



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

**Background on the Democratic Republic of the Congo
February 2008**

"Using war to resolve conflicts between inhabitants is futile and must be absolutely condemned as it represents total contempt for human life and can never be justified."

- Memorandum from the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), January 2008

BACKGROUND

Violence continues to plague the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The fighting, which has caused up to 5.4 million deaths is the most recent chapter in a conflict that observers have called "the world's deadliest conflict since World War II". Over the last year the conflict has caused around 45,000 deaths every month and has displaced around 450,000 people. To make matters worse, the incidence of systematic rape by armed groups has reached drastic proportions and reportedly is the worst in the world today. Many human rights groups consider the acts committed in Eastern Congo as crimes against humanity or war crimes. The International Criminal Court has now arrested three people suspected of war crimes, or crimes against humanity and is preparing trial proceedings.

Despite the violence and suffering, the Congo has made two important strides towards building peace. First, the successful election of President Joseph Kabila in 2006 completed a long and difficult process of establishing a duly elected government. Secondly, the Goma Peace agreement signed in January 2008 has given hope that the government can meet the challenge of bringing peace to Eastern Congo

The UN Secretary General, the UN Security Council, the international community and many in the DRC welcomed the agreement. The agreement was signed by President Kabila and all of the biggest militia groups, including Laurent Nkunda's CNDP, and the Mai Mai. The agreement holds out the promise of large scale funding for rehabilitation and governance activities. It provides for an immediate cessation of hostilities, the disengagement of troops and militia and the creation of a buffer zone. The UN MONUC (UN Mission to Congo) force, comprised of 17,000 soldiers, is authorized to position itself to keep the various forces apart and to assist with local elections. The agreement also stipulates that Congolese militia be disarmed or integrated into the national armed forces.

The Goma Peace agreement faces a number of challenges. First, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the remnants of the former Rwandan army and the militia allegedly responsible for the genocide in Rwanda, still remain in Eastern Congo and continue to cause havoc. FDLR leaders have no incentive to return to Rwanda and face trial for the crimes they allegedly committed. In addition, the UN and the Congolese army, itself accused of poor discipline and violations of human rights is responsible for disarming the militia forces. The program to do this has been crippled by insufficient funding from the international community.

The Catholic Church is a major social institution in the DRC. Fifty-five percent of DRC's 60 million people are Catholic, making it the largest Catholic population in Africa. In the absence of functioning government structures, the Catholic Church, along with other churches, has for decades provided most of the basic

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services such as health care and education for the Congolese people. The Church also played an important role in providing non-partisan civic education – supported by CRS and other Caritas agencies – in all 47 dioceses across the country for the referendum on the new constitution, as well as the two rounds of presidential elections. The Church also trained election monitors to help ensure free and fair elections.

The Conference of Congolese Bishops has issued numerous public statements over the past two years related to making elections fair, transparent, and inclusive. In their statement of January 2008, the bishops called on the government and the militia groups at the Goma peace conference to work in a spirit of dialogue, to use the peace conference as a forum to bring out the truth, to resolve the root causes of the conflict and to build reconciliation among the people who have suffered. The Bishops stressed the importance of protecting the territorial integrity of the Congo and called on the militia forces to unite under the government and for the Congolese people to live as one country. On February 9, the Bishops of Congo issued a statement entitled “Change Our Hearts.” The Bishops appealed to all, but especially to those in leadership positions, to address the problems of poverty, work with the international community to repatriate foreign armed groups, fight corruption, support civil society and insure that the country benefits from its many natural resources.

USCCB POSITION

Congo is at a real crossroads in its history. If the government of the DRC is to succeed, it needs to take full advantage of the promise offered by a newly elected government and harness the DRC’s natural resources for the common good of its people. Lastly, it should work with the international community and the UN force MONUC in Eastern Congo to build on the ceasefire and peace agreement in order to promote a just and sustainable peace. Achieving these goals will require support from the United States and the international community.

ACTION REQUESTED

- 1) The Administration should continue implementing S.2125, the DRC Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act, and Congress should provide adequate levels of foreign aid to the DRC, including funding for MONUC.
- 2) The United States, other international donors and the MONUC should work with DRC and Rwanda to resolve the insecurity created by the presence of the FDLR in Eastern Congo.
- 3) The U.S. and international partners should work with the Congolese Government to build a professional and disciplined national armed force committed to the respect of human rights.
- 4) Within the terms of the Goma Peace agreement, the U.S. should encourage MONUC, to work with the militias to promote disarmament, demobilization and reintegration into their community of origins.
- 5) The U.S. and the international community should commit to long term development assistance to allow the DRC to address the root causes of conflict in Eastern Congo.
- 6) The U.S. and the international community should support the DRC in establishing a legal framework for the exploitation of natural resources that assures a fair share of the benefits go to local communities.
- 7) The U.S. should work to strengthen democratic institutions to be transparent and accountable so that they can meet post-election expectations of more jobs and better services by:
 - Working with other donors to press the DRC Government to enact legislation implementing the decentralization program and establishing an independent judiciary; and
 - Working with the DRC Government to ensure that civil society groups can fully participate in working for a better future for the people of the DRC.

For further information: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/drc.shtml> or contact *Stephen R. Hilbert*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3196 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), shilbert@usccb.org