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Crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Role of the International Community

By David Aronson

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The humanitarian situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (the Congo) remains among the most catastrophic in the world. The International Rescue Committee estimates that 3.8 million people have died there since the start of the war in August 1998, and that over 1,000 people continue to perish every day. Most of the victims are children under the age of five, and the vast majority of them die from diseases and malnutrition brought on by the [disruptions of the war](#).

Other byproducts of the war are extreme poverty, the recruitment of child soldiers, and widespread sexual violence against women and girls. Meanwhile the political prospects for resolving the war's intertwining conflicts remain tenuous, with unrest and ethnic conflict flaring in the east and a political dispensation tending toward paralysis prevailing in the capital.



Acknowledging Difficulties

This was the situation outlined by [David Smock](#), director of USIP's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, at a [Current Issues Briefing](#) held at the Institute on February 24. Smock served as the moderator on a panel headed by Jean-Marie Guéhenno, UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations. Chester Crocker, a board member of the Institute, former assistant secretary of state for African affairs, and current professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University; and Suliman Baldo, Africa director of the International Crisis Group, served as respondents. Their discussion focused on what the international community can do to promote democracy in the Congo and help resolve or manage tensions between the Congo and its neighbors, particularly Rwanda. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes their comments and does not represent the views of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno opened his remarks by acknowledging the recent scandal surrounding UN peacekeeping troops and the sexual abuse of minors in the Congo. "Sexual abuse has to be eradicated," said Guéhenno. At the same time, he said—and without excusing the behavior of the soldiers—"the risk of sexual abuse is always present in crisis situations, particularly when power and wealth meet extreme poverty." This was not the first time that the United Nations has been forced to deal with allegations of sexual abuse, and while it had implemented lessons from earlier episodes, the Congo is a tragic illustration of how things can still go wrong. He assured the audience that the UN is working to make the Congo a test case for more professional peacekeeping operations in the future.

Defining the UN Role

Guéhenno then turned to three questions that, he said, defined the nature of the debate over the UN's role in the Congo. The first was "whether this considerable effort is worth it?" The UN's peacekeeping effort in the Congo, called MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo), is the largest operation of its kind and continues to grow, as it builds its troop strength up to 16,700 soldiers with an annual budget of over one billion dollars. The answer to this question, said Guéhenno, is an emphatic "yes." The human case for the Congo is overwhelming—the sheer number of dead and dying, and the dire poverty of the vast majority of the living—make an inescapable claim on the world's conscience. But the Congo—a country the size of western Europe, bordering nine countries in the center of the continent—is also one of the fulcrums upon which Africa's destiny hinges. "Were the situation in the Congo to turn around, one of the principal sources of Afro-pessimism would be alleviated and hope would be brought back to Africa."

The second question, said Guéhenno, is whether the UN's mission in the Congo is "doable." Too often, a sense of impotence can be an excuse for inaction, and horror can, paradoxically, lead to disengagement. But it is not unreasonable to ask how 16,000 troops could transform a country the size of the Congo. The answer, Guéhenno said, can be seen in part in the difference MONUC has already made. It has not extended peace throughout the country, and it has not always reacted quickly enough to events on the ground. But compared to five years ago, the Congo has made dramatic progress. Five years ago, the country was a war zone, foreign armies occupied half the territory, different governments competed for legitimacy, and travel between regions was often impossible. Today, a transitional government is in place and national elections are scheduled. Then, the country was experiencing negative growth; now, the economy is growing at a four or five percent rate. The pace of progress has been slow, said Guéhenno, but "both we and the Congolese must stay the course."

Finally, said Guéhenno, the most important question is: "How can it be done?" How can some measure of peace, democracy, and prosperity be brought to the Congo? The answer, he said, lies in a sustained and deepened international engagement combined with a more judicious local leadership. For example, one constant irritant has been the presence of the ex-FAR/Interahamwe in eastern Congo. These troops, the remnants of the Rwandan forces responsible for the genocide in 1994, pose little strategic threat to the Rwandan government, but their continuing presence on Congolese soil is unacceptable. Though its actual authority hardly extends that far to the east, the Congolese government can and should be doing more to put political pressure on the ex-FAR to return to Rwanda. Rwanda could do its part by demonstrating that it is serious about resettling those who aren't guilty of major abuses, and opening some "political space" for the airing of legitimate grievances. A ramped-up MONUC—with the deployment of a new brigade in the region—will put military pressure on the ex-FAR, who must be prevented from preying on civilians. This combination of political and military pressure will help tip the balance in favor of returning to Rwanda.

Potential Regional Powerhouse

More generally, said Guéhenno, the role of the blue helmets is to marginalize potential spoilers, by providing a backdrop for political stability without which events could easily spiral out of control and bring down the transition. MONUC can also help rebuild the Congo's security sector, because more than anything else Congo needs well-trained police and soldiers, loyal to the state, and—not least—paid at the end of the month. Finally, he said, elections are now the only way forward. The Congolese themselves want elections, and only elections can provide a sustainable dispensation of power. Nevertheless, the international community must proceed with caution. The right balance must be found between the various groups competing for power and between the local, provincial, and national governments, if elections are not to trigger renewed bouts of violence. Elections pose immense practical challenges as well. They may not take place as early as originally planned—in June of this year—but they can't be indefinitely postponed.

Guéhenno concluded by noting how a re-united and democratic Congo could become a powerhouse for the region, accelerating growth, and exporting peace as well as wealth. It has not always been clear that the parties are committed to peace and reconciliation, he acknowledged, but then "trust is not built in a day." The UN has been given a broad mandate in the Congo, but a mandate alone is not enough to bring peace to the region. That mandate must be accompanied by a real and sustained engagement from the international community.

A Glass Half Empty

Suliman Baldo of the International Crisis Group framed his response in terms of what he called the "other half of the glass"—the half-empty part. At the moment, said Baldo, the major problem is the absence of political leadership in the Congo. The parties involved are "unwilling partners" who have demonstrated little sense of ownership over the transition process. There is no effective integration of the army, and local populations are still under the control of the various factions. And while the international community is now contributing a substantial amount of aid, there is little willingness to leverage this aid to put pressure on the Congolese leaders. For its part, MONUC has lacked a strategy for protecting civilians—even when it had both the mandate and the means at its disposal. The clearest example of this failure came in December, when a militia under the command of the notorious General Laurent Nkunda descended upon Bukavu, killing over a hundred civilians while MONUC forces passively looked on. Finally, MONUC could be doing much more to stem the conflict at its source, by denying rebels access to arms and to the mineral wealth that fund them. Stronger border station, airport, and seaport inspections could go a long way toward enforcing the UN arms embargo and staunching the illegal expropriation of conflict resources.

Chester Crocker agreed with Guéhenno that the trend line is hopeful and that the stakes are huge, but drew attention to the gap between "what could have been and what actually is." Faced with Africa's seemingly unending series of crises, policymakers engage in a form of triage, Crocker explained. How many very difficult challenges can an Administration take on? For the past several years, Sudan has gotten most of Washington's attention—with results that are now becoming clear. There's been a level of attention to the Sudan that's been utterly absent from the Congo, said Crocker, despite the presence on the ground of some very capable UN leadership. The Congo faces several enormous obstacles to the attainment of a genuine peace. One immediate problem is the almost complete lack of

electoral infrastructure. "We have to get this right," said Crocker. If elections are held, but the results lack legitimacy, the outcome could be explosive. Security sector reform has also been very slow: one has to ask whether the key armed players are really committed to the transitional process: "We should move forward aggressively on elections while at the same time making sure that we don't compromise on standards." The bottom line, said Crocker, is that the "stakes are very high, leadership from outside is central—and can't only come from New York, it has to come from Paris, Brussels, and Washington as well as Kigali and Kampala—and I think the sequence has to be security, accountability, and long-term institution building."

Can the UN Perform?

Questions from the audience indicated a degree of skepticism about the UN's capacity to perform its mission. One member asked whether the UN had learned anything from its experience in the Congo; another asked why MONUC had been so reluctant to use its Chapter VII mandate when the need arose. Still another asked whether the UN had built accountability measures into its transitional mechanisms. Guéhenno admitted that the UN had been reluctant to employ its arsenal, but in defense pointed out that "having a mandate and having real power are different things. One is just words on paper; they don't stop guns. We often lack what military planners call 'escalation dominance'—the clear ability to decisively overwhelm an opponent and thereby deter him." On the question of what the UN had learned, he said, several lessons came to mind: don't dribble in troops a few thousand at a time, insist on greater coordination between the major international organizations, and renew and intensify efforts to eliminate sexual abuse.

Valentin Mubake, a senior adviser to veteran opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, made a plea for greater international involvement in the Congo's problems. He painted a stark picture of the conditions prevailing in the Congo, with 80 percent of the population living on 20 cents a day; and denounced the transitional process—which, he said, "had been a gift to the warlords," who had no intention of relinquishing power. Guéhenno responded that the major players involved in the Congolese transitional process were indeed far from confident about how they would fare in a free and fair election, and pointed out that identity politics were intensifying as the presumptive candidates were positioning themselves for the election. "The transition from the rule of the bullet to the rule of the ballot is a complex problem," he said.

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United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)