

110th Great Lakes Policy Forum

November 4, 2004, Washington, DC

Theme: Obstacles & Opportunities in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo

The 110th Great Lakes Policy Forum (GLPF) was held shortly after Burundi's interim constitution went into effect and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) faced new violence and instability in the eastern part of the country. DRC is scheduled to hold elections in eight months.

The panel included Mr. Fidele Lumeya and Mr. Andrea Lari, Advocates from Refugees International and Mr. Anthony Gambino, former USAID Mission Director in DRC. Ms. Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Search for Common Ground's Sub-Saharan Africa Programs, facilitated the forum.

Part of the discussion centered on the humanitarian side of the two countries' situations, focusing mainly on individuals' stories. In the DRC, internally displaced person (IDP) camps originally set up by the government and UN agencies appeared to have been neglected. Based on conversations with IDPs, no one in an official capacity had been to see the camps since 2002.

Stories were shared from people throughout the northeastern region of DRC. Young women who have been raped and contracted STDs have no health clinics to go to; the WFP has pulled out due to military mismanagement, leaving people with virtually little or no humanitarian assistance; and there are gaps in information regarding events—such as the Gatumba massacres in 2004. UNHCR does not have a presence in many of the camps. By all accounts, it is MONUC and the Congolese military that have been handling crises as they arise.

In Burundi, the situation is better. The UN peacekeeping mission to Burundi is raising the level of hope among Burundians for an international commitment to peace and stability. Programs have been instituted that help reintegrate refugees. One town has a seed market that helps returnees purchase seeds from local merchants. This has helped to bolster the local economy and build confidence through a community-based approach. Three recommendations were made:

- Apply diplomatic pressure to both the transitional governments of DRC and Burundi to live up to the commitments they've made to the international community and their citizenry for elections.
- Strongly support the peacekeeping missions in both countries.
- Funds should be committed to DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) in order to facilitate the process
- UN aid agencies should speed up implementation of the return and reintegration of displaced persons.

The remainder of the discussion centered on the tenuous DRC transition. If the political process does not move forward, the entire transition may be in danger. MONUC has made some mistakes, but they must be given support—for better or worse, they are the main force for peace. MONUC must have a clear political strategy that decreases the opportunities for spoilers. This will free the DRC to focus on the four essential elements of peace and security:

1. The restoration of security, military integration, DDR, and continued progress with Rwanda
2. Effective territorial restoration

3. Adoption of a legislative framework, which is essential to the constitution and the electoral process
4. The holding of elections as the basis for democratic rule

The first six months of the transition went well and were marked by a sense of calm and great optimism throughout the country. This past year, however, has been more difficult. Processes that should already have happened, such as DDR and army integration, have not. At this point, elections cannot take place, but this does not imply that the transition will fail. There are two six-month extensions written into the transitional constitution, so elections in June 2006 would still fall within an acceptable timeframe.

Why is DRC not ready to proceed with elections as planned? Three fundamental steps to be taken before elections can be held have not been taken: 1) constitutional referendum at the local and national level, 2) the identification and registration of voters, and 3) a network of polling stations in place. A precise calendar should be established on a week-by-week basis. DDR and voter registration should be a priority. A clear calendar would allow the transitional government and international community to see what needs to be done and in what sequence. The international community would then be in a position to apply pressure if activities are not being carried out in the agreed upon timeframe.

Impunity is among the transition's most important issues. The DDR process suffers from a lack of political will, which gives people two options: 1) integrate into the army or 2) depending on their ages, receive training and education or training and a \$300 cash payment. In a country where most people live on \$80 per year, \$300 is an exorbitant amount. An additional problem with the \$300 cash payment is that the money goes toward sustainable development. The cash payment would be better allocated if it were used to fund community development, instead of individuals. This also begs the question of who is receiving the money. Some would argue that it is going to criminals who return home to their villages as rich men, while the survivors who remain are left with nothing. To prevent such a scenario, it was suggested that human rights screenings take place as people go through the DDR process. Members of the international community, however, find this approach to be problematic, noting that the lack of judicial infrastructure would make indicting people responsible for human rights violations very difficult.

A potentially dangerous actor is Rwanda, which as some have argued, has much to gain from a weak DRC at its border. Its interference in the eastern part of the country has helped to weaken the DRC's transition. The international community should therefore follow the same approach with Rwanda as it did with Uganda. It should apply a unified response, making clear that Rwanda is to leave DRC. The tripartite security agreement between Uganda, Rwanda and DRC should be encouraged, although it is going to be a long process. Agreements are easy to sign; the hard part begins with their implementation. This agreement should not take precedence over the DRC's internal security problems and relationships with neighboring countries.

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