

Activity 2.2: Case Study – The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Between 1994 and 2003 the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) endured a conflict frequently referred to as “Africa’s first world war.” Millions of people were killed or died as a result of starvation and disease as Congolese militias, backed by armed groups from neighboring states, perpetrated atrocities against populations from rival ethnic groups. During the war, Tutsi militias marched on the capital, Kinshasa, and overthrew the government of Mobutu Sese Seko, installing Laurent Kabila in his place in 1997. Four years later, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph Kabila, assumed his role as President. During President Joseph Kabila’s first term, the DRC continued to be the location of proxy wars between militias from various neighboring countries.

Despite the war being declared over in 2003, the east of the country continues to be unstable as dozens of armed groups fight for control of land and resources while targeting members of rival ethnic groups for attack. This instability is particularly strong in North and South Kivu provinces on the border with Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. During conflicts in these countries, notably the genocide in Rwanda, waves of Hutu and Tutsi populations have fled into eastern DRC, disrupting the ethnic balance of the region.

DRC’s porous borders have also allowed armed groups to enter the country, smuggling in weapons while extracting the region’s vast natural resources. North and South Kivu are resource rich areas with dense deposits of exploitable minerals, oil and charcoal. Four “conflict minerals” (gold, tin, tungsten and tantalum) are particularly profitable due to their use in jewelry, cell phones and cars.

The government of the DRC lacks a strong state presence in these provinces, with the capital, Kinshasa, located more than 2,500 kilometers away and relatively little investment in government infrastructure in the east. As a result, more than 30 rebel groups have been able to operate and compete for control of mines and transportation routes while frequently taking control of territory. In the absence of state authority and sufficient protection from the national armed forces of the DRC (FARDC), local self-defense militias have also emerged throughout the region. Such groups have engaged in widespread fighting with armed militias, often resulting in reprisal attacks on local populations. Local ethnic conflicts over customary succession or land rights have also been politicized by political elites, resulting in further fragmentation of groups and mobilization of violence.

Populations throughout eastern DRC have been victims of killings, sexual violence, abductions, torture, forced recruitment into armed groups and forced labor. Villages have been routinely attacked, with houses burnt, women singled out for attack, and men used to carry looted goods for rebels. Specific villages

have been singled out by militias based upon ethnic affiliation and for being suspected hosts of enemy fighters and their families. More than two million displaced persons are scattered in camps and with host families throughout North and South Kivu.

The DRC has been undergoing a constitutional crisis since December 2016 when President Kabila's second elected term was mandated to end. Disputes between the government and political opposition in the capital, Kinshasa, regarding the election process and whether President Kabila could run for a third term has resulted in delays. Legislative and local elections have also been put on hold until the government is able to organize the presidential elections. This crisis has had destabilizing effects throughout the country. There have been reports of increasing government repression, as it has reacted violently to peaceful demonstrations organized by the opposition in response to President Kabila's refusal to step down in December 2016. Hate speech by politicians to mobilize ethnic groups and militias during the 2006 and 2011 elections has also raised concerns of incitement to violence once campaigning begins.

In eastern DRC repression and arrests of protesters has culminated in growing unrest amongst civilians and the mobilization of anti-government armed groups. Such groups have attacked FARDC posts and local government offices. In an attempt to address the threat posed by these groups, the FARDC launched several offensives in late 2017 and early 2018. The deployment of troops to these operations has left a power vacuum in parts of North and South Kivu, as well as Ituri province, that other militias have attempted to fill.