

Belated Peace in a Troubled Land

After decades of despotism, corruption and war, the Democratic Republic of Congo is slowly making its way to peace and stability—and Canada is a strong player among those nations offering help along the road.

Though geology has been kind to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—it is more richly endowed with natural resources than any other country in Africa—history has delivered mostly cruel blows. The colonial period was brutal, the ascent of Mobutu Sese Seko to power in the mid-1960s ushered in three decades of authoritarian rule and corruption, and the war that followed his 1997 departure was the most lethal since the Second World War, leaving more than 5 million dead, mostly from disease and malnutrition.

And the problems continue. Though the war ended in 2003, there is still a lot of violence in the eastern regions, where armed groups are unreconciled to the central government, sexual violence against women persists, and exploitation of minerals provides funds to fuel the ongoing insurgency.

Though the road to stability and peace is fraught, its end point is simple. “The main requirement is to increase the capacity of the state to enforce

the rule of law throughout the DRC,” explains Kadia Gassama, program analyst for the DRC in the department’s Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START).

To this end, the justice system must be strengthened; conflicts that remain from the war era must be resolved, particularly for displaced people returning to their homes; and the use of mineral wealth to support insurgent activities must be curtailed. DFAIT has been helping on all of these fronts. Since 2009, START has disbursed more than \$4 million annually to help improve life in the DRC.

START’s initiatives include the funding of prosecution-support cells, which mentor the work of Congolese military police and prosecutors and raise it to an international level. Canada’s funding, at \$2.9 million, is among the highest of any nation’s. This improvement in the military justice system is important, since undisciplined elements of the armed forces commit many of the human rights violations. Canada is well suited to help because it shares French as an official language with the DRC, and it is seen as an honest broker, particularly since it never had any colonies.

The return of millions of people displaced by war is causing many conflicts between them and the people who have taken over their homes and land. One of START’s major initiatives is to fund local mediation efforts to resolve many of these disputes.

The insurgents have supported their activities through the sale of valuable minerals, including gold, tin, tantalum and tungsten. To reduce this flow, START has supported trading centres where miners within a 25-km radius can sell their ores without interference from armed groups. As Mora Johnson, a senior advisor in the Human Rights and Governance Policy Division, points out, “When armed groups have illicit revenues from mineral exploitation, armed conflicts are lengthened and there is more motivation to spoil all efforts at achieving peace.”

To further undermine the insurgents, one must stop the flow of illicit minerals—anywhere along the supply chain. Protocols are needed to certify the provenance of clean minerals right up to the Western companies that use them—and DFAIT has supported the efforts of regional governments and of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to develop them.

When will peace and stability come to this huge country, similar in size to Western Europe? Pierre Lantoin, desk officer for Africa’s Great Lakes Region, can’t predict. “But improvement has been happening over the past 10 years—and we’re glad to be part of this important process.”



Kadia Gassama of DFAIT interviews a group of women in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
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