

108th Great Lakes Policy Forum

July 1, 2004, Washington, DC

Theme: “Crisis Unfolding in the Democratic Republic of Congo”

The 108th installment of the Great Lakes Policy Forum (GLPF) was held shortly after the eruption of insurgent violence in Bukavu and just days after high-level talks took place between DRC president Joseph Kabila and Rwandan president Paul Kagame to ease tensions among the two neighbors. The theme, “Crisis Unfolding in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” set the tone of the event, whose goal was to bring together experts on the matter, facilitate dialogue on the crisis, and to formulate policy recommendations.

The panelists included Hans Romkema, the former DRC representative at the Life and Peace Institute and currently an independent consultant, Professor Herbert Weiss, a Senior Policy Scholar with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWIS), and Jason Stearns, a former demobilization officer with the United Nations Mission in the DRC (MONUC). Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Search for Common Ground’s Sub Saharan Africa Programs, facilitated the forum.

The three presenters discussed factors contributing to the current situation, particularly the violence in the East, possible implications for the future, and finally recommendations for the DR Congo and the international community to mitigate the conflict, both generally and specifically. A question and answer session following the presentations produced a lively debate, showing the ambiguous nature of the myriad issues affecting the Great Lakes.

Contributing Factors

That the transitional government lacks authority was a theme echoed throughout the forum. The country is still divided into spheres of influences, as recent violence in the Kivus demonstrated. One critical factor in the lack of governmental control that has created regional fragmentation is that the army is not unified. Previous faction or group loyalty currently hampers the chain of command, with entire regiments, especially in the East, being essentially autonomous.

Three issues relating to mismanagement of the army and governmental impotence created the recent violence in Bukavu. First, the generally unwieldy and corrupt nature of the government led to a lack of integration of the newly unified political and military factions. Second, a governmental and military impasse in Kinshasa contributed to a lack of authority in the country, especially in the Kivus. The confrontation between President Kabila and Vice-President Ruberwa over security, defense, and governors, and indecision over laws of amnesty all contributed to a lack of control over former rebel officers, most notably General Nkunda and Colonel Mutebutsi. Third, mismanagement of the army, including little mixing of newly allied troops, poor treatment and pay of officers, troop loyalty to local and not central constituency, and a large number of autonomous officers further added to RCD (Rally for Congolese Democracy) frustration and, ultimately, the

brief occupation of Bukavu. As one participant pointed out, the proper balance between accepting local power realities and establishing superficial authority has not been struck.

In addition, too many governmental initiatives merely serve as “firefighting” remedies – a road is built, a rogue officer is defeated, but the larger underlying problems continue. Real and more complex issues are not adequately dealt with. Impunity, for example, remains a reality for all parties, due to a minimally functional judiciary, therefore doing little to discourage violations of the rule of law – both RCD and government troops in the Bukavu skirmish contributed to the looting of an estimated half the city’s homes.

Official corruption, too, leading from a lack of salaried workers, contributes to a poor administration of the country. DDRRR will continue to progress haltingly, as long as “firefighting” remains the overall policy for nation building.

All in all, the Kinshasa government lacks domestic authority, and cannot solve the current problems unless Kabila regains true sovereignty. As one attendee asked, “Can Kabila be the Leviathan for this Hobbsian state?”

Therefore the most recent fighting in Bukavu was a political crisis that led to military escalation, with three simultaneous developments contributing to the conflict. The first two contributing factors of lack of governmental authority leading to regionalism and the mismanagement of the army led to growing dissent in Goma and Bukavu. The group of disgruntled ex-RCD officers who began the insurgency had nothing to gain in the transition, they were not sworn-in in Kinshasa (and would not go there for fear of persecution for being Banyamulenge), and a stockpile of arms existed in the region, especially Bukavu. These escalating tensions built up over months and eventually brewed over into the violence that occurred in Bukavu.

The Rwanda Factor

Rwanda, it is alleged, has been smuggling arms across the border to RCD soldiers in an effort to wipe out FDLR (Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda) soldiers in the Kivus. MONUC has seized weapons, supporting this claim. Furthermore, Radio Rwanda, with the support of Kagame, broadcast “genocide alerts” the day violence erupted in Bukavu, prodding RCD militias raising Congolese suspicion of meddling. Lastly, Colonel Mutebutsi had found refuge in Rwanda. Despite evidence of Rwandan interference, the international community has historically been hesitant to exert real pressure on Kagame. Most in attendance agreed, however, that the FDLR are still an active and armed threat to the Congolese population who need to be disarmed.

MONUC’s Reaction, or Lack Thereof

The Congolese population became frustrated with the United Nation’s mission in their country when MONUC peacekeeping troops stationed in Bukavu failed to prevent violence. The inaction was due to the UN’s lack of leverage on the transitional government, worries over taking sides, poor intelligence, lacking clarity of the powers of

the mandate, and too few troops. The peacekeepers were caught off guard and, unsure of what they were allowed to do, took the path of least resistance and did not engage the enemy with force.

Culmination

The complex sum of these contributing factors were not dealt with, both domestically or internationally, letting discontentment brood, resulting in the May and June 2004 events in Bukavu.



MONUC: Needing a more explicitly defined role?

The result, the much-reported takeover of the city, was nothing less than full-fledged urban warfare. While governmental forces regained control, the city paid the price, with little property left unscathed. Furthermore, Human Rights Watch and other groups have reported human rights abuses during and after the fighting, by both sides.¹ The violence showed the results of Kinshasa's lack of authority as well as the failures of MONUC's ability to keep the peace.

The Future?

Although nothing is certain, the panelists addressed possible scenarios that could play out if the tension in the Kivus is not properly mitigated. The potential for ethnic killings, new national or secessionist wars, total disorder, disintegration of the Congolese state, continued foreign military interference, humanitarian failure, and investor flight could all happen. Additionally, the issue of impunity has the potential to lead to military coup by the new army out of fear of prosecution if the judicial system decides to go after all guilty parties.

What Needs To Be Done

Generally

First and foremost, the "hollow shell" of the state authority needs to be reestablished. The national authority of DR Congo needs more help from the international community, both better coordinated and targeted. The army, police, and judiciary need to become unified, trained, and better equipped, again with international assistance. DDRRR efforts need to continue and be stepped up. Impunity and corruption need to be dealt with; the recently formed corruption commission will do little to make real change. Rwanda and others need to stay out of the East, ending their alleged support for rebellions. The law on nationality needs to be signed by President Kabila, ending governmental inconsistency on the Banyamulenge ethnicity issue. The executive branch's "1+4" (one president and four

¹ http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/06/11/congo8803_txt.htm

vice-presidents) structure is ineffective; many feel that a single policy by Kabila would be preferable for the country given the current disorder.

The UN also needs to more clearly define MONUC's mandate – adding “teeth” to too broadly defined terms of mission. The mandate should clarify exactly what MONUC can and cannot do, and this should be explained to the Congolese population. The current command and control apparatus is fragile and needs less timid investment, including better pay for Congolese soldiers. It was also argued that the US needs to stop prioritizing reintegration too far above the reduction of violence, focusing first on targeted disarmament.

Specifically

Specific policy recommendations that came out of the Special Session on DR Congo immediately following the 108th GLPF will be posted when available.