

**112<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum**  
*“Democratic Republic of Congo: The Road to Elections”*  
Meeting Report – March 3, 2005

The 112<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum, “Democratic Republic of Congo: The Road to Elections,” came at a critical and uncertain time as the DRC prepares for democratic elections, currently scheduled for June 30. The Forum also took place in the context of the continuing reassessment of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operation in Congo, MONUC.

Panelists included Valentin Mubake Numbi, Political and Strategic Advisor to the National President of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) and Dorothée Gizenga Ngolo, Representative of the Parti Lumumbiste Unifié (PALU). Chris Hennemeyer, Africa Regional Director for IFES, moderated the Forum.

Panelists initially relayed the tumultuous political, economic, and social situation of the DRC since independence. Members of the panel expressed the grandeur, intensity, and dimensions of the conflict, and the implications of the conflict for regional stability in Africa. The humanitarian situation was underscored, highlighting the internal displacements, civilian casualties, misconduct on the part of MONUC, and economic stagnation. It was articulated that women have been disproportionately affected by the conflict. Currently, 80% of Congolese live on 20 cents per day. Considering that the poverty threshold is \$1 per day, the state of human misery is particularly dire in Congo.

Addressing the regional nature of the conflict is central in order to find lasting solutions. Panelists first highlighted that the DRC itself is bordered by nine countries, and stressed that if the situation in the DRC does not deescalate, there is an enormous potential for negative spillovers into neighboring countries. Furthermore, given the size and location of the country, the outcome of the political transition has implications for the stability of the African continent.

Panelists also highlighted regional impediments to the political transition process. In particular, the role of other African states in bringing Laurent Kabila to power was mentioned. The conflict along the border with Uganda was also listed as an impediment to democratic transition in the DRC. Moreover, the panelists underlined the role of Rwanda, especially in the DRC’s eastern provinces. It was argued that the international community was overlooking Rwanda’s behavior because of the failure of the international community in the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

In addition to highlighting the lack of pressure put on Rwandan aggression in the eastern provinces, the panelists chastised Western governments for supporting poor leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The international community was presented as ineffective and unresponsive to the needs of the Congolese people. Panelists also touched on the issue of South African designs in the DRC, arguing that the United States might be influenced by the ANC (African National Congress) lobby in Washington. Therefore, panelists urged the international community to be more constructively engaged in the transitional process in the DRC.

The 24-month transitional period initiated by the Global and Inclusive Accord scheduled the end of the transitional period for June 30, 2005. Elections are to be held on this date. The purpose of

the transitional government has been to prepare the country for elections and the creation of a legitimate government for the Congolese people.

Concern was expressed over the transitional government's seriousness in readying the country for elections; the lack of progress on the electoral and constitutional frameworks necessary to hold elections was of particular concern. Furthermore, voter education and registration have not moved forward in a satisfactory manner. Although the process of establishing technical, legal, material, and financial bases to run elections throughout the country is daunting, it was argued that the problem is not fundamentally logistical, and thus, can be attributed to inertia on the part of the transitional government. In support of this point, it was stated that it is not in the interest of the transitional government to move forward with the democratic transition process, as this will undermine their power. Under the current agreement, the elections can be postponed for up to six months, but only for technical reasons.

Nevertheless, it was stated that elections could still take place by the scheduled date. While there are logistical problems to be overcome, there is the capacity to hold elections. The example of national exams was given as evidence of this capacity. Every year, including last year, the government has held national exams. The logistics of holding these exams are difficult, but the government has managed to execute the process, even in the eastern provinces. From this example, it was argued that what is needed is the political will to execute the elections. Pressure and engagement from the international community would push the interim government in this task. Conditions necessary to hold the elections that were brought up in the forum were for the interim government to pass three specific laws and increase the MONUC presence, especially in the eastern provinces. If these conditions are met, then the elections might be a real possibility on June 30. The idea of partial or rolling elections was not supported.

If the necessary steps are not taken to hold elections on June 30, one suggestion was to create a government of "national rescue," which would replace the interim government and undertake the necessary steps to hold elections. However, it was pointed out that a possible disadvantage to this is that a government of "national rescue" would only prolong the process, and would not offer any guarantees of better governance and election preparation.

It was unanimously expressed that elections are needed in Congo to ensure that the Congolese have, at the very least, a legitimate government of their own choosing, free from foreign intervention and influence. However, caution was urged about the true power of elections; elections will not signify the consolidation of democracy in Congo. The Congolese and the international community must understand that democracy is a lengthy process and that elections are the first step in that process.