

Civil society and the displaced persons of Bandundu

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Local organisations in Bandundu province located in western DRC are struggling to meet the needs of displaced persons in the absence of government or international assistance.

Bandundu province, located adjacent to Kinshasa and bordering Angola, has not suffered the same degree of conflict as provinces in eastern DRC; nevertheless, it has been a hotspot for forced migration. Two factors have triggered population movements within Bandundu province: the border situation with Angola during and in the aftermath of the civil war there, and the insecurity surrounding diamond mining on the Angolan side of the border.

Angola experienced a long and vicious rebellion in the 1980s, fought by Jonas Savimbi's UNITA. This conflict led many Angolan officers and citizens to cross the border to seek refuge with their Congolese neighbours. UNITA's subsequent cross-border raids to pursue fugitive officers created insecurity within Bandundu, one of the results of which was the eventual deportation of all Angolans who had settled there.

The other major factor behind population movements in this area is the presence of diamonds. Drawn by the precious stone, the Congolese (Zairians at the time) often crossed the river Kwango into Angola to mine diamonds. But given that the majority of their financing came from diamond sales, UNITA controlled all mining activities and demanded a special 'expatriate fee' from non-Angolan mine operators. Those who did not or could not pay were stripped of their belongings and summarily deported.

Continuing insecurity on both sides of the border has triggered further displacement within Bandundu and many of the displaced face enormous difficulties.

The involvement of civil society

Civil society in Bandundu is frail but tries to make a significant contribution to the care of displaced

persons in the province. National authorities and the international community have dedicated most of their attention to the east of DRC, and the lack of any large-scale initiatives in the west is striking. It has been left to NGOs and local solidarity organisations to try to provide assistance, as far as their resources allow. These include, among others, the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ in Congo, the Kimbanguist Church, the Church of the Awakening in Congo, the Église des Noirs en Afrique, mosques, and various animist movements as well. These churches and religious movements organise money collections at their weekly services to support an aid programme for displaced persons. The funds raised pay for goods such as foodstuffs, salt, palm oil, drinking water, cooking pots and other kitchen utensils, clothes and cultivation tools.

The distribution of goods is done alongside a wide range of other actions – the creation of jobs and provision of healthcare and education – intended to help displaced persons to become self-sufficient and to fully integrate into their new environment. These initiatives allow them access to the forest to gather wood, train them to build cooking stoves for sale and teach them how to construct latrines. When it comes to health, the traditional practitioners and resources of the Église des Noirs guarantee free medical care to displaced persons. A little cash is also made available to enable them, if necessary, to access modern healthcare. The religious schools offer free education to their children.

Although churches and religious movements in Bandundu are making great efforts to transcend their rivalries in working together for the well-being of displaced persons, this is not necessarily the case

for the various other civil society organisations. In pursuing their own ambitions, the majority of these organisations are less inclined to undertake concrete actions than to spend their energy seeking financial or material aid from governments, to which they are supposed to act as a counterweights. Torn between pursuing their own aims and the needs of the population, they have rarely been able to work together.

Nevertheless some non-religious NGOs are also effective in helping displaced persons. For example, there is significant support from the provincial branch of the Collectif des Organisations des Jeunes Solidaires du Congo-Kinshasa (COJESKI) which was involved in observation missions on the Angolan border and in alerting the authorities and the rest of the world to the situation there. And displaced persons arriving in the town of Tembo, for example, find the Association Mamans LISALI de Tembo which has raised money to pay for the transport costs of certain displaced families who want to return to their homes.

Recommendations

The prolonged inaction of the authorities in Bandundu province has led to the continual deterioration in day-to-day living conditions of the IDPs, and the forced displacement there is the basis of the current border crisis between DRC and Angola. There needs to be:

- greater coordination and synergy within civil society
- recognition of the migration problem by the provincial administrative authorities; efforts in this direction were made with a meeting between the Governor of Bandundu and his opposite number from Lunda-Norte in Angola in 2007 but the initiative needs to be renewed to make concrete proposals for reconciliation across the River Kwango

- a firm commitment from the central governments in Kinshasa and Luanda to find a solution not only to the local border dispute but above all to the challenges posed by the presence of displaced populations in the provinces
- a more vigorous reaction from the international community with a view to helping DRC and Angola to resolve this thorny issue
- a clear support from the international community to reinforce the capacities of the religious movements and

other NGOs taking interest in the fate of the IDPs.

Coordinated action on a local, national and international level, including the active participation of the populations concerned at all stages, would provide an impetus to manage the migration crisis around the River Kwango and would allow adequate protection for displaced individuals and families. This shared involvement is essential, not only to deal with the immediate needs of the displaced persons but also to halt a border conflict which is smouldering between Angola and DRC.

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