

**The 100<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum**  
**Meeting report**  
*October 1, 2003*

Through the generosity and cooperation of the South African Embassy, it was a privilege to host and celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum at the South African Embassy on October 1, 2003. This celebratory Forum was dedicated to discussing and analyzing the past, present, and future situation of the Great Lakes region, with particular emphasis on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Her Excellency Barbara Masekela, Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to the United States, opened the 100<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum and welcomed speakers and attendants to the Forum and the South African Embassy. Ambassador Masekela referred to the role that the Republic of South Africa has played in the Great Lakes region as well as its involvement in creating and promoting peace and stability. Ambassador Masekela also highlighted that peace and stability lead to important economic and social developments and gains.

In contrast to most past Forums, the 100<sup>th</sup> Great Lakes Policy Forum was not a panel discussion. Rather, the Forum took the form of a presentation by Mr. Aldo Ajello, the Special Representative of the European Union for the Great Lakes Region. In his presentation, Mr. Ajello highlighted the feeling of positivism that currently prevails in the Great Lakes Region, particularly in relation to recent developments and the current situation in the DRC. Mr. Ajello was introduced by Dr. I. William Zartman, Director of the Conflict and Management Program at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, one of the co-sponsors of the Great Lakes Policy Forum.

Dr. Zartman explained how the Great Lakes Policy Forum had been formed seven years ago as an interface between officials and people and organizations with an interest in the region. The initial aim of the Forum was to exchange information and knowledge and to build sustainable peace in the Great Lakes region.

The following is a summary of the remarks made by Mr. Ajello:

The situation in the Great Lakes Region is considerably brighter today than it was only six months ago. The situation six months ago was grim, but today we see light. The main reason for optimism is that institutions of democratization are in place in the DRC. The establishment of these institutions has not been easy. The Government of the Republic of South Africa has, among others, made an enormous effort in helping set up these institutions. Further, the United Nations has played an important role in the DRC and has been very committed to the region. The UN Secretary-General appointed an experienced diplomat, William Lacy Swing of the United States, as his Special Representative for the DRC in May 2003, and this has already proven very beneficial.

The main reason why the efforts in the DRC have led to positive results is because the international community and the United Nations have worked very well together. This was also the lesson learned from earlier efforts in Mozambique. When representatives from different parts of the international community cooperate and work together, positive results are achieved. Therefore the international community must keep working together so that the peace, stabilization, democratization, and development processes keep moving forward in the Great Lakes Region.

In order for the situation and the efforts in the DRC to continue moving in the right direction, the international community must also be vigilant. There are groups within society itself that can be of danger to the Congolese government and the institutions (official institutions as well as civil society institutions) that are in the process of being established in the DRC. In order to contain and suppress these groups, as well as protect citizens of the DRC and the newly established institutions, the international community should aid in the establishment of a police force and an army. Furthermore, everyone should pull together in order for democratic elections to be held in the DRC. Three years has been suggested as a realistic timeframe before such elections can and should take place. Consequently, involved actors must work in a speedy fashion – there is a lot of work that needs to be done before this time.

Furthermore, the international community must provide sufficient resources to the peace, stabilization and democratization processes that are being undertaken in the Great Lakes Region. Two summits on peace and development in the Great Lakes Region are scheduled for June and December 2004. The purpose of these summits is to consolidate peace and stability efforts in the region. The summits will also seek to find solutions to the problem of foreign actors and groups playing a role in national conflicts in the Great Lakes Region.

Regarding Rwanda, there are still threats to national security. As Rwanda continues its transformation into a more democratic society, it is important that the international community keeps pressure on Kigali to be as open and transparent as possible.

While important steps have been taken in the establishment of democratic institutions in the DRC, Burundi is at the start of such a process. Consequently, the international community must focus on Burundi in order to find a way to start rebuilding the nation, its institutions and democratic processes. Nevertheless, such a process cannot start until a cease-fire is in place.

Impunity is not considered the best solution to the problems past and present in the Great Lakes Region. Furthermore, there should be a greater focus on the issue of national justice rather than solely focusing on the International Criminal Court. Local administrations in the region must be supported and the local justice systems developed in order for the wrongdoings of the past to be dealt with in a manner that will serve the future.

In spite of there being many unresolved questions and problems relating to the situation in the DRC, the country is on the right track and should continue down this path. This can be achieved through strong backing from the international community and a commitment to cooperation from all parties represented and involved in the peace and reconstruction efforts. As for the Great Lakes Region, the process for peace and stability is moving in the right direction. While continuous efforts must be made and there is plenty of work to be done, this is definitely a time for optimism and mild celebration.