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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Update on the Gety Food Crisis in Ituri

The recent fighting in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), between the forces of President Kabila and Vice-President Jean-Pierre Bemba threatens to distract world attention from the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the east of the country.

Although the situation in the east has improved markedly over the past few years, there are still pockets of extreme insecurity, displacement, and need.

In the southern part of Ituri District, in the far northeast of the country, 45,000 people are wedged into the village of Gety, having abandoned their homes and fields during fighting over the past few months between the Congolese national army (the FARDC) and local militias. Trapped due to the fighting, their lives are under increasing threat from lack of food, the most basic of humanitarian needs.

The security situation in Ituri remains unsteady despite the cease-fire agreements signed recently between the FARDC and various militias. While some militias, including Peter Karim, a Congolese rebel leader who kidnapped seven Nepalese United Nations peacekeepers in May of this year, have laid down their arms and signed a peace agreement with the government, disarming the rest of the armed groups in the area will be very difficult.

In the home villages of those displaced in Gety, roughly 90% of the houses, schools, churches, and health centers have been destroyed. The 45,000 displaced in Gety now live in appalling sanitary conditions and are facing severe shortages of food. The most vulnerable are malnourished children. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) warned that food supplies are running out, and the new distribution needs to take place immediately.

WFP had already delivered 50 tons of food to the displaced in Gety, out of the 410 tons needed for an initial distribution,

as of mid-August. A WFP official wrote to Refugees International, "We are hoping there will be sufficient food to serve the ever-increasing numbers of those displaced who are in dire need of food assistance. A monthly need for internally displaced individuals and malnourished children in Gety is 1,300 metric tons of assorted food."

Gety is not the only area in need in Ituri, however. Those caught in the crossfire during the fighting fled to other villages as well, and to the district capital, Bunia. At the moment, WFP is transferring food from other areas of eastern DRC; WFP has also had to borrow food from its stocks in Sudan and Uganda to help in the process. A WFP official stated, "If we can get additional resources, we will do all we can to feed the IDPs, malnourished and other categories of vulnerable people. The constraint of low stocks does have an adverse effect on the beneficiaries and makes it difficult to measure impact of food aid."

Due to the food shortage, WFP is forced to prioritize distributions: the primary concern is for those with special nutritional needs (malnourished children, pregnant and lactating women, and patients with HIV or AIDS) and particularly vulnerable groups (chronically ill patients in hospitals, hospitalized victims of sexual violence, institutionalized orphans, and elderly individuals with no family support). In Bunia, WFP has managed to supply food to nutrition centers, in spite of the food crisis, but the situation elsewhere is desperate.

The lack of food in Gety and other parts of Ituri is easily explained: WFP has not received the donations it needs to

meet humanitarian needs. While the United States and other donors have already made substantial contributions to meet humanitarian needs in the DRC over the past several years, the crisis in Gety shows that more is needed. The elections are a positive step forward for the DRC; the world must redouble its efforts to make sure that the displaced have what they need to survive while the democratic process moves forward.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The United States and other donors confer immediately with the World Food Programme to determine the best way to increase food stocks in the eastern DRC, and ensure the displaced in Gety and other parts of Ituri get the basic ration needed for survival.
- ❑ MONUC build on the truce recently struck between the FARDC and local militias in southern Ituri, and ensure that the FARDC stops the abuses against civilians that has been fueling retribution by the militias.
- ❑ Uganda and others take steps to enforce the embargo on the illegal transfer of arms and natural resources to and from the DRC, in order to reduce the military capacity of the armed groups wreaking havoc in Ituri.

McCall Pierpaoli Fellow Emila Brkic, along with Advocate Rick Neal and consultant Nigel Pearson, just completed a one-month assessment mission in the DRC.