



Conflicts of Volcanic Magnitude

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

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“On est ensemble” -- we are in it together. Everyone who has been to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has heard this sentence. “On est ensemble” ... but are we?

It is very tempting to have positive spin on describing the humanitarian crisis in DRC to overcome the international “fatigue” in addressing humanitarian needs. But it is hard. There are very few ways to describe a really, really bad humanitarian crisis. DRC is a very large territory of land with over 20 million people facing systematic breaches of international law and inhumane child recruitment, systematic rape, torture, burning of villages, lack of food, forced displacements and evictions. The humanitarian crisis in DRC ranks amongst the worst five in the world on major indicators. “Fatigue”, when referring to the DRC, is only appropriate when describing the emotion of the girls, boys, women, and youth that are hit from every direction.

In such a context, humanitarian action should be indefatigable and supported for as long as people are left behind and alone.

In 2018, the DRC made its first peaceful transition of power since independence. Political momentum and humanitarian assistance have seen progress made on the stabilisation of many regions. Nonetheless, the severe humanitarian crisis persists, fuelled by ruthless exploitation of natural resources, recurrent violence in the east, COVID-19, and regular natural shocks such as the recent volcano eruption that hit Goma.

When it comes to humanitarian action in DRC, we must stick to the fundamental basics and not get distracted out of the box. When it comes to victims and survivors’ assistance and support, let’s come back to the box. Let’s do it well. Let’s do it for as many people for as long it is needed.



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What is happening in DR Congo?

Equivalent to the size of Western Europe and with an estimated population of 90 million¹, DRC continues to suffer one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with almost 20 million² people suffering from protection risks.

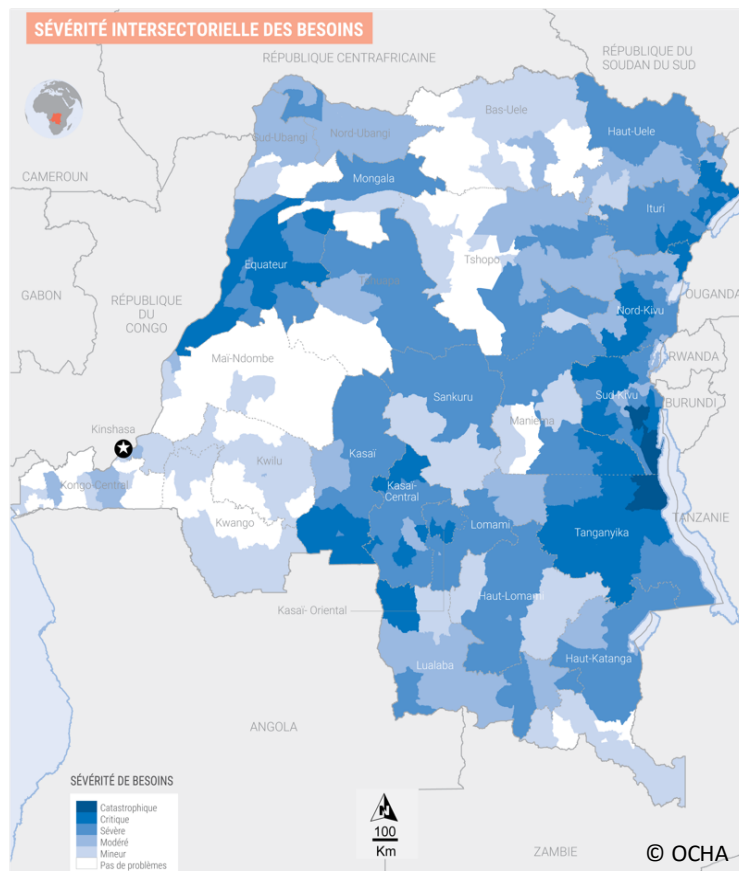
The multitude of armed conflict that erupted in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide is inflamed by high poverty rates, limited State presence and authority, corruption, issues of land, identity, and the race for natural resources, which benefits from the chaos. Attacks by armed groups more than doubled in 2020, with thousands of civilians killed.

The violence triggers ongoing displacement. Over five million³ Congolese are internally displaced – the highest number in Africa and second highest in the world after Syria. Two million displacements were registered in 2020 alone, making DRC the country with the largest number of new displacements due to conflict in the world. In addition, the DRC hosts 536,000 refugees⁴ and is dealing with an ongoing influx of people from the neighbouring Central African Republic.

The east of the country – witness to almost three decades of relentless violence – sees many people primarily from Kivus, Ituri, Tanganyika and Maniema provinces flee homes that were burned and ruined, leaving them with nothing. Exposed to murder, rape, and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV), displaced communities are on the edge of survival. The conflict devastates basic services, such as health and education, with agricultural land and property pillaged.

North of Beni, in the north-east of the country, in the "**Triangle de la mort**", civilians are trapped between rival armed groups vying for control of mining areas – particularly gold mines – and in retaliation for government-led military operations. During the past decades, Eastern DRC – which borders several towns between Tanganyika, Maniema, and South Kivu provinces – has seen

thousands repeatedly forced to flee their homes, as well as horrifying levels of sexual violence, with women and girls abducted and used as sex slaves by members of armed groups.



**Severity of needs in areas impacted by at least 3 sectors*

In the Kasai region, the terribly violent and deadly conflict of 2018 torched the provinces, destroyed communities, and saw massive displacement of the population based on ethnic grounds. This context and the resulting needs were never addressed with durable solutions, leaving tens of thousands of IDPs – some from the conflict, some from the group of 400,000 people that were expelled from Angola in 2018 – in temporary setups for the last three years. As a result, intercommunal conflicts, the prevailing nutrition crisis, as well as increasing poverty in urban areas hosting IDPs risk jeopardising post-conflict transition and development.

People suffer from recurrent epidemics with ongoing outbreaks of measles, cholera, Ebola, yellow fever, plague, and COVID-19. Suspected

¹ World Bank:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=CD>

² OCHA: <https://www.unocha.org/democratic-republic-congo-drc/about-ocha-drc>

³ UNHCR: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/drc>

⁴ UNHCR: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/democratic-republic-congo-monthly-statistics-refugees-and-asylum>

cases of malaria have soared to 16.9 million, with around 15,000 deaths recorded in 2020.

The DRC bears the brunt of recurrent **large-scale natural disasters**, including over 615,000 people affected by devastating flooding in 2020⁵ and displacement of over 500,000⁶ individuals by the eruption of volcano Nyiragongo in 2021, in which over 23,000 persons lost their homes and land.



Why is it important?

Firstly, because the situation is terrible, and risks getting worse. Solidarity and immediate action in the DRC are of utmost importance to save lives and find solutions to large-scale suffering. Children are a direct target, including widespread child kidnapping, sexual violence, child recruitment into armed groups, child labour and child marriage – affecting a population of which well over 50% are children. Even when they are not a direct target, children are affected by family separation occurring during population displacement, food insecurity, epidemics, and limited access to basic services – including health, education, and psychosocial support. The loss of livelihoods amounts to additional stress for families, which can lead to increased violence against children in the

household and negative coping strategies, such as child labour, SGBV and rape.

While armed groups continue to perpetrate sexual crimes, an increasing proportion of perpetrators are found in the civilian population. The number of cases has been steadily increasing since 2019. Many more go unreported, even in stabilised regions. The support for GBV survivors must not fall by the wayside.

Similarly, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) responses are weak. Less than 10% of GBV survivors receive psychological support. Social stigma and discrimination attached to sexual violence result in double victimisation of those already struggling to piece their lives back together.

Recurring mass displacement, together with damaged land and property, threatens the legal rights of affected persons. Of the one million individuals displaced in 2021, many lack the proper documentation and find little to no legal assistance. Over the years, the resilience capacity of local communities has been eroded, making it difficult for them to reach durable solutions on their own. This increasingly hinders efforts to break the cyclical nature of displacement.

Secondly, because there is hope. The potential of the DRC is enormous. There is political opportunity, seen in the peaceful transition of power following the presidential elections in December 2018. Many western and central provinces are comparatively pacified. Our goal must be to capture this ambition and bring together the political will, advocacy, resources, and humanitarian and development actors to find solutions.

Last year's humanitarian response plan (HRP) was 39% funded. The 2021 HRP requires almost two billion USD. The United Nations, international non-governmental organisations, and the government of the DRC stress that funding is urgently needed to address the pressing humanitarian needs.

⁵ OCHA: <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/DRC%20HF%202020%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

⁶ UNHCR: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/unhcr-emergency-update-volcano-nyiragongo-5-i-23-august-2021>

What can we do about it?

Here are five things that we believe can be done to seize on the momentum of change in the DRC and ensure that no one is left behind in the wave of much-needed development and stabilisation.

1- Share vital information and analysis

We need to consistently share information and analysis. The country is vast, with a large humanitarian presence to match. The challenges are diverse and extremely complex. Humanitarian agencies must share their perspectives to define a narrative and react to agreed priorities. What is happening in the DRC should constantly feature at the political table and in the media. This requires solid data and narrative.

2- Define the mission and don't get distracted

The priorities are many. In the first six months of 2021 alone, protection monitoring identified thousands of protection incidents. A lack of local humanitarian presence or fears of reprisals or social exclusion mean many go unreported. We must fulfil our mission to stand by and assist those left behind and renew investments in the areas where the most suffering and injustice is present. In other words, we need to get back to basics. We must urgently address those areas most in need; protection of women and children, those with disabilities and older persons, and concentrate efforts on restoring basic services, such as health, education, and shelter.

3- Choose partners and support them; include them, don't tell them what to do

Supporting local partners, authorities and communities in DRC is key to deliver, to access and to sustain humanitarian impact and community-based protection. We need a comprehensive plan to make this approach central to humanitarian work in DRC. It is right. It is feasible.

4- Respect and advocate for human rights or lose the moral high ground

We are facing long-term crisis impact. While there could be quick wins, we must stand firm on our upholding of human rights and the rule of law as a main ground for operation in a chaotic environment. The humanitarian community should seek to strengthen national human rights committees and actors, support human rights defenders, and promote the fight against impunity for serious violations of human rights. Authorities also have a responsibility to act towards peace, good governance, and respect of human rights.

It is imperative that the integrity of the humanitarian response is upheld at every level. The DRC response has been tainted by sexual exploitation and abuse. We must continue taking strong and immediate action to prevent and denounce all misconduct and crimes.

5- Have an exit plan

The goal is to support the DRC to reach a place where recurrent humanitarian aid is a thing of the past. We recently marked the anniversary of the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, second UN Secretary-General in the province of Katanga. 60 years on, we are still addressing humanitarian needs in DRC. Our interventions should never be indefinite. Wherever stability and governance structures can be established, humanitarian actors should speed up dialogue with development and peacebuilding actors, as well as with authorities to foster crisis prevention and sustainable solutions.

Finally, the essence of our actions is to relieve suffering and empower peoples' lives and futures. Openness to approaches and steps that help us to outpace the acceleration of conflicts is paramount to tackle the overwhelming challenges of the DRC. We must come together to explore new tools to help us rethink what we know, such as the Nexus or Call to Action for protection, whilst ensuring we think inside the box on basic service provision.

Ultimately, we must make sure that in doing so we are not pulling in two different directions, but rather encompassing a comprehensive approach to ensure that no one is left behind.