

Great Lakes Policy Forum
Special Meeting Report
August 5, 2003

Through the generosity and cooperation of the South African Embassy, it was our privilege to convene a special meeting of Great Lakes Policy Forum in August. The August Forum was dedicated to discussing and analyzing the involvement of the South African government in facilitating the peace process in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In contrast to the Forum's traditional panel discussion format, the forum was centered upon the remarks of the Honorable Fholisani Sydney Mufamadi. Minister Mufamadi is currently serving in President Mbeki's cabinet as the Minister for Provincial and Local Government and as the official South African Facilitator involved in the DRC peacebuilding process. Minister Mufamadi's comments focused on the South African contribution to the peacebuilding process, the current status of the negotiations, and the most proximate challenges to progress towards a sustainable peace.

Summary of Minister Mufamadi's Remarks:

There is a contentious debate throughout academic and policy circles as to whether the DRC should be considered a failed state, a weak state, or an incomplete state. Regardless of the final result of this scholarly discussion, the practical reality is that developing peace and security within DRC is vital to the stability of the entire region. It is this regional dimension of the Congolese conflict that has prompted the government of South Africa to undertake a dominant role in the facilitation of the DRC peace process. South Africa's experiences over the last two decades, particularly the struggle against apartheid and the challenges of democratization, have empowered the South Africans with keen insight into developing peace and democracy in deeply divided African societies. South Africa's national interests are integrally linked to developing peace and improving the quality of life for all Africans. Therefore, it has been this desire to encourage regional stability and African solidarity that inspired South Africa to assume the role of a regional player in southern Africa and in the Great Lakes peace processes.

Within the DRC peace process itself, South Africa has been involved in a dual capacity: first as the chair of the African Union; and second, as an individual country assisting a fellow state under the auspices of the United Nations. The official international credentials of the AU and the UN have enhanced South Africa's legitimacy as a facilitator for the peace process, and as an important catalyst in bringing the parties to the negotiating table. South Africa has limited its role to the facilitation of a Congolese dialogue about peace and post-conflict reconstruction.

A foundational tenet of the South African approach has been to empower the Congolese by encouraging them to accept responsibility and ownership of the peace process and its successes. South Africa has also been committed to promoting leadership development among Congolese elites and civil society. The negotiation process has been extremely challenging. The process has also been complicated by the influx of foreign militia groups into DRC and the active, and often destructive, involvement of foreign players in exacerbating the conflict.

Over the last several years, South Africa has been successful in moving the belligerent parties away from the political culture of despotism and "Mobutuism." The South African facilitators have been committed to framing peacebuilding and democracy as an inclusive and progressive (yet incremental) process. Today, the various Congolese factions have become more accepting of power-sharing agreements and are exhibiting a greater commitment to finding common ground.

The current phase of the peace process and the established agreement focuses on 3 fundamental aspects:

1. Increased accountability and transparency
2. Developing good governance policies and practices
3. Creating an inclusive, centralized government

These foundational principles are reflected in the body of the new constitution and serve as the basic values underlying the transitional government's authority. Over the next two years, the peacebuilding process and the transitional government will focus on developing the democratic institutional infrastructure necessary to ensure the longevity of Congolese democracy.

International community efforts in the DRC should be prioritized, and should immediately focus on the proximate goals of ending the violence and increasing security. The regional violence, particularly in the Ituri region, continues to threaten the stability of the entire country and the peace settlement. Even though the transitional government has stated its commitment to ending the violence, it lacks the ability to actively intervene. The UN force MONUC and South Africa, both acting under the auspices of a UN Chapter VII mandate, have assumed the international military peacekeeping efforts in DRC. The presence of international peacekeepers in DRC should not and will not be a permanent reality. The goals of the South African government and UN peacekeeping missions are: 1) to train a new national Congolese security force; 2) to manage the demobilization of the various militias and belligerents; and, 3) to foster the integration of the combatants into the national force and/or civilian society.

The limited experience of the Congolese people with democracy and the lack of a democratic political culture is posing yet another challenge to democratization in DRC. DRC has had only a brief flirtation with democracy during the immediate post decolonization period of the 1960s. This considered, the international community must be patient and realize that a country with only limited experience with democratic political practices cannot immediately call for elections. On the contrary, voter education and democratic institution building must precede any efforts to hold national elections.

Congolese civil society and the infant democratic state system are involved in a mutually transforming and evolving relationship. On the one hand, many government elites have ambitions of winning the elections, and are often too focused on "dominating" the political system rather than working within it. Government responsibility to the public extends beyond the power of the elections and the executive; therefore, the Congolese government elites must strive to reconcile their desires for power and their responsibility to the people. The rest of the international community should join the efforts of South Africa and share their insights into balancing power and democracy.

Furthermore, the DRC transitional government must conceptualize the issues, challenges and rewards of democratic post-conflict reconstruction. Throughout the reconstruction and election processes, the transitional government will need assistance in both the areas of conceptualization and implementation. The message that everyone in civil society and the government have a role to play in the reconstruction effort must be infused into the Congolese understanding of democracy. South Africa hopes that placing a strong emphasis on the variety of opportunities for everyone beyond gaining an electoral office will serve as an effective conflict prevention mechanism, and they will be able to reduce the malignant nature of competition and "Mobutuism."

In conclusion, the South African government is particularly optimistic about the long-term success of the peace process and democratic reconstruction. Previously, the rebel factions had balked at the idea of becoming involved in Kinshasa. Now the rebel leadership has been accepted into the transitional government, and the Congolese people have applauded them as heroes and welcomed their participation. Throughout the DRC there is an increase of political will amongst the population and elites to support the process and actually adhere to agreements. While the Congolese peacebuilding and reconciliation processes still have a long and challenging road in front of them, the prospect of developing a sustainable peace in DRC has never been more promising.