



Refugee Assistance in the DRC: Filling the Humanitarian Gap

Event Summary
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It is important to remember that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a large and diverse country. There are multiple forcibly displaced populations of concern. The largest internally displaced person (IDP) groups are in the Kivus in the East. The largest group of refugees produced by the DRC comes from Equateur province and the largest forced migration has been Congolese refugees forced out of Angola. Congolese refugees live in the Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Burundi, and Uganda. The DRC is also a refugee host for people coming from Angola and Rwanda. Many of these people, particularly the Rwandan refugees have been integrated into Congolese society and receive very little assistance. The numbers of refugees living in the DRC are loose government estimates as there have been no recent surveys. The refugee status for Angolan and Rwandan refugees in the DRC will expire at the end of 2011 and will either need to return home or achieve official citizenship status in the DRC. Considering abuses that Angolan refugees have faced in the past, this should be a significant concern.

The refugee situation in the DRC is bleak. It has been 15 years since the end of the 1st Congo war and there are still many displaced people. Refugee returns are only a trickle of the total displaced. IDPs are not receiving the services they require and protection efforts are not working. Women in camps are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence and despite efforts to care for the survivors of sexual and gender based violence, and some improvements to the justice system, rates of attacks are not going down.

Protection of Civilians

The UNHCR is a protection agency mandated 60 years ago to work with refugees. The United States provides ¼ of the UNHCR's budget. The State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) is primarily focused on the need for civilian protection and PRM advocates for UNHCR funding and support for refugee assistance in Congress. PRM is a small part of an inter-agency effort. PRM's role is often that of an advocate for victims of conflict and the needs of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The office is currently particularly concerned about gender based violence and improving capacity and performance.

The situation on the ground is very difficult. Camps are very insecure and there is little access to justice, leading to impunity. Rates of sexual violence are very high and protection of children has not been working. However, most refugee camps are in remote areas and security restrictions prevent most workers from staying in the camps over night. For these reasons, visits to camps are generally very short, providing little time for assistance staff to do more than hand out aid.

Protection of civilians is the first priority for the US Department of State. Like the UNHCR, PRM has a humanitarian mandate, not a development mandate, which means that it is limited in what it can provide to returnees who are often returning to economically devastated regions and in desperate need of development assistance.

The UNHCR and NGOs have been physically bringing refugees home from Zambia and 225,000 have returned since 2004. However there is a massive need for development assistance in areas that refugees have been returning home to. Even "peaceful" areas lack security. The Congolese government needs to support and protect its own people and has been failing to do so.

IDPs and Humanitarian Assistance

There are 1.8 million IDPs in the DRC, approximately 1.2 million of which are in the Kivus in Eastern Congo. These numbers are increasing. Many of these people are "pendulum displaced" and go home to work in their own fields in the day when it is safe but leave at night or when conditions change.

PRM and the UNHCR do a good job protecting civilians; however, there is a persistent gap in humanitarian aid to IDPs. Current assistance programs assume that host populations will take on the primary responsibility for IDPs. While this has traditionally been the case, high numbers of IDPs and the great length of conflict has stressed host capacity and host communities have very limited resources. Many are no longer able to provide any assistance. There are very few large scale assistance providers. One man was quoted in explaining his decision to move back to his home village "I would rather die in my field than starve here." While UNICEF has done a good job assessing the needs of IDPs using a cluster system of NGOs, this same system has only been providing 1/3 of IDPs with care. This has been shown to have a direct impact on population security and protection. For example, when fuel distribution was halted in North Kivu, rates of sexual violence escalated. Assistance needs to be increased by humanitarian actors.

UNHCR planned for a higher rate of refugee return in 2011 than has been seen, as refugee returns have stalled. While there have been pushes to utilize this budget in IDP assistance, the UNHCR reports that their donor countries often have tight control over what funds can be used for and using refugee funding for IDPs is a controversial issue. Many donor countries believe that local government should be responsible for caring for its own people when they are internally displaced. There has historically been resistance among donors to the expansion of the UNHCR mandate to include IDPs. However, UNHCR has the most experience working with forcibly displaced people and there does not seem to be another organization capable of carrying out the sizable tasks of assisting IDPs. The gap in known needs and provided services is exacerbated by the growing problem, which has been expanding faster than the budget to deal with it.

Role of the Congolese Government

The Congolese government should be doing more to help its own displaced people. The government signed the Kampala IDP convention, obliging the government to protect IDPs. However, the government lack capacity and the Congolese army, the FARDC, has been responsible for significant human rights violations.

IDPs and Refugees suffer from donor fatigue and the “CNN factor” where issues receiving a great deal of media coverage get more public attention from constituents and, consequently form donors. Because the conflict in the DRC has been going on for such a long time and many refugees have been displaced for such a long time, coverage of the problem has nearly disappeared.

Locally focused responses should pay more attention to those who are generally responding to IDP needs. Local communities and churches are often the first responders.

Services for Refugees

Search for Common Ground works with refugees in the DRC in North Kivu, Kitanga, and Equituer province in partnership with PRM, UNICEF, and UNHCR. It is the largest provider of UNHCR funded refugee services in the DRC.

Refugees have a real need for access to information. Refugees in Tanzania and Rwanda receive very little accurate information on the communities they are from. Refugees are often vulnerable to manipulation and rumors and human rights and news reports have a fearful effect, giving refugees a distorted view of the home communities. Refugees from Kitanga province have reported that they are afraid to go home because of reports of violence in the Kivus, which should be sufficiently far from their home communities to assuage such fears.

Refugees and their home communities are also in need to skills to deal with conflict upon return. Land rights are a major issue, as is access to water and schools. 2010 saw a 20% increase in land conflict connected to returning refugees and news of this conflict further dis-incentivizes refugees to return home. This only serves to increase instances of conflict as the longer refugees are gone the more likely it will be that their land will become occupied while they are away.