

Global Advocacy Report:

The M23 and the Crisis in Goma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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The conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has intensified in recent weeks, and the international community has quickly responded to help maintain peace and stability. On November 20 the rebel militia known as M23 took control of the city of Goma, which is the capital of North Kivu province and a commercial center on Congo's border with Rwanda. According to the DRC and the United Nations, the armed takeover was accomplished with the backing of Rwanda's armed forces. Because Goma is distant from Congo's capital, Kinshasa, and is separated by difficult terrain, among many other reasons, the DRC's central government has struggled in the past to maintain firm control over its eastern provinces and their abundant mineral resources. This has contributed to instability in the region and made the civilian population susceptible to violent conflicts between militant groups competing for control of land, labor and the trade routes by which to expropriate Congolese minerals into Rwanda and Uganda.



Although the M23 has withdrawn from Goma following the recent take-over of the city, their presence in the region is still a threat to civilians and to the sovereignty of the DRC. Over 120,000 people have been displaced in the area around Goma, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and incidences of rape and Gender-Based Violence are increasing.¹ There is always the fear that the M23, emboldened by the takeover of the city, will retaliate against DRC loyalists in the region through targeted killings, or engage in indiscriminate violence against civilians.

Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ holds historic partnerships in the Congo, with the Disciples of Christ Community and the ecumenical Church of Christ in the Congo. The communities of our partner churches have been affected by the instability and violence presented by the crisis in Goma. In a visit November 28 to the offices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada, the Rev. Dr. Jean-Pierre Keela Bonketshi Wabi, head Protestant chaplain of the armed forces of the DRC, said of the situation surrounding the confrontation with the M23:

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "North Kivu Situation Report No. 13" (<http://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/north-kivu-situation-report-no-13-28-november-2012>), November 28, 2012.

“The entire country of Congo is in sympathy with people in the eastern part of the DRC. We want the war to come to an end. The most affected people are the women and children who continue to suffer. We wish the church would become more involved so that peace can come to the eastern part of the country.”

The international community should intensify efforts to end the rebellion by the M23, stop the violence and protect civilians in and around Goma, address the mounting humanitarian needs of the tens of thousands displaced by the fighting, and ensure that neighboring countries respect the Congo’s sovereignty and domestic mineral rights. The UN Security Council, Africa Union, the U.S. and other countries should all enforce sanctions aimed not only at M23 but also at the foreign officials backing their atrocities.² The UN and African states in the Great Lakes region should strive to end the crisis between the Congo and Rwanda before it sparks a wider war in the region, and in any ceasefire the external actors involved in the conflict should be identified and sanctioned.³

Background to the Crisis

The M23 militia is comprised of former Congolese soldiers and officers who mutinied from the Congolese armed forces in early 2012, ostensibly claiming the DRC Government failed to honor a March 23, 2009 peace treaty (hence the M23 name) with a previous Rwandan-backed rebel group upon its reintegration with the Congolese army. The M23 rebels are led by former Congolese military officers who have been implicated in heinous war crimes. Human Rights Watch reports General Bosco Ntaganda “has been wanted by the International Criminal Court since 2006 for recruiting and using child soldiers in Ituri district in northeastern Congo in 2002 and 2003. In July, the court issued a second warrant against him for war crimes and crimes against humanity, namely murder, persecution based on ethnic grounds, rape, sexual slavery, and pillaging, also in connection with his activities in Ituri.”⁴

External governments, notably Rwanda and Uganda, have long sponsored rebel militias like M23 and used them to destabilize the region and intimidate the local population through looting, killing, child conscription and rape. In November 2012, a UN Group of Experts on the DRC verified in their report to the UN Security Council links between the M23 rebels and contacts in Rwanda and Uganda and documented evidence of numerous atrocities attributed to

² In a positive move, on November 20, 2012 the U.S. Senate unanimously approved sanctions on any group supporting the M23, as part of an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act due to be passed this session of Congress. See “Senate approves Congo sanctions,” United Press International/UPI.com (http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/11/30/Senate-approves-Congo-sanctions/UPI-33681354315527/), November 30, 2012.

³ International Crisis Group, “DR Congo’s Goma: Avoiding a New Regional War” (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2012/dr-congo-s-goma-avoiding-a-new-regional-war.aspx>), November 20, 2012.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “DR Congo: U.S. Should Urge Rwanda to End M23 Support” (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/20/dr-congo-us-should-urge-rwanda-end-m23-support>), November 20, 2012.

their leaders.⁵ Moreover the UN Group of Experts claims that the Government of Rwanda has provided “direct military support to the M23 rebels,” while “Senior officials of the Government of Uganda” have also supplied troops, weapons and other technical assistance.⁶ In response, the UN Security Council and the United States imposed stiff sanctions against another principal M23 commander, Colonel Sultani Makenga.

The takeover of Goma was just the latest action on the part of M23 to challenge the military and political authority of the DRC and weaken its control over the region. Frustrated by the closure of a border crossing between the Congo and Uganda, just north of Goma, and in retaliation for the UN’s actions against Col. Makenga, the M23 began advancing against DRC troops and UN peacekeeping forces (MONUSCO) in Goma on November 15. By November 20 they had pushed the DRC army out and seized control of the city and its strategic airport. Eyewitnesses and UN investigators have attested that Rwandan armed forces directly assisted M23 in the takeover. The international community and leaders in Africa’s Great Lakes region urged M23 to withdraw from the city and have been trying to negotiate a peace agreement. On Sunday December 2 the M23 rebels withdrew from Goma, but Congolese troops have not effectively restored security to the city of about 1 million people, and M23 forces have remained positioned outside the city, threatening to retake it if Congo’s President Joseph Kabila refuses to meet their demands, some of which relate to government reform but others which are seen as conditions that would increase control by the rebels and their foreign backers over mining and mineral trade in the North Kivu province.⁷

Mining interests are at the root of much of the conflict in the Congo. The Congo has some of the most abundant natural resources in the world, but the extraction of Congolese timber, gold, coltan and other rare minerals used in electronics and high-end manufacturing is tainted by systemic corruption both in and outside of the Congo, violence, and innumerable human rights violations, while contributing little to the well-being of the people of the Congo.⁸ Many companies exploit Congo’s natural resources by making deals with neighboring countries and armed militias who help maintain control over the mines and local labor, with little to no regard for safety and human rights, and frequently through extreme violence. The abuse of workers, theft of land, attacks and murder of civilians in Goma and throughout the Congo’s eastern provinces have been well-documented and persist, seemingly beyond the control of the DRC and international community. U.S. investments in transnational corporations are supposed to be subject to U.S. laws governing human rights and the protection of national sovereignty, but

⁵ United Nations Security Council Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Document S/2012/843 (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/843), November 15, 2012.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Executive Summary, p. 3. See also Human Rights Watch, “DR Congo: M23 Rebels Committing War Crimes” (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/11/dr-congo-m23-rebels-committing-war-crimes>), September 11, 2012.

⁷ “M23 rebels threaten to take back Congo’s city of Goma if government doesn’t negotiate,” *Washington Post* online (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/m23-rebels-threaten-to-take-back-congos-city-of-goma-if-government-doesnt-negotiate/2012/12/02/c12ab72e-3c9a-11e2-8a5c-473797be602c_story.html), December 2, 2012.

⁸ See the August 2010 Pole Institute report “Blood Minerals: The Criminalization of the Mining Industry in Eastern DRC” (http://www.friendsofthecongo.org/pdf/blood_minerals_pole_aug2010.pdf).

companies often escape oversight by transporting illegal or tainted resources through third parties in other countries before placing them on the global market.⁹

Responding to the Crisis

The UCC General Synod and Disciples General Assembly each passed a resolution in 2011 entitled “A Call for Reflection and Advocacy on Behalf of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” The resolution aims “to raise awareness of and engage settings of the church in advocacy regarding the violent conflicts and human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, related especially to the exploitative mining of resources for export and industrial application”... and calls on the church to “reflect and advocate on behalf of sisters and brothers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.”¹⁰

While the first concern is to stop the violence and protect the people of Goma and the region, in the long run the international community should also work to end the exploitation of Congo’s mineral resources. There must be stronger enforcement of safety, environmental, labor and land rights in the mining industry, and greater transparency and regulation of companies that invest and conduct resource extraction in the Congo.¹¹ The annual Breaking the Silence campaign’s *Congo Week*, with its “Cell Out” period of digital fasting, is an opportunity highlighted in the Disciples and UCC resolutions for churches to advocate to stop the violent conflict over Congo’s valuable electronics-grade minerals.¹² More can be done to strengthen U.S. regulations designed to prevent the trafficking of these so-called “conflict minerals.” In August 2012 the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission finalized new rules implementing section 1502 of the 2010 Dodd Frank act, which require companies with foreign investments to verify that the minerals used in their products are “conflict-free” – meaning they do not help finance ongoing violence in places like the DRC, but public vigilance is required to ensure industry compliance and federal enforcement of the regulations.¹³

We are called in the Disciples and UCC to speak out in this time of crisis in the Congo, to advocate for a peaceful resolution to the conflict between the DRC and its neighbors, and to

⁹ Enough, “Conflict Minerals” (http://www.enoughproject.org/conflicts/eastern_congo/conflict-minerals)

¹⁰ See links to resolutions on Global Ministries “Resources for Congo Week” <http://globalministries.org/africa/congo-week.html>.

¹¹ The London-based NGO Global Witness provides detailed recommendations for reforming Congo’s mining and resources sectors. See “New Congolese oil and mining codes must include strong measures on transparency, tenders and community rights” (<http://www.globalwitness.org/library/new-congolese-oil-and-mining-codes-must-include-strong-measures-transparency-tenders-and>), October 11, 2012.

¹² Breaking the Silence Congo Week Campaign <http://www.congoweek.org/>

¹³ See U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Specialized Corporate Disclosure (<http://www.sec.gov/spotlight/dodd-frank/speccorpdisclosure.shtml>). U.S. faith groups collaborate on corporate engagement efforts to hold companies accountable to responsible practices, including supply-chain accountability, through the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. See Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, “Investors Welcome New SEC Rule Addressing Conflict Minerals in Supply Chains” (http://www.iccr.org/news/press_releases/2012/pr_sec082212.php), August 23, 2012.

push to end the unjust systems that profit those who commit the violence at the expense of the people of the Congo. In support of our Congolese partners, we urge U.S. leaders to work with the international community to mediate a peaceful end to the crisis over Goma and M23 rebellion, and to work for a comprehensive agreement with Rwanda and Uganda that would respect both the Congo's sovereignty and its natural resources from further exploitation.

For more information on the Congo and the conflict in Goma:

Africa Focus, <http://www.africafocus.org/>

Breaking the Silence Congo Week, <http://www.congoweeek.org/>

Enough Project, http://www.enoughproject.org/conflicts/eastern_congo

Friends of the Congo, <http://www.friendsofthecongo.org/>

Global Ministries Africa Office, <http://globalministries.org/africa/>

Global Witness, <http://www.globalwitness.org/>

Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo>

International Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/dr-congo.aspx>