

Child Alert: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. UNICEF UK Goodwill Ambassador Martin Bell travelled to the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2006 and produced this *Child Alert* on one of the world's deadliest humanitarian crises.

A tsunami of death every six months

A human tragedy has unfolded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over the past eight years. The continuing conflict between the Congolese army and rebel militias – despite a nearly four-year-old peace agreement and a transitional government in place – has resulted in a death toll greater than in any conflict since World War II. Since 1998, nearly 4 million people have been killed by war or disease, or have simply disappeared without a trace. Put another way, every six months, the burden of death from conflict in the DRC is similar to the toll exacted by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The DRC is currently witnessing the world's deadliest humanitarian crisis.

Conflict-related deaths have exacerbated the national crude mortality rate. The International Rescue Committee has estimated that 1,200 people die each day in the DRC as a direct or indirect cause of the conflict. Over half of them are children.

As so often happens in conflicts, the casualties are disproportionately high among the young. Children bear the brunt of conflict, disease and death, not only as victims; they are also witnesses to, and sometimes forced participants in, atrocities and egregious crimes

that can inflict lifelong physical and psychological harm. For many children growing up in DRC, particularly in the east, their childhoods have been, and are still being, stolen from them.

Part of the horror of this conflict is its scale. But the figures do not tell the full story. The conflict in DRC no longer makes waves or headlines. Perhaps because the war has gone on so long, or because the situation has at times seemed so hopeless, it is the war the world has largely forgotten.

Part of the reason for this may also be the lack of access to the conflict zones. Insecurity in the worst-affected areas in the east of the country has placed some of the victims beyond the reach of aid agencies. UNICEF and its partners are preparing to implement programmes that provide long-term development, in addition to emergency relief. But ongoing conflict has caused the displacement of millions of people, and without improvement in security, field offices in the eastern towns of Kalemie, Bunia and Goma, and mobile operations in Beni, as well as the southern town of Lubumbashi, are limited to helping people survive.

Peace is the missing link between a violent past and a more hopeful future. It is the prerequisite for investment in vital basic services that have been limited by conflict, such as free universal primary education, free basic health care for children under five, mosquito nets for pregnant women and children under five, rehabilitation of water sources, counselling and support for vulnerable women and children.

The road to peace can begin with free and fair elections. Elections are not a panacea for all a nation's woes, but they can go a long way to restoring order and stability. On 30 July 2006,

for the first time in over 40 years, the Congolese people will have a real choice at the polls and a real chance to end what is often called the “First World War” of Africa.

The burden of war

The burden of war has taken an enormous toll on Congolese children. Again, the figures speak for themselves: Each year, more children under five die in DRC than in China (a country with 23 times the population), and than in all the Latin American countries combined. Children are caught up in violence as victims: Sexual assaults on women and children have reached epidemic proportions; 25,000 *reported* cases of rape occurred in eastern DRC in 2005. They are caught up in war as refugees and internally displaced people: Constant migration robs them of schooling, health care and the chance for a normal life. And they are caught up in combat as soldiers and camp-followers.

Sexual assaults on women and children

The victims of rape or other forms of sexual violence in DRC could easily be in the hundreds of thousands. The Heal Africa Hospital in Goma, run by the organization Doctors on Call for Service (DOCS), has provided care to more than 4,500 rape victims in the past three years alone. Sexual violence is consciously deployed as a weapon of war, by one group against another, to humiliate, intimidate and tear apart families and entire communities or even force them into an alliance. Gang rapes, mutilation, rape involving the insertion of objects into the victim’s genitals and forced rape by one victim upon another are not uncommon in this largely ungoverned eastern part of the country.

The victims include those who are forced to witness these atrocities against their spouses, parents, children, relatives and friends.

Girls and women who become pregnant as a result of rape often become social pariahs, rejected by their families and their villages.

As a consequence of extreme sexual violence and difficult pregnancies for very young girls, an untold number of women suffer from vesicovaginal fistula, a debilitating condition resulting from trauma to the body that prevents women from controlling their bodily functions.

The number of people living with HIV is currently estimated at 1.1 million. For women and children who live are subjected to this extreme violence, HIV/AIDS is part of their daily reality: Many combatants involved in the war are HIV positive. The risk of transmission is higher when women, particularly young girls, are violently raped, because of internal injuries. Very young children and adolescent girls are frequently singled out for their youth and relative defencelessness or in the fallacious belief that having sex with them will cure AIDS.

Case Study

Martha (not her real name) is 14. She comes from a religious family in North Kivu Province. When she was 13, her mother sent her to buy a dress for her own baptism. On the way home, and as darkness fell, she was attacked and gang-raped by some people from her neighbourhood.

As a consequence of the rape, she gave birth to twin boys born 28 days prematurely. They lie beside her in an incubator at the Heal Africa Hospital in Goma. At first, she hated them. But for the moment, she says, she loves them.

She is one of many victims of rape receiving care and counselling at the hospital. The chief surgeon, Dr. Kasereka Lusi, says: "It's a terrible experience. They all become mad, really furious mad. They would rather be dead than live like this. At first they see the child as the enemy within. They try to smack it and kill it. To heal them, you need the whole community to counsel them to accept the baby."

Anita Smeets is a former Wall Street banker who runs a managerial skills training programme at the hospital. Torn between hope and despair, like many aid workers, she comes down on the side of hope: "I feel that hopes are so high for what we all can do. If we can meet that request for help, then there is hope."

Children associated with armed groups or forces

Exact numbers are hard to estimate, but DRC is thought to have the largest concentration of child soldiers in the world. At the height of the war, estimates suggested that as many as 30,000 children were fighting or living with armed forces or militia groups. Nine groups have been listed by the United Nations as parties to conflict that recruit or use children in armed conflict.

Children are forced into armed forces and groups by extreme poverty, abandonment, homelessness and the random hazards of war. Many are left with no choice but to join the militias who offer a modicum of protection and provisions. It is estimated that 30 to 40 per cent of children associated with armed forces and groups are girls. Many are held in captivity as sexual slaves for extended periods of time. Children are used not only as soldiers, but as porters, spies and sexual slaves.

Demobilization has been in operation since the peace agreement of 2003 and there have been signs of success. So far, 18,000 children have been released and reintegrated; however, a significant number still remains with armed groups resisting participation in the demobilization efforts. Reintegration of children in communities that were highly affected by the conflict and so have very limited prospects for children is proving to be a challenge. Faced with the choice of destitution at home or paid military service with the armed groups, the young former combatants will all too often re-enlist.

Case Study

Patrick (not his real name) is 17, and a battle-hardened veteran while still a child. He is one of 33 demobilized child soldiers at a UNICEF resettlement centre in Goma. His story is typical of many: "When I joined the militia I was 11.5. At 13, I was fully capable of carrying guns without any assistance. At Kisangani, we fought the Ugandan Army for six days. After three days we retreated. In our battalion, 17 soldiers were killed on the battle front. I was wounded in the shoulder. I have killed many people. I never want to become a soldier again. My dream is to become a mechanic and UNICEF can help me achieve that."

Violence uproots children's lives

As of October 2005, at least 1.6 million people were internally displaced by conflict in DRC. Since then, the numbers have increased. At the close of 2005, it was estimated that 120,000 people were fleeing their homes every month. While the numbers are concentrated in the east, there are also displaced persons in the northern and western parts of the country. Violence and instability in the region have caused an estimated 400,000 refugees to flee DRC to Burundi, Rwanda and Sudan, among

others. DRC itself is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries.

After fleeing their homes, refugees arrive by the thousands, often near the camps of the UN Mission to the DRC (MONUC) for security, with nothing but what they can carry. Refugee and internally displaced children are often separated from their families and become vulnerable to those who prey on them. The difficult living conditions are particularly hard on children, often causing poor nutrition and the spread of disease. It is a priority for aid agencies to establish safe spaces for children within camps so they may also continue their education. But when months in camps grow to years, as in eastern DRC, the disruption to the learning process has permanent consequences for children.

Case Study

In late 2005 and early 2006, government forces launched a series of offensives against rebel militia positions near the border with Uganda. One of these drove the rebels into the rain forest, where they in turn attacked the pygmies, the DRC's original inhabitants. The pygmies, armed only with bows and poison-tipped arrows, were powerless to resist. For the first time in their history they were forced out of the forest, carrying their bows and arrows, their musical instruments, a few pots and pans – and not much else.

Thirty-three pygmy families – about 200 people – have found refuge in an encampment near Beni. Their head man, Batsinga Sepi, says: “We did not just hear about the war, we lived through it. This has been a serious war and many of our relatives have been killed in the fighting. Our message to the world is that we cannot remain living like this.” The UN force commander in the area describes their conditions as “miserable

and pathetic”.

The immediate care of the pygmy families is the responsibility of a French aid worker, Guillaume Sauval, in a UNICEF-funded project. He says: “The Democratic Republic of the Congo is undergoing something close to a world war. The death toll is comparable to that of the tsunami over a six-month period. However, what we lack is tsunami-type coverage to highlight the plight of these people.”

Growing up without access to education or health care

DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world and the lack of education is chronic. The number of children out of primary school approaches 4.7 million children, including 2.5 million girls – almost half the total number of primary-school-age children. Even outside the areas of conflict, extreme poverty puts school out of reach for many because it is too expensive. Teachers are extremely underpaid or receive no pay at all.

The eight-year conflict has led, inevitably, to worsening poverty and deprivation in an already impoverished nation. According to the latest estimates, 71 per cent of the population have no access to adequate sanitation facilities and over half of the population lack access to improved drinking water sources.

As in other emergencies, children are the most vulnerable. About 1 out of every 3 children under the age of one is not vaccinated against measles. The chronic lack of basic health-care services heightens the risk of death from preventable causes. One such example is malaria, one of the biggest killers of children in DRC. Only 17 per cent of children under five with diarrhoea receive oral rehydration and continued feeding, one of the

lowest rates in the world.

These conditions can have fatal consequences for children. DRC has among the worst child survival and nutrition rates in the world. Half a million children under five die each year, earning the DRC the grim distinction of being one of the top three deadliest places in the world in which to be born. An alarming 31 per cent of children under five are underweight.

Case Study

Michael lives with his parents in the Lemba, a densely populated suburb of the capital Kinshasa. He missed the last two weeks of school, a time when all pupils prepare for the end of year examinations, because his family could not afford the school fees. "They won't let me take the exams this term, so I have to repeat my class next year. I sell kerosene around my neighbourhood every evening to help my mother with school fees. I even walk to school so that we can add the bus fare to the fees. If I walk quickly, I can get there in one hour. So far we have only been able to pay for the first two terms."

Lost Childhood

DRC is a resource-rich country; gold, diamond, cobalt are mined throughout the country. Too many children are forced to work in the dangerous and deplorable conditions that exist in these mines, more susceptible to illness and injury. Child labour is one of many reasons why so few children regularly attend school.

In urban centres throughout DRC, children live on the streets, separated and sometimes abandoned by their families. They are routinely attacked by other street children and at times abused by the police. They are prime targets for armed forces and military groups

looking for new recruits.

The election: The chance of a lifetime

After so much suffering, DRC does not lack its champions and well-wishers. The United Nations is breaking records with its US \$422 million support of the election scheduled for 30 July 2006. While this election represents an enormous challenge, there is reason to hope.

The election is historic because it is the country's first free vote in over 40 years.

The Congolese people *want* to vote. 25.6 million have already registered, over 77 per cent of the eligible population. Despite the war and the insecurity, 70 per cent turned out to vote in the referendum on 18-19 December 2005, approving a new constitution.

The election is critical. It is only a beginning, and will not by itself bring the conflict to an end. But it can be the catalyst for the emergence of a new DRC. Until now the lives of families and entire communities have been defined by conflict. Many children have grown up in the past eight years not knowing anything but war. The Congolese people must see results to encourage further peace and stability.

Children must be at the heart of the post-election agenda. Nothing else can have a greater effect in shaping the country's future.

A Call to Action

For the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, indifference is not an option. Most of the lives at stake are those of their children. UNICEF urges the international community to first fund measures to save the

lives of displaced people and others affected by the conflicts and then to help them return to some sense of normalcy in the coming months.

As humanitarian aid workers continue the emergency response on the ground, it is critical that pressure be placed on the political factions in DRC to ensure that children are not manipulated and exploited as part of the election process. Leading up to the formation of a permanent government is the time to get children on the agenda.

The UN agencies in the DRC, including UNICEF, stand ready to help the new Congolese Government to rapidly emerge from the forthcoming elections so it may begin to develop the infrastructure and programmes needed to improve people's lives. That includes giving special priority to children by investing in the social services sector and committing to the demobilization of all remaining children associated with armed forces and groups.

The success of a newly elected government will depend on the international community to provide resources but also to be vigilant, long after the results of this election are announced.

Postscript

From soldiering in Cyprus in 1957 to visiting the DRC for UNICEF in 2006, I have spent one year short of half a century in the unquiet corners of the world, including 99 countries and 13 war zones.

The DRC was the most shocking, yet in some ways the most inspiring, of all these assignments. So outstanding is the commitment of the staff of UNICEF and other agencies, so intense is the yearning of the people for the peace and security they

have never enjoyed, so great is the courage of so many Congolese risking their lives to help each other, so rare is the electoral opportunity, with international support, for a new beginning – that this is a moment to be seized. If it is not seized it will be lost, and DRC consigned again to the basket of hopeless cases.

Things don't have to go from bad to worse – even, and perhaps especially, in the stricken heart of Africa. Since the Congo was established as a Belgian colony in 1908, it has had no respite under successive regimes from brutality, oppression and exploitation – usually, all three at the same time. Rich in natural resources but little else, it has till now been the most unfortunate of nations. This is the time and the opportunity to make a break with the past.

We owe it to the children of DRC to give them the future that up to this point they have only been able to dream of. It is a by no means an impossible dream. UNICEF and its partners stand ready to help make it a reality.

Martin Bell, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador