



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

Background on Democratic Republic of the Congo February 2018

“May the risen Lord break down the walls of hostility that today divide brothers and sisters, especially in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. May he sustain all those who day by day strive to combat evil with good, and with words and deeds of fraternity, respect, encounter and solidarity.” Pope Francis, Prayer for Peace in the DRC.

BACKGROUND

Since independence in 1960, the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have never known a period of peaceful, democratic rule of law where human rights are respected and government promotes the common good of its citizens. Congolese survived over 30 years of corrupt dictatorial rule under President Mobutu that ended with his overthrow by Laurent Kabila in 1997. For years afterwards the DRC witnessed war, pillage and mass rape involving nine African countries and about twenty armed groups. Small armed groups continue this violence in the East and in the Kasai provinces to this day.

After a constitutional reform process Joseph Kabila (Laurent Kabila’s son) won the country’s first free and fair election in 2006. The 2011 elections were marked by systematic fraud. The 2016 elections should have been held December 2016, but President Kabila manipulated the system, violated the Constitution and stayed in power. In December 2016, the Catholic Church organized a negotiation process that resulted in the St. Sylvester Framework Agreement which defined a road map to a transitional government and out of the political, constitutional and social crisis.

The parties agreed to hold elections by the end of 2017, and that President Kabila would not run nor call a referendum to amend the Constitution so he could. The agreement called for the government to reduce tensions by freeing political prisoners, allowing for greater civil participation, press freedom and the rights of opposition parties to field candidates and hold an unencumbered electoral campaign. Lastly, the agreement gave opposition leaders the chance to name a new Prime Minister and the President of the National Accord Monitoring Commission (CNSA).

From January through beginning of April 2017, the Church facilitated discussions to implement the framework accord. The parties agreed on most issues, but remained deadlocked on the process to nominate the Prime Minister and the President of the CNSA. The Church called an end to its mediation efforts in April and handed President Kabila the responsibility to resolve the last two issues. Instead of building a final consensus on these issues, President Kabila violated the agreement by picking a Prime Minister and a CNSA President who were not members of the opposition coalition.

In June, the DRC Bishops’ Conference (CENCO) issued a pastoral statement noting that the President had violated the St. Sylvester Accord and had no intention of holding elections before the end of the year. Quoting the National Anthem and citing the Constitution, the bishops called on people to stand up and defend their Constitution by thwarting peacefully the President’s attempt to violate it. The President was so angered by the statement that he flew up country to meet with the CENCO President to convince him to soften their call. CENCO stood firm.

In September, CENCO sent its General Secretary to London and its President to Paris and Brussels to

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advocate for international help in resolving the crisis. CENCO also sent Bishop Nicolas Djomo, the immediate past President, to Washington. Committee and CRS staff helped Bishop Djomo to meet with the State Department, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP), and DRC experts. The Bishop urged the United States to increase pressure on the DRC Government to hold free and fair elections as soon as possible, to protect civil liberties, to halt the violence in the Kasai provinces, and to allow humanitarian assistance to those who had suffered from the violence and unrest. On the question of sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe, the Church had told the Kabila government that it must take responsibility for the consequences resulting from its violation of the Constitution. The Church also holds the government responsible for all international consequences of its unconstitutional actions and considers current and future sanctions as part of these consequences.

In November 2017, the Electoral Commission (CENI) called for elections on December 23, 2018. CENCO met later that month and issued a statement that called on the people to hold their government to the elections date and to remain peaceful in all their civic actions. The bishops insisted that President Kabila state publicly that he would not run for a third, illegal term and that Parliament and the CENI should ensure that all is in place for elections. The Church is implementing a nationwide electoral education program to ensure that the Congolese people will be ready to make informed and reasoned decisions if and when elections are held.

The Church fears for the future of the country. The Church, the Congolese people, the neighboring countries and the international community all fear that President Kabila will find a way to stay in power at any cost. The opposition parties have come together in one coalition, but still remain divided and without a clear strong leader capable of offering a credible alternative candidate. Civil society has many individuals and small organizations with good ideas, but is not strong enough to organize the people into a political force that can impose its will peacefully on an intransigent government.

The Catholic Church is the only strong, organized and credible alternative force in the country capable of engaging the government in a constructive way. The St. Sylvester Agreement and the Church's subsequent success in convening the political opposition and civil society leaders to negotiate the new election date are proof of the respect and influence that the Church wields. The church fears that if this crisis is not resolved in 2018 through peaceful, free and fair elections, the country could experience a significant increase in violence, a civil war, or even a coup d'état. The Church is developing a series of non-violent actions that would allow people to express their will in ways that create pressure for progress and reduces the chances of violence breaking out. They will review these strategies and the overall situation in the country in an Extraordinary General Assembly from February 15-17, 2018.

USCCB POLICY

For years, USCCB and CRS have actively supported the Church and people of DRC. CRS operates a full array of development and humanitarian programs in the DRC that save lives and build peace and prosperity. Bishop Cantú made a solidarity visit to the country in November 2017 when he met with numerous Church, civil society, diplomatic and political leaders. After his visit, he met with the office of the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley to stress the need for continued robust American pressure to ensure that free and fair elections are held, that President Kabila does not violate the Constitution by running for a third term and that the United States continues humanitarian, development and civil society programs to support the Congolese people in their moment of crisis. The United States should continue to support the UN Peacekeeping forces and offer financial assistance to the elections process where appropriate. Finally, the United States should support the Church efforts to mobilize civil society to participate actively and peacefully in building a new democratic Congo.

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