

Continuing displacement in DRC



by Greta Zeender

Despite successful elections in late 2006 and an overall increase in the level of stability, over a million people remain displaced in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The situation is particularly worrying in North Kivu where over a hundred thousand people have been displaced in recent months.

In 1996, and again between 1998 and 2003, the DRC suffered two major wars as rebel groups with close links to neighbouring states competed to control large areas of eastern DRC. Civilians have borne the brunt of the violence, often being targeted for ethnic or political reasons. Displacement peaked in 2003, with an estimated 3.4 million people forced from their homes, most of them in the east of the country. Around four million died as a result of the conflict. The scale and intensity of conflict have considerably decreased over the last few years. More people are returning home than are fleeing but displacement is ongoing and the needs of returning IDPs are not being met. Operations by Congolese armed forces to disarm militias, as well as human rights violations committed by the army and the militias, continue to cause frequent displacement in eastern provinces.

Over half of the current IDP population are in North Kivu – the eastern province bordering Rwanda and Uganda – with substantial additional numbers in the provinces of Ituri, South Kivu and Katanga. Most IDPs live with host communities or hide in forests. Following massive influxes of people, IDP camps have also been set up.

In mid-2003, a power-sharing transitional government was set up following the withdrawal of foreign armies. Made up of former enemies who frequently quarrelled, the government was not able to bring security to eastern DRC where local militias continued to cause massive displacement. The 17,000 soldiers

of MONUC – the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo¹ – have played a crucial role in providing security in the country. In May 2007, MONUC's mandate was renewed by the UN Security Council until the end of the year. In 2006, millions of voters took part in the country's first multiparty



UNHCR/S Schulman

elections in 45 years which were won by Joseph Kabila. The majority of IDPs were reportedly not able to vote due to insecurity, or because they had lost their electoral cards or had them confiscated by armed men. One cloud on the horizon is that the main defeated candidate, Jean-Pierre Bemba, slipped out of the country in April 2007 after violent clashes in the capital Kinshasa between his armed supporters and the security forces.

A major challenge for the Congolese government is the need to integrate over 78,000 troops from different

belligerent factions (in a process known as *brassage*), as well as to disarm and repatriate foreign armed groups. Until the reform of the army is complete, DRC will experience at best a fragile peace. The integration process has been marred by corruption and by conflicts between soldiers, often reflecting local ethnic divisions. Failings in the disarmament and demobilisation programme, administered by the Commission Nationale de la Demobilization (CONADER), have resulted in an undisciplined national army, which has taken on the characteristics of the rebel groups it was supposed to be integrating. Congolese soldiers, themselves ill-equipped, unpaid and unfed, are often in no position to defend themselves – or any civilian in their care – against armed groups. In addition, they continue to harass civilians and extort their goods. In 2007, the situation in North Kivu further deteriorated. Brigades made up of former Tutsi militias loyal to former dissident General Nkunda were deployed in the province rather than being sent to other regions and integrated with other soldiers (a process known as *mixage*). They are reported to have committed widespread human right violations, including the recruitment of some 300 children and the displacement of over 100,000 people. Ethnic tensions in the province are reported to be on the rise. Also, as a result of attacks but also of the targeting of vehicles delivering humanitarian assistance, humanitarian space has shrunk in several areas of the province.

Armed groups are committing grave human rights violations, including killings, rape, sexual exploitation, abductions, forcible conscription of children, looting, plundering of crops, illegal taxation and general harassment of civilians. The illegal exploitation of natural resources (gold, coltan and diamonds) and the smuggling of goods and weapons add to the violence. Despite all

IDPs
homeward
bound, DRC



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initiatives undertaken to counter sexual violence and the adoption of two laws on sexual violence in July 2006, rape continues to be widespread throughout the country. Soldiers and rebel fighters have engaged in acts of sexual violence in order to attack the fundamental values of the community, to scare the civilian population into submission, to punish them for allegedly supporting enemy forces or to provide gratification for the fighters.

Many displaced children have been forced into the ranks of the armed groups, and thousands of them remain in militias. Ongoing recruitment of child soldiers by militias is reported, particularly in North Kivu. Amnesty International reported in October 2006 that some 11,000 children were still with the armed forces or groups, or were otherwise unaccounted for in the demobilisation programme.

Returning IDPs left unassisted

Most returning IDPs do not receive assistance, despite the fact that fighting and looting have led to a complete breakdown of services and destruction of facilities. The vast majority of IDPs and returnees lack access to health centres, schools, roads, potable water, food, seeds, tools, clothes and straw to build houses. Displaced people are particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases. Every day, 1,250 people die in DRC – above what is considered a ‘normal level’ for the country. Over 70% of these deaths are due to easily preventable and treatable diseases. Epidemics of cholera, measles, bubonic plague and other

diseases broke out among IDPs in Ituri, North and South Kivu, Katanga and Maniema in 2006, due to their precarious living conditions and lack of access to clean drinking water. Malaria remains the number one cause of mortality. Displaced people are also exposed to HIV/AIDS infection, as they usually lack the means to protect themselves and do not have information about its transmission. Data is not available but it appears they are more at risk of HIV than the general population.

In 2006 and early 2007, access to IDPs and other vulnerable populations in eastern DRC improved in many areas. But in parts of the Kivus, Katanga and in Ituri, access remained difficult, due to military operations against uncontrolled armed groups and related attacks on civilians by militias and undisciplined Congolese troops. Some areas of North Kivu have become inaccessible due to insecurity. WFP has had to resort to food drops and airlifts to reach IDPs in areas of Katanga, Maniema and South Kivu where road and rail transport is virtually non-existent.

In 2006, the DRC was selected as one of the pilot countries where the UN introduced its new ‘cluster’ approach, aimed at increasing accountability and predictability by designating lead agencies for humanitarian sectors. It is too early to know whether the cluster approach and the new funding mechanisms have made an impact for IDPs and other vulnerable people.

On a provincial and national level, the Congolese government has so far played little role in responding to the needs of IDPs and returnees. Nominally, the Ministry

for Solidarity and Humanitarian Affairs has primary responsibility for responding to the needs of IDPs. The ministries of the interior and defence are also involved but their roles are unclear. There is an urgent need for a national framework or strategy for tackling displacement:

This will require:

- mapping out current return movements and number of returning IDPs, particularly in eastern DRC
- strengthening coordination on return issues between Kinshasa and government representatives at the provincial level
- increasing funding for return activities, including the building of infrastructure in villages of origin
- monitoring the human rights situation of returnees
- ensuring displaced people return in safety and dignity and are given proper information on the conditions in return areas.

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1. www.monuc.org

IDP Voices

www.idpvoices.org

This site lets internally displaced people tell their life stories – in their own words – providing a valuable complement to the official information on conflicts which governments and international organisations offer. The stories deal with the real lives of real people. The narrators share their personal experiences, their feelings, hopes and dreams, and the impact for them of being forced from their homes. The first IDP Voices oral testimonies project took place in Colombia. IDP Voices from further countries will be added as the projects progress.

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