Finding a Lasting Solution to Instability in The Democratic Republic of the Congo*

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo, or the DRC as it is commonly known, is one of those countries that deserves greater research and attention, as well as a higher place on our foreign policy list.

Since its independence on June 30, 1960, the DRC has been mostly a poster child for many of the problems that have afflicted Africa over the past five decades—military coups, rampant corruption, anemic development, health pandemics, runaway inflation, conflict minerals, and poor governance. After many years of looking at and trying to deal with a string of recurring crises in the DRC, many people have ignored or written off the country as simply hopeless. That would be a serious mistake for the people of the Congo, for those countries in Central Africa who neighbor and border it, and the global community, who recognize that we have a stake in promoting stability and social progress around the world, and that the instability in the DRC is not cost free to the United States.

I think there is a very strong constituency among Americans, Africans, and the broader international community that wants the DRC to reach its true potential. And I believe this Administration has parallel support within Congress to elevate the issues affecting the DRC to a new level of importance.

First, a little background. The DRC should be one of Africa's economic and political powerhouses. It is the second largest nation in sub-Saharan Africa, and home to the third largest population after Nigeria and Ethiopia. The DRC has some of Africa's most fertile soil and possesses almost unparalleled hydroelectric potential. The country also contains many of Africa's most precious materials and sought-after land.

But the DRC is not one of Africa's political and economic powerhouses. It has had a recurring UN peacekeeping presence since independence in 1960, has the fifth highest child mortality rate in the world, the seventeenth highest maternal mortality rate, and less than 2,000 miles of paved road. The DRC's poverty, infrastructure deficits, and other development benchmarks are among the worst in the world. The Congo is ranked last—number 187—on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index. Instead of peace and prosperity, the Congolese have been plagued by decades of mismanagement, corruption, poor governance, and recurring civil strife. These problems, such as the proliferation of foreign armies, rebel groups, ethnic violence, and arms trafficking, and illicit mining, have exacted a horrifying toll on the DRC and its people.

* *Editor's Note: This piece is excerpted from a speech given by Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson at the Brookings Institution on February 11, 2013.*

The international community has invested huge sums of money into the DRC over many years with sometimes little to show for it. Why should we continue to do so when there are so many other competing and compelling global challenges out there?

First, no other conflict or act of violence since World War II has come close to taking so many lives. Rwanda, Somalia, the civil war in the Sudan, and the conflict in Darfur all have commanded our attention. Eight hundred thousand people were killed in Rwanda in the summer of 1994, just over one million in Somalia's two decade long conflict, 300,000 in Darfur, and two million people were killed in the conflict between North and South Sudan before the Naivasha Peace Treaty was signed in January 2005. However, in the DRC, conflict and resulting disease have killed more than five million people since 1998.

I think that the international community has a moral imperative to act more effectively in the DRC to break this cycle of death and suffering and to address the other consequences of this violence—the unmitigated rape and sexual violence against women and children, the nearly two million internally displaced people, the approximately 450,000 Congolese refugees who have been forced to flee into neighboring countries, and the absence of secure and prosperous lives for virtually the entire country.

Secondly, the DRC's chronic instability has consequences for US national interests and the interests of the nine other countries that border the DRC. These interests range from multination efforts to dismantle the Lord's Resistance Army, to climate change and the protection of one of the world's most important ecosystems, to advancing global energy security, and to the economic benefits that derive from open and secure borders. If the DRC were more stable and had an economy that benefitted all Congolese, it could become a leading exporter of natural resources, agricultural products, and scientific research that could attract substantial US and other foreign investment. The DRC possesses the second largest rainforest in the world, and it must be a critical partner in any global effort to combat climate change and to conserve and protect our biodiversity.

Thirdly, there are good fiscal and financial reasons for redoubling international efforts in the DRC. The United States, as well as many of our other international partners, has a number of competing international priorities that cry out for the money of American taxpayers. The crisis in Mali is only the most recent demand on those resources, the spending of which sometimes requires making enormously difficult tradeoffs among equally important causes. During our last fiscal year, the United States provided $410 million in assessed contributions to the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC—MONUSCO—and we have provided more than three billion for MONUSCO since 2000. We also provided nearly $115 million during our last fiscal year for humanitarian efforts in the DRC. These are essential expenditures that must continue in the medium term, but this is not a strategy that can be sustained indefinitely. We need to begin now to ensure that these investments address the underlying causes of the conflict and pave the way for an enduring solution to the continuous problems that that country has faced.

Lastly, and quite simply, the world cannot afford to fail in bringing stability to the DRC. If we are sincere in our hope that African countries will continue to make progress toward greater economic growth and development and toward achieving a more central role in the international community, then the DRC will have to be a significant element in meeting these continental-wide and international aspirations. Otherwise, it will continue to absorb scarce resources, rather than reaching its potential to make contributions to global security and economic prosperity for its people and the region.

I am not a pessimist by nature, but I also am not a romantic optimist either. The DRC has some very serious—some might even say some Herculean—challenges, but there are some concrete reasons to be optimistic about the DRC's future. More of the DRC's soldiers and police are being paid regularly and increasingly through mobile banking. Its economy is slowly stabilizing. During Prime Minister Matata's visit to Washington in February, we were all encouraged to learn of the reforms he is instituting to increase the DRC's macroeconomic stability and to strengthen oversight and transparency. Inflation is down, the DRC's GDP is up, and no one sees the country returning to the Mobuto era of 1,000 percent weekly inflation and the one billion Zaire note that characterized the DRC's devastated economy less than two decades ago.

While resolving instability and other challenges in the DRC has not been as high an international priority as Somalia, Sudan, or Côte d'Ivoire over the last four years, we have not been sitting with our hands folded, ignoring the complex challenges of the Congo. Rather, we have been working closely with others in the international community to resolve the underlying causes of the instability in the DRC, as well as helping to mitigate the most recent crisis in the eastern Congo. We recognize a comprehensive approach is absolutely essential, and we have proceeded in such a manner to address security, political, humanitarian, and development challenges simultaneously. Let me briefly review what we have recently done.

We have made reducing sexual and gender-based violence and fighting impunity top priorities. In 2009, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the DRC on her very first trip to Africa. She met with President Kabila and she also visited Goma to speak out about the treatment and prevention of sexual violence against women and issued the demand for greater accountability for perpetrators. We have advocated at the highest levels for the arrest and prosecution of five officials of the Congolese army—the so-called FARDC five—accused of sexual violence in 2008 and 2009. The most senior of the five is now on trial, and other FARDC officers accused of subsequent atrocities have been convicted and sent to jail.

We are training frontline Congolese soldiers on gender-based violence, human rights law, and other issues intended to improve civilian and military interactions, and we have urged the FARDC to complete the process of removing child soldiers from its ranks. Last year, the Congolese government took an important step by signing a UN action plan to address this issue. And across all of these and other issues, Ambassador Barrie Walkley has continued the work of the late Howard Wolpe to improve our coordination with

African, European, and other partners to address the problems in the eastern DRC. We know that much, much more needs to be done.

In September of last year, after the M23 rebellion erupted in the eastern Congo, former Secretary of State Clinton met with Presidents Kabila and Kagame to urge them to engage in a constructive dialogue to bring peace and stability to the region. In the UN Security Council, we proposed the listing of five of the M23's top commanders and the M23 as a group for targeted sanctions. All are now subject to a worldwide asset freeze, and the five individuals also are subject to travel bans.

President Obama spoke with President Kagame in late December to underscore that any support to the M23 would be inconsistent with Rwanda's desires for stability and peace in the region. He further encouraged the parties to reach a transparent and credible political agreement that includes an end to impunity. Based on a large body of evidence, and as required by law, we suspended Foreign Military Financing funds to Rwanda. And we will continue to review carefully, and when it makes sense to do so, we'll withhold other assistance to partners in the region who may be providing support to the M23 or otherwise impeding the peace process in the region.

In addition, Ambassador Susan Rice in New York, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, Ambassador Barrie Walkley and I, as well as other dedicated members of our diplomatic team in Kinshasa, the region, and back here, have worked tirelessly to help address the underlying causes of instability. So far, the cessation of hostilities between Congolese forces and the M23 appears to be holding, and the international community is helping to foster dialogue between these critical players.

But the M23's takeover of Goma at the end of last year showed the world that the collective efforts of the DRC, its neighbors, and the broader international community have not been sufficient to lay the foundation for a durable solution. If the world does not get more serious about finding a formula that will lead to a lasting arrangement for stability in the DRC, then it is highly probable that the same cycle of violence and its subsequent horrors will continue into the future. I do not believe that we can, or that we should, accept the status quo. We must do better.

Clearly, a sophisticated and internationally backed solution is the only way forward. We were able to achieve such a solution to end the conflict in the former Yugoslavia through the Dayton Accords. We were able to end Africa's longest running civil war, the conflict in Sudan, through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that was negotiated by the IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] states and supported by the United States, Norway, and Great Britain. A similarly energetic and international effort is now required for the DRC. First and foremost, the DRC government and its people have primary responsibility for rising to the challenges that they face. But the international community should be complementing these efforts with a more focused and holistic approach.

I believe this approach requires four basic components, all of which are interdependent and all of which are equally important.

First, the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and other countries in the region must sign and implement the UN framework agreement as soon as possible. The United States supports the principles in the agreement and the ongoing efforts by the United Nations to secure signatures. However, simply signing the agreement is not sufficient. The signatories also must follow through on their commitments with concrete and visible actions on the ground, and they must be held accountable if they fail to meet their commitments.

Second, we need to put flesh on the bones of the agreement by establishing a comprehensive peace process around the agreement's principles. This process needs to include all of the relevant parties—not just the countries in the immediate region, but also local communities in the Kivus, civil society, and a clearly defined role for the international community. Such a peace process will not happen overnight, nor will it be easy, which is why the United States supports the appointment of a senior, high-level United Nations envoy dedicated to the hard work of bringing together the relevant stakeholders to work out and enforce the peace process over the long run.

As we all know, many agreements have been signed in the Great Lakes region in the past that have not been respected or faithfully implemented. So we also should develop strong enforcement and incentive mechanisms to ensure compliance. For example, the United Nations should regularly report to the UN Security Council on the implementation of this agreement and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon should monitor its adherence closely. The United States is prepared to work with other UN Security Council members and our African partners to discuss how to move forward on the DRC.

And other, key international partners also have a role to play. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the African Union, and the European Union's structures, among others, all should elevate their focus and attention on the DRC.

Third, the United Nations must complete its reevaluation of the role and strength of MONUSCO and implement necessary changes to the mission's structure as soon as possible. For instance, the mission and its troop contributing countries must have the capacity and the political will to prevent a relatively small group of rebels from taking over one of the largest and most populous cities in the DRC. The United States strongly supports the integration of a regional intervention brigade into MONUSCO. We believe an integrated force will be able to maximize the mission's impact by ensuring coordinated action and the best use of existing resources. However, increased military pressure is not a solution in and of itself. Any security solutions must complement the peace process and other essential political steps and measures.

Fourth, and finally, if we are to adopt a holistic approach, the DRC government must build on the incremental reform progress it has made by implementing long-overdue reforms and demonstrating much greater political will and inclusivity. And if we are

serious, international assistance should be conditioned on the DRC government making further reform progress. The primary responsibility for stability and prosperity in the DRC lies with its government in Kinshasa. Just as it has a reasonable expectation that the international community will live up to its commitments in the DRC, the international community has an equally reasonable expectation that the DRC will deliver on its promises and utilize the contributions of the international community to the benefit of the country and its people.

For us, there are two primary areas in which reforms must take place. First, the DRC government should overhaul its security sector, including its army, military, justice system, and police force. Specifically, the country needs a Congolese-led, long-term security sector reform strategy that can be supported by the international community. Second, the DRC needs to expand its democratic institutions across the country, including working to address the most salient governance issues in the east, such as land disputes, refugee returns, the protection of minority communities, and the need for electoral changes. We accept that some of these reforms may take time, but the world needs to see the DRC taking the initiative and beginning to implement them assertively. Without such visible steps, it will be increasingly difficult for the world to continue its massive investments in the DRC.

Finding a sustainable solution to the protracted instability in the DRC will continue to be a daunting challenge for the global community. But we should not shrink from acting just because it is hard, nor should we abandon the DRC because its challenges are complex. If we have low expectations, these will prove self-fulfilling. We must continue to aim high and expect a lot from our DRC partners as well as its neighbors. I know the Congolese people are courageous and resilient. We all have seen evidence of this during our engagements and many visits to that country. We should not miss this opportunity to build on this courage and resiliency for a brighter future for the DRC and its people, and for a brighter future for those states around it and for Africa as a whole.