

World Vision Q&As - A synopsis of the DRC conflict

Since hostilities intensified in eastern DRC in August, a quarter of a million people have been newly displaced. Many people have been displaced multiple times and are living in devastating conditions, causing an increase in humanitarian need. 1.4 million people remain displaced in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. Camps are densely crowded, chaotic environments with no basic social facilities and services.

Approximately half of IDPs are children, more vulnerable to rape and recruitment into armed groups due to the conflict. Protection of civilians and an end to all fighting and violence is the highest priority to meet immediate humanitarian needs and provide the environment for development.

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What has happened?

Renewed heavy fighting within the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (E-DRC) has thrust this chronic and largely forgotten emergency back into the global media spotlight.

On 30 Oct, rebel fighters loyal to General Laurent Nkunda announced they were opening a narrow “humanitarian corridor” for aid organizations to access affected populations. The following day, the UN reported that roughly 200,000 people have been displaced by renewed conflict and some 50,000 had fled advancing rebel forces.

The international community has been pushing for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, with the former President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo acting as the UN Special Envoy to DRC.

On 7 November, Presidents within the Great Lakes region met in Nairobi and issued a joint communique calling for a ceasefire in the fighting. The heads of state who attended the

meeting were from DRC, Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and South Africa, The Heads of State were joined by representatives from the African Union and the US and EU. The summit was convened by the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon.

On 25 November (time of writing) a fragile ceasefire declared by renegade General Nkunda is holding. However all rebel fractions continue to loot, kill and rape displaced people and communities. Renewed violence close to Goma and further north remains a real threat and more than a million people continue to live in fear and with limited access to food, clean water, healthcare and protection.

What is World Vision doing to respond to the crisis?

World Vision is responding to the immediate needs with life-saving assistance, as well as to the long-term impact of the crisis, with development initiatives.

The organisation has been working with communities in eastern DRC for 13 years and is currently concentrating its efforts on peacebuilding, protection of vulnerable groups, HIV and AIDS, agriculture, education and water and sanitation.

Since the current conflict escalated, the organisation has provided relief supplies to 20,000 displaced people. This week it will distribute 115,000 dollars worth of medicines to hospitals in Goma.

World Vision is also implementing strategies to protect women and girls from sexual violence, including fuel-efficient stoves that require fewer dangerous trips outside the camp to collect firewood, and community-based protection committees that monitor violence in the camps and escort women in activities that expose them to threats.

It is providing therapeutic food to its nutrition centre in rebel-held territory and supporting two centres for separated and abandoned children in Goma.

Six Child-Friendly Spaces are providing safe environments for children to play and talk about the threats of rape, recruitment and conflict they face in everyday life. World Vision staff help children to work through their traumatic experiences and provide a place for creative, informal education.

Agriculture projects are helping to generate income for households, as well as providing a more diverse diet for families.

HOPE project activities include home-based care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs), psychosocial support, training and sensitization in Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), as well as capacity building of local partners.

Why are children particularly vulnerable?

Children are always most vulnerable in an emergency and in a crisis of this scale, children are at risk of sexual violence, malnutrition, separation, recruitment into armed groups, child labour and conflict. In addition displacement and the level of poverty in the east means most children do not receive their rights to food, clean water, education and adequate healthcare.

This past week, according to the provincial health services, 20 cases of sexual violence were reported in Goma alone and as always, many more cases went unreported.

World Vision works in a number of IDP camps in North and South Kivu. Surveys among children coming to the World Vision's Child-Friendly Spaces in six displacement camps found that 120 girls under the age of 17 reported being raped in October, compared to only five reported cases in twelve Child-Friendly Spaces between April and June. The six camps recently surveyed are located in Goma, Shasha and Minova.

In a recent joint survey conducted by World Vision, Oxfam, Save the Children, Action Aid and Merlin, we found out that "over half the people displaced by the latest round of fighting in eastern Congo have become separated from family members in the chaos of war".

The survey showed 63% of displaced people in the camps and shelters around Goma in eastern Congo had lost contact with one or more close relatives as they fled the fighting. Over a quarter – 26% of those surveyed had lost a child, and 17% had lost their husband or wife.

In addition the number of children suffering from severe malnutrition in eastern Congo is rising dramatically as a result of the increased conflict,

In an area held by rebel groups, World Vision estimates the number of children under the age of five suffering from malnutrition has increased ten-fold.

Before the conflict, nutrition experts were admitting one or two malnourished children per day. Since fighting devastated the rebel-held territory near Rutshuru, between eight and ten children per day are arriving at a World Vision nutrition centre.

Where does World Vision work?

Its operations cover three provinces (South Kivu, North Kivu and Maniema) in east DRC, including high-risk security areas. Relief supplies are being distributed to two IDP camps – Shasha and Minova, south of Goma.

Assessments for immediate response are being carried out further north in Beni, Lubero and Butmebo to identify how World Vision can assist the growing number of IDPs in the region. Distributions will soon start in Beni. The team is concentrating on Water and Sanitation, shelter, food security, protection and child rights.

How are World Vision staff affected?

Due to an increase in instability in Goma and Rutshuru, World Vision evacuated eight international staff from Goma to Rwanda and 18 national staff from Rutshuru on 29 October. All staff have now returned to Goma and operations have resumed.

An evacuation and security plan is in place to mitigate and limit the risks against staff as they continue to work in difficult and challenging environments.

What has World Vision done to engage international community/leaders?

World Vision DRC and International are for the following actions to be taken to address the conflict in eastern DRC:

- * Immediate Ceasefire. That all parties implement and maintain an immediate ceasefire.
- * Negotiated Settlement. The only lasting solution for this conflict is a negotiated settlement, not a military solution. The UN-appointed mediator must work closely with the international community—in particular, the US, UK and the EU—to broker a comprehensive

peace agreement, including viable solutions to disarming and demobilizing the FDLR and CNDP.

* A Unified Peacekeeping Operation. The proliferation of multiple peacekeeping frameworks could further destabilize this fragile situation. Any additional forces sent by regional bodies or other nations should increase the capacity of MONUC to provide stability, civilian protection, and humanitarian space.

* A Focused Peacekeeping Mandate. Too many competing priorities have been demanded of MONUC. The UNSC must review and focus MONUC's mandate so that civilian protection is its first priority, particularly the protection of women and girls against gender-based violence.

* Humanitarian Resources. The donor community should immediately make additional resources available to address increased displacement, particularly addressing the needs of children, who make up 50% of IDPs and are highly vulnerable to recruitment by armed forces. In addition:

* Support to Host Communities. Resources are urgently needed to support host communities who are absorbing many of those newly displaced, as well as the expanding health threats found in IDP camps.

* Humanitarian corridors. The donor community should prioritize the establishment of humanitarian corridors for the safe, effective delivery of assistance, as well as the safe movement of IDPs to camps.

* Preserve Humanitarian Neutrality. To better protect civil-military boundaries, OCHA must more robustly engage in negotiating humanitarian space on the ground, so as to preserve the impartiality and access for all humanitarian actors.

* Address Natural Resources Funding Conflict. Access and control of DRC's abundant natural resources is one of the root causes that continue to both fund and drive conflict and instability. The international community and key industries must work closely with all regional governments to design systems to ensure that natural resources are supporting legitimate economic development.

On 25 November World Vision presented to the UN Security Council meeting, focusing on issues of sexual gender-based violence and child recruitment.

What are the root causes of the conflict?

The conflict has a economic as well as political and ethnic roots. Fighting is fuelled by the country's vast mineral wealth, with all sides taking advantage of unrest to exploit natural resources. The "business of conflict" is also economically profitable.

A 2007 Oxfam report "Africa's Missing Billions" found that of 1,100 weapons collected by international peace-keepers in Ituri, eastern DRC, less than one per cent were African-made. While, Amnesty International's report "DRC: Arming the East" provides an extensive list of questionable arms transfers to countries involved in the DRC war. In 2000, the UN established a Panel of Experts on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth of the DRC to analyse the links between the exploitation of resources and the continuation of the conflict.

The Panel's first report, published in April 2001, was highly critical of the situation in the DRC. Both the Rwandan and Ugandan governments condemned the report's findings, arguing that it contained factual errors and relied too much on unconfirmed information. However, the governments acknowledged that the report's portrayal of the exploitation of resources by the military and others was fundamentally correct. The report attracted widespread media attention and strengthened the international campaign against conflict diamonds.

In another report, published in October 2002, the Panel stated that "elite networks" consisting of key political and military elites and business persons continue to plunder the country's natural resources and public coffers with impunity. In January 2003, the Security Council issued Resolution 1457 in which it strongly condemned the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC, noted its concern that this plunder fuelled the conflict and demanded that all governments act immediately to end these illegal activities. The population is made up of around 200 ethnic groups, generally concentrated regionally and speaking different languages. Although there is no majority ethnic group, societal discrimination on the basis of ethnicity is widely practiced by virtually all ethnic groups. However in many parts of the country intermarriage across ethnic and regional divides is common.

What is World Vision doing to address the root causes of the conflict?

World Vision has consistently called for all of the root causes of the crisis in eastern DRC to be addressed peacefully and politically, as opposed to militarily. The military option has been tried multiple times over the years, each time unsuccessfully, and every time resulting in massive new displacements of innocent civilians, more suffering, human rights abuses, and more bloodshed.

At a grassroots level, World Vision is running peacebuilding projects, which seek to unite communities who have been previously disunited, as well as supporting advocacy initiatives such as a Child Parliament, which calls for the strengthening of child rights.

What is the mandate of MONUC in facilitating humanitarian operations and protection of civilians?

The UN Security Council has voted to increase its 17,000-strong force by another 3,000. But diplomats admit they do not know where the troops will come from, or when they will be sent. There are currently some 5,500 peacekeepers in North Kivu, where the latest clashes have taken place, including some 1,000 stationed in the provincial capital, Goma.

The UN sent helicopter gunships to help stop the rebels and said they would defend the city, however there have been calls for the mandate to be made stronger.

The force operates under a Chapter Seven mandate, the most robust available for a peacekeeping operation - allowing it to protect the civilian population and themselves.

There are also calls from some leaders for Europe to send in an elite force, fearing that the UN deployment will take too long.

World Vision is calling for a more focused peacekeeping mandate. Currently too many competing priorities have been demanded of MONUC. The UNSC must review and focus

MONUC's mandate so that civilian protection is its first priority, particularly the protection of women and girls against gender-based violence.

What is the background to the Goma Peace Agreement?

On January 23 2008, the Congolese government and 22 armed groups signed the Goma peace agreement, committing to an immediate ceasefire and observance of international human rights law. This Agreement followed the "Nairobi Communiqué" of November 2007 between the Governments of Congo and Rwanda, which sought to address the presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), in eastern Congo.

The peace conference leading to the Goma Peace agreement had two principal goals; brokering a ceasefire and forging an agreement on a comprehensive plan for peace, security and development. Since the signing of the Goma Peace Agreement, there have been numerous cease-fire violations and human rights abuses.

Is World Vision doing advocacy at local level?

Yes, on November 10, 2008, a network on Peacebuilding, called, "Reseau des organisations de promotion de la paix" (Network of Organizations in Peace-building) was launched at the Centre d'Accueil Caritas Hall in Goma, led by World Vision.

At least 70 people representing 54 NGOs and associations were present. The date of Nov 10 is significant, as ten years ago, on Nov 10, 1998, the UN through resolution number 53/25 proclaimed the decade 2001-2010 as Decade for the Promotion of a Culture of Non-Violence and of Peace, for the Benefit of the Children of the World".

This network was started by World Vision in July 2008 with a small group of international NGOs and 4 local NGOs. In September, during the Week for Peace celebrations, there were around 18 NGOs who participated in the various activities. During this launch, more NGOs and local associations joined, indicating the interest and the need for activities in Peace-building.

What is World Vision doing to tackle malnutrition?

Cases of malnutrition in E-DRC, especially those affecting children have dramatically shot up as a result of the increased conflict. In one hard-hit area, World Vision estimates the number of children under the age of five suffering from malnutrition has increased ten-fold.

The organisation runs community-based nutrition programmes, treating under fives with severe malnutrition.

World Vision is also providing more than 100 tons of food to communities over in the coming months, including beans and maize to almost 4,500 people.

Apart from treatment of malnutrition, World Vision also trains local health workers and parents on prevention of malnutrition and disease. With support from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), parents are receiving tools and seeds to help the growth of nutritional crops.

Should UN OCHA be moving the people of Kibati displacement camp to another site? Kibati camp is on the front line between CNDP and FARDC (Government army) positions. It is frequently caught up in sporadic violence and is potentially at risk of serious crossfire.

A survey was carried out by UNHCR and 85% of the population stated they wanted to move. At the moment they are at great risk of violence and unrest. A site is being prepared with water sources and other facilities 15km away. This area is considered much more stable than Kibati and would provide more protection for the 30,000 people due to be moved.

Should additional troops be provided to stabilise the situation?

Any additional troops deployed to eastern Congo should strengthen the stretched MONUC peacekeeping force to provide civilian protection, stability and humanitarian space.

A proliferation of multiple peacekeeping forces could further destabilise the fragile situation.

What is the background to the crisis?

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is still struggling to recover 15 years of conflict, which has killed millions and devastated the lives of the population through disease and poverty. Despite a peace agreement between rebel factions in January this year, the east is still rocked by violence and lawlessness. The most recent war of 1998–2003 was characterized by mass displacement, collapse of health systems and food shortages, all contributing to major elevations of mortality. 1.4 million people remain displaced in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. Camps are densely crowded, chaotic environments with no basic social facilities and services.

Since 2000, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has documented the humanitarian impact of war and conflict. The first of four studies, conducted between 2000 and 2004, estimated that 3.9 million people had died since 1998, arguably making DR Congo the world's deadliest crisis since World War II. Less than 10 percent of all deaths were due to violence, with most attributed to easily preventable and treatable conditions such as malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia and malnutrition.

However, peace is yet to be established on the ground. Clashes between rebel factions, FARDC and armed groups continue to affect the population and families continue to flee their homes in fear of attack. The conflict has also destroyed critical infrastructure, the few social services that previously existed, as well as informal economy and livelihoods. Instability has exacerbated national issues of governance, with the loss of potential revenue from the wealth of natural resources in the country. According to UNDP, the conflict has set back the country's development by more than forty years.

While in January 2008 an "Acte d'Engagement" was signed signalling an opportunity for peace, many IDPs remain in host communities or camps and the vulnerability and needs of civilian communities continue to increase.

I thought army unification was meant to stop fighting?

The unification of the Congolese army (FARDC) was part of the peace agreement in 2002. All Congolese factions were obliged to integrate with the national army of disarm, demobilise and reintegrate (DDR) into peaceful society. The agreement also called for repatriation of foreign forces. Six years on, DDR and army unification remain incomplete.

Do you work with other NGOs on the ground?

World Vision DRC, Eastern region, has long and good relations with UN Agencies, including UNHCR, UNICEF, FAO, UNDP and WFP, as well as international and local NGOs such as Heal Africa and Save the Children. The office partners with UNICEF to run Child Friendly Spaces in IDP camps and nutrition centers in rural areas for example.

Do you work with the government or with rebel groups?

Partnership with the Congolese Government is an important part of sustainable development and relief. World Vision supports national structures to help strengthen them in the long-term. WVDRC also coordinates with local authorities in its areas of operations to effectively address the needs of the populations and also ensure a joined-up humanitarian response.

How is development, or indeed peace, possible with virtually no effective justice, infrastructure and a shattered economy?

Peace and development must go hand-in-hand. The Congolese Government, UN agencies and NGOs are working together to strengthen the weak education, health and justice systems, whilst also calling all sides to establish an environment of peace, where development is possible.

When did World Vision start operating in the east?

WVDRC started working in east DRC in 1993. More than 100 staff have experience in managing an advocacy, protection and a rights-based approach to relief and development projects and programmes.

Has anything changed since the democratic election in 2006?

All the transitional institutions have been established – including the government of national unity mostly composed of former belligerent parties; a two-chamber parliament with more representatives of the society at large; and five civil commissions including an independent electoral commission.

While international governments, NGOs and UN agencies continue to pour money and aid into east DRC, the need of the population is too great. World Vision prioritises the needs of the vulnerable – children, women, people with disabilities, minority groups and the elderly.

However, aid is only part of the answer. The overwhelming poverty in east DRC calls for all actors to address the root causes of the crisis. Only when peace and security is established, will sustainable development be really possible. Reaching affected communities is also a factor. The only paved road of any quality runs from the capital Kinshasa to Matadi, the country's only ocean port. All other roads are in a high state of disrepair and many are impassable for any vehicle larger than a motorcycle. Others have totally disappeared in the central African rainforest. As a result most of the population lacks access to even the most essential services.

You are operating in areas controlled by rebels – are you not helping to prop up the conflict?

No, we are addressing the needs of the people in all areas of the country. World Vision's assistance is based on humanitarian need and not on any political, ethnic or religious grounds. World Vision calls on all parties to keep their agreement to peace.