

Hope and Change are Far from Reality for Congolese and a Threatened Environment

An IISD Commentary

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Hope and change. More than any others, these two words have dominated headlines over the last few weeks. And while the recent U.S. election has many believing the future will bring both, for the people in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), hope and change are quite far from the daily reality.

Fighting in the region has intensified in the last few weeks. A fragile ceasefire—signed in late October—is in place, but does not appear to be holding. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese have been displaced by clashes between government and rebel forces (and often between the rebel forces themselves) in the eastern province of North Kivu. Aid is not getting through. European foreign ministers have rushed to the area, with some calling for a strengthened mandate for MONUC, the UN’s mission in Congo and its largest peacekeeping operation. MONUC itself is under fire, as locals protest that it is not doing enough to ensure their safety.

For the residents of eastern DRC, caught in this conflict, the only change being seen is the change from a bad situation to one that is worse. Despair, not hope, is becoming further entrenched.

This humanitarian crisis is unfolding against one of the world’s most important ecological backdrops. Virunga National Park stretches along the Congolese border with Uganda and Rwanda. It is Africa’s oldest park, and its most diverse. It is home to the critically endangered mountain gorilla, once hosted the world’s largest hippo population and recently witnessed the first sighting of a wild okapi in 50 years. The park contains more than 700 bird species—two times the Western European total—and almost 220 mammals, both African records.

But the importance of Virunga extends beyond the role it plays for the DRC’s wildlife. Over 3 million Congolese rely on the park and its ecosystem; from its watershed and its fishery to its energy sources and the opportunities it presents for generating income. The park is a globally significant biodiversity hotspot that is central to the lives of the local population. Unfortunately, it is also found right in the middle of the world’s worst ongoing humanitarian crisis.

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charcoal—now estimated to be worth \$30 million per year—is run by competing groups: rebel organizations and corrupt army and government officials.

To meet demand, up to 25 per cent of the old-growth hardwood forest in the park's southern half is believed to have been completely cleared. The revenues in turn fund the violence. This illegal trade was tied to the killing of 10 mountain gorillas in 2007, which thrust Virunga into international headlines; the gorillas were killed to warn off conservationists trying to dismantle the trade. There may not be any mines in the park, but there are certainly park-based resources worth fighting over.

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In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees, displaced by war, have relied on the extraction of park-based resources for their livelihoods. Insecurity has kept tourists away and in doing so has significantly reduced park receipts and conservation budgets. Poaching has increased.

The Congolese wildlife authority is ill-equipped to deal with these challenges; nearly 20 years of conflict has eroded environmental governance in the region and fostered corruption. 120 park rangers—a sixth of the total patrolling the park—have been killed while on duty. Compounding matters, conservation has fallen down the list of international priorities as resources are diverted into the humanitarian crisis.

Despite these threats, the park survives and can be saved.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon arrived in Nairobi on Saturday to attend an African Union summit on the crisis in the DRC. He met with Congolese President Joseph Kabila and Rwandan President Paul Kagame, with the hope of arriving at a binding and sustainable peace agreement for the region. This must be the first priority for the region; more needs to be done by the international community to support this process and avert an even larger crisis.

The environment has to be integrated into any peace agreement. Without a meaningful improvement in environmental governance, capacity and enforcement, park-based resources will continue to be used as a funding source by belligerents.

It would be wrong to prioritize conservation over the very real humanitarian needs of the local and refugee populations. But recovery could depend on it. Sustainable development and

environmental protection cannot be set aside; the ecosystem services, natural resources and tourism potential of the park will undoubtedly play an important role as the economy rebuilds once peace is established. Local livelihoods, overwhelmingly tied to natural resources for energy, agriculture and jobs, will require a functioning, healthy environment.

For the past two decades, the region has experienced near-constant violent conflict. For the local population, the result has been widespread suffering: death, rape, displacement, sickness and starvation. According to the International Rescue Committee, more than 5.4 million people have died in the region as a result of the conflict since August 1998, making this war deadlier than any since 1945. Most of the casualties were civilians, and almost half were children.

The international community—including Canada—must intervene to help save Virunga; to protect its forests, mountains, lakes and plains, and the plants and animals found in them. By doing so, it will address some of the root causes of the conflict, and can help secure a park that is central to the lives of millions who rely on it for their livelihoods and well-being.

They need hope and change. So does Virunga.

Alec Cranford recently co-authored a case study on the impact of conflict on Virunga National Park, see http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/meas_cons_conf_virunga.pdf.