

Forgotten People: Republic of Congo (ROC)

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Humanitarian interventions in the pure sense of the term are rare, and the situation in the Republic of Congo is a telling example of how easy it is for a local conflict to be completely ignored by the international community.

Humanitarian Conditions

According to figures released by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR), approximately 30,000 citizens of the Republic of Congo were refugees or asylum seekers by the end of 2001. Though exact figures are not yet available, continued violence suggests the number rose in 2002. Additionally, close to 100,000 people remain internally displaced in the country, which is also home to more than 100,000 refugees from the DRC, Angola, Burundi, Rwanda and the Central African Republic. Violence in the country has claimed more than 20,000 lives, and reports of rape and sexual assault are widespread.

The ROC has also been plagued by bouts of temporary displacement, during which tens of thousands, and sometimes hundreds of thousands of people, have fled their homes for short periods of time due to local unrest. The combined effects of conflict and displacement have devastated the country's economy. USCR estimates that 70% of all residents in the country's two largest cities live at or below the poverty line, and 40% of the country's half-million school-age children do not attend school.

Also in jeopardy is the country's health system, tested most recently by an outbreak of the ebola virus. An estimated 60% of all health centers remain closed, and humanitarian organizations report severe shortages of drugs and other medical supplies. Maternal mortality in the country is between 890-900 per 100,000 live births, and infant mortality stands at 82 for every 100,000 live births. Approximately 10% of the country's 3.1 million citizens are thought to be infected with HIV/AIDS.

Why has the Republic of Congo been forgotten?

The Republic of Congo (ROC), about the size of Montana and with a population of 3 million, rarely receives media attention. Therefore, serious, long-standing humanitarian problems, resulting from conflict and ethnic violence, have gone mostly unnoticed. Moreover, the ROC is often confused with its larger and even more conflicted neighbor, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Thus, the ROC is a

neglected corner of the massive regional conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Congo Basin of Central Africa.

The ROC is therefore an example of a country in which few global economic or political interests are at stake. Despite the ROC's offshore oil resources, the conflict in the ROC has attracted little external involvement, perhaps because disruption on the mainland has little effect on oil extraction taking place some 30-50 miles off the country's coast. Thus, any external engagement in mediating the conflict and responding to the needs of the population would have to be grounded in humanitarian motives.

The most recent outbreak of violence flared in April, despite a March 17th peace agreement. Focused in the ROC's Pool region, combat between government forces and "Ninja" rebels, militant supporters of former presidential candidate Bernard Kolelas, is estimated to have displaced approximately 150,000 civilians, or 60% of the population in that area. In the shadow of events in the Middle East, however, the resurgence of violence has gone largely unreported and appeals from UNICEF and the Red Cross remain grossly under-funded. In 2002, only 14% of UNICEF's overall appeal, and only 27% of the organization's Flash Appeal for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the Pool region received funding. Figures from the Red Cross were equally dismal.

Without the funding needed to carry out operations, it has been virtually impossible for humanitarian organizations to meet the needs of the ROC's displaced and other needy people. As they struggled to provide basic health and nutrition to the population, programs in areas such as child protection and women's development were scaled back or eliminated. "The wide shortfall of funding is having a major impact on the efforts of UNICEF and its partners on wider coverage of project beneficiaries including the expansion of activities to other needy and underserved areas," UNICEF reported in January of 2003. The situation only worsened following the surge in violence this spring. Poor security and a lack of infrastructure continue to impede efforts to reach the country's most vulnerable.

Recent weeks have offered signs that violence in the Republic of Congo may be waning, but sustaining peace in the ravaged country will be a challenge of considerable measure. Promised amnesty and reintegration, demobilized Ninjas are already complaining that they have yet to receive tools or seeds for farming. Many Ninjas have refused to relinquish their arms until the promised items are delivered. If efforts are not made to quickly rehabilitate the country's infrastructure and support micro-development projects, this fragile window for peace may close.

The People and the Land

A former French colony, the Republic of Congo was granted independence in 1960. Originally inhabited by pygmies and later settled by Bantu groups, the country has fallen victim to the same divisive ethnic rivalries that have plagued so many African nations. In the ROC, tensions are exacerbated by an economic divide between the country's commercial south, and less prosperous and more sparsely populated north.

Four major ethnic groups make up more than 95% of the Republic of Congo's population: Kongo (48%), Sangha (20%), M'Bochi (12%), and Teke (17%). The groups speak distinct primary languages and are geographically concentrated in discrete areas of the country. The ROC's relatively prosperous south is inhabited primarily by the Kongo, while the Teke dominate the central region. The Sangha control the northeast, and the M'Bochi inhabit the far north. The greatest inter-ethnic tensions exist between the Kongo and the less economically fortunate northern groups, largely due to the perception that the political and economic liberalization favored by the Kongo and their southern compatriots will endanger northern interests. In addition to disrupting political and social relations within the country, ethnic sympathies have also been responsible for pulling the ROC into cross-border disputes and, alternately, engaging neighboring nations in the country's internal struggles.

Much of the prosperity of the ROC's southern region can be attributed to the country's large offshore oil reserves, revenues from which have played a part in fostering rivalries. The French company TotalFinaElf currently dominates the country's oil sector. The Italian oil firm Agip is second in position, and the American companies ChevronTexaco, CMS, Nomeco and ANAdarko are also active players. In the early 1980s, oil revenue and related development projects held the ROC's GDP growth rate at 5% annually, but the numbers have since declined. Production could rise again, however, if a joint exploration project with nearby Angola proves successful.

Traditionally one of the most urbanized countries in Africa, widespread conflict and the destruction of roads and railways have further encouraged migration to urban areas. More than 85% of Congolese now live in urban centers, while much of the north remains a virtually uninhabited tropical jungle. City living has not improved conditions for everyone; as of January 2002, an estimated 70% of all residents in the ROC's two largest cities, Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, lived at or below the poverty line.

Anatomy of the Crisis

After three decades of independence marked by political instability, the Republic of Congo experienced its first prolonged period of violence following disputed parliamentary elections in May of 1993. At the heart of the conflict were lingering tensions between then-president Pascal Lissouba and ex-president Colonel Denis Sassou Nguesso.

Sassou, who took power when previous-president Jacques-Joachim Yhombi Opango was forcibly deposed, served from 1979-1991, when he was replaced by a Prime Minister and a 153-member elected council following a National Conference on the country's political future. The council drafted and approved a new constitution, but ran into harsh opposition from Sassou and his followers when it attempted to exert its authority over the army. After five civilians were killed during clashes between the government and army in January 1992, the government backed off and appointed a Minister of Defense favored by the army.

In August 1992, Lissouba won the presidency in the first peaceful, multi-party general elections in the country's history. In order to secure a working majority in the National Assembly, however, Lissouba's party, the Union Panafricaine pour la Democratie Sociale (UPADS) needed to form a coalition with at least one smaller political faction. Sassou's Parti Congolais du Travail (PCT) stepped forward, but soon withdrew their support following an argument about the number of ministerial posts the party would be granted. The PCT then formed its own alliance, known as the Union pour le Renouveau Democratique (URD), and demanded the right to appropriate representation. In response, President Lissouba dissolved the National Assembly and scheduled new legislative elections for the following year.

In the new elections, Lissouba's UPADS won 63 assembly seats while the URD secured only 49. Citing unconfirmed elections irregularities, the URD protested and tensions soon escalated to violence. Leading the call for civil disobedience was Bernard Kolelas, a former presidential candidate whose Mouvement Congolais pour la Democratie et le Developpement Integral (MCDDI) party had joined Sassou's URD coalition. Calling themselves the "Ninjas," armed supporters of Kolelas were at the heart of violence in which more than 2,000 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced. As the fighting escalated, ethnic undercurrents began to take hold, and accusations of "ethnic cleansing" soon followed. Though ethnic divisions are at times ambiguous, ethnic groups dominant in the north were generally seen as supporting Sassou, who is M'Bochi; while southerners support either Lissouba or Kolelas, whose ethnic backgrounds are Nibolek and Lari respectively (both Nibolek and Lari are subgroups of the larger Kongo population. A testament to the confusion of ethnic and political loyalties, the term "Nibolek" is a recently coined word derived from the contraction of the names of three southern provinces: Niari, Bouenza, and Lekoumou).

To quell the violence, international arbitrators were called in to rule on the fairness of the '93 elections. The arbitrators found that the election process had been flawed in eight constituencies and it was agreed that new elections would be held in those areas. Lissouba, Kolelas and Sassou signed an agreement to end hostilities.

Tensions, however, were never quite dispelled. For the next four years, political factions continued to splinter and grow militant. In addition to Kolelas' Ninjas, a militia group calling itself the "Cobras" emerged to back Sassou; and a third group, the "Cocoyes," took arms in support of Lissouba. Backed by neighboring Angola and a sizeable militia, Sassou overthrew the Lissouba government in October 1997 and declared himself president shortly thereafter.

A National Forum for Reconciliation was held in 1998 at which a transitional advisory legislature was appointed and national elections were scheduled for approximately three years later. However, fighting erupted again in 1998 between the Ninjas and Cocoyes, and a lasting peace remains elusive. The most recent peace agreement was signed in March 2003.

Though violence in the Republic of Congo is certainly longstanding, the potential for a peaceful and even prosperous future is not out of reach for the country. While political players have used ethnic divisions as a means to serve their own ends, much of the underlying tension in the ROC is economic rather than ethnically based.

An effective demobilization process supported by economic development utilizing the country's oil resources could well pave the way to a stable future.

Recommendations

* The United Nations Secretary-General engage a senior diplomat from a member country to mediate the conflict in the ROC. Examples of this approach are the involvement of senior officials from South Africa in Burundi, and officials from Norway in Sri Lanka.

* International donors increase funding of humanitarian appeals. Special attention should be paid to:

- * Providing economic incentives for demobilization
- * Expanding support programs for victims of rape and sexual assault
- * Increasing awareness, education and testing initiatives to curb the spread of HIV
- * Rehabilitating critical transport infrastructure