

**Briefing to the Security Council by John Holmes
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Mission to DRC - 3 to 8 September 2007

Thank you, Mr President, for this opportunity to brief the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in the DRC, which I visited last week, seeing the President and senior Ministers in Kinshasa, and going on to visit South and North Kivu provinces in the east of the country. I am grateful to the DRC Government and to MONUC for their help.

As the Council knows, the rich natural resources of this huge country are matched by extensive poverty and deprivation, the result of decades of neglect, corruption and war. There is severe malnutrition in some areas, and high levels of displacement. These come on top of, for example, widespread chronic disease – in the last year there were a staggering 111 million cases of malaria, around twice the population – and the virtual absence in much of the country of infrastructure or a functioning government presence.

Last year's successful national elections and the establishment of democratic institutions are important steps on the road to recovery, and to the reestablishment of state and government authority. The successful completion of the local elections planned for next year should be a vital next step. This progress, and the end of major fighting in most of the country, has had a positive effect on the humanitarian situation. Over the last 4 years, the total number of internally displaced has decreased from 3.4 to 1.2 million. In Katanga province alone, some 350,000 people returned home last year. Most of the

country is beginning to experience greater calm and stability, even if MONUC should not yet even start to contemplate leaving.

Nevertheless, serious humanitarian problems remain, particularly in the east, where hundreds of thousands of civilians are still displaced and more continue to flee fighting and violence, and where illegal armed groups terrorize large parts of the population. While the position in Ituri has improved significantly, continuing insecurity in North and South Kivu has particularly severe humanitarian consequences. These two provinces account together for close to one million of the internally displaced, or ninety percent of the total national caseload. North Kivu alone represents almost two-thirds of this number, including about 300,000 more since November last year.

Immediately before my visit to North Kivu, renewed fighting opposed the DRC National Army (FARDC) and troops loyal to renegade general Laurent Nkunda, mainly around Sake, 30 km west of Goma. Tens of thousands of people fled, most not for the first time. The current unofficial ceasefire is fragile. Meanwhile one potentially alarming feature is renewed activism by the FDLR, the ex-génocidaire group, in particular the occupation by them of areas temporarily left by FARDC troops moving towards the fighting.

I went to Mugunga, halfway between Goma and Sake, to see for myself the latest influx of those fleeing the fighting. It was a grim sight. Most people were already in desperately poor condition because the long running conflict had ruined their agricultural economy. UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross movement in North Kivu are redoubling their efforts to respond. I was able to witness emergency mass registration so that food and shelter could be distributed as quickly as possible. But capacities were clearly being

stretched anew. Also worryingly, we have recently noticed trends both of longer-lasting displacement than in the past and self segregation along ethnic lines among the displaced.

I expressed strong concern to President Kabila and his colleagues about the potentially catastrophic humanitarian consequences of further fighting. I stressed the need to work for an immediate peaceful resolution of the current tension, since the problems manifestly cannot be solved militarily, to do everything possible to allow the return of the displaced to their homes, and meanwhile to facilitate help for them: access, like truth, is too often the first casualty of war. I also urged a much greater effort of communication by the government, to explain their policies clearly and to tackle head on the rumours that spread so easily, for example of indifference to the fate of the Tutsi community, or tacit government collaboration with the FDLR. I also take this opportunity to appeal to Laurent Nkunda himself to prevent further civilian suffering, and to remind him of the absolute need to respect international humanitarian law.

While in North Kivu, I also visited Walikale. This isolated but strategic town has been the scene of repeated confrontation. It is also in some ways a microcosm of DRC—rich in mineral resources exploited for the good of a few, mostly foreign owned companies and corrupt individuals, while the people who live on top of these riches suffer deep deprivation. People in Walikale, emptied of its population of 23,000 more than 4 times since 1996, are desperately in need of humanitarian help. In the longer term they also need major development assistance, not least to open up the vast forest hinterland. Seventy five percent of the territory has no access to clean drinking water, and its health infrastructure has almost completely collapsed. Meanwhile the thousands of FDLR soldiers still in the forests represent a constant threat for the population.

I had already heard about the nature of this threat in the Kaniola area of South Kivu, where recent massacres by FDLR/Rasta armed groups had provoked the displacement of more than 20,000 people. Many of them are still so-called “night commuters”, families who flee their homes at nightfall to seek relative safety in FARDC protected areas. Many men are kidnapped and killed. And then there are the women. I met a 16 year old girl survivor of abduction by the FDLR. She had lost her parents and brother in an attack and had then been held as a sex slave in the forest for several months, in circumstances of unimaginable horror, before managing to escape. She was 8 months pregnant but will never be able to identify the father.

As we are all by now aware, this kind of brutal sexual violence is a particularly horrific feature of the DRC. I visited the Panzi Clinic, near Bukavu, which specializes in treating the victims. I heard first hand from women who had been raped many times, sometimes first in front of their husbands and children, and usually publicly, and who had then suffered indescribable pain and humiliation as sex objects. The gratuitous wounds inflicted by their attackers on women they have raped are in some cases so severe that multiple surgery is needed. The details are harrowing, and I will spare the Council.

The numbers are also shocking: 15,000 women have been treated since Panzi opened its doors in 1999, 90% of them apparently victims of the FDLR, and 31 % of them effectively children. 27,000 new cases of sexual violence were registered in South Kivu alone in 2006. But who can say what the true figure is? For many victims, registering a case and speaking out means almost certain ostracism by their own family and community. In any case, the chances of redress in a situation of virtually total impunity are close to

zero. So while the Panzi director, Dr. Mukwege, and his colleagues do their heroic work, countless others receive no medical attention, and are left physically and psychologically unable to work in the fields, to provide for themselves and their children. The result is destitution and despair.

Perhaps most worryingly of all, despite a slight apparent decline in the number of overall cases this year, civilians seem to be picking up the habit from the armed groups.

Mr President,

The world rightly talks about the priority we should give to the protection of civilians. To do justice to the women of DRC, we cannot be satisfied with just treating the results of this scourge. We have to find better ways to stop it.

As always, the Government has the primary responsibility for protecting its own citizens. I urged them, including at the highest level, to do much more: to give tougher orders to their own forces of law and order, to stamp out the indiscipline in their own ranks. Paying and feeding the soldiers properly would be a start. Effective measures are needed against perpetrators and against any who protect them - even in the few cases where there have been convictions, most of those convicted have quickly “escaped” from jails. Those in authority need to go faster to put in place a justice system worthy of the name to stop the prevailing impunity and to implement the excellent law on sexual violence recently passed by the National Assembly. They also need to speak out more strongly and more constantly to make clear that this sexual violence is not only unacceptable but also profoundly damaging to the whole of society, not just the immediate victims.

For its part, the international community has been reacting for some time. MONUC's own commitment to the protection of civilians is invaluable in this area, as in others. But we must step up our own efforts in a more coordinated and intensive way. I made clear to President Kabila and to the provincial authorities that we were ready to work closely with them in the common fight to stamp out this plague.

The biggest problem underlying attacks on civilians, men as well as women, is of course the continued illegal presence of the FDLR and other armed groups. I was given one simple, forceful message by those subject to their raids: "Please help get rid of these armed groups who are wrecking our lives. Why should we pay the price for what happened in Rwanda in 1994? All we need is durable peace, and we can manage the rest." This is a plea which deserves to be heard loud and clear. We have, for example, to reinforce the DDR and DDRRR programs. They have had significant success. And some progress has been made in rescuing and rehabilitating former child soldiers, as I saw for myself at an NGO-run school for them in Bukavu. I heard the individual stories of boys and girls forcibly recruited and often re-recruited and re-re-recruited, passing from one armed group to another. Whatever the progress, the fact is that there are still tens of thousands of illegally armed soldiers who have not yet come forward, and many children among them.

Above all, the complex, political and ethnic roots of these issues must be tackled through dialogue and negotiation. We need strong, urgent and concerted political and diplomatic action, by the DRC Government, by the concerned governments of the region, and by the international community as a whole. This crisis is no less important and no less fraught with unacceptable consequences for millions of innocent people than that in

Darfur, and it should receive no less high level attention in the great chancelleries of the world. The reestablishment of formal diplomatic ties between neighbours, the ratification of the Great Lakes stability pact and increased willingness to monitor borders could be initial helpful steps in the right direction.

Mr. President,

Let me come back finally to the humanitarian situation. As I have underlined, it continues to be critical in the eastern provinces, but the situation of people in much of the rest of the country also remains fragile - and indeed in some cases virtually unknown outside the accessible areas. Despite the complexities, DRC is also an area where we have been able to pilot successfully policy changes such as the cluster approach aimed at making relief efforts more systematic and predictable in the key sectors, and use of large locally pooled funds, bringing the decisions on priorities nearer to the needs of the beneficiaries themselves.

Naturally there is a desire to move on to recovery and development as soon as possible, and indeed that is already happening in some places. There should be no rigid frontier between the two, and there are some hopeful signs. But the humanitarian needs remain great, and the risk of a major new displacement crisis in the Kivus high. So the continuing need for significant humanitarian resources is also clear. To date, only 42 per cent of the USD 686 million requested through the 2007 Humanitarian Action Plan has been financed. This is a recurring pattern. I appeal to donors to respond accordingly, including in the vital and particularly under funded area of health care. I should add that the DRC is already by some way the largest single recipient of CERF funding, mostly from the under funded window. I am ready to release quickly further CERF money for the latest

flare-up if necessary.

Mr. President,

Many of those I met in the east asked, not unreasonably, what they could expect from this nth high-level visit when previous such visits had seemed to make little difference to their key concerns. I told them that I could not promise miracles, but that I would continue to draw the attention of the international community to their needs, try to ensure that humanitarian action was well coordinated and resourced, and press hard again for political progress leading to lasting peace.

Everything in the DRC is huge, including its problems. My predecessor rightly told the Council last year that the international effort had to be a marathon, not a sprint. So I hope the Council will reaffirm its commitment to give the DRC the short and long-term priority it deserves: to deal better with those who need our help, to make some real impact on the horrors faced by the civilian population, and to make a renewed, urgent effort to remove the presence of illegal armed groups such as the FDLR. The point is that if we allow these issues to fester further they may put at risk all we have achieved in the DRC in the last few years, at such difficulty and cost. That would be the biggest tragedy of all.

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