



Congo Crises Challenge the UN's Response

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In March, the Security Council will decide on the future of MONUSCO, the UN stabilisation force in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The role of this UN contingent, its biggest and most expensive, is increasing with the evolution of the situation in Congo and Central Africa in general. The political deadlock caused by Congolese President Joseph Kabila's reluctance to quit and the deepening humanitarian crisis in the country affect UN policies towards it. The humanitarian and political engagement of the UN in the region also need corrections.

Congo is the biggest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 78 million residents and inhabited by more than 200 ethnic groups, the Luba being the biggest (18%). The country is rich in mineral resources, but its development is blocked by chronic problems, including the weak state, uncontrolled exploitation of minerals in the east (North and South Kivu), presence of dozens of armed groups, and interventions by Rwanda and Uganda. Both the militants and the government forces violently repress civilians.

The Political Situation and Humanitarian Crisis. President Kabila ascended to power in 2001. He twice won re-election, but the EU views the votes as not democratic. His last term came to an end in 2016, but he has failed to call new elections. Mediation by the Catholic Church led to a compromise signed with the opposition on 31 December 2016 for a new vote to be called before the end of 2017 and the country run by a transitional unity government. The president failed to honour the deal, though. The Church, being the only effective and credible nation-wide organisation, has become an umbrella for the anti-government forces. Bishop-led Sunday demonstrations in late 2017 and early 2018 were Kinshasa's biggest anti-government manifestations in years.

The crisis has deepened beyond the capital. Apart from the escalation in South and North Kivu, in 2016–2017 clashes surged in traditionally calm provinces: Kasai in the West and Tanganyika, bordering Tanzania. In the former, which voted massively against Kabila in 2011, the president offered his supporters positions in the provincial government to counterbalance the influence of the traditional Luba chiefs. In reaction to this meddling, the mystical-political movement Kamuina Nsapu emerged to mobilise resistance to the state, which it called an "occupation force." To pacify the region, Kabila brought in notorious army commanders from the east, former warlords, and encouraged the local Bana Muro militias to act as his proxies. The conflict in Kasai took on an ethnic dimension, and children were massively recruited by the various sides.

From this area and other parts of the country, 2 million people have fled their homes, making it 2017's biggest surge of refugees. There is a total of 4.3 million internally displaced people in Congo, and outbreaks of cholera worsened their already poor situation. The UN estimates 7.7 million Congolese are at risk of famine, 30% more than in early 2017. It labelled the humanitarian situation in the Congolese provinces of Kasai, South Kivu, and Tanganyika as an "L3 emergency," reserved for the world's most complex crises and requiring urgent, complex reaction. Apart from Congo, this designation is applied only to Syria, Iraq, and

Yemen. The UN calls for gathering \$1.7 billion to meet the humanitarian needs in Congo, particularly to mitigate the risk of famine in Kasai.

UN Mission to Congo. Since 1999, the biggest and most costly of UN contingents has been present in the country, from 2010 known as MONUSCO. It is composed of 17,000 soldiers, 3,000 civilian personnel, and 1,500 police. The troops come mostly from India, Bangladesh, Tanzania, South Africa, Nepal, Uruguay, and Morocco. Their main task is to protect civilians and humanitarian personnel when threatened and support the DRC government in peace-and-stabilisation efforts. The UNSC renews and modifies the mission mandate every year. In March 2017, it added the goal of supporting the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement. To do that, it airlifted 4,000 tonnes of voter registration material. The cancellation of the elections put the mission in a delicate position. Relations with the DRC authorities further deteriorated after MONUSCO deployed observers to Kasai on reports of human rights violations, and then to Kinshasa to monitor the anti-government demonstrations. The president is increasingly uncomfortable with the presence of the mission—he demands “clarification” of its role in the country and an exit date for troops to be defined.

The safety of UN personnel is another challenge. According to a report by General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, the former head of MONUSCO, UN fatalities increase when its forces are seen as “weak.” In 2013, with Resolution 2090, the UNSC created an “intervention brigade” within MONUSCO. This unique tool allowed the force to offensively engage armed groups in eastern Congo to enforce peace. It also rendered UN soldiers “enemies” in the eyes of some of the armed groups. The bloodiest assault on UN forces in the last 25 years occurred on 7 December 2017, when a MONUSCO base in Beni in Northern Kivu was attacked, allegedly by Ugandan-originating Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). In the attack, 15 Tanzanian UN peacekeepers were killed and 44 wounded.

The future of the UN mission is uncertain. Given the scale of the challenges, even the length of the MONUSCO and earlier missions have not resulted in a breakthrough in resolving the country’s principal problems. MONUSCO’s budget is \$1.14 billion, which is \$100 million less than in the previous year. The reduction was not based on a positive assessment of the mission’s effectiveness, rather follows a general trend to cut personnel and financing in response to U.S. demands for UN reform. Russia and China are not eager to strengthen MONUSCO.

International Context. The crises in the Congo affect neighbouring countries. The 1998-2003 civil war engaged more than a dozen African states. Implosion of the state risks internationalising the conflict and new forces entering into competition for the Congo’s resources. In answering the ADF’s attack on MONUSCO, the Ugandan army began shelling militant positions on the Congolese side of the border. For Uganda, key to regional security, a new war with a home-grown insurgency along its borders could serve as a pretext to end its other foreign engagements, including the EU-funded fight against Islamic extremists in Somalia. Congolese traditionally flee war in their country to Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Uganda, which hosts 250,000 Congolese is particularly under pressure, having the biggest number of refugees in Africa at 1.4 million altogether. Because of a widening of the conflict zones, Congolese refugees are entering new countries now, including Angola and Zambia. In January, Belgium, the former colonial power in Congo, alarmed by the violence in Kinshasa, announced it would deeply revise its relations with the DRC. In return, Kabila called for the closure of the Belgian aid agency Enabel and “Schengen House,” where EU visas are issued. There is a risk of a break in relations between the country and the EU.

Conclusions. With the failure of the 31 December 2016 compromise and the March renewal of the MONUSCO’s mandate, the UNSC must present a new political strategy for the country. It should be based on a return to the implementation of the agreement but with an understanding of the current circumstances, including the possibility of a lack of cooperation from the Congolese government and the rejection of talks by the opposition. The UNSC should therefore draft a plan to pressure the sides to hold elections within a fixed timeframe. Any attempt to delay them beyond that date should be considered illegal. Preventive measures, particularly engaging the regional South African Development Community (SADC) in the political dialogue, should be taken to diminish the risk of a descent into civil war in Congo. The humanitarian crisis in the country requires urgent intervention, including a boost in financial assistance for refugee care in neighbouring states. The worsening situation of the Congolese people provides an argument for countries like France that traditionally support a high level of UN engagement. With the crisis deepening, downscaling MONUSCO’s budget further would be counterproductive. Adding Poland’s voice to calls for deep UN engagement in Congo would stress its support of multilateral solutions to global crises.