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Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Factor 14

## **No Voice, No Food: Promoting Democracy & Food Security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

The blessing of abundant natural resources has proven to be a curse for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); conflicts over these resources have exacerbated food insecurity and plagued attempts at democracy. DRC's mineral wealth, bounteous water supply, and exceptional biodiversity offer the nation an enormous amount of potential. However, the dichotomy between DRC's hopeful future and its current state is tremendous. The country has failed to capitalize on its resources because of persistent warfare and illegitimate governance, forcing three and a half million people into severe hunger (WFP). Furthermore, the Congo's decade long conflict has killed an estimated six million people to date (Kristof). Along with these conflicts, gruesome human rights atrocities have negatively altered the psyche of the Congolese people to that of a state of hopelessness that pervades the entire country. In fact, DRC is often described as the worst place to be a woman, and its culture holds a suppressive view of women. The country experiences the worst rates of sexual violence, and women are frequently denied basic rights. The government has been incapable of ending the international conflict, and has not adequately expanded social services, developed infrastructure, or combated the large income disparity. Creating meaningful political efficacy on the part of the Congolese citizens and a government based upon the rule of law are necessary to solving these problems. Successful democratic rule can be achieved with the help of the international community by monitoring the upcoming presidential election in November, fostering local control, and altering certain elements of US policy towards DRC.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is considered one of the world's least developed countries. One-third of its population eats just once per day (WFP). Consequently, the conflict that has taken place has been devastating to food production. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has ascertained that countries in protracted crisis, on average, have undernourishment rates that are three times greater than those of other countries. During the war, many farmers fled the rural, agricultural areas to seek refuge in the DRC's urban centers, leading to an urbanization rate of almost five percent (CIA). Furthermore, there are 1.74 million internally displaced persons (IDP's) in DRC. These IDP's may have been wise to migrate to the urban areas for increased security, improved water access, and greater infrastructure, yet agricultural production fell nearly forty percent during the conflict (WFP).

The average family in DRC must fight to survive each and every day. An estimated forty percent of Congo's children are experiencing chronic malnutrition (WFP). Accordingly, most of the DRC's farming is subsistence-based. Aside from that, the DRC's agricultural industry has seen a degree of profitability in growing coffee beans, largely in part due to the success of Arabica Coffee. Another main source of livelihoods for the Congolese families is mining. In the DRC, there is a remarkable presence of diamonds, gold, cassiterite, coltan, tin, tungsten, and other ores. As is generally expected, the level of education of the head of a household and family size play their typical roles in affecting poverty, with increased education decreasing one's chances of being in severe poverty and increased family size variably increasing one's chances of poverty. Approximately seventy-seven percent of families in the DRC with ten or more members are in severe poverty, while only fourteen percent of those with three to five members are in severe poverty (World Bank). The struggle to survive, though, has been made even more difficult by the prolonged international conflict in the region.

The protracted crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has deep historic roots dating back to colonial ties, and surrounds the conflict among nine African nations. One of the major forces behind the war is the neighboring country of Rwanda's Tutsi army. In 1994, Paul Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic

Front invaded Rwanda from Uganda, and ended the genocide of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus (French). Kagame then became president of Rwanda and established a minority Tutsi government. Meanwhile, two million Hutu refugees fled Rwanda. Many migrated to what are now DRC's North and South Kivu provinces. These Rwandans began challenging Congolese for land, continuing a trend that dates back to colonial times. Two years later, the Tutsis were able to persuade militant Hutus to help them topple the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko of what was then known as Zaire, but now is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This effort was supported by the governments of Rwanda and Uganda. They successfully ousted Sese Seko, and installed Laurent Kabila as president. However, when Kabila asked Rwandan forces to leave DRC, Kagame responded with an increased invasion. Angola and Zimbabwe then allied with Congo to expel the Rwandans from the nation, causing what has been described as "Africa's World War." Indeed, twenty-two thousand UN soldiers were dispatched from more than forty different countries, marking one of the largest UN interventions in history (BBC). The nations have fought for DRC's valuable resources in a manner that leaves nothing and no one unscathed.

The human suffering that has occurred during the conflict in DRC is unparalleled in any other region of the globe and of any time since World War II. The dispute that was once over land ownership, ethnicity, and power has morphed into a struggle between various armed militia groups vying for control of Eastern Congo's \$180,000,000 mining industry (Prendergast & Cheadle). These groups, including Congo's own army, have raided entire villages, recruited child soldiers, committed systematic sexual violence, maimed civilians, and used forced labor, all of which have translated into displacement, epidemics, and a cycle of impoverishment and food insecurity for the Congolese. There are an estimated 45,000 fatalities each month in DRC (Kristof). As in many cases, the majority of these deaths are not the direct result of combat, but are caused by the disease, displacement, and hunger that follows.

One of the worst contributors to violence against the civilians is the DRC's own army, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC). There is a great deal of military impunity, due in large part to the criminals who run the military and to the fact that soldiers in the state-run military are often un-paid. This impunity will not end so long as criminals continue to run the military. For example, Bosco Ntaganda has continued to serve in his position as the chief of staff of CNDP, despite his arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Rwandan forces have also enjoyed impunity. Although Rwanda claims to be working to disarm the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) - the Hutu perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda- soldiers from the Rwandan military has been collaborating with FDLR. While the soldiers of DRC's military may not receive pay from the state, the soldiers take their own retribution. Soldiers often steal food from rural farmers, and perceive attacking women as an inferred benefit of their service.

Rape is used as a weapon of war in the Congo, making it a brutal conflict for the nation's women. The rebel groups use systematic rape to maintain a tight grip on Congolese society; through humiliation, they gain social control. Stories from the survivors of militia attacks are incomprehensible. Women watch as members of their families are killed right before them, and then they are raped by the armed groups. In many cases, the militias use machetes to maim civilians, taking advantage of any opportunity to instill fear in the Congolese citizens. The view of women and cultural mores in the Congo force women into an even greater state of destitution. Rape is a taboo topic in the DRC, and victims would face further rejection from their families and community if they were to speak out against their offenders. Rape statistics, therefore, are quite deflated, and the precise extent of violence against women is unknown.

Conflicts such as these pose a noteworthy threat to achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halting the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015. Evidence has shown that increased gender-based violence is directly related to a rise in the spread of HIV (DESA). The women of Eastern Congo lack the education to adequately demand the protection of their rights. Of the 4.4 million Congolese children that do not attend school, 2.5 million are girls (UNICEF). With the current state of Congo's health care system, victims of

rape typically struggle to address the physical wounds of their assault, and are even less capable of addressing the psychological wounds that persist long after.

Although the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo lack an adequate influence over the actions of their government, elections have been in place for over fifty years there. Still, the voice of the people has been compromised for various reasons. For as long as the elections have taken place, the elites in Congolese society have successfully controlled the election, turning the general voters into meager beggars. During election campaigns, the destitute population of the DRC is used to being bribed with gasoline, food, and water. In the 2006 elections, candidates bombarded voters with crates of beer, clothing, bags of flour, and other goods in the hopes of winning over a starving people. Unfortunately, the people were persuaded by these bribes. By the time they realized their candidates' deceptive ways, the same people who had been despotically ruling the country since the 1960's were already reelected. Consequently, the average Congolese citizens feel a great deal of inefficacy, and believe that elections are altogether purposeless. This sentiment seems to have grown throughout the years, and has caused the DRC to find itself on the brink of anarchy.

On July 29, 2011, something truly remarkable happened in the DRC's South Kivu Province. When an important delegation began to leave the village of Shubunda, the population attempted to prevent it from leaving by blocking the road and throwing rocks. The delegation of Roger Meece, Head of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and Marcellin Cishambo, Governor of the South Kivu Province, were able to break away from the village only after police firing. By threatening two symbols of authority, the people epitomized the state of desperation and de facto slavery that they are experiencing because of the rebel groups that control the region, and the futility of efforts aimed at achieving security for the Congolese people. Exasperated, the people of the Congo are ready for change and are tired of empty promises from their leaders.

The government of the DRC faces the potential of collapse with the upcoming elections in November for the president and members of parliament. After the relatively legitimate election of President Kabila in 2006, the people have grown disillusioned yet again with their government and are outraged by the failure of elected officials to promote the improvements as promised during the 2006 election. There is a great chance that violence will precede the election, and that it will be followed by the return of antigovernment protests throughout the nation. The various militia groups in the DRC would eagerly band together to oust Kabila in the event that the November elections are perceived as corrupted in his favor. Bearing in mind the past year's developments in the Middle East, it is likely that Kabila would be equally as eager to increase state power in order to intimidate, bribe, or impose violence directly upon the people, all of which have been effective tactics for him in the past (Marks). In fact, on September 1, 2011, the DRC's police began the use of tear gas to silence a group of protestors who have accused the election commission of fraud (Aljazeera).

Politically-motivated violence has been rising in the Congo, ever since the beginning of this year. One hopeful aspect of the rapidly approaching election is that more voters have been registered. The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) effectively increased voter registration by six million compared to the previous election of 2006 (Pole). Another alarming trend in the DRC is the increasing role that ethnicity plays in determining one's vote. People from the DRC's various provinces and ethnicities have aligned with their own corresponding candidate. Not only does this work to promote disunity among the various political opposition groups, it also threatens to move ethnic and geopolitical concerns ahead of the nation's general political issues, and makes the potential of conflict all the more disconcerting.

Despite the developmental stagnation that has taken place in the DRC, there have been some recent reforms initiated in regard to promoting democracy and peace. Early this year, some remarkable strides

have been made in the effort to end the impunity in the DRC. For the first time, FARDC officers accused of human rights violations were tried in South Kivu. The UN's mission in the Congo has continued to work to increase protection of civilians and to improve humanitarian aid. President Kabila has called upon MONUSCO to help train the DRC's police force, an essential first step in promoting the rule of law. In addition, the number of FDLR officers which have participated in MONUSCO's program to disarm and reintegrate militia men has increased. To directly combat the food insecurity in the DRC, an urban horticulture program has been developed. Capitalizing on the former farmers that migrated to DRC's cities, this program has more than doubled the nation's urban production of vegetables and created a surplus worth over \$400 million (UN News Centre).

The United States has also implemented important policy changes involving the Congo. In the summer of 2010, the US Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Bill, also known as the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which includes a small section that requires all companies that use tin, tungsten, or tantalum – the so called “conflict minerals” – to explain in an annual report where they purchased their minerals and how they carried out “due diligence” in avoiding trade with the DRC's rebel groups. This was a sweeping reform, considering the fact that the DRC produces forty percent of the world's cobalt and twenty percent of the world's tantalum (Marks). The implementation of this policy was left to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The reasoning behind this was the belief that if the international community worked together to boycott the minerals mined by rebel groups, then the rebel groups would be without the resources necessary to continue to wage war and control Congolese society.

While well intentioned, this policy has had some negative effects on the DRC. Rather than complying to carrying out “due diligence,” it is much more expedient for some companies to simply divest in the DRC altogether. In fact, some organizations have called for just that. The policy must be carefully executed in order to encourage companies to work to prevent their use of “conflict minerals” without making it easier to not invest in the Congo at all. The mining industry is a main source of income for the DRC's GDP, and if companies chose to not trade with the Congo at all, economic growth would be jeopardized. If mines were to be shut down, the artisan miners would most likely be forced into armed militia groups. While the conflict does, in part, surround disputes over mineral wealth, simply taking away this wealth would not create peace, as the fighting goes much further beyond that. Still, though, Congress's attempt to trace the origins of the minerals that make their way into our electronics is a positive first step in preventing the developed world from fueling the Congo's wars.

Aside from careful execution of the requirements of the Dodd-Frank Bill, there are other initiatives the US could undertake in order to promote democracy, development, and the rule of law in the Congo. The US could play an integral role in creating an election monitoring committee, in order to prevent widespread violence and protect the will of the Congolese people in the November election. The US-Africa trade policy, as described in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), must be reformed. The AGOA works under the guise of lifting trade barriers between African nations and the US, yet the program has actually worked to stall African economic development. In order for countries to qualify for trade under AGOA, there are certain conditions that must be met, and the US President determines what nations are in compliance. One such requirement is extreme deregulation, which forces African nations to remove protective tariffs, in effect weakening African industries. In addition, many of the “African” companies which partake in this trade deal are not African. Instead, they are often companies owned by Asian countries, and the African employees that work at them often make meager wages (Hickel). While the Act claims to require compliance with human rights laws, this aspect is not enforced. In fact, some of nations that are the worst perpetrators of human rights violations are often deemed compliant with AGOA. This Act must be revised so that complete economic deregulation is not a requirement, so that the companies involved are actually African, and so that the human rights policies are thoroughly enforced as a prerequisite for AGOA eligibility.

Effective democratic development must begin and end with the Congolese themselves. One of the best investments the DRC could make would be with its women and girls. The culture of the country, gender-based violence, and the lack of education for the nation's girls have prevented the DRC from unlocking an essential resource. The international community must work to empower the people of the Congo, so that their voice is protected. This can be done, in large part, by increased protection of civilians and helping to establish a justice system to end the impunity and corruption that pervade the government. If food insecurity for the Congo is to be combated, the Congolese must begin to adequately distribute resources in society so that the potential wealth of the nation is taken full advantage of to develop social services and infrastructure. In order for rural growers to play their part in combating food insecurity, they must have adequate access to sanitary water and roads. Currently, the rural parts of the DRC's roads are far too few, its water is scarcely accessible, and social services such as education and health care are much too rare. With their political efficacy secured, the Congolese would use their voices to bring about such changes, placing the country on the right path toward alleviating its hunger pains.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo's absolute poverty is caused mainly by its weak state and corrupt politics. For far too long, the DRC's elite have squandered the people's power in an effort to protect their own interests. The persistent civil and international conflict has worked to further weaken the state and plunder the Congolese people into utter destitution. Along with the conflict came impunity and increased corruption, gruesome human rights violations, especially against women, and the slaughter of millions of the Congo's civilians. The small developments that the DRC has made of late are tenuous when the country's rapidly growing population is considered. While the DRC's natural resources have been a mixed blessing in the past, they currently offer the nation a great deal of hope for the future. The international community must continue to work to empower the people of the Congo, not only through humanitarian aid and protection, but also through promoting the development of infrastructure. Once the people are empowered, they will see a day in which the government of the DRC is based upon the principles of democracy and the rule of law. With this, the general welfare of the people will be more properly considered, and the nation will begin to alleviate its food insecurity.

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