

VOICES FROM CONGO: THE ROAD AHEAD

Policy Summit Findings

July 26, 2011

On July 26, 2011, over forty representatives from the U.S. Government, UN, NGOs and independent experts joined a delegation of Congolese civil society leaders to discuss the Democratic Republic of the Congo's most pressing challenges and ways the U.S. and other actors could more effectively respond. The summit was co-sponsored by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Eastern Congo Initiative. It was held in conjunction with a public conference.

Key Findings & Recommendations:

- **The core problems in Congo today stem from a failure of governance** that inhibits sustainable progress on human rights, provision of social services, and security sector reform.
- **The November elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo) could lead to destabilizing violence**, especially given current problems in organizing the elections, rhetoric of major political parties, and relative lack of international engagement.
- **The U.S. and Western partners are less engaged in Congo and fail to coordinate their messages in order to maximize their impact.** Lack of engagement is demonstrated in the near term by a marked decrease in financial assistance and high-level diplomatic attention to Congo's elections from what existed for the 2006 elections. In the long term, Western partners could improve their assistance by better coordinating their messaging and policies toward the main country governments in the central Africa and Great Lakes regions.
- **These same partners have failed to effectively use existing points of leverage** to encourage better governance and respect for human rights. These leverage points include conditioning loans and project financing from international financial institutions and the sizeable bilateral aid from Western governments.
- Outside partners to Congo must **make greater efforts to reach out to the Congolese population and civil society**, despite the challenges the task presents, in order to better understand the deteriorating situation in the country and involve the population in democratization.

Understanding the Challenges

Despite democratic elections that installed President Joseph Kabila five years ago, the country suffers from poor leadership at all levels, leading many Congolese today to perceive the massive human rights and security crises as rooted in the collapse of governance. Since the previous elections, quality of life in Congo has not improved and may have gotten worse. Civilians in the east remain vulnerable to predatory armed groups, including the national army. Sexual violence remains rampant. Many Congolese in the capital, Kinshasa, have no electricity or water today, yet enjoyed these services during the 2006 electoral period. Since the days of the Mobutu Sese Seko regime, government corruption has not changed, even as the capacity of the state to manage the corruption and its citizens' expectations has crumbled.

While the core problems demand longer-term engagement, the upcoming elections could precipitate a crisis. Preparations for the elections are behind schedule, making it unlikely that credible elections will be held on November 28. The incumbent is unpopular, even among easterners who were previously his base of support. While perceptions of the elections differ between the east and west of the country, the population is increasingly angry, fearful and frustrated over the government's failure to provide security, deliver basic services, and provide a vision for improving the state. Neither the incumbent nor a major opposition party will accept anything but victory in the presidential elections and opposition has failed to unify around a single candidate. Many parties have also recently rejected a government-proposed code of conduct.

Several scenarios are possible and none of the likely ones are reassuring. These include the holding of chaotic elections before December 6, a date that many claim marks the end of Kabila's constitutional mandate; another is the postponing of elections well before this perceived deadline or right before the deadline; yet another assumes that Kabila will win but in deeply flawed elections, regardless of when they are held. In any of these cases, the result could be discredited elections or popular protests, which is likely to prompt the state to use violence to crush the opposition, as it has in the past. Some believe that, in the event of election-related violence, attention will inevitably turn to the UN mission in Congo (MONUSCO), even if it does not have the mandate to resolve such political crises.

International Engagement

The U.S. and other important outside players are well aware that sustained peace in Congo will require more than credible elections and have been implementing major programs for years. Today, however, the international community is less focused on Congo than in the past and overall policy is characterized by a lack of coordination by stakeholders who have previously cooperated effectively. While the U.S. and other international players engage on a broad range of issues, their lack of coordination means that the sum effect of their initiatives is not equal to its parts.

On the critical upcoming elections, the international community is doing less than it did in 2006 to monitor the process and promote the political space needed for free and fair elections. MONUSCO, for instance, faces massive logistical and political challenges and is not completely equipped to address them.

For longer-term improvements, even small successes are difficult to consolidate into sustainable gains for the country without addressing fundamental problems of governance. While U.S. efforts to address sexual violence and conflict minerals represent a pragmatic approach to complex issues, these efforts do not address the root causes of Congo's problems and could ultimately be counterproductive. U.S. policy toward the specialized mixed courts proposal to deal with the most serious international crimes committed on Congolese soil in 1990-2003 has been positive and welcomed, but the challenge now will be to ensure that the legislation on the court being considered in Congolese parliament is in line with international norms. Several programs have attempted to reform Congo's security forces but the international community has not yet been able to provide meaningful change. Besides, it is unclear whether protection and security programs are even helping the lives of those in the interior, especially women.

To fend off international engagement on these issues, the Congolese government misleads the international community with its rhetoric and half measures. At the same time, the government fears the international community and tries to woo Chinese engagement, which is less concerned with governance and human rights issues. Since the population is scared to communicate the abuses they suffer or the wretched state of their daily lives, the outside actors must make a greater effort to reach out to them.

Civil society also has a useful role to play in addressing Congo's challenges but is beset by its own problems. It operates under extraordinarily difficult circumstances that include not only the overwhelming issues of human rights and governance but also the continued dangers of antagonistic security forces, militia groups, and decrepit infrastructure. Civil society actors face increasing pressure from the government, which is demonstrated by attacks against prominent leaders, government attempts at bribery, and threats. Much of this sector of Congolese society is robust and committed, but needs to be better organized in order to address the issues effectively and represent the concerns of the people. Finally, civil society cannot assume the role of the government but should be supported in pressuring the government to assume its proper responsibilities.

Key Recommendations

These recommendations are based on remarks made during the summit and the summit evaluation sheets.

The core recommendations emerging from the discussion focused on three strategies:

- **Increase high-level U.S. government engagement.** The U.S. must increase its engagement at the level of Assistant Secretary of State or Secretary of State to improve interventions with the Congolese government and coordination with other external actors.
- **Improve coordination among outside stakeholders.** Like-minded partners should agree on a viable structure or modus operandi to work more closely together to coordinate their messaging toward Congo and its neighbors, such as Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Rwanda. Together, they could then craft stronger policy, including on security sector reform and on governance. These partners include the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), European countries, the U.S., African Union, and certain key African countries, such as South Africa and Tanzania.

- **Strengthen conditionality in bilateral and multilateral programs.** Conditionality must play a more important part in the programs of the IMF, World Bank, and like-minded stakeholders in outside policy regarding Congo. Building off a more coordinated approach, these external actors should condition funding to Congo's government programs, including perhaps in human rights and governance.

These recommendations could then be applied to:

- **Elections:** The electoral process needs additional attention, including bolstering the role of civil society and holding the government accountable to ensure a credible process. Additionally, stakeholders to the elections should better prepare for multiple scenarios when the results are announced or if delays occur. Coordinating monitors would be helpful, particularly if the results are contested as expected.
- **Security sector reform:** These recommendations could provide a more solid basis to address security sector reform, elements of which have been undertaken by diverse international players over the years. Analysts continue to cite this as a pressing area of reform where there have been insufficient gains.
- **Government institution-building:** Regardless of the election results, outside governments must continue to focus on strengthening government institutions, especially in the area of justice, and the delivery of basic social services, with a view toward eradicating corruption.

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The National Endowment for Democracy is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world.
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INITIATIVE

The Eastern Congo Initiative is a U.S.-based advocacy and grant-making initiative that believes local, community-based approaches are essential to creating a sustainable and successful society in eastern Congo.
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