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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Frontline Communities Need Help Recovering from Years of War

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has quickly faded from the news following the relatively peaceful installation of Joseph Kabila as the country's first democratically elected leader in over 40 years. While the humanitarian community focuses on recent displacement caused by renegade militia attacks in the east, deep in the center of the country thousands of former internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled the 1998-2003 civil war struggle daily to rebuild their lives with almost no assistance.

Katoko-Kombé Territory in the northeast part of Kasai Oriental Province is home to some of the formerly displaced, an area of return likely similar to scores of others stretching diagonally across the Congo from northwest to southeast. Almost the entire territory was emptied during the war: residents fled as Rwandan-backed rebels from the east moved on the diamond center of Mbuji Mayi, the capital of the province, and again as local militias known as the Mai-Mai conducted a guerilla campaign against the rebels. With family members dead and houses burnt, people fled to safety in nearby towns such as Lodja, the entry point to the region today. The humanitarian assistance they received while displaced and as they began to return home a few years ago has now dried up, leaving them to fend for themselves.

At first glance, the villages strung to the northeast of Katoko-Kombé seem unremarkable, no different from the thousands of other villages spread throughout this vast country. The days are peaceful now: governmental troops have left for training and integration with the new national army and the Mai-Mai have laid down their weapons and melted back into their communities. The residents, only recently returned from internal exile, have painstakingly rebuilt their houses and returned to their fields, showing the resilience that characterizes so many people in the DRC.

Unfortunately, this resilience is not enough to pull everyone through this period of recovery. While there is ample land available, along with the security required to farm, the former internally displaced simply do not have the tools and seeds they need to take advantage of this opportunity to rebuild.

Women in the village of Kahudi were straightforward, saying, "We would be able to grow enough food to feed our families if we just had some help." Families throughout the area share tools in a struggle to cultivate fields now lying fallow, and watch helplessly as seed stocks dwindle due to infestations and degeneration. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has managed to distribute some seeds and tools to about 900 families, but this barely makes a dent in the estimated 15,000 households that need help.

The impact on the most vulnerable is clear as visitors get past surface appearances. In the village of Omesende, the chief led the Refugees International team to a cluster of houses sheltering families from other villages, still displaced from the war, afraid to return home because of lingering tribal tensions. A woman emerged with a small child in her arms: her daughter, two years old but the size of a baby, unable to walk, weakened by progressive bouts of malaria, her mouth open in silent cries, her body twisting with hunger. She is not the only case: data collected by the Dutch agency Cordaid in March and April 2006 reveal that up to 18.7% of the children in northern Kasai Oriental suffer from acute malnutrition – a figure that in other parts of the country would prompt immediate intervention.

These former IDPs, however, live in an area cut off from standard assistance, far from the glut of agencies that work to ease the suffering of the ongoing violence in the east. No food is distributed in Katoko-Kombé nor are there any feeding centers for malnourished children. Cordaid has in fact just received funding from the UN-managed Pooled Fund to set up such centers in the area, relying on food donated by the

World Food Programme (WFP). WFP, however, says it does not have the funds to transport the food to Katoko-Kombé, endangering Cordaid's initiative. If the Pooled Fund or WFP does not move quickly to correct this oversight, children in old frontline communities will continue to starve.

Other challenges exist as well. Support for health centers is slowly increasing, but for the moment, nurses can dispense little more than advice, as their medicine chests are largely empty. The future for children is bleak as schools remain gutted. Rape survivors bear a heavy burden as they look for help with health care, trauma counseling, legal assistance, and financial support.

Despite these needs, which have been known for some time, the response of the humanitarian community has been somewhat dismissive. The area is "not really a priority," according to a high-level official with MONUC, the UN peacekeeping mission. This bodes ill for the former IDPs, as MONUC is the main coordinating agency in Kasai Oriental Province, given the absence of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) - the agencies with formal responsibility for coordination, protection of IDPs, and the return and reintegration of displaced people.

Donors are not allocating resources to the region, but their help is not being solicited. The frontline communities in Kasai Oriental are completely absent from the 2007 Humanitarian Action Plan for the DRC, an oversight that should be corrected immediately. OCHA and NGOs have delayed a joint assessment mission to the region for months; without their data, nothing will change. In the meantime, agencies such as Caritas, which has maintained a presence in the area for years, continue to respond as best they can.

Improving access to the region would have a quick impact on conditions, not only to address immediate humanitarian needs but also to open up the area to markets. Prior to independence in 1960, a road ran from Lodja to Katoko-Kombé and on to the Lomami River, allowing produce and goods to move in and out of the region via the river and its connection to Kisangani. Entry to the region is now by air from Kinshasa to Lodja, and the road is now a track through the forest. After the village of Kiomi, passage is only by foot or bicycle, as six major bridges along the 120 kilometers of road have collapsed. Improved access would benefit the entire region, while offering an immediate improvement in the very difficult situation for the 5,400 households living along that road.

Little will improve without an end to the neglect by the national authorities and the humanitarian community. Some awareness exists - the 2006 Humanitarian Action Plan for the DRC included projects (regrettably unfunded) to address some

of the needs - but there has been little action. The UN instituted the Cluster Leadership Approach to prevent such gaps in assistance, and the Early Recovery Cluster, led jointly in the DRC by UNDP and UNHCR, has the primary responsibility for catalyzing action in communities like those along the old front line. The Early Recovery Cluster, however, is barely functional in the DRC; beyond meetings in Kinshasa, little has happened in the field. Even the need for the cluster is debated, with some saying that other clusters such as nutrition, health, and protection can meet the needs of returning refugees and internally displaced people. The lack of assistance for former frontline IDPs, however, shows what happens when there is no single entity accountable for results. In addition, the Early Recovery Cluster is the only one that has economic recovery as part of its mandate, a clearly felt need for all returnee communities.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ WFP, with assistance from the Pooled Fund if necessary, transport food for Cordaid's feeding centers in former frontline communities to address high malnutrition rates there. The UN and its donors must then address this gap in transportation in a systematic way across the country.
- ❑ United Nations agencies and NGOs conduct immediately an assessment of conditions and needs among former frontline communities in the DRC. Previous assessment missions have been limited to very brief meetings in administrative centers; this mission must travel out to the villages where the formerly internally displaced have returned.
- ❑ FAO move to address shortages of seeds and tools for frontline communities without waiting for the planned inter-agency assessment mission to validate its earlier findings that 15,000 households need help; those data should be sufficient to begin planning and organizing distributions.
- ❑ Donors work with Caritas to implement its plan to repair the six bridges that block access to markets along the road from Kiomi to the Lomami River.
- ❑ UNDP assume immediately its responsibilities as the lead agency for the Early Recovery Cluster, working with OCHA, NGOs, and UN agencies to ensure that early recovery needs are monitored and addressed in old frontline communities as well as other areas of the DRC.

Rick Neal and Andrea Lari evaluated needs among returning refugees and IDPs in the D.R. Congo from October 28 to November 16, 2006.