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Contact: Rick Neal

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Elections Provide Hope for Resolving Humanitarian Crisis

Elections are a necessary step towards stability and safety for the millions of displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the humanitarian crisis there will continue without increased engagement by the international community.

Elections for president and National Assembly delegates on July 30 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) will be the first real chance for Congolese to choose their leaders in over 40 years. Campaigning is proceeding, logistics are falling into place, and the media is gathering to document the long lines at polling stations and the stories of those casting the first vote of their lives.

A few years ago, national elections appeared impossible. Militias ran roughshod over two-thirds of the country and massacres occurred with sickening regularity. The situation now is much different. Large areas of the east are peaceful, including the scenes of some of the worst atrocities in Katanga, the Kivus, and Ituri, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have started to return home. This improvement is largely due to international intervention. The UN Mission in the Congo and its peacekeeping force, MONUC, have restored a measure of peace in the east, despite troop numbers and budgets modest compared to the size of the task, and organized a successful referendum on a new constitution in a country that has not had a census since the 1960s and has almost no modern infrastructure.

The elections of July 30 should confirm the positive trend. The process has not been perfect, but people will go to the polls as planned. The vote may even produce a clear and credible winner for president in the first round, paving the way for the installation of a new government that has a measure of legitimacy by the end of September.

The displaced themselves express enormous hope for the elections. “We want to vote,” insisted a displaced woman in the central Katanga village of Mitwaba. “We want to have a president

so that we won't be hungry any more,” added a recently disarmed rebel, unsure when he would be able to return to his fields despite the rapid approach of the planting season. In North Kivu, a group forced to flee fighting between the national army and the FDLR (a Rwandan Hutu rebel militia) was sure that the vote would take place as scheduled on July 30, and that the result would be peace. “If we have goats or sheep, we will be able to raise them well,” they explained, “without fear of them being stolen or anything.”

Despite these hopes, international donors and agencies are adopting a wait-and-see attitude for two contradictory reasons. On the one hand, some fear widespread violence as election results trickle in and the losers assess their options. On the other hand, those who believe the elections will go well may exaggerate their overall positive impact. That in turn may lead to premature cuts in humanitarian assistance, while long-term development projects start slowly and multinational corporations move to invest before the government is strong enough to ensure that the population benefits.

Neither of these attitudes will serve the Congolese people. Now is the time for increased assistance: humanitarian needs persist, and election spoilers will find little support if people see rapid, concrete improvements in their community. There are still pockets of insecurity and displacement throughout the east that require sustained humanitarian commitment, and fighting and displacement will continue throughout the coming months. The elections, no matter how accepted the results, will not bring an immediate end to these problems; support for rebel groups, illegal exploitation of resources, and a weak and abusive national army will not change overnight.

In central Katanga, the recent humanitarian crisis has eased. The thousands of people displaced by fighting between the Congolese national army (the FARDC) and local Mai-Mai militias are getting more help, and fighting itself has stopped following the departure of marauding government troops and the demobilization of the Mai-Mai. The latter have received only some of the assistance promised through a World Bank project, and their families receive no help whatsoever. Both the displaced and the ex-combatants are eager to get home to prepare their fields ahead of the planting season that starts in September, but fear former government troops still in those areas, despite orders to report for integration in the new national army. If these troops do not leave soon, the displaced will miss the start of the planting season and remain dependent on assistance for months to come.

In North Kivu, the UN has developed a “rapid response mechanism,” through which agencies have helped hundreds of thousands of IDPs since the beginning of the year. In Rutshuru, north of Goma, local residents have been sheltering hundreds of families who fled fighting in Katwiguru, while others spent weeks crowded next to a church. A UN partner provided plastic tarps, latrines, and a steady water supply, but for only about half of those on the site; others slept outside while officials quibbled about where to send them. A few miles away in Rubare, a man showed Refugees International a small shelter made of reeds that has been his home since he fled fighting seven months ago. Despite the overall efficiency of the UN program in the province, the displaced in Rubare, where arrival dates range from as long ago as four years to as recently as three weeks, claimed they had received no assistance.

In Ituri, recovery and relapse exist side-by-side. In Djugu Territory, where the conflict in Ituri started in 1999, the situation has greatly improved over the last few years. Many (but not all) of the displaced have gone home, access is much easier and more secure, and a deal has been struck with the last warlord in the area to end fighting with the FARDC and MONUC. However, in Irumu Territory, just to the south of Djugu, war has returned. In a replay from the past, displaced people are flowing into Bunia, agencies are scrambling to help (as attention is pulled away by the elections), and no end is in sight.

Poor security is the common thread of these problems and the most important cause of the people’s suffering. The poor security in turn is the result of the vast disparity between the natural wealth of the country and the weakness of the state. With the government unable to exercise effective control over the eastern borders and secure the country’s resources, armed groups throughout the east battle for control over mining and timber areas and access to export points. Foreigners, largely from Rwanda and Uganda, support them, eager to exploit and manipulate the security vacuum. The sale of the resources

provides money for weapons and salaries. According to widespread reports in Ituri, it also allowed rebels to buy off FARDC commanders during an offensive in March.

Reforming the FARDC is one crucial task; the other is holding Rwanda and Uganda to account for the transfer of weapons, natural resources, and rebel financing between their territories and the DRC. The U.S. can play a role in both tasks, increasing the positive impact it has already had through its humanitarian aid and support for MONUC. The Tripartite Plus Commission, which the U.S. facilitates to improve security cooperation between the DRC and Rwanda and Uganda, as well as Burundi, provides a forum to address these issues. In addition, the European Union has established a structure within the FARDC for training and paying salaries to which the U.S. should contribute.

The elections are a moment to take stock, but the uncertainty they create should not paralyze the international community. Some four million Congolese have died due to the conflict since 1998 and millions more languish far from their homes and fields; natural resources that could fuel the continent disappear across borders; and an army that should protect its people creates enemies of them instead. Much has already been done, but donor governments and international agencies need to recognize the immense needs that remain, and redouble their efforts to realize fully the hope and promise of the July elections.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The United Nations, donor governments and international agencies focus on getting people home. Help with seeds and tools so returning displaced people can plant; pursue negotiated solutions with armed groups in addition to military action; and deploy MONUC peacekeepers to stabilize areas and deter abuses by the national army.
- ❑ The United States put pressure on Rwanda and Uganda to cease their involvement in and tolerance for the illegal transfer of arms and natural resources between their territories and the DRC.
- ❑ Donor governments recognize that the key to security is the development of the national army, and build on efforts by the European Union to prevent abuses by making sure soldiers can support their families, are properly trained and equipped, and face justice if they continue to abuse those they should protect.

Rick Neal, Nigel Pearson, and Emila Brkic visited the D.R. Congo from June 17 to July 12, 2006.