

114th Great Lakes Policy Forum

*“Democracy and Conflict Assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo:
The Road to Elections”*

Meeting Report – May 5, 2005

The 114th Great Lakes Policy Forum – entitled "Democracy and Conflict Assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo: The Road to Elections" – featured three distinguished guests: Dr. Rene Lemarchand, Professor Emeritus at the University of Florida; Mr. David Pottie, Senior Associate in the Carter Center Democracy Program; and Mr. Michael Neuman, Program Officer with Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders). The forum was facilitated by Ms. Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Sub-Saharan Africa Programs at Search for Common Ground.

Several complex and challenging issues emerged from the speakers' presentations and ensuing discussion, including whether elections in the DRC will be successful, the logistical and political roadblocks to their achievability, regional and international actors' role in the country, and the priority of elections versus humanitarian concerns.

The potential for successful elections

Historical lessons from the DRC's past cast doubt on the potential for success in the current elections process. There have been five elections since the DRC gained independence, of which only two were multi-party (in 1960 and 1965). These elections divided the country into factions and paved the way for Mobutu's ascendancy, which resulted in subsequent elections being devoid of choice. There is often talk of the challenges in carrying out post-conflict elections, but the DRC will try to hold its elections in the midst of the conflict, rendering the process all the more difficult.

There was little respite from the overwhelming problems addressed in this form, including the potential for post-election violence. A few suggestions were made for transforming the elections away from a zero-sum game: it was proposed that tradeoffs could be made to accommodate the minority populations in the post-election period. Disarmament initiatives and/or amnesty might be traded for commitments to non-violence from internal and external actors. There were some signs of progress, including recent success in FDLR negotiations, the reactivation of the verification method whereby joint Rwandan and Congolese patrols monitor their common border, and the arrest and incarceration of most leaders of factions in the Ituri province. Speakers' general sentiment, however, was sober with regards to the elections, and much of the discussion focused on reducing the cost and potential for violence.

Roadblocks to elections' achievability

There was extensive discussion of the shortcomings of elections preparations to date; several basic and essential requirements have not yet been met. These include a formal and final constitution, a strong legal framework, infrastructure, and security. The constitution is currently a draft that has not yet been voted on by the Senate. The legal framework in place includes some key components like an electoral commission and a law for the formation of political parties, but it lacks crucial laws such as those governing public financing of elections, amnesty, and

referendums. Infrastructure that would make elections possible in the DRC is lacking. In fact, the prospect for elections was seen as much easier in Iraq because Iraq has roads and a viable communications system. The lack of fundamental census information, air transportation for elections equipment, staff, materials, and security for the estimated 40,000 polling centers will prove daunting challenges to the elections' success.

It is estimated that the elections will cost \$245 million, of which \$200m has already been pledged (\$180m by international donors and \$20m by the DRC itself). This does not take into account the estimated logistics costs of \$103m and security expenses of \$41m. The current plan on the ground is to equip polling centers with one laptop, one digital camera and one color printer to record 15 statistical categories on each person who registers to vote. The information collected at voter registration stations would then be uploaded daily via satellite communication. This process, in addition to registering voters and producing voter cards and voter lists, would serve as a national census. There was some concern over the "unbridled faith" that seems to be held in the technology of these voter registration systems. It was emphasized that all technology can be political and easily manipulated.

During the discussion, it was cautioned that members of the transitional government have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and in protecting their current positions. Though there was a general consensus that elections could not possibly occur in any legitimate or thorough way by June 30, 2005, it was hoped that voter registration would begin by that time. If this happens, it would at least provide some tangible evidence that the transitional government is making progress in the electoral process.

Regional and international actors' role in the DRC

A dynamic discussion followed the presentations, focusing on regional and international actors' roles in the DRC. Discussion about Rwanda concerned Kigali's vital interest in the mineral wealth of eastern Congo, the arms trade, and Rwanda's willingness to violate the DRC border. Several contributors felt that Rwanda does not respect the DRC's sovereignty. It was discussed whether elections would strengthen the DRC in this regard or whether Rwanda would maintain the upper hand because of their superior army and weapons. To back these suggestions, the December 2004 UN report on Rwanda's violations of the arms embargo was offered as a good source of information on the subject.

The role and reputation of MONUC (the UN peacekeeping force in the DRC) was discussed, and speakers offered differing opinions on its ability to contribute constructively to bringing about democratic elections. It was observed that some in the DRC see MONUC as more of a hindrance than a help, and that people's experiences, sexual abuse, misconduct by the peacekeeping forces, and the DRC's slandering campaign against MONUC have constructed a very negative view of the UN force. Other speakers felt that the UN, EU and US could choose to have more positive leverage in the DRC

Weighing elections with humanitarian concerns

The humanitarian situation in the DRC surfaced during the forum as an important issue directly related to the elections. Some contributors felt almost ambivalent about the elections because of the dire reality of the humanitarian situation in the country. Inadequate health care and food resources, the continued presence and/or threat of violence that displacement Congolese and disrupts social structures, and the high incidence of abuse and rape all contribute to the current situation in the country. The instability of some areas has led to a suspension of EU aid. Forum contributors offered different views on Congolese citizens' priorities with respect to elections and the humanitarian situation. It seems clear that those in rural settings, especially in eastern DRC, are more focused on the relief of quotidian suffering than on the political elections process. In contrast, a greater percentage of people in Kinshasa seem adamant that elections – and successful elections – are needed to begin to curb the deep problems that plague the DRC.

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