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DR Congo: IDP return picks up despite glaring lack of reintegration support

Since the mid-1990s, millions of Congolese have fled their homes to escape fighting between rebel groups and the national government in a complex conflict which has, at times, involved as many as nine neighbouring states. Close to four million people are estimated to have died as a result of the conflict which has been accompanied by widespread human rights violations. Displacement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) peaked in 2003, with an estimated 3.4 million people forced from their homes, most of them in the east. Following the establishment of a power-sharing transition government in mid-2003, hundreds of thousands returned home. The UN estimated that at least 1.48 million people remained displaced as of August 2006. In the first half of 2006, every month, an estimated 84,000 people fled their homes in eastern DRC, primarily due to operations by Congolese armed forces to disarm militias, or attacks by militia. Displacement has been accompanied by the killing of civilians, widespread sexual violence against displaced and other women, child recruitment and looting and burning of IDP possessions.

Despite renewed attacks and displacement, the security situation improved in 2006 compared to previous years. The first round of presidential elections took place relatively peacefully in July 2006. Moreover, military operations to drive out militias with the support of peacekeeping troops have allowed the Congolese government to dominate large areas of eastern DRC, and permitted hundreds of thousands to return home. Despite the length of the displacement crisis in the DRC, however, no comprehensive strategy was in place as of October 2006 to respond to the needs of IDPs or returning IDPs. More needs to be done to accompany the return of IDPs, whose villages have often been utterly destroyed, and to prevent new displacement, particularly by Congolese armed forces.

IDPs in the DRC



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Background of displacement and recent developments

While the eastern province of North Kivu was the location of ethnic clashes and the displacement of thousands in the early 1990s, internal displacement spread throughout the DRC (formerly Zaire) during fighting in 1996 and 1998. The underlying causes of displacement have been the disintegration of the state, which started long before the 1996 demise of President Mobutu Sese Seko's regime, and the subsequent competition among various ethnic groups for political and economic power in their respective provinces. A number of rebel groups, more or less closely linked to outside powers such as Uganda and Rwanda, competed to control large areas of eastern DRC. Civilians have borne the brunt of the violence, often being targeted for ethnic or political reasons. Their meagre resources have been seized, children have been conscripted into armed forces, and women and girls have been used as sex slaves by combatants. Displacement peaked in 2003, with an estimated 3.4 million people forced from their homes, most of them in eastern DRC.

Following an upsurge of violence by militias in Ituri in mid-2003, the UN Security Council authorised the MONUC (UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo) peacekeeping force, under "Chapter VII" of the UN Charter, to use all necessary means to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence in Ituri and in the Kivus. MONUC was also tasked with monitoring compliance with the arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council in July 2003 on armed groups operating in eastern DRC. In July 2006, the UN Security Council

extended the scope of possible sanctions in the DRC to individuals committing serious violations of international law – including forced displacement – involving the targeting of children in situations of armed conflict (UNSC, 31 July 2006). MONUC currently has some 17,000 troops, mainly from Pakistan, India, South Africa, Uruguay, Bangladesh and Nepal (MONUC, 14 May 2006).

One of the major challenges for the Congolese government is the need to disarm and demobilise over 150,000 excess military personnel, as well as to disarm and repatriate foreign armed groups. The Congolese army has launched a series of operations against militias in eastern DRC, with the support of MONUC troops. These operations have allowed the government to dominate large areas of eastern DRC. However, several of these operations resulted in thousands of civilians fleeing from affected areas and being victims of army abuses (UNSC, 22 May 2006). In order to improve collaboration between MONUC and the international aid agencies, MONUC announced that the opinion of these humanitarian actors would be taken into account in the planning of military operations.

Despite these operations, the looting of the DRC's natural resources by various armed groups and their business allies continued, and those responsible for their illegal exploitation have not been held responsible. Also, weapons continue to be channelled to various armed groups in the DRC from neighbouring countries, despite the establishment of the 2003 arms embargo. Non-payment to former soldiers has led to frequent outbreaks of violence at the disarmament centres, and delays in the demobilisation process have

prompted demonstrations in protest at the slow pace of reintegration (IRIN, 7 July 2006). Tensions between IDPs and demobilised combatants have also been noted, for example between IDPs in Dubie, Katanga Province, and former Mai Mai – local militias once backed by the central government – now back in that locality (OCHA, 23 June 2006).

On the political level, Congolese voters massively approved a new national constitution in December 2005. In order to promote the participation of IDPs in the referendum, special registration stations were installed in IDP camps in Ituri, Kivu and northern Katanga (Mission Electorale de l'UE en RDC, 21 December 2005). On 30 July 2006, millions of voters took part in the DRC's first multiparty vote in over 45 years, in order to replace the power-sharing transition government established in mid-2003. The capital saw three days of fighting between soldiers loyal to President Joseph Kabila and former rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba, who face each other in a 29 October 2006 runoff. Around 1,000 EU troops and more than 17,000 UN peacekeepers protected the elections. In Ituri, the Congolese government and the main militia active in the area, the Congolese Revolutionary Movement (MRC), agreed to put an end to hostilities and "to undertake to facilitate the free movement of displaced persons so they can go to their electoral districts to vote freely and then return to their places of residence" (AFP, 27 July 2006). Despite these measures, the majority of IDPs, particularly those in eastern Ituri, in North Kivu and in central Katanga, did not vote. Most of them had lost their electoral cards during their flight, or had had their cards confiscated by armed men. Due to insecurity, many

had not been registered as voters, while others did not return home to vote for fear of attacks by armed groups (OCHA, 15 August 2006; NRC, April 2006).

New displacement and return movements

The UN estimated that at least 1.48 million people remained displaced in the DRC as of August 2006. Most IDPs in eastern DRC live with host communities or hide in forests. Following massive influxes of people, IDP camps have also been set up, particularly in Ituri, North Kivu and Katanga. The main IDP concentrations are in Ituri, and North and South Kivu (OCHA, 31 August 2006, "crisis watch").

Every month, tens of thousands of people flee their homes in Ituri, North and South Kivu, and Katanga, due to attacks by armed groups such as local militias, the Hutu Rwandan Armed Liberation Forces and Mai Mai factions, as well as operations by the Congolese army against such groups. According to the UN Emergency Coordinator, some 500,000 people were displaced in eastern DRC between January and June 2006. This amounts to an average of 84,000 displaced people per month, which is three times greater than the same period in 2005. He added that civilians generally fled because of the fighting, but were then victimised by the Congolese army, who accused them of supporting the militias (UNSC, 15 September 2006; DPI, 10 August 2006).

Displacement per region: main actors and patterns

Ituri: civilians continue to flee attacks by militias, as well as operations by the Congolese army and MONUC against those militias. In the region south of Bunia, some 150,000 people found refuge in 2006 in other parts of Ituri with host families and in camps, such as in Gety (OCHA, 15 August 2006). WFP said in July 2006 that these were the largest displacements that they had had to deal with in the region for at least two years (WFP, 25 July 2006).

North & South Kivu: in North Kivu, battles between rival army factions, attacks by Rwandan Hutu rebels and Mai Mai militias, as well as atrocities committed by Congolese armed forces against the population continue to cause displacement. There were some 100,000 new IDPs in North Kivu in the months leading up to the first round of the national elections (OCHA, 15 August 2006). Just after the election, clashes between troops close to dissident General Nkunda and other troops in the town of Sake, close to Goma, prompted the displacement of thousands. The high level of armed group activities in South Kivu, particularly by Rwandan Hutu militias, continued to cause internal displacement in the province (OCHA, 31 August 2006, “humanitarian situation”).

Katanga: by the end of August 2006, over 100,000 people displaced by fighting between Mai Mai and Congolese troops in the previous months, had returned to their homes (OCHA, 31 August 2006, “crisis watch”). Meanwhile, some Mai Mai groups continued to launch attacks, causing the displacement of tens of thousands in the north of the province (OCHA, 31 August 2006, “humanitarian situation”; OCHA, 15 August 2006).

At the same time, the relative improvement of the security situation has allowed hundreds of thousands to return home in eastern DRC since 2004. However, there seems to be a real gap in terms of addressing critical return and reintegration needs of IDPs in DRC, mainly due to lack of funding (OCHA, 21 July 2006; 31 August 2006, “crisis watch”). In Katanga, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that most of the returning IDPs had not received assistance (UNHCR, 5 October 2006). Upon their return to villages destroyed by the militias or the Congolese army, IDPs found no schools, no health centres and nothing to eat (Reuters, 30 August 2006).

Physical security

The protection of the displaced and other civilians remains a serious concern in eastern DRC. 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. The International Rescue Committee estimates that 3.9 million people have died as a result of the war since 1998 (IRC, 6 January 2006). In August 2006, the UN noted the increased harassment by armed groups of IDPs in camps set up in the town of Gety, and the high rate of rape against IDPs in neighbouring Aveba, in Ituri (OCHA, 31 August 2006, “crisis watch”).

Unruly and unpaid Congolese military personnel have become the largest threat for Congolese civilians, as they have been reported to rape and abduct IDPs, terrorise farmers, steal livestock, and pillage local plantations (ICG, 9 January 2006; MONUC, 9 October 2006; RI, 15 August 2006). In August 2006, MONUC reported that a displaced woman and her four children were killed in Ituri by men reported to be soldiers (MONUC, 15 August 2006). In July 2006, it said that measures should be urgently adopted to stop and punish extremely grave human rights violations committed by the Congolese army. It added that many IDPs could not go home due to the current climate of violence (MONUC, 27 July 2006).

Rape has been used extensively as a weapon of war by virtually all the forces involved in the conflict. Soldiers and rebel fighters have engaged in acts of sexual violence in the context of fighting, 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 (HRW, 7 March 2005; AI, 26 October 2004). Thousands of women have also been abducted and kept as slaves in the forces' camps to provide sexual, domestic and agricultural services (International Alert & al., 2005). UNICEF noted that 25,000 cases of rape were reported in eastern DRC during 2005, and this is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg, with many sexual violence survivors ashamed or otherwise unable to come forward to seek help (UNICEF, 24 July 2006). In South Kivu, some 4,000 displaced women were reported to have been raped in a few months in 2006

(IRIN, 2 August 2006). Men and boys have also been sexually assaulted by combatants (HRW, 7 March 2005).

Many displaced children have been forced into the ranks of the armed groups, and thousands of them remain in militias. In June 2006, the UN Secretary-General reported to the UN Security Council that violations against children in the DRC continued to a large extent with impunity, including the recruitment and use of children in armed forces and groups, abduction, sexual violence, killing and maiming of children and attacks on schools (UNSC, 13 June 2006). According to Save the Children, the number of children – including girls – being recruited to fight, work as porters, sex slaves, cleaners, and cooks, was on the increase in the run-up to the July 2006 election (Save the Children Alliance, 27 July 2006). Amnesty International reported that some 11,000 children were still with the armed forces or groups, or were otherwise unaccounted for in the demobilisation programme (AI, 11 October 2006).

Humanitarian conditions

In September 2006, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator met with IDP communities in eastern DRC, as well as members of the government and of the international community, to draw attention to the critical humanitarian situation of IDPs and other vulnerable people (IRIN, 7 September 2006). At least ten people were dying every day due to appalling sanitary conditions and food shortages in displacement camps housing some 45,000 IDPs in Gety, Ituri (IRIN, 1 September 2006). Children were particu-

larly affected (RI, 25 August 2006). Attacks on humanitarian workers by armed groups in the area prevented the delivery of basic services and food (IRIN, 1 September 2006).

The vast majority of IDPs and returnees lack access to basic infrastructure (health centres, schools and roads), potable water, food, seeds, tools, clothes and straw to build houses. With DRC's healthcare structures collapsing, 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 per cent of these deaths are due to easily preventable and treatable diseases (IRC, 6 January 2006). Save the Children Alliance reported that in the first four months of 2005, 59,000 children died as a direct or indirect result of the conflict in the DRC, the vast majority of them from easily preventable and curable causes such as diarrhoea, malnutrition and malaria (Save the Children Alliance, 27 April 2005).

Cholera and measles epidemics broke out among IDPs in North and South Kivu, Katanga and Maniema in 2005 and 2006, due to their precarious living conditions and lack of access to drinkable water (IFRC, 5 September 2006; OCHA, 31 August 2006, "humanitarian situation"). Malaria remains the number one cause of mortality in the DRC. In North Kivu, malaria kills several people every day, notably among the 100,000 newly-displaced people who live in churches and host families (OCHA, 14 August 2006). 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 (WHO, 31 May 2006). They may

even be more at risk to HIV than the general population in the DRC, but more information and data are needed before conclusions can be drawn (UNHCR/IDD, January 2006).

Few attend school in the current war-damaged education system, reducing their prospects for a more secure future. Only 40 per cent of children in eastern DRC are enrolled in school, and in some areas, such as in North Kivu, only a third of girls go to school (UNICEF, 16 December 2004). Some school buildings, especially in South Kivu, are occupied by the military (OCHA, 31 August 2006, "humanitarian situation").

Humanitarian access

In 2006, 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 (OCHA, 21 July 2006). In April 2006 for example, troops hampered humanitarian access to some 10,000 IDPs in Mitwaba region, Katanga Province (UNSC, 13 June 2006). Armed groups have repeatedly attacked, looted and taken hostage humanitarian staff, making it one of the most dangerous places for aid workers. Thirteen UN staff were killed in the DRC in 2005 (UN News Services, 5 January 2006). Other factors hampering the response to the needs of displaced people and returnees include the sheer size of the country, the absence of roads and the high degree of geographical dispersal of IDPs. WFP 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 (IRIN, 6 April 2006; WFP, 26 September 2006).

National and international response

On a provincial and national level, the Congolese government has so far played little role in responding to the needs of IDPs and returning IDPs (RI, 17 October 2006). Nominally, both the Ministry for Solidarity and Humanitarian Affairs and the Ministry for Social Affairs have responsibility for responding to the needs of IDPs. The first is tasked to focus on protection and assistance during displacement, while the second is the focal point for return.

UN agencies, national and international NGOs and the ICRC are providing emergency assistance to IDPs as well as transport assistance and return packages to returning IDPs. UNHCR indicated in October 2006 that for the first time, it was providing return packages to returning IDPs in a region of the DRC that did not coincide with refugee returns (UNHCR, 5 October 2006). In May 2006, in collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières, UNHCR registered IDPs in central Katanga and gave them digital identity cards in order to systematise the distribution of assistance (IRIN, 4 May 2006). In North Kivu, the Norwegian Refugee Council started an innovative project linking rapid reconstruction of village infrastructure providing work for returning IDPs, with measures to protect them from violence in a still-volatile area (RI, 17 October 2006).

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. Each cluster includes UN agencies and international NGOs, which coordinate their actions in a specific sector. Of particular relevance to IDPs in the DRC are the cluster on protection led by UNHCR and the early recovery cluster led by UNHCR/UNDP which focuses on return/reintegration. According to OCHA, the protection cluster has been one of the most active in the DRC, for example by working with MONUC to reverse army decisions to force IDPs to return home, or carrying out training of Congolese troops on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, humanitarian principles and gender-based violence. The early recovery cluster was only established in May 2006, and a main task for this cluster will be to elaborate a country strategy and a mapping of the population displaced by the war. Also, a Rapid Response Fund (RRF), managed by UNICEF and OCHA, provided emergency assistance to some 500,000 IDPs in 2006 (OCHA, 21 July 2006).

In order to strengthen the response to the crisis in the DRC, the humanitarian community has requested close to \$700 million through its DR Congo 2006 Action Plan. This is more than three times what the UN Consolidated Appeal had called for in 2005. The main funding source for this plan is a mechanism called the “Pool Fund”, a multi-donor humanitarian fund. DRC was also, as of August 2006, the country getting the largest amount of money – \$38 million out of some \$130 million – from the Central

Emergency Response Fund, as part of its grants for under-funded emergencies (DPI, 30 August 2006). Despite these efforts, funding remains inadequate. The Action Plan had received less than half of the requested amount as of October 2006 (FTS, 18 October 2006). WFP warned that it could not make critical food distribution to IDPs around the country, due to insufficient donations (DPI, 30 August 2006). The Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the DRC, Ross Mountain, who is responsible for ensuring a strategic and coordinated response to internal displacement in the country, warned that there was a risk that if the UN withdrew or scaled back in the DRC too soon, the country could slide back into conflict (Reuters, 26 July 2006).

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

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Note: All documents used in this overview are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the DRC 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.

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