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The U.S. Must Rethink its Approach to the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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The recent occupation and subsequent retreat by the rebel group M23 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) city of Goma is the latest episode of the country's instability. Though M23 is just the newest rebel group among many, it is emblematic of the failure by the Congolese government and the international community to address the development and governance issues that undermine peace prospects.

The crisis occurred despite a United Nations peacekeeping mission for over a decade, billions of dollars in economic and humanitarian assistance, and ongoing diplomatic efforts. The United States should reassess its support for the U.N. peacekeeping mission, increase accountability for the inept government in Kinshasa, seek to secure Rwandan and Ugandan support, and emphasize the need for an African-led strategy.

Decades of War and Failed Policy. Within a year of independence in 1960, the DRC experienced political divisions and a series of unstable governments.¹ Relative stability was achieved following a military coup by Joseph Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko) in 1965. However, rampant corruption and poor governance ensured that the DRC remained poor.

In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda grew concerned about Mobutu's inability to control eastern DRC, where forces responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide continued to mobilize and support a rebel movement led by Laurent Kabila. Mobutu's ineffective and ill-trained armed forces offered little resistance.

A year after seizing power, Laurent Kabila ordered Rwanda and Uganda to withdraw from the DRC. Their refusal and support for proxy-armed groups led to what is often dubbed Africa's World War.² In 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated and succeeded by his son, Joseph Kabila, who initiated peace talks that resulted in the 2003 Lusaka Peace Accords.³

Despite the war ending, rebel groups dissatisfied with the terms of the Accords remained active, particularly in the east, with le Congrès National pour la Defense du Peuple

(CNDP) being the most prominent.⁴ While the CNDP officially disbanded after a March 23, 2009, peace deal, both sides accused the other of failing to uphold the agreement.

Kabila ignited this nascent tension into rebellion by ordering the arrest of former CNDP leader Bosco Ntaganda in March 2012. By June, M23 rebels (named after the March 23 peace deal) were on the offensive throughout eastern Congo and in late November 2012 occupied Goma. The poorly trained and equipped Congolese armed forces put up little resistance despite years of training and support from the international community.

Failed International Efforts. At the conclusion of the first civil war, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1279 in 1999 establishing the Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC).⁵ Provided with a Chapter VII mandate, MONUC was charged with observing the Lusaka Agreement and the disengagement of forces. Later, in 2010, the Security Council passed Resolution 1925, renaming MONUC the U.N. Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

Despite the continued presence of a U.N. force for over a decade

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the situation has not significantly improved.⁶ Specifically:

■ **Failure to protect civilians.**

MONUSCO's current force includes 19,055 military personnel from 58 countries. Last June, the U.N. General Assembly approved a one-year \$1.4 billion budget resulting in a total expenditure of \$11.5 billion since 1999. Although the DRC has primary responsibility for protecting civilians, MONUSCO is also mandated to "use all necessary means" to protect civilians.⁷ Yet, during M23's November attack on Goma, media accounts reported that U.N. peacekeepers retreated when the Congolese army, also known as FARDC, fled, leaving civilians at the mercy of M23.⁸ This also illustrated the failure of MONUSCO

and the international community to adequately train FARDC. Congolese soldiers maintain questionable loyalties and have been accused of human rights abuses.

■ **Lack of development.** Despite vast natural resources, DRC citizens are very poor, with an estimated annual per capita income of \$300, ranking amongst the world's worst countries in terms of life expectancy and infant mortality.⁹ Corruption is rampant and infrastructure is virtually nonexistent in many places.

■ **Legitimizing a corrupt, inept government.** MONUSCO is not an impartial force; it is specifically instructed to accomplish its objectives through support to the DRC government. However,

Kabila's government has used violence, corruption, and cronyism to maintain power. The November 2011 election was riddled with irregularities and targeted violence against the opposition. Consistent support from the international community, supplemented by U.N. peacekeepers, allows Kabila to disregard his governance and security responsibilities.

U.S. Role. Although the U.S. does not have a direct national security interest in the DRC, it does have an interest in promoting stability and good governance. In fiscal year (FY) 2012, the U.S. provided more than \$110 million in humanitarian assistance for Congolese refugees, internally displaced persons, and conflict-affected civilians. This included a \$5

1. An intervention by Belgium (ostensibly to protect its citizens in the DRC) and the secession of the Katanga province led the U.N. to establish its first large-scale peacekeeping operation to establish law and order, protect civilians, and maintain the territorial integrity of the DRC. The U.N. Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was controversial and unsuccessful. The mission resulted in a number of U.N. casualties and did not resolve the conflict as fighting resumed after UNOC left. The mandate of the operation also sharply divided the U.N. membership and a refusal by a number of member states to pay for their assessments related to UNOC nearly bankrupted the organization. In the end, the most significant legacy of UNOC was to avoid similar missions in the future. As a result, it was nearly three decades before the U.N. again involved itself in more robust peacekeeping operations.
2. Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe sided with Kabila.
3. Despite initial constitutional and popular objections, Joseph Kabila succeeded his father. According to the U.S. State Department he was the "natural and obvious choice" as "the only person who could hold together various government and military factions." Embassy Kinshasa, "How Joseph Kabila Became President; Conversations with A 'King Maker,'" March 26, 2011, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=01KINSHASA1610> (accessed December 13, 2012), and "Joseph Kabila Sworn In," BBC, January 26, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1138137.stm> (accessed December 13, 2012).
4. The remnants of the forces responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), also remained active.
5. Provided with a Chapter VII mandate, MONUC was charged with observing the Lusaka Agreement and the disengagement of forces. United Nations, "MONUC United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monuc/> (accessed December 13, 2012).
6. Thomas M. Woods, "Crisis in Congo and the Challenge for the International Community," Heritage Foundation *Web Memo* No. 2124, November 7, 2008, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/11/crisis-in-congo-and-the-challenge-for-the-international-community>.
7. United Nations Security Council, Resolution S/RES/1925 (2010), May 28, 2010, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1925\(2010\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1925(2010)) (accessed December 13, 2012).
8. Jessica Hatcher and Alex Perry, "Defining Peacekeeping Downward: The U.N. Debacle in Eastern Congo," *Time*, November 26, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/11/26/defining-peacekeeping-downward-the-u-n-debacle-in-eastern-congo/> (accessed December 13, 2012); Gaaki Kigambo, "MONUSCO in the Spotlight over 'Failed Mandate,'" *The East African*, December 1, 2012, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Monusco-in-the-spotlight-over-failed-mandate/-/2558/1634400/-/jukbso/-/index.html> (accessed December 13, 2012); and Jeffrey Gettleman, "The World's Worst War," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/sunday-review/congos-never-ending-war.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all& (accessed December 17, 2012).
9. CIA World Factbook, "Congo, Democratic Republic of the," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cg.html> (accessed December 13, 2012).

million supplemental contribution for the increased needs in the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda.¹⁰ Washington has also worked in coordination with regional stakeholders to establish a more permanent peace. The U.S. can facilitate these discussions by:

- **Acknowledging that the DRC government lacks legitimacy.** The Kabila government cannot deliver on its commitments. Yet, there are no legitimate local representatives to fill the void. The U.S. should press Kabila to decentralize authority and transfer power away from Kinshasa to the provincial and local governments. Provincial and local elections should also be scheduled to replace officials that were undemocratically handpicked by Kabila.¹¹
- **Enforcing sanctions on supporters of rebel groups.** There have been a number of allegations linking Rwanda and Uganda to support for rebel groups in eastern Congo. Although Rwanda and Uganda deny these allegations, it is appropriate that the

U.S. discourage such actions if it has sufficient evidence. The U.S. recently cut \$200,000 in security assistance to Rwanda for supporting rebels. Although this is a small portion of total U.S. aid, the U.S. should be prepared to enforce its policy.¹²

- **Encouraging regional economic integration.** Many argue that Rwanda and Uganda's contribution to instability is driven by the desire to access the DRC's mineral wealth. Following the decentralization of governance, provincial leadership should be granted the authority to forge economic ties with neighbors. Rwanda and Uganda have much to gain from a stable eastern DRC, particularly one with greater autonomy that would be open to trade and investment.

In addition, the U.N. has announced that it is conducting a review of MONUSCO in the wake of events in Goma. As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council and the largest contributor to U.N.

peacekeeping, the U.S. plays a critical oversight role.¹³ Therefore, the U.S. should:

- **Take steps to sharply diminish the size of MONUSCO, limit its mandate, and establish a framework for terminating the mission.** MONUSCO's current capacity is unable to impose peace in eastern DRC and the Security Council, heeding past lessons that "the United Nations does not wage war," has demonstrated little appetite for increasing its capacity and mandate to meet that objective. As much as instability is troubling in the DRC, the U.N. is not the proper instrument for peace enforcement, and MONUSCO should focus on less ambitious goals of protecting and providing security for humanitarian efforts and transitioning to an African Union operation.
- **Support the creation of an African Union (AU) peacekeeping force.** The U.N. acknowledges that "peacekeeping can only succeed as part of a wider

10. Johnnie Carson, "The Devastating Crisis in Eastern Congo," testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, December 11, 2012, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/HHRG-112-FA16-WState-CarsonJ-20121211.pdf> (accessed December 17, 2012).

11. In congressional testimony, Steve Hege, the former coordinator of the U.N. Group of Experts, addressed the issue of federalism, stating, "The best case scenario ... is for the DRC to seize upon current negotiations to address ... a federal state in the eastern Congo ... through Congo's pre-existing decentralization legislation. Then, the international community must robustly support the DRC's central and provincial institutions and economic infrastructure to slowly diminish unfettered external control and meddling." Hege assessed that before decentralization can occur, there must be a strong federal state first. However, this approach would award undeserved legitimacy to Kabila, require time that the current crisis cannot afford, and idealistically assumes that Kabila would yield power once he possesses it. It is better to build governance with the endgame framework in place rather than build up a centralized model simply to deconstruct it. Steve Hege, "The Devastating Crisis in Eastern Congo," testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, December 11, 2012, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/HHRG-112-FA16-WState-HegeS-20121211.pdf> (accessed December 13, 2012).

12. The U.S. provided \$451 million in economic assistance and \$36 million in military assistance to Uganda and \$221 million in economic assistance and \$0.7 million in military assistance Rwanda in 2010. USAID, "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants," http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov/query/do?_program=/eads/gbk/countryReport&unit=N (accessed December 18, 2012).

13. The United States provides over 27 percent of the \$1.4 billion MONUSCO budget this year. MONUSCO Facts and Figures, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/facts.shtml> (accessed December 13, 2012).

political strategy to end a conflict and with the will of the parties to implement that strategy.”¹⁴ The U.N. presence has served to divert resources and focus toward the U.N. and away from a process centered on stakeholders in the DRC and neighboring countries. The African Union Security Council has pledged its support toward the deployment of a Neutral International Force in eastern Congo.¹⁵ The AU mission should be led by a contingent unrelated to the conflict, but should allow for Rwandan and Ugandan participation to enable those governments to allay their concerns. AU leadership has helped address a similarly dismal situation in Somalia and could bring vital regional attention to resolving the DRC situation.

Regional Solutions. In the 13 years since MONUSCO was founded, the international community has not effectively addressed the

plight of Congolese civilians. The U.S. should reorient its approach to emphasize regional solutions based on enhanced local governance in eastern DRC.

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14. U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations and U.N. Department of Field Support, “A New Partnership Agenda: Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping,” July 2009, p. 35, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/newhorizon.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2012).

15. Frank Kanyesigye, “Congo-Kinshasa: AU Commends Regional Efforts on Congo,” *The New Times*, December 13, 2012, http://allafrica.com/stories/201212130054.html?cid=nlc-dailybrief-daily_news_brief-link17-20121213 (accessed December 13, 2012).