

Forum: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Issue: Supporting displaced refugees from the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Introduction



Figure 1: One of the many sites for internally displaced people that have sprung up in North Kivu where 1.2 million people have been forced to flee their homes since March 2022 (UNHCR/Blaise Sanyila)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remains embroiled in a protracted humanitarian crisis, hosting more than half a million refugees and asylum seekers, and 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDP) – the largest IDP population in Africa, and the number continues to rise. More than 2.1 million people were forced to flee their homes in 2017 alone, which is equivalent to an average of 50 families fleeing every hour, every day. Of these individuals, they mainly come from Rwanda, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Burundi, who

must flee their home countries due to insecurity and political instability. Decades of conflict between armed groups, widespread violations of human rights, and devastating incidents of gender-based violence have caused unprecedented levels of protection needs, vulnerabilities and risks, therefore necessitating urgent and comprehensive intervention.

As of today, the crisis continues to worsen with a weak government, a lack of infrastructure, and a stunted economy, coupled with two decades of longstanding conflict. Having such issues prevalent have significant effects on the state and its population as it leads to political instability. A weak government can result in political instability, with frequent changes in leadership, lack of effective governance, and corruption. This can lead to a lack of trust in institutions, political unrest, and hinder the country's progress towards peace and stability. The lack of infrastructure in the DRC also leads to inadequate public services, leading to its population and high number of refugees to struggle to access basic public services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare. Additionally, a weak government and a stunted economy can exacerbate social and gender inequality, with a small portion of the population benefiting while the majority struggles to meet their basic needs and are more vulnerable, exemplified by the high percentage of refugees that are women and children. This contributes to a humanitarian crisis, with widespread poverty, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and displacement of populations. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening governance structures, promoting economic growth, and improving public services to ensure a more stable and prosperous future for the DRC and its people.

It is important to support efforts to address the crisis in the DRC to help alleviate the lives of refugees. Efforts to address the root causes of the crisis, such as political instability and armed conflict, can help create a more stable environment for refugees. This can reduce the risk of violence and displacement and allow refugees to return to their homes and communities. Ratifying efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, such as food, shelter, and healthcare, can help alleviate the immediate needs of refugees. This can improve their living conditions and reduce their vulnerability to disease, malnutrition, and other health risks. Protecting human rights, including the rights of refugees, can help ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect. This can include efforts to prevent forced displacement, protect refugees from violence and exploitation, and promote access to education and other essential services. Efforts to promote sustainable development in the DRC can help create long-term solutions for refugees. This can include supporting economic growth, improving access to education and healthcare, and promoting social inclusion.

With that said, it is important to consider ways to support displaced refugees from the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have collaborated to find sustainable solutions for Congolese refugees and host communities, emphasizing the importance of addressing the root causes of forced displacement and creating a conducive environment for safe, voluntary, and sustainable return. The complexity and longevity of the crisis stresses the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by displaced individuals from the DRC.

Definition of Key Terms

Armed conflict

Whenever there is a resort to armed force between States or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a state

Asylum seeker

A person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim

Internally displaced persons (IDP)

Someone who is forced to leave their home as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural disasters but who remains within their country's borders

Political instability

A natural tendency of a government to collapse either because of conflicts or growing struggles, sometimes violent, between various political parties

Refugee

Persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that they have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection

Social inclusion

The process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society

Social welfare

Organized public or private social services for the assistance of disadvantaged groups

Background

Colonial Era

The DRC was colonized by Belgium under King Leopold II in the late 19th century. Initially, Leopold established the Congo Free State as his personal colony, exploiting its resources, particularly rubber, ivory, and minerals. The Congolese population suffered greatly under this brutal regime, with forced labor, violence, and human rights abuses being widespread. The primary aim of Belgian colonization was to extract resources from the

Congo for the benefit of Belgium. Rubber production was a major focus, with Congolese workers subjected to harsh conditions and brutal treatment. The forced labor system resulted in countless deaths and immense suffering. The Belgian colonial administration implemented policies that favored European settlers and exploited the Congolese population. Congolese people were subjected to forced labor, their land was taken away, and they were denied access to education and economic opportunities. This created deep socio-economic disparities that continue to impact the country today. Despite the oppressive conditions, Congolese people resisted colonial rule. Various movements emerged, advocating for independence and self-determination. Pressure from both internal and external forces led Belgium to grant independence to the DRC on June 30, 1960. However, the transition to independence was tumultuous, marked by political instability and power struggles. The legacy of the colonial era in the DRC is complex and has had lasting effects on the country's socio-political and economic landscape. It laid the foundation for many of the challenges that the DRC continues to face today, including political instability, economic inequality, and social divisions.

Mobutu Regime

The Mobutu regime, also known as the Mobutu Sese Seko era, refers to the period of Joseph Mobutu's rule in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1965 to 1997. Mobutu came to power through a military coup in 1965, ousting the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. He established an authoritarian regime characterized by strong personal control and repression. Mobutu quickly consolidated his power by dismantling political opposition, suppressing dissent, and centralizing authority. He renamed the country Zaire and himself Mobutu Sese Seko, adopting a policy of "Authenticité" that aimed to promote Congolese culture and identity. Mobutu established the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR) as the sole political party, effectively eliminating any opposition. The MPR served as a tool for Mobutu to maintain control and exert his influence over all aspects of society. The Mobutu regime was marked by widespread corruption and embezzlement of state resources. Mobutu and his inner circle amassed enormous personal wealth while the majority of the population lived in poverty. Mobutu's economic policies, such as nationalizing industries and implementing economic autarky, led to the decline of the country's economy. Rampant corruption and mismanagement hindered development and stifled private enterprise. The Mobutu regime was notorious for its human rights abuses, including political repression, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Dissidents and opposition figures were silenced, and freedom of expression was severely curtailed. In the 1990s, mounting domestic and international pressure for political reform intensified. The end of the Cold War weakened Mobutu's support from foreign allies. In 1997, rebel forces led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila launched a successful offensive, overthrowing Mobutu and ending his 32-year rule. The Mobutu regime left a lasting impact on the DRC, with its legacy characterized by political instability, economic decline, corruption, and social divisions. The country continues to grapple with the consequences of this era as it strives for stability, development, and good governance.

First and Second Congo Wars

The First Congo War (1996-1997) erupted as a result of regional conflicts and ethnic tensions. It led to the overthrow of Mobutu and the rise of Laurent-Désiré Kabila as president. However, Kabila's rule was marred by

political instability and armed opposition, leading to the Second Congo War (1998-2003). This war involved multiple armed groups and neighboring countries, resulting in widespread violence, displacement, and loss of life. The First and Second Congo Wars, along with subsequent conflicts and instability, have made a significant contribution to the ongoing refugee crisis in the DRC. The displacement of millions of people within the country and across borders has created significant challenges in terms of providing humanitarian assistance, protection, and long-term solutions for those affected by the conflicts.

First Congo War (1996-1997)

The First Congo War led to widespread internal displacement within the DRC. Millions of Congolese people were forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, human rights abuses, and the breakdown of social structures. The conflict also resulted in a significant number of Congolese refugees seeking safety in neighboring countries, such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. The flow of refugees across borders intensified as the conflict escalated.

Second Congo War (1998-2003)

The Second Congo War was one of the deadliest conflicts in modern history, involving multiple armed groups and neighboring countries. It caused an enormous displacement crisis, with millions of Congolese people being uprooted from their homes. The Second Congo War triggered a regional refugee crisis, with large numbers of Congolese refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries. It strained the capacity of host countries to provide adequate support and protection for the refugees. As the conflict ebbed and peace agreements were signed, some Congolese refugees returned to their homes. However, ongoing instability and the presence of armed groups led to re-displacement, as people were forced to flee again or became internally displaced within the DRC. The protracted nature of the conflict and its aftermath prolonged the refugee crisis in the DRC. Many Congolese refugees remained displaced for extended periods, unable to safely return home due to continued violence and insecurity.

Regional Dynamics

The DRC has experienced cross-border conflicts involving armed groups from neighboring countries. Various rebel groups, militias, and foreign forces have operated within the DRC's borders, often with support or involvement from neighboring countries. This has contributed to the complexity of conflicts and the displacement of people across borders. The DRC is rich in natural resources, including minerals, timber, and oil. Its resources have attracted regional and international interests, leading to competition and conflicts over control and exploitation. Neighboring countries have been involved in resource extraction, sometimes exacerbating conflicts within the DRC. The DRC's conflicts have resulted in significant refugee flows across its borders. Neighboring countries, such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania, have hosted large numbers of Congolese refugees seeking safety from violence and instability. This has placed strains on host countries' resources and created complex challenges for regional cooperation. Regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have been involved in peacekeeping efforts and conflict

resolution initiatives in the DRC. These interventions aim to address the root causes of conflicts, promote stability, and facilitate dialogue among different actors in the region. The DRC's economy is closely linked to its neighboring countries. Trade, infrastructure development, and cross-border economic activities contribute to economic interdependence. Regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Great Lakes Region Economic Community (CEPGL) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), seek to foster economic integration and development in the region. The porous nature of borders in the region allows for various forms of cross-border movements, including trade, migration, and illicit activities. These movements can have both positive and negative impacts on stability, security, and socio-economic development. Understanding and addressing regional dynamics is crucial for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in the DRC. Cooperation among neighboring countries, regional organizations, and international partners is essential for addressing the complex challenges faced by the DRC and its neighboring states.

The Rwandan Genocide

The First Congo War (1996–1997) began in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, during which ethnic Hutu extremists killed an estimated one million minority ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda (DRC's neighbor to the east). During and following the genocide, nearly two million Hutu refugees crossed the Congolese border, mostly settling in refugee camps in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces. A small subset of those Rwandans who entered DRC were Hutu extremists who began organizing militias within the Congo. Pressure intensified as Tutsi militias organized against the Hutu groups and as foreign powers began taking sides.

The Rwandan genocide led to a massive refugee crisis in the region, with an estimated 2 million Rwandans fleeing their homes. Many refugees sought safety in neighboring countries, including the DRC. The influx of refugees into the DRC created significant challenges for humanitarian assistance and protection. The presence of Rwandan refugees in the DRC also led to the formation of armed groups, such as the Interahamwe and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). These groups were responsible for violence against both Rwandan refugees and Congolese civilians, exacerbating the refugee crisis and contributing to instability in the region. The presence of armed groups in the DRC led to cross-border conflicts between Rwanda and the DRC. Rwanda accused the DRC of harboring armed groups responsible for attacks on Rwandan territory, leading to military interventions and further displacement of people. The Rwandan genocide had a profound impact on the refugee crisis in the DRC, contributing to instability, cross-border conflicts, and the formation of armed groups. The legacy of these events continues to impact the region today, with ongoing displacement and challenges related to humanitarian assistance and protection.



Figure 2: Image of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda on display in the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre (Emmanuel Santos).

Major Parties Involved

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC government plays a critical role in addressing the refugee crisis within its borders. It is responsible for providing protection, assistance, and support to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. The government's efforts include collaborating with international organizations and neighboring countries to address the humanitarian needs of affected populations.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

As the leading international organization for refugee protection, UNHCR plays a significant role in the DRC's refugee crisis. It works closely with the DRC government and other partners to provide essential services, such as shelter, healthcare, education, and livelihood support to refugees and IDPs. UNHCR also advocates for durable solutions and supports voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement of refugees.

Neighboring Countries

Several neighboring countries of the DRC are directly involved in the refugee crisis. Countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania have hosted large numbers of Congolese refugees fleeing conflict and violence. These countries provide asylum, protection, and humanitarian assistance to refugees while facing challenges in managing their influx and ensuring their well-being.

International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Various international NGOs are actively engaged in addressing the refugee crisis in the DRC. Organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), Oxfam, CARE International, and many others provide vital humanitarian aid, healthcare services, food, water, and sanitation support to refugees and IDPs. They also work on advocacy efforts to raise awareness about the plight of displaced populations and push for sustainable solutions.

Regional Organizations

Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) are involved in addressing the refugee crisis in the DRC. They support peacekeeping efforts, conflict resolution initiatives, and regional cooperation to promote stability and find durable solutions for displaced populations.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1994	The Rwandan genocide leads to an influx of Rwandan refugees into the DRC.
1996-1997	First Congo War displaces millions of Congolese, creating internal displacement and refugee flows to neighboring countries.
1998-2003	Second Congo War intensifies displacement, with millions of Congolese forced to flee their homes.
2009	Renewed conflict in eastern DRC leads to a spike in internal displacement and cross-border movements.
2012	M23 rebellion causes a significant increase in displacement, both internally and across borders.
2017	Violence in the Kasai region triggers a large-scale internal displacement crisis, with thousands of people seeking refuge in neighboring countries.
Ongoing	Armed conflict, ethnic tensions, and resource disputes continue to drive displacement in various parts of the country, leading to an ongoing refugee crisis.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The refugee crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been ongoing for decades, and various attempts have been made to address it. Several peace agreements have been signed between the DRC government and armed groups to address the root causes of conflict and promote stability. A notable example of such is the

2003 Sun City Agreement, which was a peace agreement signed in South Africa between the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and various armed groups. The agreement provided for a transitional government that included representatives from various armed groups and political parties. The transitional government was tasked with preparing for democratic elections and implementing reforms to promote peace and stability. The agreement called for the integration of armed groups into the national army and police force. It also provided for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. Additionally, the agreement recognized the importance of respecting human rights and providing protection for civilians affected by the conflict. It called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights abuses and promote reconciliation. Lastly, the agreement received support from the international community, including the United Nations, African Union, and regional organizations. International partners provided financial and technical assistance to support the implementation of the agreement. The 2003 Sun City Agreement was a significant step towards resolving the conflict in the DRC, which had been ongoing since the late 1990s. It paved the way for democratic elections and contributed to a period of relative stability in the country. However, implementation of the agreement faced challenges, including continued violence, political tensions, and delays in disarmament and demobilization efforts. Despite these challenges, the Sun City Agreement remains an important milestone in the peace process in the DRC.

Furthermore, the *2009 Nairobi Agreement* was another peace agreement that was signed in Kenya between the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), an armed group based in the eastern part of the country. The agreement provided for the integration of CNDP members into the national army and police force. It also included provisions for the participation of CNDP members in the provincial and national governments. The agreement called for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. It also provided for the reform of the security sector to promote professionalism and accountability. The agreement recognized the importance of respecting human rights and providing protection for civilians affected by the conflict. It called for the establishment of a commission to investigate human rights abuses and promote reconciliation. The agreement received support from the international community, including the United Nations, African Union, and regional organizations. International partners provided financial and technical assistance to support the implementation of the agreement. The 2009 Nairobi Agreement was significant because it ended a period of intense fighting in eastern DRC and paved the way for greater political stability in the region. However, implementation of the agreement faced challenges, including delays in the integration of CNDP members into the national army and continued violence by other armed groups. Despite these challenges, the Nairobi Agreement remains an important milestone in the peace process in the DRC.

Other significant peace agreements include the 2013 Addis Ababa Peace and the Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC and the region. However, implementation of these agreements has been challenging, with continued violence and displacement.

Possible Solutions

The global community has acknowledged the severity of the refugee crisis, emphasizing the need for international solidarity and shared responsibilities in addressing its impact. The burden placed on developing host countries and the dangers of forced returns have been highlighted, underscoring the urgency of collective action to support displaced populations.

To alleviate the lives of refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), organizations can provide life-saving emergency assistance, including cash aid, to the most vulnerable families suffering in the current crisis. Additionally, they can help large communities access clean and safe water, improve sanitation practices and hygiene information, offer financial education and small loans to women and young people to foster economic opportunity, and support farmers in growing more food and increasing their incomes through education, training, and crop diversification.

Nations can contribute to humanitarian assistance by allocating sufficient resources to provide displaced refugees with essential items such as clean water, shelter, and healthcare. This includes supporting UNHCR's efforts to provide assistance to refugees, returnees, and displaced persons in Africa. Furthermore, nations can engage in stabilization initiatives through investing in the DRC to support efforts aimed at maintaining peace and security, such as the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUSCO).

In addition to monetary assistance, nations can create refugee returnee programs by developing and implementing programs that promote the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes, ensuring that they have the necessary support to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Another solution is to help through capacity building, strengthening the capacity of UN agencies, national authorities, and local organizations to manage the ongoing crisis and prevent further displacement. This includes providing training, resources, and technical assistance to improve their ability to respond to the needs of displaced refugees.

Despite these efforts, the refugee crisis in the DRC remains unresolved, with millions of people still displaced and in need of assistance. Addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting stability, ensuring respect for human rights, and providing durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons are critical to resolving the crisis.

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