

**GREAT LAKES POLICY FORUM
MEETING REPORT
March 20, 2003**

The March Forum included presenters Charles Snyder, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; Steve Wisecarver, Director of USAID's Office of East African Affairs; Jennifer Cooke, Deputy Director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); and Susanna Campbell, Consultant to the International Crisis Group (ICG). The forum focused on current US policy toward the Great Lakes Region, which comes in a timely manner on the heels of a Paul Kagame visit to the White House and the beginning of a US-led war in and subsequent international focus on Iraq.

The US main objectives throughout Africa are: to help build regional stability; to encourage conflict resolution; to strengthen democratic institutions; to combat transnational threats; to promote integration into the global economy; and to increase access to and quality of education and health services. The overall current US policy towards the Great Lakes is one of providing low-profile yet active support and aid to the countries in the region, though not attempting to solve the political, economic, and health problems that contribute to the precarious state of the region. The US sees the solutions to the regional problems as needing to come from the leadership within the region. For example, DRC President Kabila must show the will and resolve to do what's best for his country and region by being ready to compromise some of his power.

There are challenges that the US faces as it continues to deliberate how best to serve the Great Lakes Region. One such dilemma is discerning how to pressure governments to become more stable and transparent while supporting the governments' efforts to improve basic services for the populations. A related dilemma is how to convince the US Congress to invest in the region when Congress has a tight budget as well as doubts about whether the money will be used effectively. This year's development food assistance funding, cut in half from last year, is stretched to its limit. Much of humanitarian and development funding is being used to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, leaving little for other programs. The US government no longer has an overall framework for aid to the region, such as that provided by the USAID's Great Lakes Justice Initiative from 1999-2001. The \$5 billion Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) is good news for Africa. Of the \$1.3 billion pledged for 2004, President Bush has stated that half of that money should go to Africa.

The United States plans to help to restore sovereignty to the Congolese people—to let the people choose who they want to be their leaders. The current situation within the DRC seems to indicate that this ideal may be still a long way off. President Kabila and MLC leader Bemba are not showing many signs of willingness to compromise. Security in Kinshasa for those outside the government remains highly questionable. The situation in the East remains turbulent. The political parties involved in the transition process have not acted according to what they have agreed to on paper. Thus to this point, because of the

ongoing fighting and humanitarian crises in country, most of US financial assistance has been humanitarian aid, focusing on greater food security, health, and the transition process. The people are not necessarily seeing all of this aid money, as often resources to the DRC do not find their way from the top down to the people in need. There is also a severe need for a programmatic emphasis on economic assistance that generates employment and income. This can only become a reality when there is some stability.

In Rwanda, the US is supporting the writing of a new Constitution as well as parliamentary elections later this year. The plan for Rwanda is based on its post-conflict government stability. The US role in Rwanda is three-fold: to help enhance democracy and rule of law by promoting more transparency in Kigali; to improve health and food security; and to increase productivity and private sector development. There have been recent successes in Rwanda such as food for work programs, genuine economic stirring, and reintegration of ex-FAR/Interhamwe back into society. The political stability in Rwanda allows US assistance to be used for more economic development programs that encourage building capacity for income producing activities that hope to stimulate the private sector. President Bush, in his recent meeting with Paul Kagame, congratulated Kagame on Rwanda's economic gains and in country reconciliation, while cautioning him on Kigali's role in the DRC and the ever-present need for a more transparent democracy and more open trading. Overall, Kagame's visit to the White House signifies a solidification of US-Rwandan relations with a hint of caution from the US President.

The situation in Burundi has much riding on a proposed May 1 presidential transition that is supposed to see President Buyoya, who is a Tutsi, hand over power to his Hutu Vice-President, Domitien Ndayizeye. US policy towards Burundi currently emphasizes the ongoing peace process and good governance, as well as increasing food security, encouraging the Burundian oligarchy to yield power, and increasing access to social services. As of now, 75-80% of US assistance to Burundi is humanitarian aid. Just as in the DRC, more economic stirring activities are needed and are crucial to a post-transition. The US is reinforcing South Africa's lead in Burundi with money, material, and diplomats. There have been successes in Burundi through the use of international monetary assistance—such as radio programming promoting dialogue and reconciliation, the creation of interethnic women's centers, and an increased access to justice for youth and women through strengthened advocacy and civil society groups.

Some critics argue that the role of the international community in Burundi in the past three years has been noticeably stagnant, as international donors have used the lack of a cease-fire as an excuse not to give aid to Burundi. In the past, before this seemingly inactive period, donors focused too much on blind assistance and handouts in lieu of community development. Aid to Burundi would ideally facilitate the return of IDP's and reintegration of ex-combatants into society. Responsible aid would also potentially help create credible new leadership. Further, the international community has the ability to help provide the vision and framework for a successful transition to peace, offering crucial third party leadership to usher in the May 1 transition. However, has Burundi itself shown enough commitment to deserve international support in its transition? The

last thing the international community wants is another Rwanda, but on some level Burundi must show how much it is concerned about and committed to peace.

The situation in the Great Lakes can be seen as a rather bleak one. Nevertheless, there are positives to be noted: the proposed May 1 Presidential change in Burundi, the ongoing Inter Congolese Dialogue in Sun City, and the successful aid efforts on local levels in the region. With all that is taking place in the world contemporaneously, there is a great need to remember the Great Lakes region and keep it on the international community map so as to avoid another Rwanda and so the region can begin to focus more on education and development rather than peacekeeping and humanitarian crises.