

Displacement trends in DRC

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Internal displacement has plagued the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for nearly 20 years. This article provides an overview of the scale and causes of displacement during this period as well as efforts to address the assistance and protection needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In the early 1990s inter-ethnic confrontations in the central and eastern regions aggravated political instability which spread throughout the country and turned into a full-scale civil war in 1996. In the years that followed, the process of return and reintegration for IDPs was halted when a major rebellion against the Kinshasa government almost tripled the number of IDPs which reached two million by the end of 2000. Continued hostilities between government forces, armed contingents from several African nations and three rebel factions affected nine of DRC's ten provinces, plus the capital Kinshasa, with IDP numbers peaking at 3.4 million in 2003.

With the establishment in mid-2003 of a Transitional Government, which included the armed opposition, violence decreased by mid-2004 and many IDPs returned home. However, despite the power-sharing agreement and the withdrawal of foreign troops, the government struggled to assert its authority in the eastern provinces. The continued presence of up to twenty armed groups remained a threat to the population. The activities of domestic armed groups – entrenched within the local population and antagonistic towards civilians associated with other groups – triggered new displacement at alarming levels, illustrating that displacement in DRC does not depend so much on the scale of warfare but rather on how such warfare is carried out.

The government's response has been to integrate militants into the army and to disarm and repatriate foreign armed groups but this process has been marred by corruption and further conflict, often reflecting local ethnic divisions and competing command structures. The flawed integration resulted in

an undisciplined national army, which acquired the characteristics of the rebel groups it was absorbing. From the end of 2004 until mid-2006, the Congolese army launched a series of military operations – some with the support of the UN's peace keeping mission MONUC¹ – to disarm groups in Ituri and the Kivus before the national elections in June 2006. However, while these operations contributed to improving access to IDPs and allowed some to return home – particularly in Katanga province in 2005 – they also caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

In Orientale province, where the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was subject to a joint military strike by Uganda, DRC and Southern Sudan armies in late 2008, the LRA retaliated against civilians by killing thousand and displacing tens of thousands more.

The struggle for resources

Members of the army as well as militia groups have been involved in the illegal exploitation of minerals, contributing to further displacement. In early 2007, for example, several thousand people in Kasai Oriental province fled as their villages were burned down following a conflict over a diamond mine in the area. In Lubero territory in North Kivu, Hutu militia forced the civilian population to act as slave porters for their mining activities, causing many to flee their villages. Competition between two communities over access to fishing ponds in Dongo, Equateur, in October 2009 turned into a full-fledged insurgency which forced 200,000 people to flee, two-thirds over the borders to the Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, the rest within DRC.

Control over arable land has been at the core of the cause of displacement

in eastern DRC as well as during displacement and in the search for durable solutions. Access to land through displacement has even been an objective of the armed conflict itself, illustrated by how CNDP since 2006 have expelled Kivu peasants from one ethnic group to replace them with peasants from their own constituency. IDPs who need to cultivate during displacement in order to survive have put pressure on scarce land resources leading to disputes with host communities. When attempting to return, they have often been met by angry farmers who have occupied their land in their absence.

Patterns of displacements

The vast majority of IDPs find refuge outside camp settings, whether with host families in other villages and urban areas, or in forests. Very often people are displaced on multiple occasions but for a short time. As a general rule, IDPs try to remain close to their place of origin but shifting frontlines in the Kivus have forced many to flee greater distances, making it more difficult for them to maintain communication with home areas or to return home permanently.

Host communities have become increasingly unable to cope with the influx of people and several hundred thousand IDPs have built makeshift settlements or found refuge in dilapidated buildings or camps in Ituri, North Kivu and Katanga. According to OCHA, the percentage of IDPs living in camps in North Kivu increased from 5% in 2005 to 35% in 2008 but fell to 16% by mid-2010.

A number of IDPs have fled to urban areas. Whilst such urbanisation swells slum areas, it is also an opportunity for adept IDPs to integrate locally. Camp residents near Goma, for instance, have found work in urban areas while maintaining part of the family in camps to access food rations.

The total of IDPs in DRC at August 2010 stood at almost 2 million.² North and South Kivu provinces had the highest numbers of IDPs,



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with some 1,542,000 people reported, i.e. close to 78% of the total number of IDPs. While close to a million people had returned home over the previous 18 months, the number of IDPs had still increased due to ongoing military operations against rebel groups and due to reprisal attacks against the population.

Vulnerability exacerbated by displacement

The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) mortality surveys indicate that the number of deaths resulting from conflict has grown steadily from 2.4 million in 2001 to 5.4 million in 2009.³ IDPs also suffer gross human rights violations and social marginalisation.

The displacement of farmers, the burning of fields and food stocks, and the destruction of infrastructure have made trade and commerce extremely difficult and caused widespread malnutrition in eastern DRC, an area with considerable agricultural potential. Moreover, millions lack access to basic services. The health-care system, already in a weak state

when the conflicts started, has been degraded by looting, fleeing staff and lack of funds. On several occasions displacement crises have coincided with a sharp increase of epidemic diseases, such as hemorrhagic fever, measles and cholera. Some groups are more affected than others.

Those who are forced to flee into the forests are particularly vulnerable, as are the Pygmies who, uprooted from their traditional lands since 2003-04, struggle to survive.

Many displaced children have been forced into the ranks of the armed groups. UNICEF estimates that 20-40,000 children were associated with armed groups between 2003 and 2005, falling to 3,000 by 2008. Displaced children in North Kivu, particularly those separated from their families, remain at risk not only of being recruited by militias but also of being raped and exploited. Left on their own, many are homeless. Without food, medicines and shelter, displaced children have also been denied a range of other essential rights. Few attend

school under the current war-torn education system, reducing their prospects for a more secure future.

Rape has been used extensively in the context of military operations by most of the forces involved in the conflicts. Within the context of existing gender relations in DRC, much of the sexual violence is directed against women and girls; however, internally displaced men and boys are also sexually assaulted by combatants. Despite all initiatives undertaken to counter sexual violence, it continues to be widespread throughout the country, used against the population generally, against displaced people, and as an instrument of displacement.

Erosion of local capacity

Despite the national government's primary responsibility to protect and assist IDPs, there is still no national IDP strategy nor policies with a direct positive impact on the lives of IDPs. Some government ministries have been tasked with responding

to their needs, and governors of several provinces have established offices to coordinate humanitarian assistance but with little success. In search of new sources of revenue, the DRC authorities have inconsistently taxed humanitarian supplies.

Solutions at the local level have been far more in evidence. The vast majority of IDPs have survived on their own or with the support of relatives, friends and people of the same ethnic group who have taken them in with the encouragement of local authorities. Church and IDP leaders have often negotiated the modalities of settlements of IDPs with the host communities. Local authorities have also assigned to IDPs a place to stay, as well as land to cultivate while they are displaced.

With customary laws guiding most social relations in DRC, local authorities have an important role to play in managing most protection issues between civilians, including IDPs. In some cases, they have had some success in persuading militia commanders to change their conduct towards civilians, such as keeping combatants out of communities, the creation of safe spaces for communities in danger of being displaced and making military looting and recruitment practices less harmful. However, conflict has eroded their capacity to manage disputes.

Internal displacement has affected the regulating role of local authorities in at least four ways. First, the influx of large numbers of people from other areas has fuelled competition over scarce resources, leading to an overall increase in poverty. Second, due to the mixing of populations following displacement, local authorities have had to manage the conflict of interests of different ethnic groups for which custom and tradition offers limited guidance. Third, IDPs – having lost most of their resources – cannot compensate wronged families where there has been conflict as in the past, leading in some situations to a logic of revenge rather than resolution between IDPs and their hosts. Finally, local military commanders have, to a certain degree, replaced the traditional leaders trained to uphold customary law, leading to decisions

that do not respect restitution rights and international human rights.

International humanitarian assistance and protection

International humanitarian agencies have been providing food assistance, health and other basic services to large numbers of IDPs for several years, both during displacement and upon return, focusing mainly on camps and small towns in eastern Congo. It has not been easy. Constraints on mobility have been a significant obstacle to assisting IDPs and ensuring quality in humanitarian interventions; attacks against national and international staff are common. UN agencies in 2009, for instance, were unable to access 94% of North Kivu without a MONUC escort, and have become reliant on international and national NGOs to reach the IDPs.

The Protection Cluster, led by UNHCR, coordinates its action with MONUC. They have developed a handbook for peacekeepers, detailing measures for the protection of IDPs and a strategy to better assist IDPs in host communities.⁴ However, in December 2009 Human Rights Watch commented that, while this was an important initiative, there had been no formal training on the guidelines, no mechanism for monitoring and evaluation on whether and how these guidelines are followed, and nothing in the rules of engagement or force directives instructing troops to follow these guidelines.⁵ The creation of specific mechanisms to respond to pressing protection issues, including MONUC's Joint Protection Teams (comprising civil affairs, human rights and child protection staff), has given the international community the capacity to catalogue violations and assess protection issues – but they have yet to find a way of translating that knowledge into effective action in the field.

MONUC has been crucial to guaranteeing UN access to communities in insecure environments, and people living near MONUC bases are reported to be safer than in other areas. At the same time, MONUC's reputation has been tarnished both by its inability to keep rebels at bay and by its support to a poorly trained, abusive national army. The relationship has embarrassed UN

peacekeepers who since 2004 have regularly threatened to withdraw their support for the army.

Rather than supporting local authorities (which can protect IDPs but which also come from a tradition that has favoured older men over women and children), agencies have instead strengthened alternative (and competing) structures such as national NGOs and women's groups. While these groups may coincide better with the Western worldview, the question is whether these groups really are capable of increasing protection.

Recommendations to the international community

- Promote the development of policies for durable solutions for IDPs, focusing on security and on land tenure.
- Support customary law in tandem with the formal legal system in ways which are not vulnerable to abuse i.e. so that it neither legalises the injustices of the past nor poses serious obstacles to durable solutions.
- Work with existing governance structures and support their strengthening in line with international standards rather than creating parallel structures which can lead to further erosion of local governance.
- Ensure that the most vulnerable are reached by channelling resources through organisations which have access to the frontline.

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1. Known from 1 July 2010 as MONUSCO – Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo / United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Security Council Resolution 1925)

2. See latest statistics at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/DRCongo>

3. <http://www.theirc.org/special-reports/congo-forgotten-crisis>

4. *Protection in Practice* <http://tinyurl.com/DRCpeacekeepers-handbook>

5. <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87142/section/12>