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## Congo: IDPs and returnees face lack of support

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*Four years after a peace agreement brought an end to more than a decade of conflict in the Republic of Congo's Pool region in the south of the country, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), returnees and residents still face considerable humanitarian challenges. Although the number of IDPs has decreased and the situation is no longer characterised as an acute humanitarian crisis, the majority of the displaced who have returned to Pool are facing hardship. No systematic assessment of the number of IDPs has been undertaken. However, the government estimates that there are still 7,800 people unable to return to their homes, down from 800,000 at the peak of the disturbances in the 1990s. The displaced are not easily identifiable as they live with families and host communities.*

*Since the end of the fighting in 2003, little has been done to reconstruct and rehabilitate social and public infrastructure in Pool region. The fighting between Lari rebels and the government in the region resulted in massive organised looting, the burning of houses, destruction of the rural economy and infrastructure, as well as devastating the social fabric of the Lari people. Despite much rhetoric, since the end of the conflict the government's efforts to invest in the recovery and development of the region have not reflected the level of the needs. For instance, no comprehensive health care service has been provided to the population of Pool where the mortality rates are higher than in the rest of the country. Instability due to the presence of former rebels, or bandits claiming to be rebels, who continue to roam parts of the region uncontrolled, hampers mobility for civilians and humanitarian agencies. Violent incidents and lack of funding have forced some of these latter to pull out temporarily or permanently from the region which is still faced with vast reconstruction and rehabilitation needs. The repeated harassments and massive human rights violations in the region have left many people, including an unknown number of IDPs and returnees, deeply traumatised and impoverished, and largely neglected by the international community. With the decision of the leader of the rebel movement to transform it into a political party, it is expected that about 5,000 former rebel fighters in Pool region will be demobilised as part of the country's National Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme. Consequently there is hope that the security situation will improve and lead to more government investment in the currently isolated region.*



More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

## **Background and main causes of displacement**

Civil conflicts hit the Republic of Congo intermittently between 1992, the year of its first democratic elections, and March 2003 when a ceasefire was signed between the National Resistance Council (NRC), representing the "Ninja" rebel group, and the government. Some analysts have interpreted the fighting as a struggle between rival factions within the country's elite for control of Congo's rich oil resources (Engleberdt, 31 December 2003). The conflicts have also involved government troops and rebel groups from neighbouring countries. The latest episode of civil strife began with presidential elections in March 2002, when President Denis Sassou Nguesso won a landslide victory. His main rivals, Pascal Lissouba and Bernard Kolélas, had been declared ineligible to run under a revised constitution. The two were in exile abroad after having been convicted in absentia for crimes allegedly committed during the civil conflicts in the 1990s. Soon afterwards, government forces claimed that military positions in the Pool region were attacked by "Ninja" militias. These fighters, who take their name from the masked assassins of feudal-era Japan, originate from the Lari people loyal to Kolélas. By early April, tensions between the two sides had escalated into heavy fighting in Pool, the area around Brazzaville, and by June in the capital itself, causing renewed displacement. The fighting resulted in massive organised looting, random killings, rapes, the burning of houses, and the destruction of the rural economy and infrastructure in the Pool region as well as devastating the social fabric of the Lari people (Caritas, 30 November 2004,

p.7). It went on until a ceasefire was signed in March 2003.

However, since the signing of the ceasefire there have been a series of military confrontations between the government forces and the rebels. For instance, in October 2005 the government security forces exchanged heavy gunfire with the rebels in the southern Bacongo District of Brazzaville for several days, in an effort to expel them from occupied villas. This prompted fear and panic among the residents who were forced to temporarily seek refuge in the centre and the northern areas of the city while the rebels moved to their stronghold in the Pool region. Between five and 20 people were killed, three were wounded and a number of displaced residents and shopkeepers fell victims to harassment and looting by both sides (IRIN, 21 October 2005; Icimac.com, 31 October 2005). In October 2006, 2,600 people became internally displaced as a result of fighting between factions of the rebel group during a "pacification" operation carried out by its leader Pasteur Ntumi. Since he decided to disarm and transform the NRC into a political party in order to participate in the 2007 legislative and local elections, there is hope that this will once and for all resolve the conflict that has shaken the country for more than a decade (UN, November 2006, p.8; IRIN, 1 February 2007).

## **Few IDPs left, but reconstruction needed**

Most of the up to 800,000 people who had been displaced during previous rounds of fighting in the 1990s had either returned or settled down in their areas of displacement, particularly in Bacongo and Makelekélé neighbour-

hoods in the capital, when hostilities broke out again in March 2002 (UNDP, 6 March 2003; OCHA, 27 January 2004, 10 January 2003). There are no more IDP sites or camps assisted by humanitarian organisations in Brazzaville or in other parts of Congo, as they were closed by the government following a small-scale return exercise that ended in April 2004 (IRIN, 4 May 2004).

Although no systematic assessment has been carried out recently and the information on IDPs is very limited, the government estimates that as of September 2006 there were still 7,800 IDPs temporarily settled in stable districts of Kinkala, Boko and Igné of Pool region and in Brazzaville (UN, November 2006, p.1). All IDPs come from the most conflict-affected districts of Pool -- Gindza, Kimba, Kindamba and Mindouli. The displaced are difficult to identify because they have integrated with host communities and families.

Four years after the ceasefire agreement of March 2003 was signed, the situation is no longer an acute humanitarian crisis and there has been a notable increase in routine activities such as agricultural cultivation and small business (MSF, 3 January 2007, p.1). However, there are still pockets of vulnerability in Pool which need to be attended to (UN, November 2006 p.1). Despite the massive number of returnees in this area, there has not been enough infrastructural development. The population of the region nearly doubled from 186,000 in 2000 to 362,000 in 2005 as people returned there following the 2003 peace agreement, but there has been no commensurate investment in rebuilding the infrastructure and shelter. Pool still needs reconstruction, the rehabilitation of its schools and

health facilities and the revival of the means of livelihood for its people. Only eight per cent of its population have access to clean water and the rate of school attendance is 30 per cent. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), while the reduction of violence has permitted improved freedom of movement to many areas previously inaccessible, there are still medical needs more indicative of a chronic crisis than a stable situation as is the case in other parts of the country. No comprehensive health care service has been provided yet mortality rates are higher than in the rest of Congo. Despite much rhetoric, since the end of the conflict the government's efforts to invest in the recovery and development of the region have not reflected the level of the needs (UN, November 2006 p.10; MSF, 3 January 2007, p.1-2).

### **Lack of security in parts of Pool region**

Lack of security in parts of Pool is the main obstacle to the return of remaining displaced population, and of the integration of those who have already returned. The unresolved political issues have, since the signing of the 2003 ceasefire agreement, created a volatile security situation in the region, which is characterised by occasional clashes between government forces and rebels, or bandits disguised as rebels, and the uncontrolled roaming of rebels or bandits in the region. Attacks on poor people, train passengers, NGOs or UN operations regularly forced some aid organisations to pull out temporarily, limiting the needy population's access to effective support. Out of 13 districts that make up Pool region, only the administrative centre of Kinkala is considered to have made noticeable progress towards nor-

mality. Local qualified medical personnel fear to work in the region because of insecurity (IRIN, 16 March 2007).

The lack of security, mainly caused by the illegal circulation of weapons, creates an atmosphere of uncertainty among the population and aid workers. In 2006, the NGO Small Arms Survey estimated that there were up to 40,000 weapons of all calibres in circulation in the country, most of them in Pool. So far at least 1,000 weapons have been collected, with 15,000 weapons of all calibres expected to be taken out of circulation by the end of 2008 (IRIN, 1 February 2007; 16 March 2007). The lack of political will from the main actors did not allow the reintegration provided for by the 2003 ceasefire agreement (UN, 30 November 2006, p.1). It is expected that about 5,000 former rebel fighters in Pool will be demobilised as part of Congo's National, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme which has received funds from the World Bank and the Japanese government (IRIN, 26 September 2006; 28 February 2007).

### **National and international response**

In 2000, the government created the Ministry for Humanitarian Activities and put it in charge of addressing the internal displacement situation. However, the Ministry's response has been utterly inadequate. For instance, no budget had been adopted for the devastated Pool region as of early 2005 and the local authorities represented by the *sous-prefets* of Mbandza Ndounga and Kindamba claimed to be without any means to address the returned or resident populations' needs. Some NRC representatives say the inadequate government response amounts to a deliberate attempt to de-

prive the IDPs, returned IDPs and resident population alike of access to cultural and economic benefits as part of a broader strategy to shatter the entire structure of the Lari people (Caritas, 5 January 2005; NRC, 24 May 2004). The government has done little to reconstruct and rehabilitate social and public infrastructure. According to MSF, in order to address the health care needs of the Pool region, it is essential that the government and its Ministry of Health take greater responsibility for the provision of the service (MSF, 3 January 2007, p.10).

At the international response level, there is a UN unit trying to improve the coordination of IDP-related activities among the various NGOs and UN agencies, donors and the government. The unit is headed by the OCHA Humanitarian Adviser who organises and undertakes many assessment missions on the humanitarian situation (UN, November 2006, p.6). Efforts to address the unmet needs of IDPs, returnees and the resident population in Pool region have been hampered by a number of factors, principally lack of funding. Only 38 per cent of the \$34m requested in the Consolidated Appeal Process for 2006 was received. The limited funding led to a reduction of the NGO presence on the ground. For instance, the Agence pour la Coopération Technique et de Développement decided to close its offices in Mindouli because it failed to secure enough funding to implement a project to rehabilitate the road infrastructure in order to open up some areas of Pool. ICRC and MSF-Holland pulled out from Kindamba and Kinkala respectively but are still providing assistance in other areas of the region. MSF, who have been providing health care in Pool, can no longer justify longer-term commitment

beyond 2007 on humanitarian grounds alone and will facilitate a coordinated handover of its current services (MSF, 3 January 2007, p.3). Lack of security due to the presence of ex-combatants with weapons is hampering the implementation of some projects in some districts of the region. The lack of information on the location and the needs of the vulnerable populations does not allow humanitarian agencies to get a better overview of the needs and to formulate adequate targeted programmes (UN, November, 2006, p.6)

Given the political breakthrough with the decision of the NRC rebel group to transform itself into a political party, the government should start addressing unmet investment needs in the Pool region in order to facilitate the full reintegration of IDPs, returnees and the resident population.

*Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Congo. The full country profile is available online [here](#).*

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Congo country page.

## About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org).

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