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## Democratic Republic of Congo: Respond to Needs of the Displaced in Katanga

Hundreds of thousands of displaced people are facing life-threatening conditions in central Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the international response to the crisis has been largely slow and inadequate.

Donor governments, UN agencies, and NGOs need to provide food supplies, household goods, and water and sanitation. To better protect the displaced and local populations the UN peacekeeping force in the DRC, MONUC, must deploy troops immediately.

Conflict in Katanga is not new: a secessionist movement took root shortly after independence, and former president Mobutu brutally manipulated ethnic tensions in the area to shore up political support in the early 1990s. During the 1998-2002 war, opposing forces clashed along the front line that ran through central Katanga, where Laurent-Désiré Kabila armed local militias to stem the tide of Rwanda-backed rebels moving towards the mineral-rich south. These militias (generally referred to as Mai-Mai) have spun out of the government's control. Armed groups throughout the region, including the national army (the FARDC), are riddled with competing structures of command and patronage, as politicians seek security guarantees against upheaval after national elections scheduled for June.

Over the past two years, tension in central Katanga between the FARDC and the Mai-Mai groups has led to open fighting, with civilians caught in the middle. The Mai-Mai burn and loot villages in retaliation for their perceived support of the FARDC and to deny haven to the army; in turn, the FARDC views the displaced from these villages as Mai-Mai sympathizers. All armed groups, but particularly the 63rd Brigade of the FARDC stationed since 1997 in Mitwaba, live off the backs of the displaced and local population, forcibly appropriating food, money, household goods, relief supplies, and labor. Women are particularly vulnerable to abuse, including rape.

The humanitarian consequences of the conflict are grave. Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes over the past two years, many in just the past few months. Some have chosen to gather around administrative centers, relatively accessible to humanitarian assistance. Most of these people are spread throughout local communities,

building makeshift shelters on borrowed land, although those around Dubie have settled in camps. Others remain hidden in remote forested areas, out of reach of assistance, afraid of retaliation and extortion by the FARDC.

The most alarming results of this situation are increasingly high rates of malnutrition and death rates that exceed emergency levels of two per 10,000 persons per day. Some of the displaced have received basic household items, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is providing healthcare in many parts of the area. Food deliveries by the World Food Program (WFP), however, have suffered unreasonable delays. While waiting for the convoys, displaced women showed Refugees International remnants of their daily meal made from scraps of cassava that they normally throw away. The lack of clean water and adequate sanitation is equally deplorable, especially considering the outbreak of cholera that has recently occurred in the Lake Upemba area. Overall, the humanitarian response --- on the part of UN agencies, donors, and most international NGOs --- has been unacceptably slow and insufficient.

The slow response has not been for lack of warning. Information about the developing crisis has been available for several months, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented needs in the area in April and June 2005. Although OCHA, in partnership with UNICEF and through the Rapid Response Mechanism, has been able to provide supplies and protein biscuits to the displaced, OCHA has not been able to catalyze a greater sustained response from other agencies.

WFP has recently been able to deliver food over hundreds of kilometers of bad roads from Lubumbashi to Mitwaba and the Lake Upemba area, but the ration is incomplete. The deliveries themselves occurred only after months of bureaucratic wrangling, missing an opportunity to use the direct route from Lubumbashi to Mitwaba in

November before it was cut off due to insecurity. For its part, UNICEF is running long-term development projects in Katanga, but has not taken a leadership role in coordinating the response, not even in water and sanitation, its primary area of expertise. The emerging crisis seems to have caught both WFP and UNICEF by surprise, and they have been slow to shift their focus from activities more suited to a stable environment.

Leadership has also been lacking from donors, and funding shortfalls explain part of the slow response in Katanga. Recent visits to the region by teams from the emergency aid bureaus of the European Union (ECHO) and the United States (OFDA) are welcome, and WFP donors must make sure that food deliveries continue, especially given reports of ruptures in the supply pipeline.

Logistics is a major challenge for agencies operating in the region. Sites are remote and road access poor, requiring heavy reliance on air transport to deliver materials and supplies. Donors therefore must be willing to fund high transportation costs in order to ensure an appropriate response. Despite these obstacles, NGOs should not shrink from engaging fully in Katanga. MSF has shown that is possible to operate in the region, and there are serious unmet needs for water and sanitation, household items (such as clothing, mosquito nets, and plastic sheeting in the Lake Upemba area), and emergency education. The displaced around Lake Upemba are in particular need, and NGOs with development projects in the area have an existing logistics capacity that could serve as the foundation for a broader response.

Protection is the overarching need among both the displaced and local populations in central Katanga. Given the fighting in the area and the resulting consequences for civilians, the predatory practices of the FARDC, the need for stability during the upcoming elections, and the overall strategic importance of Katanga in the political and economic future of the DRC, the level and pace of MONUC civilian and military deployment in the province are cause for concern. Security sector reform and the replacement of brigades such as the 63rd in Mitwaba are much-needed initiatives.

In the short term, there is no time to waste in deploying MONUC peacekeepers to central Katanga. This would protect civilians by providing a deterrent to extortion by FARDC troops (thus mitigating a major grievance motivating Mai-Mai groups and protecting civilians from attack after receiving assistance), improve delivery of humanitarian assistance, and prevent the FARDC from coercing the displaced to return to their destroyed villages in order to vote. It would also draw inaccessible displaced people out of hiding. A recently arrived group in Mitwaba told Refugees International that they left

their refuge next to a river due to the presence of MONUC, which at that moment was represented only by a small group of human rights staff on a brief mission and deliveries of food by helicopter from Lubumbashi.

The crisis in central Katanga will continue for some time. If humanitarian agencies and MONUC respond quickly and decisively, the number of accessible displaced will rise as those hidden in remote areas emerge. If elections then occur peacefully and the results are widely accepted, the displaced may return home soon afterwards. But they will find their villages destroyed and little means of survival. They must receive seeds and agricultural tools by August to begin planting at the beginning of the rainy season, with the first harvest in December. It seems unlikely that security will be established to the extent necessary to encourage such early returns, but even under this scenario people will need assistance for several months.

## REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Donors, in particular ECHO and OFDA, provide the resources to UN agencies and NGOs to respond swiftly to urgent humanitarian needs. Due to difficulties in access by road, donors must be willing to fund the air transport required to deliver materials and supplies to the region.
- ❑ WFP support and monitor its local partners to ensure that recently delivered food is distributed quickly, complete their food rations, and preposition stocks in central Katanga to guard against further delays in delivery.
- ❑ The UN Food and Agriculture Organization preposition agricultural tools and seeds to locations closer to areas of IDP concentration to support their eventual return to areas of origin. If appropriate, and according to land availability, distribution should take place immediately.
- ❑ UNICEF provide leadership and coordination in water supply and sanitation, nutrition, and emergency education, as well as in distribution of appropriate non-food items, particularly to the displaced around Lake Upemba.
- ❑ NGOs operating in the region take advantage of existing logistics capacity and deploy emergency teams. Other NGOs mobilize to meet minimum standards of assistance.
- ❑ MONUC deploy peacekeepers immediately to central Katanga, especially to Mitwaba, around Lake Upemba, and along the road from Lubumbashi to Mitwaba via Likasi.

*Advocates Andrea Lari and Rick Neal, currently on mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, visited Katanga from February 16 to 23.*