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The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

African Union

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), located in Central Africa, is the second-largest country on the continent and highly rich in natural resources, particularly minerals. Despite this, the country has endured decades of conflict and instability, and humanitarian catastrophe. The violence, described as one of the most complex and longest humanitarian crises in the world, is fueled by an intricate interplay of internal divisions, regional rivalries, and international interests. Regardless, it remains labelled as a civil conflict.

This ongoing turmoil has approximated 6 million deaths ever since its beginning in 1996. Armed groups, competition for resources, and political fragmentation have escalated displacement, poverty, and instability. The weak governance, civilian attacks, and chronic lack of essential services compounds this crisis even further. Finding a peaceful and sustainable solution remains a formidable challenge due to the violent and perpetual nature of the crisis. Local aspirations are continually undermined by external interference or lost within the relentless struggle for control over the country's vast resources. The people of DRC continue to endure undeniable hardship and unsafety, urgently awaiting a solution that offers stability and hope.

Definition of key terms

Armed groups

Non-state organisations that have the capability of using violence during non-international armed conflict.

Ceasefire

A temporary suspension of fighting between conflicting parties, often agreed upon to allow for negotiations or humanitarian access.

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)

Acts of sexual violence are often used as tactics of violent extremism during times of conflict.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

A set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict.

Mediation efforts

The systems and strategies employed by a neutral third party to help conflicting parties reach a mutually agreeable resolution.

Mineral exploitation

The process of seeking concentrated deposits of minerals with the purpose of mining for economic benefit.

Natural Resource Governance

The processes and institutions that manage how natural resources are accessed and used.

Peacekeeping mission

A deployment of personnel, often including military, police, and civilians, to a conflict zone to maintain or restore international peace and security

General Overview

Decades of conflict

The origins of the current crisis in the DRC can be traced back to the country's turbulent post-colonial repercussions. After gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, both the DRC and its neighbour Rwanda faced immediate political upheaval, which included foreign intervention and the secession of resource-rich provinces. This culminated in the assassination of the prime minister Patrice Lumumba and the start of a three-decade authoritarian rule under dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who renamed the country Zaire.

Ethnic tensions

Ethnic tensions have played a pivotal role in this prolonged issue. In 1960, political persecution in Rwanda forced more than 300,000 individuals from the Tutsi minority group to flee to neighbouring countries, particularly to the DRC. These tensions escalated dramatically in the mid 1990's following the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In its aftermath, millions of displaced Rwandan refugees- including Hutu extremists responsible for the genocide- fled into eastern DRC. Upon establishing refugee camps, the area became significantly destabilised due to conflict with the local communities like the Congolese Tutsi.

The Tutsi-led Rwandan government, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), pursued Hutu militias into the DRC which triggered the First Congo War (1996-1997). Consequently, Mobutu was overthrown and the installation of Larent Kabila as president took place. Regardless of this change, ethnic tensions persisted, armed groups remained active, and competition over the DRC's vast mineral resources - such as cobalt, coltan, and gold- fueled present day's violence in the DRC, especially the East.

The Second Congo War (1998-2003) led to the involvement of 9 more countries, including Namibia, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Sudan, Angola and Chad, as well as the rise of 25 armed groups. Ever since, ethnic divisions have become millitarized, forming the armed groups perpetuating violence within the DRC. Perhaps the most infamous rebellion, led by the M23 in 2008-2012 and composed largely of Congolese Tutsi, reignited tensions and further displaced hundreds of thousands. Even today, mistrust between communities remains high and ethnic militias serve as proxies for foreign interests or economic gain. Cycles of revenge killings, exclusion from local governance, and competition for land continue to deepen divisions. The failure of national disarmament and reintegration efforts have allowed ethnic armed forces to thrive, perpetuating violence in the DRC.

Mineral exploitation

The DRC boasts an assortment of natural resources, possessing large deposits of gold, coltan, cobalt, copper, diamonds, and many more. Whereas this should pose as an economic advantage to the country and fuel national development, these resources have become a major driving force of the current conflict. Both armed groups and foreign interferences have been exploiting these minerals to fund their operations. During both the First and Second Congo Wars, establishing control over mining sites was a key motivation for the neighbouring countries' military, including Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Much of the mining in the DRC is carried out by artisanal miners, meaning individuals extract resources with tools in hand rather than safer and developed machinery. Here they face systemic exploitation by the powerful in control of these mines- armed groups and corrupt political figures. Fatal accidents on these mining sites are reported regularly by the media and NGOs.

Today, the DRC is victim to illegal mining and smuggling, specifically in the eastern provinces, where almost all major mines are located near the borders of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. Militia groups such as the FDLR, Mai-Mai, and M23 continue to extract and traffic

minerals, often using forced labour and child miners. Continuous profit from these illegal actions sustains violence within the country and weakens the state's ability to govern.

Despite traceability initiatives, enforcement remains limited. As long as the DRC's mineral wealth is unaccounted for and unregulated, instability will continue within the country.

Humanitarian crises

The DRC faces a severe humanitarian crisis fuelled by the armed conflict, including 6 million deaths, over 7 million individuals displaced, and repeated cases of violence, including rape, abduction, and mass killings. Many residing in the city live in dire conditions without access to clean water, food, healthcare, or education. Children are the most vulnerable and targeted community during this crisis, subject to crimes such as forced labour in the mines and sexual exploitation. Armed groups such as ethnic militias and also soldiers are the perpetrators of these actions and, without immediate interference, will continue to deepen the crisis in the DRC.

Major parties involved

Armed groups

Multiple ethnic groups are operating in the DRC, such as the FDLR (Rwandan Hutu rebels), M23 (Tutsi-led rebel group), and various Mai-Mai (defensive Congolese militia). These groups compete over territorial control, exploit mineral resources, and target civilians.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The central government, currently led by Felix Tshisekedi. Their main struggle is maintaining authority over the Eastern regions due to limited resources and weak institutions. The Congolese army, Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) is engaged in operations against armed rebel groups.

Rwanda and Uganda

Not only do both countries have countless refugees residing in the DRC, but are also responsible for military intervention and the support of proxy militias. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has been accused of supporting the M23 rebellion to secure economic and strategic influence.

UN

MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, is one of the largest in the world and aims to protect civilians and stabilize the region.

Timeline of events

1960 June 30th	The Republic of Congo gains independence from Belgium,
1961 January 17th	First prime minister of The DRC, Patrice Lumumba, is assassinated by a government led by Mobutu Sese Seko and backed by the US, leading to the destruction of democracy.
1965	Mobutu Sese Seko seizes power and establishes a dictatorship.
1996 October 24-1997 May 16th	The First Congo War takes place, where Rwanda and Uganda support Laurent Kabila to overthrow Mobutu. Kabila becomes president.
1998 August 2nd-2003 July 18th	Kabila breaks ties with Rwanda and Uganda, urging them to back new armed rebellions. 9 other countries are involved. Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila. Groups such as M23, ADF, AND CODECO emerge as rebellions.
1999	UN Deploys MONUSCO peace forces.
2003 February 4th	Sun City Agreement formally ends the war, setting the process for the transformation of the political climate within the DRC.
2008-2012	M23 rebellion (Tutsi-led) seizes territory in the east, in North Kivu, multiple times before being defeated by UN-backed forces.
2018 December	Felix Tshisekedi is elected, marking the first peaceful transfer of power in The DRC.
2022-2025	A dormant M23 resurfaces and seizes North Kivu continuously.
2023	EAC's deployment of troops fails to stop M23's advances. EAC and UN troops begin withdrawal following violent protests. Regional troops are deployed instead.

Possible solutions

Regional cooperation

The African Union should facilitate peaceful and sustained dialogue between the main countries involved in this crisis, such as the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, to reach a mutual agreement on further steps needed to maintain peace and prevent proxy conflict.

Demobilization of armed groups

A renewed focus on a disarmament program is essential to discourage armed conflict within the nation. Seeing as the majority of the ethnic rebel groups are in armed conflict with one another, a primary step should be to restrict armed access to non-state parties. Secondly, combatants, especially child soldiers, should be offered vocational training, education, and psychological support to reintegrate into society peacefully.

Regulation of mining processes

Though foreign affairs in the DRC have proven to be rather complex and sensitive, regulation of the mining process is a crucial step towards achieving long-term stability within the country. As the mines lie on the eastern border of the DRC, there is an opportunity to establish control around the borders of Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, which may also aid in decreasing displacement and violent behaviour between the countries.

Humanitarian aid

It is essential to respond to the humanitarian crisis in the DRC. The lack of access to food, clean water, healthcare, education, and shelter occurs due to displacement and violence. As a response, countries increase attention to UN bodies such as MONUSCO, UNICEF, WFP, and uphold NGOs such as Médecins sans frontières (MDF) to increase provision of emergency relief. Humanitarian corridors can be established to safeguard resources sent into the country. Operations have the opportunity to be coupled with initiatives to rebuild local infrastructure. Strengthening coordination between aid organisations, the Congolese government, and MONUSCO is vital to ensure the well-being of the victims of this tragic crisis.

Strengthen the Congolese government

The government of the DRC is unable to reach political stability due to its weak institutions, which can be supported through anti-corruption reforms and assistance with law enforcement and judicial reforms.

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