

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGOISSUE

The DRC has been stifled by a civil war since August 1998. At the outset, the conflict appeared to be an internal rebellion with support from some neighbouring countries. However, increasing involvement of DRC neighbouring countries and ensuing alliances have resulted in a regional conflict that threatens to develop into a continental war. Corruption, uncontrolled armed groups and lack of leadership characterize the war, leading to serious human rights abuses throughout the country, attributable to all parties involved.

BACKGROUND

On July 27, 1998, President Kabila ordered the **withdrawal of foreign troops** (Rwandan and Ugandan) from the country. These troops had previously been his allies, together with the Angolan troops during the war of liberation that brought him to power. The troops refusing to leave Congolese territory, a rebellion emerged within the Banaymulenge (Congolese-Tutsi). Alliances rapidly developed with Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad and Namibia supporting Kabila and the rebels receiving support from Rwanda and Uganda.

Throughout this war, the international community has been receiving alarming reports of arbitrary executions, disappearances, torture, harassment and detention of civilians based on their ethnic origin. Hate propaganda broadcasted over the mass media are sadly reminiscent of that used during and after the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Kabila's alliances with former members of the **Forces armées rwandaises (ex-FAR)/Interahamwe and Burundian Hutu rebels** and the lack of popular cooperation with the rebel forces has resulted in severe retribution. Allegations of similar human rights abuses committed by pro-Government forces continue to flow out of the country at an alarming rate.

Another source of great concern is the sexual violence committed against **women and children**. The recruitment of child soldiers by both sides has also become a renewed feature in this conflict. The war has led to the collapse of already weakened health, sanitation and medical services. Large segments of the population in the conflict areas have become internally displaced or refugees - resulting in a potential humanitarian crisis.

In the **Eastern Congo**, humanitarian operations are facing serious constraints, including insecurity and shortages of equipment. Nearly all goods and equipment belonging to humanitarian agencies, including more than 120 vehicles, were illegally seized. While some equipment and vehicles have since been returned, the NGOs remain largely incapacitated. There are severe restrictions of the work of NGOs and media personnel, including the banning of human rights organizations, harassment and detention of human rights defenders and journalists.

**Regional leaders**, under the auspices of the OAU and the SADC, have been actively seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Reports indicate that an agreement in principal on a cease-fire was agreed to by Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe and the DRC at the France-Africa summit on November 27th. However, the rebels, who did not take part in the negotiations, refuse to adhere to a peace agreement. Kabila refuses to acknowledge the rebels.

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