

Democratic Republic of the Congo factsheet

country profile

Population¹

56,625,039

Geography

Congo is situated in Central Africa bordering Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia

Size

2,345,410 sq km, slightly smaller than one-fourth of the U.S.

Languages

Kongo, Lingala, Luba-Kasai, Congo Swahili, French

Religion

Roman Catholic 50%, Protestant 20%, Kimbanguist 10%, Muslim 10%, Indigenous beliefs 10%

Ethnic Groups

Over 200 groups; four largest tribes—Mongo, Luba, Kongo and Mangbetu-Azande—make up about 45% of the population

A complex web of local, regional and national conflict has devastated much of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo for the past several years. Ethnic strife and civil war broke out in 1996, sparked by a large inflow of refugees from the neighboring Rwandan genocide in 1994. Rebel groups from neighboring countries entered the conflict in 1998. Mortality surveys estimate that 3.3 million people have died as a result of this war, the majority of deaths due to preventable disease and malnutrition.² The war, involving seven African nations and many groups of armed combatants, is the deadliest in documented African history, with the highest civilian death count in a war since World War II.³ Fueled by ethnic rivalries and competition for control of Congo's mineral deposits, including cobalt, diamonds, copper and gold, the war has been marked by gross human rights violations, often directly targeting women who have faced staggering levels of sexual violence. An estimated four-fifths of rural families have fled their homes at least once during the conflict, and more than 2 million people are currently displaced within Congo's borders.⁴ Despite the country's enormous mineral resources, several years of conflict on the heels of 32 years of corrupt, one-party rule, has shattered the country's infrastructure, economy and basic human services. A fragile, transitional government of national unity has been in operation since

June 2003, with the hopes of holding general elections in 2005. A United Nations peacekeeping force continues to monitor the eastern regions of the country where sporadic militia attacks against civilians persist.



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Status of Women

Women have been extraordinarily impacted by Congo's conflict. Although an exact number is not known, some international organizations estimate that hundreds of thousands of women may have been raped during the war.⁵ Some women have been raped and tortured in front of their families. The physical effects of some rapes are so debilitating that women require multiple surgeries simply to regain normal functions. Unfortunately, few doctors in Congo are trained in these types of procedures. In addition to the increased risk of infection and the psychological trauma resulting from rape, the stigma attached to rape in Congo often means that victimized women face isolation and rejection by family members.



recorded in eastern Congo.⁶ Between 60 and 80 percent of women have become single heads of households due to the conflict.⁷ These women shoulder significant burdens stemming from shortages of food, fuel and water, and the failure of the healthcare system and other social services.

The gender disparities prevalent in

communities. Women's inclusion and active participation in the ongoing peace processes and new governance structures are crucial in determining women's status in the country's future.

Brief History

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has long been considered an important country in Central Africa due to its strategic location bordering nine nations, its rich mineral resources and its history of crisis, particularly following independence. The country's recent turmoil has roots in a history of struggle for power and resources among both domestic and foreign interests.

In 1884–1885, the Conference of Berlin recognized King Leopold II of Belgium's claim to the

greater part of the country and the Congo Free State was established under his direct rule, bringing together several hundred ethnic groups. Leopold's rule was characterized by personal gain at the expense of the population, brutal treatment of the Congolese and stark incidence of disease and malnutrition.



The conflict has caused other severe problems for women, including displacement from homes and increased levels of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. National maternal mortality rates are among the very worst in the world at approximately 1,837 deaths per 100,000 live births, although rates as high as 3,000 deaths per 100,000 live births have been

Congolese society have created additional obstacles for women. While the education system has been severely disrupted for both boys and girls due to conflict, the last recorded enrollment rate was 32.3 percent for girls and 61 percent for boys.⁸ In 1995, the female illiteracy rate was 45.9 percent, as opposed to 17.5

percent for men. Before the conflict, the legal and institutional framework of the country recognized men as heads of households and required that married women obtain their husbands' permission for activities outside of the home.

Despite the suffering women in Congo have endured, the long-term peace and prosperity in the country in part depends on the ability of these women to rebuild their lives and

Footnotes

- 1 "Democratic Republic of the Congo." CIA World Factbook, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications>.
- 2 "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Results from a Nationwide Survey." International Rescue Committee. April 2003, <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2003/irc-drc-8apr.pdf>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo." Human Rights Watch. June 2002, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/>.
- 5 Ibid.

In 1908, Belgium took control of the colony, renaming it the Belgian Congo. Although the extreme brutality of the earlier regime somewhat subsided, accompanied by significant economic development, the Congolese were mostly confined to positions of low status and influence and often forcibly recruited into the military. Opposition to colonial rule began brewing in the 1950s, finally resulting in independence for the nation in 1960 as the Republic of the Congo.

Belgium did little to prepare the population for independence and no political parties emerged with the capacity to truly unite the fragmented nation. Nationalist Patrice Lumumba, who became prime minister, headed the party that was able to win Congo's first and only election to date. The subsequent attempted secession of two of the Republic's mineral-rich provinces sparked clashes among Congolese groups, and a power struggle between Lumumba and opposition groups ensued. Opposition factions assassinated Lumumba shortly after he took office. This crisis also had international dimensions, as scholars place the Congo at the heart of Cold War rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union. Many argue that Lumumba's assassination was supported by the U.S. and Belgium, who resented his overtures toward the Soviet Union and his anti-Western nationalism.

Continued rivalries between groups

ying for power created the instability that allowed Mobutu Sese Seko to seize control in a coup in 1965, establishing a single-party rule, which lasted until 1997. Mobutu's regime initially embraced nationalist doctrine and a rejection of foreign cultural influences, changing the country's name to Zaire in 1971. The primary battle was waged over economic interests, though, as Mobutu tried to oust foreign business from the country. These measures, punctuated by large-scale industrialization at the expense of other sectors, proved disastrous for the country. Facing severe financial crisis, Zaire began borrowing heavily from international lenders, resulting in massive foreign debt and damaging the country's social sectors.

Mobutu's rule was characterized by immense greed and corruption, as he enriched himself at the expense of the majority of the population whose standard of living continued to deteriorate sharply. Also on Mobutu's watch, armed security forces, originally designated to restore domestic order, became engines of repression and intimidation against ordinary citizens, a pattern evident in today's conflict. Mass executions were conducted in 1978, 1981 and 1990. Despite his actions, Mobutu escaped broad international censure, largely due to Cold War interests in the region, until the early 1990s when the West terminated most of its aid to the regime.

The economic crisis in the country had a catastrophic effect on the general population throughout the 1990s. Widespread unemployment and poverty were accompanied by a virtual failure of state institutions, including schools and hospitals. HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, vaccine-preventable diseases and sanitation problems increased throughout the decade. Amidst this dire climate, sentiment against Mobutu, which had been brewing since the 1980s, exploded into rioting and looting in a number of areas in 1991. Ethnic tensions, fueled by the country's failing economy, also grew during this time.

In 1994, the influx of more than 1 million Rwandan refugees fleeing

genocide created further chaos in a country already beset by lawlessness and deprivation. This situation was further exacerbated by the spillover into Zaire of the ethnic conflict between Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus. In 1996, the situation, particularly in eastern Zaire, worsened, as rebel groups took up arms against Mobutu. Laurent Kabila united various dissidents into an anti-Mobutu group, the Alliance of Democratic Forces, overthrowing Mobutu on May 17, 1997, and renaming Zaire the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Fighting continued during the early part of Kabila's rule, as a number of militia groups clashed with his supporters and attempted to overthrow the government. Much of the fighting since this time has occurred in North and South Kivu, along Congo's eastern border. In North Kivu, Rwandans (both Hutu and Tutsi) constitute a major ethnic community. A number of groups have struggled for control of resources and land in this area: Rwandan factions, a cluster of local militias created in response to Rwanda's occupation of eastern Congo, a Uganda-supported insurgent group, as well as troops sent by Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia to support the Kabila government.

Although 1999 saw several attempts at peace agreements between these warring parties, tensions and clashes continued, especially in the east. A ceasefire signed in Zambia in July 1999 called for an end to hostilities and withdrawal of foreign troops from Congo, and a UN peacekeeping force, MONUC, was deployed. Despite these measures, clashes persisted, causing further suffering and displacement. In 2000, MONUC was authorized to increase its forces to more than 5,000, with an additional contingent of observers. In early 2005, troops numbered about 13,000.

President Kabila was killed by one of his bodyguards on January 16, 2001, and replaced in power by his son Joseph Kabila. Despite Joseph Kabila's attempts to revive the peace

6 "No End in Sight: The human tragedy of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo." Oxfam. August 2001, http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/conflict_disasters/noend_drc.htm.

7 Puechguirbal, Nadine. "Women and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2003): 1273.

8 "Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper." World Bank Group. March 2002, http://poverty.worldbank.org/files/DRC_IPRSP.pdf.

9 Ibid.

process, tensions and violence continued. In December 2002, Kabila signed a power-sharing agreement with rebel groups as part of the Inter-Congolese dialogue held in Sun City, South Africa. A transitional power-sharing government was inaugurated on June 30, 2003, ostensibly bringing an end to the conflict, with a mandate to hold nationwide elections within two years. This fragile peace agreement was undermined by renewed clashes between government and militia troops in late May and early June 2004, December 2004 and early 2005, resulting in a number of civilian deaths, rapes and the departure of thousands of refugees for Rwanda and Burundi.

Human Rights

International human rights organizations report that systematic violations of civilians' rights have characterized the recent conflict in Congo. Armed groups have perpetrated war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international humanitarian and human rights law on a massive scale. Members of various militia groups have massacred civilians on the basis of their ethnicity, and kidnapped and tortured others. Armed groups preventing humanitarian relief from reaching those in desperate need have often exacerbated the humanitarian catastrophe caused by displacement of civilians. This was a prime factor in the war's astronomical mortality rate from infectious disease and malnutrition.

Human rights research estimates that tens of thousands of soldiers under

age 18 have been recruited into militia armies. As indicated earlier, rape, murder, mutilation, torture and sexual slavery of women has been a particularly devastating aspect of human rights violations in Congo's conflict.

In the fragile and uncertain period that marks the attempt of the transitional government to unify the country, questions of justice for human rights violations as well as establishment of the rule of law are vital. Ensuring accountability for such crimes is an immense challenge for the transitional government, as various groups feel compelled to take revenge for crimes perpetrated against them. Congo has vowed to establish a truth and reconciliation commission and its success will be an essential component of lasting peace.

Social Exclusion

Exclusion of the civilian population from resources needed for survival and normal social functioning is a mass phenomenon in Congo, affecting all areas of the nation, both rural and urban. About 80 percent of the population of approximately 56 million lives on less than US \$0.20 per day.⁹ Despite its natural resources, the DRC remains among the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and at least 60 percent of the population lives in rural areas and survives on fishing, farming and hunting. Economic poverty also has a distinct gender component, as women have been hit harder in this area than men. Although current figures are not available, a 1999 survey found that, on

average, 44 percent of women (and 22 percent of men) have no income at all to meet their basic needs. A major cause of women's exclusion, in addition to the effects of conflict, is the dearth of opportunities available to women, as well as poor access to land, vocational training and credit.

A lack of basic services and employment options are other major obstacles for Congo as it enters a phase of reconstruction. The public education system is marked by large-scale deterioration and lack of resources. The percentage of children entering school at the legally required age of six was 13.9 percent in 2001. The health system is barely functioning, and conservative estimates indicate that at least 37 percent of the population has no access to any health services at all.

Fueled by conflict and crisis, mass unemployment is another major problem. In 2000, only 2 percent of the total population was employed in the formal sector. Informal sector activities are the primary means of survival for most of those able to work. The development of employment and income-generation options for former combatants and civilians will be key to maintaining stability in the country. However, a key part of the country's rehabilitation will be creating these same opportunities for women and facilitating their inclusion in economic, social and political activities. Large-scale reconstruction efforts combining international support and domestic political will are essential to help the population meet its basic needs and build the foundation for future peace.

