

## **Current Situation in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

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Gladys and I have been on a two week tour of Rwanda, Burundi, and North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC for the people involved in the region). We spent two nights in Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. Here are my observations of the current situation there plus some reports on our HROC (Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities) program there.

The last time we were in North Kivu was a little less than a year ago. At that time the fighting in North Kivu was heating up as the Tutsi rebel leader, Laurent Nkunda, was expanding the territory he controlled. After we left, he reached the outskirts of Goma itself. Fighting was fierce and hundreds of thousands of additional internally displaced people (IDP) packed the camps. Nkunda made some comments that he was going to attack the capital in Kinshasa, one thousand miles away.

Since the prevailing assumption was that Rwanda was supporting Nkunda and his rebels, Sweden and the Netherlands suspended their aid to Rwanda. I think two things happened: (1) Nkunda overplayed his hand and became a decided liability to them; and, (2) since 50% of the Rwandan operating budget was financed by external aid, Rwanda was under intense pressure from the international community.

(Note 1 – One of the reasons that Mwai Kibaki of Kenya could hold out against the pressure from the international community after the disputed December 2007 elections was that only 5% of Kenya's operating budget was financed by foreign aid.)

(Note 2 – Shortly thereafter President Kagame made a speech indicating that Rwanda had to become independent of the international community's foreign aid for its operating budget. Clearly he was unhappy with the pressure the international community put on him. As a result taxes in Rwanda have increased tremendously which I'll detail soon in my report on Rwanda. One Rwandan told me (this is unconfirmed) that the amount of the operating budget in Rwanda supported by foreign aid has fallen from 50% to 36%.

At the beginning of this year Rwanda abruptly switched "sides" (strategy?) and arrested Nkunda in Rwanda. (Since then, although both the DRC and the International Criminal Court want him for war crimes, Nkunda has disappeared completely from the scene) Rwanda also made an alliance with their former antagonist, the Kabila Government of the DRC, held a joint military operation with the Congolese army – supported by the UN's MONUC peacekeepers – against the remnants of the "interahamwe". This led to more killings, displacement of civilians, and retaliation killings by the former "interahamwe".

Since then, the situation has calmed down. President Kabila of the DRC and President Kagame of Rwanda met in the no-man's land on the border in Gisenyi, sealing the new alliance. The Congolese government – like the Kabaki-Odinga regime in Kenya –

declared that peace had returned to North and South Kivu. As a result all internally displaced camps would be closed: no planning, little or no transport back to the home areas, no peacemaking in the home communities between those who had fled and those who had remained behind.

Zawadi had reported to me that when some people went back home, they were not welcomed and had returned to the IDP camps. Zawadi said that the current problems are not "ethnic", but between those who fled and those who remained.

Here I need to explain the basics of land ownership and use in this part of Africa. People do not "own" land as we do in the United States and elsewhere. Rather people "use" the land. Unused land can be taken by others. For example, at the Peace Center AGLI is helping to build in Gisenyi, across the border in Rwanda, the area where the conference hall is supposed to be built is still vacant. The Rwandan Government wants to repossess this land and give it to someone else to use (this is a swiftly developing area in Gisenyi) so the Peace Center needs to begin building as soon as possible in order not to lose this land. If people flee from their land, it can be taken up by others – particularly their neighbors and relatives! Whenever people flee in this region, their land, their animals, their possessions, their homes are occupied by others. During the conflict in Kenya I heard people say that they didn't want the displaced people to return because then they would have to return the door, roofing sheets, cooking pots, etc. that they had taken from them. This all becomes very complicated. Say a person left more than a year ago when the fighting intensified. Then a neighbor/relative took over the field and planted it. Now the crops are growing: who owns the harvest? So this is the root of the problem regarding the returnees.

AGLI is supporting eight HROC workshops in an area of Masisi called Nyamitaba (in the mountains outside of Goma). In these workshops we are bringing 200 people together from all ethnic groups, but more importantly, including both those who remained and those who fled. The purpose is to relieve tensions between the various groups and restore healthy human interactions as all these difficult problems are resolved. Gladys and I met with eleven of the HROC facilitators who had already done two of these workshops. They said that the workshops were extremely well received with people walking up to two hours each way on all three days in order to attend.

As part of the peace agreement Nkunda's forces were integrated into the Congolese army. As a result the local government leader in Nyamitaba is one of Nkunda's men. And, as happened before, Nkunda's troops (even if he is out of the picture) can still "secede" from the army and reform their rebel group leading to another round of fighting. The question is: "Will the DRC and Rwanda hold to their peace agreement so publicly announced or will they secretly continue to arm and support the various proxy rebel groups as before?" If the former, peace will probably last; if the latter then war will resume. I was told that there is still some fighting in the more remote areas of North Kivu, but if the three strongest groups – the Congolese army, the former Tutsi rebel army, and the UN's MONUC troops – work together, they will be able to put down any of the small armed conflicts instigated by the various remaining forces.

We also visited the last remaining IDP camp near Goma. It continues with 3200+ people, mostly handicapped, elderly, or sick. The camp commander told us that this camp would be closed by the end of the year. He had already laid off 14 of the 17 members of his staff. Goma and North Kivu is supported by an amazing number of UN and NGO organizations – not only all those big ones I had heard of, but many smaller ones I had never heard of. They all race around in very fancy SUV's costing in excess of \$50,000 each: Goma is filled with them. This NGO-based economy is going to collapse quickly as "peace" has returned to the area and they will go off to the next trouble spot. AGLI, with our small program, will of course remain steady as we work to heal the wounds of the conflict.

The IDP camp commander was actually very negative about developments. He felt that many people, due to the conflicts over land, would be killed when they returned home. That the conflict could break out again at any time and then the international community would be unprepared as they had closed up "shop". I wonder; was he just protecting his job and those of his co-workers?

We were told that the IDP's were given three months of rations when they returned – this would be the end of international support. As the rations were trucked up-country from Goma for distribution the merchants of Goma followed in their own trucks. When the rations were distributed much of them were purchased by these merchants and trucked back to Goma for sale. Why would the returning people sell their food at probably very cheap prices?

Before you condemn them or the purchasing merchants, think about it. If you could not buy any more food, how long would the food in your house last? Two weeks? Three weeks? Do you have a three months supply of food in your house? Moreover, where are the returnees – whose homes have been destroyed or inhabited by others – going to store all this food? How can they keep from having it stolen? But most importantly, the returnees have immediate needs beyond food which have not been met by anyone. So they sell some of what they received for money to fulfill their immediate needs.

The sad part of this situation is that it is the Goma merchants who will benefit most!

To give you a flavor of what is happening in North Kivu; let me tell you three stories. I asked the eleven HROC facilitators to each tell me a story of one of the most significant changes that they heard about as a result of their workshops.

1. A man fled to the IDP camp leaving behind his adult daughter. When he returned he found that his daughter was very distraught and her home was a mess. He was not welcomed by his daughter and they had arguments. After the HROC workshop the man realized that his daughter was traumatized and that rather than argue with her, he need to go and listen to her, comfort her, and encourage her.

2. A Hutu man and Tutsi man were neighbors. When the fighting broke out, the Tutsi man fled and the Hutu man took care of his cows. While he was taking care of the cows, one fell into a ditch (I assume that it was badly hurt). The Tutsi man claimed that the Hutu man purposely did this because of "ethnicity" while the Hutu man claimed it was just an accident. The HROC facilitator was asked to intercede in this conflict. In the end the Tutsi man agreed that it was an accident and not due to ethnic hostility. He agreed to slaughter the cow that got hurt in the ditch and share it with the Hutu man and moreover agreed to give the Hutu man a second cow so that he could begin building his own herd!

3. A woman, her husband and children were renting a house from a landlord. The husband went off to become a soldier and was killed. The woman remained in the house until the landlord kicked her out because she was no longer paying the rent. When he did so, he took all her possessions to pay for the missing rent plus one of the woman's daughters to work for him until the debt from the rent was finished. The daughter died while working for the landlord. Another time the woman had two goats and the landlord saw her with them and took them from her. The woman wanted revenge saying that he should die along with one of his daughters so that his wife could feel what she was feeling. She was going to a witch-doctor to implement her revenge. Then she fled to the IDP camp. One day, while waiting in line, she saw the landlord in the line next to hers; in other words, now he was as destitute as she was! Then she attended a HROC workshop and realized that her desires for revenge were not going to help the situation. So she decided to forgive the landlord and move on with her life.

So behind those headlines of fighting, war, and internally displaced people are thousands upon thousands of individual stories: each one a tale needing to be told. Summing them up is the real history of the conflict. Yet life goes on as new stories are created daily. The work of HROC is to make some of these stories positive ones of the healing and reconciliation that is so needed in our wounded world.

Peace,  
Dave

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