



**enough**

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

# The Democratic Republic of the Congo

## Roots of the Crisis

The crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, has many layers. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Congo's vast natural resources have continually attracted violent intervention from abroad and stoked internal conflicts. Congo's government has never effectively represented or protected its people, and has all too often simply served as a source of unchecked power and personal enrichment for individuals. The ongoing crisis in eastern Congo is rooted both in this history of predation and corruption, and the continuing aftermath of the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda. Today, Congo continues to struggle with an explosive combination of conflicts at the local, regional and national levels.

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### Colonialism and Independence

Congo experienced a brutal colonial history. Beginning in the 1880s, King Leopold II of Belgium took personal control of the territory, ruthlessly exploiting Congo's vast natural resources through harsh autocratic rule which included widespread slave labor. Under massive pressure following an international outcry against these practices, Leopold transferred control of the "Congo Free State" to the Belgian government in 1908.

Following an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and growing demands for independence, Belgium accepted Congo's independence in June 1960. Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister and Joseph Kasavubu President. Within two weeks of independence, however, Congo's new government faced a national mutiny from the army and threats from a variety of secessionist movements.

Cold War tensions increasingly played into Congo's leadership struggle, with the U.S. fearing that the charismatic Lumumba and his supporters would allow the break-up of Congo and Soviet domination of central Africa. With the backing of both the U.S. and Belgium, Kasavubu dismissed Lumumba, who was later arrested and, with active U.S. and Belgian complicity, handed over to his enemies. Lumumba was assassinated in 1961.

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### Dictatorship

Mobutu Sese Seko began his 32-year rule in 1965 when he ousted President Kasavubu in a coup with support from both the United States and Belgium. Mobutu brutally quelled new rebellions and personally dominated Congo. In 1971, Mobutu changed the name of the country to Zaire. He systematically used the country's mineral wealth to co-opt potential rivals, and to enrich himself and his allies through a patronage system so wildly corrupt that many came to view Zaire

as a “kleptocracy”—a country with a government whose principal aim was to loot public goods. Mobutu is conservatively estimated to have stolen at least \$5 billion from his country, much of it moved to international banks and investments.

With the end of the Cold War, his health failing, the suspension of international economic aid to Congo, and the global collapse of raw commodity prices at the end of the 1980s, Mobutu began to lose his grip on power. Following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Mobutu provided shelter and protection not only to the two million Rwandan refugees who had fled to eastern Congo, but also to the Rwandan Hutu army and militias that directed the genocide. This provoked Rwanda and Uganda to invade Congo in July 1996 in pursuit of Hutu military forces. The ailing Mobutu was finally ousted from Kinshasa in May 1997, and Congolese rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila took over the country.

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## Regional Warfare

War broke out again in August 1998 when President Kabila attempted to gain independence from his regional backers and moved to purge Rwandan elements from his government. Rwanda and Uganda re-invaded Congo, supporting rebel proxies against Kabila. While Rwandan forces had previously largely focused on pursuing the Hutus who conducted the genocide, both Rwandan and Ugandan forces increasingly became interested in controlling and exploiting the mineral-rich eastern provinces of Congo. Kabila called on Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia for help, and, with their military support, managed to stop the invasion. During this period, Congo was home to military forces from across the continent, almost all of which brutalized civilians while using their deployment as a pretext to loot vast natural resources and terrorize civilians. By mid-1999, a front line was stabilized and Congo was effectively cut into two.

A ceasefire agreement was reached and signed in Lusaka in July 1999. Although a UN peacekeeping force, known by its French acronym MONUC, was authorized to monitor the agreement, the conflict continued as all sides violated the accord. President Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 and his son, Joseph Kabila, assumed the presidency.

In 2002 peace negotiations were re-launched, and in December of that year all Congolese belligerents, civil society groups, and unarmed opposition movements signed an agreement in South Africa. By the end of 2002, Angolan, Zimbabwean, Rwandan, and Ugandan troops had fully withdrawn from Congo. Rapid progress was made on paper, but the situation for civilians on the ground, especially women, remained dire. Although open fighting between the government and rebels became rare, both sides continued to use sexual violence as a military tactic against civilians, using its trauma to terrorize, control, and, in some cases, ethnically cleanse targeted populations.

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## Continued Conflict and Elections

Rebel groups, including dissident members of former rebel movements and untamed militias, continued to fight the government and local enemies, often seeking to maintain or establish control of mineral wealth. MONUC’s efforts to protect civilians were reinvigorated in September 2004 with the expansion of its force from 10,800 to 16,700 troops, and the granting of a more aggressive mandate that allows for more robust civilian protection. However, the sustained level

of violence throughout 2004 combined with the large number of people who continued to flee their homes to avoid violence led the UN in March 2005 to describe the situation in eastern Congo as the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis.”

Following a national election conducted with very substantial international support, Joseph Kabila was sworn in as the first democratically elected president since Congolese independence on December 6, 2006. While this landmark election was largely free of major violence and serious irregularities, the country still has many challenges to surmount. The new government is weak and barely functioning in many respects, and faces persistent political and security challenges. Predatory armed groups, including Rwandan rebels and the Congolese army, continue to prowl eastern Congo with impunity. Congolese women and girls in particular bear the vicious brunt of this crisis.

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## Humanitarian Crisis

The International Rescue Committee reports that since the end of the first war in the Congo in 1998, 5.4 million people have died (more than 8 percent of the Congo’s population of 66 million). Every month, 45,000 more Congolese—half of them children—die from hunger, preventable disease, and other consequences of violence and displacement. Over one million people have fled their homes within Congo as a result of the ongoing conflict. Eastern Congo right now is perhaps the worst place in the world to be a woman. Used as a weapon of war, rape in Congo exists on a scale seen nowhere else in the world. Often successful in its intent to destroy and exterminate, rape as a weapon of war is causing the near total destruction of women, their families, and their communities.

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## Recent Events

Rebel forces under the command of Laurent Nkunda, known as the National Congress for the Defense of People, or CNDP, have taken control a swathe of territory in eastern Congo that remains beyond the control of the Congolese government and even the UN peacekeeping force. Nkunda claims to be acting to protect his fellow ethnic Tutsis from Rwandan Hutu militias, and he has received substantial support from neighboring Rwanda, but he has political ambitions of his own in Congo and has threatened to take the fight all the way to the capital, Kinshasa. A peace agreement between the Congolese government, the CNDP, and more than 20 other armed groups effectively collapsed late in 2008.

The current crisis in eastern Congo illustrates the historical patterns at the root of this conflict: as long as the Congolese government cannot control its territory, provide basic services or effectively protect its population, and as long as armed groups are able to prosper from illicit trade in natural resources and complex regional alliances, eastern Congo will remain a battlefield and innocent civilians will pay a tragically high cost.

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Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org).

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