



Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Democratic Republic of the Congo February 2007

“These last years your country has lived through a series of deadly conflicts that have left deep scars in the memory of its peoples... At a time when the Catholics of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in union with all people of goodwill, prepare to participate in some important events for the future of their nation, I would like to express my spiritual closeness to them by raising up a fervent prayer to the Lord that they persevere, with unshakable hope, in the construction of peace and fraternity!”

- Pope Benedict XVI to the Congolese Bishops, January 2006

BACKGROUND

In 2006, with the support of the world’s largest and most expensive UN Peacekeeping mission (MONUC), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; formerly Zaire) overcame huge logistical and political challenges and successfully held its first elections in 40 years. While there was some violence and the process was not perfect, major conflict was avoided, the Congolese people participated in massive numbers, and the election was considered free and fair by international observers. Joseph Kabila was sworn in as president in December and the presidential run-off challenger Jean-Pierre Bemba conceded defeat and committed himself to leading the opposition in the newly established parliament. There is great hope now that democratic governance can consolidate the gains that have been made, and lead to peace, stability, and reconstruction throughout the country. The new government, however, is inexperienced, has weak institutions, and faces huge security, political and humanitarian challenges.

The electoral process followed what has been called the “world’s deadliest conflict since World War II.” More than 4 million Congolese have died since 1998 as a result of a six-year war involving eight nations and numerous rebel groups, and the lingering insecurity in the eastern part of the country where rebel groups, militias, and oftentimes underpaid and poorly trained Congolese armed forces continue to attack, rape and loot the population. More than 1,000 people continue to die each day in the DRC--almost half of these are children under the age of five. Most of the deaths are due to disease and malnutrition, the result of displacement of civilians from their homes and fields, and the lack of health services. The root cause of the conflict is the struggle to control the vast natural resource wealth of the DRC that includes diamonds, gold, tin, copper, timber, and coltan – a vital component of our computers and cell phones. Vast quantities of mineral wealth are smuggled from the DRC every year without benefit to the Congolese people.

The Catholic Church is a critical force in the DRC. Fifty-five percent of its over 60 million people are Catholic, making it the largest Catholic population in Africa. In the absence of functioning government structures, the Catholic Church, along with other churches, has for decades provided most of the basic services such as health care and education for the Congolese people. The Church also played an important role in providing non-partisan civic education – supported by CRS and other Caritas agencies – in all 47 dioceses across the country for the referendum on the new constitution, as well as the two rounds of presidential elections. The Church also trained election monitors to help ensure free and fair elections.

The Conference of Congolese Bishops issued numerous public statements over the past two years urging the transitional government to move forward with the electoral process in a fair, transparent, and inclusive manner. In their most recent statement of December 2006, the bishops congratulated all on the successful elections and urged

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the nation to focus now on national reconciliation and reconstruction. Congo's future is in God's hands, said the statement, but depends also on the Congolese people working together for peace and national unity.

USCCB POSITION

USCCB continues its support for the efforts of the Church in the Congo. In July 2005, Bishop William Murphy and USCCB staff visited Bukavu, in eastern Congo, to learn about the continuing crisis in that part of the country from religious, community and political leaders. These leaders expressed their hopes for the emergence from the elections of a peaceful, united and democratic Congo.

CRS and USCCB were instrumental in developing and supporting passage of S.2125, *The Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act*, a bipartisan legislative package initiated by Senator Barack Obama that allocates \$52 million to help create conditions favorable to the electoral process and to improve development and security in the DRC. Now that Congress has passed the bill and the president has signed it, the focus is on implementation of the provisions of the bill.

Some key policy objectives of S.2125 include: ensuring government commitment to democracy, transparency, human rights, peace, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures; expediting the process of disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement of armed rebel groups; ensuring governmental commitment to responsible and transparent management of natural resources; protecting internally displaced persons; addressing basic humanitarian needs and the special problems of vulnerable members of the population; and engaging with other governments working to promote peace and security in the region, while holding accountable those working to destabilize the country.

Significantly, the proposed legislation also requires the United States to use its seat on the UN Security Council to strengthen the authority and capacity of MONUC by clarifying its rules of engagement, increasing the availability of resources, and providing authority and support for assisting with the elections and monitoring arms trafficking and natural-resource exploitation.

The UN peacekeeping force in the DRC (MONUC) continues to play a critical role in the DRC, and is up for mandate renewal in February 2007. USCCB believes that MONUC's troop level should be kept at the current level of 17,000 at least through 2007, and that MONUC's mandate should be clarified and revised in the post-election context.

ACTION REQUESTED

- 1) Ask the U.S. Congress and Administration to move forward with implementing the S.2125 legislation, and to provide adequate levels of foreign aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- 2) Ask the U.S. to support the renewal of the UN Peacekeeping mission's (MONUC) mandate at current troop levels and continue to provide adequate U.S. funding for it.

RESOURCES: See the recent correspondence from Bishop Thomas G. Wenski urging Senate action on the *Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security and Democracy Promotion Act* (S.2125) and other documents on the DRC at: www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/drcstatements.htm.

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