent elections. The people who are fed up with fighting, with corruption, with warlords, with foreign invasions. The people who just want to see their country back on its feet.

And then there is the small minority: the people fostered by the typhoon of violence and anarchy that swept across the east of the country between 1996 and 2003 – and which continues sporadically to this day. The people who have grown accustomed to killing and to taking what they want, and destroying what they don't want. The people who have raped, pillaged, turned at least 30,000 children into soldiers, and caused millions to flee their homes.

In the immediate aftermath of a successful referendum on the country's constitution in 2005, and tense but in the end equally successful presidential elections concluded in November 2006, there is some hope that the latter group may – finally – be on the wane.

It is virtually impossible to give a properly balanced picture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is just too big. DRC has been generally neglected by foreign media – especially outside the Francophone countries. What news there has been, has inevitably focused mainly on the fighting and atrocities taking place in the east.

Yet, even if the scale of these horrors makes such coverage unavoidable – how can you ignore massacres, mutilation and

the rape of tens of thousands of women and girls? – it is nevertheless, in a way, misleading.

Much of DRC has not been actively involved in conflict – including some parts of the east. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and refugees have returned home, and are reintegrating successfully. Repatriations of Congolese refugees are currently, or will shortly, be taking place from six countries to DRC – and refugees from four of DRC's neighbours have also been benefitting from repatriation operations in the opposite direction.

But all Congolese, even those who live thousands of kilometres from the conflict zones, have been affected one way or another by the troubles: through interrupted food and medical supplies, decayed or destroyed infrastructure and lack of investment.

And DRC's nine neighbours have been affected too: through diminished trade, population movements, and above all through shared insecurity – with the conflicts in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi fuelling and then becoming lethally intertwined with those in DRC.

A peaceful, functioning DRC could – should – be an economic turbo-charger for the other countries in the region. The country possesses an incredible array of mineral wealth, and could generate enough electricity to light up the whole of Africa. But from the time of the Belgian King Leopold II, via three decades of kleptocracy under President Mobutu, to today's collection of local warlords and foreign exploiters, DRC's wealth has so far brought it little except war, corruption, and – ironically – intense poverty.

The recent advances on the political front are important milestones in the development of the nation, achieved with immense effort and the help of over 17,000 UN peacekeepers. But they represent only the first steps on the path to stability and prosperity that so many Congolese desire and deserve. The rest of the journey promises to be equally hard – and will take much longer.



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REFUGEES is published by the Media Relations and Public Information Service of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of UNHCR. The designations and maps used do not imply the expression of any opinion or recognition on the part of UNHCR concerning the legal status of a territory or of its authorities.

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English and French editions printed in Italy by AMILCARE PIZZI S.p.A., Milan. Circulation: 114,000 in English, French, Italian and Spanish.

ISSN 0252-791 X

Cover Clockwise from top left: Congolese woman heading home.

UNHCR / J. OSE / ROC-2005

Voter in Bunia, Ituri.

© REUTERS / J. AKENA / DRC-2006

Lendu militiaman.

© AP / K. PRINSLOO / DRC-2003

Rainforest background.

UNHCR / C. BOWERS / DRC-1997

Back cover Rwandan refugees in Goma.

UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN / ZRE-1994

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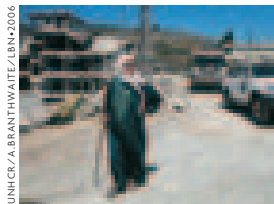
UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/ZRE-1997

4 It is vast, and should be rich, but war, chaos and corruption have taken a huge toll on DR Congo.



MONUC

15 Women have suffered immensely at the hands of rampaging groups in eastern DRC.



UNHCR/A.BRANTHWAITE/LBN-2006

20 Over a million people were displaced by the short but devastatingly destructive war in Lebanon.

Huge Country, Huge Prob

Once known as “one of the most magical and cut-off places in the world,” the Ituri Forest, in north-east DRC, has in recent years witnessed some of the country’s worst atrocities.

blems – Huge potential

Can DR Congo turn the page?

BY CÉCILE POUILLY

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC Republic of the Congo are often seductive. Visitors arriving in Kinshasa are confronted with an intoxicating blend of colour, noise, smells and movement. Against a background of Congolese rumba and animated discussions, an extraordinary range of market stalls decorates every street corner: peanuts, smoked meats, ginger juice and brooms are bought, sold and haggled over with good humour and a certain panache.

More than 80 percent of the economic activity is located in this lively informal sector, generated by legions of struggling but tenacious street sellers, bicycle traders and shoe-shine boys. And it is not just Kinshasa, tucked down in the bottom left corner of the country, which functions in this way: “In the large cities, every street is turned into an open air market. That’s all the people have to live on,” explains Zacharie Kasongo, head of the research network Réseau Grands Lacs.

But this vivacious street life cannot mask the sad reality of a country where the problems are as gigantic as the terrain (the total land area is bigger than France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK combined).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo should be

one of the richest countries in Africa.

The Congo River – the country’s legendary backbone – is capable of generating immense quantities of hydroelectric power, its output of 40,000 cubic metres of water per second making it the second most powerful river in the world after the Amazon.

DRC also possesses the largest rainforest in Africa; and a staggering array of subterranean wealth that includes between 50 and 80 percent of the entire global reserves of cobalt, niobium and coltan (a rare metal used in the manufacture of portable telephones and game consoles), as well as dozens of other valuable minerals including diamonds, uranium, gold, silver and oil.

Despite all this intrinsic wealth, DRC is currently one of the poorest countries in the world – ranked 167 out of 177 countries in the 2006 Human Development Index. Eighty percent of the population live on less than a dollar a day; and more than half do not have access to health care or drinking water.

The statistics are numbing; over 12,000 reported rapes in eastern DRC alone in the six months up to October 2006; as many as 3.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs) at the peak in 2003; around 4 million deaths attributed directly or indirectly to the 1998–2003 war; and one in five children dead before the age of five.

DRC is bigger than France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK combined

THE MOBUTU YEARS

THE TWO WARS THAT SPANNED THE PERIOD FROM 1996–2003 speeded up the process of decay that had begun under President Mobutu Sese Seko, who seized power in 1965, five years after the then Repub-

imperative: namely the need to eliminate the threat posed to its borders by the Rwandan Hutu militias that had fled the country after carrying out the ghastly 1994 Rwandan genocide, during which more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

As an army headed by the future Rwandan President Paul Kagame fought its way down from Uganda, capturing the Rwandan capital Kigali in July 1994, over 1.2 million Rwandan Hutus crossed the Congolese border, settling in huge refugee camps around Goma and Bukavu in eastern Zaïre (as the DRC was still known at the time).

In addition to hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens – thousands of whom died of cholera during the first few days – the camps also contained perpetrators

of the genocide: the Interhamwe and members of the former Rwandan armed forces (FAR). Repeated pleas from UNHCR and others for effective international action to remove them from the camps fell on deaf ears. “The consequences were disastrous,” said the Director of UNHCR’s Africa Bureau, Marjon Kamara, “for many of the refugees and for the DRC, which has been paying a heavy price ever since.”

In September 1996, following a succession of cross-border attacks by the re-formed Interhamwe and their allies, the Rwandan army launched a series of heavy artillery attacks against the camps in DRC, as well as sending in ground forces.

In the ensuing chaos, involving the Congolese army and rebel forces as well as the Rwandan military, some 600,000 refugees returned to Rwanda, while hundreds of thousands of others – including both refugees and former Interhamwe – retreated into the jungles or fled further westward to escape. Many died of hunger and disease or in a series of massacres, which continued well into the following year. The precise numbers remain contentious to this day.



© M. BLEASDALE / DRC-2004

With different mines – like this open-cast gold mine – controlled by different armed groups (and even different states), DRC’s immense mineral wealth fuelled the devastating cycle of war and violence.

lic of Congo achieved independence from Belgium. In 1971 – “the year of the three Zeds” – Mobutu decided to rename the country, the river and the currency, using the word Zaïre. He also nationalized the biggest companies – a move that accelerated the disintegration of the economy, as the corrosive social and financial effects of corruption at the highest government levels eventually permeated all levels of society.

After more than 30 years in power, President Mobutu was finally toppled in 1997 during the First Congo War, by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the son of a postman from Katanga. The charismatic Kabila had already been an established opponent of Mobutu three decades earlier when Ché Guevara paid a 1965 visit to the Republic of Congo to help foster a revolutionary movement.

THE RWANDAN EFFECT

MUCH OF THE IMPETUS BEHIND KABILA’S FINAL successful campaign against Mobutu was provided by Rwanda and Uganda.

For Rwanda, the war was driven by a security



Source: OCHA, Oct. 2006

UNHCR / SATELLITE IMAGE MAP © 1996-2004 PLANETARY VISIONS

Meanwhile, DRC's political landscape was radically altered as Kabila, boosted by his rebel force's victories in the east, ousted Mobutu in May 1997. However, after a short period of relative calm, he in turn faced rebellion in the east.

DESCENT INTO ANARCHY

BY AUGUST 1998, WHEN THE SECOND CONGO WAR broke out, President Kabila's relations with his former allies had broken down as he tried to assert his independence.

This conflict – also referred to as the “African World War” in that it involved seven other African countries – resulted in the division of DRC into a government-controlled zone in the west and a rebel zone in the north and east, held by fluctuating coalitions of various different factions, including the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo led by Jean-Pierre Bemba (the losing candidate in the 2006 presidential election).

During the Second Congo War, the DRC rapidly degenerated into a battleground where various neighbouring countries attempted to play out their own internal conflicts, and various local Congolese political or tribal groups were quickly sucked into an ever accelerating kaleidoscope of violence. The established Hutu and Tutsi Banyamulenge communities in particular – many of whom had lived in DRC for decades – found themselves at the centre of an increasingly complex conflict, at least partly because of their historic links with Rwanda.



© S. SALGADO / ZENIT 1994

Local resistance movements against the “invaders” began to emerge and multiply. The best known is probably the Mai Mai from the diamond-rich Katanga Province. At first, according to Zacharie Kasongo, despite their strange rituals, they were “well received by the population, as people who would defend an ideal.” But the movement very quickly went wildly off the rails. Other groups such as the Hema and the Lendu in the north-east were also engaged in repeated fighting and tit-for-tat massacres and atrocities, of which the best known took place in the Bunia region of Ituri district in 2002-2003, leading eventually to the first-ever operation by a joint EU military force.

Meanwhile numerous different interests – occupying foreign forces, local tribal groups and political

Some of the 1.2 million Rwandan refugees who poured into eastern DRC after the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The murderous Interhamwe who fled alongside them helped trigger the destabilization of Rwanda's huge western neighbour.

Numerous different **interests** took advantage of the **mayhem** to secure for themselves some of DRC's **dazzling array** of mineral resources.

factions, as well as international commercial operations – took advantage of the mayhem to secure for themselves some of DRC's dazzling array of mineral resources.

In the end, all the armed groups operating in eastern DRC played their part, to varying degrees, in the cycle of violent acts against civilians: mass executions, acts of torture, gang rapes, forced labour, theft and abductions – to name just a few. Largely ignored by the outside world, a large swathe of the country was sinking into an orgy of violence and anarchy.

The capital Kinshasa, despite being some 2,500 kilometres to the west, was not immune from the effects as food supplies from conflict-affected eastern provinces began to dry up. Every available parcel of land was turned into a vegetable garden – but this “economy of resistance,” as it has been called by Congolese researcher Thierry Mayamba Nlandu, has its limits.

In July 1999, there was a positive development when the Lusaka Peace Accord was signed, under the aegis of the Organization of African Unity. This in turn led to the creation of a joint Commission involving the various belligerents, as well as the deployment of an armed UN force commonly known as MONUC.

The Lusaka Accord did not, however, bring an end to population displacements. According to the United Nations coordinating agency, OCHA, more than 75 percent of the families living in the rural zones of eastern Congo have suffered displacement at least once during the past five years and some 1.2 million in all were

still displaced at the beginning of December 2006.

PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

THE DISPLACEMENT SCENARIOS ARE EXTREMELY varied. For the most part, people move between five and eighty kilometres from their villages, and return home within 48 hours. Although the great majority of displaced Congolese remained inside the country, by the beginning of 1996, 431,000 refugees had left DRC to find safety abroad.

Some areas in the east had been virtually emptied of their inhabitants. The so-called “triangle of death” in Katanga Province is one such example – left at the mercy of the infamous Mai Mai warlord Gideon, who with his band of child soldiers surrendered his weapons to MONUC last May.

Meanwhile, at the turn of the century, around 300,000 Angolan, Burundian, Rwandan, Ugandan and Sudanese refugees, who had fled their own countries in search of safety in the DRC, found themselves caught up in the middle of this Congolese torment.

Hilarie Mukamurara, a Rwandan who arrived in the DRC with her family in 1994, recalled their years of wandering: “We were cut off in the forest, without a roof over our heads, and we suffered insecurity, cold and hunger,” she said.

“For a number of years,” added her husband, Pierre, “the rebel groups in the DRC prevented us from returning to Rwanda.” Then, in 2004, they were kidnapped. After managing to escape, they finally found their way to a UNHCR reception centre, from where they were repatriated voluntarily to Rwanda.

GETTING BY

DURING THE WAR, THEIR ECONOMY IN TATTERS, most Congolese muddled their way through from one day to the next – a way of life that led to some intriguing inventions: there's *kibabola*, for example, which is made from the ashes of banana peel and wood, mixed with palm oil, and is used as a substitute for detergent. Unable to acquire petrol, traders travelled hundreds of kilometres through dangerous territory by bicycle, and the *tsukudu* – a robust hand-made, foot-powered scooter capable of transporting over 100 kilos – became the king of the road.

According to Cyprien Fabre of the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO), who

CONGOLESE REFUGEES AROUND THE WORLD

(as of 1 January 2006)

Country of Asylum	Refugees
AFRICA (Top 10)	
United Rep. of Tanzania	150,100
Zambia	61,200
Congo	56,400
Rwanda	41,400
Uganda	20,600
Burundi	20,400
Angola	13,500
South Africa	10,600
Zimbabwe	6,500
Central African Rep.	3,300
ELSEWHERE (Top 5)	
France	8,500
United Kingdom*	6,500
Germany	6,300
Canada*	5,100
United States*	2,400
OTHER	18,200
Total	431,000

* UNHCR estimates

Six Years in the East

Denise Beutler is a smiling, energetic young woman who lives in Switzerland with her husband and her son. She arrived in the country in 2000, after spending the previous six years of her life

in North Kivu Province in the eastern part of DRC.

Born in Kinshasa, she began her job as a customs officer in Goma in March 1994, just before the genocide in Rwanda and the massive influx

of Rwandese refugees into DRC that followed.

“It was as if the whole of Rwanda was running away. People were packed together. Some died on the spot from exhaustion. Goma became a living cemetery. I hosted three people at my place. Some Congolese took kids they found by the road suckling the breasts of their dead mothers. We were deeply moved.

“The water supply, health care, security – everything kept on deteriorating. The cholera caused terrible losses. I was attacked in my little house by masked and armed people. The only reason I am still alive today is that I let them take everything they wanted.”

Two years later, in 1996, the rebel groups fighting against the Mobutu regime seized several towns, including Goma, before they moved on to capture Kinshasa.

“When the ADFL [the alliance run by Laurent-Désiré Kabila] arrived, I was visiting a colleague of mine in another neighbourhood. We had just got out of his place when we saw a crowd of people running past... We started running too. There was shooting. I remember a woman just in front of me – a bullet hit her right in the head. I barely managed to avoid her as she fell. There was nothing I could do. Shells were being fired at civilians. It was raining bullets.

“Everybody panicked. We took refuge

in the forest. I had some water, bread and a bag of sugar with me. It saved us. At one point, I told them: ‘I am not going any further. I am not from this place, so I would rather die here. At least someone will find my body and my mother will know that I am dead.’”

When the situation calmed down, a traumatized Denise rejoined her family in Kinshasa.

“I had images of dismembered bodies in my mind: a head here, a leg over there. I was crying endlessly. I remembered the clothes I was wearing, covered with blood.”

However, after giving birth to her son, she was obliged to return to Goma by the end of 1997, to avoid losing her job. Life picked up again, bit by bit. Then, on 2 August 1998, the Second Congo War broke out, bringing a new wave of attacks and atrocities against civilians. What shocked Denise most was what was being done to the women.

“Women were raped in front of their kids, of their husbands. It was dreadful. After the rape, some men took knives and placed them in their vaginas. Up until now, the world has looked away – but this is the reality. Their homes were destroyed. Many of these women were cast out... these women have been mutilated, their womanhood destroyed. Some will never be able to give birth again. These are human lives that have been destroyed.”

In Goma, the tension continued to rise with the arrival of more Rwandan forces. Denise, who also acted as the president of a local trade union branch, resented the growing sense of humiliation felt by her compatriots and decided to resign.

“People advised me not to. I had also written a piece in a local newspaper to denounce the illegal cross-border smuggling that was going on.”

Feeling very exposed, Denise made up

her mind to leave again. She entered Rwanda disguised as a peasant going to the market, helped by people waiting with her belongings on the other side of the border. From there she made her way to Kenya and finally to a new life in Switzerland, where she received refugee status, settled down and got married.

Despite her evident courage and determination to move on, her six years in the troubled east of DRC still come back to haunt her. “On the first of August

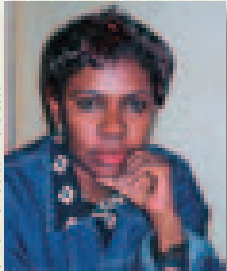
Displaced Congolese a month after the first civil war broke out in 1996. Millions more have been displaced in the decade since then.



[Swiss National Day], I hid under my bed when the fireworks started,” she said. “I thought the war had begun again – I had forgotten I was in Switzerland.”

“I will never give up,” she says. “That’s why I choose to talk openly about what happened. What I feel the most strongly about is the need to help women who have been raped.”

—Interview by Cécile Pouilly



The hospital where Immaculate is shown receiving treatment after being attacked by Lendu militia had itself been looted, and was without medical supplies. Even her bandages had to be salvaged from the debris.



© M. BLEASDALE / DRC2003

was stationed in the Bukavu region until recently, the villagers sometimes went so far as “to create false villages to attract the militia and the bandits, while they kept the bulk of their goods and livestock hidden elsewhere.”

“There were some very isolated zones beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance,” Fabre continued, “notably in the High Plateau region. I recall the first time that I went up to Fizi, a small town in

the west. They had nothing. There were people in very difficult circumstances. It was appalling... I believe the hope that our visit gave rise to was even more important to them than the assistance. The people were happy to find themselves finally reconnected with the outside world.”

OBSTACLES TO AID

AFTER THE LACK of security, the biggest problem the humanitarian community has

encountered during the entire crisis has been simply getting physical access to people in need. “The hours and hours on motorbikes, or in dug-out canoes – the sheer difficulty in getting access to certain areas – is unimaginable,” Fabre added.

This opening up of the territory, through constructing, repairing or securing roads, was to become one of the top humanitarian priorities. One of the key events, however, was the momentous journey up the Congo River of the so-called “Peace Barge” in June 2001.

After three years of suspended river navigation, this boat – provided by MONUC – travelled from Kinshasa to Kisangani, symbolically reuniting the deeply divided nation.

News of the operation, which was broadcast nationwide by the UN’s Radio Okapi – the only station covering the entire country – was particularly significant to the Congolese given the immensely important role the Congo River has always played in their culture, history and economy.

Assistance operations for the displaced people have been centred on North and South Kivu and Katanga provinces, as well as in Ituri district (in Orientale Province) – which at the height of the crisis accounted for one million uprooted people all by itself.

Over the past year, the DRC has become one of the eight countries where the new so-called “cluster approach” – a concerted effort by the UN and other humanitarian organizations to improve the coordination of aid for internally displaced people – is being tried and tested. Under the cluster approach, agencies join forces in groups covering their specific areas of expertise such as health, food, water, shelter, education, “early recovery” (in DRC led jointly by UNHCR and UNDP), and protection (led by UNHCR and MONUC).

PEACE AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL, THE ASSASSINATION OF Laurent-Désiré Kabila on 16 January 2001 marked another major turning point.

After his son, Joseph Kabila, succeeded him as interim President, the peace process began to pick up steam again, and in December 2002 the Sun City Accord was signed, which finally brought an end to the Second Congo War.

Even though by mid-2003 all foreign troops had officially left the country, various armed factions remained active – for example, the 2,000 men of Laurent Nkunda who continued to carry on a reign of terror in North Kivu,

Nkunda himself is the subject of an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant for alleged war crimes during the capture of Bukavu in June 2004.

REFUGEES IN DRC

(as of 1 January 2006)

Country of origin

Angola	106,800
Rwanda	42,400
Burundi	19,000
Uganda	19,000
Sudan	11,700
Congo	5,200
Central African Rep.	100
Various	200
Total	204,400



AP / K. PRINSLOO / DRC-2003

And the Court is also responsible for the arrest of a notorious warlord from Ituri District, Thomas Lubanga, for war crimes and military enlistment of children – a development that sets an important precedent.

Accusations have also been levelled against the national army (FARDC) – with some observers even suggesting it has become the primary source of insecurity for civilians. In October 2006, for example, Human Rights Watch issued a report that accused the army of continuing to carry out abductions of civilians in Ituri for forced labour.

According to the Director of the Initiative for Collaborative Leadership and Cohesion of the State in the DRC, Michel Noureddine Kassa, it is essential that the “culture of impunity” be terminated at all levels of the political and military spectrum. “For trust and cohesion to be restored, it will require a visible change starting from the top leadership,” he said.

In another encouraging development, twelve

soldiers recently received 15-year prison sentences following the collective rape of 120 women and pillaging of the towns of Nsongo Mboyo and Bongandanga in Equateur province in December 2004.

But, according to one foreign diplomat who requested anonymity, the fundamental problem remains unsolved: “After the integration of some rebel forces into the army,” he said, “they were sending the salaries from Kinshasa. But a great deal evaporated before anything reached the pockets of the lower ranks. Since the military are not paid, they help themselves – after all, they have to eat. Whether it’s the regular army, or rebels or militia, they are all the same: they get hungry, in the full sense of the word. When they rob a house, they first head for the kitchen.”

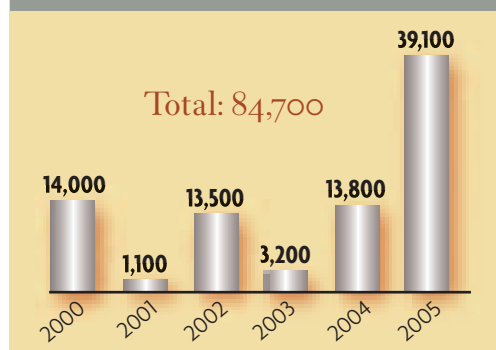
TWO-WAY TRAFFIC

NEVERTHELESS, THE LULL IN HOSTILITIES SINCE June 2003 has allowed the return of a large number of displaced people and refugees. Over the past three

A ten-year-old Hema boy chasing a woman out of her shop during the battles and tit-for-tat atrocities between the Hema and Lendu militias in Bunia in 2003.

Apart from security, the biggest problem has been simply reaching people.

RETURNEES TO DRC



years, hundreds of thousands of IDPs have returned to their homes, in addition to around 85,000 refugees – mostly from Tanzania and Congo-Brazzaville. Those who returned (the great majority to Katanga, Orientale Province and the Kivus) have sometimes been confronted with considerable difficulties, owing to the destruction of houses and absence of basic services.

In addition to helping in the actual repatriation of some 38,000 of the refugees, and providing assistance packages for returnees, UNHCR has established a number of programmes aimed at revitaliz-

ing the communities to which refugees are returning. These include efforts to help find peaceful solutions to land disputes – an initiative stimulated by the assassination of several former displaced people in Ituri – as well as the renovation of schools and medical facilities and the launching of income-generating projects, such as manioc mills, bakeries, carpentry and tailoring shops – all projects designed to “benefit not only those who have returned to the DRC, but the entire community” according to Seibou Insa, head of the UNHCR office in Equateur Province.

But the movements are still by no means all in the right direction. Military operations against rebel groups, and renewed direct attacks against civilians continued to cause new population movements throughout 2006 – to the tune of 40,000 a month, according to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre.

As a result, a number of humanitarian agencies

DRC is the size of Western Europe, has huge tracts of rainforest and hardly any roads – making aid delivery exceptionally difficult.



The Sun City Accord and MONUC



Signed on 17 December 2002 in South Africa, the Sun City Accord was essentially a power-sharing agreement which helped unite the main opposing forces in a transitional government under a transitional constitution. It also provided for demilitarization, the withdrawal of foreign troops and the disarmament of the militias, as well as the organization of free and democratic elections. Under the Accord, some of the former rebel forces were to be integrated into the Congolese army (known by its French acronym FARDC).

Established in November 1999 by the UN Security Council, the Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) has a key role in the execution of both the Lusaka and Sun City Accords. Following the capture of Bukavu by rebel

forces led by Laurent Nkunda and Jules Mutebusi in June 2004, and because of the continuing precarious security situation in North and South Kivu, its troop strength was increased significantly by the Security Council in October 2004.

Acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, MONUC is authorized to use “all means deemed necessary, within the limits of its capacities and in the areas of deployment of its armed units,” to discourage any forceful action that threatens the political process and to ensure the protection of civilians facing an imminent physical threat.

MONUC is also charged with facilitating the process of disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, resettlement and reintegration, and with organizing

elections.

Headed by William Swing, a former United States ambassador to the DRC during the Mobutu era, MONUC is the biggest and most expensive peacekeeping operation in the world. It is also one of the most complex, involving not just peacekeepers but also political, rule-of-law, humanitarian, human rights and civil police elements. However, its 17,600 soldiers, from 50 different countries, are spread over a country that is two thirds the size of the European Union, and are – as the MONUC website puts it – “severely challenged by the operational and logistical difficulties of deploying in a continent-sized country without roads, where one-third of the budget is needed just to get in place to be able to start work.”

were continuing to assist some of the 1.2 million people who were officially recorded as displaced as of December 2006, an aid operation that is complicated by the fact that only a small proportion of them are living in camps.

DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS

DURING 2006, THERE WERE SIGNS THAT THE Democratic Republic of the Congo was moving closer to living up to its name. Indeed, given the state of the country in recent years, the progress up to and during the presidential elections was remarkable. In December 2005, 85 percent of those who took part in a referendum on the new Constitution voted in favour of it. The enthusiasm of the population to take part in the vote was clear. In the words of Eusebe Hounsokou, UNHCR’s Representative in Kinshasa:

“The people are sick and tired of fighting – they want food on the table every day; they want their children to go to school.”

The first round of the presidential election on 30 July 2006 and the run-off between the two leading candidates – Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba – on 29 October were a unique opportunity to “rehumanize millions of Congolese,” according to Michel Kassa. The election also brought an end to “ten years of humiliation of the Congolese people,” who were energized by “a desire for freedom and human dignity, from Ituri to Bas-Congo,” he added.

As with so many things in the DRC, in order to come even close to succeeding, the election operation had to match the scale of the country. During the initial vote, 33 candidates were competing for the presidency, and 8,000 for parliamentary seats. The choice

The UN peacekeeping force (above) is the largest in the world, with more than 17,000 soldiers.

Given the circumstances, the **progress** up to and during the presidential elections was remarkable.

After five years in exile, a returning refugee receives a warm welcome home from her relatives in Equateur Province.



was to be made by up to 25 million voters in 52,000 polling stations, dispersed across a territory that exceeds 2.3 million square kilometres. It was the largest electoral operation in the entire history of the UN and, irrespective of the political aftermath, it succeeded – in spite of the immense logistical challenges posed by the country’s non-existent infrastructure.

On 15 November, Joseph Kabila’s victory in the run-off with 58 percent of the vote was announced by the electoral commission, amid widespread fears that the next vital step in the democratic process – acceptance of the election results – would be where it all fell apart. Such fears had been heightened in August, even before the run-off took place, when at least 23 people were killed in Kinshasa during fighting between supporters of the two candidates.

Concern mounted when the Supreme Court was set on fire on 21 November. However two days later, with UN and EU troops patrolling the streets of Kinshasa, and an intense international spotlight focused on what he would do next, Jean-Pierre Bemba began withdrawing his militia from the capital. On 27 November, shortly before this magazine went to press, the Supreme Court confirmed the election results.

Despite a comfortable margin of victory for Kabila, the country was split right down the middle geographically as well as politically: the western part, including Kinshasa, had voted overwhelmingly for Bemba, whereas the eastern half of the country had voted overwhelmingly for Kabila. For this reason, Bemba’s pledge on 29 November that he would not oppose the Supreme Court’s final decision was greeted with relief and considered significant.

Such polarization nevertheless presents a clear set of dangers. Even if the country makes it through the initial post-election phase relatively peacefully, the long-term struggle for a stable democracy and greater prosperity will still be in its infancy. As William Swing, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, noted, “the worst thing would be if there was a good election but nothing changed.” ■

Carving Out A New Life

The province of South Kivu welcomed its 20,000th returning refugee in September 2006, and many have already made an impact on their home communities. A

returnee called Samora, for example, has set up a successful business in Kazimia village: “Before the war, there was one milling machine here,” he said. “After the war there was none – until I returned.” Every morning, a line of women queues up outside his premises to grind their maize and cassava into flour, and fewer local girls now have to spend hours laboriously pounding their food with a pestle and mortar.

A few kilometres away, in Lubondja village, 46-year-old Msambyo Choloko has also made an

impression since his return across Lake Tanganyika. “I did not flee with a skill,” he said. “But, in the refugee camp, a Congolese man called Survey taught me how to work wood.” Thanks to a tool-kit provided by UNHCR, he has started a small carpentry business that enables him to feed his family and send his children to school. He’s even taking on apprentices: a pair of septuagenarians who had no other way of making a living. “They are picking up the skill incredibly fast,” he says.

“It’s encouraging,” adds UNHCR’s Jens Hesemann in Kinshasa. “Sustainable repatriation is built on thousands of small successes like these.”

One Among THOUSANDS

The story of a Congolese rape victim



MONJIC / G. BOULLERAC / DRC-2005

BY MILLICENT MUTULI

More than six years ago, Beatrice M.*, a schoolgirl at the time, was abducted by a band of armed militia from Karanga village, near Goma in North Kivu – the epicentre of Congo’s civil wars over the past decade. She was held captive along with five other girls from Karanga and repeatedly raped by the Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda-speaking fighters at their camp in the forested hills of Rutshuru.

Her five-year-old child, Pelagie, is the daughter of one of the rapists.

“For one week, we were tied with ropes. The way you tie a goat,” Beatrice explained in a mix of Kiswahili and French. “You can still see the scars on my leg,” she added, pointing to welts on her shin. “They only untied us when they wanted to satisfy themselves.”

Beatrice’s abductors were a group of nearly 50 armed young men who lived in shelters assembled from leaves, branches and plastic sheets. Their captives were left outside, with only the eucalyptus trees for cover.

“We stayed in the open – exposed to rain, flies, mosquitoes and other insects. Even an animal is treated better than the way they treated us,” she said.

After nearly three months, Beatrice began to feel unwell. However, she dared not tell anyone – least of all her abductors.

“If you said you were sick, you were flogged like an animal,” she said.

All her fellow captives, with the exception of one girl called Elodie, died – “maybe from the sickness, or from the beating, or both.” Their bodies were then pushed into shallow graves dug by the surviving girls.

As the group continued to plunder villages on their way south towards Uvira, they ran into another armed militia – possibly the Mai Mai. Fierce fighting broke out, and Beatrice (who by now knew she was pregnant) and Elodie seized their chance and escaped.

Beatrice eventually found her way back to Goma where she was taken in by an aunt who, along with the rest of her family, had long believed she was dead.

After her daughter was born, Beatrice decided to return to Karanga – against the wishes of her father, who feared for her life.

She had told her family what had happened. She was emaciated, and she knew people thought she had AIDs. Some kept their distance from her, but mostly they were sympathetic. You could not afford to be scornful of a rape

victim, when tomorrow it might be your turn, or that of your daughter or your mother.

Karanga had continued to suffer raids that tended to follow a predictable pattern: bouts of gunfire would precede the arrival of the fighters, then the screams of panicking villagers, followed by pandemonium as people ran for their lives into the surrounding hills.

As feared, soon after her return, the rebels attacked again and, for the second time in nearly four years, Beatrice fled from a group of armed men – but this time with a baby strapped to her back. She remembers her mother’s warning: “Next time they will kill you, Bea. You have to go.”

Beatrice went first of all to Uganda, but quickly moved on after she spotted one of her abductors at the main bus station in the capital, Kampala. In September 2004, she reached Kenya, where her sister lives.

Early this year, Beatrice joined a tailoring school in one of Nairobi’s suburbs and her daughter was enrolled in pre-school.

Pelagie will soon be celebrating her

sixth birthday. She has started asking about her father, and Beatrice does not know how to answer. After all, the father could be any one of the dozens of armed men for whom Beatrice was cook, porter and cleaner by day, and sex slave at night.

Throughout her interview, even while describing what was done to her during her months in captivity, Beatrice M. remained matter-of-fact, even somewhat detached. When she began to talk about the father of her child, however, her eyes filled with tears.

Beatrice is certain of two things: she is not going back to DRC yet; and she will never tell Pelagie the truth about her father. During counselling, arranged for her by UNHCR, the possibility of having an HIV test came up.

“I have not gone for a test,” she said, “because I’m scared of what the result may be. But maybe I am not seropositive, because Pelagie is healthy.

“If I can learn to be a good tailor, maybe I can live here,” she added softly. ■

** The names of Beatrice M., her daughter and her village have all been changed to protect her identity.*



Sheer BRUTALITY

HIV may compound the suffering of the women raped in the eastern DRC

BY SARAH RUSSELL
Global Coalition on Women and AIDS

Over the past decade, fighters from many different groups have ranged up and down the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo slaughtering people, robbing and destroying property – and also raping tens of thousands of women and girls. That is the cautious figure. Several

experts involved with the issue in eastern DRC believe the true number of rape victims in the past ten years to be well over 100,000. Many, including Beatrice M. (see previous interview), have been kept as sex slaves for weeks or months on end.

The aim – at least in part – seemed to be to use women as a means of helping to damage or destroy entire communities because of their ethnic,

tribal or political affiliations: once again – as in Bosnia and Darfur – rape has been used consciously, and with the utmost callousness, as a weapon of war. The result: a petrified population, deserted villages and what will most probably turn out to be a severe HIV epidemic.

“The conflict itself has made it virtually impossible to obtain reliable statistics,” said Paul De Lay, Director of



Survivor of a massacre: Many women from eastern Congo have suffered horrendous experiences at the hands of various local and foreign fighters.

MONIC / Y. BOUZIANE / BDP/2004

the UNAIDS Evaluation Division. Nevertheless, in 2002, Human Rights Watch estimated that as many as 60 per cent of the armed men roaming the countryside raping, torturing and mutilating women and girls could be HIV-positive, and noted that almost none of the women had access to services and care.

Now, however, medical workers are beginning to get to areas that have been long cut off by conflict. Their findings are chilling.

The NGO Global Rights claimed that just in the province of South Kivu, some 42,000 women were treated in health clinics for “serious sexual assaults” in 2005 alone. Doctors and women’s groups report that the assaults are notable not only for their scale, but also for their sheer brutality.

One survivor told another NGO, Human Rescue: “Sometimes the rapes are so violent that the woman dies... We

can be attacked anywhere and at any time of day or night: in the fields, at the market, on our way to collect water, in our houses...They are destroying us, body and soul.”

Aware that they will never reach the majority of the victims, UNHCR and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) have nevertheless been working together since early 2006 to provide survivors with treatment and counselling, by training health-workers how to deal with rape.

Survivors are encouraged to come forward within 72 hours so they can take a post-exposure prophylaxis against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. However, many women continue to conceal the fact that they have been raped because they fear social ostracism.

As part of a regional initiative on AIDS, alongside the governments of Burundi, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda,

Tanzania and Uganda, UNHCR has also been focusing on establishing comprehensive HIV and AIDS programmes for refugees, returnees, internally displaced people and local communities in all six countries.

And sensitization about HIV and AIDS is also an integral part of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme that began in July 2004. The challenge is not just to raise awareness about AIDS among ex-combatants, but to try to persuade them to change their sexual behaviour.

Participants receive information about the virus, and how it is transmitted. They learn why fighters are a high-risk group. And they are offered voluntary testing and counselling services. But few volunteer to be tested, stoking fears that large numbers of infected demobilized militia will return to their communities and boost the epidemic even further. ■

The Congolese refugees in

BY JACK REDDEN

IN AN APARTMENT IN WHAT WAS once a wealthy area of Johannesburg, a mother holding her baby explains that she left the Democratic Republic of Congo eight years ago to escape the brutal fighting between foreign-backed rebels and the government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila. On another street nearby, a recent Congolese graduate says he arrived in the last two months, driven out of the DRC because of the stance he took during the run up to the presidential election.

The Congolese form the largest single group of refugees in South Africa: over 10,000 recognized refugees and a further 15,000 with asylum applications pending. As a result of continuing violence and political tensions in DRC itself, coupled with an illicit network of smugglers crossing the intervening countries, the flow of Congolese asylum seekers to South Africa shows no sign of stopping.

"A cousin was living with us but she returned home two months ago," said a Congolese woman, interviewed just before the final election results were announced, and who preferred to be identified by the pseudonym Gloria. "Now she has called to say she can't stay because of the political tensions and is going to come back to South Africa."

Gloria is a mother of three daughters ranging from six years old to a few months, living with a husband who works in IT, but earns the equivalent of under US\$200 a month. They live in what was once a desirable part of Johannesburg, but a long-abandoned swimming pool behind the building now holds only refuse and puddles of green liquid. They split the \$170 a month rent of the one-bedroom apartment with three other refugee families.

She makes a special plea for assistance to get her eldest daughter into school,

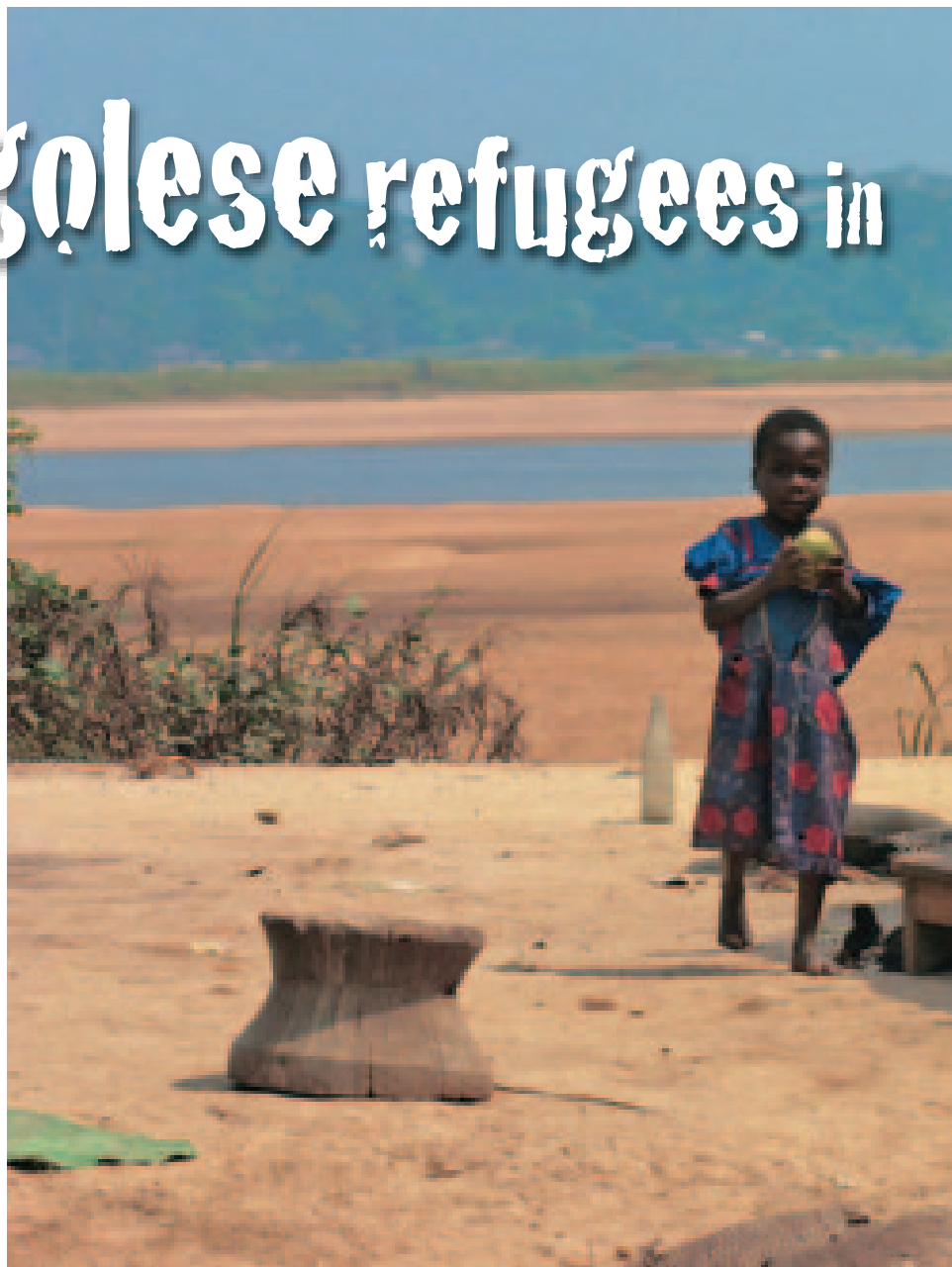
saying they cannot afford the modest fees that face both refugees and South Africans: "It's important for their future. It is painful to see them at home." A 2003 study showed that nearly half of Congolese refugees had tertiary-level education, the highest rate among refugees surveyed. In comparison, only five percent of South Africans had been through tertiary education.

Congolese refugees are found across the continent. In southern Africa, there are some 60,000 in Zambia – 40,000 in camps near the border with their former homeland – as well as 13,000 in Angola and 6,500 in Zimbabwe.

The part of DRC bordering Zambia is also the exit point for most of those who

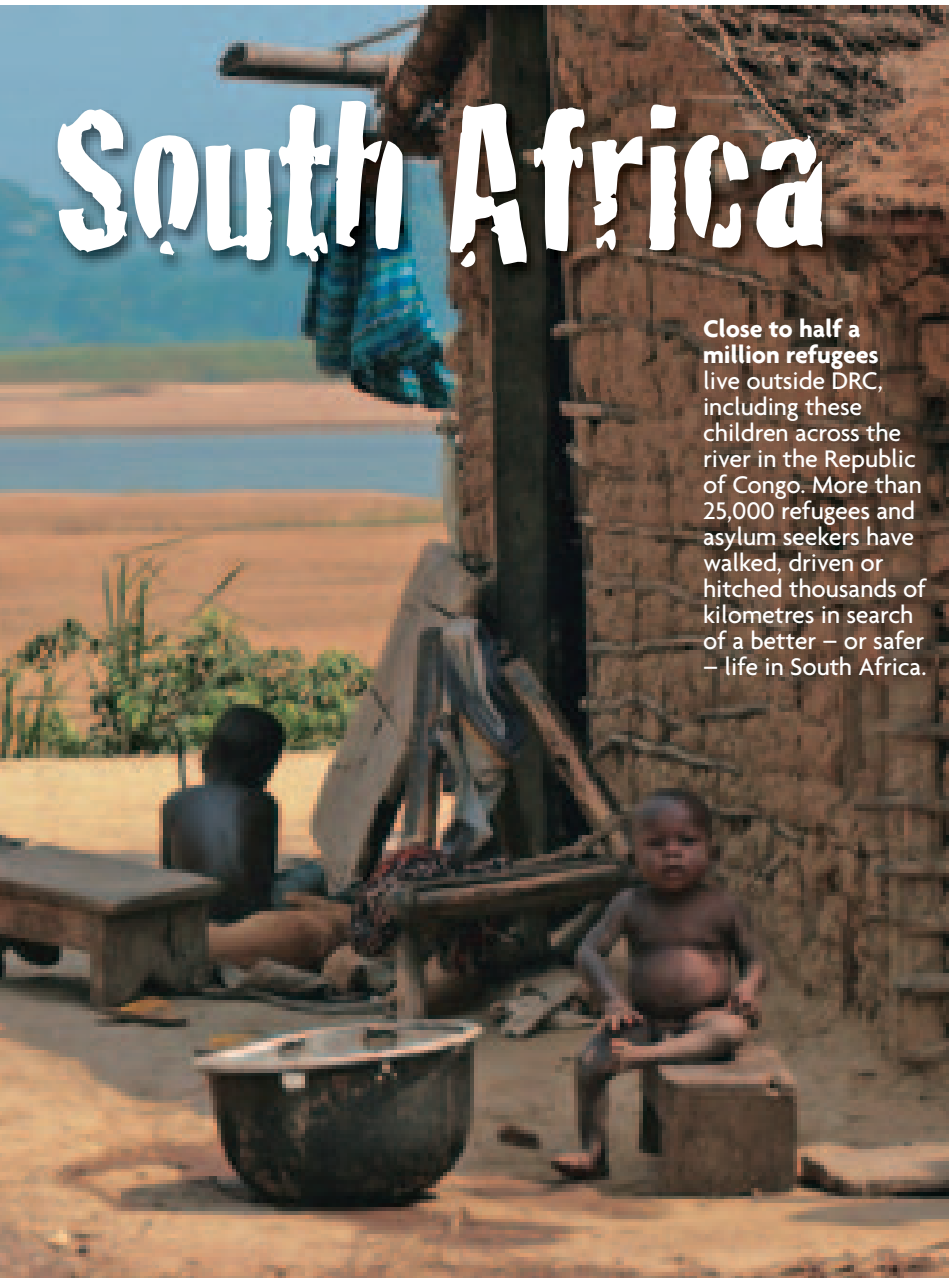
end up in South Africa, the economic powerhouse of the continent that is a magnet for both economic migrants and asylum seekers. Congolese asylum seekers in South Africa describe how they paid to be loaded aboard a truck with other Congolese inside DRC, then were carried across Zambia and Zimbabwe into South Africa. Some are delivered to specific addresses, such as a church in Johannesburg where one woman says she was told to go by the relative who paid for her trip.

"Some people are just coming from DRC for work but it is very rare," says Blaise Nzuzi, who works for the Jesuit Refugee Services, one of UNHCR's partners in South Africa. "Mostly now it



South Africa

Close to half a million refugees live outside DRC, including these children across the river in the Republic of Congo. More than 25,000 refugees and asylum seekers have walked, driven or hitched thousands of kilometres in search of a better – or safer – life in South Africa.



UNHCR / J. HESEMANN / ROCK2006

is the political situation.”

Esper, a nurse, said she fled DRC after soldiers confronted her outside a hospital in the east of the country because they suspected – correctly – that the staff were treating wounded Rwandans. “They would not hear of it when we said we must treat anyone who needs help. There was shooting and I ran back into the hospital to warn the patients to escape. Then I fled out the back door and hid in the bush.” Travelling by foot, and by boat and then by a people smugglers’ truck, she eventually reached South Africa. But

left behind were her three children: a son of 17, and daughters of 16 and 12. Her husband is dead and a friend has taken in the children, but she had not spoken to them since reaching South Africa five months earlier. “I would love to go back to the children, to resume my job,” she said in a house full of Congolese refugees in the Yeovil district of Johannesburg. “But my brother told me I cannot go back as long as the current government is in power.”

Unlike many countries, where refugees and asylum seekers are confined

to camps, South Africa has never imposed such restrictions. But with the freedom the government has extended to refugees – giving them similar rights to citizens – comes the obligation to take care of yourself. UNHCR’s 2003 study found that, despite their relatively advanced level of education, those from DRC had the lowest household incomes of all refugee groups – a median of only about US\$70 a month. “Refugees are really in need of support, but here it is complicated,” says Leon, a Congolese journalist who fled three years ago after receiving threats because of a television programme in which he appeared. “Here they are expected to be productive, to support themselves.” In an effort to continue his profession, he has learned English, in addition to the French spoken in DRC.

Congolese, like other refugees in South Africa, tend to be young and often either single or separated from their spouse. They are scattered across the country but the biggest concentration is in Johannesburg, the commercial capital of South Africa. They also reflect the diversity of their vast homeland – including the ethnic and political rivalries. Feelings over the 2006 election ran sufficiently high for one humanitarian organization working with refugees in South Africa to suggest it might not be safe to organize a meeting that would include backers of the two rival candidates for president of DRC.

“I can’t talk about integration at this stage, there are so many obstacles to overcome,” says a graduate in international relations who left the DRC capital, Kinshasa, after the first stage of this year’s two-stage national election because of threats from political rivals. “But I can’t think of going home yet either.”

If the initial calm following the Supreme Court’s upholding of the election results prevails, this understandable caution shown by the refugees in South Africa may gradually shift into

“I can’t talk about integration at this stage – there are so many obstacles.”

Last summer's 34-day war in Lebanon, which displaced more than a million people, caught the world totally by surprise. Seven UNHCR staff members who worked in the region during the crisis describe their experiences during the war and in its immediate aftermath.



A UNHCR aid convoy enters the town of Siddiqine in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon



The Diarists:

CAROL EL SAYED (CS), 30, *Lebanese*.
Current posting: Lebanon.

ARAFAT JAMAL (AJA), 36, *American*.
Current posting: Lebanon.

ARJUN JAIN (ARJ), 32, *Indian*.
Current posting: Geneva.

ASTRID VAN GENDEREN STORT
(AvGS), 39, *Dutch*.
Current posting: Geneva.

MICHAEL BAVLY (MB), 71, *Israeli*.
UNHCR Honorary Representative,
Jerusalem.

ANNETTE REHRL (AR), 43, *German*.
Current posting: Liberia.

LISA QUARSHIE (LQ), 37, *Ghanaian*.
Current posting: Ghana.

Wednesday 12 July

EMAIL FROM UNHCR BEIRUT
TO UNHCR HQ IN GENEVA

You have probably heard about the reported kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah, in the south. We will be monitoring the situation to see what consequences this might have.

SWEDEN (CS): "Carol, it doesn't seem like you'll be returning to Beirut soon. The airport was just hit." That was how I first learned about the situation in Lebanon: from my fiancé as we walked out of the door to visit relatives. We had gone to Sweden together to visit his family. I was now stuck there, unable to go home, while he left five days later to Malaysia for work. I spent my remaining days in Sweden trying to keep in touch with my family in Lebanon by telephone.

I had a strong sense of disbelief about what was going on and the magnitude of it. I began picturing the bridges and areas where the shells were falling. Some were close to my home. I could not absorb the situation: I could not understand why my parents chose to remain at home despite attacks nearby;

Diaries

Lebanon Diaries

I could not understand why they simply placed their most important documents near the door and slept in their clothes, rather than seek refuge somewhere else straight away.

The news spoke of refugees in Lebanon. Despite working with UNHCR, it took me a couple of days to realize that “refugees” didn’t just mean foreigners any more – I myself was now, in a way, a refugee.

Saturday 15 July

REPORT FROM UNHCR BEIRUT TO HQ
Important targets (airports, bridges, roads) located all over the country have been hit. The country is effectively sealed off from the outside world.

BEIRUT (AJA): Some of the Lebanese staff have sought safety in their ancestral mountain villages. I am trying to call everyone at least once every 48 hours, to see if they are safe. They want to help displaced people who are starting to arrive in their home areas, and I authorize them to do whatever they can. They immediately begin purchasing mattresses, blankets and diapers, and enlisting husbands, brothers and other family members to help kick-start the UN’s emergency response. Meanwhile, I sit listening to the muffled sound of bombs pounding away at the infrastructure.

Tuesday 18 July

REPORT FROM UNHCR BEIRUT TO HQ
UNHCR will play a role with internally displaced people (IDPs) in the context of the [new UN system-wide] “cluster approach,” which in practical terms means a close focus on protection and shelter (camps are not currently a viable option in Lebanon).

Friday 21 July

BEIRUT (AJA): The disaster professionals are arriving, and with them a new vocabulary and aesthetic. The starched shirts and Dior scarves that once marked the elegant UN House are giving way to safari shirts and photographer vests, and even in town, the few remaining restaurants are being taken over by a blonder, hairier, and more earnest crowd. It’s the Sarajevo, Loki or Kabul look, and a far cry from the glamour, gorgeousness and limitless superficiality of the Beirut that we knew only ten days ago.

The new people are good, professional... give off an air of competence, and show an inspiring willingness to work as a team, and to



The southern suburbs of Beirut on 23 July, after repeated Israeli airstrikes.

put aside institutional egos.

A crowd of 150 [refugees, asylum seekers and other foreigners] staged a frustrated but also at times belligerent demonstration in front of the office on Wednesday, demanding evacuation. Emotions were at a fever pitch, with the sound of bombing in the background, a thick summer heat and the knowledge that other, more fortunate foreigners were leaving by the boatload.

Saturday 22 July

ALEY, LEBANON (AJA): We visited some of the 38,000 IDPs residing in

schools in Aley [south-east of Beirut]. Conditions are precarious. People sleep three families to a room, and there is one toilet per 75 persons. The food stocks will hardly last the next two days. The bathrooms are clean: a disciplined and systematic cleaning rota is in place.

The first line of response has been undertaken by the people themselves and the authorities. It appears, at first glance, to be professional, swift and coordinated. These people have been through war before, and they know what to expect, and what to do.

Entry of humanitarian personnel to Lebanon has been suspended. Our Emergency Team is gathering in Damascus. I hope that permission will be granted in the next 48 hours. If not, we will have to consider other options.

DAMASCUS (ARJ): Thousands of refugees are arriving every day and many of them are in bad condition. We have been trying to ensure they can get safely into Syria and receive the food, shelter and other basics they need to get by. The most destitute are living in public buildings – schools, mosques and churches. During the past week, we have distributed tons of blankets, mattresses, kitchen sets, clothes and other essential items to

refugees as well as host families who do not have money to keep hosting Lebanese for a long period.

I’ve had a total of about 20 hours sleep over the past seven days. New members of the team are not doing any better. My diet consists largely of a healthy dose of cigarettes and Coke, with a splattering of sandwiches and I have been spending my nights on the office couch. I only realised it was my birthday this afternoon when my family called.

Monday 24 July

SWEDEN (CS): According to the UNHCR website, 700,000 people have

now been displaced by the conflict. UNHCR is sending 19 emergency team members “to augment its existing staff in Syria and Lebanon.” The teams are to fly in from UNHCR offices worldwide by the end of the week. I hope to be back there by then too, to help out.

Friday 28 July

BEIRUT (AVGS): My first day in the Beirut office, after several days stuck in Damascus. Everyone is running around. Most of the Lebanese staff are out – at home, in the mountains, displaced themselves. The driver tells me he is from south Beirut. His house has not been bombed “yet,” he says – but he left just in case. He tries to be upbeat. “As long as we all stay alive, I do not care about my belongings.”

We’re trying to do something for the hundreds and thousands of displaced. But how? Not only is the south of Lebanon being bombed, also Beirut, the Beqaa Valley, the main roads, the strategic points. We are curtailed in our movements by security rules and we try to find a way round, without breaking the rules. We have bought goods in the local shops – while waiting for our trucks from Syria to get into Lebanon – and had the shops deliver the goods to many people in need. That way, we avoid the requirement to have UN security and Israeli military clearances for the bigger truck convoys. Our own displaced staff are continuing their work with hundreds of thousands of other displaced people in districts north and south of Beirut. A drop in the ocean, perhaps, but still important.

Friday 28 July

JERUSALEM (MB): I have told UNHCR HQ I am ready to liaise with the Israeli Defence Forces and Ministry of Defence

to help speed up clearances for convoys, free passage, cease fires etc. All they have to do is ask.

Saturday 29 July

BEIRUT (CS): After 14 hours of travel, and 12 hours at the Syria-Lebanon border, I finally got home on a joint UN convoy bringing 140 tonnes of UNHCR supplies into Lebanon. Some UNHCR emergency



Israel: Aftermath of a Hezbollah rocket strike on the port city of Haifa (above).

Lebanon: Displaced people living rough in a park in downtown Beirut (below).



team members were on the same convoy. When we arrived in Beirut, some of them commented that everything looked normal. It was not the case. The area we were in used to be bustling with traffic and people. To my eyes, it looked eerily deserted. This was not the way I left Beirut.

I headed home while the international staff undertook a security briefing. I wanted to attend it. I was afraid.

Sunday 30 July

DAMASCUS (AR): I arrived here from Liberia two days ago. Damascus is getting overcrowded. The school we visited today is packed with women, children, babies, elderly. They sit in the school’s courtyard, not knowing where to go or what to do. A 12-year-old girl, Alaa, runs towards me, in need of a big hug. She is missing her mom. Alaa feels that she is now responsible for

the rest of her family – three little sisters and an aunt. She is skinny, pale and so fragile – but she talks like an adult. What will this experience do to her, once she really grows up?

BEIRUT (AVGS): It may be Sunday, but there’s no chance to rest. The news cries out about this morning’s Israeli air strike in the southern village of Qana. It seems at least 28 people were killed, including children, though some are reporting almost twice that number. My Lebanese photographer friend has already seen the photos. She sounds so numb, whereas she is normally so cheerful. It makes me shiver.

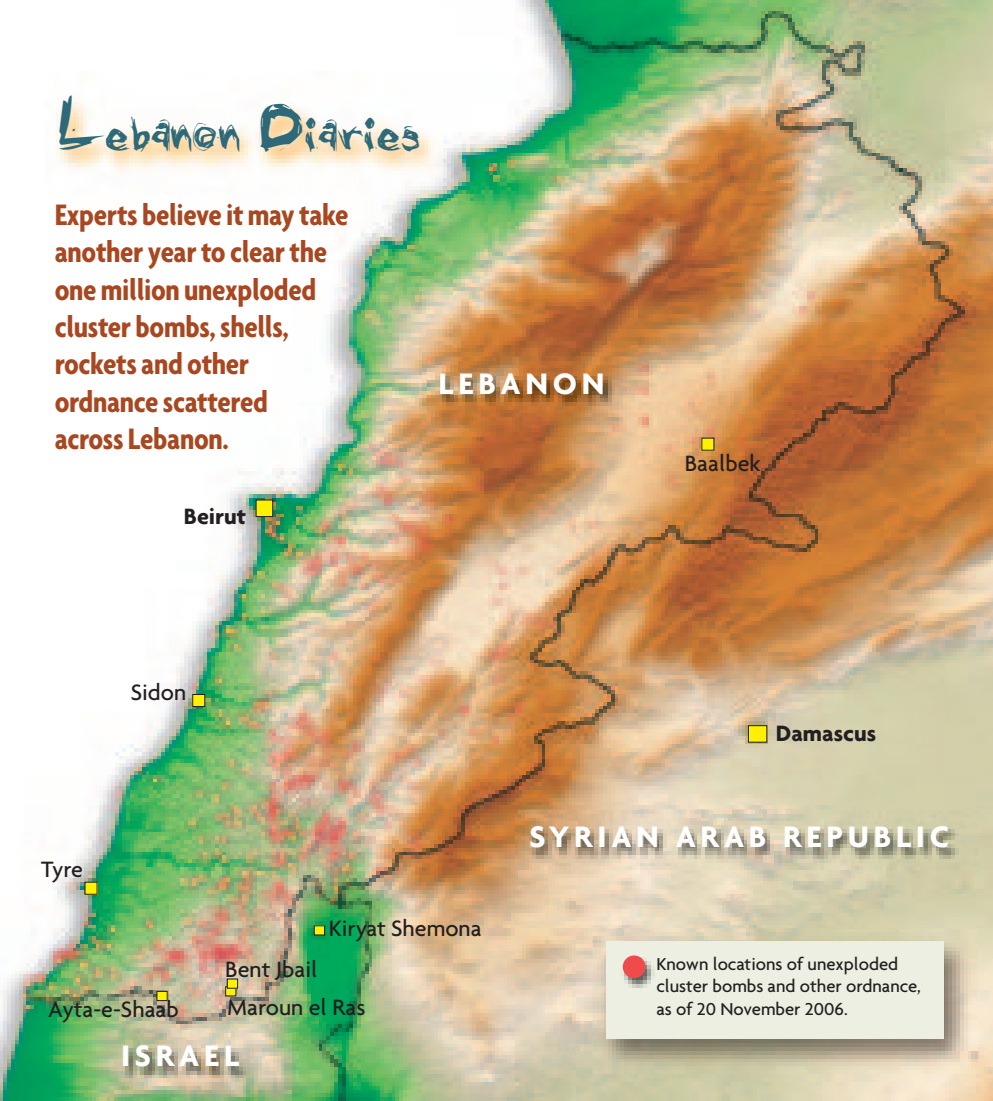
At 12:00, I check the TV – and see the main UN building in downtown Lebanon, with some 5,000 protesters ramming the doors, breaking the windows. I call out to my colleagues in the office: “The UN building is being attacked!”

We stare at the screen in disbelief...there are hundreds of colleagues from other agencies inside.

In the end, no one is badly hurt. As the day passes, it is more and more clear that these protesters are mainly crying out for attention – utterly distraught at what is happening in Lebanon, calling out to the UN at large: Do something – stop this! Many Israelis and their supporters are also furious with the UN. They think we’re biased. Not for the first time, we take flak from all sides.

Lebanon Diaries

Experts believe it may take another year to clear the one million unexploded cluster bombs, shells, rockets and other ordnance scattered across Lebanon.



● Known locations of unexploded cluster bombs and other ordnance, as of 20 November 2006.

SOURCE: UN MINE ACTION COORDINATION CENTRE

ringing. Why can't the world always cohabit like this? I ask myself.

BEIRUT (AVGS): I watch early morning TV again: Hezbollah fired more than 200 rockets into Israel; and Israeli troops have carried out a raid in Baalbek – the deepest attack yet.

A lot of sadness in the office. No one can escape this war. In the capitals, and at the Security Council, the talk continues. In the meantime, we continue trying to get goods to the people, but we are running out of fuel. There are sea and air blockades – and queues of hundreds of cars in front of the petrol stations.

Friday 4 August

SAFITA, SYRIA (LQ): I met Nour, a 7-year-old girl living with her mother and little brother in the Al Ja'afari hospital in Safita. She hesitantly touched the skin on my arms – and held on to my hand when I smiled. She asked if I could bring her milk, shoes and clothes, since her mother had forgotten to bring any. Her mother, with her young son on her hip, added that their house near Tyre had been completely destroyed.

Monday 31 July

BEIRUT (AVGS): A 48-hour halt to the air strikes in southern Lebanon is announced – to allow the people trapped in the south to leave, and an investigation into the Qana attack to take place. However, after about seven hours, new reports of fighting across the border – both ways. What a sick crisis. Journalists who call me from the south tell me it is scary down there: a lot of destruction, dazed people, trapped people, old people who sit in their dining rooms refusing to leave their homes.

blankets and 500 mattresses as part of the UN joint convoy to the beleaguered villages in the south. The convoy takes hours to get there because of all the traffic coming the other way. Because of the lull in the fighting, people are trying to get out – by car, on foot, anyway they can.

I get a media SMS alert: "Israeli troops are pushing towards the Litani River." The cessation of hostilities – if there ever really was one – is over. Back to war.

Tuesday 1 August

BEIRUT (CS): I have to find my niche in this operation which has spiralled from around a thousand foreign refugees living in urban areas to almost a million displaced Lebanese scattered all across the country, or over the border in Syria. Nowhere feels safe anymore.

Wednesday 2 August

DAMASCUS (AR): Each morning, on our way to the Damascus office, we pass two churches and a mosque, standing next to each other. We hear the Muezzins calling for prayer and the church bells

BEIRUT (AVGS): From the balcony, I can see huge smoke clouds over Beirut. Three or four main bridges on the coast road from Syria to Beirut – the main humanitarian corridor, which we take all the time – have been bombed. The other



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UNHCR trucked in hundreds of tonnes of aid, including these tents, from Jordan to Syria.

road from Damascus to Beirut was bombed a while back. Slowly but surely the main arteries inside Lebanon are being cut. The Israelis say it is because they are being used to supply Hezbollah.

I call a pregnant colleague who uses that route to come to work. "It feels like a wound that was nearly closed, has been ripped open again," she says, referring to the 15-year civil war that ended in 1990. All the staff are shaken and scared.

According to Lebanese government figures, 903 people have been killed and 3,293 injured. And dozens of people have also been killed in Israel.

Sunday 6 August

TALAT AL KHEDER (LQ):

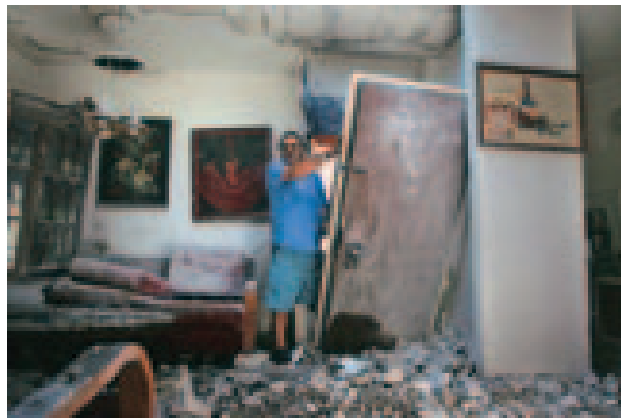
I am amazed at the level of hospitality the Syrians are showing to the refugees. We Ghanaians may have some lessons to learn about hospitality to displaced people. During a visit to the refugees living in the Talat Al Kheder mosque, some teenagers playing football became interested when they realized I am from Ghana, and asked me lots of questions about our team's performance in the World Cup.

BEIRUT (AvGS):

There are some 900,000 people displaced on this side – 700,000 within Lebanon and nearly 200,000 in Syria – as well as half a million in northern Israel. In displacement terms, it's worse than Kosovo.

Monday 7 August

BEIRUT (CS): I have been working with the displaced during the day and spending sleepless nights fearing the worst, as bombs fell nearby. I live in Chiah [part of Dahiyeh, the mainly Shia southern suburbs of Beirut]. It had been considered a safe area, and people fleeing other parts of the country had sought refuge there. But today I was forced to



Israel: An apartment in Kiryat Shemona, hit by one of some 4,000 rockets fired into Israel.

Lebanon: UNHCR staffer with a displaced woman and her newborn baby.



leave my home when bombs fell on a building about 400 metres away. Dozens are reported to have been killed. People living nearby evacuated their homes and headed towards the already crowded centres and public parks in the city centre.

Tuesday 8 August

DAMASCUS (AR): The Lebanese keep coming – and the Syrians keep accommodating them. The Syrian Government does not want to speak about 'refugees.' "These are our guests," they say. And as guests they are treated. I'm really impressed. Village committees turn up to cook three meals a day for them; local people lend strangers their mobile phones to call home; rich and poor Syrians open their homes to Lebanese families. Clothes, toys, prayer mats and money are donated by private citizens. This is so rewarding to witness. The interest of the international media is enormous. Some of them seem surprised to hear that Syrians can be generous. I get an urgent phone call from a German TV station. The German Parliament is discussing how to prevent a

mass influx of Lebanese refugees into Germany. The interviewer asks me whether I perceive this "danger" too. I have difficulty remaining polite. Oh, Europe!

Friday 11 August

BEIRUT (CS): The situation is getting increasingly difficult as the days go by. The water systems are not equipped to host such large numbers of people. There are reports of lice and scabies among the displaced and some medicines are in short supply. I'm seeing a lot of lethargy – especially among adolescents. There are many pregnant women. Most don't know where to go to give birth.

Host families are being inundated with displaced relatives – and they're getting little in the way of support. They say it's too difficult to arrange. I guess it's much easier to deal with the

collective centres.

The children's faces are becoming increasingly grey and pale. Most of the food is canned. There is hardly any fresh meat or vegetables.

Monday 14 August

BEIRUT-SIDON HIGHWAY (ARJ):

We haven't needed alarm clocks to wake up. The bombings at 5:00 am every morning have been sufficient. Today at 8:00 a.m., the ceasefire took effect under Security Council Resolution 1701. There is a silence on the streets of Beirut – the sound of disbelief that the bombs have actually stopped after 34 days.

By 9:00 a.m., thousands of people were returning home in southern Lebanon – an estimated 6,000 people every hour. I met an 8-year-old girl who told me she was keen to go back because she had left her favourite doll at home and wanted to make sure it was not hurt. Her parents told me later that they don't even know if the house is standing, or where they will get their next meal.



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A girl shortly after returning to her apartment in the Lebanese village of Ayta-e-Shaab.

BEIRUT (AVGS): They are all on the road! Thousands of displaced Lebanese wanting to see their homes – see if they are still there. No more dependency on others. No more displacement. Thousands are stuck in traffic jams, waiting hours. It is wonderful to see the packed cars, stuffed with mattresses and blankets and children. An Israeli media outlet interviews me on the phone:

“What’s happening there in Lebanon? Are people going home?” I say they are, and tell them I hope all the Israelis displaced by the Hezbollah rocket attacks will now be able to do so as well.

YABOUS BORDER, SYRIA (AR):

It is unbelievably hot. Our team stands at the border, handing out bottles of water and return packages. But most of

the time we just wave goodbye. The returnees are in too much of a hurry – they don’t even have time to stop. Their joy is highly contagious. “No matter how much destruction awaits us – we want to go home!” And off they drive.

Tuesday 15 August

JERUSALEM (MB): The war in Lebanon has exacted a heavy toll in Israel



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ABOVE: **A young mother** inspects her bedroom in Ayta-e-Shaab. Her house had been used as an impromptu clinic for wounded Israeli soldiers.

BELOW: **A couple** in their living room in another Lebanese village, Ayn Ibil.



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too. In all, 3,970 missiles were fired by Hezbollah at cities and villages in the north prior to the ceasefire. Some 2,000 houses were damaged and several hundred completely destroyed. The number of people displaced is estimated at 500,000 – around half of the one million people living within range of the Hezbollah missiles – including some 180,000 from the city of Haifa alone. This

has not, however, necessitated an intervention by UNHCR. The government has supplied free hotel rooms, NGOs have mobilized, and kibbutzim in the south are hosting the kibbutzim from the north. In addition, some rich entrepreneurs have built free “summer camps” on the beach. Everybody has a “northerner” in their home, but he or she is a worried guest: there have been

2,015 casualties (of whom 53 were killed). The casualties have included many Israeli Arabs as the population of Haifa is mixed, and Central Galilee is mostly Arab.

Friday 18 August

TYRE (AvGS): We came south to Tyre yesterday. Before that, it had been more or less off limits. The four of us are working out of a single tiny room. It is actually



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Unexploded cluster bombs are small, deadly and very hard to spot.



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A cluster bomb in the garden...

quite funny, and we laugh a lot in between the madness and sadness of it all. Grumpy faces, stress behind laptops, filled ashtrays, running around to find our bearings, load trucks, recruit national staff.

We try to get out – to visit the displaced, to assess the destruction and to help in whatever way we can. UN security is strict: the Israeli army is still in the south, and there are cluster bombs everywhere. Nasty little black things with white ribbons that can kill a human being. Wherever we go, we are escorted by armoured vehicles. What a nightmare. We need to get close to the people – and the last thing they want to see right now is a tank or armoured car.

Saturday 19 August

TYRE (ARJ): We have visited some of the most devastated villages in Lebanon such as Ayta-e-Shaab and Bent Jbail, close to the Israeli border. The devastation is shocking. Over 80 percent of Ayta-e-Shaab is destroyed. Yet hundreds of people have already returned. They tell us they are sleeping 20-30 per room. They have nothing – no water, no blankets, no mattresses, no houses – but are determined to stay.

In another heavily destroyed village, Marwaheen, they described their biggest tragedy: the villagers had sent away 27 children, elderly and other vulnerable family members on a truck

in order to save them from the fighting and shelling. But their truck was bombed on its way north and 23 of those on board, mostly children, were killed.

Sunday 20 August

LEBANON-ISRAEL BORDER (AVGS):

I go out on a joint UN assessment. My first trip close to the border with Israel. We cross villages that just seem to have gone – to have been erased, turned into rubble. I feel numb and sick at the sight. In just 34 days... so much destruction, as if some giant hand has tried to sweep the villages off the map. Yellow banners supporting Hezbollah are everywhere, as well as anti-US signs.



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In the bedroom ...



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In the kitchen...

And under the tobacco plants in the back yard.

we are able to do much more. We have now distributed tons of tents, mattresses, clothes and other items that the people need to survive in southern Lebanon. Other agencies are distributing food and water. We have concentrated on the 30 most affected towns in Lebanon to begin with, and are now moving to other villages.

Monday 28 August

MAROUN EL RAS, LEBANON (AVGS):

Maroun el Ras. On the hills overlooking Israel. It is like Armageddon. A cold wind blows, an eery atmosphere. Some UN peacekeepers. Silence. Emptiness. Even the black crows have gone. I want to get out of here.

A few people materialize on the outskirts of the village, and we distribute some relief items. I detect a woman behind the bars of a window and talk to her in a mix of broken Arabic and sign language.

Wednesday 30 August

TYRE (AJA):

I spent the day in villages near Tyre – Aynata, Ayta al Jabal, Haddathah. We have all seen enough pictures to know what a flattened house looks like, but to travel in this area is to see the sheer quantity of destruction. I am sure that some civilian-looking houses may have contained military targets, but to hit house after house after house?

Friday 1 September

TYRE (ARJ): Our team has grown and

Saturday 2 September

AYTA-E-SHAAB (AVGS): I take a film crew to Ayta-e-Shaab. In one house, we find traces of blood, and discarded drips used for wounded Israeli soldiers. Explosives can be seen embedded in walls, fields, floors. Bulldozers and house-to-house fighting erased the original town layout, and it will have to be completely redesigned.

A destroyed house has been ripped wide open on one side, exposing a pink family couch.



Tuesday 5 September

BEIRUT (CS): We are continuing to help displaced people in the north as well as the south – Mount Lebanon, Jbeil, Kesrouane, Metn, Aley, Chouf, Baabda and Baalbek.

However, I am now working in Dahiyeh – the southern suburbs of Beirut.

Around 5,000 housing units here have been completely destroyed or partially damaged – and almost all its residents were displaced.

The people of Dahiyeh – mostly lower-middle class and the poor – have been grateful for the items we have distributed. This has created space for us to carry out home visits to see displaced people and learn more about their situation, priorities and concerns. Many are really struggling financially, and some of the women note that their children are growing more aggressive.





Thursday 7 September

TYRE (AVGS): My friend was out in her car yesterday. She passed a kid on a moped. He had a clusterbomb in his mouth, the white ribbon between his teeth. Swinging it back and forth, he was laughing and racing around. She got him to stop – for fear of her own life as well as his – and managed to get a de-miner to come over. He finally got the boy to part with the cluster bomb. It turned out to be a dud – but it could have been totally different.

I'm leaving Tyre for Beirut this afternoon. Tomorrow I'm due to head on to Damascus, then back to Europe. I feel totally dazed.

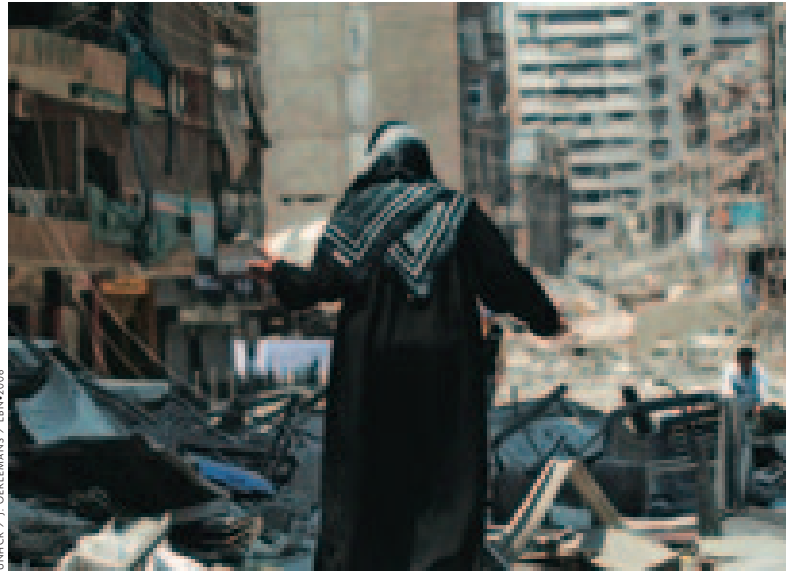
Sunday 10 September

TYRE (ARJ): The UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre (UNMACC) – on whose premises in Tyre we initially lived, worked, ate and slept – has been extremely gracious towards us. And it's a good thing they are in southern Lebanon. There are believed to be around a million cluster bomblets littering the country, a significant proportion of them dropped in civilian areas and on farmland during the last 72 hours before the ceasefire took effect. For the Lebanese, the war is not over: men, women and children continue to be killed by the cluster bombs. We are providing some logistical support to try and help UNMACC in their valiant efforts to clear the bombs.

Sunday 24 September

BEIRUT (AR): It is a quiet Sunday morning. The city is still asleep. We have a meeting in Dahiyeh, Beirut's most destroyed neighbourhood. I have seen pictures in magazines. I have seen the bombs falling on TV. I've been visiting displaced people in neighbouring districts

An old woman surveys the southern suburbs of Beirut.



UNHCR / J. OERLEMANS / LBN-2006

repeatedly over the past few weeks, since moving here from Damascus.

I've seen Dahiyeh from a distance, but only now am I actually entering it.

The reality dwarfs all the images I've seen. They lack the smell, the taste, the dust hanging in the air, the anger simmering among the rows of collapsed apartment buildings. Some buildings crashed totally, others remain standing in the midst of tonnes of rubble – “partially destroyed” in UN terminology. I spot a family living on one floor in a building that is close to collapse. At least that is how it looks to me. The scene is apocalyptic. We drive by. Angry young men, clearing the rubble, glance at our UN car. The atmosphere is tense. Street after street, the same impression. It leaves me appalled. Nobody on the team feels like speaking. As UNHCR staff, we visit such places and then we go back to our office as if nothing happened. However, these images stay with us. Deep inside, they do something to us, gradually change us. While driving through Dahiyeh, your heart seems to stop beating. But there are no words that really express how that feels, just as there are no pictures. ■



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