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SPOTLIGHT ON THE EQUATEUR CRISIS

Violent conflict in Equateur province in northwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) forced nearly 200,000 Congolese civilians to flee their homes in the last six months. Humanitarian agencies have struggled to meet the needs of those who fled, many of whom do not want to return anytime soon, and assistance is urgently needed now in areas of displacement. At the same time, events in Equateur underscore the overall fragility of peace in the Congo and the vital role that the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC) continues to play in responding to outbreaks of violence and protecting the Congolese people.

A COMPLEX CONFLICT

The eruption of violence in Equateur is closely linked to the long-standing socio-economic and political tensions between the Lobala and Boba tribes. It exemplifies the potential for instability outside of DRC's conflict-affected east, and also the inability of the Congolese government to respond to crises without the continued support of MONUC.

Tensions between the Boba and Lobala center around Dongo, an important commercial and trade port on the Oubangui River. Dongo historically belongs to the Lobala, but over the years, the Boba have increasingly begun to control the town economically and through political aspirations. While the growing marginalization of the Lobala is what ultimately led to an armed rebellion against the Boba in 2009, this larger conflict was sparked by localized tensions over access to fishing ponds between two ethnic groups, the Inyelle and the Manzaya, whose grievances date back to the 1940s.

After repeated failures by the Congolese government to mediate between the Inyelle and Manzaya, in 2009 the Inyelle enlisted the help of a Lobala witchdoctor named Odjani to chase out the Manzaya. This resulted in several clashes between the two tribes, and ultimately led to the burning down of over 300 Manzaya homes in July 2009.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- International donors, including the U.S., must allocate increased resources to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of internally displaced people and refugees from Equateur province.
- OCHA, UNHCR, and MONUC must take a strong leadership role to ensure that assistance and protection is provided to the displaced where they are now, and to mitigate the push for non-voluntary returns.
- The UN Security Council should ensure that any discussions of MONUC drawdown are based on reasonable benchmarks and that the mission maintain the capacity for rapid reaction and political monitoring to respond to future crises in western DRC.
- MONUC and international donors should support the Congolese government to address the long-standing grievances between the Boba and Lobala tribes and implement a comprehensive reconciliation and dialogue process in collaboration with local civil society organizations.

and the displacement of the entire population. Despite the fact that the Manzaya and Inyelle are both Lobala, given the Manzaya's historical ties to the Boba, Odjani's success provided an opportunity for Lobala politicians and businessmen to help transform his militia into a larger rebellion now directed against the Boba in Dongo.

In late October 2009 Odjani and his insurgents carried out a major attack on Dongo, where they issued a list of people they would target, including Boba who were planning to run for election. Non-Boba civilians fleeing the violence were attacked as well, and many people drowned as they flooded the banks of the Oubangui River in order to flee to neighboring Republic of Congo (RoC). In the end, half of all the homes in Dongo were burned and between 250 and 500 civilians were reportedly massacred.

Further major clashes and displacement took place both in Dongo and in other areas, including the town of Bobito, 60 kilometers from Gemena, where Odjani and his forces were pushed back and their numbers significantly reduced in early 2010 by the Congolese national army, the FARDC. The situation in Equateur remains tense as the army continues to track down Odjani and the remaining insurgents.

During the height of the violence in Equateur, Odjani was referred to by his supporters as "Nkunda II." This alias reflects the hope of many Lobala that the insurgency could become a strong platform for their political grievances similar to what Laurent Nkunda's CNDP rebel group established in eastern DRC. At the same time, the Congolese government never seriously addressed the underlying animosities of the Lobala against the Boba. The unresolved status of these political and economic contentions, exacerbated by the recent conflict, leaves displaced people fearful about returning home anytime soon.

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS UNMET

Although many people have been displaced for several months, humanitarian assistance in Equateur has not yet reached the majority of the affected population. Increased resources must be allocated urgently to meet the growing humanitarian needs.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of February there were approximately 31,000 internally displaced people in Equateur, 110,000 refugees in neighboring Republic of Congo and 18,000 refugees in the Central African Republic. Most displaced people on both sides of the Oubangui River are

living with host families. The majority of displaced Lobala sought refuge in RoC, while the Boba and other ethnic groups were forced to flee within Equateur. Over 80 percent of the Congolese refugees in the RoC are women and children.

In the chaos, many families became separated, and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the DRC has reported a high number of unaccompanied minors. There are also many women-headed households struggling to meet the needs of their families. Malnutrition in Equateur is on the rise, as people fled far from their fields, and even when land is available they do not have the tools for cultivation. Most health clinics are no longer functioning as doctors became displaced or were killed and medical supplies were looted. Schools have also been abandoned and those who are displaced often cannot pay school fees for their children.

Since October 2009, despite high needs of the displaced population, poor roads and ongoing insecurity have limited the humanitarian response. Some assistance, including food and other basic supplies, trickled in by December. However, access continues to remain a major challenge and resources of the host families are wearing thin, as the displaced remain for longer than expected.

The lack of information and coordination on the actual situation in Equateur also hampered the response. Donors were reluctant to provide funding because the numbers of displaced and the scope of the needs remained unclear. Following an inter-agency assessment to Equateur in January 2010, a humanitarian appeal was launched for approximately \$28 million for 6 months. Only \$5 million has been allocated so far by the UN Pooled Fund for three months. Many vital sectors, including protection, which only received \$300,000, remain sorely under funded. Given the scale of the needs, there is concern that there will be a gap in assistance because of the delay in mobilizing funding.

Few humanitarian agencies are responding to the crisis in Equateur. For example, UNICEF is leading the protection cluster in Gemena, the hub for humanitarian activities, rather than the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which leads the protection cluster elsewhere in the DRC. UNHCR has been slow to start up a protection response in Equateur, where they plan instead on assisting with returnees, once the numbers become greater. However, given the ongoing needs of the displaced, UNHCR should begin to carry out protection monitoring and coordination with MONUC.

In the RoC, a lack of funding and difficult access to Congolese refugees in the Likouala region has hampered humanitarian assistance. At the end of 2009, UNHCR was able to act quickly to assist with the refugee outflows from Equateur, since its operations for returning Congolese refugees recently closed. However, the provision of relief supplies via the Oubangui River has been extremely difficult due to the remote location of the refugees and the ongoing insecurity caused by FARDC operations against the insurgents.

Congolese refugees in Likouala outnumber the local population in many areas, and resources are strained between the communities. UNHCR has been registering and assisting refugees with non-food items and the World Food Program (WFP) has distributed food assistance. Because of ongoing access constraints, WFP will begin to airlift food assistance to the refugees, a vital but extremely costly strategy. In early March, a UN consolidated appeal for over \$58 million was launched, of which \$41.5 million remained unmet. The appeal targets Congolese refugees and host communities in RoC for one year, with the understanding that many people will not be returning home anytime soon.

TOO SCARED TO RETURN HOME

Since lifesaving assistance has not reached many of the displaced in Equateur and the Republic of Congo, some agencies, including donor governments, have called for assistance to begin in return areas. However, most people are afraid to go back home and assistance and protection is needed urgently in areas of displacement.

Ongoing insecurity in Equateur is the main factor keeping people from going home. The violent nature of the conflict and the impact of the mystical figure Odjani on the psyche of the displaced were profound. Without proof of Odjani's arrest or death, many people said they would not return. There have also been reports of FARDC abuses against the local population, and many displaced people told Refugees International (RI) that they were uncomfortable with the heavy presence of the military in return areas, particularly as Congolese soldiers are squatting in abandoned houses. There is also a wide presence of unexploded ordnance, mainly due to shelling carried out by the FARDC against the insurgents.

This is the second time that civilians in Equateur have been displaced because of violent conflict. Many of them fled their homes several years ago as a result of Jean-Pierre Bemba's MLC rebellion. Returns following this conflict were slow, even after security was restored. With the current

causes for displacement tied more strongly to local ethnic, political, and economic tensions, rather than simply generalized insecurity, it is likely that many displaced people will be even more apprehensive about returning. In areas around Dongo, where there have already been concerns about reprisal killings by the Boba against the Lobala, there is a growing fear that all Lobala may be blamed for supporting the insurgency, including those who did not participate in the violence.

Coupled with the ongoing instability, lack of access to basic services and livelihoods is also deterring returns. One mother told RI that she had enrolled her children in school where they are displaced, and because of this was waiting until the academic year was finished before considering going home. The fact that many health centers were destroyed or looted means that the displaced have better access to medical care in the towns they fled to, although several people told RI that they struggled to pay for the associated costs. Other displaced people told RI that they were missing a planting season and so would wait to return until it was time to plant once again. A lack of resources to rebuild destroyed homes in return areas was listed as another problem.

In the RoC, since assistance has not reached all of the refugees, many of them cross the river daily to gather food and other items from their destroyed homes and fields, as well as to carry out small commercial activities. However, they return at the end of the day to sleep on the other side of the river, where they feel safer. In Gemena, RI also met with displaced people from Dongo, who had originally fled to RoC, but because of the lack of assistance, had decided to return to Equateur. They remain displaced because they are still too scared to go home.

Assistance such as plastic sheeting and household items, in addition to seeds and tools, is immediately needed in areas of displacement. These supplies can then be carried back home when people are ready to return. In the longer-term, the humanitarian response must take into account the situation of host communities in both the DRC and the RoC, as their resources are being gradually depleted by displaced people who continue to live with them.

A KEY ROLE FOR MONUC

As the humanitarian response has been slowly gearing up, MONUC has played an important role in providing logistical support and uncovering the political dynamics of the conflict. The peacekeepers have also been providing protection for the local population, who told RI they feel much safer

with the presence of MONUC than the FARDC. As MONUC, UN agencies, and donors continue to shift their focus to the ongoing conflicts in Kivus, the situation in western provinces such as Equateur remains central to the long-term stability of the DRC and serves as an important example of how the peacekeeping mission continues to play a vital role in protecting the Congolese population.

In Equateur, MONUC is supporting the FARDC operations with rations and fuel. MONUC's conditionality policy requires them to withhold assistance to those army units who have committed human rights abuses. However, given MONUC's limited civilian capacity in Equateur due to a lack of staff, this process is not yet fully institutionalized. More civilian staff with the requisite expertise are needed in Gemena to investigate FARDC treatment of civilians in support of the overall protection response.

Along the Oubangui River, RI heard reports of entire Lobala villages that had been burnt to the ground, reportedly by FARDC chasing Odjani and his militia. These types of attacks are contributing to the fears of the displaced, and the presence of MONUC remains vital in ensuring the protection of Congolese civilians.

Despite its important protection role, MONUC continues to face resource constraints throughout the DRC and has become more and more focused on the ongoing conflicts in the Kivus. When the crisis broke out in Equateur, MONUC was forced to send resources such as helicopters and military contingents from the east to the west to respond to the violence in Dongo. This limited MONUC's protection activities in North Kivu province. It had to cancel planned deployments of several Joint Protection Teams, which are comprised of civilian staff within the mission who make critical assessments and recommendations for how the peacekeepers can improve their protection response. Any scaling back in resources through drawdown of the mission would make it even more difficult for MONUC to respond to future crises in hot spots throughout the west, like Equateur, without leaving civilians at risk and unprotected on both sides of this vast country.

The ongoing fragility of the security situation in provinces like Equateur will require MONUC to conduct consistent political monitoring and risk assessments. More staff and logistics are needed for the recently deployed Joint Protection Team in Gemena, and also to support mediation and reconciliation efforts between the Lobala and Boba by the

government and civil society representatives. The mission must also maintain a rapid reaction capacity to respond to future crises.

CONCLUSION

Civilians in Equateur will continue to be displaced for some time and insecurity will likely persist. The displaced do not want to go home anytime soon, but the Congolese government is actively promoting a message that there is now peace in Dongo and that people should return. One displaced person, expressing the anxieties felt by many of those affected by the violence in Equateur, told RI, "The war might be over, but the conflict is not." Donors and UN agencies, led by OCHA, must therefore mobilize quickly to meet the urgent needs of displaced people and refugees where they now live.

Reconciliation activities can also begin while people remain displaced, and civil society organizations in Equateur have an important role to play in facilitating sustained dialogue to address ongoing grievances between the Boba and Lobala. Congolese government mediation efforts in Equateur have failed to properly deal with localized crises, which allowed ethnic tensions to boil over in such an explosive way. The involvement of MONUC civilian staff is vital in supporting future mediation efforts, and international donors like the U.S. should provide political backing to any dialogue and reconciliation process that happens.

As long as insecurity persists throughout the DRC, and the Congolese government and military are incapable of resolving crises such as Equateur independent of international support, the drawdown of the UN mission remains premature. While people continue to be displaced, MONUC must maintain its presence in Equateur and the number of civilian staff in Gemena should be increased in order to support the protection response. Any discussions of withdrawal by the UN Security Council must focus on reasonable benchmarks, including building Congolese state capacity to resolve potentially violent conflicts in the lead up to local elections scheduled for next year. MONUC's civilian capacity must also be reinforced in order to maintain robust political monitoring in places like Equateur to prevent and respond to future crises.

Advocate Camilla Olson and consultant Steve Hege assessed the humanitarian situation in Equateur Province in February.