



# A scandal that needs to end

John Holmes

**While the crisis in the Kivus has been a focus of action and advocacy by the international community for decades, further conflicts characterised by massive internal and cross-border displacements have been proliferating in all four corners of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).**

As of 31 July 2010, an estimated 1.9 million people were internally displaced in North and South Kivu, Orientale, Katanga and Equateur provinces of DRC. And it should not be forgotten that IDPs represent just a fraction of the people in need in DRC. The situation of returnees, host families and large numbers of populations in non-conflict affected areas is often dire.

## The Kivus

In the North and South Kivu provinces people are still routinely caught in the frontlines of armed confrontations between the Congolese army (Forces Armées de la

République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC) and various armed rebel groups, particularly the Rwandan former génocidaires,<sup>1</sup> the Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR). Over the course of 2009, the situation initially improved in North Kivu, following the peace and integration agreement signed in March between the government and Congolese armed groups, including the former opposition group Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP). This led to the return of over half a million former IDPs during 2009. However, the total number of IDPs in North Kivu still stands at 875,000 due to frequent

armed confrontations between the national army and different armed opposition groups in the context of the government-led 'Amani Leo' military offensive against the FDLR and other Congolese armed groups. A recent worrying trend has been the impact of the extension of the government offensive to new armed groups, such as the FARDC 'Rwenzori' offensive against the ADF/Nalu rebel group at the end of July 2010 in Beni territory. This resulted in the displacement of 90,000 people.

In South Kivu, the situation worsened during 2009 and 2010 as the province became the main arena for military operations against the FDLR – especially in the Kalehe, Shabunda and Uvira territories – raising the total of IDPs in the province to 626,000. Whatever their military justifications or successes, these operations continue

to inflict a heavy toll on civilians and cause new displacements, while the armed groups targeted by the military operations have in no sense gone away.

In addition, all armed groups, including the FARDC, are responsible for widespread human rights abuses against civilians. Villages are routinely looted and burned, with entire communities uprooted repeatedly. This not only results in massive humanitarian needs but it also blocks and hinders the recovery and development prospects of large areas. Earlier this year, when I visited Mwenga territory in South Kivu, it was clear that people were still afraid to resume their normal activities because of continuing strong FDLR and other militia presence in the vicinity. Local representatives of the humanitarian community reported then that the military operations were also pushing IDPs towards even more remote and inaccessible areas, posing a further challenge for humanitarian operations.

Sexual violence remains amongst the worst abuses. Cases are registered on a daily basis in DRC. Most recently and horrifically, a group of alleged FDLR and Mayi Mayi rebels attacked and took control of villages around the town of Luvungi in North Kivu, looting the area and raping hundreds of women within four days. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that in the two Kivu provinces alone over 8,000 rapes occurred during 2009, averaging around 160 rapes per week. Most of these are committed by armed men, including members of the national army. These abhorrent crimes are unacceptable, as is the virtual impunity for the perpetrators which accompanies them.

### Other provinces

In Orientale province in the north-east of DRC, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the brutal armed group originally from Uganda, is still terrorising the local population, causing widespread displacement in that region. Since the LRA began their attacks in December 2007, 1,893 civilians have been killed, and over 1,600 adults as well as 854 children have been abducted. Currently, more than 390,000 people are internally displaced in the Haut- and Bas-Uélé districts of Orientale



Mugunga  
IDP camp  
outside  
Goma, DRC

province. Humanitarian access remains very challenging in the whole province, due to insecurity, the remoteness of many areas and very high transport costs. There are still groups of IDPs, for example in Bas-Uélé district, to whom it has not yet been possible to deliver assistance.

In this respect, the augmented presence and role of the UN peacekeeping mission in DRC (MONUSCO) in Orientale province remain crucial in deterring LRA attacks, in facilitating humanitarian access, and in providing essential logistical support for humanitarian operations. The suffering and trauma of the civilian population from LRA terror remain deeply disturbing. All concerned UN missions in DRC, Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan, the governments in the region and UN Member States more widely must shoulder the responsibility for promoting new, decisive measures to end the LRA's reign of terror.

Another recent crisis erupted in DRC's north-western Equateur province in October 2009, when intense inter-communal violence gradually turned into a widespread insurgency. At the peak of the crisis in late 2009, approximately 200,000 people were displaced as IDPs in Equateur province or as refugees in the Republic of Congo and in CAR. With the gradual stabilisation of the security situation, an estimated 25,000 IDPs out of an initial caseload of 48,000 have already returned to their villages of origin. But most of the refugees have not yet returned. Durable return of these populations will not only require recovery

assistance for the re-establishment of livelihoods but further reconciliation and mediation efforts to address deep-rooted animosities between different ethnic communities on the ground, not least to avoid future political manipulation that could destabilise the region.

These examples bring out the sad reality that significant displacements will persist as long as armed groups continue to prey on the population, human rights violations are perpetrated with impunity and the Congolese government does not succeed in establishing its presence and providing basic security and social services to its population. For the UN, the gravity of the problems and the complexity of the tasks require not only determined action but also improved coordination between humanitarian, peacebuilding and development actors to develop a comprehensive vision that is shared by and jointly implemented with Congolese authorities at all levels. Those IDPs whom I have visited in DRC, many having been repeatedly displaced over many years, were in as bad a condition, with virtually nothing to their names, as any people I have seen anywhere. This is indeed a scandal that needs to end.

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1. Those implicated in the mass killings of the 1994 Rwandan genocide